Tea Tulić

OLD WORLD VULTURES

Translated from Croatian by Mirza Purić

THIS IS A BODY LYING DOWN AND IT IS ALIVE

Father and Mother are making love on the floor by my bed. It is night, and the light from the tiny attic window shines on their heads. On the cracked window pane Mother had painted a particoloured flower in nail polish. I think about it as I pretend to sleep. I clasp my hands on my chest so that afterwards Mother would say:

– Look at her, asleep like an angel.

Mother is on top of Father, and in my cramped innards a black forest grows thick. Tendrils shooting out of my belly-button quickly grow into large trees. Red pharaoh ants march up their rough bark, and their tiny legs look like Mother's mascaraed eyelashes. In their thousands, they rush towards the tree crowns, Mother's and Father's tremoring eyelids. A bit below is Mother's knee, bent and as white as a calla lily. So white I can't get my eyes off it, a knee like a kingdom. It's all happening in deep silence, only breathing can be heard, and Mother whispering: *Gipsy*. I'm stiff and doubled up lying on my hip, my innards are warming the entire bed. Trees come out of me, they swallow up the clearing, the carpet runner by the window. They swallow the two moonlit heads. Red ants feast on the droplets of the two intertwined bodies, then fall, gorged, and disappear into the abyss of the dark parquet. In my mind I've climbed a cherry tree and I hear my uncle laughing and saying to me:

– Get off that plant!

Father and Mother look as though a sounder of wild boars had trampled them over. Father breathes heavily. My arm is numb. It is like a branch. I can't turn around. Opposite me is another, empty bed, and below me something I couldn't have dreamt.

If I could turn around to face the wall, my white canvass, I would see the house which I tidy up every night for my arrival. I would see the stairs leading to the other rooms.

That is one of my first memories.

BEGINNING

All our furniture was in the narrow room. Two low wardrobes with a cherry laminate and glossy finish. One contained all four seasons. Summer would crawl under winter and my father's swim briefs would fall on my face when I pull out the red jumper. Once, when we were preparing for the beach, I saw my father wearing them and I asked him:

– Does that get in the way?

– What?

– That thing in your briefs.

In the other wardrobe I had my own knicker drawer. Sometimes I would find boiled sweets there. The other two drawers were theirs. Some of the bedding stored in that wardrobe was in yellow stains from disuse. We never reached those pillow cases. Above the bedding was a small unit with a glass door, and in it was the *kumulica* – that was their word – *your sandwich money is in the kumulica*. The *kumulica* was a glass bowl with a lid, I still have it. We had money enough for food, bills, ice cream, cigarettes, coffee with cream, short summer holidays, colouring books. We had books, too, around thirty. I would lie on the floor between our beds and read till my bones hurt. Opposite the two wardrobes was a low table at which they drank coffee, and I revised. Mother smoked at the table, sitting on a pink garden chair. All three of us are short, slim and proportional, so we didn't have to stoop too much under the slanted ceiling. We'd just bend our necks. This room could be painted in an afternoon, but we had nowhere to put the furniture. If we moved it to the small dining room, where would the things from the dining room go? And if we emptied the dining room, too, and moved the things to Nonna's room, where would we put the things from Nonna's room? That room was the end room. It contained a large king-size bed made out of two separate beds put together, two great wardrobes, a make-up table with a mirror, a sewing machine and a TV on a stand. Above the bed hung an oval profile portrait of Jesus, Jesus on the Mount of Olives, Jesus in the end room awaiting his end.

So we spent a lot of time outdoors. If our room was small, the streets, benches and the marina weren't. We felt almost all things outside the house as our own. But then the city started to shrink. All kinds of fences appeared on our streets, a pile of warning signs, instructions at every step. And the city had actually been small all along, but our dreams were oversized.

Father didn't want us to leave, though he never said it out loud. We had no palms here, so we loved chestnut trees instead. As for the beach sand (which was in short supply) we used to say it was absolute horror, unlike the pebbles we often took home. But something happened that made all these attempts to beautify reality futile. One night they carried out disinsection, spraying entire façades so the whole high street was strewn black with dead roaches as early as six in the morning. It was like walking on walnut shells, everything around crunched underfoot. A surviving cockroach ran for it and hid under my shoe. I closed my eyes. A bit farther, in another street, Mother threw up.

– Mussels, I thought of mussels.

We were supposed to move to Canada, but Father wasn't ready. *Snow and mosquitoes, snow and mosquitos*, that was his mantra as he paced from one end of the narrow room to the other. He no longer worked at the docks, his future was a freight forwarding company with a wooden lion's head at the entrance. He said to me:

– We'll move to another neighbourhood. You'll have a room of your own.

When I started going to the empty church to revise, I stopped reminding him of what he'd said. At the time, talking to Mother had become more than difficult. She started binge-watching films. As she watched, every now and then she would finish a character's line. I'd fall asleep listening to her saying:

– The world belongs to the meat eaters, Miss Clara!

Then I'd wake up in the middle of the night and watch cockroaches, snakes and scorpions scurry about my bed, swallowing it whole. When I sobbingly turned towards their bed, I saw that there was nothing scurrying about theirs. Because of that dream and this room I started fearing I'd suffocate.

Father and Mother were often told to come to my school to be explained, always in some novel way, that I simply disappeared in the middle of a lesson, that my gaze became vacuous. That in phys ed I'd just stop in the middle of running in circles. I'd just stop and be unresponsive. My grades weren't bad, but I was prone to such 'truancy'. I just became unresponsive.

– Where do you go, luv? – Father asks at the table in our room later.

To this day I don't know where it is that I go. When I go to that place, nothing happens but sentences. As though they were the only thing left of us. Words said or written down, stuck for all eternity in the space between the sky and the sea, hovering in the blue above our heads. It's just a pile of simple sentences, but those sentences are mere echoes of thoughts. Like the sentence *Whatever will be will be*. Like the sentence *Get off the plant*. I hear these sentences in me even when I no longer hear anything coming from the outside. There are no grand sentences when you're setting out. *It is what it is*. Magic may happen, such as *Paris is wonderful in winter*. Then I gather Paris between my thin lips where there is no more sound. I land on Paris like a flake of snow.

That is the space the two of us go to when we unmoor the boat.

KALINKA

If proper fishermen could see us, they would probably swear at us. Father had done all kinds of things for a living, but fishing came only after Mother. And it's not as if we knew a lot about it. We know enough not to injure the fish. The hook is cruel. Father first got a mooring post at the canal, in settlement of an old, hard-to-enforce debt. Then we bought a used boat, a wooden skiff with a small cabin whose name we erased from the memory of the sea gods and dubbed her Kalinka. Kalinka is an old Russian song Father used to sing to make me laugh when I burst into tears for some reason. He would throw his hands in the air and spin:

– Калинка, калинка, калинка моя!

I, too, would throw my hands in the air and hop around him. We'd spin and sing till I fell on the floor like a grain. Later I found out Kalinka meant a little cranberry.

There was a time people believed that a woman aboard a ship brought misfortune and storms from the gods, so women were prohibited from boarding ship. Therefore many women boarded ships disguised as men, as pirates. If they were found out, they were tossed into the sea.

If this skiff had a sail, we would probably take off into the clouds. So light we are. And lightly we eat.

It is gloaming and we're at anchor by the beach. It is as if it were always gloaming and we were two buoys, Father and I, that is what our grown-up life looks like to me. He hasn't got a single grey hair in his black hair and moustache but his face is wrinkling, gathering salt. I watch him untie and unravel, all his life he's been untying and unravelling: my shoelaces, my hair, wires in the flat, a string of glass bells on the bathroom window, a wire leader and fishing flies, bills, his own tied tongue. At gloaming Father looks like a Roma boy. His features soften, his dark skin takes on a glow. The gloaming is nice until I start to shift from one end of the boat to the other, and shout:

– Dad, I've bloodied the entire boat.

I look around every which way. Father takes a green chequered tea towel from the cabin, soaks it in the sea and wipes the blood off the benches. It is seven in the evening and a feeding frenzy begins, the flailing of the flippers, the flash of nacre. The sun is by the mountain, and tuna and chub mackerel are breaching. It sounds like the flap of heavy wings. Great dark shoals break below the surface. They always look menacing, as though they were something more than heaps of fear. Around us, between the hips of the boat and my hips, everything is tearing apart. Two chub mackerels writhing furiously in a plastic pail. If Father pops one more in, it'll tip over. The pain muddles my mind to such a degree that I think the tunas would break us. I'm clutching my stomach, sitting and whimpering.

– Don't do that, luv – says father, wringing the tea towel into the sea.

When he wrings the tea towel, he stands in the middle of the boat, raises his hands high and starts walking on the spot in tiny steps:

– Калинка, калинка, калинка моя!

He sways the boat so hard I become upset.

Still, it was written that a woman bleeding nude has the power to drive away storms. I put a tissue in my knickers and lift my gaze to the pink sky. The sea is a Western saloon now.

In the pink sky, Volga smiles like cherry brandy.

COWBOY SALOON

The last café I worked at is opposite our building. The owners are a young couple, both blond, always dressed in pastel colours: pink, green, blue and yellow. They remind me of a child's drawing. He's got a head from a child's drawing, disproportionately large, round but irregular, as if someone was practising the letter O. There are plastic chairs and tables in the garden, inside it's a combination of wood and metal. Nothing inside is completely clean, although some effort is put into achieving cleanliness. This is a hang for teenagers who hide cigarettes from their parents, people with ADIDAS along the length of their trouser legs, lovers at the table in the back, all the way behind the lavatory wall, who sound like they've just started learning the language. Sentences like these come out of them: *I'm fine, this coffee is really nice, I've cleaned up my room, I love that movie, I love, love that movie, I've bought a new lighter, fancy ice cream, oooh, you, what, nothing, what, nothing, nothing, what do you mean nothing, well, nothing*. They laugh, touch with their finger pads, their elbows on the table so their arms start to look like swans, a shadow theatre.

I also retain this from the café: it is early afternoon, summer swelter. A man my height, fair hair, dark face, sits at the bar. He always comes alone. Men like him, who sit alone at the bar, always start stories which they can't wrap up. First they gaze at the bar, then at their glass, then they heave an *uuuh*. I play dumb. It's a survival mechanism inscribed in me over the centuries. That man always sits at the bar when there's no one else in the café except me. He orders a pint. I always pour pints carefully, lest someone get upset by all that foam. He keeps quiet at first, plays with the beer mat, then he says:

– What's your name?

I answer.

– Where do you live?

Mum.

– I said, where do you live?

I tell him it's none of his business. He raises the pint and asks:

– How 'bout I cracked your skull right now?

The heavy espresso portafilter is already in my hand, I grip the handle and keep my eyes on the pint glass; I see every protrusion on it, it's bigger than my head. In such moments your head clears up and every thought becomes accurate. I see everything: I'm faster, I'll kill him, I'll go to jail. The portafilter is just a swing away from his face. One fly keeps circling round us. I shiver as I look at the face which suddenly no longer belongs to anyone. He looks back at me, with his blue eyes, looks and looks and puts the pint down on the bar. And leaves. Two banknotes fall on the

floor. Ten minutes after him I step out and pace in the same circle round the café. I call my boss. When he arrives, I go home.

– In early tonight? – Father asks.

– Not much going on at work – I reply.

I eat a piece of lesso meat and spend half the night sitting on the bed, looking at my hand which I don't recognise. I become even more frightened. The next day my boss, with his wide meaty palm, catapults the patron into the category of former patrons. I get fired not long after, over the phone. They tell me they have more waitresses then they need. But I know it's because I'm not endearing.

But you are my deary, whispers Volga.

– But, whose hands are these, Volga?

VOLGA

No one knows if Volga made a sound. Perhaps she'd kept quiet all day, or she may have said something like:

– This soup needs more pepper.

She may have whistled like the pressure cooker on the stove. Whistled and sunk like a carrot into a knuckle-deep layer of yellow fat. Into the froth at her mouth.

I don't know, but I see this: her sitting on a chair at the kitchen table. She fills her space. Her legs are not crossed and stretch on to the end of the world. As I circle round her, I see a valley in her short black hair, as though she'd taken a quick kip just before death. Her head is cocked on her right shoulder, her mouth is open. Her mouth normally looks like the beak of a chicken. On the table in front of her is a packet of cigarettes, and on it a photograph of human lungs. White, non-smoker's lungs. To this day Volga thinks those are angel wings. Now her white hands hang free, empty. She's crossed the ell to eternity. She left her body a few hours ago and it is now rearranging itself, compressing. Her daughter is in the kindergarten, playing with blocks. For days she's been playing with blocks.

I pull Volga's ear and I whisper into it:

– How are you going to fall in love now?

Her sister tells me about it at the kitchen table.

A week after the funeral I fly into a fit and slam a plate on the floor. I pick a faceless one, something I'd use to get my neighbour some cake, and I slam it. It doesn't break. I'm a bit

embarrassed. I pick it up again and bang it on the floor with all my might. It smashes to bits and I scream inside *How are you going to fall in love now, motherfucker*?

– Don't remove this for two days – I say to Father as we stare at the shards.

For the next two days, Father lifts his feet high as he steps over the fragments, he walks across the kitchen like a peacock.

Volga's real name is Olga. But she's always been Volga.

Volga as in, Volga-Volga, not as in Olga-Olga.

See how they put angel wings on the cigarettes? Are they mental?

They are completely mental, Volga-Volga.

CITY

The lampposts shine a dim yellow light on our city. The colour is that of urine from a drowsy dehydrated body. The few evening strollers on our main promenade are mostly elderly couples. Doing their constitutionals and digesting early supper. The odd puppy-walker, a group of secondary school kids here and there. Long-standing cafés are closing, fast food restaurants opening. Small shops are disappearing. A haberdashery that used to be known as Partizanka, now Jadranka, is surviving. I like to go there and shop for pins, zippers and buttons. I'm going to Partizanka, I say. There's a famous crystal jewellery shop on the main promenade, I've never set foot there and I always wonder who shops there. Whoever is buying those crystals isn't buying them regularly, this is a small city. Pressed into a hill.

We live in the centre, near the port. In our neighbourhood, the smaller buildings look like they're gathered round something dead, observing in silence. That's what our inner yards look like, littered with clothes pegs, old towels and stiff mice. The beige façade of our building is flaking off, and the walls of two of the balconies are painted pink and blue. By the building is a lamppost which often props up a drunken theatre actor. Plenty of people live around us, so we don't feel all alone. That's our socialisation, watching people pass us by, drink coffee in beer gardens, drop scraps of paper on the ground on purpose for us to pick up and give back, watching them when, in the supermarket queue, they say to Father:

– Go on before me, you've got fewer items.

It's easier that way, when you know there are humans around.

This is a city of quiet arrivals and even quieter departures. Once divided into two parts by a small river and human will, this city is sinking into the sea with its buildings. The houses are leaning and sinking. It smells of chestnuts and asphalt. Italian coffee and American burgers. City cats are

neutered and spayed and seldom quarrelsome. If a dog wanders in, alarm is raised to find out who the owner is. If the owner can't be found, the dog is taken high up above the city where all former strays live, to a gated forest asylum, so sometimes it is as if the forest is barking.

We weren't born in the wrong place, we are cut out precisely for this city. We are tiny and we can slip between parked cars and buildings with ease. We fit in the toilets of city cafés in which there is always a mosquito lying in wait, even long after the end of the summer. Our beaches aren't all dolled up and full of palm trees, so we lie around and relax. As though we belonged to an older world in which everyone had a swimsuit in the wardrobe. It's a world in which we comb our hair on the beach by the shipping containers and return home in jeans pulled over our bare arses. A world in which Buga sunbathes on the roof of a building and I'm afraid that she would slip and fall naked onto the pavement, slathered in olive oil as she is.

There is a dearth of sunny weather outside of summer season. Sometimes we don't see the sun for weeks, we catch a glimpse of it only when it's setting and shining on the top of the mountain. When a bright sunny day dawns after a lot of rain, Father opens the window with a painful grimace. As if his face were an antique book that needed to be protected from light.

I sometimes climb onto the tower above the city and watch from above the streets that I'm normally afraid of, where I don't venture at night. I've read somewhere that's called geography of fear. I once dreamt that I'm up on the tower, it's night and I'm pulling some kind of cable on purpose, leaving the entire city without power. After the city goes out, I light up a cigarette.

– If the cities kick the bucket, the sea lives on. If the sea kicks the bucket, everything kicks the bucket – says Volga.

This city has a funerary culture. It was among the first cities in Europe to have a public cemetery. The cemetery is now listed cultural property. My family lie there, refined in death.

This city lies on an unblessed stretch of coastline which doesn't bear the name of a saint. A stretch of coast shouldn't bear a human name anyway.

In the bay between the islands there are three sea gates: Small, Large and Medium. Those doors lead to our harbour where the cawing of the birds heralds the violence of the sea and the wind.

THE MERCY OF A BIRD

Father's feet are swollen. It is summer, but no great heat so far. And even if it was hot, how is it possible for his feet to swell so much as to take up the entire boat? Swollen and bluish, as if Father had drunk sea water. When we set out and he hopped onto the boat, I thought he would sink it.

– Do your feet hurt? I ask.

– A bit – he answers.

– Does your heart ache?

– Never.

– How about finding a woman?

– How about finding a man? One who won't cause you to lose weight?

How? We're in the middle of the sea all the time. Except Buga and Volga, only the squid look at us with those big eyes of theirs. We don't smell nice. Maybe the dolphins will start kissing us in the end.

– If I find one, shall we take him fishing? – I ask.

– We shall, as long as he's not talkative.

I agree. It's nice when a man is quiet. When he emerges from his silence and says something like I'm freezing, warm me up. You can't take just about anyone on a boat. Some lose their mind when they ask about the toilet, and you tell them:

– Well, you just lean over.

No, thanks, they'll hold it in whilst our arses glisten in the sun, above the sea. A plop is heard now and again, and the young breams in the sea scatter like small bolts of lightning. The breams act as if they never do it. We call them blackarses.

A gull lands on the left side of the boat as my arse hangs above the sea. It looks at me. Looks and looks and looks at me and then at Father. So large is the gull that we could set up a circus here, we've got about enough fish. The seagulls aren't afraid of us in the city, let alone so many miles from it. We don't believe in the concept of a satiated seagull, but we let him sit there at arm's length. The gulls have got the beak for every task.

Keeping people at arm's length rarely happens at once. It proceeds gradually, like taking measurements for a fine bespoke coat. It can stem from the need to be alone for a bit, because normally there is always someone around you. Or because you grow bored with the things people say easily. One often alienates oneself when one feels broken deep inside. It didn't happen to the two of us at once. We used to be quite social, Father in his youth, me in primary school. The seclusion started with our room. We could never invite anyone to our home. All our birthdays were celebrated somewhere out. I had friends who'd say from time to time:

– I've never seen your room.

I would say nothing. Instead, I put up posters on the wall, and so above my parents' bed hung a picture of a fat Elvis Presley with whom I was so deeply in love that I found it unacceptable that he was dead.

– But he's so dead – Mother would say.

Those you let into your life, into that room, you expose to objects that are very important to you, as important as your own self. You expose them to objects which they delicately touch as though they were a hidden treasure hoard, not rubbish. Those you let into that room you keep close. Have them keep your secret. So I kept Volga for as long as I could. So I'm keeping her even now as she floats.

In the street I always looked like everyone else. Until Father was sent to the mountain to defend the country. In my childhood they dressed me nicely, the patissier from our street would shout *principessa*! when I walked past. But in secondary, when combat boots were all the rage – not proper combat boots, but those made for my generation of peacetime soldiers – I wore the real deal. Father's, the previous country's army standard issue, size 9. My size is 7.5. To hide how oversized they were, I pulled on my mother's black floor-length skirt. I scraped across the city, scraped as if there was a medal waiting for me at the end of the road. When winter came, Mother and I couldn't afford sheer tights so under the skirt I wore violet swishy tracksuit bottoms. Volga saw that. She still flies silently and sees everything. If Volga were a bird, she'd be a scops owl.

– You haven't got a woman because Buga is watching you – I say to Father.

He silently steers Kalinka towards the island. His feet are so swollen by now I don't know how he's going to move about. The white vulture is still sitting on the side of the boat, staring on. I hum:

Cranberry, cranberry, my little cranberry!

My little raspberry in a bed of strawberries!

Oh, under the pine, the green, green pine

Lay me down to sleep!

Rock me, rock me, rock me,

Lay me down to sleep.

At home, as we prepare to go to bed, Father tells me he hasn't got the teeth for a woman.

MY ROOM

I call Nonna's flat a house. The house is ours now, but hers forever. When asked where we are, we say that we're in Nonna's house. Of all her things, Father chucked out only Jesus. The sleepless night on the Mount of Olives that hung above his head wouldn't let Father sleep. Still, Father

takes a sleeping pill every night, just in case. Because we've had a situation where he was without pills for a week, and when he returned from the shop he asked:

– Why is the face of everyone in the street so twisted out of shape?

Or, later, on the boat:

– Why are these fish without eyes?

The fishes' eyes are melting in Nonna's pan, on Nonna's stove. Gills sizzle, and I'm lying on the bed in a room from which I have nowhere to escape but to the sea, on the gill. Now all the drawers in the room are mine.

It's a warm evening, soon it'll be warm enough to jump into the sea from the boat. During the sultry summer periods, Mother would sleep here, on the floor, by the window. I would lower my hand onto her blond hair and stroke the red edge of her ear with my index finger. I remember best of all how animated she was in her sleep, how her arms and legs twitched… *Sleep, I'm not going to hurt you*, I whisper to her. From the floor I shift my gaze to the walls. It would be good to paint them, before the whole flat melts down into a scorching soup, I think. I'll buy a new table, new glasses. I want to cuddle with someone. Where should I bring him? I pull up a yellow blanket with stars and lay my palms between my stiff thighs. They are sore from tottering about on the boat, from *go there*, whereby *there* feels like it's fifty yards away. *Give some water to the porgy. Why so cramped*? Easy, easy… my fingers are thin wet adders. Somewhat stiff. Easy, I repeat in my mind. If I bring a man, he will look at me only. Everything else will disappear. Everything else will shrink and compress into the *kumulica*, into small change. The asymmetrical wardrobe door, mum's kindergarten chair, all the clothes, the television set, the stickers from comprehensive, everything will disappear between my legs. Everything will disappear with me in the first orgasmic pulse. My womb is cracked soil ants march out of. March straight into his eyes. That man now can't see anything. He can't see me either, his breath leaves him and disappears like a shadow on the street corner. Volga is standing by the wardrobe saying:

This day is pure lead.

I once believed that I'd left my room permanently. When I went to live with the man I loved, I left only my baggy denim overalls behind in the wardrobe. Father said:

– Don't forget the towels.

When I returned after a while, it seemed the room would be the measure of my life forever. Whatever fits inside, fits. All the things that were part of the attempt to start a new life – new and old clothes, new foot tub, a set of coffee cups, a soap holder, cushions and long curtains, all of that I crammed into the two wardrobes. Now all of it is mine and belongs to another, more beautiful home, and it threatens to collapse on me. When I returned, Father asked:

– Did you remember to bring the towels? We're running short.

After that he gave me a brief hug. He smelt of camphor.

Our building is one of those nobody lifts their eyes to. Especially not to the very top, where we, like birds, live. It's a four-storey that used to belong to the Church. It's over a hundred years old and is rooted in the graves of priests. Our building shakes from mild earthquakes now and again, so the safest place in every flat is the doorframe. In moments of possible catastrophe we frame ourselves there, like a family photo. I often can't tell earthquakes from selfquakes.

Today is exactly like that.

I stick my knee out towards the Moon. Now everything in this room is looking at me. In the knicker-drawer are the caramels. The aroma of fried porgies wafts in through the barred window. I once chucked my doll Laura out that window. It's such a small window, only a doll can jump out of it. It's by the very floor.

TAMARISK

I think losing her index finger at the sawmill is what killed Buga. She got a job there when she was in her early forties, when Father had just been demobilised and was unemployed. Debts forced her to close her café. Father had returned from war in one piece, only for her finger to be blown away indirectly by that same war. I remember her getting ready for work early in the morning, putting on her make-up, light pink shadow on her eye-lids and black mascara on her lashes. The pink eye shadow gave her grief. She bought it by mistake, she didn't see that it cost a third of her salary. This she realised only at the register, when the receipt was already printed and she was too embarrassed to return it. Thus dolled up, slightly swollen and awake as awake can be, she drinks her coffee in murky mornings. Those mornings are silent and hers only. Nothing but the exhaling of cigarette smoke is heard. When the church tower tolls three times for quarter to six, she stands up and replaces her pink dressing gown with a black ski suit. Underneath she wears black thermal track suit bottoms, and on her feet a pair of black polyester-lined boots. Flat soles, no heels. She goes down the stairs so softly, as if threading through snow, so blackly, like a panther. As I watch her, I become emotional at the memory of her beige summer boots which she bought during the care-free Yugoslav era. I remember, it was early spring and it had been raining for months. That's what it looked like to us. It seemed to me as though we were living in cardboard boxes, like alley cats that kids took pity on. Our buildings soaked up enormous quantities of soft rainwater. They too went soft eventually, and started to rot. Father then went from one state service to another to apply for some veteran benefits. He walked round the city slightly bent because he had several damaged vertebrae. One of those rainy days I come home from school, and Buga is sitting at the dining table with her hand bandaged, crying large locks of tears. She's unable to tell me what happened, she just stares at me, cries and rocks, as if to put it to sleep, her hand, a pink newborn.

– It hurts – she repeats.

– Come on, it's just one finger – I tell her later, because I don't know any better. In that moment I'm happy the machine didn't saw through all of Buga. I haven't got the faintest clue as to how close of a call it was.

Afterwards, everything she writes looks like the scribbling of a five-year-old.

The sawmill is high above the city, surrounded by a thick evergreen forest. The trees look like priests meditating or praying for the souls of the departed, and the whole forest like an open-air monastery. Many women work at the sawmill, pressed for money, oppressed by time. Few of them come to work with make-up on, unlike Buga. When the work is done and the sun turns to old gold on its way down, I see fine wood dust on Buga's eye-lashes.

Whilst she's working, I'm in love, I levitate, and I store inside me, like fast food, all the bad things happening around me. So I swallow Buga's maimed hand like a croissant. I go for a coffee with my boyfriend, I laugh at almost everything he says and every now and then electric charge flows through my stomach as though I've been tased. I feel shame and don't say anything to anyone, not even myself. At home, Father and I pretend everything is normal. If we start to talk about it, the words will electrify in the air and fry us. We haven't found our place in the world and therefore we barely belong to our bodies, to one another and to this city. Buga is clumsy, not because she's left-handed but because her eyes have long been unable to focus. She mourns her index finger with all of our house – objects drop from her hands and break, food becomes saltier, the worn-out kitchen dirtier, we don't even turn on the radio. I see her bring a pot of soup and put it on the table, and I imagine her eyes would spill into our plates, that she would go back to the kitchen eyeless, as if nothing happened.

Then she rocks that hand on her small breasts, going *shhhhhh*, *shhhhhh*. A tired Buga, sleep-deprived, soothes herself as if she were someone else, someone even more powerless. I scrub the stove and I ask her why she didn't ask them to let her keep the finger, so that we preserve it somehow. She says that wasn't possible. We have ownership of our body parts only when they are attached to us.

In her dreams, Buga has a full complement of fingers.

She is a finger that has separated from our hand.

Perhaps we could've dried her index finger like a tamarisk twig and put it under a pillow or above a window, like a dreamcatcher. Catcher of waking dreams, if such dreams exist in the first place – dreams about saving one's fingers. Sometimes one has to become a part of someone else's dream so that one's own dream may come true in that other person's dream, but this brings the dreamer mere solace. In one dream after another, the person being dreamt of lifts up a great white kitchen, lifts it in long stages, thoroughly and slowly as if erecting a monument to his or her life that soars up to god's nose.

When Buga was disobedient, her father belted her with a broad brown belt. He belted her, snowy as she was with her blond locks, like a picture from a Christmas orb, till she turned livid. I hate the fact that I imagine this. I would take the little Buga in my arms and kiss her pink eye-lids till she fell asleep. *Sleep, my little cranberry, sleep, tomorrow we shall burn the belts of the righteous*.

We all love Buga, but we rarely tell her that.

Our cat Big Bum loves Buga, too, but she no longer leaps into her lap.

A restlessness the size of an oak tree rules this house.

We would saw off its branches that threaten our heads, but it seems to me we're not cut out for the job. When I imagine serenity, I imagine it as a leopard slumbering on the thickest branch in the crown of the tree which has possessed our home. Its large spotted paws casually hang above our table as I carve a chicken for Buga on a plate. I hear it breathing shallowly, abandoning itself to the dreaming. And so its dream wipes away our day.

A bit farther from our house grow tamarisks. A tamarisk tree grows bendy, like my father. With its twigs it combs the wind creating a lee. In this way, it protects from the wind and salt even the bigger trees growing behind it. When it withers, it crumbles. When it blossoms, its crown is a soft pink. That is the colour of Buga's light summer skirt. When she walks through the city in it, with all her fingers, the city becomes more polite, more beautiful. In the street they have a pet name for her – *prima donna* – and on she walks, like a prima donna, a creature that may not be touched.

Things don't matter. Say the people who can afford things.

Buga invested a part of her body in us having things in our house.

Our cat Big Bum saw to it that we have someone to pet, swear at and call by pet names. I remember how Buga put Big Bum in her lap and stroked her. Big Bum raised her bum high and contorted like a devil, huffing and puffing. Buga stroked her head, neck and back, careful not to touch her belly, careful not to bother her too much. She stroked her, going *shhhhhhh* till the cat calmed down, and then Buga, too, fell asleep at the kitchen table, propping up her head with her hand. I saw the missing index finger. Buga's head is tiny, it could've slipped through the gap.

Then I realised you can only quieten a devil by petting it in your lap. You have to say to it:

– You're mine, it's ok.

Then balance of power happens.

Father doesn't understand this. Father chases devils around the city. That's what his face looks like as he walks down the high street, as if he's about to kill them all. I make him at least wear his sunglasses while he's at it.

It would seem Buga was attacked by her own body after she'd lost her illusions and her index finger. The assault started from her sinuses and branched downwards and swelled like a rainy spring.

Buga took her last breath in a crowded hospital room. For three months she'd been losing her senses, weight, hair and finally her ability to speak. The morning before Father and I arrive, after her gastrostomy, she is lying on a gurney. Tubes stick out of her nose. Tears drip from her blue eyes. In her nightstand she has a packet of cigarettes, but for the first time in her life she is unable to light up. Therefore Buga inhales a large chunk of air into her deflated body, opens her eyes wide and disappears without a cloud of smoke. It is early morning and everyone around her body is still asleep.

Father sees her for the last time a day before the surgery. Furtively, he carries her to the toilet. There they smoke and drink the coffee he brought from home. I see her for the last time in waking as she lies cold on the mortuary cosmetologist's metal table. I pick an eye-shadow for her eye-lids and a blush for her cheeks. That which departs leaves the hand – the new-born. That which remains no longer resembles my mother. And from that moment on I call her by her name – Buga.

[***]

THE SMELL OF FATHER AFTER WORK

When he returned home from the office, Father smelt like a Yugoslav office sofa: of Vecchia Romagna, cigarettes, carbon paper, old plush and beef leather. Every day we expected him to shout from the doorway that we got a new flat from his company. Instead of heralding the glad tidings, he would eat dinner and have a lie-down, uncovered. I'd cover him with a blanket, and he'd remove it because being uncovered guaranteed he'd get up shortly. So he would get up frozen and quiet. I remember when they said there would be a war, before air raid alarms started, I nagged him to stock up on food. One day he came from work tired and went to bed, and I took his wallet from his pocket and went to get leavening, flour, rice and milk. He didn't even get upset. Luv, you're taking it too far, that's what he said to me. Later, in his mature years, when his company went out of business and he was returning from the shipyard, he smelt of sweat, iron, cigarettes and recycled shopping bags. I would watch him doss in the armchair after dinner with his shoes untied, and I sniffed him. His body has taken on a slightly sour smell, one that a man takes on when he worries a lot and would like nothing better than to escape his life. But instead of escaping, he, like me, would sink into deep sleep. Sleeping in the armchair was good for his heartburn. His head would drop on his chest, he'd breathe shallowly, from time to time he'd let loose a whimper, as if he had a headache or had stubbed his pinky toe. He was all twitchy, as though he was unable to find justice even in his dreams. I remember how he released air through his mouth, it sounded like deflating a balloon. On Christmas we'd sprinkle him with

golden strands of fairy hair as he lay sour and sleeping. Nowadays, when he comes home from the boat, he falls asleep on a dining chair. He leans the left side of his face on the wall. He smells like a shipwreck, like a cast net, like a landing hook, like a trawl net, like offal. He's all inside out, smirking, exposed, he trusts only his house which surveils him with me. After a while, I go to bed too, and the smells no longer exist for us.

[***]

PEOPLE WHO REMAIN TO LIVE IN THE CITY CENTRE

Our neighbours are quiet creatures. Like prawns at the sea bottom. That is how they move, too – in swift, small steps they pass by one another left and right. They have prawn eyes, wandering and defocused. They are unassuming, elderly people who seldom know how to stand up for themselves. Their front doors are clean, there is no 'WELCOME' on their mats. Our neighbours, unlike fishermen, seem somewhat unreal. They have small dogs that look like bouquets of dried flowers. Like pampas grass. The dogs make up for their owners' silence. They own their owners. Perhaps that is a sign of our times – seeking the love of an animal.

I look at our elderly neighbours picking up their little dogs' warm turdlets off the street. The difficulty with which they stoop down. I think about Father and his ageing. About how he never got used to doing things online and prefers to be vexed in the counter halls of various institutions. The first thing he asked during his first encounter with the Internet was:

– What are goji berries?

I don't know how it happened that he first saw goji berries, but happen it did. Goji berries get on our nerves. Chia seeds as well. Still, we were not raised as predators.

Exactly below us live two sisters, two elderly panthers. The two nonagenarian Italian women are the only noisy tenants in our building. They often beat up one another. Cries are heard:

– *Aiutooo! Mi ucciderá!*

Of course she's not going to kill her. Nothing external will ever kill the two of them. They will simply die when their existence loses its meaning and sense.

When I was child, every time I misbehaved my mother threatened me thus:

– I'll have the Italians come upstairs!

In this country we are threatened with noisy people, rather than quiet ones. Noisy people get all the negativity out, whilst the quiet ones keep quiet, don't poison themselves all the way, and eventually commit some unimaginable things.

People who remain to live in the city centre often have nowhere else to go. In recent years they've been sharing their blocks with tourists more and more. Along with yachts, here also berth great big cruisers. Blackbirds fly above them like knives in the air.

If a cruiser casts its shadow for a long time, marine flora die. If a cruiser casts its shadow for a long time, the city bends. The people who remain to live in the city centre put up a quiet resistance. They remain faithful to the city to the very end, till the tourists eat them with mousse, a bed of rocket, and black risotto.

Our neighbours are quiet creatures and are threatened by extinction. The few streets round the market and the fishmonger's are their coral reef. They're not obsessed with life, they merely live it. Sometimes they make up for the greyness of their blocks with fine light blue shirts and fluttery floral dresses. Who knows what they daydream about? But daydreams are declarations of love to someone or something else. Therefore other people's daydreams are by and large of no interest to us.

Our neighbours are like vultures. Like us, they lay dead bread on their tables. All the bread from the nearby bakeries looks dead.

[...]

OLD WORLD VULTURES

In order to love and thrive, scavenging birds require spaces of deep peace. In our area, they nest on high cliffs above the sea, on an island opposite our city. They line their nests of twigs with sheep wool.

We often see them flying in kettles of two or three. As they fly they almost never flap their wings. Their great big dark wings are made for smooth gliding. They are quiet birds. They hiss rather than chirp. And there aren't many of them. When our boat gets close enough to the island, Father says:

– Lift your head.

Then we spot them. They fly high, so high indeed that we barely see them in the glaring sunlight. They look like aeroplanes in the heights. Their wingspan is up to three metres.

– Imagine we were birds – I say to Father.

– And the world was our toilet – he replies.

– Imagine Big Bum was a bird.

– She'd be a bumblebee.

As griffons, those pharaonic chickens, fly above our heads, I feel elated.

Their wedding flights begin in early autumn and they fly in pairs, wing to wing. Last autumn the newspapers ran a story:

“Eighty-nine griffon chicks fledge in Kvarner”

Such news is the best news around here.

Vultures are patient birds. The god of justice rode a griffon vulture. The Zoroastrians gifted the bodies of their dead to vultures. They carry human souls to the other side. Shamans take on the form of a vulture the easier to navigate between the worlds. Griffons enter people’s lives as spirit animals when people need a new sense of direction, when a great change is impending. It seems they weren’t heralds of change to my father and me. It seems they don’t find us interesting. But here, at sea, we, too, navigate between the worlds, with them escorting us. And during the hardest of times, just like vultures, we remain loyal to one another.

Young griffons, after their first flight, do not linger in our area. They move on, they scatter round the old continents, and return to us when they are about five years of age and have reached sexual maturity. Then they nest on the stone shelves of our cliffs. Their nests can be up to on metre wide. Males and females jointly care for the offspring. Griffons mate for life, they can live together for forty years. I don’t know how they mourn, we’ve never seen them mourning. Sorrow hides an animal away and eventually becomes one with it.

Sometimes, as we wait for the fish, Father and I foretell future events on the basis of their flight. It’s likely that we’re not doing it properly, but who’s there to complain?

– This couple are flying towards the edge of the world – I say.

– Which mans the mountain will twat down on our city – Father prophesies.

Or:

– There aren’t any in the sky today.

– Which means they’re flying in someone’s dream.

We never prophesy our own destiny. And since we therefore don’t know what awaits us, we survive everything.

The language of the birds is deceptive; rather than war for territory, in their lively voices we hear summery joy. Griffons have a fluted tongue so as to be able to suck marrow out of the bones of the carrion. As for feeding and prophesying, unlike turtle doves, griffons are unclean birds. However, when they sink their fluffy heads into the cold, soft tissue of a sheep, the whole unclean process cleanses nature. Likewise, our impure prophesying purifies our thoughts.

Of all the living creatures, except plants, birds have the finest build. Or so I’ve read somewhere. Griffons move on the ground like ballerinas. Their adagio is for the carrion, not for any audience. Also, of all animal faces, the face of a bird looks the wisest. As they travel through the air light of

heart, it is no wonder that we see them as our connection with the world of deceased mothers and friends. We, who wait down below for a world without a final judgment, and they, who don't care one way or the other.

I once dreamt of an adult griffon standing in the middle of a meadow surrounded by the letters of the alphabet. The world seemed to be at a complete halt, only a gentle breeze ruffled the feathery collar on the great bird's neck. I asked him what would be the name of my child. He replied: palm. When I woke up, I thought: perhaps I will receive a child on the palm of my hand, like a kitten is received. Actually, I'm convinced that the only grandchild my father would ever have would be Big Bum, the cat that gazes at the sky and looks like she runs the universe.

Humans take good care of the griffons. A young female once wandered into a foreign country on her first flight, and they put her on an aeroplane and sent her home. When I told that to Father, he said:

– My pick-axe of a nose is growing, I'm starting to look like a vulture myself.

And, really, it's not just the nose, there is also his thinning crown and his narrow, rounded shoulders. Like a general full of rheumatism, so sits my father in Kalinka as the sun runs down his back and farther, along the edge of the peninsula we call world's end.