CROATIAN LITERATURE

Damir Karakaš

Damir Karakaš was born in 1967 in the village of Plašćica in Lika, the mountainous region of Croatia. After attending university in Zagreb he was reporting for Croatian daily newspaper *Večernji list*, later becoming a reporter from war-fronts in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. He is the author of eight books, out of which there are three short story collections and two novels. His works were translated to French, English, German, Spanish, Czech, Slovak, Macedonian, Slovenian, and Arabic. He is putting up performances and exhibits conceptual art. In 2008 a movie made according to his short stories collection *Kino Lika* was released, directed by Dalibor Matanić, winning numerous awards in Croatia and abroad. He writes theatre plays and his play 'We almost never lock up' was directed by Paolo Magelli as a part of a play 'Zagreb Pentagram', the most awarded theater play in Croatia in 2009. His plays were performed at the theatres in Croatia, Serbia, Germany and Chile, and the last one called 'Sniper' in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. He is currently located in Zagreb.

„Brilliant author who does miracles on a very little space."
– Zarez magazine

„Karakaš has a superb talent to draw the reader into his world, no matter if it is Lika or Paris."
– Radio 101

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MAIN WORKS:

Bosnians are good folks (*Bosanci su dobri ljudi*), travel prose
Kombetars (*Kombetari*), novel
Lika Movie Theater (*Kino Lika*), short stories
How I Entered Europe (*Kako sam ušao u Europu*), documentary novel
Eskimos (*Eskimi*), short stories
Perfect Place for Misery (*Sjajno mjesto za nesreću*), novel
Colonel Beethoven (*Pukovnik Beethoven*), short stories
Blue Moon, novel

„This is a novel you can't stop reading, but you also feel somewhat bad, because the main protagonist was one of the few who had any perspective at all."
– Jutarnji list

TRANSLATIONS:

Lika Movie Theater: Czech Republic (Dauphin), Slovenia (Beletrina)

How I Entered Europe: Serbia (LOM)

Perfect Place for Misery: Macedonia (Makedonska reč), Serbia (B92), Germany (Dittrich Verlag)

„This is a perfect place for new Croatian literature!"
– Večernji list

RIGHTS SOLD:

Perfect Place for Misery: Czech Republic (Doplnek), Egypt (Maktabet Dar El Kalema)

Damir Karakaš
It's Me

(story – published in *McSweeney's Quarterly* no. 48, 2014)

1.

Philip was standing by the window in white long johns. From time to time he sighed through his nose, blew on the glass to melt a misty layer off the window, and then looked through that little hole, as if through someone else's eyes, at the row of tall willow trees covered with so much snow that their limbs sagged under the weight. What Philip liked, almost obsessively, was the moment—he once called it the moment of true feeling—when the willows, with almost stylized movements, cast off that weight, shaking off the snow, and the branches slowly sprang back up, releasing themselves, as if growing again.

As he watched that scene of liberation, everything seemed to Philip to separate from what it had just been connected to.

* * *

"Please, honey, fix that cotton on the Christmas tree," Philip's wife said in a tender voice. "You might pay a little more attention."

Philip turned around slowly; she was mixing dough, rolling it out, sprinkling flour onto it. Her arms were covered in flour up to her elbows.

Philip went slowly up to the Christmas tree in the corner of the room, where the afternoon shadows were thickening: he looked at it. Then he spread out the fluffed cotton on its edges, which was supposed to imitate snow.

Philip's wife stopped kneading the dough for a moment, looked straight at the tree, tilted her head, and then moved back, trying to find the right angle.

"Good, now it's much better," she said.

Shortly afterward she stopped what she was doing again.

"Did I hear something?" she asked.

Then she said: "Please, go take a look."

Philip got up and went to the little room whose door was painted blue, with little golden stars scattered over it: inside, two children were sleeping next to one another. They had pacifiers in their mouths and their little noses twitched like rabbits' snouts. Philip covered them a little better with the blanket, went up to the window of the room, and continued looking into the white, at the cars that passed at regular intervals.

A truck came down the street with its turn signal on, as if it were winking. Philip thought that someone was mocking him. He returned to the living room, went up to the window again, and stared, motionless, at the willows.

The two of them had come here to Canada, to this city that some still call "the Chicago of the north," when the war had started in their country. His wife's older sister had already been living here. They'd been here for a long time, now, snow and icebound.

His wife had been trained as an elementary school teacher. Now she worked as a cleaning lady in the neighboring houses. He had an electrical engineering degree but worked in a bus factory, screwing in screws. He focused on the last twist of each screw. His boss, a wire-haired Dane, constantly repeated the same thing: "Concentrate on the last twist! Concentrate on the last twist!"

Philip, not wanting to think about anything, would just nod.

The house that they'd rented with the help of his sister-in-law was a simple, one-story house. His wife dreamed of having her own house or apartment, someday. Philip just nodded. Even before she would finish what she was saying, he nodded.

All he'd cared about was avoiding conscription, but now he regretted it. Leaving. He would have rather been in a war than here.

A child was crying in the little room. His wife said: "Please, Philip, go take a look."

He went back to the room. The pacifier had fallen out of one child's mouth, and then its crying had woken up the other child, whose pacifier had been lost as well. He restored the pacifiers to their places and waited a little for the children to fall back asleep.

"You know what occurred to me?" his wife asked when he sauntered back out. He sat down on the couch to leaf through some newspaper advertisements and nodded to signal that he was listening.

"Did you know that the Indians here can get free credit?" she asked, kneading the cakes, putting all of herself into those movements. "And you have that Indian friend." She stopped, looked at him, and blew a lock of hair from her brow. "Why couldn't he find one more Indian, so they could affirm that you're an Indian, too? I asked around—actually my sister asked around. It's a great idea, isn't it?"

He looked at her, and then looked away, at some point beyond the wall. His wife spread out the dough as far as the ends of the table, then sprinkled flour on it in wide motions, as if she were sowing a field.

"I know it's immoral," she said, "but think of our children a little. We can't let a chance like that slip by."

He still didn't say anything. He was thinking about that Indian, George Welcome; what a strange surname, he'd said to himself when he'd met him. He'd thought that the man was joking about it, at first, but George was always dead serious. He always had his arms folded over his chest. Once Philip had even seen him walking like that.

"Philip...?"

He lifted his gaze to her and sat up on the couch.

"My sister is coming in half an hour. She'll explain everything to you. And I forgot to tell you, she and her husband are inviting us to a New Year's Eve party. That's nice, right?" she said, removing her apron and throwing it carelessly over the nearest chair.

"It's at some fancy hotel," she added.

They heard a car outside. Its muffled sound was drawing nearer. He stood up and slid his feet more firmly into his slippers.

"Please, just go change out of that underwear," his wife said from the door.

He went to the closet, pulled a pair of jeans over his long johns, sat down in an armchair, and played with the slippers on his feet.

"Philip...?" his wife said. She sat down on the couch and stretched out her legs. "You know what I think? You should start thinking about taking some vacation and going to your brother's place when the weather gets a little better there, so you can get that house of yours sorted out. Enough time has passed, and we need every dinar we can get. It's time to divide up the property. And then we'll figure out about that free credit. I'll take a look at plane tickets tomorrow."

2

When the plane landed, he took a taxi to the bus station.

He bought a ticket for the bus to Brinje. He was lucky; he would catch the only one leaving that day.

The bus was old, with paint peeling off its sides. It was almost empty, but it moved so slowly that it seemed weighted down, or as if it were dragging the road along with it. Philip sat up front near the driver, who wore a cap and drove with one hand while he switched radio stations with the other.

After two hours of driving they arrived at Brinje. There was no one on the main street except a man hauling sacks of cement on a wooden wheelbarrow, weaving back and forth. In the middle of the town, up on a hillock, stood the ruins of a medieval castle. Wooden scaffolding had been erected all around it. It occurred to Philip that he'd never actually seen that castle without the scaffolding.

Philip turned off the main road, onto a side road that went up toward gray, jagged mountains, their peaks piercing the sky. He walked with his rucksack on his back, looking at the straggling villages. He breathed in the air and recognized the smells of his childhood. Around him people were dressed in a mixture of civilian and camouflage clothing. The houses cast elongated shadows across the road.

In the yard of an old farmhouse he saw a Gypsy who'd knocked a sorrel horse down onto its side. The Gypsy was sitting on the horse's head and smoking nonchalantly. A different, older Gypsy was picking at the hoof of the horse with the tip of a knife blade. Philip could hear female voices inside the farmhouse, and the crying of a small baby. Both men greeted him with a nod. He nodded back. He knew most of the Gypsies here; he'd gone to school with many of them. But he didn't know these men. They'd probably settled here after the war.

Farther on, the houses near the road disappeared. Philip continued walking, passing reddish-yellow pools, the choruses of frogs resounding in the air. He marched through denser and denser woods, the birds in the trees droning like a well-tuned orchestra.

He used to walk to the cinema through these same woods, in spite of the sinister howling of wolves. Strangely, his father hadn't forbid him to go to the cinema. It was only drawing that he'd hated. Whenever he'd seen something Philip had drawn, he'd gone wild, tearing it up and thrashing Philip good with a switch.

His father hated sketching and anything that reminded him of it from the depths of his soul. He would say: "You should eradicate bad things from a man while he's still young."

Andrija, Philip's older brother by four years, took this advice to heart. Whenever he caught Philip drawing, he'd tear up his sketch and beat him up. Then he would report it all to their satisfied father. He was his father's little soldier. Once Philip saw him literally saluting their drunken father as he reported having torn up two of Philip's sketches. Andrija had slapped him, that time.

Their father approved of all this; their mother didn't get involved. Andrija had even gone as far, once, as to undress Philip and toss him naked into a bed of nettles. Another time he'd walked on top of him, furious; Philip had begged him to stop, but his brother had just stepped on him harder, and added in a few kicks and punches.

Philip had tried to run into his mother's arms, once. But when Andrija came over to beat him, his mother said only, "Don't hit him on the head, just don't hit him on the head." Her breath stank of slivovitz. "Whoever deserves a beating should get it," she would say. She thought he wasn't sufficiently obedient to his father, who, to her mind, only wanted what was best for him.

With time, Philip stopped drawing. In art class, at school, his hand would tremble so that he couldn't make a straight line.

After he'd finished eighth grade, Philip's father called him in for a talk. He told him that he would go to school to be a precision engineer, to be someone who repairs televisions. That was the future. His father said that Andrija would repair cars and Philip would repair televisions. Philip simply shrugged his shoulders.

He ended up studying electrical engineering in Zagreb. He remembered how, on his first day in the big city, he saw a graffiti on a wall: they won't give alex a piano, it said. He averted his gaze quickly. He felt pressure in his chest for two days afterward.

Later he met his wife, and had children. Sketching and the desire to sketch had long since left him.

He arrived in the village after nightfall. Ten or so old houses, nestled in a valley between two mountains. Someone's dog started barking, followed by all the others, as Philip approached. He stopped in the middle of the village, beside a wild apple tree with forking branches. Lights were on in a few of the houses, but it was dark in his family's home. After a while the dogs stopped barking, as if they had finally realized he belonged there. He adjusted his rucksack and followed the winding trail down to the house.

There were junked cars scattered around the property. A white car was parked by the front door. Philip took off his rucksack, stood for a while motionless in front of the door, and then finally knocked.

No one answered. He knocked again.

"Who's there?"

"It's me."

"Who's me?"

"Your brother."

* * *

They sat in the kitchen, in a thin mesh of light. On a glowing burner on the stove hissed a battered tin pot, something inside of it simmering. There wasn't anything on the walls except a Catholic calendar, smeared with traces of dead houseflies. Andrija was telling Philip that his wife had left a month before. She had taken their two children and gone to her parents.

"Bitch," he said.

He repeated his sentences when he spoke, as if stressing their importance. The older he got, the more he reminded Philip of their father. Philip mainly listened, glancing around and nodding. Andrija crushed out a cigarette in the ashtray, then got up and went to stoke the stove. He dragged a low table with squat legs along with him, the same table their mother had sat on when she milked the cows. Now Andrija sat down on it, opened the metal door beneath the burners, and pushed in one more piece of wood. Some red-hot coals fell out, but he knocked them back in with his hand.

"Tomorrow there'll be vegetables and meat on the stove, so help yourself," he said. "I'll be gone all day. I have to go repair a truck."

"Bitch!" he hissed once more over the pot. Then he came back to the table, sat down, and passed his palm over the plastic tablecloth. He looked at Philip.

"The old man really loved you," he said, turning his eyes back to the stove and gazing at it for a long time. "He admitted that to me before he died. He said that he was afraid more than anything of you becoming an artist, and then turning into a faggot, like our uncle. He was really afraid of that. You can imagine how he felt when it came out that our uncle had been living with some other faggot in Belgium," he said, turning toward the wall. "What a shame that was for our family!"

Philip said nothing. He could barely remember Uncle Mile. All that came to mind were black-and-white photographs in which their father and uncle were mowing hay and smiling at one another tenderly. He knew that his uncle had studied to be a stonecutter: he'd made portraits, and various ornaments on gravestones. Later he'd gone abroad and never come back. Only rarely did they mention him at home, even when word came that he'd died of a stroke. He was buried somewhere in Belgium.

"And then, when you went to Canada," Andrija was saying, "Papa always boasted: 'I made a man of him! I made a man of him!' And he did, when you think about it." He got up and leaned with his palms on the table. "If there had only been someone to beat me like that, who knows what I could have been," he said, and looked away, lost in thought.

Then, little by little, Andrija began to talk about the war, in which he'd taken part from beginning to end. He said that he expected the police to burst in and take him away at any moment, because someone in the village had accused him of having thrown two old women into a well during the fighting in one of the neighboring Serbian villages.

"That tells you what kind of people live in this wretched village of ours," he said. "They live just to make your life hell..."

He fell silent, and started toward the stove. He grabbed the pot by its handles and moved it to the edge of the burner.

"And how long are you thinking of staying?" he asked, moving the pot a little more. "Did you have some reason, or did you come just because?"

Philip started to say something but stopped. He didn't want to start talking about selling the house—at least not yet.

"I'll be here for a while," he said.

Andrija looked at him curiously, then glanced at the clock and gave an audible yawn.

"Let's go to bed," he said. "I've got a lot of work to do tomorrow. I've got a lot of work to do tomorrow, and you must be very tired."

Philip got up, and Andrija patted him softly on the shoulder. "You know what?" he said. "I'm very proud of you." He began slowly twisting the various buttons on Philip's shirt. "You live in the West, you've had success. Papa would be very proud of you if he were alive. Papa would be very proud. Now be good and go to sleep. You've had a long trip, you must be very tired." Andrija paused. "If you happen to hear someone walking around up in the attic, don't be afraid, that's our old man stopping by. You know how he always liked rummaging around in the attic. I went to the priest, and he said it's normal, that it will stop with time, and there's no reason to be afraid. And besides, Papa always leaves peacefully." He ran his hand across Philip's back. "Good night," he said. "Tomorrow or someday soon we'll go to the cemetery."

Philip nodded and walked up the stairs.

He dropped his things in the little room that their deceased grandma had used. After she died, Philip had begun to sleep there. Before that he'd slept with Andrija on the couch in the kitchen, where Andrija still slept now.

Philip turned on the light. He put his rucksack into the dry, brittle closet, pressing down on it with his knee so that he could close the door. Then he opened the cobweb-covered window to ventilate the room a little. He sat down on the edge of the bed and lifted his head. His gaze passed slowly around the room. Everything was as it had been before. Sagging walls of indeterminate color, a woodstove, a tattered blanket on the bed, across which Philip ran his fingers nostalgically. He turned out the light, listened for a bit, and then slipped under the warm blanket, feeling the familiar indentation in the mattress, which had a bad spring.

In his dream Andrija told him to go to the cemetery. Philip got his shotgun and put in two shells for bears: one red and the other blue. He slung the gun over one shoulder and hoisted a pickax over the other. When he reached the cemetery he walked up to a fresh mound of earth, set the shotgun down, and started digging a grave with the pickax. After a while he struck something hard. A coffin. He deftly opened up the lid with the tip of the pickax.

His father was lying inside, wearing a white shirt with a starched collar that didn't suit him at all. He was smoking a cigarette and smiling.

How are you? his father asked.

Good, said Philip. *And you?*

A coffin is the best bed. Never makes you sore, Philip's father answered cheerfully.

Why did you beat me? Philip asked him quietly.

Because you turned out better than me, his father said, and laughed.

Philip's eyes rolled back in their sockets. Eyeless, he took the shotgun and pulled the triggers, firing both barrels at his father at the same time.

A light flashed.

Philip awoke, bathed in glistening sweat. He got up and sat on the chair for a while, with his head in his hands. Afterward he fell back asleep, and didn't wake until noon.

Later he slowly went down to the kitchen. Andrija wasn't there. Philip strolled around the house for a bit, and then went back into the kitchen.

He sat at the table and looked out the low window. He had no desire to take a walk through the village and talk with the neighbors. He had no desire to talk to Andrija. He had no appetite, and no desire to go to the cemetery. He didn't feel like doing anything.

He sat the whole afternoon by the table, leaning on the plastic tablecloth with his elbow. Now and then his elbow slipped, and once he almost banged his head on the table. At one point he thought it might be best to kill himself; nothing made any sense anymore.

A phrase repeated itself in his head: *Merciful bullet*.

He left the table and pulled open a drawer mechanically. Inside was a screwdriver, cellophane tape, stress tablets. His gaze stopped on a stonecutter's pencil.

He looked for a long time at that pencil and its dull point. Then he took it in his hand, went to the dresser, and pulled out some brown, oily packing paper. He tore off a rectangular piece and went back to the table. He began turning the pencil in his hand, lost in thought.

He stood up, grabbed the paper, and went up to his room. Darkness fell. He turned on the light. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked through the window. Then he went into the hall, carefully lifting his feet from the floor as if he were walking on the rungs of a ladder, and grabbed a board from the attic. He brought it back to his bedroom and put it on his knees. His pulse quickened, and he felt the paper trembling.

He began to draw.

The moon hung outside the window like a giant white animal. The tip of the stonecutter's pencil stubbornly followed its long shadow. Philip's eyes gleamed as he drew, as though they were emitting moonlight themselves. He drew the Gypsy who'd been sitting on the horse's head, and the other Gypsy who picked at the horse's hoof. After he added the last few lines, he decided that he was never going back to Canada, not alive nor dead.

He went down to the kitchen and found some tape. Then he went back upstairs and taped the sketch onto the wall above his head.

In the morning Philip heard the noise of a car outside. Someone was revving the engine. He looked through the window.

Andrija was standing next to a yellow car and pulling on his work overalls. A man Philip didn't know was sitting in the driver's seat.

"Do you need anything from town?" Andrija called up when he spotted Philip at the window.

Philip waved and then said, "No, nothing."

"I won't be back till late. I'm going to repair something," Andrija said.

Philip nodded, watched the car drive away, then lifted his head and looked at his sketch.

Later, Philip walked around the village, glowing. He visited their neighbors. There were only ten or so of them, now. When he'd been a kid, there had been more than a hundred and fifty men and women in the village. They asked him when he'd gotten there, though they all knew exactly when he'd arrived. They asked about his wife and children, and about life in Canada. Philip smiled and nodded. He hadn't ever said much, so the neighbors weren't surprised.

He visited the old woman who lived on the very edge of the village last. Her eyes were watery and she was lying in bed, grinding coffee with a coffee mill on her chest. Her neck was lined with deep wrinkles, as if she'd had her throat cut a hundred times. He took the coffee mill and ground the coffee for her.

“Nobody comes here anymore,” she said, getting up with difficulty. “Not even my sons. Such are the times. The only one who stops by is your brother. Sometimes he brings me something from the store, and asks about my health. God will repay him.”

She went shuffling to the wall and kissed a wooden crucifix on it.

When he left the woman’s house he went off into a fragrant field and lay down in the grass. Everything seemed wild, pure, and untouched, as if it were the first day of creation. His eyes followed a flock of birds until they disappeared into a part of the grainy sky. Then he went to the woods and strolled among the trees, touching their branches.

At a tree stump he thought of his wife and children. Every time they came into his mind he felt for a moment as if he were trapped in a hemp sack, with no air, and staggered. He couldn’t think about them anymore. Instead he thought of his sketch, and felt great happiness.

He would work some job, start studying at the art academy, and begin a new life. They’ll be better off without me, he thought.

* * *

When he returned to the house, he saw Andrija lying under a gray car. Only his legs were visible. There was another guy there as well, the same man he’d seen that morning. He had a flat face and he greeted Philip with a nod. Darkness was already gathering in the corners of the house.

Philip went into the house cheerfully, hurrying up the stairs to his room. He wanted to see his sketch as soon as possible, to enjoy it. As he skipped up the stairs, he thought about how this evening he would tell Andrija that they didn’t need to divide the house or the property, that he would leave him everything. When he got into the room, though, he saw that the sketch wasn’t there.

At first he thought it had fallen under the bed. He knelt down in a panic, but he couldn’t find it there, either. He looked outside—perhaps the wind had carried it away—but he didn’t see it on the ground by the window. He ran his hand along the wall where the sketch had been. There was nothing.

Outside Andrija was repairing the car by the light of a flashlight. Philip stood in the yard and watched the darkness settle over the house like an even layer of molasses. His brother opened the car’s hood, stuck his head inside, and tinkered with something, increasing and decreasing the gas. Then he shut the hood and the man with the flat face paid him, got in the car, honked, and drove off.

Andrija snorted audibly as he left, counted the money, and put it in his pocket.

“Andrija?” said Philip.

Andrija looked at him.

“My sketch is gone.”

“What sketch?” he asked.

* * *

The next day the two of them went out behind the house. Andrija cast glances around the field and led Philip to a hole in the ground.

“Here,” he said. “It was a morning just like this one, and those dishes, the dishes that had been in the kitchen, were right here. Clean, clean as can be.” He repeated this in a whisper as he paced back and forth. It was the same thing he’d said to Philip the night before.

“But I know, I know that I had, after my supper the previous evening, I had left them dirty. So the first thing I thought was, Maybe it was our dear departed father. Maybe he washed the dishes.

“And then, about ten days later, I was standing right over there,” he said, pointing to the corner of the stable with his chin. “And I see that weasel stealing an egg from the stable and carrying it in its paws. It was walking on its hind legs, like a human. So now I think—maybe it went into the kitchen that evening, and licked those dishes and brought them back out here. But who knows? And who knows what else it took out of the house?” His last words were barely audible; he was staring down into the hole.

“See what I’m talking about?!” he exclaimed. He called Philip closer to the pit, crouched down, and reached inside.

He held up a piece of brown paper between his thumb and index finger, showing it to Philip in triumph.

“It’s your sketch,” he said, and then he knelt down, positioning himself a little better. Philip slowly knelt down as well. Andrija removed two rocks from the pile, laying one next to him and the other one next to Philip.

"We'll wait for it. We'll wait for it. Damn that thing. We'll wait ten years if we have to," Andrija said.

Philip was squatting down and staring into the hole. He put his fingers on the rock, feeling its little indentations and cracks under his fingers. The quiet was absolute, so quiet that Philip could hear that rock breathing beside him.

When Andrija bent over and peered into the hole for the umpteenth time, Philip grabbed his rock, raised it high over his head, and hit Andrija hard with it on the back of his skull. Andrija dropped down gently, his head covered in blood. It was as if he were still peering down into the hole, but now from a much more uncomfortable angle.

Philip hit him again for good measure. In the quiet of the morning all one could hear were the motions of his arm and the dull thuds of the rock when he connected.

At one moment, between two powerful swings of his arm, Philip thought he saw the weasel jump out of the hole in his brother's head. Before he could react, it grabbed his sketch from the ground and vanished back into the pit.

Translated by Stephen M. Dickey