



Olja Savičević Ivančević

“A colourful and bold book by a daring, imaginative author. The boisterous and unbridled style, vibrant with emotion, is topped off by many a beautiful ending. You put her down, glowing, and think: Wow! That’s what you call literature.”

– Deutschlandfunk
on *Goodbye Cowboy*

Olja Savičević Ivančević, a poet, a writer and a journalist was born on September 16, 1974 in Split, Croatia. She gained the BA degree in Croatian language and literature. She worked as a teacher and as a lecturer at workshops – subject: Creative writing. For several years now she has been working as an independent writer and a columnist in newspapers and internet portals. She got a prize for her first published story as a twelve years old girl and her first collection of poetry was published when she was fourteen.

Olja published the following collections of poems: *Bit će strašno kada ja porastem* (*It will be tremendous when I grow up*, 1988), *Vječna djeca* (*Eternal Kids*, 1993), *Žensko pismo* (*Female manuscripts*, 1999), *Puzzlerojc* (*Puzzlerojc*, 2006), *Kućna pravila* (*House rules*, 2007) and *Mamasafari* (*Mamasafari*, 2012). She also published the short story collection *Nasmijati psa* (*To Make a Dog Laugh*, 2006) and novel *Adio kauboju* (*Good bye Cowboy*, 2010).

She collaborates with theatres as a dramatist and the author of lyrics for theatre songs, and two of her short stories have been adapted to short films.

The manuscript of *To Make a Dog Laugh* won Olja the prize for the best prose author under thirty-five awarded jointly by *Vijenac*, a Croatian literature and culture magazine, and the publishing house AGM. Olja won the „Ranko Marinkovic” award for the best short story in 2007 and the „Kiklop” prize for the best poetry collection in 2008.

Good bye Cowboy won the award „Roman T-portal“ as best Croatian novel 2011. As well as the art prize „Jure Kaštelan“ and translations into several foreign languages and based on the novel play.

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An excerpt of the novel has been included into the Best European Fiction 2014 and won her the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

Her work has been included in a number of Croatian anthologies and International selections, and her writing, books or parts of prose work, poetry and essayistics have been translated into German, Czech, Italian, Spanish, Slovenian, French, English, Slovak, Macedonian, Polish, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Rumanian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Albanian and Zulu language.

“... a wild ride through the dusty streets of a coastal city in Dalmatia; clouds of memories are stirred up and verbal hot lead fills the air. The dust settles to reveal a subtle and cleverly crafted family story, which revolves around a pervasive past waiting to be addressed.”

- Wortlandschaften
on *Goodbye Cowboy*

MAIN WORKS:

It will be tremendous when I grow up (*Bit će strašno kada ja porastem*), poems

Eternal Kids (*Vječna djeca*), poems

Female manuscripts (*Žensko pismo*), poems

Puzzlerojc (*Puzzlerojc*), poems

House rules (*Kućna pravila*), poems - **Kiklop prize for the best poetry collection in 2008**

Mamasafari (*Mamasafari*), poems

To Make a Dog Laugh (*Nasmijati psa*), short stories - prize for the best Croatian prose author under thirty-five by magazine *Vijenac* and publisher AGM

Good bye Cowboy (*Adio kauboju*), novel - **Croatian Telekom Award for the best novel in 2010, Art Prize Jure Kaštelan**

TRANSLATIONS:

Goodbye Cowboy: Germany (Volland & Quist), Spain (Ediciones de Baile del Sol)

To Make a Dog Laugh: Serbia (B92), Macedonia (Blesok), Germany (Volland & Quist),

RIGHTS SOLD:

Goodbye Cowboy: Turkey, Slovenia (Littera Picta), UK (Istros Books), US (McSweeney's)

Olja Savičević Ivančević

Pretty hunger

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

As your bony fingers close around me...

Everything began on Monday. Usually Sunday is my water day, and I don't eat. But this week, here's what I ate on Sunday: half an apple, half a plate of noodles with no sauce, green salad with a whole lot of vinegar, and some yogurt. I ate all of this stuff because that bitch Carmen made me. I can't wait till she leaves. She annoys the hell out of me—her and her purple nails, her pitiful looks, those swollen little feet in their high heels. And her obsession with food: always cooking, tinkering with her roux, splattering grease everywhere, chewing mouthful after mouthful of stuffed cabbage, of bacon, of goulash, of tripe. Every day she brings home those bags full of bloody meat—veal brains, pigs' ears, chickens' lungs. She leaves fish eyes in the sink and a thick yellow skin on some cold milk in a saucepan. Father and her are like two hamsters, dozing all day long and then suddenly coming to life around the table. So much cheerful harmony and family spirit generated by the smashing of rabbits' backbones!

Such are the horrors of our meals together. Their quick, tiny mouths obliterating everything in front of them like little mechanical animals— first the soup, then the meatballs, the mashed potatoes, and the cabbage salad. Smacking, slurping, swallowing, belching, *scherzo, allegro*.

I wonder to myself what they were like as children, my father and his fatty sister, long ago when they still refused mashed carrots. When they were those willowy teenagers from our family photographs, who would sleep through breakfast and often skip dinner. I've seen those pictures, but I still can't imagine Carmen ever having been a child. I bet that even then she suppressed her nervousness with rose-hip jam, just as now she suppresses the idea of her wasted existence on the planet Earth with cooking and eating.

That mass of sebaceous glands and depressive gonads has always gotten on my nerves, but it has been much worse since she resorted to this strategy of phony understanding. Now I can't even tolerate her. There's no way anyone like her could understand the beauty of hunger: how it empowers me, how it makes me clean and fresh on the inside, how it allows me to be the creator of my own body. Its subtle controller. *Just make a wish!* My body says. I want to be as pretty as a moonbeam, I say. And I'm making this wish come true.

Eating serves no higher purpose. The conscious acceptance of hunger, on the other hand, does something wonderful: it promotes the gradual attainment of perfection. After a while you get used to the pain, and begin to see it as part of the beautiful, terrible sacrifice you are making. You begin to worship the hunger.

Hunger makes my body bearable. I'm 5'7" tall, and I'm proud to say that I've kept myself at 101 pounds for the past month. It's not like I want to get sick and die; right now I'm content with my 101 pounds. It's not really unhealthy to be "Ana," no matter what that fat cunt Carmen says. Some girls lose control, but there aren't very many of them.

Dad, of course, is on her side. I'm well aware that he asked her to come on my account. He thinks I need a mother. As if that doughnut could replace my mother—it's not like her gluttony is any healthier! She's getting more and more ugly, while I'm getting prettier all the time. I just hope I haven't gotten any of her genes. I can't believe she gave birth to a girl like Zvezdana. My darling little blonde cousin Zvezdana. She arrived yesterday, with her red suitcase full of white shirts and pleated skirts. If it weren't for her, I'd have found a way to get rid of her tiresome mother long ago.

So, to get back to the story: on Monday, I lost it. As I said, Sunday has been my water day for months. I'd love to be like water. Clear, cold, powerful, transparent.

My aunt knows I feel most tempted to eat on Mondays. So what did she do, that old crow? She left a plate of hot meat pie, half uncovered, steaming on the table! When I saw it my stomach turned, and then tears came to my eyes. I grabbed the plate and started for the trash can. I've become skilled at throwing food away. I have so much self-control that I can make smoothies for my father and Carmen, tossing in strawberries, oranges, and bananas—which I have a weakness for, even though they're full of sugar—and still not eat any of them myself. But that fucking meat pie smelled so damn delicious that I took it back out of the trash can, sat down on the tiles, and shoved it into my mouth.

Afterward I licked the greasy paper. I thought I would throw up, but I had sworn to myself that I would never become one of those pathetic "Mias" who eat too much and then vomit.

There were two of those girls in my high school. They make an effort, but they're still the lowest of the low. Vomiting is such a primitive way to gain control. I still respect them, though. After all, not everyone can be "Ana." A moonbeam. A stream of water. A silver thread.

My revenge for the meat pie was fearsome. I dumped salt into the soup. I turned up the dials on the oven until the roast burned. I put Tabasco sauce in the cake icing, toothpaste in the homemade mayonnaise.

I think Carmen got the message. She stopped looking at me like a loggerhead turtle looks at its poisoned young, and something new flashed in her eyes: rage. Dad shrugged his shoulders. I almost felt sorry for him. I must have made him feel like a loser, but what the hell, that's how you cure prejudice.

In any case, Aunt Carmen gave up trying to make me into a pert, ruddy little girl after that. I could feel that I was close to getting rid of her. But I didn't want her to leave before Zvezdana came. She wouldn't visit us unless Carmen was still here. Zvezdana lived in some rural backwater with the rest of their family, and Carmen had promised her a weekend in the city, or something like that. Then they would go back home together. I hadn't seen my cousin for almost two years.

Usually I don't like those country girls in their pleated skirts and white shirts or puff-sleeve tops. I just don't get it. Even dolls' clothes are more modern than that. But Zvezdana was always dressed like she was about to be in some school performance. She was without a doubt the prettiest girl in her school. And now she was fourteen and as tall as me. She looked like she'd stepped out of a picture book or an old film. She looked like a sunbeam.

They put her up on a cot in my room. I'm proud of my room. I have posters of Calista Flockhart and Kate Moss, a lampshade that I made myself, and a window that looks out on the city marina. Sometimes the moon hangs right above a ship's mast, like some black-and-white lollipop.

Zvezdana was tired from the trip. We talked about some guys that we'd hung out with the summer before; I hadn't seen them since then. I'm graduating next year, and I've already been out to clubs a few times— those guys didn't go to the clubs. They still kicked soccer balls around and ate big bologna sandwiches. I haven't spoken to them at all since one of them called me Skeletor.

Girls like me don't have problems with the guys in the clubs, but they're usually too high or drunk or ugly to go off with. There's a DJ I kind of like, though. He's got taste, he's cool. The club where he works is like a spaceship; it's fantastic there.

Zvezdana said she's never been to a club. I told her we could go together tonight.

She fell asleep in the middle of our conversation, still dressed, on the cover of her cot. She looked so precious, not like other girls her age. I covered her with a blanket. Later, when I was in bed, I remembered that I'd forgotten to ask her how much she weighs.

Saturday. The day I go dancing. I'm taking Zvezdana with me, but, God, I'll have to loan her some jeans—she can't go there in a pleated skirt, even if she is a sunbeam.

All morning I was really nice to her loggerhead turtle of a mother. She kept eyeing me suspiciously. She didn't know what I was up to.

The weather was clear, and I could taste salt in the air, feel the empty spaces in my body. Strong southern sunlight was coming into the kitchen, motes of dust swirling in circles. When the days are clear and cold, my pain is more pronounced, the empty spaces wider.

Zvezdana was sitting next to me, drowsy and disheveled. She had slept all morning and smelled of apple shampoo. Carmen, whose motherly instincts I had completely fucked up in the last few days, vented her frustration and fed her only child: crepes, milk and cereal, homemade butter and bread—the only thing missing was a slice of ham, but that was probably on the way. The hot pastry disappeared, along with the fragrant hot cocoa, but Zvezdana only picked at the rest of the food, probably just so she wouldn't insult her mother. I ate a nonfat yogurt and a piece of toast.

Zvezdana wants to meet up with the guys we talked about yesterday. I'm not crazy about the idea, but I go with her. She's brought rollerblades, and I keep up on foot. She's in a good mood and babbles the whole way to the soccer field, skating around palm trees and along the very edge of the road. She's going to fall into the sea, I think. She's reciting lines from "Dream On," by Depeche Mode; I tell her I didn't know she was a fan of theirs. I didn't think people were into them anymore. She smiles and says she isn't, that she just likes that song and had no idea who sang it. I say the song is cool no matter what, and then we're already at the soccer field.

The guys have rollerblades, too, and she skates alongside them. She's adept at it. The best-looking guy, the one who called me Skeletor, takes her by the hands. I used to like how his bangs fell on his face when he smiled, but now I hate him. My emptiness is spreading. The sun is harsh, the air thin and dry. I leave to drink a glass of water and afterward I don't feel like going back.

That evening I'm angry. I don't want Zvezdana to meet the DJ I like. I know she'd like him, too, because girls go crazy for him. I'm afraid she'll catch his eye and I won't.

I make something up about a headache so we don't have to go to the club. We sit for a while in front of the television, while Carmen mixes icing for a chocolate cake and makes more crepes. My cousin eats four with apricot jam. Dad eats two, because he's on a diet or something. I eat one and a half, and now I feel guilty. Today was complete shit. Meat pie and crepes in the same week? And a package of peanuts when I came back from the soccer field, because of my nerves?

So that my cousin won't see me cry I complain about my headache again and go to my room. I'll never be like Kate or Calista, I think. I'll never be a moonbeam.

Around three in the morning I'm woken up by pain in my empty spaces. That damned crepe is to blame, I think. It aroused my appetite. I feel terribly hungry. They say it helps to chew celery, but where could I get celery at this hour? So I do the next best thing and drink a glass of water. That usually helps, if you fall asleep fast enough afterward.

But I can't fall asleep. I can smell Zvezdana's apple shampoo. Everyone likes her, I think. She looks like a ray of sunlight. I go back to the kitchen and am about to get some lemonade out of the fridge when I catch sight of that beautiful chocolate cake. It's smothered with a dark, finger-thick glaze of chocolate icing. I cut it into rectangular pieces, arrange them on a plate, and take them to my room. Zvezdana is sleeping like an angel. Her bangs are covering her eyes, so I tuck them behind her ears. With my fingers I open her lips, slowly. I still haven't asked her how much she weighs.

I take the first piece of cake and start shoving it into her mouth. I do the same thing with a second piece. I do it quickly. After the second piece she wakes up and starts choking on the cake, suffocating. I grab her by the arms, firmly, as hard as I can, and with my free arm I grab pieces of cake from the plate and smear them all over her face. She kicks me away and I tumble down from the bed onto the floor.

"Mamaaa! Mamaaa!" she shouts. The loggerhead turtle flies into the room in her white nightgown, like a breathless ghost. She picks up her child as though she were a baby and flies back out of the room, cursing me.

From the hallway, I hear her shouting at my father.

"Your daughter, your daughter!" she yells.

"Look, Papa," I say to him as soon as he enters the room, "I'm eating cake." I'm shoving piece after piece into my mouth, tears and snot running down my face. I feel like I might choke.

The next day he will tear down all the posters of my idols for the third time that year. I will eat breakfast again, but he will take me to the doctor anyway. Carmen will shake her head and its three double chins, and Zvezdana will only look at me sadly. My father will look tired and worried. But that night I still think I can convince him that everything is all right.

"Why did you do that?" he says.

"Papa, I ate all that cake, all of it..."

I don't want him to hug me. Nothing like that. He doesn't do it, either, not this time. He closes the door softly so that I know that this shame is mine and mine alone.

Translated from Croatian by Stephen M. Dickey