

Sven Popović  
**Loser by a Landslide**  
(Uvjerljivo drugi)

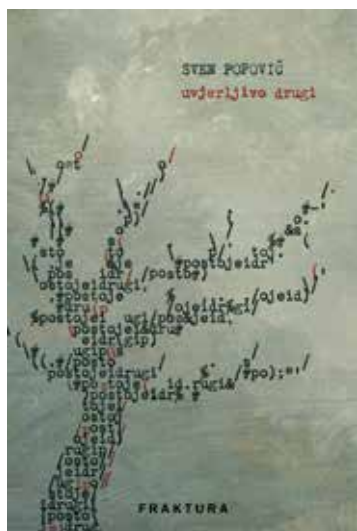
Novel

Translated by Ivana Ostojčić



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SVEN POPOVIĆ was born in 1989 in Zagreb. He graduated Comparative Literature, English language and literature and American studies from Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. He writes music and literary reviews for magazines and web portals. He has published his prose in *Quorum*, *Zarez*, *Fantom slobode*, magazine *Nova riječ*, *Script*, *Record Stories*, anthology of young prosaics *Bez vrata, bez kucanja* and on various web portals. His first literary book *Nebo u kaljuži* (*The Sky in Quagmire*) was published in 2015. He is one of the founder of the program “TKO ČITA?” (“WHO IS READING?”), intended for young authors. He is also one of the editors of the almanac *WHO IS READING?* for the season 2015/2016 and 2016/2017. His stories are included in the anthology *Best European Fiction 2017* and translated into English, German, Polish and Romanian.



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Thirties are new early twenties, or at least that is the case for Nameless Writer, the anti-hero of the *Loser by a Landslide*. Girls, booze and endless alternative parties with the crew from the block are his way of prolonging careless adolescent years of living with parents and avoidance of adult responsibilities. While dancing as long as he can, Nameless Writer makes us think twice about today's *lost* generation who grew up in deterioration of a welfare state. Between the values they adopted and the world they live in there is a huge discrepancy, which makes them so eagerly attached to the unreal. They are precarious culture workers, poorly paid (if paid at all) talented individuals, unable to move out of their parents' house.

When Nameless Writer's friends, Emir, Ilija and Fric accept responsibilities that come with adult life, such as jobs, children and seriousness, it will make him question his reality. While he experiences romantic unhappiness, it will result in great clash that will finally make him grow up. Very much attached to the Zagreb scenery, identity of this modern Peter Pan is greatly influenced by music and literature, which he doesn't try to hide while advising us what to read or listen to according to his taste.

Smart and humorous, witty and dynamic, stylistically precise and superior literary voice of Sven Popović is one of the most interesting emerging voices of contemporary Croatian literature.

PRAISE

“*Loser by a Landslide* is a novel of great atmosphere, sharp sentences and solid characters that don’t dissipate in provincial *weltschmerz*, but buzz with life vibrancy.”

- Denis Derk, *Večernji list daily*

“Stylistically between poetry and prose, Sven Popović heirs beatnik as much as legendary Croatian Quorum poetics, creates strong as much as dreamy fiction, prose of rock passion and jazz fluidity and softness, with crumbs of Hemingway, Burroughs, Johnny Štulić and Tom Waits between the written lines, and melody of The Ramones, The Pavement, The Strokes, Modest Mouse and Iggy Pop in the ear.”

- Božidar Alajbegović

## Two Moons, a rabbit and diodes

“Moonlight can leave us defenseless. It causes us to remember, wounds tear open and we bleed.”

Jón Kalman Stefánsson

All things considered: another smashing night. I'm missing some pieces. Doesn't matter, they'll appear in my dreams or as flashes in the middle of my waking hour. I'll try to avoid Judy. I'll escape her eye. I could barely climb the stairs to my apartment. I took off my shoes and fell on my bed without changing. The morning was bluish and flickering. I didn't want to think about Judy anymore. Instead I closed my eyes and remembered Hana.

It was a smashing night, I don't really remember it that well. Some pieces appear as flashes in my mind and I'm not in fact sure what actually happened and what is a product of my drunken dreams. Hana and I came home at dawn. Shuddering, we lay down and fell asleep. We woke up at sunset. Hana found ants in the bathroom.

How did we get ants in the apartment?

Ask Menocchio.

I beg your pardon?

Kings, crowns, fools, martyrs, saints, bonfires, revolutionaries, motorcycles ripping the continent, ships chopping the Atlantic, guillotines, hillside town, seasons of the nations, silk roads, gods. All this is somehow fiction to me. And what about Menocchio?

What are you talking about?

Should I make coffee?

Fine. And think about the ants.

And you think about Menocchio.

Soon the memory overlapped with the dream. I woke up several hours later. Without Hana. Without the ants. I get up. I observe the room.

A *Sin City* poster (three prostitutes) hangs on the external side of the door. So I cannot see it. It doesn't count. The entrance to the room reveals vintage electric organ. Several keys don't work. On it, instead of music sheets, is a corkboard and a few replicas of Toulouse-Lautrec posters. Tickets and photos are pinned to it. White Stripes, Goribor, Dinosaur Jr., Handsome Furs, festival passes, Xiu Xiu, Lambchop, Pips, Chips & Videoclips. A photo of Emir and me. Holding each other at a party. Sixteen. A photo of Fric and me. Black and white. Leaning against a car. I'm smoking, he is rolling a cigarette. Nineteen. Photos of Ilija and me, in the shade, on holidays, we're both drinking beer, playing chess, by the number of figures out of the game and facial expressions, he was kicking my ass, also nineteen. A photo of Hana and me. In a café in Ljubljana, I'm reading McCarthy, she's reading Cortázar. Twenty-one. A poster of Libertines above the organ. The four are walking the streets of London. Next to the poster, a poem by Bukowski (*Footnote upon the Construction of the Masses*), typewritten. Above the poem, a sticker of 'Free the Faculty of Humanities'. A fight for free education. On the left, wardrobes. Packed with clothes. Above the shelves, books. Books are all over my room. Some of the titles on the shelf above the wardrobe: Boldvin, Baldwin, Kesey, DeLillo, McCarthy, Hemingway, Nabokov, Fitzgerald, screenplays by Tarkovsky, Ljosa, Llosa. The bed. Above the bed, a dream catcher and a Turkish Nazar. As if someone would throw a chicken over an eight-storey building. On the wall above the bed, a Flaming Lips sticker, a Gorillaz poster, a Goribor poster and another free education fight poster. And then on the right of the bed, a shelf. Some of the titles: Ryokan, Mumonkan, Kerouac, Principia Discordia, Dostoevsky, Rabelais, Cervantes, Kafka, Murakami, Wilde, many biographies of musicians and bands (Sex Pistols, Pips, Leonard Cohen), a book of Spanish Civil War posters, Welsh, Donovan, Joža Horvat, some films by Wim Wenders, Quentin Tarantino, Wonga Kar-wai and Woody Allen. Many film noirs. And a shelf above the bed. Theory (comparative literature course) and quite a few poetry and Latin American books: Todorov, Hebdige, Barthes, Engels, Eco, Bukowski, Karanović, Mraović, Šehić, Slamnig, Sever, Šoljan, Cortázar, Bolaño, Borges, Sabato. Finally, the desk. An extensive interview with Hugo Pratt (with a lot of photos), a kaleidoscope, a glowing ball, a flask, journals, felt-tip pens, a bunch of papers, half-empty cigarette packs, I see also a book by Vonnegut below Krivac and Rilke. A corkboard, photos of me, extremely bearded, in front of the university. A photo of my primary school crew. Birthday cards by Greiner&Kropilak, a postcard with Mayakovsky (stay avant-garde, a somewhat older writer wished me), a photo of Bukowski and a photo of Joe Strummer. Above the desk, a poster of Corto Maltese. A laptop. Windowsills with scattered CDs. Below: a bass guitar and an amplifier. Another

poster, this time the Bonfires of Trnje. A messy four walls that somehow represent me. At least something I can be satisfied with.

I designed my looks to the point. You'll call me pretentious. But boo-hoo. Aren't we all? We all strive to what we WANT to be. Not to what we are. We are nothing. I wasn't ready to fly the white flag. I've seen things I liked, things that thrilled me, sad and magnificent things that told me something. I built my character in line with them. I've never thought it makes me a liar. My theft was honest and just. I was an ordinary child who wanted to shine. Now I'm an ordinary young man. Quite an ordinary young man with an unsteady future and a quite an uneventful present. But people have always been impressed with my erudite knowledge of useless facts, my fake confidence and a mask of brazen irony which acted as though it knew what it was doing. This is the most important thing, I acted perfectly and I understood it all. A bone fide know-it-all. And I know almost nothing. Just a bunch of broken images. I was most upset, in fact scared, by the fact that everything was fine with me. Everything was in place. I can't tell a single story worth telling. It all came down to adding tragedy, a few nasty over-turns to reality, so dull, so painfully boring and endlessly flat. In short: to lie. Nothing worth mentioning was happening to me. I'd like to think Hana was worth mentioning. Our whole relationship. But this story has been told a thousand times, right? A boy meets a girl. He loses her. And everything goes to hell. I tried so hard to write a big love story, a love story of the Twitter generation, that I started to believe love actually exists. And what now? I'm left with variations. Mannerism on the bones of reality. I love her and I loved her as others have and will. The only difference is that I will put it on paper. For the sake of drama, I'll be a most miserable pussy. A champion of unhappy love.

I glance at the journals. Twenty notebooks written out. Been writing them since I was seventeen. This one took almost six months to write and I really feel like nothing has changed. I'm still unhappy with myself. I still believe there's more to life than this. Not everything can be as flat, only a series of nights under bright lights and lobotomised afternoons. There's got to be more than broken hearts, feverish looks and cracked smiles. As though all this time dissolved into one painful night and waking up without Her. And the body got used. You stretch in your sleep, for how many streets you need to pass just to see her smile? The spirit of the smile. The curve etched into my eyes for all times. As though I wrote our names in ashes. The wind took them just like you and me, but the movement will remain forever. Trapped in a law of physics incomprehensible to me.

I write. Short stories. Prose. I believe this is a good piece of advice if you plan to write: you should be as ruthless to yourself as possible. It's not that much about

self-criticism, no, it's about admitting what turns you on, S&M, same sex, chains, whatever. And then you create something marvellous and dark out of what people find incomprehensible or disgusting, with a teeny tiny glistening flicker. Just so you know you're not alone in the dark.

My cell phone rang. People really love me these days. It's Ilija. He wants to go to lunch together. I tell him I'm not all that hungry. He says I can watch him eat. I shrug and he can't see me. I say okay.

He ordered a large one with extra onion and a Cockta. I took a large coffee although I know it's disgusting and that it runs through your bowels like a liquid centipede. The sun dispersed through the window, through the drops of last night's rain, sparrows and kids jumped all over the neighbourhood, just a few clouds in the sky. Strange days, I thought, like all the seasons collided. Look at this sky - and I'm not a place, look at this cloud - and I'm not the wind, look at this girl - and I don't belong to her. I read this somewhere, I don't know where. Ilija swears these are the best kebabs Brko has made in a long time, his funeral will be attended by zillions.

That shit - Ilija takes a sip of Cockta.

What shit?

The shit that's in toilet bowls.

Excuse me? - I put a pack of cigarettes on the table.

You know the thing Japanese have?

No.

You press a button and this shit comes out and sprays your ass.

Okay, when you said shit I thought you really meant shit, not a thing.

I did mean shit.

It's not shit.

How come?

Well, it simply isn't.

It looks like shit and it sprays all over your ass.

And that reminded you of shit. Are you hiding something from me?

No, I didn't mean that. It's gay.

This is gay?

Yes.

It reminds you of something spraying on your ass?

Yeah - he is chewing with his mouth open. I see a shapeless mass of meat and onion. I take a cigarette out of the pack and bring it to my mouth.

Come on, don't smoke - he interrupts me.

Why?

It's bad manners while I'm eating.



You chew with your mouth open.  
Because I'm talking.  
Don't talk.  
What, we just sit in silence?  
It's not silence, there are people around.  
You're rude.

Me?

You want to smoke.

It's not forbidden.

So?

So this means I can.

Not while I'm eating.

Is this some sort of rule?

Yeah.

It's even more rude to talk with your mouth full.

I don't think so.

How come? People see you. No one minds if I smoke. And if they do mind, they should go to the non-smoking section.

Well, I'm going then - he got up, with his plate and Cockta. He did it clumsily and some onion fell on the floor.

I don't give a fuck.

Go fuck yourself.

At least I won't have to listen about the shit in the toilets.

You know what?

What?

No even that shit could outshine all the shit you're in.

\* \* \*

I'm walking back home. My head still aches. I feel a surge of demons around my eyes. Hangovers get stronger with each new drunken night. Shouldn't it be the other way round, shouldn't we become more resilient? This way I have a feeling that the hangovers just add up to positive infinity. And I don't like that. Hangover becomes the sum of all nights. And nothing new is happening. The city roars, windows, blind eyes in the concrete stare at torn streets and glass people whose nerves pulsate in the rhythm of clanking trams.

My mother and father smoked and drank out of romantic rebellion. I do it out of pure despair. I drink and I smoke because the only thought in my mind is to live through the night.

It's a tricky thing. Night after night I wait for something to finally happen. A meteor shower (I dreamed once that Hana and I were walking, under an umbrella, on the outskirts of the city, watching flames and smoke soaring from ruins), a beautiful girl, any kind of good chance. Sometimes something does happen, it jumps in like an unexpected night tram you gave up on long ago. You just have to wait.

I didn't even realise I was in front of my building. With a lit cigarette. Kids are coming out of the school. They are banging a ball against the wall. The headmaster's head arises at the window and yells telling them to go play someplace else. They look down dejectedly and the minute the head disappears they start swearing.

They pass by me. One of them decides to take a piss in the bin. I'm looking at this kid, a chubby boy with a footballer's hair (more like that Portuguese clown Ronaldo), barely taller than the bin, taking his dick out with no shame and starting to piss.

Hey - I yell at him. He looks at me - Go take a leak in the bushes.

Cocksucker - he says.

I'm afraid there would be nothing to suck, now beat it before I slap your face.

What are you smoking, sir? People! - the retard delinquent yells - This guy is smoking pot! - he stops pissing and joins the laughing crew.

And we relate schoolchildren with innocence. I'm trying to remember what we were like. Probably the same. I remember how we used to tie two door knobs with a string, one opposite the other in the building corridor. Then we'd ring the bell and watch tenants push and pull. We always wanted to be cool. On the first day of school we watched with awe the spotty titans from the eighth grade. They secretly smoked in the restroom. They groped girls and grabbed newly discovered parts of their bodies, while the girls were beating them. All until we became the spotty titans (I myself wasn't spotty, but I was just as stupid). And why did I think we were innocent? I could have used the time before my balls came down more wisely. I was doing fine the first few grades in primary school. It wasn't a problem for me to step away from the crowd. I believe constant bullying pushed me into puberty and made me do bad things instead of dangling from a tree or playing PlayStation. What a crock of shit.

I finish off my cigarette. I enter the corridor, I press the button and wait for the elevator. I open the door, mother is standing in the hallway. She hugs and kisses me.

Yuck. You've been smoking.

Yes, Mum. You came back from the country early - I say. Her hallway is packed with their stuff. - Where's old man?

In his room, he's already writing.

The column?

No, a new manuscript.

Already?

Yes. How is yours progressing? – she moves to the kitchen.

Fab – I lie.

I go to the father's study. – Hey, old man – I say.

I'm not your old man – he says without even looking at me. His hair is growing.  
The chemo went well. Until a month ago he looked like Walt from *Breaking Band*.

You look fine.

He looks at me, his glasses halfway down his nose. – Thanks. You're a bit pale.

I didn't get out much these days.

Yeah. Are you writing?

Not really.

Why?

I shrug. – But I published an article in the last issue.

I saw that. You could have tried more.

I did, yes.

Lunch is ready – Mum yells from the kitchen.

Are you coming? – I ask father.

In a minute.

I go to the kitchen and sit at the table. Mother serves food. Rice, salad, very colourful salad, mushrooms with many spices. I haven't taken this many vitamins and other extremely healthy shit in a long time. I mostly eat at cafeterias or I cook the simplest recipes. A Spartan life. It's not that I can't cook, but I like to cook for others. For Hana, say. For Ilija, although he nagged that I cook hipster or hippie food. If I was smarter, I would cook for Judy. Perhaps it would sweep her off her feet.

You're no longer seeing that girl... - mother sits next to me.

... Hana.

Yes.

No.

Oh well. Even better.

She got on your nerves?

Sometimes.

I laugh – Me too.

And you're not seeing anyone new?

I was.

Over already?

Of course.

Of course – father laughs. He sits opposite me.

Shall we say the graces? – I ask him.

Yeah, right – old man answers.

How are you?

Fine, nothing new.

And how are Ilija and Amir? – mother asks.

Emir, Mummy dearest, Emir. I've known him over twenty years. And so have you.

Fine, Emir.

They're fine, I guess.

You guess? – my old man asks.

Well, I don't know. Emir dropped out of school, it seems. He hasn't appeared at that very few classes we have. He mostly takes photos for magazines. And Ilija... I don't know, married life seems to be suffocating him.

He seems happy to me – mother says.

He looks satisfied, that's the thing – I respond.

And that's bad?

I don't know, I think we're too young to be satisfied.

Don't you fall for that cliché – father says – You're still at that point in life. You think madness and exaggeration are necessary to write well. Believe me, this restlessness will go. It happened to me too. Only when I stopped drinking, I started writing.

I didn't like repeating the same mistakes, but the reasons were different. It's easy for you to say, I thought, before he even graduated he could earn a decent living from journalism. But I didn't want to go there again. He knows they didn't make this world a better place for us. I don't blame them, they really did all they could for me.

It's not just writing. I simply think a wife and a kid reduce your possibilities.

Mother laughed – You're the only one who can reduce your possibilities.

Listen to your mother – old man said.

Again I wasn't sure if it was true. Their philosophy seems quite acceptable for a different time. But I don't have the strength to explain for the umpteenth time how things have changed. Because they know it, because they feel guilty and because despite that they think I can and should do better.

After lunch we talked. About Joe Strummer, Ikky Sojun and bankers. On my way out mother asked me what is Thom Yorke up to. I promised I'd find out.

I'm going over to Ilija's place – I said – I owe him an apology.

Stay golden, Ponyboy - father said - and write. You have no right to neglect your talent.

Right - I answered.

\* \* \*

What do you want? - Ilija is standing on the door like Monty Python's bridge keeper.

To apologise.

Nothing to apologise for. We're both idiots.

I'm a bigger idiot.

Come in. I'm alone. Emir is coming too. Wanna beer?

Yeah - I sat on the edge of the bed which is in fact a couch, wanting to ask where Lana is - Can I smoke?

If you have to. Go to the window.

I don't have to. Fine, fuck you, I won't. My folks say hi.

Every day they say hi - he gives me a beer.

I know. They say you seem happy.

I am happy.

Are you?

Yes, you know why?

Nope.

Because I'm not afraid of being happy.

I'm not afraid either.

You just think happiness can't give you a good story. Just look at your father.

But you said I was afraid of being happy.

No, I said I wasn't afraid of being happy.

And why is that?

Why is what?

If you weren't aiming to tell me I'm afraid of being happy, why did you say you weren't afraid of being happy?

Words, words, words. Stop chasing them, bro.

Fine, Hamlet. I'm just saying it's not about what you're saying.

Then what is it about?

The blank spots between the lines.

Human conversations don't have blank spots between the lines.

That's what you think.

Fine, whatever.

Well... - I begin.

... you're wondering where the boy and Lana are?

Yeah.

She moved in with her folks.

Fuck.

Yeah, she said I can't live halfway between the bar and home.

Sorry.

Why are you sorry?

It's because of me you were out so often - I play with the can opener, turning it in my hand.

Bro?

Huh?

You really think you're that special or whatever, charismatic, I'd be going out just because of you?

I say nothing. I look him in the eyes - I have a feeling you're babysitting me. You've been watching my back for years now.

Believe me, you were the cause, like that wretched Gavrilo Princip.

Yeah, what was the cause then, rearrangement of the colonies? A minute ago you said you were happy.

I am, but I'm also terrified.

Of what?

Ugh, you name it.

Start from the beginning.

That I won't be a good father.

You're a great father, in a way you raised me as well.

Ugh, don't blame me for being the way you are.

Okay, okay, what's next?

I blame Lana for not being able to live like you anymore, and I blame you for living the way you do.

Believe me, I don't want to live the way I live - we heard the bell.

Emir was down. He will probably lose his job with the newspapers and we wanted to cheer him up by kidding and remembering high school, when I was so drunk celebrating my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday that I fell asleep in the bushes, and when I stole Emir's girlfriend and then I suggested we go to the roof. Ilija said he would bring more beer and I was already running up the stairs. I felt the light soaking my clothes. These last rays of sun burning against the skin, the concrete, the asphalt and the tin. It's as good as it can be. For several hours it'll just be the three of us. In a past time. Just the three of us. While we still believed. In the eternal present and an endless road. Instanters. Something better and higher is just

around the corner. The three of us. A bass, a drum and a guitar of a rock'n'roll band saving souls at 33 turns per minute.

Catch – Emir says and throws me a can.

Fuck. Now the foam will go everywhere – I caught the beer. The opening hiss, the rustling foam, the sipping lips – So, you're getting laid off.

Probably.

Then I'm off too. I'm just a freelancer anyway.

They'll probably keep you for some time, because of your old man.

This stung me a bit. On such occasions Emir never forgot to mention my old man. I know he doesn't mean any harm, but he seems to have forgotten about the fact that I have talent and that I fuckin' work on it every day. I was grateful to my father, but he only opened some doors to me. It was up to me to enter. – Possible. Who cares? They're all assholes. I mean, Ralph Lauren, Burberry and iPhones. Man, who wants to belong to that club?

The one who worries over paying bills.

Right. True.

With beer cans in our hand we watch the weary sun heating the convex geometry of reinforced concrete and the Moon shyly peeking out like a baby's first tooth. If I squint, they look like two teeth-moons. I remembered a summer night three or four years ago on the top of this skyscraper, we were high and watched the hot, red Moon, and laughed and sang the Pips' song where the Moon is a blue grapefruit and we pissed off the top of the skyscraper without the fear of vertigo and everything was in the palm of our hand. We sat the city on fire whose daughters adored us and we drove around aimlessly in Ilija's car, playing loud *Cabin Fever* by The Brian Jonestown Massacre on repeat. We wanted so much. To write a novel better than Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*, make a better album than *Take It From the Man!*, go to New York and fall in love unhappily with Alison Mosshart, and all we got was bad jobs and problems we can't cope with because we counted on a fireworks life, instead just life.

What are you thinking about?

I point my finger to the sky – Two Moons.

Excuse me?

Just squint and look at the Moon.

Wow, really.

Ilija climbs up to the roof with more beers – So, what's the plan?

Let's have another beer and drive around – I say.

I'm in – Emir says, digging through his pockets in search of a cigarette.

Why not? – Ilija takes a sip.

It's cold – I throw cigarettes to Emir.

Yeah, it's getting dark - Emir nods.

It's more like day - I offer him a lighter.

No, day just sank - Ilija concludes the discussion - Have you heard from Hana?

It's always Hana - I yell - Hananananana - I scratch my head and jump like a monkey.

Lananananana - Ilija joins me. Emir kicks hic chest like a gorilla, making loud, unarticulated sounds.

It's getting dark and we're shouting and jumping and spilling beer and we don't care. I know, we'll learn to solve our problems when the time comes. And I'll stop thinking about Hana, about Hana as an ideal, Hana the Moon and Hana the most ruthless angel when the time comes. And I'll walk around the neon streets of Memphis tipsy with a guitar buzz in my ears when the time comes and I'll let the Moon burn on my skin on summer nights in Madrid when the time comes and I'll smoke Moroccan weed in Porto when the time comes and I'll see the day break walking across Las Ramblas when the time comes. But neither the carefree azure of the past nor the phosphorescent glow of the future are near as sacred as this moment now. These are the good old days. These are the waves that will take us to better shores. These are the days of our lives.

\* \* \*

We jumped in the car and told Ilija just to drive. I asked him if he still had that Jonestown CD and he said he did. We played *Cabin Fever*. We knew: our road is not endless and it's not a metaphor of freedom. The neon landscape switched in the windscreens like slides in a projector, our drive created and erased worlds in plexi glass and we knew we were doing it ourselves. We erased our world and an interplay of the night, neon and city lights created a landscape to our liking and a road to nowhere. Nowhere except in the curtain of the night giving oblivion oblivion and a bluish, soft morning far away on the other side where we were no longer what we were, but what we wanted to be.

Ilija chose the road to the east, there, east of the petrol station (where we bought more beers and cigarettes) where it used to be just fields and now it's all abysmal geometry of new neighbourhoods, half-empty shopping malls, south of the urban waste where thousands and thousands of white seagull wings batted the nocturnal sky and on to the east of the batting wings, until he reached the bridge lit by red and blue diodes, and the river, usually grey or green, was now purple and the shadow were dancing on it. Here we are, east of the city where the clouds were slapping the two Moons and the Moons were staring at the diodes, and the diodes were casting their light everywhere, here in the east because we're



not Kerouac, nor we spent our lives like Kerouac seeking gods only to return to the beginning.

Do you know that drunken koalas fall off the trees? – I asked.

I beg your pardon? – Emir said.

Yes, when eucalyptus ferments. They fall off like crazy.

What's that got to do with anything?

We drank and stared at the Moons and diodes – The country is falling apart and we're just drinking – I say.

What all this bullshit about? – Emir still doesn't get it.

Some say he is a holy man, the others he's an asshole – Ilija got it.

Hearing this enlightened him – I nod.

Instanters, bro.

What are you two on about? – Emir was beside himself.

You can't understand. You don't follow your cock around like me.

What's your problem?

Too much writing, too few writers – I look at Ilija and laugh. I can't remember the last time I had such an honest good laugh with them. Was it the night on top of the skyscraper? Did we need children, a failed relationship and getting fired to talk carefree?

Hey, how many girls have you slept with since Hana dumped you? – Emir wanted to know.

I don't know.

What, so many?

No, I really don't know. With some I didn't sleep. I was too drunk. First we snogged and then I'd move on to oral pleasure, then they'd want penetration, then I couldn't, and then I fell asleep.

What, you couldn't get it up? – Ilija jumps in.

Yes, sometimes.

Don't you feel like less of a man?

No.

And you don't know how many they were?

A dozen, I'd say.

Did you get tested?

Aha.

And?

Well apparently nothing, for fuck sake.

Alright, why are you yelling at me?

I took a sip – Not much of a joke.

What? – Emir gives Ilija a new can.

Sleep with so many girls. You don't feel special. You don't feel like a conqueror.  
How do you feel?

You know what Kenzaburo Oe said?

No, and I don't care. Tell me what you would say.

Yeah, right. Why the fuck do you always express yourself in someone else's words? – Emir gives me a cigarette.

You feel like a lowlife cheat – I say and Ilija lights me.

What do you mean? – Emir asks and blows off little hoops of smoke towards the Moons.

You present yourself to these girls as the best version of yourself. You glow and you don't stop. These few hours they feel like they're in a crazy indie movie where lovers are mad and shots are blurry and Galaxie 500 is playing. And you're a sick fuck and that's why your girlfriend dumped you, it got on her nerves that you were never around. You kept running away from every moment and recorded it for some distant future.

Let's go find Hana – Ilija says.

No way – I answer.

Come on, you can tell her.

I don't want to.

Why?

We can go to town, but I wouldn't want to see Hana.

How come? – Emir lies on the hood of the car.

I wouldn't want to see her with that guy.

Right.

Yes. Anyway, it's not Hana I want to see, that is, don't want to see.

Who is?

Judy.

Well, let's go then – says Ilija and jumps into the car. We jump in after him. We rush back to civilisation along a dusty road, the Moons are between the diodes and Ilija pulls over.

What? – Emir asks.

A rabbit.

It really is – Emir peeks from the back seat.

The rabbit is standing on the verge between the headlights and darkness. Standing, looking at us. I wonder what Judy's rabbit is doing right now. Is he jumping and chewing? What is Judy doing? Is it pretentious to think that she is thinking of me and will she see our relationship as a shipwreck? Ilija starts the car, giving the rabbit a chance to escape. As soon as he brakes, the rabbit stops.

Well - I say - put on some speed.

Ilija steps on it and chases the rabbit, the rabbit escapes, but as Ilija slows down, so does he. We're laughing at the suicidal rabbit which, after well over 500 metres of wild chase, thought of leaving the path and running to the bushes. We go on. To the city. The best stories are in the heart of the city.

\* \* \*

Why have you never told Hana? - asks Ilija, keeping his eyes on the road.

Told her what?

That you cheated on her too.

Because I didn't cheat on her.

No?

How come? - Emir jumps in from the backseat while unsuccessfully rolling a smoke.

What's it to you? Jesus, come on - I give him a pack of cigarettes - stop trying to roll it, it's all over the place.

He takes a cigarette - You did cheat on her.

I didn't.

What about Margarita? - Ilija rummages through the CDs.

Watch the road. What do you want to listen to? - I reply nervously.

Play Svemirko, it's easier to be young with them - Ilija again focuses on the road.

Fuck the music now, how do you explain Margarita? - Emir jumps in.

I don't.

This couldn't be truer. I refused to subject Margarita to the painful rationalisation process. She tripped and fell into my life in a half-empty concert hall with a performance of a noisy three-member band from a city in the east. She was just finishing school and we were introduced by a friend from another noisy band. These were from the north. At first, because of her accent, I thought she too was born more to the east. She was deliciously bipolar, ranging from the childish to the cynically bad-tempered, had a showstopping pair of legs and an honest enthusiasm for the years to come. I liked her and I hated her for it. She liked me and a few months later she hated me for it. She learned how to look away if she saw me or, if we were in the same company, to roll her eyes a nanosecond before I said something arrogant and incredibly oh so incredibly stupid.

\* \* \*

You must be a bad writer – she sat on the stairs across the university building and put down a cup of coffee.

What makes you say that? – I was struggling to light a cigarette with a dying lighter. I put it down. Goodbye, mechanical pal, Godspeed, you served me well. She gave me hers.

Well, you're so full of yourself, you definitely take criticism badly.

Taking it badly doesn't mean I don't listen to it – I watch her crossing her legs.

And what do you write?

Short stories – I sat next to her and took a sip of my coffee.

Could you be more specific?

Have you read Kafka?

Yeah.

Nothing like him.

Funny.

I think it is.

No, really, how do you write?

Well.

You're boring.

What do you want me to tell you? I dig hardboiled style with poetical surges of magical realism.

Sounds interesting.

I shrugged – I guess.

A friend told me you were included in a collection of young authors.

I was. Which friend?

Igor.

Oh yeah, the one who thinks he's a great singer songwriter, poet and writer. And photographer. Makes promo universals. What did he tell you about the story?

He said something like: that arrogant piece of shit and his infantile crap ended up in a collection together with me. And you? Have you read his story?

No – I blew off the smoke – I just read my own.

You're quite a character.

The main one. At least in my stories.

She said it was a nice day. She was right. The smell of cherry blossom streamed through the streets. She stretched. Her breasts stood out. I squinted behind dark glasses. The first warm days. I was wearing only jeans and a shirt – Are we really going to talk about the weather?

What do you want to talk about?

Want me to go grab us a beer?

You said coffee.  
That's alchemy for you.  
Your treat.  
My treat.  
Deal.

We slept together the same night. I was still with Hana. It was a week or two before she began cheating on me. On a regular basis. Neither of us knew about the cheating for a few months. Then she admitted. I kept my mouth shut like a prick.

\* \* \*

Why would I tell her? – I throw the cigarette out of the window. I put the CD of Svemirko in the player. Now we're slowly driving up the mountain road above the city.

So that she doesn't feel guilty – Ilija tells me. Emir sipped on his beer.  
And let her take his righteous anger away from me?  
You've read Milton, right? You're supposed to be smart, right.  
Yes, I did.  
Well, look where this angry righteousness brought Lucifer.  
Into Eva's pussy.

That's right. The point is, you have no right to keep it secret – he turned onto a byway and parked on a clearing. The city was floating in the valley, with the two Moons spilling their shine all over it. We came out of the car and opened the last beer can.

Alright – I said to no one in particular – I'll tell her. Just let me have another one.

You know we don't judge you, bro – I hear Emir speak.

How can someone say they don't judge other people? Every human being possesses enough of evil and enough of complex to do this. I know I do. You love Whitesnake? You're a hillbilly. Haven't read Henry Miller? Hillbilly. Haven't seen a single movie by Jarmusch? Super duper hillbilly. But I never judge someone's moral transgressions. You slept with your friend's girlfriend or sister? Could happen to me. You lied to your friend about doing it? Fuck, he better not find out. I understand and don't judge this. As much as it may be bastardly. We are inherently weak. A damaged good cannot be fixed, but bad taste definitely can. My philosophy is simple: love to the ones who love, a bullet to the ones who hate, unless they hate Coldplay.

\* \* \*

Have you read Kundera? – she was smoking naked on the bed while I was putting on my jeans. It was the week when Hana decided she didn't want to see me on a regular basis. Or often. Or at all. The sun was sprayed across the walls, making its way through the attic and painting an interesting mural, cosmic battles before the beginning of time, a light and shadow interplay.

I tried when I was seventeen.

Ambitious.

Yes.

Which one?

*The Unbearable Lightness of Writing.*

You mean of being.

I know the title, I just didn't like the cheap philosophising.

What did you even know about philosophy at seventeen?

That it's not for me.

Such an expected answer. Apart from being an ignorant, you're also predictable.

I read in an interview that today it takes to be a peasant to be a gentleman.

Who said that?

A journalist.

You should read Kundera.

Given the situation, I should just drink, listen to Ty Segall and fuck. By the way, why are you so smart? You also broke up with that guy. He loves Oasis. I can't remember his name.

Neither can I.

A week later I read Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (I lied about being thrilled, I still find it absolutely dull). She came to love garage rock. When the night became sticky, we drank Chilean wine, Ty Segall, Lux Interior and Jeffrey Lee Pierce threw themselves around the room and yelled like shamans, and the light bulb, that glassy sun and the sticky darkness again painted murals on walls and on our naked bodies drowning in booze and sweat.

\* \* \*

More wine? – Writer asks.

Sounds good – I answer.

Only two things mattered – Poet quotes an iconic island band.

Which ones this time? – I ask.

We were trying to wash the weekend off ourselves, although – weekend or no weekend – every day looked the same more or less. A bunch of days Writer called ‘polishing your dick on the infinite merry-go-round of pussy’.<sup>1</sup> A bunch of days whose worth, if we try to make it a literary material, was debatable. It’s not that a book tour of three young authors along the coast doesn’t abound in both youth-like and lyrical and crazy material, but the formula of young men + trip + a lot of alcohol and other substances + the coast + discussions about life, women and poetry<sup>2</sup> is tedious and corny. What’s the point of this segment if I don’t intend to celebrate youth once again and everything that comes with well used youth?

Wine and good company – Writer answers.

Epicure would agree – I accept a glass of freshly poured wine.

Cheers – Writer says and raises his glass. We make a toast.

You know why people started making toast? – Poet asks while rolling a cigarette.

It rings a bell – I say – roll me one too.

Man, why don’t you learn how to roll them yourself – but he gives me a cigarette all the same.

Fine, well, why did people start making toasts? – Writer asks.

In the Middle Ages they had those wooden jugs and noblemen, at feasts, would raise them and bump vigorously so the drinks would mix. That way, if someone put poison in the other guy’s drink, they’d both be fucked.

So, this is our way of guaranteeing there’s no poison between us – Writer says.

No bad blood or hissing – I conclude.

Why did Hana leave this morning? – Poet asks, squinting while the light skilfully avoids the bushes and tickles his eyes – Pass me the shades – he says.

I give him his sunglasses – Work.

She doesn’t mind Margarita being part of the travelling circus? – Poet adjusts his glasses.

Or that you and Margarita exchange glances from across every bar? – Writer adds.

This last part isn’t true and even if it was, it’s not that every guitar player of every fucking band didn’t hit on her – I reply.

Yes, but she showed no interest – Poet says.

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<sup>1</sup> Only later he admitted that he nicked the expression from Douglas Coupland.

<sup>2</sup> Always the most boring discussions, but transferred onto paper without redundancies, so they don’t turn out bad.

Nor noninterest - I fight back.

Fine, keep it down, it's just her response to your shit - Writer pours us more booze.

I deny all that shit - I get up and go to the back of Poet's country house. I empty my bladder - When are they coming?

Who, Margarita? - Poet asks.

Fuck off, I mean the entire crew - I shout and my gush begins to meander. Great, I'm tipsy, i.e. we're tipsy and the Sun didn't even trip yet.

But especially Margarita - Writer says. I shake off the last drops of urine and put my pants up. Several drops end up on them. I curse. I go back to the table.

And you don't bother the ladies although you have a girlfriend? - I ask Writer.

Yes, but I didn't bring her with me on tour.

How does that make it better? - I ask.

I don't know, it simply does.

I said I was going for a swim. I put on my trunks and walked to a nearby cove. I plunged into the sea and dived until I felt pressure in my lungs. I dived out, lay on my back and floated. I was already sober.

Soon I heard new voices. Our little circus. Fools, poets, writers, troubadours and several posers. We travel along the coast and perform what needs to be performed. Readings, concerts, exhibitions. New faces with incredible ideas, hey, why don't we organise our own everything instead of relying on dead institutions? We were full of enthusiasm and convinced documentaries would be made about these nights, thirty years later we'd say how we were a part of something, a part of something that thrilled people and possibly changed lives.

A bunch of shit. Towards the end of the summer it all started going to hell. Several bands fell apart. Frequent concerts and overdoing it with speed wrecked everyone's nerves. One actor, a performer, ended up in a psychiatric institution after someone gave him a bad trip, walked naked along the town coast and claimed his dick was writing poetry on thin air. One poet (not Poet), after many days of partying with too much cocaine, fell off the sixth floor. He didn't die. He fell on a tree and broke almost every bone in his body, but he remained alive. After that he quit drinking and drugs. He discovered God and started writing self-helpish poetry. If you ask me, he might as well have been killed. After the third album and several awards, Margarita quit her job and lived quite decently off music.

I'm still in touch with Poet and Writer, we published an almanac with all the authors who took part in our tour and events. We're in touch, but when I talk to them I feel stupid, like a sober man walking into a party right before it's over. I



don't mean to say they were drunk or inconsistent. Quite the contrary. They saw it all: they were capable of analysing poetry and prose brilliantly, and all I could say was if I liked something or not. It was always like that, naïve but true. With them I had to pretend to be smarter. That made me feel like a chameleon. I change colours according to the environment, my defence mechanisms work perfectly. If I didn't, I'd be screwed, I guess. Whatever, a chameleon remains a chameleon. Regardless of the situation, regardless of the colour. The only difference is what is in the background.

I came back to the terrace, said hi to several people, saw Margarita talking to an irritating young writer. His name was Elias and I always thought him to be a poor man's version of me. So I said to Poet and Writer. I was nice to him though. To avoid uncomfortable situations, I said to myself. The truth is that I'm just a prick. She looked at me and nodded. I nodded back and carried on talking to Poet and a bass player about Bolaño's impersonality and fake erudition. So bright, so brilliant.

So, what's it like to be a young writer everyone writes about? - the bass player asks. She's been giving me the eye throughout the entire tour and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't giving her the eye too. Kim Gordon. Kim Deal. Ana-Marija from Repetitor.

Being a writer is a job like any other, the only difference is that you're your own boss, hence, your boss is a bigger asshole than usual and you don't get paid overtime. In fact, in most cases you don't get paid at all - I answer with a well prepared, not sure how sincere, answer. In fact, I was enjoying the attention my book was attracting.

Your girlfriend is gone?

I nod - Aha.

How long have you been together?

Five years.

Wow, I never managed it so long. Little things would start to get on my nerves, like hairs in the shower.

I roll my eyes. People in prose or in lifestyle magazines often write how in a relationship tiny things like, say, hairs in the sink or ticks start to get on your nerves. It's never been like that with me. I was always most annoyed (and hurt) by the fact that a person was on to me, which meant I could no longer bluff. Not lie, bluff. That's the shield, the pseudo protecting you, and this person is persistently taking it off before other people. Well, this is discomfoting and this is what can be the death of a guy soon to pass to the loser side of the twenties and who is still not ready to face the world as it is, and I am that guy.

The talks got louder, the discussions heated. For some reason I avoided Margarita, I drank faster than usual and at one point I was again behind the house, urinating and swinging like a boat\* in somewhat stronger wind.

Already drunk - it was Margarita's voice.

I'm not drunk, I just lost balance, nothing new.

Are you ok?

I stop pissing - Yes, I am. And you? I saw you talking to that pain in the ass.

With Elias? Don't say that, he's a nice guy. He has potential.

The boy is stealing from me - I say.

No, he's just stealing from the same ones you stole from.

Maybe, but I did it with more style - I button up and turn.

Could you be jealous?

How could I be jealous if we're nothing?

This seems to have stung her, she wanted to say something, she stopped and finally opened her mouth - No need to be cruel.

Cruelty and honesty are not the same thing.

The truth is not necessarily cruel.

It is. You and I are cheating on our partners. That makes us bad people. There, that's the blunt, cruel truth. Tacheles reden.

No, it's just...

... complicated. Right, it sure is.

You're again going to reduce this to basic elements? You know that this way you can only reach cowardly conclusions and solutions?

So lucky that Catholic upbringing avoided us, otherwise we'd be maimed by altar boy guilt.

Didn't you say you were once an altar boy?

That was only so that Ilija and I could get our hands on the wine.

Not only were you a delinquent, but a blasphemous one too.

Were?

Yes, sorry, you lost that aura of an outlaw. Now you possess the aura of...

... let me guess, a lost boy?

It wasn't hard to guess?

Not at all.

She came to me. I didn't move away.

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\* The boat comparison is here for the ambience. Corny on purpose.

The cans are lying on the tables like scattered chess figures. Emir is lying unconscious, high as a kite, it happens, smoke lifts you up and nails you to the floor. Someone put a salmon steak on his forehead. Ilija, Fric and I photosynthesised. We picked Fric up somewhere. I don't remember where. Along the way. The thin branch fingers open another can. The foam explodes, I blow it off the can and it sprays on my trousers.

Hey Fric? - I say.

Silence.

Fric?

Silence.

Can you hear me, you cocksucker?

Silence - I think he's asleep - Ilija says - He never could take weed well.

What's o'clock? - I ask.

That moment when you say o'clock instead of what's the time? When your eyes swim in an aquarium of beer.

Just a second ago I had a feeling everyone was here.

What do you mean?

Džokola and Zigi. And the Stević girl like she's back from Canada.

Džokola and Zigi talk about how football teams should play. What formations.

We don't get a damn thing. The Stević girl is flirting with me.

With me.

But she was always flirting with me.

Yes, but today she decided to be my white fairy.

Okay, you can have her.

Thanks.

Silence.

I can't believe she just told you that - Ilija yawned.

Aha.

She didn't even cry, she wasn't angry, didn't throw a drink in your face?

Nope.

Just said she doesn't want to see you again?

Aha.

What now?

Nothing.

You no longer feel a need for grand gestures?

I don't think I ever did.

What's that supposed to mean? Didn't you say she was your La Maga, your Daisy Buchanan?

Know what?

No.

I got up and came near Emir - We should fry that salmon on olive oil. Add capers and lemon.

Are you crazy? My wife would kill me.

She's also kill you if she knew the poor fish was on Emir's forehead.

True that.

Well then?

First tell me what you wanted to say about Hana - Ilija insisted.

I'm not sure if I was, now watch this soppiness, in love with her or in love with an idea of her or in love with the idea of falling in love and love. I don't have a full time job, I didn't graduate, my life is not stable or put together. I still borrow money from my parents. I read a great tweet the other day: millenials, walking around like they rent the place. I'm not exactly sure who I am and I get panicky every five minutes when I remember I'm inhaling time, man, we're inhaling future all the fucking time. I'm afraid I'm doing all this to avoid the future and responsibility. And trust me, I'm sick and tired of it.

What's that got to do with Hana?

She was one of those distractions.

Is this a combo of alcohol and weed speaking or the utter cynic in you awoke again? You can't reduce her only to an element in your story.

I don't see why not. I could at least have some use of all this mess. Well, what are we going to do about this salmon?

pp. 139-173