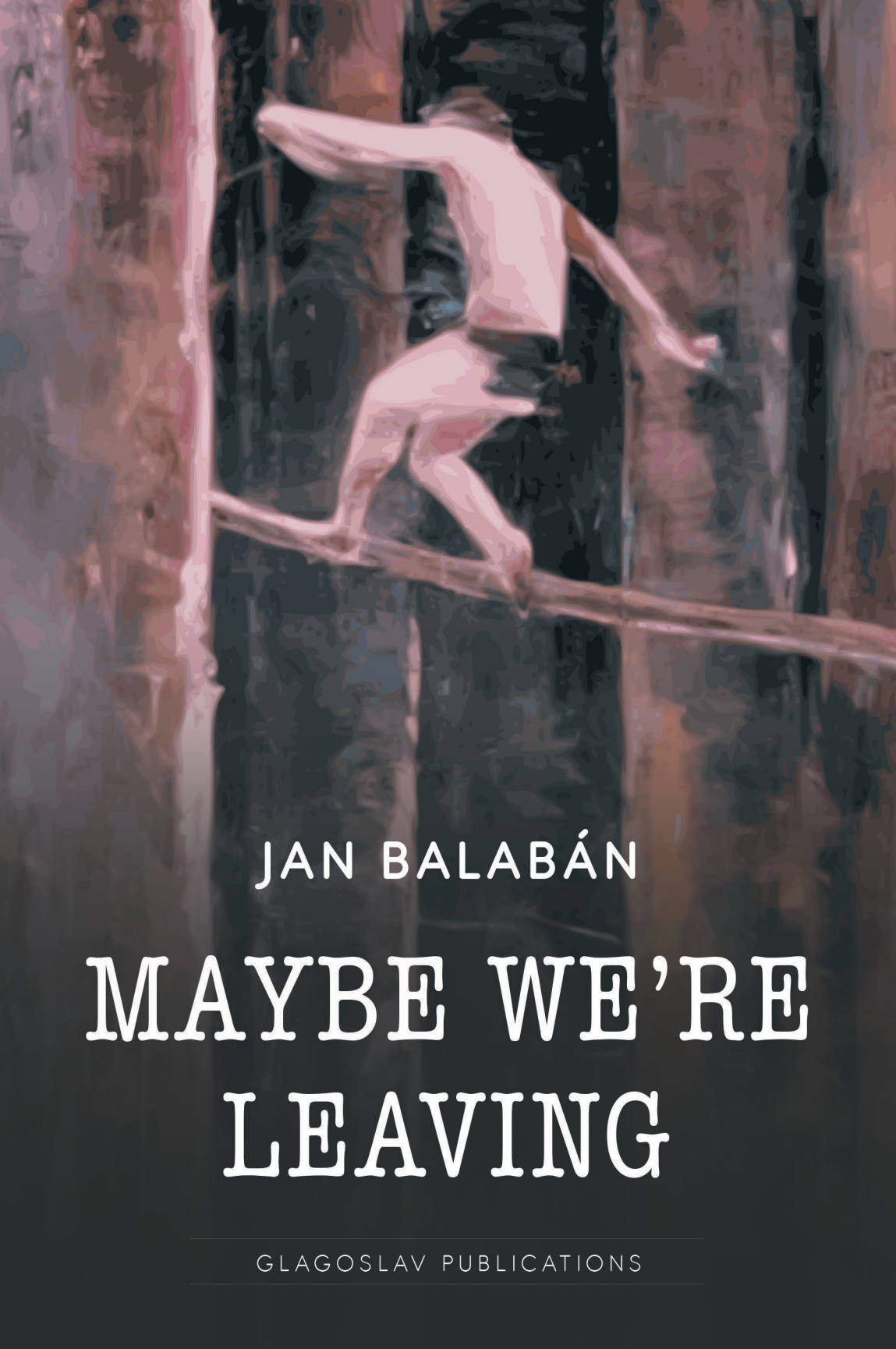

JAN BALABÁN

MAYBE WE'RE LEAVING

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TRANSLATED BY CHARLES S. KRASZEWSKI

TRANSLATION OF THIS BOOK WAS SUPPORTED BY

MINISTRY OF CULTURE
CZECH REPUBLIC

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by Jan Balabán

Translated from the Czech and introduced by Charles S. Kraszewski

Translation of this book was supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic

Book cover and interior design by Max Mendor

Publishers Maxim Hodak & Max Mendor

www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-911414-69-8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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JAN BALABÁN

1961 – 2010

WHO IS THE THIRD THAT WALKS ALWAYS BESIDE YOU?

The Everyday Apocalypse in Jan Balabán's Maybe We're Leaving.

Two great Christian authors come to mind when one considers the stories that make up the present volume: Fyodor Dostoevsky and T.S. Eliot. The first is directly apparent: Pavla, the young girl renting a cottage from the hulking tippler Vladek in the story "Bottoms Up," fears that one night he'll come into the apartment she shares with Ivan and kill them both with his hatchet "like that Karamazov fellow." "Raskolnikov," Ivan corrects her calmly — she'd mistaken *Crime and Punishment* for *The Brothers Karamazov*. Then, in "Edita," when Vladimír gets out of bed to rush cross town and pick up his unfaithful wife, he wonders bitterly, "Who am I, Prince Myshkin?" referencing the pure Christian hero of *The Idiot*.

Eliot, on the other hand, is present only indirectly, yet for all that, in a much deeper way. Whether or not Balabán was influenced by the great Anglo-Catholic poet, their work springs from the same conviction: this world, and the stream of time inseparable from it, are things lent us. We need to be aware of the necessity of right action, while we *can* act, in order to live a fully human life and — hopefully, attain an even fuller life on the other side of the grave that awaits us. Even the slightest act here below is freighted with an eternal significance for good, or evil, as Eliot says. A life worth living — or, rather, worthily lived — is one that is lived in conscious awareness of this fact, one in which the human agent strives to do good for others, and, ultimately, for himself. The time-centred words of John 9:4 are not among the sparse Biblical citations that we find in Balabán's stories: "I must work the works of Him that sent me, whilst it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." However, they perfectly sum up the entirety of Eliot's corpus, and the book in hand, as well. They are at

the heart, I submit, of the book's title: *Možná, že odcházíme — Maybe We're Leaving*; a curious phrase, but one which carries an implicit weight of consequence that is apparent at first contact, and even more suggestive after one reads through the entire collection. The title might also be translated *It's Possible, that We're Passing Away,* and this, with the subtle lyricism that is characteristic of Balabán's prose, strikes one as an introductory clause that demands its completion in the reader's mind: "and therefore…"

Balabán has a poetic gift which Eliot would certainly have appreciated. In the original Czech his prose is lucid, suggestive, and evocative with an immediacy, a conciseness, usually reserved for verse. Petr Hruška speaks of his "ability for precise, pregnant definitions [which is] well complemented by a talent for the creation of completely fresh poetic images."[1] Unsure as to whether this comes across adequately in my English translation, I will yet be bold enough to submit at least a short example from "Salami Horses":

> The road narrowed to a pathway leading into the midst of the riverside forest. Huge trees: lindens, alders, maples, oaks and innumerable hornbeams enclosed them in a balmy twilight. The path twisted and turned in the thick undergrowth of bear garlic, the white flowers of which twinkled like sparks.

It is a striking synaesthesia — one can almost hear and smell that bear garlic, as well as see it. It is an expression not unlike what we find in the verse of Marianne Moore, whom Eliot greatly appreciated (and who also had a penchant for the building up of crescendos of images).

But again, it is the message of imminent responsibility that most links Balabán with Eliot. Stylistically, besides the obvious generic differences, he is closer in literary approach to the great realists and psychological novelists of the European nineteenth century, chief

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1 In his note on the author accompanying *Balabán. Povídky* (Brno: Host, 2010), p. 517. In another short essay, he writes: "His text develops from an incisive feeling for details, for small events, actually rather a mere episode, but always bound to a concrete person in a concrete time and space, in a concrete life-situation, from which it is possible to emerge only by progressing in the direction of some sort of attempt at generalisation." "Vážně," also in *Balabán. Povídky,* p. 512.

among whom is Fyodor Dostoevsky.[2] The quote here to offer is the fevered reflection of Oldřich from "And the Birds as Well," who tries to shield his mind from the terrors of his ornithophobia by an abstract consideration of the child in his wife's womb, the gender of whom they do not yet know:

> *And so thus must you address twice over one incomprehensible child. They are two approaches to one summit, to the abstract child, of whom all concrete newborns are just imperfect variants, just like all people are merely unsuccessful derivatives of man, of the son of man, the pattern elevated above the poverty of all concrete names, above all vain human destinies.*

This is an odd, yet torturously logical, meditation (which began with a philological consideration of the morphology of the names Andrea/Ondřej) that would not be out of place in the mouth of one of the great Russian's hyper-intellectual heroes, like Ivan Karamazov, during his disquisition on the Grand Inquisitor. Yet Balabán is nowhere near as drastic as Dostoevsky. Violence, up to and including brutal murders, occurs in all three of the novels referenced in the pages of this book, but the Czech author does not need to resort to overwhelming shock tactics to discuss the pathologies of everyday life.[3] For these are quotidian situations we are presented with in *Maybe We're Leaving*. They range from the nervy half-bitten anxieties of a couple in a second marriage, played out in front of a foundling dog ("His Master's Voice") to the heartrendingly tragic, yet no less common, situation of a child suffering from an incurable illness ("The Burning Child"), but they are all of them stories to which we can all relate. They are so common in their conception that each reader, I reckon, has heard of something similar happening in the "real life" that surrounds her or him, and

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2 Hruška notes this as well, referring to "his extraordinary degree of seriousness, degree of gravity found in his words. It reminds one of that evangelical vigour in which narratives of time past are written, in the age of the Russian realist novels." p. 514.

3 Physical violence in the context of marriages breaking down, or, rather, its allure and repulsiveness to the characters concerned, can be found in stories such as "Uršula" and "Edita." But that is about as far as it goes.

even possibly — though one hopes it is not so — has experienced it on his own skin.

The limpid descriptions of these everyday situations create a sense of reality that drives deeper than what we find in the great novels of nineteenth century Realism. Objects so common that they are within our reach at this moment, as we hold this book in our hands, and people so common as to be our neighbours, coupled with Balabán's poetic mixing of narrators from third-person omniscient to stream-of-consciousness first person,[4] foster in us a sense of lived immediacy which forbids us to hold the situations at arm's length. We can almost taste the stories. As Hruška so accurately describes it in the above note, Balabán progresses from minute detail to generalisation, and thus effects a very human expansion of the experience from what happened to this particular individual, to something that touches upon us all, as humans.

The intimacy of the narrative is also helped on by the interwoven structure of Balabán's collection. Many, but not all, of the stories are linked. They do not run into one another consecutively, as they might in a traditional frame narrative; they are linked, rather, by the author's use of the same characters in different stories. Dr. Roman Hradílek is little more than an introductory prop for the story of his wife in "Uršula," while he is front and centre in "Salami Horses," and appears as a much more sympathetic character than we would have expected, based on the first tale. Likewise, his wife is only tangentially mentioned in his story — providing another look at the character of that protagonist, with whom we sympathised in "Uršula," and their son Robert, barely mentioned in the earlier work, is fleshed out and made real in the latter. The despairing drunk of "Emil" makes a phantom appearance in "Bottoms Up," while the dysfunctional Červenka clan to whom we are introduced at second-hand in "The Cedar and the Hammer" make a guest appearance, drunk at the counter of the liquor store, near the conclusion of "Emil." The positive young lovers Gabriela and Timi thread through both "Gabriela" and "Ray Bradbury." The effect we experience when coming across these familiar characters at unsuspected moments is not unlike that achieved by Krzysztof Kieślowski in his own interplaiting cinematic series *Dekalog*.

4 The latter is indicated in our translation by italics.

Since all of his stories take place in Ostrava and its general environs, Balabán heightens the reality of his narratives by immersing the reader in a situation that approximates life in a common area. We become the neighbours of these people, and they bob and weave into and out of our purview just as do the familiar faces of our apartment block, our workplace, our parks and the hospitals we visit. Unlike the writer he surely admired, Balabán does not introduce any feverish Raskolnikov into his stories, who butchers a defenceless old woman in order to test out a philosophical thesis. The anguish of a single mother about to introduce her child to an apartment in a housing estate that, with its defensively barred windows, seems more like a prison cell than a real home ("Magda"), is enough to arouse our sympathies and engage our minds on questions concerning the world about us, and the social conditions in which some of us are forced to live. By focusing our eyes on the everyday concerns and mundane trials of common, ordinary individuals — whose stories we are sometimes led to consider from more than one angle, as in the case of Roman and Uršula — Balabán slyly engages our sympathy on behalf of quite unremarkable people. And in so doing, he displays a great, deep, Christian humanism, which leads us to acknowledge the worth and dignity of every single human being.

Jan Balabán (1961—2010) was only eight years old when Aleksander Dubček sought to introduce "Socialism with a human face," a less repressive, open rule in the then-Communist controlled Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. He was still eight years old when the Soviet Union, the Communist hegemon of Eastern Europe, led the armies of five "fraternal" Communist nations into Czechoslovakia, in order to repress the Prague Spring and reintroduce totalitarian order. It is worth considering whether this wrenching event — the excitement of a Western nation beginning to breathe with both lungs again, suddenly stifled under the Soviet boot — had a seminal influence on the young boy's developing consciousness. Certainly, the characters in all of the short stories that make up *Maybe We're Leaving* seem to be in search of something that was taken away from them, to return to a better world that existed just around the corner they turned a moment before. Whether it be Edita's husband, heading for a messy divorce, yet desperately nostalgic for the happy times of their marriage, little, terminally-ill Katka longing for that time before she learned how to

count, which conflates in her mind with the time before she grew sick, or the nerdy Jaromír, sighing after the pristine Pre-Cambrian era, unspoilt as yet by the hand of man, each and every actor on the stage of Balabán's collection is in search of a return path to a paradise lost. "She didn't understand what she was supposed to understand," the narrator of "The Burning Child" tells us, in reference to Katka, sick in hospital, and preternaturally talented with a mathematical sharpness that holds her in an obsessive grip, she merely nodded so that she could get up from her crouch at last and continue on the path between the pines leading to the ruins on that hot summer day, which she still remembered chiefly as *back then*, when she still didn't know how to count. Somewhere in the back of her head she still preserved the image of her incomprehension, when she saw those lines or pebbles checked or crossed in front of her eyes as nothing more than lines or pebbles. In the same way, she remembered the incomprehensible shapes of the letters in their rows on the signs. They were not yet words and letters, but a mystery. Now, at ten years old, she guarded these memories of her illiteracy and innumeracy like a treasure chest, containing her real childhood.

Children play an important role in these stories. Most often, they facilitate the familiar theme of childhood as a period of innocence, or at least something *better* than the modern world: that golden age of mankind dimly remembered, to which there is no way back. In "Magda," young Jaromír stumbles across a pristine oak-grove which provides him with an oasis in the midst of a brutal and cold life in the concrete pre-fabs of Ostrava: "*Dubovina. Yes, Dubovina, Dubovina!* This was for him alone — no one else knew anything about it — about that shade stretching up to the heavens, about those trunks as massive as the piers of a church." The contact is so visceral, that he even names the spot — in a way not unlike the "Goldengrove" of Gerard Manley Hopkins' weeping Margaret. The naming of a place is a taking possession of it, and this Goldengrove, this Dubovina, will be "unleaving" in the best sense of the word used by the punning British poet. Jaromír will grow up and leave it — to his detriment and regret — when he enters adulthood. Yet Dubovina itself, part of that natural world which Balabán describes so poetically and lovingly in the pages of his book, will remain, and retain its healing might. Twenty years, at least, pass between Jaromír's story and that of Magda, the

eponymous hero of the narrative. Ugly apartment blocks now stand where the acres of maize fields stretched before the boy's eyes, and the mysterious airplane hangar, which made him shiver, has been gutted of all its numen via its conversion into a supermarket. But Dubovina remains as an oasis amidst it all:

> She lights a cigarette and balls herself up into the intimate area bordered by her shoulders and knees, collarbones, small breasts, lap and arms. *Here I'm home. Here I'll make your crib, little boy.* She smokes and sobs a little bit. *We'll go to the discount store in the old hangar together, shopping. You'll like the arches. And on our walks we'll make a little detour into that little wood of oaks, all shattered and bruised, left among the prefabs. There nobody'll find us.*

Impermanence, mutability, the stream of time, which carries everything — but especially the good things, the ones we regret — away from us, never to be found again, is the defining characteristic of these stories. It is tempting to see here an almost Ovidian sense of the worsening of times. Men, and the civilisations they created, were better "back then;" the modern world is soulless, empty. This idea can certainly be found in the reflections of Hans, upon his arrival at his grandfather's old parish to collect some books, while the most recent pastor and his wife are moving out: "He noticed that the large Volvo was now almost full — such as contemporary churches never are. Soon the pastor and his wife would be off, and the vicarage would be orphaned. They call it an unstaffed parish." The church is no longer needed, and where it is allowed to serve its dwindling congregations, even its architectural decoration has been pared back to the absolute minimum.

Similarly, Vladek, the hero of "Bottoms Up," compares the capable, tough and fruitful generation of his grandparents with the grubby and devolved state of his own:

> Granddad walked the seven kilometres into the village each Sunday to Mass, in a black suit with a hat on his head. That suit can still be found in the cabinet. Vladek wouldn't be able to squeeze himself into it, even if he tried. Narrow arms, short pant legs — what a small fellow he had been. When he thought

> of it from time to time, Vladek just couldn't understand how such small people (Grandma was a full head shorter than her husband) could bear so much work. And everything by hand — no chainsaw, no winch to pull the wood close. *Those were solid people. Unbelievable people*, their grandson thought, shaking his head. *Everything in good order, washed and swept clean, not like it is with me.*

Man has grown smaller, as have his ambitions and opportunities. The cynical number cruncher in "Bethesda" describes his own downward spiral:

> Once he had studied music, then even theology — he had this twisted period in his life, when he wanted to "serve" — and in the end, he finished in this well-paying, but gruelling grind at the computer. At work, he had to forget completely about everything, switch off all unnecessary circuitry and concentrate only on what the computer wanted of him.

The urge to "serve" is encased in quotation marks here, because it seems to the person concerned that such dreams are not only out of step with real life, but the domain of such mousy, do-gooder souls as are themselves in need of charity. He's wised up, so it seems. Yet how has he progressed since those unprofitable days of impractical pursuits? Turning from the vocations of musician and pastor of souls, he has become the slave of the computer, attentive only to what it "wants of him:"

> *Where are my numbers? They have disappeared into the underworld of forgetfulness like unplayed notes. I am paid to shuffle thousands of numbers through my poor brain, numbers of which I know nothing.. I'm like the musical scribes, who made copies of scores they never heard. No one wanted them to hear them. They might as well have been deaf. All that was required of them was clean penmanship, and thus in their ignorance they touched the summits of the musical art. They say that the entire Gospel can be found in the compositions of Johann Sebastian, and in their heads nothing more remained than there does in mine after the passage of these numbers.*

But the characters who populate Jan Balabán's stories are not victims. From this statement we except children, of course, and animals, of which Balabán was inordinately fond and which he describes with touching empathy. Examples of this abound; we shall focus on only two. In "His Master's Voice," the Catholic Anna Maria is irritated with her Protestant husband's sermon to the dog in the foyer, which strikes her as overbearing and nastily triumphalist, exploitative:

> Beyond confessional distinctions, though, what really bugged her was the way her husband, in his hangover, exalted himself above the dog, as if it were a mere worm. Who else would seek to assert his dignity above that of an unfortunate, stray animal, and in such a refined way, as if he expected a confession of solidarity and understanding?

Call him a tree-hugger if you must, but the sensitive appreciation shown to animals by Balabán in his stories — the understated sorrow for the "salami horses" leaps out at us — is no mere cuddliness. It serves a subtle, yet strong, philosophical purpose. Oldřich, the male protagonist of "And the Birds as Well," is literally prostrate with an irrational fear of birds. The only manner in which he can rid himself of it, is by slaughtering a tom turkey at a farm. He pushes himself to do it, and it works. He returns to his job as a ship designer, and rejoins his wife and unborn child in normal life. However, in the end, although he seems to be healed of ornithophobia, he may well have replaced that hang-up with something worse:

> The aft superstructure with rudder bracket and rudder post of the transatlantic ship was assuming clear contours on his computer, thanks to his precise calculations. Everything was in order, as much as anything can be. Only from time to time did his heart pain him on behalf of that heart, which had been beating so close to his own heart, and then ceased beating.

The economical image of that still-beating heart which he felt thumping against his own chest before he ended its pulsing, by hacking off the animal's head on the chopping block, is so immediate and evocative that further commentary is unnecessary. But the point is, whatever

Balabán's convictions in regard to animal welfare may have been, the sympathy he reveals in these concluding lines are more on the side of the turkey than the man. Oldřich goes from being a victim to a killer. He even comes to the realisation that it was not birds he had a problem with, really, but killing. Cruelly persecuted throughout the entire story (by his own mind), he is freed of that persecution by becoming a persecutor himself. Killing, as therapy? Killing, as a constituent element of human nature, the lack of which leads to illness? This sort of Darwinistic, law-of-the-jungle world does not agree with Balabán's ethos. And just as, stylistically, he progresses from concentration on individual details to metaphors open to and descriptive of us all, in these stories, Mankind's bloody dominion over the animal world becomes a topic inciting us to consider Man as a bloody creature. From stories of animal cruelty, we are moved to questions of man's inborn cruelty to others, and from that unsavoury thought, to a consideration of how we might better ourselves, and our world, by a realisation of the imperative to gentleness and understanding for all — including, and perhaps especially, other human beings.

Children and animals are innocent; children and animals can be, and sometimes are, victimised on the pages of *Maybe We're Leaving*. It's not that way with the adult characters, who are truly responsible for the fixes they find themselves in. However, if there were any one among them who might justly gripe against the way in which his life has been skewed and corrupted by his early environment, that would be the hero of "At the Communists." A Freudian tale if there ever was one, "At the Communists" grounds the adult Leoš's problems in his upbringing, at the hands of an overbearing mother, who "knowing what is best for everybody," not only jammed him into the strictures of a Communist childhood from which most parents sought to shield their sons and daughters, but ostentatiously performed sex acts in front of the child, despite her husband's prudent objections. Why she did this — whether it was perverted exhibitionism, or a no-less unfitting didacticism, aimed at depriving sex of its prurient mysteries in the child's mind — is never quite explained. It is, however, a rape. By imperiously forbidding the teenaged Leoš to leave the common bedroom for the kitchen once the moaning in the conjugal bed has begun, the wicked mother is using sex as a tool of control, of

power. But the fact remains that although Leoš is able, and more than willing, to castigate his mother's actions, as an adult, he is no different:

> *To calmly buy yourself a bottle of good Hungarian wine, sure, Egri Bikavér, and drink it, alone if you must, or with a female, whom you lead to the door tomorrow, with a smile, and close it behind her. All right. With a smile and a little something else, I don't have anything else for you, but what I gave you is quite enough. Three times a night, for sure. Four, no problem.* That's why he bought himself a nice wide bed. A real airport for long taxiing and sheer takeoffs. *It depends on what you're flying. I fly all sorts: from ultra-lights to B-52s. I've got something for them all. But mostly I prefer the F-16s, oh, those young rockets! — you can do whatever you like with them. They respond so well.*

His attitude toward sex is no better than his mother's. He completely objectifies his partners, to the extent that he not only pays for services rendered, but spins out a metaphor of womanhood that deprives the girls of their humanity. The bed is an airport runway; the women are categorised as airplanes, and he is the pilot — completely in charge of the experience, which is entirely for his benefit, as he conducts his aerial acrobatics at the controls of the passive machines.

Love is a problematical thing in the stories that make up *Maybe We're Leaving*. There is hardly a single instance of a truly happy pair of lovers in its pages. Divorce, infidelity, and unhappiness are the norm. Twice — in "Uršula" and "Edita" — violent marital spats are preludes to hateful sexual relations. In "And the Birds as Well," where we find in Betyna one of the few examples of a truly caring spouse, she too must be hurt by her husband's aberrant, psychosexual problem, which is not entirely resolved even at the "happy" conclusion of this, one of the darkest, of Balabán's stories. And even the one pair of seemingly happy spouses, Timi's parents, as described by Gabriela in the story to which she lends her name, are shown in the concluding tale, "Ray Bradbury," to be far from marital bliss. They live separately, and a shocking divorce attempted through suicide has not yet been completely scarred over.

Love, and its failures, are more than a symptom of the disjointed modern world described by Balabán in his stories. Rather, he uses

them, not unlike Oldřich's therapy, as a symbol for the cause of the disease: the rampant selfishness that sits at the root of societal atomisation. This is especially seen in the aforementioned "At the Communists," in which the sex act for Leoš is so auto-erotic in nature, that it can be replaced just as easily by onanism:

> *I c'n toss off at home under the covers on the airport even drunk. Three, four times a night, no problem. Of course, Leoš can do it, Leošek. Leoš, after Brezhnev, of course, Leonid! Not fucking Emperor Leopold, first or second! I don't have the good heart of an emperor. Don't have a good one, or a bad one. Don't have any at all.*

Whatever is eating him here — characteristically, he blames it on his mother — despite himself, he hits the nail on the head with the final diagnosis. He has no heart for anyone, save himself. And that can be said for more than a few of the contemporary Czechs that Balabán sets before us.

In this story, which describes as dysfunctional a family as one might ever find — a tyrannical woman who holds both son and husband under her thumb with a perverse dedication to casual sexual expression — it is not surprising that Leoš should find his perfect erotic match in an incestuous attraction to a newly discovered half-sister.

In Balabán's stories, sexual dysfunction and the eroding of the traditional significance of family can be seen as indicative of the breakdown of aimless contemporary society as a whole. In "Carousel Swings" the sensitive Hans reflects on this in a manner which repeats the auto-erotic metaphor of the runway-bed from Leoš's story:

> *To have children means the end of one's career. How stupid that sounds. Like from some idiotic soap opera retransmitted at three o'clock in the morning, when because of your insomnia you'll watch anything. Three years in the shithouse, and you'll fall out of everything. But not to have them, my God, and the whole world becomes an empty stomach, where there's room enough for everything, except a corner to snuggle in. One's bed is no longer a nest, but an airport, an international one at that, where*

each starts off from his own place in a different direction. Each unfaithful spouse with trembling knees thinks on that little piece of happiness… with someone else.

A strong, and palpable, current of Christian ethics pulses through the stories of Jan Balabán, who comes of the minority tradition of the Protestant Czech Brethren — his uncle Milan Balabán (born 1929) is an important theologian in the Protestant Reformed Church.[5] To what extent Balabán might be called a "Christian writer" as opposed to a "writer, who happens to be Christian" is difficult to assess. Petr Hruška is of the opinion that "his humble evangelical faith accompanies his sensitive reception of the ontological and existential frivolity of our murky lives."[6] Yet one needn't be a Christian to notice, as Mario Vargas Llosa does, that the emptying of the sexual act of any deeper significance in love, leads not only to its banalisation, but also the evaporation of its power to inform and positively aid in the construction of human society. In his criticism of Catherine Millet's autobiographical *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.,* the Peruvian novelist writes:

> This book confirms what all the literature centred on sex has shown us, again and again. That, when sex is separated from the other activities and functions that constitute existence, it becomes extremely monotonic, with so limited a horizon that it eventually results in dehumanisation. A life defined (*imentada*) by sex, and only by sex, reduces this function to an organically primal activity, no more noble or pleasing than eating for the sake of eating or defecating. Only when it is civilised by culture and the charge of emotion and passion, and clothed (*reviste*) in ceremony and ritual, does sex enrich human life in an extraordinary way, its beneficent effects projecting themselves through all the paths and byways of existence.[7]

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5 On the other end of the scale, so to speak, is the writer's brother, the accomplished Czech painter Daniel Balabán, who once attracted the criticism of Cardinal Miloslav Vlk for his admittedly heretical presentation of Jesus as a woman.

6 Hruška, p. 517.

7 Mario Vargas Llosa, *La civilización de espectáculo* (México: Punto de lectura, 2015), p. 127.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This translation is based on the Czech original of *Možná, že odcházíme,* collected in Volume I of the *Sebrané díla* of Jan Balabán (*Povídky*), edited by Petr Hruška and published by Host of Brno in 2010. It is identical with the original printings of 2004 and 2007, also published by Host.

The publication of this translation was made possible through the generosity of a grant from the Czech Translation Programme of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic. I wish to express my sincere gratitude for this aid.

I also wish to thank all the folk at Glagoslav for their expertise and help, and for affording me the opportunity to bring this beautiful book to the attention of the English reading public.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jan Balabán was born in Šumperk, a town near the city of Olomouc in what was at the time Czechoslovakia, on 29 January 1961. He was raised in the city of Ostrava, which lies some 92 kilometres southwest of his birthplace. It is this city that forms the backdrop for most of his fiction.

He entered the University of Olomouc in the 1980s, where he studied Czech and English. Upon graduation, he began work as a technical translator in Ostrava. Up until the Velvet Revolution and the fall of Communism in 1989, his works were clandestinely published; like his brother the painter Daniel Balabán and so many other artists of his generation, he was a dissident.

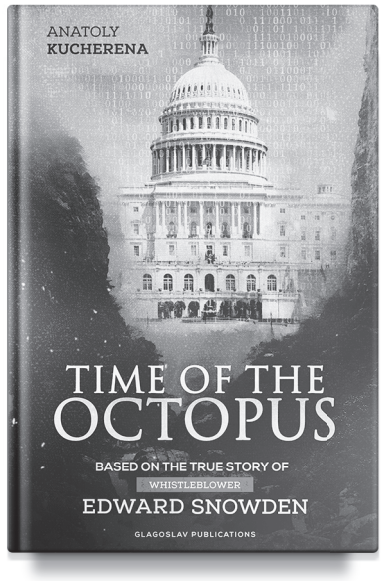
Before his sudden and untimely death on 23 April 2010, he had published several books, mostly collections of short stories, in the now unfettered press of the free Czech Republic. These are: *Středověk* (Middle Age, 1995) *Boží lano* (The Rope of God, 1998), *Prázdniny* (Holidays, 1998), *Možná, že odcházíme* (Maybe We're Leaving, 2004), and *Jsme tady* (Here We Are, 2006). He also published two novels, Černý beran (The Black Ram, 2000) and *Kudy šel anděl* (Which Way the Angel Went, 2003), a screenplay *Srdce draka* (The Heart of a Dragon, 2001) and a stageplay entitled *Bezruč?!* (No Hands?!, 2009) in collaboration with Ivan Motýl. *Zeptej se táty* (Ask Dad), the manuscript of a novel that he was working on at his death, was posthumously published in 2010.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Charles S. Kraszewski (b. 1962) is a poet and translator, writing in both English and Polish. He is the author of three volumes of original verse: *Beast* (2013), *Diet of Nails* (2014) and *Chanameed* (2014). Among his translations from the Polish published by Glagoslav are Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* (2016) and Stanisław Wyspiański's *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* (2017). His translation of Czech author Jaroslav Hašek's *Secret History of My Sojourn in Russia* was published by Glagoslav in 2017. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and of the Association of Polish Writers (Kraków).

TIME OF THE OCTOPUS

by Anatoly Kucherena



A frightening, prophetic vision of our world...
In Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport, fugitive US intelligence officer Joshua Kold is held in limbo, unable to leave the airport's transit area. He is on the run, after blowing the lid off the terrifying reach of covert American global surveillance operations. Will the Russian authorities grant him asylum, or will they hand him over the clutches of the global octopus eager for revenge for his betrayal?
As this gripping psychological and political thriller unfolds, a Moscow lawyer takes Kold to a secret bunker and grills him intently on just why he did it. Upon Kold's answers hang not only his own fate, but much, much more as the true extent of this chilling 1984 world unfolds.
Anatoly Kucherena is the famous Russian lawyer who took on the case of the American whistleblower Edward Snowden whose revelations about US intelligence operations sent shockwaves around the world in 2013. Time of the Octopus is a fiction, but it is based on Kucherena's own interviews with Snowden at Sheremetyevo, and provides the basis for Oliver Stone's major Hollywood movie 'Snowden' starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, one of the movie events of 2016...

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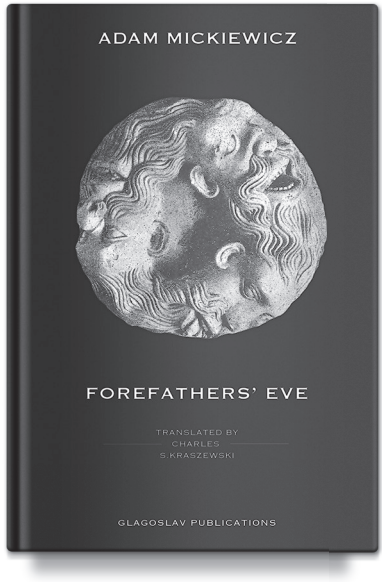
Forefathers' Eve

by Adam Mickiewicz



Forefathers' Eve [*Dziady*] is a four-part dramatic work begun circa 1820 and completed in 1832 – with Part I published only after the poet's death, in 1860. The drama's title refers to *Dziady*, an ancient Slavic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the dead. This is the grand work of Polish literature, and it is one that elevates Mickiewicz to a position among the "great Europeans" such as Dante and Goethe.

With its Christian background of the Communion of the Saints, revenant spirits, and the interpenetration of the worlds of time and eternity, *Forefathers' Eve* speaks to men and women of all times and places. While it is a truly Polish work – Polish actors covet the role of Gustaw/Konrad in the same way that Anglophone actors covet that of Hamlet – it is one of the most universal works of literature written during the nineteenth century. It has been compared to Goethe's Faust – and rightfully so...

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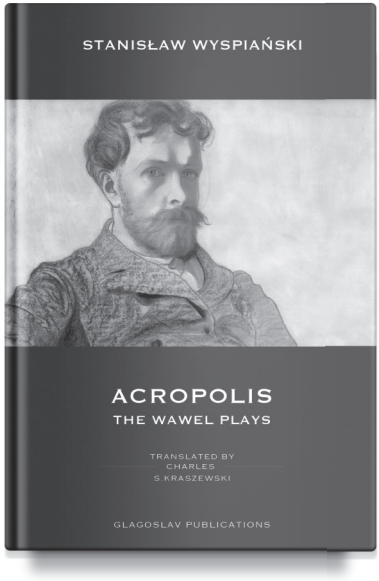
Acropolis – The Wawel Plays

by Stanisław Wyspiański



Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) achieved worldwide fame, both as a painter, and Poland's greatest dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century. *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays*, brings together four of Wyspiański's most important dramatic works in a new English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski. All of the plays centre on Wawel Hill: the legendary seat of royal and ecclesiastical power in the poet's native city, the ancient capital of Poland. In these plays, Wyspiański explores the foundational myths of his nation: that of the self-sacrificial Wanda, and the struggle between King Bolesław the Bold and Bishop Stanisław Szczepanowski. In the eponymous play which brings the cycle to an end, Wyspiański carefully considers the value of myth to a nation without political autonomy, soaring in thought into an apocalyptic vision of the future. Richly illustrated with the poet's artwork, *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* also contains Wyspiański's architectural proposal for the renovation of Wawel Hill, and a detailed critical introduction by the translator. In its plaited presentation of *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skałka*, the translation offers, for the first time, the two plays in the unified, composite format that the poet intended, but was prevented from carrying out by his untimely death.

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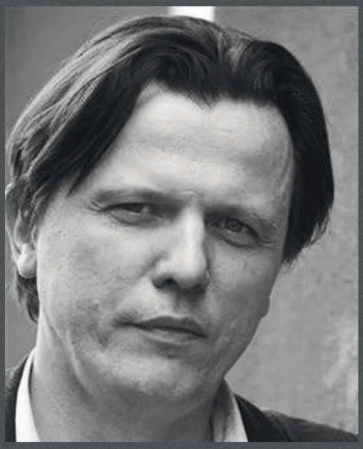

A young boy from the housing estates comes across a copse of old oaks to which he can escape, as to an oasis of calm. Although he may forget about it once he becomes an adult and "puts aside the things of childhood," it will remain a locus of balance, decades later, for a single mother struggling with the difficulties of raising the child she loves. A husband, on the lip of an ugly divorce, drives across town in the middle of the night to rescue his wife, abandoned by her lover, and then — as she falls asleep in the car — takes the long way home, to prolong a moment such as he has not experienced in years. An elderly doctor, self-diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, makes use of the few precious moments of consciousness granted him each morning to pass on to his grandson what he has learned about life and living responsibly. Loss, and per- manence, the ephemeral and the eternal, are common themes of Jan Balabán's collection of short stories *Maybe We're Leaving*, presented here in the English translation of Charles S. Kraszewski. With psychological insight that rivals the great novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the twenty-one linked narratives that make up the collection present us with everyday people, with everyday problems — and teach us to love and respect the former, and bear the latter.

ISBN 978-1-911414-69-8
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GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS ● ISBN 978-1-911414-69-8 ● LONDON