



JAN BALABÁN

WHERE WAS THE ANGEL GOING?

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J A N B A L A B Á N

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TRANSLATION OF THIS BOOK WAS SUPPORTED BY



**MINISTRY OF CULTURE
CZECH REPUBLIC**

WHERE WAS THE ANGEL GOING?

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

KUDY ŠEL ANDĚL by Jan Balabán
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Edited by Jan Zikmund
Proofreading by Kevin Bridge

Introduction © 2020, Charles S. Kraszewski

Cover art:
© 2016, Daniel Balabán, 'Pohřeb'

Book cover and layout interior created by Max Mendor

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www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-912894-27-7

First published in English
by Glagoslav Publications on November 27, 2020

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

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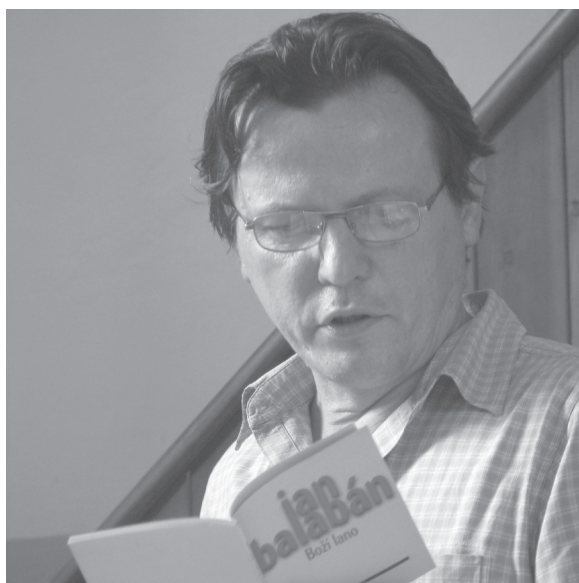
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G L A G O S L A V P U B L I C A T I O N S



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JAN BALABÁN

1961 – 2010

ANY PORT IN A STORM

JAN BALABÁN AND THE RETURN TO EDEN

Charles S. Kraszewski

I once had a friend who was a chef. A real chef; someone who loved the art of eating, preparing food, and knew a lot about both. I remember telling him once, off-hand, about having eaten in a Hungarian restaurant somewhere off Bloor St. in Toronto. ‘What did you have?’ he asked. ‘Fish,’ I replied. ‘How was it?’ ‘Horrible.’ He laughed. ‘What did you expect from a landlocked country, hundreds of miles from the sea in every direction?’ I had nothing to reply to that. His logic was impeccable.

Now, in one of the poems that make up his autobiographical cycle *Zvíře dětství* [The Animal of Childhood], Rio Preisner, who was raised in an atheist household, compares himself to the other, Catholic children, as he gazes from afar at the affection they have for the kindly parish priest, their catechist. While they had something he was deprived of, some sort of hope, some love — which he saw, but could not understand — all he was left with was adventure stories of ‘happy shipwrecks.’ Unsatisfying, but somehow fitting for his situation: alone on a desert island.

Aquatic imagery abounds in Jan Balabán’s *Kudy šel anděl* [Where Was the Angel Going?] as well. In chapter 29, for example, sitting at the window with a coffee, Martin dreams of great expanses of water which ‘should’ be found just beyond the tracks:

There, at the railway line, the city ought to end. The brick hovels and the ramps, the approaches and the bridges and past all that there should be a pier, a strip of dirty harbour water and there, where the blinking red warning lights on the roofs of the prefab blocks emerge

from the mist, there, the horizon, and on the horizon ships, and past the horizon, the measureless expanse of ocean.

The apartment in which Martin grew up is described in terms reminiscent of a sturdy little craft — something like the barque of Peter — breasting the turbulent seas of an inimical world:

The only light came through the peephole as if it were a window on another world, or the tiny porthole of a boat. Their boat, with which they navigate the adverse waters of that city. That's where they live, where they have their books and their faith, which the people around them can't understand. There, inside the boat, they sing their old songs, the echoes of which sometimes meet their neighbours' ears there in their living rooms full of television (4).

His son always has to have little boats in bed with him 'so he wouldn't drown' (34), and now that he is divorced, when he can only see his children on certain weekends, he dreams of gathering them together in the 'temporary rented haven' of his garret apartment 'as if in a ship's cabin' (29). Even Monika, when reminiscing on her own childhood as the interracial daughter of a single mother, speaks of their home as having been 'as cosy as a boat. A little boat' (36).

Whence all this nautical imagery in the literature of a landlocked country like the Czech Republic, or Czecho-Slovakia, as it was back in those days, which is about as far away from a sea as one can get? Perhaps the answer is to be found in the myth of Noah's ark — which is not so far away from our present reality as we may think. When the spell-checks of our ubiquitous electronic devices (that we take to bed with us?) underscore 'Tri-une' in red as if it were something misspelt, and offer 'Goddess' and 'Gods' as suggestions when we type in 'God,' it is not too far from here to a sense of being surrounded by a rising tide of incredulity and even the enmity of a society, once Christian, that now treats Christianity as a foreign body. A foreign body to be expelled, ignored, or wondered at, like some quaint curio. Fifty years ago, the young atheist (or agnostic; he seems more like someone who has never given a thought to God, rather than someone who rejects Him) who shows up at the chapel Martin is cleaning in chapter 39,

oblivious to Christian realities, would be the odd man out. Today — in the UK and France, no less than the Czech Republic — he is the norm. Folk like Martin are the oddballs, the fossils, the trinkets to be picked up, examined, and set back down with a shrug.

Martin Vrána, the protagonist of these stories, is, like the author himself, an evangelical Christian.¹ This puts him at a farther remove from the mainstream, as the member of a minority (Czech Protestants) within a minority (Czech Christians, most of whom are Catholic) in the overwhelmingly a-religious Czech Republic of today. Of course, Moravia, the eastern portion of the Republic, where most of the action takes place, has traditionally held a larger number of committed Christians than Bohemia, the western portion dominated by Prague. Martin, in short, is an outsider — something that becomes apparent from the very first chapter of the book, incongruously numbered ‘Chapter 19.’²

O, just don't let me run across any neighbour. He'd never really quarrelled with them, but they still didn't like him for some reason. He had striven to come to terms with this since childhood. The people I've actually done something to like me more. You come across a neighbour, your brother in humanity, in the gloomy light of the stairwell and he gives you a dirty look. Even if you've greeted him nicely, really meaning it.

His being cut off from the main currents of society is not merely a confessional matter — it is an ontological state. After Chapter 19, our first glimpse into the life of adult Martin (divorced, despairing, perhaps even despised) the narrative flow takes a hairpin turn to Chapter 1, in which we meet up with the adolescent Martin during his short-lived erotic idyll with his girlfriend, Eva.

.....
¹ That is, a Protestant — the term in Central Europe has little in common with what the word means in the USA.

² The book begins out of order with chapter 19 so as to underscore the importance of every moment — Eliot's eternal moment. On the other hand, it could underscore futility. ‘So this is all there is?’ Martin asks himself in that chapter, thus intimating, ‘yep’ — the preceding 18 Chapters of his life lead to nothing more than a lonely attic flat... Will this change from 19 on? Is this all there is to life — no hope for progression?

Escaping from their prefab estates, they enjoy an innocent frolic on the grounds of an abandoned colliery. Their existence there is typically adolescent — oscillating between the adulthood of heavy petting and the childlike innocence of play:

One simply lost oneself in that fantastic land, which they regarded as their own. The sunlight flashed and flickered on the aspen leaves, the bindweed curled toward the tree branches and they two curled toward each other as well, just a little frightened. They would kiss and embrace on an iron catwalk stretched between two pipes over a black stream. They would smudge up Eva's blouse, pressing against one another, until they couldn't tell where those snapping sounds were coming from — whether from the pipes below them, or the pipes within their bodies. And then again, a few steps apart from one another, to leap from the concrete pylon — she into his arms, there in the wood that figured on no maps, but all the same was full of birdsong and breathed its cool exhalations; where the ground was covered with nettles and burdock and birches stood naked, like skin suddenly revealed from beneath clothes. There was no end to it. Martin, knackered with standing, couldn't stop; Eva, tousled and manhandled by Martin, would fall on him, again and again. From the elderberry above them protruded an old winch, on the rusty drum of which there remained a few twists of wire rope, its end slithering on the grass like a snake.

It is an Edenic scene — underscored (not overbearingly) by Eva's name — but that cable, 'slithering on the grass like a snake,' seems a foretelling of doom. And indeed, before too long, the couple are to be expelled from Eden — through the agency of 'Eve' no less — who blindsides Martin by suddenly breaking up with him.

Is Martin's tale, like that of Adam himself, the story of us all? It's hard to be certain. Yet Balabán hints at just so much in Chapter 33. There, the two former young lovers find themselves, by coincidence, together in London. When Eva rings up Martin, he sets a rendezvous for Lambeth station, something that makes little sense — is it the proximity of the old Battersea power station, familiar to them from the album cover of Pink Floyd's *Animals*? — until he explains to her:

‘You know, there exists this unprovable and yet irrefutable legend, that somewhere in the garden of one of these old houses the Lake poet Wordsworth surprised William Blake and his wife, seated on a garden bench beneath the woodbine, as naked as Adam and Eve. The Lake poet supposedly turned aside his chaste eyes, but then he kept flapping his gums about it so, that it entered into every literary history.’

So, we might say, just as the Blakes’ Edenic idyll was sullied and ruined by Wordsworth, so were Martin and Eva expelled from their Eden by the world. You can’t escape the surrounding world; it penetrates every little Eden and ruins it. Those little boats of ours, bravely breasting the billows of an inimical world, are listing, punctured and cracked, the waters of the world constantly seeping into our dangerously heavy ballast.

Where Was the Angel Going? is a book about displacement — no Archimedian pun intended. While the main character, Martin, is the eternal outsider, much the same can be said for any of the main characters. Monika, his lover, is a Czech girl with slanted eyes — the fruit of her mother’s dalliance with an Oriental colleague while away on a stipend in America. She, as her half-sister puts it, is ‘responsible’ for the breakup of a family, although she’s paid a high price for it — being ‘hidden’ as much as possible from the outside world by her otherwise loving mother, and constantly having to bear the questioning eyes of those who look upon her as something ‘other.’ Even Martin cannot withhold his curiosity, a cruel trait in his character that, oddly enough, humanises him for the reader. He is sinner as well as sinned against; whoever the titular ‘angel’ may be, it is certainly not Martin Vrána.

Martin’s eldest brother, Petr Jr, searches for what he lacks in West Germany. Perhaps he alone of all the searchers finds some semblance of his particular lost Eden. Tomáš, the middle brother, a photographer, *must* live in Prague, and even though his mother can’t understand why this must be so, she herself idealises her life in the countryside, that period from before she got married and moved to industrialised Ostrava.

As the story plays out in the milieu of a family of committed Evangelicals, it might be that we are dealing with an allegory of the *homo peregrinus*, underscored by St Augustine in his famous dictum ‘our heart is restless, until it rests in Thee.’ But it must be remembered that the majority

of Martin's story, at least those parts of it narrated as recollection, is set in the frustrating years of Communist Czechoslovakia, where Gustav Husák 'gazed at us' from his official portraits with those censorious eyes of his and that somewhat sadistically pursed lip, like a broad pretending to be a guy. He too was a great mystic, of a sort, who knew that his material face, that trembling map of aged liver spots, didn't really exist — that only those silver icons of it glowing everywhere did — those dusty holy pictures of him hung in each and every classroom and office (20).

And so, it is a generational sense of displacement, not merely a confessional one. All of Martin's chums shared it, fantasising in a cheap sci-fi way of a lost world where they 'really' belong, and from which they have been transported to this 'prison planet' for some crime they can't remember having committed:

We drank ourselves stupid in taverns in Prague, Olomouc and Ostrava; we blushed in shame in our schools on account of all that Marxist idiocy, we goofed off at night, and, half-joking, half-serious, we told one another stories of how somewhere in the cosmos there were happier places — maybe on Jupiter or in the Pleiades — and that people are transported to the planet Earth for punishment. Part of the punishment is their ignorance of the fact. We'd forgotten that we'd forgotten. We're all in a penal colony, though we don't know it. We'd say that somewhere our letters must be hidden, in among the pages of old books, under the tiles in church, in boxes in the pillars of old bridges. Somewhere, the message I wrote to myself before they wiped my memory clean is hidden. Before they brainwashed me. There is my real name; there I could find out what it was I did, and what I'm being punished for. How I got here, and how I might get out (28).

Anyone of Balabán's generation who remembers what the world behind the Iron Curtain was like, during the decade preceding the great upheavals begun in Poland and resulting in the *sametová revoluce* that swept all the Husáks of the old Czechoslovak Socialist Republic away, will comprehend these sentiments perfectly. But the work has a wider resonance, too. Eva Topolská frames her sense of displacement — which began when she was

a child, at her parents' divorce — as something we all experience: the exile from the security and bliss of early childhood:

That's what these mobile phones do. You can be anywhere. That's no advertising slogan, that's the truth. You ring somebody up just because a friend in common gave you his number. Because you have this feeling, or maybe somebody told you, that he'd be in England, or, rather, no, you didn't suppose that; he has to be at home after all. Somewhere in northern Moravia, among the collieries, somewhere in northern Czechia, amidst the exhausted quarries, somewhere in some unreal land, where everything is disappearing. Buried in ash like the shadow of years one recalls with sweetness, because they no longer exist. Because you are no longer a young freckled girl in his embrace, but a damnably independent woman, who does little more these days than ride around in taxis and ring people up. So you pick a number, you can be anywhere. And he's not sitting there amidst the exhausted quarries, he's here, on the other side of the river, and makes a date with you at a train station (34).

And so it seems that those landlocked Czechs know quite a bit about those oceans metaphysical after all. Ask not for whom the ship whistle toots — it toots for thee.

Displacement, disenfranchisement, or exile, however one chooses to term it, is an unnatural state, if universal to all men and women. In chapter 25 Martin meditates on man's unique loneliness and abandonment in all of creation:

Since the strawy fairy stories of fated encounters of people destined for each other have long ago been ground to dust. Dust that can give rise to nothing except allergies. People are not fated to one another, people are condemned to their fate. They can't belong to one another, they can't belong to themselves, they belong nowhere. Has he not lived through enough already to understand that this not-belonging is the only home left to a person beneath these dangerous heavens? Unlike the unconscious creatures with their safe dens and cosy nests, man alone must stop deluding himself that he belongs somewhere,

that someday he'll discover that other half from whom he was once separated, and that their souls will flow together and re-meld, like it's some kind of romantic movie.

And yet, despite all the divorces and broken families that litter the pages of *Where Was the Angel Going?*, Martin is continually in need of someone. This Leitmotif by itself puts the lie to the bitter words just cited, suggesting that the true nature of humanity is communion, community. Martin's deep-seated need of this, whether we choose to refer to the Judeo-Christian myth of a return to Eden, or the pagan Greek myth of our originally composite nature which he refers to above, does find its fulfilment toward the end of Martin's story.

After Martin's horrific accident, his father, with whom he could find no common ground during the daily grind, sits patiently by his son's bedside, praying for his return, 'ben[ding] down over Martin, strok[ing] his head and [speaking] to him, as if his son were able to hear him' (46). Even more telling is Monika's decision to move into Martin's flat after all. She knows there are good reasons for not aligning her fate with that of this very imperfect man:

Suddenly, she realised that she was afraid of him. She wanted to be afraid for him, but she was afraid of him. With her eyes closed, she rolled over under his blanket and waited for him. For that dreadful man to come along and wound her. To throw her beneath the wheels of a car and then look on as her blood flowed, and then feel sorry for her and say that things like that can happen. She saw his dreadful hands, so often unwashed and with broken nails, his face, on which his beloved, boyish features gave way to hard, pitiless edges. His stomach, which would only swell larger with time, his sex, that weapon of his, with which he wounded other women, when, faithlessly, he procured himself pleasure and others — pain. He was unfaithful to his wife, unfaithful to that Eva of his, unfaithful to everybody. Ah, Martin, you're the guy who buttons his trousers and goes off on his own roguish way. Right now, in hospital, you have no feelings for anyone. You're a dreadful, dreadful person. What dreadfulness you carry around inside yourself! I can understand each and every woman who

runs off as soon as she catches sight of you. I can understand each and every wife who runs off from her husband, who doesn't want anything to do with him, with that unshaven mug, scratchy beneath the neck, with those sly glances that pierce to the very heart (44).

And yet something, something more than mere sentiment, overrides her reason and impels her to take that very step. And thus, the end of Martin's story is, actually, its beginning.

This may come as a surprise. But 'surprises' are at the very heart of the work. One of the most frequently encountered words in *Where Was the Angel Going?* is *najednou* — 'suddenly.' Suddenly, something happens, and life takes a diametrical turn from its wonted path, setting off in a new direction. The sharpest of these sudden turns happens, of course, when Martin steps off the kerb and is slammed by the car. At any rate, the Leitmotif of sudden shifts is a warning against resignation, or despair, which, as any good Protestant lad should know, is the one unforgivable sin — the sin against the Holy Ghost. That He will in, at any time, as long as one is receptive to His coming, is apparent from Martin's story of spending Pentecost at home. Contemplating a Gothic image of the flames of the Holy Ghost descending upon the Disciples,

Martin gazed at those motionless flames above the heads of the saints and felt an endless peace in contemplating their ecstasy — just like the arrow ever fixed in its target. Not striving for anything, not twitching and jerking — being, belonging to God.

And in this way that good son Martin compensated for so impiously refusing to participate in Whitsunday evensong (7).

The painting in question is a relic of the Middle Ages and — like the gold-flaked icons from which it ultimately derives — a window onto a different dimension. An eternal reality, the eloquence of which — it is so difficult to speak here without being misunderstood — is dependent on the receptivity of the beholder. The same picture, purchased (so sacrilegiously) at an antique store liquidating the furnishings of some gutted church, laicised and transformed into a community centre or apartments, perhaps hanging over the liquor cabinet in one of the nooks of just such a flat which had once

been a chancel, would be a mute, lifeless composition of colour and volume, easily replaceable by a Petr Lik reproduction of Antelope Canyon, once the lady of the house tired of funky faux-religiosity. For a believer like Martin, it is an unbroken, living continuum of power that links the apostolic age with that of the cosmonauts.

For Christianity is not merely a culture, like a mother tongue or an ethnicity. It is a manner of dealing with existence, which is often so difficult to deal with. ‘Honey and dust, that’s what life tastes like in this city,’ muses Martin at the very beginning of the book (19). As he nears its almost catastrophic end, it seems that there is more grime in the aftertaste than sweetness:

The bare earth and the bushes along the railway line were covered with litter. So many crumpled plastic wrappers, bottles, cinders, fag-ends and piles of dog shit. What’s going on here? Here in this subway beneath the rumbling corpus of the railway — what is this greasy filth, with which the water is clogged, ankle-deep?

Who makes us live here? Here amidst these bushes, from the bare branches of which tatters of plastic flutter? Here, where iron plates crumble to rust, where even iron is exhausted, handrails sag, tracks are empty, buildings shuttered, windows grim and grimy with poisoned perspectives and retrospectives on the low sky from which this dreadful April drizzle is seeping. Who was it fixed these sights before our eyes? How am I to walk off my despair, how do I get rid of this dreadful hunger? (41)

After meditating on the hopeless reality of neighbouring Poland, ‘N.N.’, the anti-hero of Stanisław Barańczak’s *Sztuczne oddychanie* [Artificial Respiration], composes a suicide note on an empty cigarette packet before opening the window and climbing out onto the ledge: ‘No one is to blame for what has happened. / No one but myself.’ The double-entendre is obvious: N.N. is taking responsibility for his own suicidal act and — for what drove him to it, the state of his society. Why is it that Martin does not do the same? Does he not bear some guilt, too? Yes, Christianity answers — but it is the guilt of Adam, who is ultimately responsible for the fallen state of all creation; it is this guilt which Martin, and all of us, have inherited from

our parents like a spiritual syphilis, to use St Augustine's colourful term. But that guilt was washed away by the waters of baptism, and, although this fact absolves none of us from the responsibility of doing what we can do ameliorate a bad situation, it prevents despair by pointing at the wider context. Here, we are not merely speaking of the world 'beyond,' which we may be made to enter at any moment, but the renewal of all things at the end of time, in the eternal moment.

It is this attitude that informs the prayer of that ancient happy virgin, Marie, who arrives to help Martin clean the chapel on his free day:

'And now, Martinku,' said sister Marie, taking him by the elbow, 'let's lift up a petition to the Lord together.' She knelt down and her gaunt hand, suddenly full of strength, pulled Martin down to his knees as well. They folded their hands and Marie prayed. And that prayer was to remain with Martin for the rest of his life. Amen. (39)

Marie, as Martin points out, is a girl, despite her years, because of her perpetual virginity (no allusion necessarily implied). A girl, and therefore a child, and, as we know, one needs to become like a child in order to enter into the Kingdom of God. It is perhaps for this reason that children are so often mentioned in the pages of *Where Was the Angel Going?* They are not merely symbols of innocence, they are sage emissaries from that other world — the titular angels, perhaps. Children see things in a simple, direct manner, and offer simple, real solutions to complicated problems: love, compassion. 'You told me how your daughter crawled beneath the table in fear when you were quarrelling,' Monika reminds Martin, 'about your son, who ran out into the corridor after you when your wife was screaming that she hated you. How that helpless little fellow wanted to soothe you' (36).

Children are wise with the wisdom of eternity, which is to say: goodness; they can be, in this respect, more mature than their elders. As Martin is leading his son back home after a visit in Chapter 31, he stops at the door and says:

'You know, boy, even though we don't live together, that doesn't mean that...'

‘I know.’ The boy was suddenly older than Martin was. Martin was ashamed of the tears that he somehow fought back (31).

But whereas children can be mentors, calling childish adults back to order, for this very reason they should not be disabused of their innocence, deprived of their simple ideals of right and wrong, by relativising adults. Morality — like it or not! — should be as ironclad as grammar, thinks Eva’s professional grandfather, heartbroken at his granddaughter’s deprivation of stable development by parents who put their own comfort and pleasure before her good. When his wife objects to his strict moral tutelage of the little girl, our hearts are first on her side. *Let the girl have as normal a childhood as possible. Don’t torment her!* we nod. And yet, it is difficult not to see his side of the argument:

‘You’re messing up that little girl’s head with adult problems,’ his wife would chide him when little Eva didn’t know where to rest her eyes, at each mention of her parents.

‘They’ve already messed up her head with adult problems,’ the old man shot back. ‘I’m setting forth examples, you understand, Olinka, examples that someday she’ll be able to grasp. So that she’ll know that in every sentence there has to be...’

[...]

Because it still holds true, even now, that a proper sentence has subject, predicate, and object, right? And each proper family has father, mother, and child. Or not? Maybe that doesn’t apply anymore? the old man seethed, then, brimming with love, he looked down at the small curly head of his granddaughter (24).

However much the modern world might want to inveigh against this sort of attitude, it bears fruit in the life of Eva. Having become pregnant by a man who took pleasure in ‘demeaning’ her, she still, in the end, decides to keep the child, and does so, with a sudden uprush of warmth at the recollection of her grandfather’s ‘soft heroism [...] that whole courageous game with life as its stakes, that game with the suppressed subject.’

We may be surprised at that phrase, ‘soft heroism.’ In our way of looking at things, the old professor may have subjected his granddaughter to a rather harsh didacticism, but it was not empty pedantry. Even if it hurt her to realise that her parents were acting wrongly, better that pain now, than poisonous servings of sugared moral indifference. This much at least is required by Christian honesty. As we know, or should know, not even Pope or Patriarch can conscience immorality for dubiously pastoral reasons. And in this case — it saves a life.

With man’s expulsion from Eden, time begins. The clock starts ticking with the first sin. And yet, Martin’s expulsion from Eden fixes him in the moment of his fall:

As Zeno of Elea proved long ago, the arrow shot from its bow does not fly, but, rather, is stationary in each segment of its route. Because the same arrow can’t be in two places at once. No more could Martin, and so he remains there, in that one shattering moment, shirtless at the culm bank, with his stomach lifting and his eyes gazing round at the empty reaches of the surrounding world, which he must, now, take for his own. (6)

‘Stunned’ is perhaps a better word than ‘fixed’ — as at the moment of his particular fall, Martin finds himself faced with the new, inimical world that he must enter. From this moment on, Martin is in the position of the first Europeans in California (and of Europeans first in California), gazing at what must now be conquered, since it has been seen, to paraphrase Czesław Miłosz. He must now set off into that land, like it or not. As in the case of old Adam, Eva has made the decision for him.

Still, in a curious sense, Martin will ever remain in that moment, at once Edenic and infernal, standing at the lip of paradise, ‘in the subsequent vacuum created by her absence [when] he could still feel the aura of her body on his face, still taste her saliva in his mouth’ (2) but facing the imminent exit, in that horrible pause between the nearness of just-passed delight and the rough thump of the angel’s hand between the shoulder-blades that will send him packing.

Eva will always remain with him — as Monika notes, referring to her as ‘your mysterious Eva, whom you never stopped loving despite your mar-

riage' (36) — to whom he was 'unfaithful' (44), even though it was she who had broken with him. Martin, it seems, is the one who 'betrayed' her the first time his eyes wandered to another woman. Eva is Martin's *donna ideale*, his Beatrice, and while she does not upbraid him in London for his 'infidelity' as the Florentine girl does Dante, when he finally meets her again in Purgatory, Monika does it for her, here.

Now Purgatory is also a place subject, in a certain sense, to time, while more than once, Balabán refers to eternal states in his record of the history of Martin Vrána:

In a tunnel, time means nothing. The moment when total darkness falls is the last moment, and others such follow, until the greyish mould of light appears in the window frames. The eternity between that moment and this is a slate wiped clean, which has different dimensions and parameters than events in time upon which the light of the sun falls (13).

Hell is eternal; one of the most moving — and frightening — parts of the *Inferno* is in Canto X when Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti explains to the pilgrim that, whereas the damned are aware of both the past and the future, knowledge of the present moment is denied them. Thus, when time ends, when the last soul in Purgatory has been received into Heaven and nothing shall remain but Heaven and Hell, the sufferings of the damned will be augmented by the total eclipse of their rational mind. In that now eternal present moment, no consciousness will remain them but that of their suffering; they will be locked eternally within the sin for which they were condemned.³

Such, however, is not the case with Martin. His frequent musings on eternity, reality, and absence tend in an affirmative direction — towards the Christian Neoplatonic idea of the mind of God, in which all things, even those hidden from us, are acknowledged and present. This is the sense of

³ See *Inferno*, Canto X: 'Noi veggiam, come quei c'ha mala luce, / le cose', disse, 'che ne son lontano; / cotanto ancor ne splende il sommo duce. // Quando s'appressano o son, tutto è vano / nostro intelletto; e s'altri non ci apporta, / nulla sapem di vostro stato umano. // Però comprender puoi che tutta morta / fia nostra conoscenza da quel punto / che del futuro fia chiusa la porta.'

his brother Tomáš's 'broadcasting' of his photographic negatives into the seemingly empty spaces of the galaxies above Ostrava, and Martin's comforting reassurance of the simple cave-paintings of men, with which he, his brother, and their friend covered the interior of an abandoned mine-shaft. Even though the vault collapsed one day, denying them further access, 'the pigments evoking the outlines of people are still there in the darkness, invisible due to the lack of light, but still there all the same. You can believe me or not, as you like. I can't prove it' (20).

This segment of the book inevitably leads us back to the prehistoric fresco, which Martin sketches on the wall of his flat:

On one side of the wall he drew a man. He was naked, but set in motion in such a way that his private parts were hidden. One of his hands was stretched out before him, as if he wanted to touch something. I'll paint over it in a minute, anyway, Martin reassured himself, and started to work on the woman. She was standing on the other side, looking out from the plane of the wall on which she was painted. She had a beautiful behind and breasts, and her long hair fell about her face. Children were playing between them, building some structures from flat stones. They were naked too, a little boy and a little girl; engrossed in their game, they weren't looking at each other. Just like the office of a child psychologist, Martin chuckled, shading the design and happily planning the background he would carve out behind them. Gigantic trees — not a pine forest, but ancient growth. (18).

This is also a cave-painting of a sort, and the primaeval setting with which he endows it also has an Edenic eloquence. His life with Daniela and the kids seems to have had little of the paradisiacal about it, yet this too is significant in its exposition of Martin's key trait: regret, sadness at the passing of *anything* good; goodness itself, however brief or trifling its appearance here, is always a reflection of prelapsarian bliss. Even as a child he had this trait, as his mother reminisces:

Martin, Martin the lefty, who always glances aside somewhat, playing with something the other two can't see. He's always got something stashed away somewhere. And won't show anyone. He'd rather stand

there, teeth clenched, with something gripped in his left hand, and should Tomáš try to pry those fingers open, he'll kick and bite in a furious whirl to keep it hidden (14).

This is not some morbidly selfish petulance, it is an image of Adam tenaciously gripping the edge of Eden with his fingernails.

Finally, *Where Was the Angel Going?* is an elegy for the most important thing in the world — not the individual, but the coming together in complete trust and support of two people. Martin and Eva, Adam and Eve, whatever it is that comes between them and breaks them apart indeed precipitates an expulsion from Paradise. Balabán is firmly set in the Biblical tradition, following which Milton correctly shows that the devil was only able to gain his brief victory over humanity by first separating Adam and Eve, to conquer them — a thought reprised by Jan Zahradníček in *Znamení moci* [Sign of Power], where it is the devil's modern helpers who do the same thing in post-war Czechoslovakia by breaking down the bonds between people; and Eliot, who underscores in his great dramas that isolation is the foundational characteristic of Hell, of damnation. However, in the final coming together of Martin and Monika, Balabán brings his little gospel full cycle by intimating a fresh beginning — the renewal of all things at the end of time. Not unlike the vision with which Dante returns to earth after his awe-inspiring journey, Balabán's novel shows us that this world is not an absurdly incomprehensible scattering of Sybil's leaves, but a book, bound together by Love.

ON TRANSLATING JAN BALABÁN

Literary translation is always a curious endeavour leading to curious results. It is both something obvious — for many years, the Anglophone world has been indebted to Constance Garnett for her magnificent translations of Dostoevsky, which have enabled the great Russian to reach, and influence, millions of people who know no Russian at all — and misunderstood, as something mechanical. Now, English speakers may chuckle at the German bon mot: 'Shakespeare is a fantastic poet. It's a shame the English can't read him in German,' but the phrase, as ironic as it may sound, contains more than a kernel of truth. Schlegel's versions of Shakespeare in German are of such high poetic quality that a seemingly heretical statement suggesting

that they are even an improvement on the original is, at the very least, theoretically admissible.

The one thing that can be said with certainty is: each translation is an original work, in its own right. That sounds like an unforgivably prideful thing to say, depreciating, if not dismissing, the original and its author. However, my intent is just the opposite. In claiming the present translation as ‘my own’ writing, I do not mean to blur or downplay its nature as that strangest beast of literary endeavours, translation, which is a ‘new’ creation that, all the same, would never have seen the light of day without the previous existence of the original work that it represents in English. What I wish to do is accept the blame for all its faults and roughnesses — I am their sole perpetrator; Jan Balabán had nothing to do with them.

Kudy šel anděl is a beautiful and fascinating work of literary art in the original Czech. This is the very reason I wished to recreate it in English. Every act of literary translation should be an act of love, and this, my *Where Was the Angel Going?* is certainly that, if nothing else.

It is, however, not the same book. It cannot be. No translation is; no translation approaches that ideal — if you can call it that — of Borges’ fictional translator, who is so concerned with preserving every stylistic nuance and every shade of meaning of Cervantes’ masterpiece *Don Quixote*, that he ends up ‘translating’ it from Spanish... into Spanish.

Translations are meant to entertain their readers — and that is all, or nearly all, that can be expected of them. They stand or fall on their own strengths, and must be judged as satisfactory, or unsatisfactory, on their own merits alone. In the best possible case, the ‘ideal’ translation will so delight its reader as to motivate him or her to see ‘what’s behind it,’ and learn Czech (in this particular case) so as to read Jan Balabán in his native tongue. If this book of mine adds one more reader of Czech to the world tally, I’ll have accomplished my task.

One thing a literary translation cannot, and must not, be used for, is literary criticism. A translation can never stand in the place of the original work for this purpose. Pierre Leyris’ French versions of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and those of Rio Preiser and Ivan Slavík in Czech, are magnificent poems. But the French critic attempting an explication de texte on the basis of Leyris, or his Czech counterpart commenting on ‘Hopkins’ by utilising Preisner and Slavík as his primary text, are simply being disingenuous, if not dishonest. It

is not Hopkins' poetry they are explicating, but that of Leyris, Preisner and Slavík. It is false advertising at best; at worst, it can lead to catastrophe. I'm still hoping to find some misguided essay in English on Czesław Miłosz's *Throughout our Lands* in which the poor, gullible critic performs acrobatics of inventiveness, trying to explicate the deep symbolism (one supposes) of those 'clocks woven of tanager and hummingbird feathers' by the natives of California, whereas the English word 'clock' is a mistranslation of *plaszcz* — 'cloak.' I'd also love to be a fly on the wall of the study of a Russian scholar, furiously searching through arcane books on North American botany, for those elusive 'lily bushes' mentioned by Konstanty Belmont in his translation of Walt Whitman's 'When *Lilacs* Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd.' Literary texts are complex things, and they demand to be met on their own ground, in the original, when being critically dissected. Translations are neither agents nor ambassadors — they cannot speak for the unique and irreplaceable original text. Caveat explicator! Reader, I hope you enjoy this translation of mine, and will be delighted if it moves you to learn Czech in order to read your next work by Jan Balabán in the original tongue. Critic, if you picked up this book in order to use it as a primary text to comment upon Balabán's work, put it right back down and get to work learning Czech, so as to be able to deal justly with one of my favourite authors.

Jan Balabán is a challenging artist, a prose writer with an incredible sensitivity to form. At times, his writing approaches the poetic — from his intelligent interweaving of thematic rhymes and Leitmotifs across many and varied narratives, to his colourful verbal expressions in both standard Czech and the jargon of Silesian miners, to his sensitivity to class and regional manners of speech and cadence. There is also the hallucinatory blending of narrative voices — first person to third person and back again — without any grammatical or syntactical distinctions, something that adds to the incantatory feel of his writing. Finally, he often employs an unusual, split-second shifting of tense — and this in a work that places such importance on the idea of time.

In my earlier attempt at recreating Balabán in English, my version of *Maybe We're Leaving*, I departed from the author's style in respect to the blending of narrative voices by introducing italics to set off a character's interior, first-person meditations from the general third-person narrative flow of the story. I came to regret this decision in the final stages of the book's production, but it had already been set for print, and so we let it go

as is. I won't say that this intrusion of mine was the worst sort of betrayal of the original, but it is certainly Kraszewski, not Balabán, writing there. I have not dared anything like that in this translation. The reader knowledgeable in Czech may note some differences in my expressions of tense, for example. But in all such cases, it was the nature of the English language that determined my choice; it was no arbitrary whim of my own. In cases like that, leaving the original expression of tense in the English text would sound wrong, or at least unnatural, and by its quiriness draw attention to something that the author had not intended to highlight. The first rule in the translator's Hippocratic Oath is to have the translation sound like it was a work originally written in the target language. If I have succeeded at least in this, I will be satisfied with the trade-off in form.



The text upon which the present translation is based may be found in: Jan Balabán, *Romány a novely* (Brno: Host, 2011).

A glossary of personal names and historical terms is appended to the text. Footnotes have been reduced to the minimum and mainly deal with linguistic matters and Biblical citations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Portions of this translation were read by Jan Zikmund of CzechLit, for whose advice and suggested corrections I am deeply indebted. This translation is so much the better in all those places where I have incorporated his expertise, his careful readings of the original, and his sensitivity to both Czech and English. If my translation reproduces Balabán's original flavour, much of the credit is his. Where I have fallen short, or, — God forbid! — mistranslated, the fault is squarely my own.

I wish to thank the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic for their support of my translations, as well as Ksenia Papazova, my friend and editor at Glagoslav, for her support and continuing faith in my work.

Miami Beach,
30 October 2020



WHERE WAS
THE ANGEL
GOING?

THE NINETEENTH

He got off the tram and a shred of wind and rain chased him along the pavement under the blooming linden trees, from which sweet water was running in tiny drops. When linden trees bloom, they get covered entirely in honey, even the surface of their leaves. Honey and dust, that's what life tastes like in this city. He pulled the zipper of his leather jacket right up under his chin. It was an old leather jacket; shiny from wear on its sides, around the pockets, and on the elbows too. It never rested in some safe and secure wardrobe. He had this sort of habit, in common with his father and his brothers — whenever bad times come round, get yourself inside a decent coat, preferably a leather one; something that won't soak through or let the wind in. He snorted with a smile at the sudden recollection of his mother's voice. Then he walked on through that bittersweet rain and said to himself that it'd be nice to toss that jacket into a corner, strip down and get comfortable somewhere, in his soft flannel shirt.

He turned into Zborovská St. This is where I live. Directly across from the entrance to our building is a keg-bar. Guys with bottles in their hands were standing with their backs to the wall beneath the eaves, and though rain was dripping from the tips of their noses and shoes, they kept their cigarettes dry. He squeezed his way in between them and bought himself three bottles of a strong beer — Red Dragon. He'd never drunk it, but he didn't know what might dispel the loneliness of his attic flat better than Red Dragon. Silliness, he admitted to himself, pushing his way back through the humid and greasy odour of the men out into the street with those three bottles in hand. The spring downpour was raising thousands of water bubbles on the asphalt.

He took out his key and opened the door to the place, which he never really thought of as his own, even after the passage of a year. That place

didn't really belong to him; only the key did. The main thing is not to lose the key. The corridor was clean, well-kept and dark, like the virtues of a bourgeois life. Wearily, he plodded up the stairs to the fifth floor. O, just don't let me run across any neighbour. He'd never really quarrelled with them, but they still didn't like him for some reason. He had striven to come to terms with this since childhood. The people I've actually done something to like me more. You come across a neighbour, your brother in humanity, in the gloomy light of the stairwell and he gives you a dirty look. Even if you've greeted him nicely, really meaning it. Or, should he hear the sound of your feet on the stairs near his door, he'd rather wait with his hand on the knob until he hears your footfalls die away past the turnings — even if he were already dressed to go out, with his parasol and keys in his other hand, breathing heavily there at the door, pissed off with impatience. Just *humph, humph*, pissed off like that, he thought to himself, as he passed by the door that stared at him with the evil glare of its peephole. He arrived at the door of his flat in the attic, which hadn't been hoisted off its hinges, and entered the room, which hadn't been robbed. This always made him breathe a little easier; at least there was that. Hello, he said aloud,⁴ hanging his coat on the nail, cracking open one of the Red Dragons and heading for his bed.

So this is all there is? The little mirror, which was still standing on his writing desk ever since his morning shave, reflected back his worn out, but somewhat astonished, face. His eyes seemed to have moved farther apart from one another than they had been. That's what a computer does to you. Pretty soon I'm going to look like a horse, or a jackass. A person who has stared at the computer screen for so long as to finally become an ass, like the one in the ancient fable, who can't decide if he's supposed to eat from the bushel on the left or the bushel on the right, until he ends up starving to death, while his eyes keep helplessly growing farther and farther apart.

Sitting in front of a screen producing hundreds of senseless translations of senseless texts all in order to settle the accounts, pay the bills, pay the rent, pay the alimony, the child support for the kids though the devil only knows what's up with them...

.....

⁴ In Czech, *Dobry den*, literally 'good day' — the possible irony of which is absent from the English word.

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.

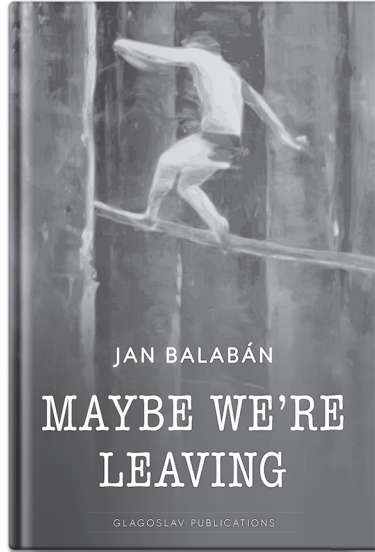
Before his sudden and untimely death on 23 April 2010, he had published several books, mostly collections of short stories, in the now unfettered press of the free Czech Republic. These are: *Středověk* [Middle Age, 1995] *Boží lano* [The Rope of God, 1998], *Prázdniny* [Holidays, 1998], *Možná, že odcházíme* [Maybe We're Leaving, 2004 — available in English from Glagoslav], and *Jsme tady* [Here We Are, 2006]. He also published two novels, *Černý beran* [The Black Ram, 2000] and the book in hand *Kudy šel anděl* (Where was the Angel Going?, 2003), a screenplay *Srdce draka* [The Heart of a Dragon, 2001] and a stageplay entitled *Bezruč?!* [No Hands?!, 2009] in collaboration with Ivan Motýl. *Zptej 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 verse in English: *Beast*, *Diet of Nails*, *Chanameed*, and one in Polish, *Hallo Sztokholm*. He translates from Polish, Czech, and Slovak. Among his many translations published by Glagoslav may be found Jan Balabán's *Maybe We're Leaving*. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and of the Association of Polish Writers (Kraków).

Maybe We're Leaving

by Jan Balaban

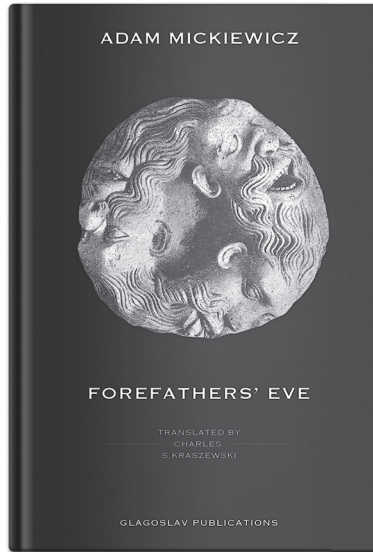


A young boy from the housing estates comes across a copse of old oaks to which he can escape, as to an oasis of calm. Although he may forget about it once he becomes an adult and “puts aside the things of childhood,” it will remain a locus of balance, decades later, for a single mother struggling with 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 permanence, 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.

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Forefathers' Eve

by Adam Mickiewicz



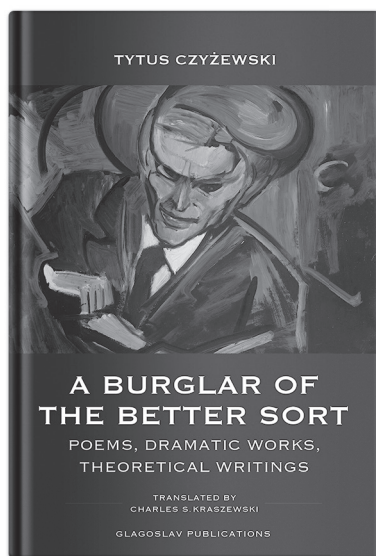
Forefathers' Eve [*Dziady*] is a four-part dramatic work begun circa 1820 and completed in 1832 – with Part I published only after the poet's death, in 1860. The drama's title refers to *Dziady*, an ancient Slavic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the dead. This is the grand work of Polish literature, 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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A Burglar of the Better Sort

by Tytus Czyżewski

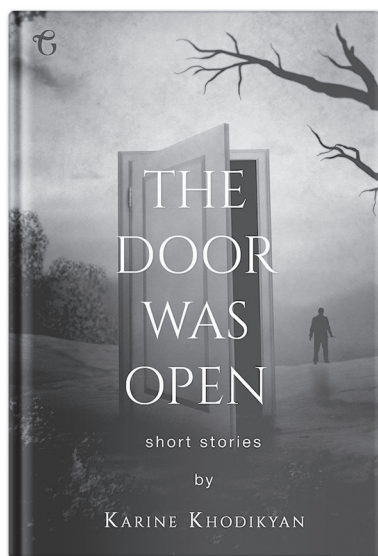


The history of Poland, since the eighteenth century, has been marked by an almost unending struggle for survival. From 1795 through 1945, she was partitioned four times by her stronger neighbours, most of whom were intent on suppressing if not eradicating Polish culture. It is not surprising, then, that much of the great literature written in modern Poland has been politically and patriotically engaged. Yet there is a second current as well, that of authors devoted above all to the craft of literary expression, creating 'art for art's sake,' and not as a didactic national service. Such a poet is Tytus Czyżewski, one of the chief, and most interesting, literary figures of the twentieth century. Growing to maturity in the benign Austrian partition of Poland, and creating most of his works in the twenty-year window of authentic Polish independence stretching between the two world wars, Czyżewski is an avant-garde poet, dramatist and painter who popularised the new approach to poetry established in France by Guillaume Apollinaire, and was to exert a marked influence on such multi-faceted artists as Tadeusz Kantor.

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The Door was Open

by Karine Khodikyan



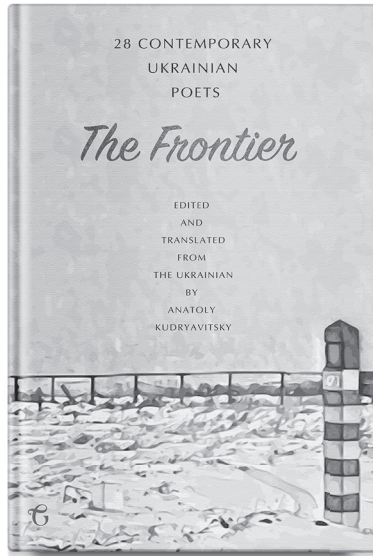
The short fiction of Karine Khodikyan can be described as intellectual fiction for women. These short stories with a “mystical touch” tell stories about women – young and old, happy and sad; even when the protagonist is not a woman, the story will immerse you into the life of a woman, revealing her role in anything and everything.

This book was published with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Armenia under the “Armenian Literature in Translation” Program.

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The Frontier

28 Contemporary Ukrainian Poets - An Anthology



This anthology reflects a search of the Ukrainian nation for its identity, the roots of which lie deep inside Ukrainian-language poetry. Some of the included poets are well-known locally and internationally; among them are Serhiy Zhadan, Halyna Kruk, Ostap Slyvynsky, Marianna Kijanowska, Oleh Kotsarev, Anna Bagriana and, of course, the living legend of Ukrainian poetry, Vasyl Holoborodko. The next Ukrainian poetic generation also features prominently in the collection. Such poets as Les Beley, Olena Herasymyuk, Myroslav Laiuk, Hanna Malihon, Taras Malkovych, Julia Musakovska, Julia Stahivska and Lyuba Yakimchuk are the ones Ukrainians like to read today, and each of them already has an excellent reputation abroad due to festival appearances and translations to European languages. The work collected here documents poetry in Ukraine responding to challenges of the time by forging a radical new poetic, reconsidering writing techniques and language itself.

Edited and translated from the Ukrainian by Anatoly Kudryavitsky.

A Bilingual Edition.

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- *Mebet* by Alexander Grigorenko
- *The Lawyer from Lychakiv Street* by Andriy Kokotiukha
- *Everyday Stories* by Mima Mihajlović
- *The Orchestra* by Vladimir Gonik

More coming soon...



‘Somewhere in the cosmos there are happier places,’ muses Martin Vrána, the hero of Jan Balabán’s novel *Where was the Angel Going?*. ‘People are transported to the planet Earth for punishment. Part of the punishment is their ignorance of the fact. We’ve forgotten that we’ve forgotten.’ Yet, as this very reflection implies, in Martin’s case, part of his ‘punishment’ is his ever-present memory of an Eden from which he had been expelled. The prototypical outsider, a member of a minority community within a minority community (a Protestant in the overwhelmingly agnostic Czech Republic), Martin, like the survivor of a shipwreck, strives to shore up his vital resources amidst the billows of an inimical world, which constantly advance and threaten to wash away everything he holds dear.

Where was the Angel Going? is a novel made up of forty-six linked stories. As always, Balabán’s prose is so vivid that the reader can practically taste the ‘honey and dust,’ which are the characteristic flavours of Ostrava. And yet, in its lyrical message of love and friendship as basic human needs no less critical than air and water, *Where was the Angel Going?* is nonetheless an eminently universal novel. Everyone will find him or herself in these pages, as we are all of us descended from that first pair of exiles, Adam and Eve.

