

Contemporary Slovene Literature

ALEŠ ČAR

Dog' s Tango

Beletrina

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Aleš Čar was born in Ljubljana in 1971. He attended secondary school in Idrija and studied comparative literature at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in Ljubljana. His work has been published in all the most eminent literary magazines in Slovenia and for his debut novel, *Igra angelov in netopirjev* (*The Game of Bats and Angels*), he received a literary prize for the best fiction debut in the years 1996/97. In 1998 he was given the status of a freelance artist and intends to continue with his profession as a writer in the near future at least. His second novel, *Pasji tango* (*Dog's Tango*), is coming out at the end of 1999.

It is the last August on the threshold of the new millenium. The novel's protagonist, Viktor Viskas, and the central ideological symbol of the former regime, the statue of Edvard Kardelj, both find themselves without a roof over their heads. The protagonist's long-term relationship breaks up, and with it a sense of material security, and the statue loses public support, which means expulsion from the park in front of the Government Palace. Location: empty Ljubljana. Whirlpool: the sun, dehydrated dogs, the protagonist who again and again pounces with optimism on what appear to be good solutions, a toppled statue, a woman from the next-door garden and a woman who played a minor role in the hero's past. Both of them are here from the outset, when the hero's "belongings are gathered on a few square metres, reasons for optimism nonexistent, therefore it's all good and well ..."

Together with the irony of the third-person narrator and the self-irony of the protagonist whom the novel follows across thirty increasingly hectic days, together with the sinking into the chaos and the awareness of it happening, in spite of which (or precisely as a result of which) the protagonist sets his mind on the one possible way, that of perseverance and struggle, through two women two worlds unexpectedly open up on the brink of his survival. The first is a promise of a material security but demands "the art of turning a blind eye" on the part of the hero and the other is a promise of emotional fulfillment. Physics or metaphysics? is the question the hero puts to himself at one point as schematically as he can only to get stuck in a rut yet again, numb and helpless in the clip of invisible scissors. In the course of the novel the hero is sucked into a whirlpool of events, approaches and failures, with each taken step sinking ever deeper into the unpredictable mess.

The chaos surrounding the statue also has its toll to take from the protagonist, for during this summer month the tension is on the rise; sooner or later the fate of the public symbol is determined by personal grudges, family scheming and human vanity. The dance of chaos is like a swirl of wishes, approaches and failures, past accounts and searches of the only right future amongst the pleiad of possibilities. Insecurity does not ease up for a moment - least of all in the open ending, on the last night in August, with autumn at the door, when stories are coming to a close without anything being finished. The protagonist remains behind the third wall ready for a new dance. Behind the bench in the park, on which he drops off that last August night, stands the three-metre bronze statue of Kardelj, cut at the knees as though it were sinking into the ground. The road is at its end, the journey only begins. Once more and once again.

Join us!

Dog's Tango
1999
novel
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hard cover
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DESCENT INTO A DEAD-END STREET

Viktor...are you already...stoned?

Tina Virjup, who Viktor Viskas would in more intimate moments call Kat, Kitty or Kitten, and ultimately also Pussycat, woke up that day as early as nine and lay in with Viktor's book on her stomach until ten. The hotel on Lastovo was absolutely fab. At ten she played a game of tennis with both of the girls and Blaž (Viktor didn't know Blaž, neither was he on Tina's expedition list), then she indulged herself with a proper bath; only sunscreen eight to put on, sunglasses and the sun on an overcrowded beach, where, so they say, there's plenty to do. It was evening now and Tina was sitting on the balcony with Viktor's book beneath her feet on a chair (on the beach she'd had it under her head and on her walk, under her arm); the other two are in the shower; Tina had turned on her mobile phone on the terrace of the apartment, intent on doing some reading at long last, and no sooner had she done that than the phone rang and, lo and behold, on the other end it was none other than Viktor himself - what an honour. The female voice in the receiver was quite ecstatic, there was a life form to be sensed, which is why the sight of Viktor's face and particularly the inside of his head was all the more pitiful. There was not a trace of enthusiasm there; on the contrary, Viktor was awfully cross with himself for not having hung up during Tina's monologue, for not silently crawling away from the line into his darkness, the only place where, in Viktor's opinion, Viktor, at that very moment, belonged. He was cross because he now saw things that were less than some ten, twenty minutes ago white, black, in other words, all trace of that lightness with which he was supposed to break the happy news to Tina had disappeared. Cross for having even bothered to phone; for why hadn't he simply gone to pick up his final batch of

belongings and stretched out in his darkness, in his summer drowning, or whatever it was? And thus we see Viktor, standing helplessly with the receiver in his hand; a little movement is all it would take, yet he can't do it, he doesn't hang up, and his only thought, which had long since overgrown Viktor's sky over Ljubljana, boiled down to how, for a month or two, he could erase himself from the face of this earth.

Viktor? Crackle, cautious silence.

What's going on, Viktor?

Nothing.

Tell me you thought of me and rang me up for a chat ... Tina was incredulous.

And what if I had...?

I'd know you'd gone nuts.

No, Viktor had not called for a friendly chat; they both knew that.

Slowly he scrunched a cigarette butt against the plastic of the phone box, flicked it on top of a pile next to a crushed beer can in the corner, puffed out through a thin crack in his mouth, ignored Tina's request, which had bordered on a demand that by God, he spit it out once and for all, but nothing; all he did was turn his empty head back to the scorching dual-carriageway: an elderly man with a terrier was still waiting for the green light, a woman was still nibbling her burek on that side of the road; only the bag lady with the bloated belly had in the meantime undergone some change, for she had dragged herself to the skip and was now rummaging through the garbage only a metre away from Viktor. Under the dirty bandages by her knees he could see a bloated stray mongrel. It was awfully stuffy in the phone box. Viktor was suffering bouts of sickness; he hadn't had a bite to eat all day; he was drenched in sweat, but what really took the biscuit: his glasses were thoroughly smeared with dust and grease from his skin, which our hero found terribly irritating.

Viktor, say it, Tina was pleading wearily. You know very well that it annoys me if you offer something and then refuse to give it.

But I've given you everything...

Viktor, please...?

You'll be gobsmacked...

Sorry?

Silence.

I'm moving out.

The bag lady dragged out a pair of jeans splotted with something white from the skip; it could have been yogurt, it could have been paint; she shook them, and it seemed only natural that a wallet should fall from a pocket. Viktor duly lowered his eyes to the small heap of filter tips.

Ciao, Viktor, Anita's voice suddenly, and a kiss from the other side. Then back to Tina, her voice terribly insecure:

Are you and Natalija moving out? A pause. In the midst of this beat? Viktor, what's going on?

No, we are not moving out, I AM moving out.

Natalija is throwing you out of the flat?

Something...like that.

A crystal silence, holding out little hope, travelled with the bag lady and the stray mongrel towards the street corner, but unlike them, it did not disappear around it, but bounced back, gathering force, and flooded the telephone box.

Natalija is throwing you out of the flat, she repeated, surprisingly calm.

Yes...

Viktor...but you knew exactly what was going on...Jesus Christ! I've explained it to you myself. You do remember at least that, don't you...?

Shall I remind you of another detail? Viktor's agitation was rising sharply, When in Natalija's bathroom with Natalija's towel you were moping up MY come ...

... Viktor ...!

...My come from your stomach, you were screaming there above the sink that it was all pointless! A pause. That it wasn't serious, That it was...simply all pointless.

But Viktor, at the beginning everything is pointless.

A small crack was widening terribly quickly.

At the beginning everything is pointless? What then, Kat? What happens after the beginning?

After the beginning...? She calmed her voice and adopted a motherly tone. *You are incredible. It appears, Viktor, that you'll never be able to figure out when a woman is with a man just...like that, and when...How can I say this? It is something more. But anyway, this is a general symptom of men's inability to...*

In other words, our hero, at the point of boiling over, cut her off sharply, for his other world too had been falling to pieces over the last two days like a house of cards, *as you can see, it has all turned out all right.*

Silence.

What has turned out all right, Viktor?

A beep in the receiver, five units left.

Who is Blaž?

Viktor, what has turned out all right? Are you norm...?

Who is Blaž, Tiny?

Have you gone nuts?

Burek, safely tucked away in the woman's belly, was pushing its way onto a bus on the opposite side of the plastic; on this side the terrier and the man were walking away towards the centre; from around the corner a little poodle showed its head, behind it a leash and, behind the leash, another biped, and in her, Viktor could recognize Tina's type. A big, bright ball finally fell behind the rooftops, and Viktor was asking himself to which breed of dog Viktor actually belonged.

What gives you the right, I mean, what gives YOU the right to be giving me the third degree like this? Are you norma...?

Beep, beep, beep...

On the little screen, zero was displayed, in the head of our hero zero, at the crossroads in front of the post-office zero. Our hero had another phonocard in his pocket with ten units; he felt like dialling the number again, just so that he could pour into that pretty little head of hers all the bile that had been accumulating over the past few weeks and had, at that particular moment, flooded his throat. His hand with the receiver was hanging in mid-air, but ultimately he whacked the receiver down onto its cradle, slammed the door of the phone box, banged the door of the car, stepped on the pedal so the tyres gave out a whine, and, yes, that's how it all started.

He drove into the narrowest street in town, which lies below the city castle and boasts merely one block of flats, built sometime at the beginning of the sixties, a one-way road past the entrance and a few parking spaces, with a length of less than fifty metres, the width fifteen and the height of the block roughly ten. Viktor set out directly for the top, for the fourth floor, and entered a messed-up room; the oddest things, bones, sweatshirts, spoons, creased carpets, tattered cans, torn and crushed photos and chewed pencils could be seen over both of the writing desks, the bed and the floor, a fair share of them being the dog's doing; the squawking of a bird came from the kitchen; Viktor halted for a mere moment and already every pore of his body was leaking, his white T-shirt was soaked and the white shorts were black from dust, the muscles in his arms and legs twitched, and his face, of which Viktor had a fairly good opinion, showed signs of displacement and agitation. All that remained were a few bits and pieces and a couple of big questions. From a full sink he dug out a coffee mug; Viktor always drank from the same one, the one with a smiling Pink Panther holding a plate saying 'Have a nice day'; into a greenish slime Viktor threw a handful of dried worms for the turtle, picked up a toilet roll and with a cigarette he once again, for what must have been the thousandth time, scanned Natalija's last note amidst the smeared glasses and files on the desk: in Trnovo he had a one-room flat free of charge for two months; how and why was apparently not important; well, at least Viktor had now got his head round the fact that Tina was not a benefactress, and this, despite the utter confusion, Viktor had managed to see for himself. Furthermore, Natalija had asked that Viktor keep to his side of the bargain, and in the same breath wished him well, yes, that all should truly turn out well for him in his life, signed: Natalija. For the first time in ages Viktor felt like breaking something. His benefactress was clearly Natalija herself, which struck Viktor as an awful realisation, the ultimate humiliation. Viktor halted at (where else?) the telephone; momentarily, his bile rose dangerously up to his throat again, and his intention to dial Tina's number, to have his say, be it screaming or begging, almost overcame him, when he whacked the receiver down on the telephone. He lit up on the

window sill, buried in the lush ficus tree: dusk was setting in outside; on the second floor of a large run-down house across the street a woman, over seventy, was again caressing a dozen cats on the window and in the recess, although only two evenings before she had been chasing them with a rake around the house and in the bushes. Now there had to be at least twenty thronging the window, the recess and the kitchen behind the woman's back; to Viktor, however, whose eyesight was much worse than his glasses, they moved more and more in the sphere of small fur isles, floating freely in space. Before Viktor's eyes scenes unrolled of cat fights and screeches as she dragged out a straw bag full of liver; at first there came a ghastly screeching and scratching from the front of the house, then an immediate response from all five dogs in the block, followed by a frenzied chase through the bushes, up the trees, and into the house; they stole from each other's mouths until, due to the volume of adrenaline released, the party carried on for the party's sake. A woman in her forties, with a yellow BMW cabriolet was the only person to visit her, and the sight of the car and the woman would make the mouths of the entire street water.

Well, the cat tales came to a close that day, as did many things surrounding Viktor. On the table, a book by Kardelj, which had somehow found its way there amidst the floppy disks, spilt sugar and dried-up biscuits; to his right were files and a botanical guide. He returned to the evening, his gaze drifting towards the left, past the roof of his Renault 5 to the beginning of the street, where under the light he recognized the retired policeman from the ground floor, the block's bad conscience and a pain-in-the-ass of the worst kind. He was coming back home with a full bag in his right hand and, despite the heat, an obligatory hat on his head. All was coming to a close; this was the thought churning away inside our hero; you could move yourself to the neighbouring tunnel, amidst other kiosks, onto another carpet, to other train stations with other faces and nothing. In view of the final statement, Viktor was indeed ready to stride into his unforced freedom; he squeezed the book under his arm, took an unopened whiskey bottle and three bottles of red wine from the wine cupboard, threw his coat over the flowers, his pil-

low, his winter blanket, keys, turned off the light and laden thus, froze; the film was over.

Viktor locked up; if there had been a back door to this block of flats, Viktor would have left the scene via that hole, but as it was, he descended a dark flight of stairs, his body laden from top to bottom, and with the onset of cramps from the day-long strain of carrying; no cause for alarm, however; Viktor had muscles permeated with the lengths of corridors, widths of turns and heights of stairs. He scratched the label with his surname off the letter box on the ground floor and dropped his keys inside; they gave out a meaningful jingle. He chucked his stuff into the car, and if the neighbours had that morning still been asking themselves by the curtains where Natalija and he could possibly be going on holiday, they must have realized by now that seven pairs of shoes, a monitor, loudspeakers, together with the rest of it, somehow did not fit in with the plan; something which had long been understood by the retired policeman at the window on the ground floor, who wasn't trying to conceal his serves-you-right grin, in which it was possible to read that he knew something our Viktor did not.

Viktor zapped down the one-way street in the wrong direction, and was stopped by a straying procession at the main road; it was Saturday, and every Saturday newlyweds streamed out of the castle all day long; that first day in August being no different, joy and laughter accompanied Viktor and his moving out for the entire day, and to top it off, he could also observe the event in two circles of car headlights, where flowers, confetti, bottles, accordions, a drum on the roof of a Skoda, and brimming fistfuls of sweets flashed before him like scenes from a never-ending film. And all Viktor could do was swallow silently the last round of victorious hooting that celebrated Viktor's defeat.

He drove out to the part of town where Ljubljana gradually dissolves into a vast plain intersected with canals, to a marshland, a side and a dead-end road on the edge of Trnovo. Private, detached houses lined both sides of the narrow asphalt road, all of them fenced off by hedges with well-kempt gardens; Viktor, apart from the dogs, which could be

sensed lurking in one or other silhouette of the decorative shrubs, under a staircase or in a kennel, couldn't see much, as most of the blinds were down; in fact, at least half the houses gave the impression that the owners were away, as was half the city, anyway. There were practically no cars, or they had been towed into garages; a Ford Mondeo of an older year in front of a smaller house in the middle of the street, at number five; on the letter box, Homšak Brane, Milica, Rok and Sonja; at the gate, a St. Bernard; on the dog kennel, the name Alisa.

For the fiftieth time that day, Viktor ducked down to a pair of skis in the hallway; they were placed on some boards below the ceiling, but this was his first time to feel them in the dark on the side of his head; past the family assortment of shoes, two refrigerators, a freezer, he opened the door, reached out for the switch and saw, which for the first time he had seen yesterday afternoon, but which was now becoming more and more real, a basement flat, low ceiling, bars across the windows - nicely wrought iron was probably a normal safety precaution, Viktor kept saying to himself all day by way of consolation; a small entrance hall leading into a small renovated kitchen, where there was not enough space for a table; on the left, a room with two wardrobes, a tiny desk, a bed, a big mirror and a chair; no sign of a phone though; and to the right of the entrance hall, a newly renovated bathroom with shower and a charming toilet seat, which to Viktor was the most promising object of all.

And, alas, Viktor spent the evening sitting in the dark, with pins and needles in his muscles and a dirty handkerchief over his temple, for the sharp edge of the skis had cut his skin almost a centimetre deep; all in all, however, there was an unusual calm in his head. His belongings were gathered together over a few square metres; reasons for optimism were nonexistent; therefore, it was all well and good. Viktor could, of course, try and be ironic as much as he liked, but the concrete surface was giving way under the chair and, having smoked three cigarettes, Viktor was convinced that he was about to sink somewhere, exactly where he didn't yet know, although he anticipated it wouldn't be nice; but Viktor knew he had better go and get some fresh air, get into his car, and that is what he finally did.

Night awaited the hero of our era, night, in which the only shoulder to cry on was the wings of mosquitoes in the thickness of the nocturnal air and the chaos in his head. There was no need to rush; Viktor gave way to pedestrians, stopped like a good boy at amber lights, accelerated gently; images were sweeping through his mind, a fair share of them too, and the confusion in there was fairly great as well: so it made more sense to close one's eyes and prick up one's ears to listen out for the offended voice, which, buried deep inside Viktor, was coaxing him into thinking that it was high time after all to pack up and go, to get away from all that flora and fauna which had been gripping Viktor's throat; the labrador, well, Viktor was indeed fond of dogs; moreover, our Viktor had a feel with which he could quite miraculously control dogs; our hero fell somewhere between a dog guru and a dog hypnotist, which was by no means insignificant, though one, according to Victor, was an honorary function and the other a motherly one, with its symmetries of daily pissings or night-time wanderings around the flat due to the labrador's digestion problems. The animals weren't the only consideration though; the huge ficus tree in the room, a luxuriant cyperus in the kitchen, mounds of..., climbing plants on doors, scores of cup flowers on shelves and in front of doors, posters of cats on the walls and broken test tubes in one's soles, aquariums, cages; Viktor there in his car was arriving at a decisive conclusion: that he did after all need to devote himself to his life, his work; this he was thinking, albeit unconvincingly even to himself; still, it was time to pull himself together and show who Viktor was.

The third time round, he parked on the side of the slope by the castle, lit a cigarette and gazed down into the sea of lights in the city below. On the roads and at the crossroads, a school of glittering fish; the city was windless, airless, as though it had been drowned. Under the festive starry sky, it was time again to say a word or two, and so Viktor blurted out one after the other the rest of what was due to poor Natalija, and that wasn't a little. After five years and more, a relationship is what it is; Viktor was getting worked up: you don't ask questions, you don't give answers, you don't touch any more, and everything is pleasantly self-

evident and well-oiled; each day is a new circle and each circle has a smaller radius than the previous one, and gradually it must all veer towards the centre, where it stagnates, just as he and Natalija had stagnated there, and where billions had stagnated and are stagnating, and where expectations are not a sound way of dealing with the problem; and that's what it's all about, about lying in the vacuum net. Viktor elaborated heatedly, to no one.

The day-long strain of carrying and the age-long putting up with life's injustices had made Viktor feel quite light. He parked in the street of his new home, and came to realize that the tiredness had disappeared; his head had been wrapped in crystal clarity like snow, by vigilance; if this continued, Viktor would be bound to await the sunrise. The St Bernard, stretched out in the grass, was the first stop; a quick fondle was a must; he dug out a rucksack from under the shower, tablets from the side pocket, Tramal, two; a couple of hours later he was still sitting beside the window; birds, the day was breaking, very gently and slowly; the room was rising out of the darkness, now the scene was getting interesting; again we are in the middle of a cluttered room, only now it's on the other side of Ljubljana; a monitor under the table, hangers with lounge suits over a chair, a keyboard in the doorway, next to it a bag of shoes, on the door handle, a bag full of tapes, underwear on the table, socks strewn all over the floor, tops, winter jumpers, folders, files, books, everything, nothing, and Viktor amidst it all, whose tired brain tells him that things which are pulled out from their places are somewhat clumsy, broken and frail, that with their blinded eyes they are feeling for the strangely low ceiling and Viktor, so they would brand them with a new image, a new order; Viktor, however, stays silent; edges are parting from surfaces, shapes are rising out of the courtyard's darkness; not a living soul can be seen on the other side, just the laundry, next door's driveway; the shades on the back windows are down, a set of chairs and a table with a sunshade is desolate in the front garden, a sack of cement against an extension wall and some tools; in short, Viktor feels so lonely this Sunday morning that weeping would rightly be a man's thing, but somehow he cannot, because, by the all odds it would

be pointless, his tear ducts have been stunted over the age-long lapping of the clouds where only air has touched them; life, however, is a distant chirping of lost crickets in the meadow, saturating the horizon; well, whatever the case may be, it is time to leave the hero of our era to close his eyes on his chair and catch his breath, to fall, at least for an hour or two, into a slumber without dreams; let us repeat, without dreams.

translated by Ana Jelnikar

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REVIEWS OF THE PREVIOUS NOVEL

Aleš Čar is undoubtedly an unsurpassable master of creating psychological moods, explicable also in terms of his supreme play with language. His flowing narrative style is abundant in original imagery, its descriptions are convincing, compressed and concise.

Tea Štoka, *Bilten*

In emotionally charged and overwhelming descriptions of states of being stoned the language and stylistic level are without a doubt perfected to their best, revealing a mature prose writer.

Matej Bogataj, *Delo*

Such multilayered painting of characters is bound to incite that genuine readerly tension and, after all, pleasure, which in contemporary prose is found only in exceptions, namely in those who in spite of everything still bet on sheer living and hope for windfall.

Dušan Šarotar, *Dialogi*

He narrates a story of an intensive, non-cathartic, open ending, the final chord of which is bound to enthuse all readers.

Samo Kutoš, *Dnevnik*