

Contemporary Slovene Literature

JANI VIRK

A View
of
Tycho Brahe

Beletrina

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A View of Tycho Brahe
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Jani Virk (1962), author of nine books writes prose, poetry, and screenplays, and also regularly translates from German. He is undoubtedly one of the central names of the younger generation of Slovene writers.

In the present collection of short prose works, Virk once again masterfully opens up our view towards the split, naked, lonesome man, crucified between physical necessity and the yearning of the heart. The essence of Virk's skilfully crafted artistic research is certainly already revealed in the very title of his collection "A View of Tycho Brahe", in which is concealed the name of the famous Danish astronomer, the untiring continuer of the Copernican revolution, who through his work even further deepened the gulf between the old metaphysics and the scientific knowledge to come. It is, indeed, in this fateful *view* into the dark, deaf skies which might reveal the ultimate secret of the world, that there remain hidden all of the man's troubles in the times to come, and of the time when the hart is left without eyes.

TO LIVE INWARDS, TO DIE OUTWARDS

Never, really never, not even in those rare moments of feeling that I am truly alive and that I can feel what I am composed of, not even in the moments of clairvoyant drunkenness, have I ever thought of myself as a true Slovene writer. That, quite simply, I am not.

I have never had any difficulties with the blank page before the author's troubled, computer-paled face, nor with the tangled erotic commitment to literature and similar fashionable ailments. It has never disturbed me that my books are not to be found in the New York bookstores, on the Square of Heavenly Peace, of beneath the pyres for cremating the death on the banks of the Ganges. Whenever I return home from abroad, from some occasional, generally boring reading expedition, and then stroll around the streets of Ljubljana, my eyes do not shine with the clear recognition that I am a poetic seer amongst the mass of pitiful worms. If my mother comes to visit, to look after my children for a while, I do not burst out at her *Oh mother, you have born a poet* The end of history, of literature, of the subject, and similar concepts, has never either pained or frightened me. I have never been interested in writers, and if in my childhood I ever imagined what my profession would be, or at least my job, the only manual work I had in mind was cooking, although intimately I gave priority to other forms of employment, in roughly this order: missionary in Africa, a romantically-burly bodyguard in a bordello (some years later I discovered to my disappointment that in this industry no such working position existed), a monk in a monastery (who after decades of solitude returns to life and, after the example of the bible tales, begets his kin), a traveller over the trackless expanses and the black women's bodies of Africa, a mercenary in the Foreign Legion... Suitably split off, torn away, two-faced and ambivalent for a man who, by no fault of his own and without prior knowledge, had been born under the sign of Pisces, of the dual slithering in the oceanic waters of life.

I studied world literature at the University of Ljubljana out of lack of imagination, quite simply because that is the way my brother had begun to study three years before me, and also out of a sense of offence, because some of my closer relatives had laughed scornfully at me when I mentioned medicine.

Apart from a blind trust in the spiritual-historical method – which in every period reliably shapes out of clay diverse and always slightly different little psycho-psysical images, which therefore densely inhabit good literature – I really did not learn anything at all, although I did finish my studies. Apart from the feeling of deep depression and of the unnecessary, comic threat of the sterile pedagogical finger, all that remained from those years resulting from the contact with the university Institution was Trakl's *Grodek*, which I read through during a flight for safety from the deadly dull, dry-as-dust professional literature in the university library. There were also

some poems by my fellow-student Lidija Turk, with whom I studied together for the exams (poems which arrived from her bed in the students' campus, and are only now revived from the warm, though unreliable memory... "little girls are cleft apart/ from the navel down/ from birth and on," "I am a woman, who has born the children of white dread"); some verses from Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol" (with which I winged a dark-haired of English, a year behind me in studies, and my wife today); and the framework of Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's philosophy which, in order to teach myself German, I actually read from beginning to end, from bottom to top, so that I recognised their thought completely within their body and nerves, and so closely felt their two souls that I could have begun debating with them if only I could have akkuned my voice to the frequency of the dead.

Whatever else I might have read during these years, I would also gladly have read if I had been a lorry-driver (a job about which I seriously thought), a sports coach or sports journalist, which I actually was during a certain period. Camus, Solzhenitsyn, Kafka, Dostoievsky, Unamuno, Viktor Frankl, Virginia Woolf, I.B. Singer, and poets by the dozen, were part of my soul even before I found them, for I had forever been swimming in their shared pool. With all of these writers, I felt quite firmly that that they touched in me something which had already been there, which I had known from the past, and which had been in my soul even before I was born. The intuition which had led me to them was by no means coincidental.

I recall the good feeling that kept me going through many years, the sense that I had a clear view through the columns and membranes of letters, that I had an insight into the supra-personal captivations from which the magma flows beneath the fingers of the people who write with the talent of surpassing, the descendants of the druids, the shamans, and the anarchic wandering bards. I was brimming over with self-confidence and clairvoyance; I wrote an essay on Virginia Woolf, who I felt sure I understood as the trusty chosen-one of the uncontrollable, capricious dogs. Then I began writing about books for the journals and the radio, dozens of pieces – at first, out of amazement at the view which broke through from the paper, and then, probably ever more so, out of routine and the need for money – and so this laser-like view became ever more dulled and blunted. "*Fucking hell*", I shouted angrily one day, when I happened to be re-reading one of my reviews in *Mladina*, or *Dnevnik* or somewhere else, "this criticism or review, or whatever it may be, is smooth babbling which I could drag out to cover most existing books, and then keep on going forever; on top of that, it's grossly more inaccurate, more lightweight, more distanced from the truth than fiction, more fictitious than fiction." "In the end," I said to myself at the time, and repeat it now, "all I am interested in is books, and not any written opinions about the works or the authors."

Without doing any harm to mankind, or anything to put the brake on the process of Slovene enlightenment, and with a slight redirection of the household economy into other activities, I gave up such behaviour.

Now, however, I find myself once again unexpectedly confronted with the temptation of grappling critically with a book, and that is *A View of Tycho Brahe* which, after all, I myself wrote. In so doing, who should I rely upon in attempting to recognise, from the other side of the good and the bad, what is good and what is weak in it? Should I turn to the undisputed critical authority of the granite-like Josip Vidmar? Is this the foundation of the Slovene critical comportment, or merely a precursor of the ideological limitation and posing within the shelter of the Institution? Last month, I read through his introductions to the poetry of Goethe and Gradnik. May the angels kindly care for his soul. However, on top of his rough and not over-intelligent grounding of Goethe within dialectical materialism or the barely comprehensible simplification by which he compresses Gradnik – in accordance with the earlier categorisation of types of people into the spiritual and the instinctive categories – and irrevocably ranks him amongst the darker earthly type of mankind, this founder of contemporary Slovene criticism can effectively be only the founder of the model which today, under the wing of the media Institutions – and mostly at a fairly low level – is still perpetuated by any arbitrarily chosen text without criteria or style and, above all, without any sense whatsoever.

Given the evident baselessness of Slovene criticism, and the critics after Vidmar, by such as Dušan Pirjevec, Janko Kos, Taras Kermauner, and later Tine Hribar, Aleš Berger, and Aleksander Zorn, who voiced their opinions on literature, were the intellectual, vitalistic and sensitive forerunners of their generations. Today, however, at least in the most exposed media, in laughable interlinks, there predominate the gall-drenched feminists surrounded by lightweight second-rate “word-smiths” who have become forcibly literate through crash courses in creative writing and who have already been dismissed by the student generation after the first sentence from lucid instinctive thinkers such as Jurij Hudolin, Mitja Čander and Dušan Šarotar, who immediately make you understand why they have actually written a particular sentence.

Every true book should, in essence, be: resistance, anarchy, mystical paranoia, carnival carnality, remorseless searching-for-god, radiant madness, nonchalant parody, while criticism is the weapon of the Institution, of directedness, supervision, which for a long time since has truly had neither influence nor reason. Any two verses by Tomaž Šalamun or Peter Semolič, three sentences of prose by Rudi Šeligo or Aleš Čar, will blow away most of the secondary pronouncements on literature which are still being written almost exclusively by people without any philosophical education or any feeling for the absurd or transcendental, yet without this horizon there is absolutely no sense in speaking about books. The magically penetrating words of Dane Zajc to accompany the collection by Maja Vidmar, *Down Below*, should withhold the right of the paid critics to attempt to pass judgement on literature; and the insight, balance and breadth of knowledge, revealed ever afresh by the insider-outsider Josip Osti in his texts on Slovene writers, should finally get rid of

the hotbeds of the flabby literary accountants who have been sheltering under the shadow of the media Institution.

It is not for me to speak of books – I read them, and I write. It is enough for me that I have to hand my Pascal, Neruda, Jimenez or Berdyaev. The books I have written are the past, and they touch on my life only at the points where they go beyond it. With them, I never intended to place into an archive my feelings, obsessions, or the congealing wax of life. I am as mortal as a dog, as a sea-monster, dissolved upon the shore, as transitory as a momentary patch of snow. Literature neither saves nor redeems me, nor do I need any therapy or transient consolation. In truth, all that interests me is this: if there exists a God, what then happens to our souls and bodies when we die; in what spaces will we once have met up with (if ever we do meet) those people without whom we do not wish to be alone in eternity, and how does the invisible woman, whom we have always loved and always will love, sigh when we touch her skin?

This is why *A View of Tycho Brahe* is also, most likely, only a pretence for telling stories, so that any word or sentence might capture the scene in which, in the blinding spark of eternity, there might appear something which could be the future home.

translated by Alan McConnell-Duff

A VIEW OF TYCHO BRAHE

I'm thirty-seven years old, and Earth is my only home. The stars above me are pale freckles of the past, not at all romantic: my emotions can't reach them. So what, most of them are mere cosmic skeletons cooled down a long time ago. I'm attached to Earth, I don't want to be blown off it; I feel uneasy when I stare up into the sky at night. Galaxies rush away from each other like powdery snow in a winter storm. Black holes are so thick you can't breathe. A heavy death, suffocating eternity, like a butterfly caught in amber. I'm not good at metaphors, that's why I say so; things are actually much worse.

They say there's life elsewhere in the Universe. I know nothing about it. All I can feel is this earth underneath me, I hear it crunch if I crush a shell, crack if I step on a branch. I like the rustle of leaves underneath my feet, or the quiet murmur of snow falling from fir-trees. That's enough for me, to be honest, I don't need life elsewhere in the Universe.

I have a dictaphone before me, and into it I'm saying these things. I'm bored, I have to talk to someone. I imagine I'm lying on the bottom of a river, chatting to a woman who's being carried downstream along the glittery, greenish-blue surface above me. In fact I'm lying on the eighth floor of Hotel Continental in Copenhagen, watching tiny raindrops hit the window. I've just put the phone down, they called me from the reception desk and told me I had to pay extra for the erotic channel. Only now have I realised that the screen is cut in two by a black strip; above it, a hairy male back is shoving rapidly, and a woman is gasping from somewhere underneath the blackness. I don't want to apologise, but as I was switching channels I must have, quite by chance, stopped at this one. »Sorry I bothered you,« said the lady receptionist before she rang off. She didn't wait for me to say anything; I guess she would've had to wait for a long time. When some half hour ago I came back from a walk through town, there

were two women at the desk; I try to picture the one who called me ... to no avail. I can't recall either of them, I can only see a pair of lips next to the receiver, moving like ribbons in the wind. And one has a birth-mark under the right nostril, in the wrinkle before the cheek, this much I can remember. That one seems nice, not at all coldly kind, nervously polite like most hotel receptionists. Was it her?

Through the window I can see the town centre, some hundred metres away rises the dark dome of the Tycho Brahe observatory, the sleeping octopus hiding thousands of eyes within. The glass eyes tear up time and travel into space. I try to imagine how awesome God's eye must be: every instant it sees everything that is anywhere, millions of colours so different from ours, the gurgling of sounds we don't even know of, the thickness of images in which a black hole's just a soft foam in the vacuum of its look. God's eye is so nicely folded, I imagine, that nothing can slip over its edge, where there's nothing anyway. I'm irritated by the squeaking of the tape in the dictaphone; as if it were rubbing against who knows what, producing rubber-metal sounds. It's quite possible that half of the words I speak are immediately erased, but it doesn't matter, there are too many words anyway, and there's so much wrong with them, you can't think of them when you need them, and elsewhere there are so many that they're turning into pus. And on top of it all this nervous buzz of electricity in the appliances and the abominable cough of cars: these sounds are getting on my nerves, I often wish I were deaf.

Last night my Danish colleague Claus took me to Tycho Brahe. I'd never before looked through a telescope. What speed! In a split second I was somewhere else, millions of miles ahead of my normal look. What emptiness, suddenly, and my eyes, levitating in the silence of space! And now this room, this damned air-conditioning, it's buzzing odiously, and I don't know how to switch it off.

In three years this is my first business trip. A congress, as they call it. I don't want to go on about it, it's a professional meeting about the permeability of cell membranes. I'll have to write a report for the institute, three, four pages, but it's no problem. All the lectures have been printed and handed out to us; during the first couple of days I leafed through them to find out which were less boring than others. I won't read the handouts,

I'll just stick the dictaphone into the lecturers' faces and ask them to summarise them for me. Nobody will tell us anything new anyway. I'm not saying I know everything, but I've been studying cell membranes for fifteen years, and at night I sometimes dream they're made up of my eyes, hundred-fold, thousand-fold. If I look at myself from the outside, I'm sick; for days, months and years I think about microscopic particles, and put them in combinations. Life's flowing past me, I know. I often feel I no longer have a body, I'm made of an airy, thin structure that might all of a sudden fall apart. I fear there'll be nothing left of my body. Actually, my body's not here even as I speak, there's only a slow explosion of substance into form which might soon sink beneath other matter. I don't know how I happened to be in this game, I'm amazed how, in this transition of everything and nothing, I can still be aware of the familiarity of myself.

My Danish friend Claus sees things differently. He's a jolly fellow, and although he's younger than me, he's been head of the research institute in Copenhagen for years. I won't be able to assume the same position in Ljubljana for years to come. As I watch him, I have a feeling that nothing touches him. He moves so swiftly along this hard world that I must admire him. No scepticism, no reserve, no problems. »No women anywhere have bums like our girls here in Denmark,« he said to me when we were walking through the centre of town, dodging cyclists. »They pedal all day, and in the evening hop on their husbands, lovers or casual acquaintances, till exhaustion,« he laughed. It's late November, the temperature during the day is near zero, and yet the streets are full of them, wild blondes with healthy complexion, animal grace and – Claus is right – temperamental, firm behinds. He's an expert. Last night, after we had been to the observatory, he took me to a house party in the suburbs of Copenhagen. A large drawing room had a dome-shaped ceiling painted in thick blue, sprinkled with kitsch silver and golden-yellow stars. »Coincidence,« Claus comforted me, »I'm here for the first time myself.« I didn't think it was a coincidence, the scary feeling I had at the observatory – that I was being sucked far up into space, never to return to Earth – was stronger than mere coincidence. Whoever is once blown away, never returns, I know it very well. All that is needed is a tiny scale to come off, and I'll be finally taken away, I can feel it. The stars will be falling

through me like stones into a well, the suns will become electrons of my atoms. I'll become dust in the tissue of space, infinitely small and infinitely large. »This is Marianne,« Claus literally pushed a woman in her thirties into my lap; she smiled, greeted me and, when Claus left us, shifted from my lap to the armchair next to me. She didn't speak English, only French, which I can't speak, so after a few attempts we figured out there was no use talking. I felt relieved, what was I supposed to do anyway, even if two people speak the same tongue they mostly don't understand each other, for the main communication is happening beyond language, all the hidden meanings, different undertones, and above all the terrible psychological holes gaping inwards. Marianne, or whatever her name was, waved her hand and left, she looked over her shoulder and smiled, I don't know, mockingly, kindly or just smiled, she disappeared among those other people, talking under the kitsch starry sky, drunkenly leaning onto each other or dancing to Tom Jones among the barren tables and armchairs in disarray. It seemed to me that the ceiling was coming down, that it might burst under the weight of the sky, that dust might rush through the splits and bury us all. I was shoving wet slices of salmon into my mouth, choking with anxiety on the smooth meat I couldn't chew properly. A plump man, probably the host, walked around and, in benevolent drunkenness, sang some Danish march, taking photos of the guests. Immersed in my wandering I noticed him only when he crouched down before me and pressed the button, the flash surprised and frightened me, for a moment I was sure that my misgivings were coming true, that I'd be pulled into a terrible explosion which would catapult human bodies and all matter into a completely different universe. »This is death,« went through my brain, which – surprisingly – retained its soft moldable shape, although I was otherwise stiffened by dreadful fear. The horror subsided only when the Danish host, sympathetically mumbling, pushed before me the Polaroid picture of me: under the lost, half-imbecilic eyes, a pink slice of salmon was sticking out of my mouth, looking like an unnaturally shaped tongue of a rare species of idiot. *Skol*, the Danish host toasted his unique shot, and started inviting other guests to have a look. Some of them indeed came closer, I earned some roaring laughter, not really vicious, but unpleasant nevertheless. »Damn,« I said to myself, and I'm

saying it now, »I'm not a sociable creature, so I shouldn't seek other people's company.« Things like that can still hurt me, although they're silly rather than sad. I decided long ago to reduce my social contacts to a minimum, to the edge of indifference and ignoring, but I somehow never manage to do so. I give in, I constantly give in, I don't know why, maybe out of weakness, under an illusion of intimacy. Yes, I say to myself, a wound does indeed first give the impression that the skin is warm, hot, but the pain which leaves a scar is truly stinging. That's how I see it. But people are all different. Say, I'm sure that Claus wouldn't be as shocked at staring at the kitsch ceiling of the drawing room as I was, even if he stared at it for ever. He obviously felt much better under that false sky than I did. When the dust around my photo settled, I sneaked out of the room. On the sofa behind the door, in the whirls of cigarette smoke, Claus was necking with a young woman. She lay on top of him, biting his neck, and he brutally kneaded her buttocks through web-like tights. I looked at his face, and had a feeling he was watching me over the girl's dishevelled hair. »I'm going to the hotel,« I said, and waited for a moment too long for his answer. He didn't see me at all, he stared at the woman and upwards, in any case I was non-existent for him at that particular moment; I can still see myself in that awkward situation, standing like a voyeur who got stuck somehow, waiting for a sign that never comes. »Damn,« I said to myself a moment later, when it became more than clear that Claus hadn't noticed me, and quickly fled from the house; »damn,« I say now, and with suspicious and fearful glance look towards the telephone, as I have once more, while switching the channels, ended up with the erotic programme. The receptionist must surely think I'm a stingy guy with a dirty mind, her computer down there is blipping, signalling that the man in 823 is again stuck in porn; bored, she's looking at the phone, tapping her fingers on the desk before her. I can see her orange polished nails, I can hear her fingers tick-tacking on the string of my nerves.

It has started to snow amid the rain, every now and then a snow-flake lands on the glass and slowly melts or is consumed by a rain-drop coming from above. I imagine that my eyes are deep in water, I levitate in a soft and warm fluid and I'm afraid of nothing. This much I know, I'm part of everything, in my current weight there's something light, the sinking

through the soft mass of water towards the bottom is becoming more and more effortless. I can see how a comet falls on Earth and destroys it, mountains are melting like butter, and everything is turning into fiery dust. Water is evaporating, I can feel my pupils contract and dry out. None of it worries me; I only fear being torn off Earth and carried behind the edge of the cosmos, where there's nothing at all. As long as I'm here, everything is fine, I sink into the layers of this world, I feel I can breathe completely different air, with completely different lungs, which are a metaphor. I feel familiar in the depths, I got stuck in the lower strata, and I'll never really come up to the surface again. This I haven't told anyone yet, but for a while I've been able to see in completely different colours. Black, violet, red mean nothing down there. Those colours are different, I can't be bothered to give them names. They resemble the impression given by melting words. Magma pours out of them, the magma that isn't specified in any dictionary.

Actually, I should sleep, but I keep talking. It's almost midnight, from the party I wandered back to the hotel around five in the cold and crisp morning, when the darkness of the night was already giving way to the milky grey humidity. Fully dressed I threw myself on the bed, but I slept only for two hours or so. Around seven, my eyes were wide open, and I started rambling around the room, even though I was in no hurry. I simply couldn't sleep any more, and even now I don't feel at all tired. Only my feet are ice-cold, all the way up to my knees, although I'm wearing woollen socks and am covered with a duvet. »Ice and dust,« I grumble towards my feet, »like comets lost in space«. I shake my leg, lift it up into the air, a hairy shin in a brown sock appears from under the cover; in the dark it looks like a stiff arm of an orangutan buried under a snow avalanche.

The congress hall is close to the hotel, a mere ten-minute walk away. In the morning, I went there just after nine, when most participants were already in their seats. Not a trace of Claus, of course. I managed to stick around through the first half of the first lecture, and then, during the break, put my things in my briefcase and went for a stroll. A cold wind was sweeping down the wide avenues, my eyes felt teary and sore. Under the bridge, in the canal cutting towards the centre of town, a bike was

lying in the water. I leant against the stone fence, the smell of sea water captured in the cold slowly pervaded me. The iron frame was gently undulating under the surface, twisted; I noticed that instead of a lamp, a tiny plush bear was fastened to the black bar with a piece of wire.

I like travelling alone. I'm not fearful, only lazy, and I find it hard to set off. For years I've wanted to visit Antarctica, I can see myself there, and hear how I walk alone across the snow, and how the snow almost inaudibly crackles underneath. It probably sounds ridiculous, but this image fills me with a feeling of happiness. I seem to live most of my life inside my head. I walk through deserts, sand's getting into my shoes and filling up the space between my toes, I dive into the sea without needing oxygen or feeling any pressure, I lower myself into sea canals, wander through virgin forests, cut through the endless web of lianas, feeling moss growing on my neck because of the humidity. I lend my eyes to others, I know what they're going through. In fact I'm well aware that I wouldn't last long in cold places or in the desert, let alone in the jungle; in a few days I'd be ridden with diseases, I probably wouldn't survive any life-threatening circumstances. My body's useless, I live wrongly, a dispensable scientist who has inhabited his own head. I neglect my body, this I reproach myself with, I can see the light pervading its tissues, and yet I can't gather the strength to do something about it.

I sit up in the bed, lazily get out of it and walk to the window. The snow's making the night bright, the impressionism of snowflakes is emphasising the contours of the buildings, yet threatening to conceal them all. Wind is sharply blowing over the dome of the observatory; I can see the snowflakes glittering in the glow of the headlights like the tail of a comet. Perhaps the instruments in Tycho Brahe have right at this moment detected a black hole hidden up to now, I say to myself, leaning against the pane with my forehead. It's approaching Earth, sucking everything in, the moon disappears in it like dust in a vacuum cleaner, damn, it seems I can actually feel the terrible brutality with which I'll be lost in it any moment now, and then bye-bye world, bye-bye ruthless fears and warm desires. It feels as if my pupils are about to break off due to the pressure. The air-conditioning device is buzzing through the slots in the sill before the window, reminding me of a sewer, it would be damn bad if this were

the last scene in my consciousness before I vanished from this world. I'd like to see blossoming trees, hear the voice of a small child, touch a woman's skin. I can feel beads of sweat gathering on my forehead, I move away from the glass, in it I can see my face in a hardly discernible negative. I take another step backwards, suddenly I'm tremendously happy to be in this world, still alive. And the next instant I'm seized by an unpleasant memory that I misplaced my briefcase containing lectures and papers about the congress! It's absurd, instead of falling peacefully asleep or at least saying three Lord's Prayers at the realisation the world is still in one piece, I'm once more in bed trying to reconstruct the day and find the point at which I left my briefcase. I took it out of the congress hall, I'm absolutely sure, for I accidentally hit the closed part of the double door with it, and the impact produced a nasty hollow sound. I might have left it in the shop where I was buying souvenirs, or in the restaurant by the canal where I had lunch. I could also have left it in the National Museum, where I got stuck for the whole afternoon and part of the evening. The problem is that in my reconstruction I feel sure I took the briefcase with me from every spot I visited. But the fact is that around seven I returned to the hotel without it. Therefore I failed to take it with me from somewhere. It was awkward because the briefcase also contained a plastic card without which I couldn't open my hotel room. I realised that when I was already on the eighth floor standing before the door, feeling lost, rummaging through my pockets under the roentgen-like neon lights. The emptiness in my palms reminded me of the lost briefcase. I had to go back to the reception desk and ask for help. The two ladies down there exchanged a few words in Danish, and then the one with a birth mark above the lip leant over the desk and wished that I might find the briefcase in the morning – and the card, of course. She found a spare one and took me up in the elevator to my room. I felt silly, I was embarrassed during the ride, damn, I wanted to look at her normally, kindly, perhaps chat a little, but instead I stared at her like a man, lustfully, and with growing unease kept looking the other way. It was clear to me that I found myself in a cliché taken from a cheap erotic film: a hotel guest and a lady receptionist together in the elevator, it only needed to break down for the picture to be complete. I was so painfully aware of it that I was almost sick,

and yet I was shocked by my overpowering desire for the woman who was kindly and innocently coming up with me, trusting I was just a confused guest who'd lost the card-key. I'm hopeless with women, I know. I never understood them, never knew when to approach them and when not, mostly made advances when they least wanted them, and felt utterly indifferent when they most needed me. When she got out of the elevator and marched down the carpet towards my room, I was suddenly overcome by a firm feeling that in a few moments I'd be lying with that woman in my hotel bed; she looked so naturally at me over her shoulder and smiled, she walked so seductively in front of me that it couldn't be otherwise. The tension in me eased, I stuck my hands in my pockets, and followed her with a self-complacent smile. She reached my door, checked if the number above the door matched the one on the card, softly inserted the card in the slot and opened the door for me. I stepped through the cloud of her thick, seductive fragrance, with the corner of my eye noticed the fine arrangement of her orange-polished nails on the handle, took two, three steps into the hall to make room for her, turned round, »Have a nice evening,« was all I could hear and read from her lips; I then watched the door slowly close, the ribbon of light penetrating from the corridor growing narrower, and finally slam into the hermetic vacuum of a tin can. In our solitude people do most stupid things, this is indisputably true. For a few moments I stood in the dark, then stepped to the door, turned the knob and opened the door ajar. I watched the receptionist as she neared the elevator, pressed the button and smoothed down her skirt. I coughed a bit to draw attention to myself, for an instant she looked round, and then I watched the lights announcing the arrival of the lift. I don't know whether she heard me, embarrassed at myself I crouched down, pressed my head against the wall and through the narrow split of the door watched her disappear into the elevator. I saw the silver metal door gently close and erase her figure, and then the red light above the lift blipped. Just like now the red diode blipped on my dictaphone, announcing that batteries need to be replaced. Damn, I don't want to be alone. I'm thinking about gathering up my courage and phoning the reception. I don't want it to sound like an SOS call, I don't want to beg out of distress. And what am I supposed to say? How can I explain to her in a few words what

can't be explained? She'd laugh, she'd be offended, she'd think I was a bore. Services like this are paid for, she'd think, I can give you the number where they'll immediately take care of you, she'd probably say. Misunderstanding is the most accurate definition of my life, definitely. It makes me mad that I can't recall her face. I can only picture her birth mark above the lip, and then the swollen, warm emotion boiling inside me. I had a similar feeling last night at the observatory when I looked into space for the last time. How patches of light suddenly started sliding into my eyes! If I hadn't looked away, my pupils would have burst. In that light, concentrated in a tiny spatial grain similar to the mark above the lip of the woman, everything started. The Universe came into being from an infinitely small mole made of power and light. Love's made of the same matter, that's clear, and anxiety appears because substance constrains and sets us limits. Stars in space are scraps of earthly loves, any dog could wipe them away with its tail if they weren't so far away. Every love explodes from the tiniest speck and is blown in all directions to all borders of space, that's clear. The big bang was nothing but an explosion of love which filled the space. – I try to figure out how this would sound in Danish, I imagine the receptionist lying next to me, with me babbling all this nonsense into her ear. Yes, I finally say, love ends with total chaos, in the end everything is smashed by comets and sucked in by black holes and then it all starts again.

The dictaphone crackles as if one slowly stepped on a shell, the silence is broken by the cracking hum and words. It seems I won't be able to go to sleep, my body feels as if the bar behind which sleep accumulates were severed from me. Lunatically I flow into serene wakefulness, I can see myself marching across a parking lot in the cold afternoon, the upper layer of mud is frozen and is crunching underneath my feet, on a rickety wooden boat in the canal a young woman is hanging out the washing, her hands are almost red with cold. Next to her is a child in striped red-green coveralls, he's hugging her around the waist, following me with his eyes. I walk down the abandoned street along the canal, stumbling over paving stones, hiding my head from the cold between my shoulders. Beside me I hear the coughing of a car engine, I turn round and see a dark man, an Indian or a mulatto, waving me into his cab. I shake my head, for a while

he remains by my side, then drives away. I turn into a wide side street, past a cafe from where a clear woman's vocal is resounding, I step towards a bunch of people at the end of the lane. Above them are two flags, the Danish state red-white colours, and a smaller one, completely white – only when I come closer can I read the inscription on it: *Nationalmuseet*. I make my way towards the building, linger before the glass door, then enter. In the marble hall there are many panels imprinted with information about various exhibitions, behind wooden counters are women wearing white blouses and blue skirts. I stand still for a while, trying to figure out where to pay the entrance fee. I receive no hint, no look, I walk on, nobody seems to pay me any attention as I follow the arrows leading to the exhibition of Viking culture. The corridors are full of children with notebooks in their hands, they run around in groups, stopping before exhibits, canoes, wooden carts, ribbed boats, shields, helmets, tools made of bone, stone, wood, iron and bronze, and earthenware. I get lost in the maze of corridors, I wander among the glitter of the metals exhibited, among crumbling textiles, I watch the pictures on the walls showing Viking houses and settlements. I'm in no hurry, I stroll around, walk into rooms where I've already been, recognise familiar crossings. I don't care, I lose all sense of time, I keep looking at the object already seen, I seem to hear the stamping of moose, I scan the place for loudspeakers, but can't see any.

I've replaced the battery and tape, I'm standing by the window, looking towards Tycho Brahe. It's stopped snowing, the wind is high. The air's clear and crisp, I open the window slightly and for a few times breathe in the piercing cold. The observatory in the dark looks like a huge bulging eye covered in glittering mould. There's nobody out in the streets, only down there in front of the hotel, on the other side of the wide avenue, a cabby is waiting in the car with the engine turned on, but I can't see him. I patiently wait for somebody to come out of the hotel, through the slightly open window I can hear the smooth running of the engine blending with the buzz of the air-conditioning in my room. I carefully look down at the street, I want to see a human body, even if unknown, any human being, anything alive, as a sign that life's not completely numbed in the cold night, that I'm not the only creature keeping the world awake. My

eyes wander from the hotel entrance to the taxi, only now do I realise that the car's parked before the window of a shop offering funeral services. Damn, I close the window, damn, I go back to bed, black funeral ribbons are invading my vigil, little embryos of decay decompose into my consciousness. I can physically feel my transience, a fall into decay and soil, the blabbering silence of worms. I should sleep, but I can't, I cover my face with the pillow, and press it down with my palms; in the complete darkness under my eyelids appears a dotted reddish-white and yellowish-white light, and starts whirling. I know, this is how stars emerged in God's eye, the accuracy of Creation is the only guarantee preventing my head from blowing up. I'm grateful I can escape into immobility and hold my breath, and thus not be sucked up through time. I'm numb like a pinecone, waiting for my eyes to once more fill with darkness. I pretend I don't exist, I can feel my body pretending with me. Only my feet feel cold, the chill I can't get rid of, a thin cold crust on my lower limbs accompanying me through all seasons. My doctor says there's something wrong with my veins, with blood circulation in the legs. I should walk on hot sand and things like that. Where am I supposed to find hot sand, I wonder in the last days of November on the eighth floor of Hotel Continental, damn, I can't even find myself a hot woman. I'm not Claus, he walks through town, goes to a party, and has a woman. I phoned him from the restaurant on the river bank where I had lunch. The waitress lent me a mobile phone, I can see myself sitting at the table, pressing my knees together underneath so as to chase away the cold emanating from the stone floor. I can see my offended face when the waitress puts before me a dish I'm supposed to have ordered, some raw and cold fish, garnished with butter, parsley, onion and spawn. I thought the fish was grilled, I said to her, it's not grilled, she said, and pointed with her finger to the menu, this one's grilled, she said, and what was I supposed to do? I asked for a phone, looked with dismay at the plate containing a strange silver fish, and called Claus. He answered immediately, he spoke quietly, I've just woken, he said, I looked at my watch, a nice still-life, a hand, a watch, a cold fish, and in the background a brick wall with a picture of a lighthouse on it, it's two already, I said, and it probably sounded like a reproach, sometimes one blunders out; yes, it's two all right, said Claus,

and she's still asleep ... do you remember her name? he suddenly asked me, and absurdly put me in the best of spirits; I've no idea, Claus, I said and laughed, me neither, he replied, and himself started laughing in a muffled voice.

I've uncovered myself, I try to keep my eyes closed, but they're opening all by themselves. I ache with greyness penetrating the thick darkness of the room, the only exit for my look is the red diode on the dictaphone, stubbornly signalling that the battery is low. Black and grey dots are snowing on the screen, I stretch my hand out for the remote control, but I can't find it. The hum of the air-conditioning and the TV unpleasantly reverberate through me, dragging me into the cosmic wind, which runs into painful emptiness. I'm not afraid of emptiness, I only hate it, I'm no longer afraid of the quiet buzzing announcing an explosion, I only despise it. My wakefulness is renewed with the persistence of large white windmills scattered around right by the sea, sending electricity to the heart of the country. Fluffy animals walk into me on their soft paws, taking away my sleep. I can hear their panting, they breathe deeply, bending under the heavy burden, they must enter me with increasing speed. I can see them slipping on smooth glass, I look closer and slip, too, damn, I'm sinking, getting lost, dissolving in masses; I shake my head, touch my eyes, I'm surprised that my eyelids are still open. I'm awake, I'm therefore still awake, but I no longer know whether I'm really speaking or only catching the words falling into me. I sit up in the bed, stretch my neck enough to be able to see the top of the observatory dome. Now I know what got stuck between sleep and vigil, I can feel the smooth surface of glass, I can see a murky room in the museum, without windows, with dim, respectfully meagre light illuminating the glass and what's in it. I got stuck under the stack-like beam of violet light directed by the flashlight on the ceiling right onto the glass. I couldn't look away, I can see myself standing before the glass, yes, with my briefcase beside me, I put in on the floor, damn, a black briefcase before the glass, and on the other side, in dim violet light, a wooden chest, a coffin, and a skeleton in it. In the slight white light coming from top of the hermetically closed box, necklaces and bracelets made of colourful stones faintly glimmered on the wrists, ankles and neck. By the skull lay metal pins and a wooden comb, patiently, without memory.

I can feel a tear gathering in my eye. *A Viking woman, died at the age of twenty*, it said on the plaque fastened onto the glass. God, I said to myself then, and I say it now, what are you doing with our bodies? What sort of love is needed for a body once more to softly inhabit the space between the bones and the necklace? I tried to imagine what the young woman looked like, I remained alone in the room for a long time, staring through glass. When I first saw the reflection of a woman with long hair in it, I was confused until I realised that somebody was watching me from behind. I slowly turned my head, but the person had disappeared. I spent at least an hour before that wretched skeleton, I couldn't leave, I watched the jewellery of the young woman, bitter, serious love was accumulating in my eye-ducts. For a few more times the image of a woman with long hair appeared on the glass that separated me from the body, once I turned again and saw the custodian with long black hair standing in the doorway, watching me. She smiled, she seemed embarrassed, she probably didn't want to disturb me, but she kept coming back to see what it was with the man who'd got stuck in the room entered but rarely, if at all. I stared right at her, I couldn't make any gesture, she smiled once more, turned round and slowly left the room.

When I came back to the corridor, I could no longer hear any noise. Behind the big glass windows it was getting dark, the custodian sat on a chair by a white wall; she looked at me over the book. I greeted her with my eyes and left. She greeted me too, immediately stood up and walked in the other direction. I didn't meet anybody in the corridors, only in the hall an old cleaning-lady was sweeping the floor; she opened for me the door of the building which – as I soon gathered from the notice by the entrance – had been closed to visitors for more than half hour.

I feel I'm sliding down the smooth glass surface, slowly penetrating it, my eyes softly piercing the structure of glass. There are no hard edges any more, thousands of my looks swim into the hermetically closed space around the wooden chest and the skeleton of the young woman, thousands of my looks expect the custodian with long black hair to enter the room again. I can hear the crystal breaking of glass, I can see how the rotten wooden foot-bridge falls apart, and how I try to grab with my hands the brownish wooden powder; I'm falling towards dark deep water, all

around me rise huge grey foamy waves, I can feel my tongue slowly tear off, opening up like scales, becoming ten-fold, white gulls suddenly appear above the grey waves, tens, hundreds of them, the tips of their wings are reddish, in the fluttering of their feathers I hear the babbling of my tongues, tiny scale-like fragments of words penetrating the impassable mass of the world, digging miniature bright tunnels. I fall into water, there's almost no difference, in the air I'm made of water, in the water I'm made of air, from the plankton an infinite number of my eyes are watching me, in every creature in the plankton there's one eye, a tiny scale of eye-like consciousness persistently dissolving me. I'm melting, changing form, I can feel my cells loosen, membranes coming apart and becoming soft film rebounding the gurgling sounds, which are becoming more and more recognisable. I hear the screaming of the gulls echoing from the cell membranes, softly first, then more and more firmly. The shouts of the animals hurt, swelling up the water and air structure, which is getting harder; a grain must feel like this before it cracks, the painful grainy structure is everywhere, running away from the screaming gulls, from the anxiety emerges a pale speck of my consciousness with hard edges, I can hear the sounds of gulls giving way to the sharp ringing of the telephone, which painfully pierces my ears. I open my eyes, shudder, raise myself on the elbows and look through the window in confusion. It's morning, grey, stuffy morning, and it's gently snowing again. I sit up, and the dome of the observatory rises before me. I let the phone ring on, pick up the dictaphone, slowly replace the battery and put in a new tape.

The phone's ringing insistently, it's 9.30, I'm on the eighth floor of Hotel Continental in Copenhagen, I don't feel well and I'm very alone. Greyness is all around me, the only sounds I hear are the unpleasant humming of the air-conditioning and the sharp ringing of the phone. I'd like to see yellow-green buds sprouting from fir branches, I'd like to hear the clatter of small children at play, feel a water-melon split under the sharp edge of a knife. Earth is my only home, I feel sorry because I left it a long time ago. I know, my life's been lost since the beginning of time, this is the only truly familiar feeling I have. I slowly pick up the receiver, I hear the gentle voice of a receptionist I don't recognise. A lady is looking for you, she says, she's here at the desk, she says. It must be a mistake, I'm think-

ing, the only person I know in this town is Claus, it must be a mistake, I say into the receiver and wait for reply. Silence, prolonged silence at the other end. She says she's brought your briefcase, the receptionist finally says, you apparently left it at the museum. Yes, that's true, I say and wait, you're right, I say after a while ... Can the lady bring it up? I'd like to thank her, I murmur. Silence at the other end. She's coming, the receptionist says when the visitor's already on her way to the elevator. I apologise for the misunderstanding and hang up.

I'm thirty-seven years old. It's too late for many things, too early for many others. My forehead is pressed against the window, I look at Tycho Brahe and feel my forehead getting numb with cold. Below me is the hum of the air-conditioning, with my finger I'm trying to find the switch-off button on the dictaphone. I'm waiting for the lady to knock on my door. I can see the briefcase in her hand. I can see the black briefcase, sitting abandoned under the violet light in the dark room of the museum. I can see her fingers gently close around the handle. I can see the well-arranged finger-bones of the woman in the wooden casket, and a bracelet made of green, red and blue stones above them. I can see a wooden comb lying next to the coffin, and the black hair of the custodian which might be reflected in the glass any moment. It seems to me I can hear the elevator door opening, it seems I can hear the steps slowly approaching my room.

translated by Lili Potpara

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REVIEWS:

This is undoubtedly Virk's finest book so far, a work which convinces us of his full narrational maturity and at the same time ranks him among the most important Slovene novelists.

Josip Osti, *Dnevnik*

In his most recent work, *A View of Tycho Brahe*, Virk reveals views of the split and lonely man, crucified between physical need and the yearning of the heart.

Igor Bratož, *Delo*

Particularly characteristic, however, is the retrospective composition: along with the recording of what is now – that is, living somewhere else, not at home – there also constantly occurs a retrospective, an explanation and summary, revealing where the central figure has strayed away, so that now he is utterly scattered apart, a foreigner, and not just in the geographical sense.

Matej Bogataj, *Večer*

This is the literature which breaks away from anthropocentric phantasm of man as the crown of creation: with the fall of geocentrism, we expressed ourselves without Archimedes's focal point, which would have centred us as the hub of the world.

Simon Bizjak, *Razgledi*

These stories stir up a real storm of thoughts in the reader. Stories about an ordinary, mature man of thirty years, and unmarried, which frequently agitate the imagination, and are quite unordinary.

Mihael Bergant, *Mladina*