

Translated excerpt

**Melinda Nadj Abonji**  
***Schildkrötensalat***

Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2017  
ISBN 978-3-518-42759-0

pp. 7-34

**Melinda Nadj Abonji**  
***Tortoise Soldier***

Translated by Alyson Coombes





**Melinda Nadj Abonji**

**Tortoise Soldier**

Novel

(Original title: Schildkrötensoldat)

173 pages

October 2017

© Suhrkamp Verlag 2017

Pp. 7–34

Translated by Alyson Coombes

1

He stood there next to the chicken coop, he might have just drunk an egg or something that has nothing to do with eggs or water or milk at all. Zoli must have drunk the cloudless sky, with its endless blue. His eyes were alert, wide open in his broad, pale face. The snot stuck to his nose – he made no move to wipe it away. He liked chickens, cats, pigs. He avoided dogs, except one called Tango. Every morning an egg for his Tango. Zoltán stood there next to the chicken coop, holding the egg that was still warm from the chicken. I have a warm, fresh egg for you. I have something wonderful for you, Tango!

Zoli, wipe that snot away! Stop talking to the dog! his mother called from the garden.

Tango, I'll give you a whole world to eat! and Zoli did not move. His snot glistened in the sun. Tango whirled around like a dervish, barking as he went. His high-pitched yapping roused even the washing line that was suspended across the yard. And Zoli held out his hand with the egg on it – an egg as white as his skin, as the washing that hung on the line. They put on this show every day. A dog spinning round as if demented, a nine-year-old boy delaying with impossible calm the moment when the egg is snatched, the dog's shaggy black legs, the boy, grimy and majestic. The sun, around which the dog ran, anticlockwise, clockwise.

Give him the egg, just get on with it, what are you waiting for?

Zoli stood there, he didn't even blink, didn't react at all, not in the slightest. Only a small smile played at his lips, and the corncobs had eyes, the chickens applauded, the dust whirled up in excitement. Zoli waited. Until a small, fiery demon bit his calf and he threw the egg into the air at last, up into the blue sky, and Tango the dog stopped his circles immediately, in one leap he snatched at the egg – the world,

1

which exploded a moment later on the paving slabs with a harsh, sharp sound. Next time you'll do it, next time you'll definitely catch it in the air, said Zoli, as the dog eagerly licked the egg from the ground. Isn't that right, Hanna? He'll get it next time? Zoli looked at me, and I was so surprised to hear him talking to me that I couldn't answer, and he came over to me with his wide eyes. He stood right next to me. I felt dizzy as he said: I know exactly what it feels like for my dog when his tongue licks the egg off the ground, I know just what that's like.

Zoltán. My aunt Zorka's son.

The last time I saw you was years ago, or was it yesterday, when you appeared to me again during the night. No, it wasn't a dream. Dreams can be cast aside, written off as 'only a dream'. I talk to you, but you don't answer. I know – where you are, people are usually silent. Or am I deluding myself? Maybe I can't hear you? Is it possible to train the ears to hear what can't be heard? To detect sound waves that are reserved for bats, and above all just for moths, whose ears are in their chests, two cavities that are covered with membranes and are so delicate they can detect the highest frequencies with no trouble – the quietest noises, which could be magnified ten times and we humans still wouldn't be able to hear them.

I am not a bat, nor a moth, but I see you, you appear to me. Appear, what a word. You look at me with the same expression you used to wear when you looked at me, when we were children. But perhaps you were never a child. Although I was older, I was always slightly afraid of you, and yet I still allowed your lips, sticky with sugar, to touch mine, that spring day when we were sitting on your bed eating *palacsinta*. We're getting married, you said, although marriage between two cousins is the highest sin according to the church. Why don't you close your eyes when you kiss, I asked you. Do you know, Hanna, it's definitely true that I sleep with my eyes open too. And there it was again, my slight fear of you, my desire to kiss you again.

We didn't kiss again, ever, not even on the cheek. We often stared at each other, silently, and I was always the first to give in. I should use another word, as 'give in' implies a fight, but we never fought with our gazes, or at least you didn't. I looked away, and you talked. You told me, for example, that school was an obstacle made up of numbers and letters. And it definitely wasn't useful to know that two and two equals four; after all, no one could ever say that two chairs are the same as two nuts. Whenever Zoli asked a question in class everyone just laughed, and the teacher said that Zoli should keep his incessant questions in his head, so from then on Zoli only asked anything when he did so without noticing, when his mouth seemed to start speaking of its own accord.

But Hanna, you know what I'm talking about, don't you?

I knew and I didn't know.

We sat on Zoli's bed, a sofa bed. Funny creatures live in their bellies, said Zoli, and plumped up the cushions before offering me a padded seat, one summer's day when I dropped round unannounced. Every time I knocked on the shabby door, when Zorka's loud voice invited me to come in, every time I opened the door that was left ajar, took off my shoes and cautiously lifted the mosquito net, not just on that particular summer's day, I felt the need to let the stained and patched-up fabric fall down again, to put my shoes back on and to disappear.

As if I sensed even then that this house smelled not only of cigarettes, coffee, sweat and iron, but of fate – however grand and terrifying that sounds – fate, irreversible, huge, acts of providence sent by God; and how dishonest to pin everything on a power that guides human life, which has nothing to do with individual responsibility, with our own small lives, and to hide behind the Almighty whenever we

are required to give human answers to human questions. I know now that we often talk about fate when what we really ought to do is stop talking. Or to tell stories. No, at that time I never thought about fate. I was just afraid of what awaited me behind that curtain, and I probably sensed that poverty always had consequences.

### **P-L-U-M-D-U-M-P-L-I-N-G-D-A-Y**

I fell off the motorbike that day like a sack of potatoes, my father rode on without me, took him ages to notice there was no one behind him, I was lying in the road, fresh bread in my satchel

vrrrrrrrm

my father came riding back, I heard him clearly even though I was unconscious, as they all said later, my father came back into my world, which was orange, red, turquoise and purple, there were flowers in every corner and along every border of my world, and these flowers smelled like bread, like the white bread that lay next to me in the dust, and I heard my father calling my name, and I heard his voice, it sputtered over the flowers, shook me by the shoulder, Zoli, Zoli! and I sent my papa a plague of locusts, whistling mice that would make his knees knock, I called the neighbour's dog to come and lick his calves – he hates that so much – there's nothing I didn't wish on him to make him leave me in peace

why would he do that? well I'll tell you, if you're patient, and of course you are, Papa tugged on my earlobes, son, get up, it's plum dumpling day today, remember? and there was another voice as well as Papa's, and this voice hissed, sent my flowers spinning, your boy is bleeding, look, here, his head! quick, we need to call a doctor!

I must say I knew then where my flowers came from, when the whispering voice said I was bleeding I knew straight away that my flowers were growing out of the blood, yes, out of the bleeding hole in my head, and I swear on my life I've never seen such beautiful flowers, they weren't carnations or roses, nor irises or gerberas, tulips or even begonias, they weren't flowers at all, they were birds' heads, oh no, I'm not making this up, I'd have to say they were bunting heads, shaped like flowers, but they weren't brown, weren't bland or banal like buntings are, instead, behind my eyelids the buntings gleamed a colour red that exists only in our imaginations, in the shape of flowers

but they dragged me from my paradise garden, a garlic-doctor pumped me up with his air, patted me, took my wrist, he lifted my eyelids as though he could see something there in my eyeballs, yes, yes, the warped world, and then they heaved me into a vehicle, he's heavier than he looks, they said, all these hands around me, all this sweating from the exertion, just let me be, why can no one hear me? so much fuss, they all kept talking at me, leave me alone, I screamed, but no one, no one heard me, and my flower-birds grew smaller and smaller, thinner, and once the red was all washed out again they flew away, because of the raised, crazed voices, they left me behind, and that, that is the reason I cried as I opened my eyes, look, he's crying, said the doctor, the nurse, and my father's face appeared above me, son, you're bawling like a baby, and us? we're sick with worry, and my father smacked a kiss on my skin, where's my bread?

they all gawped at me, he's asking for his bread, listen to him, he wants to know where his bread is and at that moment, that's when I jumped up, grabbed the doctor by his coat collar, puked my words on his white righteousness, disturbed his perfectly parted hair with my rage, and I screamed, told them why I'd cried, that because of them, my flowers...the birds...and my colours...and I was lying in the gold dust...and the doctor's help, which stinks of money, which he spirits away in his coat pocket...

and my papa gapes at me, Zoli, is that you, it can't be you, you've never talked like that before, Zoli, what is this devil inside you...

the Zoli-devil!

the dust-devil!

the gypsy-devil!

-P-L-U-M-D-U-M-P-L-I-N-G-D-A-Y- oh yes, the day we get to eat plum dumplings, usually on a Friday, I love to free the plums from their doughy potato coats, to take the plums, still hot, almost too hot, and make them vanish into my mouth, and I can easily eat seven to ten dumplings, every time.

### **B-A-S-T-A-R-D-B-L-O-O-D**

That's when it all started, I found out later, too much blood bubbled out of my head, blood doesn't bubble, I said to Papa, but you didn't see it, how it all came out, your blood, a proper fountain shot out of your head, I tell you, and Papa grabs the garden hose, sprays me between the legs, you see, like that!

and I don't bother telling him that he just said 'the blood shot out of your head', shot or bubbled, Papa doesn't care at all, he just wants to tell me again how I fell off the motorbike like a sack of potatoes – although he didn't even notice that I was no longer sitting behind him, so how does he know I fell off the bike 'like a sack of potatoes'? – Father wants to tell me again that this day was the beginning of the end, and I have to take the hose from him, because he has no idea how much drinking water my flowers need, on that day I became as thick as a pistol, he says

-P-I-S-T-O-L-

and he sits down on the bench with a sigh, aims a gob of spit at a ripe blackberry, stop that, I tell him, they don't like it, your spit, but he starts to moan, pulls at his bristle, you could have been something, Zoli, damn goat shit, damn pig manure, damn iron taste in your mouth, you could have saved yourself from this shit, instead you let yourself fall off the motorbike, lying in the dust like a dead person, and when you finally wake up you grab the doctor by the collar as though he's ruined your life, Zoli...and my Papa burps carbon dioxide in my face

Fatherly love, damnit!

and Papa hands me the bottle, I bring it to my lips, the fluffy clouds high above me, oh, this weather, it robs my garden of all its water, and I turn away, towards my trees and bushes and flowers, and my father starts to howl, rams his railways shoes into my calf, I slump over, the hose falls from my hand, aims its jet into the blackberry hedge, but the bottle's belly remains unscathed in my right hand, behind me Papa, who can no longer hold back his loud wailing, you could have saved me, me and my heart, Papa sobs, making my head shrink into my neck, his walnut fists, hard as a volley of hail between my shoulder blades, my gaze boring into the blackberries lying in the dust, oh the blackberries, formed of tiny individual berries, this purple that sparkles after a light drizzle, the ugly holes left behind by the bugs that eat the berries

the beginning of the end, says Papa, he pulls the bottle from my fingers, gurgles the beer in his throat, cries into my back, and do you know what he means by that? My tremor started when I fell off the motorbike, Papa says, that was the beginning of the end, since then my heart hasn't been beating quite right, I've become as jumpy as a little girl, a young lad who flinches during a thunderstorm, has there ever been anything like it? a towering lad who shits himself for no reason – overnight, Papa says, I turned into a crazy lad who no longer listens to anyone...

it happens, and whenever it happens I tremble all over, I get this fluttering feeling, my thoughts push against the wall of my mind and I am me without Zoli, you want to know what that means? I don't know, even if you're really patient I won't be able to explain it to you exactly, but I can tell you that my father never wanted to know what that meant, he became wild and angry and started sweating whenever I told him I am me without Zoli, that's it, this miserable nonsense in your head! and Papa always started again with his beginning of the end, that when the blood bubbled out it left only nonsense in my head, of course the boss had to move me to a different role! a puny labourer and a garden fool, that's what I've become, with a flower between my legs instead of a cock, the fresh bread, the beautiful money, where has it gone?

he, who gave his child his own name, and back then everyone congratulated him on the birth of his son, he was as proud as a peacock of this hairless being, of this nothing that could have been something, after all, people always need bread, a baker with his own business, where others could sit on pleasant, sunny evenings, that could have been you, sobs Papa, and his free hand strokes my back – a snuffling animal waiting for food

-B-A-C-K-

and Papa starts to babble, I baptise you Zoltán, Kertész Zoltán! he douses himself, and me too, from behind, and the beer makes my hair wet, a few drops trickle out, forming clumps in the dust in front of me, a memorial for Papa's heartache

-O-H-

it's true, I could have saved my father, I could have dusted everything with fresh white flour, I could have made his one and only lousy life rise in a light bread dough

beautiful -B-R-E-A-D- good -B-R-E-A-D- daily -B-R-E-A-D-

I could have worn a stiff baker's hat, a baker's apron, and the whole village would have bought, would definitely have bought their bread from me, every season would have started and ended with me, from Easter cakes to plaited Christmas loaves, the cycle of a year, a book that is opened and shut again, I would always have smelled of fresh yeast, but of course I would have, my father would have washed out his gypsy blood on my white profession, every day, we would no longer have been the tracks, the forest, the dirt, cattle, entrails and chicken feet, the roots, stolen wood for the fire, coffee grounds and odds and ends

we would have been the oven, the warmth, oh yes, we would have been the paved roads, junctions, traffic lights, healthy teeth, pets, houses with English toilets, the benevolent look, a chinwag in the market square, we would have been the village bakery, the angels people dream of, not sons of bitches, bastard blood! we would have chased away the mangy cats without beating them with a broomstick, and the village would have been proud of us

Papa, why do you call me a bastard? -B-A-S-T-A-R-D- I am your son, after all...

whose is this empty bottle? whose is this useless bottle, which insults my hand with its useless weight? have I become the father of a stuttering idiot?

and my papa has no more strength left, his heart, a limp, tortured piece of meat, and the bottle has no belly any more, no throat, the shards lie in the dust, next to the blackberries

Zoli...

Papa's voice right next to my ear, his sobs, the blood, Zoli, it bubbled out of your head

think of the goats when they rush out through the gates

think of a black cloud as it breaks

think of your mother when she starts to curse

that's what it was like, just like that, said Papa, when the blood bubbled out of your head, the beginning of the end

yes, I will never be able to save Papa

Blood, there's dried crusty blood or fresh blood that tastes like iron, blood that drips, thick and heavy and pitiful, and the blood under the skin, it's nothing more than warmth and cold, but Papa, he really doesn't want to know that.

### **S-M-O-C-K-K-I-N-G**

I watch as my father flies, he flies flies and flies high above, I think to myself that he's going to visit heaven on this humid evening, wants to tickle heaven with his calloused fingers, my father says himself that he has calloused fingers -CA-L-L-O-U-S-E-D- how high he flies – my father, who still works on the tracks, with the trains, who shunts, bends over, gets his hands dirty, who wheezes and coughs, sweats his beer out of his forehead –

he flies flies flies and flies in his work smock, which smells of oil, it's grubby even when it's just been washed, but who is responsible for this rocket drive motor in his backside now, this firework energy glowing in his eyes? Papaaaaa! I call to him, and I stand in the garden by the rosebush, and from my fingers shoots a trail of light that definitely has five colours in it, I've just given the roses their daily drinking water, Papaaaaa! and my colourful five-coloured light flows to his smock, and it looks so beautiful, so real, it definitely looks more beautiful than any I've ever seen before, my father is now sitting – and if you don't believe me, I feel truly sorry for you – on a glowing throne, no, I must say on a splendidly glittering glowing throne, which has grown and shot out of my fingers, he sits there, a blue Smock King, he no longer looks like the man I know, he isn't sweating, he isn't coughing, he sits there with his arms hanging down, he nods and smiles, it must be because he is tickling heaven with his bristle -P-I-G-B-R-I-S-T-L-E- says my papa

my Papaaaaa King! I call to him – the fact that he can sit there and glow like that, smile like that and be so content, that his smock is no longer a smock, but rather a cornflower-blue robe in the dirty yellow sky, that this firework energy in his eyes shines down as far as me, to the rose garden, and my tea roses are probably spraying out an almost outrageous magic scent because of this – the fact that everything is how it is, that I know this, is all down to me, his son...

Papa, you are the Smock King, and the yellow heaven, soon it will open and reveal all its wonders...

I propped myself up in bed and looked over at Papa, he was sitting alone in the kitchen, his bare legs stretched out in front of him, in my direction, do you hear, Smock King?

but Papa babbled, in his eyes the autumn turned, and the winter, the starless nights, a grimy moon, on his tongue Mother danced with an oily red mouth and a new hairdo, goodbye both of you, take care, I'll be back soon...

-O-H-

## **2**

If only I could say something about his eyes, something more than 'his eyes were blue', the blue of the sky on perfect, cloudless summer days, when the flowers, bushes and grasses have not yet withered; if only I could find a suitable comparison, blue like – and the comparison must be unique.

Adults initially regarded his persistent stare or refusal to look away as a triumphant and therefore impressive strength – and then suddenly as a bold insolence that didn't suit a filthy little boy.

Zoltán was standing there at the bus stop wearing baggy trousers and a faded, misshapen t-shirt when my bus pulled up, an hour late. He was standing under the shade of a gnarled tree, and we were already nearly grown up on this June afternoon with its cloudless sky, its sublime blue. I went over to Zoli, to his wide eyes. And suddenly it was there, this undeniable feeling that I had missed something in that gaze – not just any old thing, but something fundamental, and whatever it was I had missed was the result of more than just my habit of paying so much attention to the brilliance of his bold appearance that everything else faded into insignificance.

Zoli gave me a small wave, I waved back, and the closer I got the more clearly I saw the undercoat in his eyes – the beguiling blue that glazed everything was simply the top coat. I saw what I would only be able to formulate much later, that everything flowed into Zoli's eyes, unhindered, unfiltered. He absorbed everything that was there, including that which was hidden, and which should remain hidden. His gaze knew something that the rest of us didn't. And then the words spoken by Zorka or Lajos: look at these eyes, that's the gaze of a god or a devil! And the timid objection that no one had ever seen the gaze of a god or a devil made no difference at all.

We greeted each other with a long hug. Zoli's warm shoulders, his pleasantly smelling sweat. You've been away for far too long, a whole lifetime, you and your curly hair that I can always nestle into, said Zoli quietly. His fingertips stroked my hair casually, tenderly, he threw my bag over his shoulder and we set off, walking on the pavement that was warped in places from the summer heat. Moles! Zoli bent down, ran his hand over the asphalt hills, laughing, and I saw that he was missing a tooth on one side. No, not a beating, just the cheapest method of getting rid of an aching tooth.

Ah, you know we should say hello to my little house first, said Zoli as we reached his garden gate; Zoli's house – that was his barn. There you both are at last, called Zorka, waving her cigarette out of the kitchen window, come here, that green hell can wait, Lajos and I are impatient to see you! Zoli looked at me and I knew what his look meant. We would have time later to disappear into the garden. When Zorka and Lajos lost themselves in their dreams, we would be free to go out to Zoli's barn and look at the treasures he had collected since the last time we saw each other. Hanna, you'll definitely be amazed, said Zoli, as we went over to the house, the Kertész family's railway house, which had been further afflicted by 'time' or 'circumstances', with the ever-more visible wound to the right of the front door, the cracks and the crumbling plaster, through which the tarnished bricks could just be seen.

Were you dallying? Were you trying to torment us, were you having fun without us? Well, then, sit down!

I sat down next to Zoli at the kitchen table, I was afraid, as always, of the torrent of words that poured out of Lajos and Zorka, wondered at the naturalness with which they both talked at me at the same time, while I sipped my too-sweet coffee and tried to get in some answers to their questions as best I could. Zoli was bent over his crossword puzzle book, occasionally getting up, unasked, to fetch more drinks from the fridge. Lajos and Zorka hurried to free the beer bottles from their cumbersome caps. They held the *Jelen Pivo* to their lips uninterrupted, and I politely refused when they offered me one. I'll cook for us later, when we're warmed up a bit, said Zorka, and then Zoli had to read their cards, we want to consult our luck, said Zorka. Screw luck, the future, all this women's twaddle,

scoffed Lajos. But still he squinted at the cards as Zoli laid them out on the table with deft fingers. When the Ace of Cups appeared, Zorka cried out, kissed Zoli on the forehead, and Lajos lost it and lifted up the table so that the cards and a few empty bottles slid down it and fell onto the floor, the soft thump of the ashtray filled to the brim with butts. As if on command, Lajos and Zorka started berating each other shamelessly. Zoli bent down, scrambled across the floor, and I hurried to help him, but kneeling down beside him provided no escape from the hateful words; while Zoli collected the butts and shards of glass on the palm of his hand, he whispered his parents' insults almost reverently.

What's going on, what are you doing, I asked Zoli quietly, and he looked at me with those unforgettable eyes. After a while he said, almost inaudibly, Hanna, but these bad words – we definitely have to clear them away too.

And after that, everything was quiet. The tap dripped onto the dirty dishes, a few flies buzzed through the smoky air. They were sleeping now, snoring. Zoli's father on the sofa, mouth open, shaggy hair. Look how shaggy it is, said Zoli. The bottom button on his mother's housecoat lay on the floor like a face with no mouth, and the chair bobbed in time with her. She was a child too once, I thought. Zoli sat back down at the kitchen table, chewed his pencil, wrote:

male descendent

-S-O-N-

capital city of Italy

-R-O-M-E-

personal pronoun

-M-Y-

But now we have to go, Hanna! My treasures are expecting us.

### 3

I often saw how those coarse, strong hands caught hold of you, how your mother clipped you round the ear in her dressing gown, almost in passing, as though it were just a part of the day.

Adults make me nervous, you told me, but when I'm an adult I'll be an apple tree, an acacia or a spotted birch! And you showed me a piece of bark that you found in the next village. That's not possible, no one can be a tree, I answered, a person is just a person – and you looked at me disbelievingly. But Hanna, I can still become a tree, or if it's easier for you to understand then I can be like a tree, and you must understand the desire if you've ever stroked a linden leaf in the spring, even once, this velvety leaf-dress is the most beautiful thing you have ever touched in your entire life, believe me. And I suddenly felt very hot, because I didn't understand you, because I understood you. And I was disgusted by the snot that was always on your face, disgusted by your dirty feet.

You always called me 'Hanna', you said that the 'H' was the best way to sit down, to relax. I never asked what that meant because I liked that you called me 'Hanna'.

Why can I no longer hear the way your voice sounds when you say 'Hanna'? It's not possible that I've forgotten the sound of your voice, but can still remember every word you said.

Kertész Zoltán. Maybe I just need to keep saying your name out loud until I hear your voice again. Your name is there on the wooden cross, part of a sentence. Here lies Kertész Zoltán. A false sentence on a cheap wooden cross. Due to a lack of space, probably. We hope that Kertész Zoltán lies here. They could have written that at least, it wouldn't have taken up much more space, and I scrape the tip of my shoe across the dry ground. I don't even know if I liked your voice or not. But I can still see your gaze clearly in my mind.

Why do people stand at graves, why am I standing here and trying to imagine how they buried you, how the living carried you to your grave? I don't know if you can hear me, but I'm talking to you. I'd like to know when you started to die, that's why I'm here. I don't want to pity you, rather to understand, and to put an end to all speculation. And there's something I'd like to free myself from at an exaggerated volume, to scream into this false silence, always and everywhere, this excessive suffering, martyrdom in all its variations – my body, that is given for you –, and if I don't want it, this body? The martyred son? Can you imagine a more terrible martyr than the crucified Jesus, who was not allowed even the slightest bit of free will?

You cannot know that the stations of the cross lead directly past your grave, coarse wood carvings with Roman numerals that are only tolerable because they are exposed to the elements and are suitably weather-beaten. You don't know that the third station of the cross is right behind your grave. And it seems wrong to me to feel any kind of tenderness now – every cross reminds me that the salvation of the human race is based on something terrible; Christ's hands and feet that were driven through with nails, his head that hung down, with blood on his brow and his temples and on his side – how often have I seen this image? And after the shame had passed, the shame that came from looking at the suffering, humiliated Christ, who was almost naked as he hung from the cross, I was always overcome with a crazy desire to live. To bite into a creamy dessert, to feel warm water on my fingertips and on my face, to close my eyes, to think that there are old, bad dreams that at some point cease to exist.

## **G-O-O-D-M-O-O-D**

My mother is chopping garlic, she's standing at the kitchen table in her apron, I'm sitting down, she chops and smokes, she's curled her hair around her silvery holey rollers, when she curls her hair she sings, she's in a good mood, 'lalalalalali, there's no judge when it comes to love, lalalalalali' -R-O-L-L-E-R-L-O-V-E- I write in my notebook -L-A-L-A-L-A-L-A-L-A-L-I- she throws me a clove of garlic, Zoli, why don't you help instead of just scribbling, and I take a knife from the drawer and a chopping board, peeling the clove is a piece of cake, when I start chopping I slip, blood drips onto the board, bloodboard, I think, I pick up my pencil to write it down, Mother's ash falls onto the table, glimmers, eats a hole in the plastic tablecloth, 'there's no judge when it comes to love,' Mother sings and carries on chopping

the blood soaks into the board, turns the clove red, my hands, they start to shake and there it is again, the moment when things start to shift, to shuffle together – Mother's happiness, it's warm, it flows and flows from her rollers, and her face lights up with happiness, her face is as happy as mine is when I'm standing out in the summer rain, bathing without having to swim

through the kitchen window I can definitely see a celebratory, ceremonious sunset-red, happy-red, I think, and I want to write it down -H-A-P-P-Y-R-E-D- but my hands are trees, shaking off their autumn leaves, the branches of the acacia tree visible through the kitchen window, already almost bare, and my hand shakes blue-red, blueberry, blackberry, black cherry – I am the king of all crossword puzzles

– and I try to get up, to lean on the table, Mother pushes me back down onto the chair -B-U-T-T-E-R-F-I-N-G-E-R-S- do I really need to get another plaster? I don't have time to patch you up, okay? I've got to go out again! be more careful, okay?

stay here, I tell Mother as she dabs, sticks the plaster over my wound, you're in the middle of cooking!

yeah sure, cooking, I've forgotten something, okay? I'll be back in a bit, get some more carrots from the garden, my mother raises her head to the mirror, plucks the rollers from her hair as quickly as she feeds the chickens, pumps the water from the well, and be a good boy, put my rollers away, okay?

okay, Mother

Mother, who smears oily red on her lips, 'I'm painting me a mouth! lalalalalali,' she sings – when will you be back? and Mother looks at me, with laughter-eyes, loop-hair, lips-red, when I'm done, says Mother and she's gone, she slams the door shut behind her and presses the pedals down quickly, as quickly as if she were trying to outrun herself, and I, I go to the garden and grapple with the greenery, pull a handful of carrots from their deep sleep, put on the soup, at Zoli-slow-coach-speed!

when Papa got home he collapsed into Mother's chair, he slept until the soup was ready, and we bent over our plates, Papa and I, Papa's bristly hair in the steam, on the table the plates the spoons the bread, no, Father didn't ask where Mother is, he's definitely almost never asked where Mother is, he sharpened his teeth on the beer cap, he let his Adam's apple hop until he fell asleep in the chair, and I sat on my throne, the yellow kitchen light above me was my crown, oh yes, I put the letters into the white squares, solemnly painted the letters into the gaps in my notebook

sacred story

-L-E-G-E-N-D-

adult male

-M-A-N-

frequently

-O-F-T-E-N-

wild

-F-R-A-N-T-I-C-

and shortly after midnight I had to get changed, my work clothes hang on pegs in the kitchen, like always I patted Father's cheeks, he muttered something, slung his arm around me, we tottered through the kitchen to the bedroom, he whimpered as I pulled off his socks, tucked him in, I have to go to work!

Papa's bristly hair on the pillow

Papa's beer belly under the blanket

everything will be different tomorrow, I said to Papa, okay? everything will definitely be better tomorrow, and you know you need to pick me up, I'll be waiting for you, like always, okay?

yes, and the life dripped out of Father's open mouth, I saw it with my own eyes, and I wished that he could live the life of a stone, but of course, each little stone is washed and warmed and everything that can be warmed is precious, you know that better than I do, right?

and I told my papa to be happy, because happiness -H-A-P-P-I-N-E-S-S- is a hatch out of which we poke our heads on a warm day, right?

**B-O-O-T-B-R-O-T-H-E-R-S**

And then came the day when I opened my cupboard and saw that everything apart from my notebooks had disappeared, my socks, my underwear, the clothes my mother had packed for me, my pocket radio, oh, all the wonderful voices that murmured into my ear under the blanket at night, who stole them from me?

I searched, searched everywhere, in the bedroom, the kitchen, the washroom, and found nothing -N-O-T-H-I-N-G- my temples fluttered as they do so often when everything inside me goes cold, when my thoughts start to slip and I can't understand anything anymore

don't withdraw into yourself, said Mother, and in the washroom I put my head under the cold water, pressed my cold hands against the mirror – if I had had hair I would have torn it out like old ladies do when they beat their chest and wail when somebody dies – I saw my hair die, my eyes die, my silent spirit, it ambushed me, in Zrenjanin, in the washroom, in a room where people can wash themselves, where voices boom into the corners and back again, my silent spirit shook me vehemently, and Jenő found me, grabbed my shoulders, I was fighting with an animal, he said later, I gnashed my teeth terribly, I was dangerous, certainly a danger to myself as well, and Jenő pushed me to the floor, called for help, and I'm sure I thought about my mother, one single, shaky thought about my mother, get me out of here! I want to put on my green boots and jump in puddles, the sound of puddles when the water splashes in the air, I want to hear that sound! Mother – I want to sit on my garden bench, sit in front of my barn

Zoli, don't withdraw into yourself, said Mother

and Father: what have you got between your legs, a flower or a cock?

sit, sit for the whole afternoon, and when the tops of the trees glow gold, I get up and collect my watering can, Mother, I'm working, I'm watering my flowers, herbs, grasses, my bare feet, the water shoots into my eyes, I'm not crying, I'm definitely not crying, someone is throwing water at me, and Jenő is standing over me, his face is distorted, he shouts, I don't understand him because there's an entire orchestra roaring in my mind -W-H-O-S-T-O-L-E-M-Y-S-K-I-N-M-Y-P-I-E-C-E-O-F-S-K-I-N-?

and Jenő's hand in my mouth, as if his hand were a bone – I wet myself, I can feel it, or can I see it? when my silent spirit has gone again and Jenő is standing panting next to me, the lieutenant in full uniform, he bellows into every corner, and the bellowing echoes back – what's going on here? Kertész, get up!

and I get up, lean against Jenő, the puddle on the cold ground below me doesn't show because I'm wet anyway, from head to toe, my pyjamas stick to me, they are torn, my fingers shaking – what is going on here? and the lieutenant turns in impatient circles, he is no eagle, rather a buzzard, a bird of prey, yes, definitely, I don't tell him about watching my hair or my eyes die, about the hard floor, the trees that no one sees, I don't tell him about my silent spirit, about my clothes that have vanished, been stolen, and the lieutenant is the only bird I want to aim at with my catapult, and I definitely want to hit him

I apologise, apologise in every way I can for the disturbance I have caused, I say, but now I really want to sleep...

he wants to sleep, listen to that, Kertész wants to sleep and so he is still ranting!

the lieutenant looks around him, and only now do I see everyone there, in the washroom, in the middle of the night, the constant smirk at the corner of Gyruí's mouth, Imre's grey-blue flashing eyes, Ferenc, Viktor, Lőrinc, their hungry faces, their crumpled pyjamas, and me, Kertész Zoltán, will say nothing, I'll definitely say nothing, even if the lieutenant...my hide...even my damn mouth...I'm going to smash your skull, and there's nothing in there anyway, just the blue goggle-eyes of a stutterer!

Kertész sleepwalks, he put his head under the water and then fell over, that's all! and Jenő stares at the lieutenant, as though he had not just told a lie, had said nothing but the truth, yes Jenő, he supports me, grips my arm –

forward march, everyone, and Kertész, you will scrub the floor and your day will begin one hour earlier, understood?

Jenő helped me scrub the floor, and I asked him, I'm sure I asked him why he was doing that, and he answered, we're boot brothers! and Jenő laughed, his belly bounced as he did so, and I had to ask him what that meant, Jenő explained it and I forgot his explanation straight away because he was laughing in waves, in gentle waves, in which I would have loved more than anything to plunge and to be submerged.

#### **F-L-A-G-P-O-L-E-F-E-A-R**

After every target practice, after all those sleepless nights my teeth were knitting needles, but they weren't my grandmother's knitting needles, I chattered and didn't knit anything, I definitely didn't knit anything, and I was naked as a slug, I chattered and whined, whimpered, stop that, said Jenő, or we'll all get it, and then you're dead

oh Jenő

my brain puts words together to the rhythm of my chattering teeth, an old song, although I'm dead, because I'm dead

'everything you need to know

everything you need to know

the orphan makes

the greatest soldier

those with no protectors

had better carry a sword

an orphan

yes, that's what I am'

Jenő, who knows me so well, who stuffs his hanky back into my mouth, who wraps me in his blanket, rubs my arms, my legs, be quiet now, just be quiet!

-Q-U-I-E-T-

I rip the hanky from my mouth, yes, I want to be quiet, Jenő, he hugs me, they'll finish you if you don't stop, they'll cut you into tiny pieces, man, tell your brain to stop now, calm down, says Jenő, that's enough! and he presses his warm doughy fingers against my forehead, his words, right next to my ear, or do you think somehow they'll discharge you? forget it, Zoli, they'll never send you home, these days they need us for their law of nature, the war! and because they need you for that, my friend, you're supposed to become a fool, a hater – but no, I definitely don't want to be discharged, I want someone to get me out of here, my mother, Papa, someone in my life who – but Jenő, he doesn't hear me

you're supposed to become frustrated and yet oblivious to it all, whispers Jenő, someone who marches all day, wallows in the mud and then salutes red-faced, and for that to happen they need to destroy our fear, every day, at every rollcall, in every exercise, believe me, when we no longer feel fear that's the end, then we either kill or we get killed, Zoli, be bold, brave! you know what it means when they scream in your face? die or kill, nothing more, believe me, I've studied it, Zoli, I know, you're shaking because you're shitting yourself, don't show your fear, Zoli, but keep it inside you always, that must be our law of nature, our only one, get it?

and I must tell Jenő that my dog, my Tango is also afraid, that it is good and normal and understandable to be afraid, he disappears into his hut, he curls up really small in his hut, so he can't be seen, and I tell Jenő that Tango's fur changes when he's afraid, how should I describe it, his fur lies down flat against his body, and in his black eyes you can see him retreat -R-E-T-R-E-A-T-

and Jenő stops me from going on, because I obviously haven't understood him, fear is human and is probably the thing that separates humans from monsters, he says, but here, Goddammit, in the army they'll finish you off with your fear, you must understand that, Zoli, that's why you have to hide your fear inside you like a treasure, you see? and Jenő was so desperate and upset, I nearly told him that his eyes now look like Tango's eyes do when he's afraid, but Jenő pulled me close, Zoli, you believe in your Bible, you must remember a sentence they hammered into our heads, do not be afraid! always hold on to that, Zoli, understand? I'll tell you about my treasure and you tell me about yours, but otherwise you are made of steel, that's the way it has to be in order to survive, you have to understand that now and forever, Zoli!

yes, Jenő knew, Jenő's voice in my ear calmed me down

I slept and was awake, dreamed that they were hanging us all by our feet, raising us up on flagpoles – come on, get on with it, get moving, don't let your head dangle, stick your arms out, fly, come on! get on with it! nearly there!

our shaved heads are somehow different, somehow bigger and perhaps a bit like a command...so that we don't feel fear, I whispered to Jenő the next morning

and Jenő, he sat there on his bed for a moment without moving, a sock in his hand, as if it belonged to someone else and not to him

yes, Zoli, that's exactly it, we should fear this bald fearlessness.

## 7

Nobody has come to meet me. That's hardly surprising, since nobody knows I'm here. I don't even want to imagine what it would be like if someone were waiting for me. The driver holds out my rucksack as though he had to help me into my coat.

He has his hands full at the moment. But I'm still going to ask Him to protect you, says the driver, and before I can understand his words he has disappeared back into the bus. Thanks, but I don't believe in Him! I call after him and am drowned out by the hissing of the closing doors. I knock on the filthy glass, wave as the bus pulls away.

I stand still, looking around. Nothing to see apart from the bleak bus station, which in my mind has always been bleak. But what does that mean. The neon sign hanging overhead in the dawn: *Severtrans. Autobuska Stanica. Autóbusz Állomás.* A sign of perfect neglect, Serge would say. Flickering letters. Illegible timetables. Every corner stinking of urine. Rubbish bins hanging crookedly. And the rubbish strewn around beside them. Your beloved trees, poplars and weeping willows, not cared for by anyone.

Rust everywhere, a beautiful allegory for red neglect, don't you think? There are reasons why it looks like *this*. No, not only homemade reasons.

I rub my forehead, banish Serge with a shake of the head and start moving at last, towards the city centre.

The air is pleasantly fresh. An old woman cycles slowly past me, greets me with a loud 'Good morning'. A monstrous linen sack is tied to her bike rack, obscuring her almost entirely. Be careful! I call after her, and she gives me a laugh, a brief wave of the right hand, as though we know each other.

I worked everything out during the bus journey, my course of action, and the fact that I don't want to let anything distract me. Just keep calm and carry on, as they say, on to the city centre where I can bunk down in my hotel.

I tell myself that no one has ever picked me up from the bus station.

I cross a street whose name I don't know.

I tell myself that these streets aren't familiar to me.

I tell myself that none of my uncles live on the *Beogradska*.

I tell myself that I no longer know how to get to the *Beogradska*, or if the *Beogradska* even exists. The *Hajduk Stankova*. The *Laze Kostića*. The *Tornyosi út*.

I pay no attention to the pink-whitewashed music school, *zene iskola*, act as if it had never interested me. I hold my breath for a brief moment outside its closed windows – no sound at all. It's too early. I keep on walking quickly, past houses built more than a hundred years earlier in the Art Nouveau style, pastel-coloured houses, whose charm and playfulness have long since faded. And in time with my steps I suddenly hear the timeless creatures that accompany me to the city centre with their soaring chirping, singing the satirical song of an unknown composer: *Yes, yes, the people are struggling, with Kaiser and Queen, the people. They struggle, with their hearts, with their pride and their laments. Yes, yes. And the morning light sits between the leaves and watches you, sees how you all struggle, how pathetically you struggle!*

I stop in the park next to the town hall and put my rucksack down on a bench. I notice now for the first time how tired I am. Dog tired, *fáradt mint egy kutya*. And I sit down next to my rucksack, lean against it, look at the Hotel Royal. I can hear the odd two-stroke engine rattling. In front of the hotel, a man in a flat cap tries to get his bike working – a Tomos Colibri – swearing loudly as he does so. Push it, you need to push it, calls an old man, wheeling his bicycle alongside him on the pavement, four stuffed plastic bags hanging from the handlebars. The morning dew has damaged your bike! It's all right, grandpa, answers the flat-capped man, I know my Tomoska's quirks. It messes about every morning, dew or no dew, it doesn't matter.

A moment later the engine springs to life, the flat-capped man presses the gas pedal a few times, kicks the stand up and rides away.

A face appears amidst the bright clattering noise and the blue cloud, hair dishevelled from the airflow, an adolescent, a young man, whose brightly striped t-shirt balloons up, an angel fish or a crazy person with surreally thin arms, an emaciated body, which devotes itself unapologetically to the speed, letting go of his father's shoulders and crossing his arms above his head, stretching his head up to the sky, as though expecting some kind of offering. And I get up, call through the deserted park: Zoltán! Zoli! My voice gets caught in the yews, the planes, the weeping birches, please stop, Zoli! You know what will happen!

The old man with the bicycle stops, looks at me, asks if everything is all right. Of course, everything's fine, and I look at the sky, close my eyes in the morning air, which is already warm, and drift off into a state of wide-awake exhaustion.

Zoltán's milky skin. His long teeth – the gaps in between them. How his mouth laughed without him laughing. His flared nostrils. How his eyes contorted until only the whites were showing. And the words that he fired out of his mouth after a long pause, as though giving them freedom, another meaning.

The phrases written by Dr Mirjana Glavaški, specialist in occupational health:

*Kertész Zoltán's emotional state is below average. He has trouble communicating. His speech is incomprehensible, his behaviour is infantile and inexplicable to others.*

The involuntary memory of reading these phrases, phrases like straitjackets, armouries, phrases written by official offices and authorities, whose coldness must absolutely be carried across if the phrases are to be understood in their crudeness and brutal sparseness. What lies behind the words *below average*, *infantile* and *incomprehensible*? What does it mean to describe the behaviour of a person as inexplicable? And I open my eyes, pull myself together, and walk the few steps to the Hotel Royal.

The dilapidated royal hotel, in which I will stay tonight for the first time. It opened three years before the outbreak of the First World War, equipped with all the modern signs of civilisation from the start of the century: running water, electric light and central heating!

I have to call out several times before a man appears at the reception desk, looks at me sleepily and disbelievingly, a room? Yes, of course we have a room, and he coughs slightly when I say I am alone, but I would like a room with a double bed. Deutsche Marks, you know? And he coughs slightly again. Yes, I know! He turns around slowly, runs his fingertips along the row of keys hanging from a board as though breathing life back into them. We haven't had many guests lately, just a few workers on the road who are here on the job for a while, and he takes a key from the hook, turns back around, hands me number 222, the best room! He squints at my passport, Mrs Ujházi, I hope that won't disturb you, I mean the workers. No, not at all, why should they. And do I want breakfast? No, I answer, thanks very much, but that's not necessary. And no, I can carry my own luggage upstairs too. How long will you stay? he calls after me. I pretend not to hear.

Room 222 smells of sauerkraut. I put my rucksack away in the cupboard without unpacking and look around for the sauerkraut pot. No luck. With a bit of patience I get the window open. The lifeless park early in the morning – from up here, looking over the whole place, it seems different, better cared for. The playground with swings, a slide and a sandpit. The benches. Chestnut trees, planes, birches, a Japanese quince. Bushes and shrubs, a few small flowers, bristly and dry.

The wide street between the hotel and the park, leading down to the river. In the fifties and sixties, my parents' generation would spend Sunday mornings strolling with elegantly straight backs along the boulevard to the Tisza river. Boulevard, or *korzó* – to my childish ears, this word always sounded like a shower of gold, a choir of angels – and the best thing of all was hearing my mother's father speaking so enthusiastically about this glittering era. The tottering footsteps, the stiffened shirt collars. The whispering and the animated talking in the shadows of the trees. The art of giving a compliment with a glance, a small movement of the finger.

I open the window, close the dark red curtains and lie down on the bed, on top of the dark red throw. I can feel the long bus journey in my bones, it has shaken up my ears. I could be kept awake by the faint noise somewhere between a hammer, an anvil and a stirrup iron. Or by the garish orange light, the dark red curtains, through which the sunlight streams. The thought 'incubator 222' pops into my

mind. Perhaps also because of the oversized TV, which sits on a wooden table facing the bed. I get up and take the throw off the bed. It's heavy and smells like bleach rather than sauerkraut, and I wrap it around the TV. Doesn't look at all bad, my wrapped-up box. It should continue brooding without me. I fall onto the bed, try to picture the next few days. Should I go to the cemetery first, or to Zrenjanin? Probably the cemetery. And then to Zrenjanin the day after. Thinking about Zorka makes me nervous, makes my pulse race again. I would prefer not to see Zorka. Certainly not to hear her. And I can already hear her, how she sucks in smoke, exhales it again, as if this hurried breathing in and out were her only motive for living. And Lajos? It's only worth talking to him when Zorka isn't around.

I get up again to take Ödön von Horváth's *A Child of Our Time* from my rucksack. I sit at the small table next to the incubator, start to read, read the first thirty pages, underline certain sentences and words. 'Because we love peace, just as we love our homeland, above everything else in the world. And we no longer wage wars, we simply cleanse.'

Above me, a farming family sit hunched around the table, perhaps eating a plate of sauerkraut – a clumsily painted picture, which I have not noticed until now. I am the seventh member of the family, I hunch over with them, read again these two sentences that struck me. Phrases shouted from the rooftops with fatal consequences.