

emperor am I in this loneliness of mine! I defend myself with ease from all the beings! Only, it is true, the other day, when my house owner fell asleep again under the newspaper, a horror seized me that I should die sleeping under the paper...

There is still some light, the flame of the oil-lamp sometimes flickers intensely, giving me signs. Well, but why am I writing you about all this? At the beginning I had my own thought, but here his story has swallowed me... Yes, yes, with it I am writing you a message about the senselessness I discovered on the way of loneliness.

The oil-lamp has got out. Darkness. I am cowering alone. Time and the sense of hearing... A beetle!... But I see and know no more... And something keeps urging me to begin to swim in space and time, to look for him, Arkadiyevich, and for his time, his moment... 1867 and onwards, further and further... But?! I know, I know, I am acquainted with it, I am listening to the depth, I am travelling, simmering in my sense of hearing, but all the same, nothing, nothing, nothing...

Translated by Branko Brusar

STJEPAN MIHALIĆ

## The Late Poor Little World

### THE FEAR

THE FIRST THING that drew itself out of the mist and became a small picture was the grey Sunday afternoon covered with clouds. He was standing on the path in his godmother's garden, extending his fingers towards the ripe currants. From the steeple across the River Kupa, re-echoing from the roofs, a dusky ringing forced its way towards him. He was small in the vast garden, alone, surrounded by trees and bushes, where unseen eyes crept. All of a sudden fear seized him. Screaming, he ran towards the people, stamping plants savagely. He ran into his mother who was gossiping with his godmother that enjoyed her dear cheese pie. Since the women were astonished and embarrassed, he burst out crying. He did not get rid of the convulsive, unrestrained crying until the very following morning. He started during the delirious night, shouted, fell from his bed into the darkness, and dear aunt Rozalija, the sage of the street, solemnly announced to her neighbours' council that Dragica's Benko had surely stepped upon it. What »to step upon« meant, he did not know. But so much excitement and mystery spread over the face of the reputable Rozalija that he felt, frightened by it still more, that it was doubtless the matter of dangerous forces. To be, without even knowing it, in relation with things you meet but do not see, things you cannot touch, this overwhelmed him like the severest fever in measles, when he would suddenly catch a glance of the familiar unknown one, peering at him from the hung up clothes. Always the same, and in the same way, he would creep into the room through the shut windows, winking to him that he was there. Clenching his teeth he would start buzzing. Then he would extend his hot arm, start to swing him,

place him on his buzzing, and with a sly smile rock him over the hairy edge of a heaving precipice.

Somewhere about noon his father returned from the country, pale, with his right arm bandaged. While he had wanted to pacify his discordant brothers, who, stirred up by their wives, quarrelled over the partition, he found the young bride guilty at which his younger brother, although he knew it was true, »defended« him with a pitchfork.

»Aha,« Rozalija, satisfied, rejoiced. »Didn't I tell it to you? Of course, I did. Benko stepped upon it at the same moment his papa touched death.«

## THE GOLDFINCH

THE MURKY attic with old women. Hunched, maimed, lame women. Tired, sorry, forgotten women. The old woman Gojmerec had sighed upstairs totted up the days, months, years, suffered it for sixty years.

Alone, old woman Gojmerec coughed, humble in her mouse's hole, with her tiny mouse's face, under the sooty beams over the sooty holes. From dawn to dusk she wound cotton, from dawn to dusk she turned the spinning-wheel, ball after ball, today, tomorrow, hundreds and thousands of balls. Her hands moved, moved, the old and yellow worn-out hands, and when not disentangling threads, they stroked her painful hip. It burnt, in her hip, glowed like live coals, in her meagre hip, the old woman became lame because of her hip, because of her hip, she wept while peering through the skylight, at the small skylight cut out from the tiles, the sign-posted path towards the clouds and the sun. She stared with her half-gone-out mouse's eyes, from which dropped, troubled tears, glided, crawled day and night.

Why did old woman Gojmerec live?

Swallowing his uneasiness, Benko was in pain cowering on the small bench beside her kitchen-range.

And what was rustling there?

It was knocking in him because of his strained attention, while the old woman would sit in the darkness, on her bed, on the straw covered with a patched yellow sheet, with a black Virgin Mother in the corner, crowned with paper marguerites grown yellow.

Could she be a witch? And what if she was a witch? His throat, dried up, choked from fright while the reflection of the fire drew itself through the small holes, skipping around, turning into curious feelers that looked for him on the small wall and on the floor.

It was usually after the pasture time, when little candles jumped on meadows and ditches, and over the stooped roofs of groundfloor houses, in the street, ringing descended from the air to reach the elect.

Old woman Gojmerec, all beaten up by work, moved her stiff half-open mouth, talked with her consumptive fate, with her loveless and

joyless penury, sending Our Fathers and Hail Marys into abysses, without expecting betterment or dawn, and her long arms like mere bones, growing, turned into preying feelers, nearing the rickety small bench, the kitchen-range, and Benko, who, breathless, all in sweat, silent, withdrew deeper and deeper into the corner.

But stronger than fear itself was the wooden goldfinch on a Hawthorne twig in a recess facing the skylight. In fact, it would be his, after old woman Gojmerec died, after her last moment came, she had promised the bird to him. But when would it come? And how would it come? And what if she was a witch? Impatient, Benko yearned for the bird, feeling bitterness and shame for it. Shameful, he could hardly resist tears. He knew his desire was ugly, he seriously loved old woman Gojmerec, who talked to him about snakes and pilgrims, and for a reason — since he, because of the goldfinch, wished her to die, without, however, desisting from the inheritance — he had a twinge of conscience, he was looking at her sitting in her grave, upbraiding him, reproaching, threatening with her forefinger grown green, since now, dead she knew everything.

»Why are you silent? What are you thinking about?«

As if she guessed what was seething in Benko, woman Gojmerec shifted in her darkness, her voice became rough, harsh all of a sudden.

»Don't you hear the Ave Maria? Go home. Your mum will look for you again through the whole neighbourhood.«

The Ave Maria.

The deadline when one had to go home, because of the impure appearances prowling in the darkness. Jumping, he rushed through the attic like an arrow, jumped over three steps at once, crashed down upon the groundfloor, to avoid hearing steps behind him, and they were following him, surely, he heard them, listened to them, the echoes of his own stamping.

## LA PALOMA

FOR YEARS Auntie Rozalija from the town slaughter-house had sighed over La Paloma, telling the story of Maximilian, Juarez, and Charlotte, and she used to weep, weep because of herself. Auntie Rozalija was important, the interpreter of everything appearing in the street, Auntie Rozalija with her golden spectacles, and she spoke through her nose, when she did not forget to do so. While she had been young, she had been beautiful, and because she had been beautiful she had kept refusing the enamoured journeymen, entertaining herself with students and serious secondary school pupils, and she had listened and listened and listened to uncounted serenades. Since she had also listened to La Paloma, she waited for her own prince, and in the romantic expectation of her prince she met the sleeking, gloating old age, and old age turned the former fastidious beauty into an obtrusive spinster, Auntie Rozalija, as Benko himself called, her, who was withering in the cage of remem-

branches, withering, gossiping and endlessly philosophizing. As the sweetest dainty, the »food for her mind«, which she still nibbled with yearning, two big books stood on a little table, a novel of four thousand pages, a big novel, great novel, the story of the guiltlessly condemned and persecuted, of the luckless Gvozdanović and his Jelica.

Perhaps for the reason she had ogled with them, town magistrates, or their majority, with two Prague philosophers at their head, who remembered the far-off chirping, made efforts to provide for her, to insure her until her death, and they furnished her, settled her in the town slaughter-house, laughing in their weighted stomachs at how they revenged their young failures. There, in the rough empire of slaughter, powdered, velvety, with a lace collar, with her remarkably bandaged, painful head, with her feverishly blue eyes, she carefully cooked honey-biscuits, fried liver, eggs with brain, sipped šiler and soda, shouted at the apprentices to keep to the house regulations, and fought courageously with her helper, the savage blasphemer, old Kušić. To blaspheme and bite, with reason and without it, was for Kušić, his own master in the past, now a servant, sweeper in the slaughter-house, the dishevelled one, the last passion.

At night, when Kušić left work, Rozalija locked the huge gate. Without lighting the lamp, she would sit beside the window, staring for hours down the empty street, waiting for any movement or step, and as well as in old woman Gojmerec's attic, but here because of the Gvozdanović and Jelica books, Benko would cower and wait together with her. All shrunk on the little chair at her feet, he would listen to the ballad about the shot prince, admire Juarez who beat the emperor, and when Rozalija would approach the gramophone so as to hear Maximilian's last wish, he abandoned himself to the attractive calls from out of the night, and silently, trembling from something unknown that carried him off, he dreamed of adventures on seas and lands. Tearing down the moist covers of the roof, the calls would entice him away from the hoops of the street, raise him like a little feather into limitless space, where life overflowed into a luxurious dream.

When grown up, he himself would strike, fight for all who weep and suffer. He was just galloping on a foaming white horse, when all of a sudden a scream called him from the jungle.

»Halt,« he shouted, reaching for his mace.

In front of the oak-trees, the giant with Kušić's head, hairy, bloody, grinning scornfully, was dragging Milka, the street beauty, into the thicket.

## ĐUKA

ĐUKA KNEW about a hundred stories, and when they got tired of heroic wrestling, they would draw themselves under the covers of Đuka's bed, listening to the old clock ticking. It regularly happened before the full night, before the street sat down to dinner, when the old street lamp lighter, with his ladder on his shoulder, just began to light the petroleum lamps on the corners. A fire was merrily crackling in the stove, somewhere under the wardrobe a cricket sang, on the attic beams mice ran, and Đuka told about two coins, about Sindbad, the Boors, about the headless man, inserting, according to circumstances, his own into what he had read, with talent, trying to enliven the event, to make it grow, he contributed excitement and thrill to it, using his voice as a fiddler uses his violin. Although he was only a paid journeyman, Đuka was like a son in the house. Tidy, and not like some others, who were looking eagerly forward to their Saturday pays, so as to play at nine-pins or cards until Monday dawn. Đuka wore good suits of clothes, took walks, talked, went to the cinema, and read not only newspapers but also books, as seldom any of some twenty journeymen in the street. A stout well-knit boy, transpiring calm, second to none in work, not even to the oldest master, he sang in a pure ringing tenor, he wrestled with Benko, as an equal with an equal, without showing him he was a child, and still as with a child, satisfying him with stories.

Then beautiful Milka, with her silent, mild smile emerged, and it was the idyl's end. Instead of wrestling and continuing about Sindbad, Đuka forgot himself with beautiful Milka in front of the door. Frail, as if made of the finest crystal, up to then Milka had passed the window looking around herself with her wonderful eyes, a flower sentenced to an early death, but one morning Đuka looked more closely, and he blushed embarrassed. At noon, as soon as he dropped the spoon, he stood in front of the door looking towards town, and in the evening, as if he were hers, beautiful Milka was standing with him, charming him, the poor one, with her almond glances.

»Đuka,« Benko called impatiently, looking at his mother, and mother smiled.

»Đuka! Đuka!« he called the following day suppressing moans in his weighted bosom, there where the struck heart beat, oh, how he would weep, he ought to weep, but how should he humiliate himself weeping in front of an enemy?

And then he hid behind a corner and met her. He broke the barrier of hate in himself, called her to the room, since, he said, Đuka was ill and would like to tell her something. In the room, climbing a chair to be tall, he struck her face with his fist, but he froze at once, seeing how she suffered without budging, planted there like a statue. His father caught him, pushed him between his legs, lashed him with his belt, sighing. Mother wrested him from father's hands, all mad because of her only son's streaked buttocks, and Benko, tasting the belt for the first time, tumbled down to the Kupa River without a single tear, crashing into the friendly willows on the bank. They called him at noon,

he suffered hunger, but, no, never, there was no reconciliation, he threatened, withdrawing deeper into the thicket, revengefully thinking of death. Oh, to die, how he would punish them. All the afternoon long they were looking for him along the Kupa, not knowing what he was ready for, but by now he had crossed to the abandoned hen-house, tired, incessantly planning retaliation. If he could die, but to stay alive. He was looking at himself stretched on a black bier, with candles burning, they were sprinkling him with water, crying, and let them only, it served them right. To wear them out, so they would know how they hurt him, but then, all of a sudden, to rise from the casket, to laugh, and forgive magnanimously!

In the evening, all cold from the voices in the darkness, from the fright that through the cracks something was prowling after him, hearing mother's steps near there, he sighed in exasperation from the fullness of his lungs, so as to, as if casually, bring her on the track. He was already ashamed of his action, but he would not have admitted it for anything in the world if the beautiful Milka had not met him behind the corner, stroking his hair with sisterly fingers. Some ten days had passed from the blow, but only then he burst out crying. He forgave since he was forgiven, and Đuka, there he was, let her have him, he was giving him to her, and readily, but only as a gift.

### PIG-SLAUGHTERING

HE APPEARED suddenly on the threshold, as usually when he had the idea to play a little with the moulder's scraper, but an inimical silence checked him there. Nobody uttered a single word, but Benko, following the beating of his bloodstream, as yet ignorant of human maddening, comprehended almost everything. Old Bežan was sitting on his bed grinning somehow wryly, motionless, motionless was also his smile, as if he expected something, but Benko thought the old man was not sitting, he was hanging lowered down to a span above the pillows, fixed in the air by an invisible force, and the same force nailed the wry smile on his wrinkled face. Mica, somehow awed, hunched in the corner, immersed up to her waist in the dresses on a hook, wiping her weeping eyes, waiting for the same thing as Bežan, transfixed herself, not able to wrest herself away, turned towards what was happening around the kitchen-ranger, trembling like a small poor bat, nailed alive, with its wings spread, for good luck, in the shoemaker's corridor. Mrs. Bežan, confused with hurry and fire, rather small but stout, in broad skirts, well-known for her sluggishness, but now a lightning, like a bristling crow attacking, gyrating like a top gone mad, after she had thrown a piece of wood into the flame, she caught a knife and ground it on the metal edge of the range, dropped it and caught a piece of wood again, and again the knife, looked at the pot, as if she wanted to drink up the steam, everything like a lightning, as in an illusion, sweat, dark, dangerously new, and Benko thought whatever she did she did not

do it by herself, what she needed, but rather moved like a wheel under an invisible rod that made her turn like a very top. The fourth was the moulder, big, strong, with his full beard under a leather cap, in his blue working clothes, smoking a pipe on a three-legged stool by the window, as if he were all alone in the room, did not see anything, nothing interested him, he was just relaxing watching the roof. But still, it was evident he was most important there. Whatever was being mixed was being mixed because of him, the moulder knew it was being mixed because of him, but he did not like to get involved with anything around him, whatever it was it would be without him, he did not want to open his mouth, he did not let himself be drawn to any judgment.

Benko felt himself fixed, he did not understand that he had just broken the spell in which a moment ago a death had been prepared. But he would never forget Bežan, grey and wry, giving himself up to his fate, giving himself up to something he could not escape. He would never forget this woman, much younger, mad from passion, after she had already tasted the moulder's rage, wild around the pot of seething water, as if she were ready for December slaughtering, and she had been preparing herself indeed for a kill, imagining in her madness that Bežan was a pig, for him she had ground the knife on the range. And he would not forget the terrible moulder either, the guilty one, who, cold like a blue idol, having woken libidinous furies, was waiting to have a sacrifice burnt to him.

Benko was feeling with smells and colours.

The autumn dusks were yellow, smelling of quinces and tired waters.

Mrs. Bežan would remain black forever, smelling of mould in half-dark rooms. Whenever he would close his eyes, for a long while he would still see her beside the range with the extended knife, the witch from the tale of Johnny and Molly.

### KUKU JANA

DIRTY, TORN, underfed, he had the accident while cleaning canals and ditches. Who knows when, but somebody had the idea that Kuku Jana, under the coat hanging over his shoulders, in the right sleeve, hid a knife. A long knife, razor-sharp, to kill lonely children when he met them in darkness or somewhere in fields. Well, just so, he brandished it, and slash! — your throat was gone.

»Kuku Jana,« it trumpeted around him, from above, from below, from the infuriated circle, as if a flock of angry sparrows attacked a hawk, but they were afraid to get near, they cursed and shouted from a cautious distance.

»Kuku Jana,« corridors were challenging him, and doors and windows and lofts and yards, wherever an opportunity to threaten without fear, while he, like a deaf man, hurried down the middle of the road,

with his hat drawn down over his pale nose, meagre, without a shirt, mere bones and skin, with his eyes directed into the emptiness in front of him. Such was Kuku Jana, and such, guiltless of anything anywhere, persecuted, he spread terror all around him.

As usual, that afternoon they played on the rampart, the rough but dear game, »dou, dou, I'll douse your spouse.« A man went with his wife to the Fair, and from all sides blows showered on the woman, violently, as children are apt to do, with clenched teeth and fists. The man defended the poor woman, rushed against the crowd that hit and ran, and as soon as he caught the first attacker, this one had to be turned into a wife, for punishment, and the former beaten wife revenged herself with interest for all she had received.

In the middle of the uproar a scream arose, stop, look, Kuku Jana, and he did not walk, he ran, rushed, directly towards the rampart, a knife in his hand.

»Kuku Jana,« all together screamed in chorus, dissipating, running in all directions, but the majority, by instinct, towards the two-door blockhouse, with all kinds of passages for ambushes and retreat.

Cowering behind a cask in the corridor, as in a trench, Benko made himself small, keeping his breath, waiting for the sign that the air was clean. In the twilight he chocked from the stale old things. On the beam, prowling after his throat, a cross spider was repairing his web, and then it creaked, crackled under somebody's feet, nearer and nearer, and still nearer. His heart was forcing its way up to his throat, and he saw him, Benko saw Kuku Jana, sleeking towards him with wolf's steps.

Startled by something, instead of jumping, Benko erected himself behind the cask-shield, but Kuku Jana passed him, without looking at him, he only moved away the sleeve, showing, to somebody unseen, his arm disfigured by ugly crusts.

»There's no knife, look, none,« he murmured talking to the invisible one, making as if there were neither the cask nor Benko, and Benko, standing neither alive nor dead, felt at once an inexpressible weakness, which poured into the silence in sobs.

## OLD MAJER

EACH THURSDAY at two in the afternoon old Majer would emerge from his little apartment, turning, with the smile of an overtired child, the handle of an organ on a tiny trailer.

Bareheaded, with a ribbon in her smoothly licked hair, his little wife held tiny rods with little paper stars of all colours in her small hand and exchanged them for pence, twopence for a rod with the starlet. And so, two of them, from two to five, on the basis of imperial and royal permission, walked through friendly streets like two well-known but untamed birds, enlivening the sleepy afternoon hours with marches, waltzes, polkas, barcaroles, reminding that another world also lived.

Rather small and light, with his little grey Tyrolean beard, in a velvet suit, with a tie knotted artistically around his small throat, Majer performed concerts without hurry, while his dark companion, ugly, but with two mild eyes, with two silent and humble eyes, as if she teared she might come across an insult, received fees extended from steps, kreuzers and groschen, sometimes sechrsers, quite rarely whole crowns, bowing to all in the same way, regardless of how much they put in her palm, like a patiently trained blackbird.

On the basis of the illustrious attention of the most serene monarch, the court office had awarded him a gold medal he wore on a half-buttoned small coat, and added a small pension and the organ on the trailer, for his courage and wounds in the Lombardic battles, where he had been extinguishing loyally the unextinguishable. He had been transplanted into the foreign Kupa Valley at who knows who's suggestion or momentary whim. Beginning and ending the Radetzky march, Majer dreamed of his Tyrolean mountains. He had probably never tried to adjust himself to the surroundings which he entertained and to which he bowed, careful that everything was always formal, that nobody, and nothing, for any money, touched his honour as an invalid, the pride of the medalled imperial warrior, on whom, in this obstinate South-East, somebody's uniformed black-yellow ambition tried to put a Kultur-träger's dress.

As he gave his groschen (his mother taught him generosity, raising his self-esteem at the same time), put it on Mrs. Majer's cold fingers, Benko got confused, uncomfortably crimson.

Not that he would regret the groschen.

He was ashamed that everything was so among people, that somebody, an adult, and old, like the Majers, well, needed his own groschen.

## IKAN

THE MAN killed some ten travellers at America, whom he had promised he would lead across the border without a passport, leaving them half-naked in thickets and wastes, more concerned with performing it without a casual witness than with hiding the dead. The manner of killing indicated it was one and the same killer: the men were struck down by the same blow, from behind, with a knife, with such accuracy that it was evident an expert did it, that to him killing was like sewing to a seamstress. For weeks, months, almost half a year, people came across corpses under branches and in water, in the circle of three neighbouring districts, always by chance, looking for a stray animal, gathering dry wood, raspberries, mushrooms, and the authorities, not tolerating what was not according to the mould, what moved wherever it pleased, followed its own taste, swooped on tramps and all kinds of foreigners, arrested them, squeezed, released them reluctantly, shut new ones, released them, irritated because of failures, seeing no end to it.

Although it was apparent the victims were »Americans«, all of them half-literate peasants, uneasiness began to sprout in town, fear grew, hysteria spread, and as soon as the first dusk fell, an unexpected movement behind a corner, a step, a rustling, a cat on the roof, was enough to quicken the pulse, and the imagination, multiplying the bloody finas, began to locate them in a dangerous proximity, as if the person was everywhere, inescapable, and when a lull extended to weeks, probably until a new charge entangled himself into the guide's net, it was silently implored that it be over as soon as possible, since everybody considered himself the next one and the uncertainty marred his appetite and sleep. Then they seized him, by chance too, although it had been already gathered that he was such and such, tall, stooping, fortyish, hairless, olive green, taciturn, and generally unimpressive, dark as one should be in the insecure enterprise by which one wants to reach the dollar paradise against the regulations.

And now he sat in town gaol without losing his calm, as if people were the same as lambs enough of which he had killed and barbecued at church feasts. »Have you seen me?« he asked unexcitedly when his examiner presented him with the charge, as one who was accustomed to hearing all kinds of things, as if it were the matter of a misunderstanding soon to be settled between serious people. But when he closed up to him, pressed him with details, confronted him, seeing he could get nowhere, what they put on him was stronger than himself, and moreover, he was alone, and they put so much on him, without, however, ever admitting anything, he rolled a cigarette for himself and gave himself up to his fate. And streets, masters, journeymen, godmothers, yearning for monstrosities, formally stuck to the guards, bribing them in order to get near the one hidden from sensation, Jack the Slasher, but nothing out of it, a man like a man, there he was, sipping his black coffee, smoking, silent, without thinking of repentance, and what would it avail him, with the crowd of the murdered?

»How could you do it?« a guard asked him, and he, Ikan, answered: »Have you seen me?« and »Have you seen me?« and »Have you seen me?« to all in a familiar tone, harping on the same chord, without regretting himself or those under the sod. Although they would have impaled him, roasted him on a spit, cut him into strips, if they had handed him to them when he had arrived at town, »Have you seen me?« had produced its effect, it had somehow lowered him from monstrosity into daily life, it had, in a way, returned him to people, perhaps through persistence, since it also meant hope, he hoped, which is human, if even without chances, because he would, and with right, grease the rope. Besides, newspapers wrote much about him. The whole world knew about it. In London, in Calcutta, in Johannesburg, Baltimore, everywhere telephones buzzed about him, and about them through him, about their town, as if they owed him something, they began to adopt him, claim him, call him »our Ikan«, make fun by »ikanizing«, »How are you, Ikan?«, shouting across the road, or »Shoot, Ikan« at the skittle-alley, or »Are you Ikan or are you not?«, drinking, forgetting how much they had been afraid of him, writing it off, as usual, as last year's snow.

When they lead him from the gaol to the station, to Zagreb, since they would sentence him there, they were angry, hurt, since he had to go away from them, and their performance was moved to Zrinjevac, they looked at him tied between two guards, crowding the pavements as if

for the carnival, or as if they saw off a Saviour, and Ikan, cleanly shaved, as though he went to a wedding, walked, calm, as he had used to kill, quiet, as he would accept death.

Standing in front of the crowd on the edge of the pavement, while his mother firmly embraced his shoulders, as if he could still tear himself away and as though a knife were still in his belt, Benko, shaking, regretted Ikan and waited for somebody who would rush up on a horse and announce that everything was a joke, that Ikan himself knew it was a joke, and that only for that, because he knew it, did he not howl and did not bite and did not fight with the guards, and did not clank his chains to strike at the silence, which led him towards the blackest pit.

## SIESTA

BENKO WAS alone on the sunny bank, excepting the ducks and geese on the sands of the islands that emerged from the half-dried-up Kupa. The tired steaming of the sparkling currents poured into a dreamy gurgling overflowing into the satiated afternoon silence, and Benko, in pants, burnt down to the bones, satisfied, sank into the picture around him, into the blue and golden and red reflections which mixed with the greenery, overflowed into enchanting looking-glasses, pressing all this into one's tissue for the whole life. Ducks and geese, with their beaks under their wings, of course, were neither ducks nor geese, but adventurous fleets anchored in harbours, the Kupa River was an ocean, the islands archipelagoes, and the dark and bright tufts, bending towards the surface with traitorous spines, were underwater monsters prowling after prey, they would surely entangle you with their perfidious big tails, entice you into the whirlpool and draw you to the bottom. Flying from bank to bank, dragonflies seemed to leap, not fly, alighting on stones, branches, water lilies, wherever there was a short rest station, were horses with tiny women-riders, sitting not on saddles, but between the small glass-like transparent wings, also the beautiful riders' wings. He even saw one, for a moment only, when the dragonfly touched his stick, and the girl looked straight at his eyes, she was sitting in a swing inside a gaudy bubble. Swarms of small flies, dancing over the water, playing the whirly »I'm falling, I'm not falling«, not a single span from the swimming half-drunk seething little fish had just handed him over a secret message that tomorrow would also be a beautiful day. The small yellow and blue and orange butterflies, and white, and dark red, no bigger than your nail, pushed each other with their feelers in a circle on the mud, giggling. Benko even heard the giggling, the boys were from the close, invisible castle, thinking they had cheated Benko with their disguise, were just discussing where they would go at night. On the greatest island, farther from the middle, a stout warrior had dug himself in. The warrior had on an impenetrable tasselled cuirass, on his head a broken top, his helmet, and under his right muscle an umbrella, his mace, all, according to the tradition, had emerged from the Kupa. The warrior was the guarantee that the island was theirs,

the challenge to the hordes on the other bank, who killed him under the cover of the night, but they sent a new one as soon as it dawned, continuing the inherited vow of generations and leading the fierce war for two months. Throwing glances at the »grannie«, so they called him, the warrior on the island, both male and female, Benko felt his stare touching him beneath the tuft of grass. For that reason he shivered. His whole body shook like an aspen-leaf. The excitement came from the knowledge that the warrior was alive, and look, he winked and let him know that he was awake, and steady, and that he watched over the willow thickets, over the rafts under the houses above the pits between the currents, over the awry roofs, fences, supports, over the boats in shallow places and over the gardens on the slopes, over everything, all those bights, bays, lagoons, and Benko, overflowing into the calm around himself, would like that nothing moved or changed, that the moment stayed, when he was alone, with the line thrown into the current, enjoying the happiest happy world. After having got rid of the weights of time and space, near the siestas in yards, corridors which grinned with Jurek Cmok, or played at other card-games with half-litres under porches and trees, wiping out the poor everyday street, Benko kneaded whatever he pleased, into what he liked, and how he liked it, and wanted that from what was in him at the moment there was just nothing necessarily out of him, that there was indeed nothing outside him, and although he was ashamed, or wanted to be ashamed, that thus so he betrayed mum and dad, and the boys, his flesh creeping because he might do so, without turning, he sat down on the powerful carpet.

Translated by Branko Brusar

ZIVKO JELIČIĆ

## Les Jardins Suspendus

**ELLES SONT dans le jardin** — j'ai attrapé dans l'oreille le chuchotement de Jerko. J'ai couru derrière lui, à petits sauts, sans respirer, mais je n'ai pas réussi à dominer le tremblement qui m'a pris à sa voix: on l'aurait dite parcourue de fibrilles de sang et les fibres éclataient une à une, se dissolvaient dans le sable en grosses gouttes rouges. Oh, si on pouvait allonger les lèvres en bec et les picorer comme ça, en sautillant! Elles sont dans le jardin. Nous les avons surprises devant notre petite maison: elles déplaçaient des briques par terre. La fenêtre de Tonka la tubard était fermée. Une branche de tamaris grenait: j'ai gardé les yeux dessus tandis que Dobrila baissait le tête par terre. Elle se tenait accroupie et elle hachait de la verdure avec un bout de verre. Son ombre s'est glissée comme un lézard dans la petite gouttière de la nuque, follette. Anka avait mis les poings sur les hanches, menaçante: **On a rien à faire cuire, on se taille si vous rapportez rien de la chasse, mais hein, surtout pas des mille-pattes, ça fait puer des mains. — Regarde** — dit Jerko en tirant de sa poche le bout supérieur d'une cigarette. **Laisse-ça, laisse-ça, faut arranger la maison, apporter de l'eau, vous êtes encore là, en avant, marche** — Anka attrapa une baguette et en se tortillant de tout son corps, elle s'approcha de nos jambes nues. Dobrila riait mais sans lever les yeux de terre. J'eus honte de ses longs bras qui étaient pliés aux coudes, ceux-ci piqués comme des becs dans le vide pendant qu'elle tapait sur la brique avec son bout de verre. Nous sautions la baguette avec laquelle Anka fouettait le sol. J'enviais Jerko. Nous avons couru le long du sentier, sauté le buisson, débouché dans le pré. Dobrila, quand elle se lève, démonte ses jambes l'une après l'autre, comme le photographe les pattes de son appareil. Elle a honte de ses grandes incisives, elle tire toujours sur sa lèvre pour les couvrir, et quand elle rit, elle baisse la tête sur sa poitrine. Jerko tira du buisson nos outils de chasse. J'ai défait la corde, j'ai fait un lasso, et j'ai galopé