

Lela B. Njatin: A Night in Ljubljana

as i turn the key in the lock i can't feel the springs give way. in the bunch of keys hooked onto the same ring i press in my palm this one is the lightest, aluminium. there seems to be no resistance in the lock when i turn it. the door is locked, but it can be unlocked as if one were drilling with look into thought, neither one nor the other has any real weight, and when they meet, the distinction between them is hardly noticeable as they have no shape, no colour, no density, one can only feel they exist, and that the look is piercing through the thought. and more often than not it is the thought that gives way, and the look remains somewhat suspended in the air.

when i press down the handle, the door opens. for a few moments the aluminium key sticks out of the bunch in my fist like a feather-light miniature shark which, with a single toothed jaw, is waiting to snatch its prey; when i close the door behind me after i enter, i appease it, i put it back into the lock and leave it there, hanging off the spring hook along with the others. while it is firmly clasped in the lock, the others, like worthless corpses, dangle for some time, just like the chain i fix in the slot above the lock a moment later.

without turning on the light i let the bag fall on the floor by the door, bend over and take off my shoes. the hall is filled with heat which immediately laurels my forehead with beads of sweat. the paint smells of burning. i walk to the windows, open them, leaving the blinds lowered, i only turn the metal bars and they make a squeaking

noise after having been motionless for months, left to the mercy of the sun and the rain.

it's just as hot outside. the heat rushes through the blinds into the flat, i feel it on the sweaty forehead like a whiff of gentle breeze, but a moment later the air is still again, humidity spreads into the rooms, sticking to walls like suffocating slime. it penetrates my shirt, my trousers, permeates the upholstered seat of the chair which i sit on, saturates the table cloth on the table which i rest my elbows on and, with the dust caught into its texture, forms a gauze-like web sticking to my fingers.

through the grid of the blinds i look at the town, the building across blocks the view, it's dark, the open windows gape at me like burns, they're darker than the facade, behind it there's another rampart of buildings, with fiery hollows staring out; some of the tiny eyes are illuminated, and i gaze over there in search of human figures. the night is thick, it intensifies the heat with its substance, and the people inside are motionless, burnt by the hotness of the day, inert like running sores splitting up with every move, exuding pus in the summer of stifled acts, sediments of desiccated desires and deposits of stale aspirations.

the night out there doesn't emit any sounds, i can hear it pulsate like the swelling pouches of frogs dug in the mud from the period of chaotic time, not articulated to the measure of man, but impregnated by human thirst. the adventures people have prescribed for them in this season are being swallowed up by the heat. the dark

sky is tailored to fit the endless farewells made to shattered plans. i'm calmed by the impotence of my fellow-burghers - when the temperature of their bodies is defeated by the temperature of the environment - to capture the fleeing time and draw it into the mills of their vanity. whenever i return in such weather i feel fine. only then do i feel that i'm not here because i was ordered to be.

i sit still until all the patches of my skin showing from under the clothing are covered in drops of sweat as if sprinkled with the finest shower. i shake them off, walking through the flat: the fridge, switched off, with the door ajar, the armchairs covered in sheets, the bed made, the carpet rolled, the phone with the answering machine switched off, the fuses unscrewed, a pair of tongs in the sink by the valve ... i first plug in the radio, so that the lights on the panel light up and i can hear music from afar, but i immediately give it up. the silence of the night is more pleasant.

i look through the window once more, this time across the neighbouring buildings. behind them is a wooded hill, behind it more houses. in a house, far away, in another town at the other end of the globe, where it is day now, is boštjan. a traveller like me, he must never cross the border separating night from day, the change of time must be experienced on a single spot, when you die without expiring. boštjan, tomaž, another tomaž before him, ivo and i - dashing like comets leaving behind a trail of expectations, rushing towards knowledge, trying to overtake the moment of our death, sick of evasive answers

we find refuge where there are no more questions. while the people in the towns of our lives speak of us: "they're gone", we, in the places we inhabit, appear in the windows of houses. they see us, but never ask who we are, where we are from, what we do, where we are going; we are images framed by the windows of neighbouring buildings which, even more often than we appear in them, remain empty. we stage up stories in fragments, too unpretentious to tell a story.

which window should i stand in: kitchen? bedroom? i stay where i am, in the kitchen. i pull the string of the blinds, it's all greasy from the air, for most of the year the only occupant of the place, motionless, thick, giving in to pressure, smooth, waxy. when i pull the string, the blinds squeak, the sound rebounds from the opposite wall to me, and back again. the charred hollows in it gape, and nothing disturbs the evenness of the light penetrating here and there. i lean on the window-sill and poke my head out: the night remains still. as if the people were resting with their backs against the world.

now i switch the lights on. in the kitchen the table stands just below the window, the people living opposite can't see it. the other time boštjan and i shouted at each other, fighting for the table to attract the glances of the people, to imprint ourselves in their consciousness as something that exists, and thus get an excuse for them to keep us in their midst. when i'm alone, it's harder.

a stream of sweat pours down the nape of my neck, i feel moisture between my breasts. i lean above the table and smoothen a crease running down the middle of the cloth like a trace of resistance

to the iron. the surface of the table is smooth, the cloth feels slippery under my fingers. i cling to the edge and mount the table, knees first, in a co-ordinated movement i remain there squatting, take hold of the post. i lean out, my shirt sticking to the torso with the liquid squeezed from me by the heat, and remain dangling. the building across echoes as if it were dead. i turn my head, and steer my gaze along the pool of houses; it stumbles on no eye.

then i let go.

propelled towards the asphalt of the bottom of city
indifference, with the corner of my eye, through the drop of sweat on the lash, in the numb night i catch a glimpse of a tiny red dot - the burning end of a cigarette in the window across.

Translated from Slovene by Lili Potpara