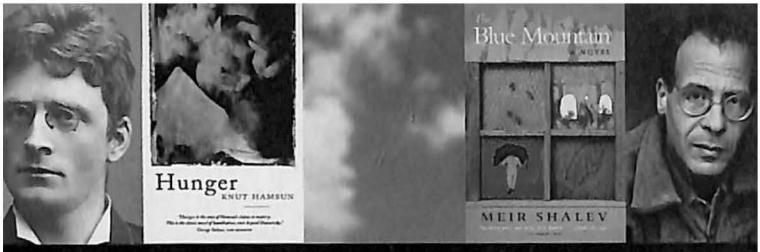

CANONGATE INTERNATIONAL SAMPLER

'The omens for translated fiction look more promising at present than for decades past.'
BOYD TONKIN, Literary Editor of *The Independent*

Canongate International was launched two years ago out of a growing desire to make more translated fiction available to British readers. With a few notable exceptions, of which Harvill, Faber & Faber, Granta and Serpent's Tail are the most significant, the majority of British publishers have tended to neglect the extraordinary riches available from abroad, and we felt it was time to begin redressing the balance.

We are delighted to present you with some selections from the list – a diverse mixture of contemporary work and acknowledged classics. Alongside extracts from such highly-acclaimed novels as Antoni Libera's *Madame* and the Persian classic *The Blind Owl*, are illuminating articles on, and by, some of the writers we have worked with. The sampler also includes Paul A[illegible] Hamsun's ground-breaking f[illegible]

We will always try to pu[illegible] translation; and we hope this

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CANONGATE INTERNATIONAL SAMPLER

JENS-CHRISTIAN GRØNDAHL; *back cover, from left:* KNUT HAMSUN, MEIR SHALEV. *Design by* JAMES HUTCHESON & MARK STANTON

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CANONGATE

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FOREWORD

The people who will be able to advance the universal conversation . . . will be those who are able to bring hitherto untold stories, along with new ways of telling.

CHINUA ACHEBE

THE GREAT NIGERIAN writer, Chinua Achebe, captures one of storytelling's key possibilities when he writes, in his inspiring book of essays, *Home and Exile*, about the need for universal conversation. It's a sentiment that every publisher, bookseller and reader should take to heart. For crossing borders, breaking down prejudice, opening up new ways of seeing and understanding the world and all that inhabits it are essential planks for building a truly sane global society.

Writing in translation fuels the universal conversation and thankfully, as Boyd Tonkin describes in his illuminating introduction, it seems to be undergoing some sort of resurgence in Britain right now. Why it hasn't always been more to the fore has never ceased to surprise us because our culture has been enriched for centuries by outside influences. And the sheer quality of international writing makes the majority of novelists

coming out of our alarmingly dominant language seem dull and unimaginative by comparison.

For sure, publishing in translation is fraught with added complications and challenges. In what is an increasingly impatient industry, one in which quick gains too often are preferred over lasting quality, time is always an issue. And publishing translations unquestionably takes more time. With most British and American editors being monolingual, we have to rely on outside readers to assess a work. Once the book is acquired a suitable translator then needs to be commissioned. Then the much undervalued art of translation needs time to flourish. Usually a three-way dialogue is had between editor, translator and author through which the translation is fine-tuned. Finally the book needs to go out and compete with all the other books that are being published. It's a gestation period that some would regard as being unjustifiably long when set against the returns that book might bring.

Simultaneously there has been a disturbing tendency amongst most booksellers to believe that people in this country don't want to read fiction in translation. The danger is that this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, one which has led to translated novels not being well supported by publishers, literary editors and booksellers, despite

there being numerous instances of 'foreign' novels selling in large quantities and against the odds. This is simplifying a complicated issue but the fact remains that blind and, quite often, indefensible justifications have been made that have perpetuated the myth and restricted the range and quality of what we read.

Fiction is the ultimate form for exploring new ways of telling and has an extraordinary capacity to transcend time and place. Or, as Ralph Ellison memorably ended his magnificent novel, *Invisible Man*; 'Who knows but that on the lower frequencies I speak for you?'

What this sampler sets out to do is offer you what we hope are appetising snippets from some of the wonderful writers in translation that we are publishing at Canongate, alongside some other fascinating pieces. And if they don't speak for you, we certainly hope they speak to you. For universal conversation has never been more needed than in these difficult and troubled times in which we currently live.

We would like to thank the fine novelists and translators who have worked with us over the past few years, some of whom also generously gave of their time to write contributions for this volume. Thanks also to Boyd Tonkin and to Gavin Wallace of the Scottish Arts Council who

has shown tremendous enthusiasm and support for Canongate International.

Judy Moir, Editorial Director
Jamie Byng, Publisher
March 2002

INTRODUCTION

Boyd Tonkin

In Britain, 2002 began with a sensational literary discovery. Critics tumbled over themselves to praise a newly launched author who enjoyed none of the usual attributes of sudden fame. He was not young, nor good-looking, nor blessed with a million-dollar advance or a famous family. Oprah had not invited him onto her show, nor had he turned her down.

Worse, this improbable star didn't have the courtesy to write in English and (to cap it all) he insisted on staying quite as dead as he had been since 1989. Yet every wise head agreed that the appearance in English of *Embers*, written by the Hungarian novelist Sandor Marai in the 1940s, set a standard for the literary year that few merely breathing authors could ever hope to match.

Who says that the British will never make a fuss of fiction in translation, and so there's no point in providing them with it? Given a great book and a supportive trade and media, a defunct melancholy Magyar can knock every glossy, well-connected newcomer out of the literary headlines. Tell the public just why a translated novel demands their time and cash, and readers will rise to the challenge. Bury

fiction from a foreign tongue under dull packaging, poor distribution and that baleful air of 'worthy but dull', and indifference will breed only more indifference. A lazy assumption in the book trade that British readers remain 'insular' in their fiction-buying tastes has become, I now believe, the biggest single factor in sustaining that insularity. Show us why we ought to care, and we'll respond.

In fact, the omens for translated fiction look more promising at present than for decades past. Marai has not been the only linguistic stranger to claim, and win, some serious renown of late on this supposedly introspective island. Tragically, W. G. Sebald – East Anglia's own expatriate master of German prose – died in December shortly after *Austerlitz* had brought his unforgettably moving explorations of the European past to a wider audience. Last year's Macallan Gold Dagger for crime writing went not to some home-grown whodunnit but to Henning Mankell, and his engagingly gloomy Swedish sleuth Inspector Wallander. A little earlier, the latest pan-Pacific saga by the Chilean-born Isabel Allende – *Portrait in Sepia* – rode high in the charts for many weeks. *Sputnik Sweetheart* brought the Japanese virtuoso Haruki Murakami, arguably the world's coolest living novelist, to a fresh British readership of cultural trend-setters and trend-surfers. And, as 2001 closed, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, a wry

fable of Mao's Cultural Revolution by the French-exiled Dai Sijie, picked up more recommendations among 'Books of the Year' selectors than many an expensive Anglo-Saxon blockbuster.

Throughout the year, more than 50,000 British readers bought the paperback of *Atomised* by Michel Houellebecq, that scabrous satire on the Sixties generation by the Bad Lad of current French literature. Once immersed in Houellebecq's hippie orgies, few of those readers will have given too much thought to the nuances of Frank Wynne's (rather impressive) translation. Beyond doubt, translators of fiction deserve more respect, recognition and, above all, remuneration than they generally get. Yet their craft, or art, pivots on a paradox. Translation succeeds most when it disappears behind the acclaim its skills bring to the foreign authors that it serves.

Fairly frequently, passionate readers will even forget that a novel they admire has been translated at all. Sometimes, the setting and subject will conspire to hide the process. Hanan Al-Shaykh attracted a lot of well-merited attention recently for her exuberant romance of 'Little Arabia' in Bayswater, *Only in London*. She lives in London, writes shrewdly about the changing city, and belongs firmly inside British culture. Yet Hanan Al-Shaykh remains an Arabic-language novelist and it was her first-rate translator, Catherine Cobham, who made

this unexpected slice of modern British life available to us.

It's not the case that authors themselves want to neglect the often-invisible agents who smuggle their treasures from one language to another. Probably no translated novel by a living writer has enjoyed as many satisfied customers in Britain as *The Name of the Rose*. On one occasion, Umberto Eco suggested that the accomplished English version of his medieval mystery, by William Weaver, might be a finer work of art than his Italian original. Who knows how far Professor Eco's tongue had strayed into his bearded cheek?

After a period of knee-jerk deference to every American fad, translation is starting to flourish again. As I write, more readers will be looking forward with real anticipation to Bernhard Schlink's follow-up to *The Reader*, *Flights of Love*, than to any spring bloom from across the pond. But, in spite of this welcome progress, translation does still need its dedicated champions. Britain, with its privileged instant access to the whole, wide English-speaking world, translates fewer than 3 per cent of published books, compared with 30 per cent-plus in Italy or Spain.

So a few special fanfares can still do much good. Last year, *The Independent* relaunched its unique Foreign Fiction Prize, with generous support from the Arts Council of England. Worth £10,000, shared

equally between author and translator, the award honours an excellent novel by a living writer published in the UK but written in a language other than English. Last year, it went to *The Alphonse Courrier Affair* by Marta Morazzoni (translated by Emma Rose): a slyly humorous, beautifully executed but finally tragic tale of passion and deception in turn-of-the-century rural France. This year's *Independent* prize will be awarded in April, with a shortlist announced in the newspaper early in March.

Enlightened publishers also have a decisive part to play. It's heartening that, at the moment, the giant corporations seem to have begun to take a more consistent interest in translated work. Yet history shows that smaller, bolder firms have done most to stretch the boundaries of world literature for British readers. In recent years, Canongate can boast a particularly proud record. Its translated fiction crosses frontiers of space and time with both audacity and authority.

Akira Yoshimura's *Shipwrecks* carries us back to the seductive myths and harsher truths of a wreckers' village in medieval Japan and is a fine example of translation's power to abolish cultural distances. *Rembrandt's Whore* by Sylvie Matton begins with a more familiar, iconic subject – the artist's career and affairs – but makes it strange and beguiling through a focus on the mind and heart of the resourceful woman who became so much more than a painter's moll and muse. In

Madame, Antoni Libera chooses a superficially dour time and place – Stalinist Warsaw in the 1960s – but transforms it into brilliant colour with his romantic wit and dash. And, in *Love Life*, Zeruya Shalev takes a location that we think we know only too well – Jerusalem today – but then bathes it with the eerie light of erotic obsession.

In a sense, these outstanding writers and others featured in this excellent sampler prove that all distinguished fiction translates one world into another through the alchemy of imagination. Translation out of a foreign tongue merely adds another spell to the uncanny magic of the novelist's art. Whether the translator can, or should, aim for a perfect match with the original text remains a question for the scholars and linguists to chew. Readers in Britain can simply rest assured that the quality of our literary translation stays, by and large, reassuringly high. In an age of greater global contact, and global consciousness, than ever before, the fiction of an entire planet is knocking on our door and pleading for access. Open the book, and listen to its voices.

January 2002

Boyd Tonkin is literary editor of The Independent

An extract from

MADAME

Antoni Libera
Translated from the Polish
by Agnieszka Kolakowska

Madame la Directrice

ON A SOMEWHAT Lenten menu, that was the daily bread of our school, the figure of the headmistress occupied a prominent position. Or, rather, not so much the headmistress herself as the elaborate tangle of surmise and speculation that grew up around her person.

The headmistress appeared rather late on the scene – just as we were entering the sixth form – and taught French. She was a very good-looking woman of thirty-odd, and the contrast between her and the other teachers – a grey, boring and embittered lot, of whom the best that could be said was that they were nondescript – was a striking one. She was always well dressed, in clothes whose quality and cut made it immediately apparent that they were of Western manufacture; on her well-cared-for hands she wore a discreet number of elegant rings. Her face was

carefully made-up, and her chestnut hair, cut short and styled by a skilful hand to display her long, graceful neck, was smooth and glossy. Her deportment and manners were impeccable; and there wafted about her, in delicious waves, the intoxicating aura of good French perfume. At the same time she gave off an icy kind of chill.

Beautiful and cold, splendid and unapproachable, proud and merciless – this was our headmistress. The Ice Queen.

Her arrival threw the school into a turmoil, and for a number of reasons. Her appearance and behaviour alone would have been enough; the senior teachers eyed her with suspicion and were a little afraid of her, while the younger lot either were jealous – of her looks, her clothes and her position – or tried to insinuate themselves into her good graces. But there was also a rumour, spread soon after she came, that she was planning a radical reform of the school, and planning it for the very near future. The alleged aim was to make the school into an early outpost of a new educational experiment: to use a foreign language – in this case, of course, French – as the language of instruction. Her efforts in this direction were said to be well advanced; some thought the change might even take place with the beginning of the next school year.

This prospect, on the face of it so beneficial, sewed

terror throughout the school. For most of the teachers, some of whom had been there for years, it augured inevitable departure: in an experimental outpost of this kind, all subjects except history and literature had to be taught in both Polish and the other language simultaneously, and so they would have to be not merely fluent in the latter but capable of teaching in it as well. And for the pupils the thought of having to learn everything in two languages conjured up nightmares.

Another element in the consternation caused by the coming of Madame la Directrice was the disquieting tangle of emotions she stirred in the hearts of the students. At first – almost at first sight – she inspired an instinctive affection, bordering on worship; she was like something not quite of this world, a goddess who by some miracle had stepped down to earth from Olympus. Then her coldness, her superciliousness and her peremptory ways began to make themselves felt, sometimes painfully, and the enthusiasm waned somewhat. The ensuing disappointment, however, transformed itself not into hostility or a thirst for revenge, but into something quite different: a classic case of sado-masochistic love, fuelled by humiliation and pain on the one hand and images of filth and violence on the other.

In other words, worship of the headmistress continued, but in a very particular form. In secret she

was the object of fervent prayers, in which all past cruelties and humiliations were forgiven; in public – in the lavatories, in corners of the school-yard – of coarse ale-house gossip and obscene and brutal fantasies. These acts of sacrilege, in which the object of worship was verbally humiliated and abused beyond all bounds of shame, helped to deaden the stings of unrequited love, but they were also degrading to the desecrators themselves, so that, when they returned to their inner sanctuary to prostrate themselves before their idol, they paid for their profanities with further pain and self-inflicted torment.

It was some time, however, before we experienced for ourselves the stifling atmosphere of heated passions generated by Madame la Directrice, for when she first came she did not teach our class; all this was gossip and hearsay that filtered down to us from other classes. I myself was too busy with theatre at the time to pay much attention. It wasn't until I abandoned my extra-curricular activities that I became interested.

The main topic of discussion in school was, of course, Madame's private life. This was a fertile and highly rewarding subject of speculation, for Madame la Directrice was unmarried. How, when and by whom this fact had been established no one knew, but it was considered incontrovertible. And indeed she wore no wedding ring, had never been seen in

the company of a man who might have been her husband, and had never once, it was claimed, mentioned her family – an eloquent omission, for all the teachers spoke of their families at some point, for one reason or another. And then there was something the Tapeworm had allegedly let slip: on one occasion, carried away on a stream of effusive praise for her talents, her energy and her organisational abilities, he is supposed to have added, 'And her lack of family ties, too, is important, for it allows her to devote herself entirely to her work here at school.' In short, we devoted most of our time to a minute analysis of the implications of the headmistress's single state. The permutations were endless.

She was unmarried, yes . . . but was she single or divorced? (The possibility of widowhood was not even considered.) And if divorced, who had her husband been and why had they separated? Had she left him or had he left her? And if she had been the one to leave, why had she left? Incompatibility? Of habits, of temperament? Was he too macho or too much of a wimp? Or perhaps they had split up because of someone else. Was there someone else? Had he found someone or had she? How, where? And so on and so forth. We went over every conceivable possibility.

But if she was single . . . ah, then the possibilities were even more exciting. Single, and thirty years old.

No, over thirty! Could she still be a virgin? Hard to believe. So when was the first time? Where, and with whom? When she was at university? During the holidays? In a student dormitory? Unlikely. Well, then, perhaps in more luxurious surroundings – in some hotel, or a suite of rooms, or an elegant apartment? And what about now? How often does she do it? And what's the arrangement? Is she living in sin with one person? Or is it a series of brief encounters, each time with someone new? In other words, does she sleep around? And isn't she worried about getting pregnant? Does she take precautions? What are they? *Dear God, what are they?*

Born in 1949, ANTONI LIBERA is a literary critic, translator and theatre director, noted especially for his collaborative work with Samuel Beckett. *Madame* is his first novel and has just been shortlisted for the IMPAC Award, 2002.

Born 1960 in Poland, brought up in England, educated at Yale and Cambridge, AGNIESZKA KOLAKOWSKA has translated works from Polish and French into English, and works as a freelance editor and journalist.

THIS TRANSLATION BUSINESS

Magnus Magnusson KBE

Traduttore traditore
(The translator is a traducer)

It's a chilling Italian proverb: but anyone who has ever struggled with the business of translation knows what a cruel business it can be, both for the translator *and* for the author of the original; indeed, I sometimes wonder whether translation is ever justifiable, whether it is ever worth the effort – whether, indeed it is ever *fair* on the author to attempt to transmute his or her thoughts into an alien language. I am constantly haunted by the withering reply which Robert Graves is alleged to have made to an eager young fellow who had sent him a selection of translations he had made from an obscure Spanish poet, in the hope of soliciting from the Great Man a foreword for a Slim Volume. Robert Graves replied: 'If the poems were really as bad as this in the original, why did you think them worth translating?'

After all, as translators we are dealing with the greatest aspirations of the mind. As Gustave Flaubert put it so superbly in his *Carnets* (as translated by

T. S. Eliot): 'Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars with pity.'

Translation, I fear, can offer only a meagre equivalent, only a tinny echo, of the majesty of a great original: traducing indeed, however unintentional.

Benjamin Jowett, the omniscient nineteenth-century classical scholar and Master of Balliol College, Oxford, opined in the Introduction to his translation of *The Dialogues of Plato*: 'Experience has made me feel that a translation, like a picture, is dependent for its effect on very minute touches, and that it is a work of infinite pains, to be returned to in many moods and viewed in different lights.'

It is a constant compromise between the struggle to be literal and the effort to be idiomatic. As Voltaire once said, 'A faithful translation, like a faithful woman, is very seldom beautiful.' So why do it?

A long time ago, right at the outset of what I might loosely call my translating career, I was given some kindly advice by Dr E. V. Rieu, the founder editor of the Penguin Classics series who contributed his own classic translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. I had written to him, brashly, in the 1950s, suggesting that he commission a translation of *Njál's Saga*, no less, mightiest of all the medieval Icelandic

Sagas. He wrote back to say that he had never really considered the Icelandic Sagas worthy of inclusion in his Penguin Classics series, but that he had an open mind – and would I care to send a synopsis and a few sample chapters?

I tackled *Njál's Saga* like a berserk in a fury of patriotic zeal, and within days I had some chapters winging their way to London, as well as a synopsis almost as long as the saga itself. A month went by – and then came *The Letter*. Yes, he said, you have persuaded me. You say you can do it in a year? Is that long enough? Why not take two years?

And then, in his meticulous, spidery handwriting (he never dictated his letters or used a typewriter), came his piece of advice: 'Do your translation – but do it *con amore*, and not *con labore*.' Dr Rieu was right. It did indeed take me two years, slaving away over my old Olivetti every evening: I was working as a reporter on the old *Scottish Daily Express* in those days, and I consoled myself with the specious thought that the discipline of translation would save my 'literary style' from the seductive temptations of journalese.

It was certainly hard work, but it was essentially a labour of love: *con amore* as well as *con labore*. I was determined that *Njál's Saga* should be made available in a 'modern' translation, not in the consciously archaic style which earlier translators like Sir George

Dasent and William Morris had favoured. It seemed to me axiomatic that today's readers should find it as contemporary as the original thirteenth-century audience in Iceland had found it – for them it was not some quaintly crabbed relic of the past but a living, topical and profoundly relevant historical novel.

And when that first *magnum opus* was completed, with the help of my friend and collaborator Hermann Pálsson (now professor emeritus at Edinburgh University), I thought I should have a go at that other monumental figure of Icelandic letters, Halldór Laxness (1902–98), who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955.

Only three of his novels had been translated into English by the late 1950s – and that, I felt, was not good enough. Despite the Nobel Prize, despite the *succès d'estime* in the United States of the 1946 translation of his epic *Independent People*, Laxness was still almost unknown to English-speaking readers. Why? I developed a theory that English-speaking readers were only interested in Great Power literature – American, French, Russian, German and, as a recent development, Japanese. A Nobel prize-winner from a remote island in the North Atlantic, like Halldór Laxness, would be given a grave notice in *The Times* and other 'quality' newspapers, but only a couple of lines in the tabloids – if that.

It's time to change all that, I said to myself with the arrogant certainty of youth. I wrote to Laxness's current English publishers, Methuen, asking if they would be interested in publishing another Laxness, and suggesting *The Atom Station* as eminently digestible fare for the English-speaking world. Methuen said yes, and I set to work.

The Atom Station, published in 1948, was a satire on post-war Icelandic politics. Laxness had taken as his theme the huge nationalistic controversy about Iceland's role in the Cold War: Iceland's politicians, it was bitterly alleged, were conspiring to 'sell' their country to the Americans for a crock of gold in the shape of a NATO airbase. The narrator was one of Laxness's wonderfully sane (but romantic) down-to-earth women, a young girl from the north who comes to the capital to work as a housemaid in the Reykjavík home of her MP, the worldly, world-weary cabinet minister Búi Árland. It was not, to my mind, a *political* novel at all; it was a novel of national pride, as well as a sustained attack on the chicanery and rootlessness of the new urban culture of the intellectual society of the capital. In *The Atom Station*, Laxness introduced the first of the quiet, unselfish, undogmatic philosophers (the organist) who would create a centre of stillness and gravity in many of his subsequent novels.

Nevertheless, I must have been mad. I was still

a complete tyro in the translating business. My command of modern Icelandic was extremely shaky. But I was learning. And I had fallen in love with *The Atom Station*. Once again, translation would be *con amore* as well as *con labore*. I was in love with the heroine of the novel, Ugla – the owl, Athena's bird of wisdom; like Ugla, I was half in love with the cabinet minister Búi Árland, who thought he found in her fresh integrity and beauty his own belated salvation. And I was also in love with the quiet organist who accepted the world as it was but ultimately made his contribution to changing it for the one person whose genuineness he admired – Ugla.

The translation was well received, and was also published in America. I had not contacted Laxness except through his agent for permission to translate – I was not sure, then, about the proprieties of the relationship between author and translator – but he sent me a brief note of thanks and congratulation when it was published. From then on, to my intense pleasure, he would refer to me as 'my fine translator in Britain'.

The 1960s were my decade of translation, if I may so call it. With my friend Hermann Pálsson I was translating other Icelandic Sagas for Penguin Classics. And in between I was producing more translations of Halldór Laxness, culminating with his formidable tetralogy *World Light* (1969), the saga of an obscure

folk-poet who passes his life in an extraordinary dream-world of optimism, suffering, ridicule and persecution in his quest for truth and beauty in an ugly and deceitful world.

Then, after the 1960s, the translations dried up. Other preoccupations (particularly television) and other demands on my time kept getting in the way. But now, in carpet-slippered retirement, I have returned to my early love, translating more Icelandic Sagas and modern Icelandic fiction like Einar Kárason's *Devils' Island* (Canongate, 2000).

Is it worth it? Does the *con amore* outweigh the *con labore*? Of course it does! I like to think that as a result of my imperfect labours of love, people have been introduced to a significant literature to which they might otherwise not have had access. The Icelandic Sagas are now accepted as one of the greatest achievements of European medieval literature. And Halldór Laxness is at last becoming recognised in Britain as one of the truly great European novelists of the twentieth century: *Independent People*, and a revised version of my translation of *The Fish Can Sing*, have just been reissued by the Harvill Press, and Random House in the States are reissuing my translation of his *Paradise Reclaimed* and *World Light*.

And that is justification and reward enough.

January 2002

MAGNUS MAGNUSSON KBE translated *Devils' Island* with David MacDuff (a translator of many Scandinavian and Russian classics). He has also translated several Icelandic Sagas and five novels by Halldór Laxness.

An extract from

SHIPWRECKS

Akira Yoshimura

Translated from the Japanese by Mark Ealey

On the Salt Cauldrons

ISAKU LIFTED HIS bundle of dry branches onto his back and started off down the path. The sea was growing angry under the bright red sky. Whitecaps surged in, and breakers smashed onto the shore and the cape. The onset of winter was usually marked by four days of rough seas followed by two of calm; the past three days' heavy seas had made fishing impossible. Rocks were exposed everywhere along the path, and Isaku struggled to keep from toppling forward under the weight of his load.

The roofs of the houses came into view. Isaku's mother was standing beside the back door, waving at him to hurry. She seemed to have something urgent to tell him. Using a stick to keep his balance, he stepped down behind the house.

'A messenger came, saying the village chief wants to see you. Get up there right away,' his mother said hurriedly.

Isaku had seen the village chief, but he had never spoken to him and so had no idea why he was being summoned.

'Hurry up!' said his mother, taking his load off his back, something unheard-of for her, and giving him a good slap on the back to send him on his way. Isaku scampered off along the track. The reddish tinge to the sky was fading, and the sea was beginning to darken. The shore was wet from the waves.

He ran along the path and on up some stone steps. The old man who worked for the village chief's family was collecting grain which had been spread out on a straw mat.

Isaku entered the house and sat down, bowing deeply. The village chief was sitting beside the fireplace. Isaku introduced himself in a trembling voice, his knees shaking from the foreboding that he was about to be scolded for some offence.

'Starting tonight you're out on the salt cauldrons. It'll be your first night, so go out with Kichizo and get him to show you the ropes. After that you're on your own. Don't let the fires go out.' The village chief had a thin, high-pitched voice like a child's. Isaku bowed deeply, until his forehead touched the ground.

'Off you go.'

Still kneeling, Isaku shuffled back towards the entrance, stood up and left.

His face flushed with excitement as the tension disappeared. The order to work through the night on the salt cauldrons meant that he was recognised as an adult. Ever since he had been allowed to help with the cremation he had felt that this might happen, but knowing that it was actually about to come to pass filled him with irrepressible joy. He ran back along the shoreline path to his house. By now the sky was dusky grey.

He left the house carrying a flaming torch in his hand. When his mother heard that he had been ordered to watch over the fires under the cauldrons, she had become unusually cheerful and had pan-roasted beans for him to eat during the night. The torch flame flickered in the wind. He left the path and went down to the shore. He could see the colour of the fire ahead of him on the beach and sensed that someone was there.

He picked up his step. The man's good eye was trained on Isaku. The other was pale and cloudy, having long since lost its glint. Isaku was indeed fortunate to have Kichizo, who was on good terms with Isaku's father, initiating him.

Large stones had been arranged in two spots on the sandy area of the beach to serve as a base for the two big cauldrons. The wood under one of them had already been lit.

'Light that one, too,' said Kichizo, looking towards the second big pot, which was about ten yards away on the beach. Isaku responded eagerly, pulling out a bundle of dried branches from under a straw mat, swinging it onto his back, and carrying it over to the other cauldron. He put the branches into the stone enclosure and lit them with a burning piece of wood. The twigs and branches crackled as they lit. Isaku placed more wood on the fire.

Flames rose from under the two cauldrons, flickering in the wind off the sea as sparks scattered on the sand. Isaku watched the flames as he sat next to Kichizo on a log inside a makeshift wooden hut.

Several years earlier, Kichizo had been afflicted with an eye disease which had left him unable to go out fishing, forcing him to sell his wife into bondage for three years. She came back to the village after she finished her term working at the port at the southern tip of the island, but, as she was almost six months late returning from bondage, Kichizo suspected that she must have taken up with another man.

Whether it was true or not was unknown, but there were rumours among the villagers that she had had a child and had extended her term in order to clean up the matter.

Kichizo had beaten her violently, and in a fit of rage he even cut off her hair. On such occasions, when she had fled sobbing to Isaku's house, his father and

mother had intervened. Kichizo had stopped beating his wife only after the village chief stepped in and admonished him severely. After that he had become a sullen man of few words. Often at night he used to visit Isaku's house, sometimes bringing wine made from millet. He would sit there silently, nodding as he listened to Isaku's father's fishing stories.

'You know why we make salt on the beach, don't you?' said Kichizo, his good eye trained on Isaku.

One year's supply of salt would be produced and then distributed according to the size of each family. But Isaku realised that there was another reason for Kichizo's odd question.

'It's to summon *O-fune-sama*, isn't it?' he said, looking Kichizo in the face. Kichizo said nothing, turning his eye back to the cauldrons. From his expression, Isaku sensed that his reply had not satisfied the man.

Isaku thought the village chief's order meant that he had to know all about tending the salt cauldrons. There was much he didn't understand about the village rituals, but now that he was an adult he could no longer afford to remain ignorant. After tonight he would have to tend the fires under the cauldrons by himself, so he needed to get Kichizo to tell him everything.

'Is it to pray for *O-fune-sama* to come in to the shore?' he asked.

'It's not just for praying. It's to attract ships passing the beach,' said Kichizo impatiently.

'To attract ships?'

'That's right. When the north-west winds start to blow, the seas get rough and more ships get into trouble. At night when the waves start to wash over the decks, they'll even throw cargo overboard to lighten the ship. At times like that, a crew will see the light from the cauldron fires and think it is from houses on the shore. Then they turn the ships in towards the coast.'

Kichizo's good eye gleamed as if he were studying Isaku. Isaku stared at Kichizo before turning to the sea. He could just make out where the starry night sky met the dark water. A vast and intricate reef lay concealed under the surface of the water. When they went out fishing, the village men would thread their little boats through the rocks, but a large vessel entering these waters would be sure to have its bottom ripped open in no time.

Isaku thought that he was finally starting to understand. He had assumed that the salt cauldrons were part of a ritual carried out in the hope that ships would be wrecked, but now he realised that it was also the means to lure ships onto the reef.

If gathering salt were the only purpose, then doing it during the daylight hours would be far more convenient, but now he understood why it was done only

at night. Also, it was clear to him why the fires were not lit on calm nights; ships would have no problems navigating then.

'The fire's dying down,' said Kichizo, getting to his feet.

Isaku stood up and followed Kichizo, picking up a bundle of firewood from beneath the straw mats. He went over to the cauldron on the right and threw the wood underneath.

It is said that sailors in distress during a dark, stormy night will do absolutely anything to survive. They will throw their cargo overboard, cut off their hair and pray to the gods for protection and, if the ship seems in real danger of capsizing, they will even cut down the masts to keep it stable. To them the fires under the cauldrons on the beach might very well appear to be the lights from houses on the shore. No doubt they would think their prayers had been answered and turn their ship in towards the fires.

The wood was engulfed in flames.

When Isaku returned to the little hut, Kichizo sat down on the log and piled up dry twigs and branches on the sand. He lit them and put on some firewood. Isaku warmed his hands over the fire. The chill in the air suddenly intensified.

'These fires will bring in *O-fune-sama*, won't they?' said Isaku with a sparkle in his eyes as he looked at Kichizo.

Kichizo nodded. 'Not these last few years, but when they do come they come one after another. When I started going out fishing with your father, they came four years in a row. When I was eleven, we had three in one winter. All because of these fires. In those days no one had to sell themselves into bondage,' he said in a low voice.

Isaku thought that Kichizo was so unusually talkative because he felt at ease with his friend's son. Even though he had lost the sight of one eye, if *O-fune-sama* had come he would not have had to sell his wife into bondage and their marriage would not have been ruined.

Isaku gazed out to sea. He thought of Tami, Senkichi's third daughter. The eldest daughter had already been sold, and now there were rumours about the next daughter going into bondage. If there was no bounty from the sea in the next few years, Tami would undoubtedly follow.

Isaku became restless. If a ship had been lured onto the reef, his father would not have had to sell himself, either. The lives of the villagers hinged on the coming of *O-fune-sama*.

'We make salt this way to ensure the fires don't go out and to get *O-fune-sama* to come.' Kichizo's eye gleamed red with the flames from the fire.

'I wonder if it'll come this winter.' Isaku looked out to sea.

'Who knows? When the wind starts to blow from the north-west, they get scared and the ships on the offshore run don't go out. But even then, when they've got cargo to carry, they choose a calm day to set sail. Mostly ships carrying rice,' muttered Kichizo.

A wave of drowsiness suddenly hit Isaku as he warmed himself by the fire. His body was numb, and his eyelids started to feel heavy. If he nodded off, no doubt he would be removed from salt-making duty, and his mother would fly into a rage and beat him. The very thought of such disgrace terrified him.

Isaku stood up and ran out of the hut. A chilling wind blew off the sea. He stood on tiptoe and peered into the cauldron. Clouds of steam rose as the salt water boiled away. He checked the fire, then brought over several pieces of firewood and threw them under the cauldron. In a flash his drowsiness had faded.

NOTES OF AN ESCAPIST

Jens Christian Grøndahl

I WAS IN St Petersburg a couple of years ago and read from my novel *Lucca* to a group of students. After the reading, one of them asked, rather fascinated, how it was that Danes could leave their partner and find a new place to live just like that. It wasn't the leaving part that seemed to intrigue her, it was the question of finding an apartment. I suppose that she had no choice but to live with her parents, whether they got along or not. This is possibly the widest gap of understanding I've encountered since being translated into other languages.

The young Russian reminded me that my characters belong to the privileged Western middle classes and have freedom as their major problem rather than the material necessities such as a roof over one's sinful Western head. Our gap of understanding was social rather than cultural. Once married, young Russians may not be able to move out on one another just like that, but I am sure some of them would like to.

Apart from that afternoon in St Petersburg I usually encounter the same questions, in Edinburgh, Amsterdam, New York or Barcelona, and quite often

I struggle to find new, ingenious answers. This probably testifies to my general lack of ingenuity but I also take the recurring questions as a token that somehow people can relate to what I have written, no matter who they are, where they live or which culture they belong to. (We shall see about that, though, when some day I am published in Afghanistan.)

Possibly I talk like this only because I myself belong to that secular, globalised, relentlessly alienating Western middle-class culture which has practically no culture left at all. But I don't think so. I think that I am also touching on what novels are and what they do.

We are constantly being told that people cannot understand one another because of their cultural differences, and these days I have to remind myself all the time that understanding is less about what people can do than about what they are willing to do. As I see it, there would be no novelists in this world without the will at least to give understanding a try, allowing for how much there is to know and how little of it all we shall ever fathom.

If the history of democracy is also the history of the individual and how the notion of self-hood has emerged from the warm, comforting and utterly suffocating embrace of cultural identities, then the novel is a way to tell that story. So many 'Great

Novels' delve into the imaginary or very real chasm between the pressure or indifference of society on the one hand and the thoughts and sensibilities of individuals on the other. So many novels are about individuals taking leave of their homes and kinsmen, despairingly or in an act of rebellion, forced into exile or choosing to exile themselves as a consequence of self-creation. Freedom and despair, loneliness and chance encounters, unlooked-for and sometimes utterly improbable: the novel connects the social sphere and the intimate life of the soul in dramatising their conflicting perspectives, that of culture and that of one's secret fears and obsessions.

It is unbecoming, though, for a writer to generalise too profusely on the blessings of literature, and this is the perfect moment to stop myself. Fiction is nurtured by detail, invoking the life and outlook of this or that specific person. Novels are usually written in the singular, and singularity is their whimsical claim to such a thing as universal truth.

What a writer may have to say about 'The Novel' is usually nothing but a plea for his own personal way of going about it. I am no exception, and my writing has grown out of just one of several modern traditions: that of setting plots aside in favour of introspection, memory, observation and reflection, articulating the adventures of the mind rather than those unwinding out there in Reality. I would concur

with any writer who shares the hunch that nothing is more real than the mind's way of interpreting and responding to the flux of appearances.

My private literary tabernacle hosts an eclectic range of idols who might well grumble at the company they're in since form rather than topic is what brings them together: Marcel Proust, Patrick Modiano, Thomas Bernhard, Saul Bellow, to name a few. What they share in spite of all differences is a penchant for soliloquy, leaving the writing itself to become the vibrant chord stringing thoughts, emotions, impressions, digressions and events together in the narrator's effort to equalise world and self.

Most of them are French, by the way, and none of them is Danish. How come? Perhaps it is easier to point out inspirations which have required an effort. Anyway, I have come to acknowledge that inspiration is often a matter of productive misunderstanding. Obviously, there are Danish masters who whisper in the back of my head, but I don't hear them, so much are they part of the atmosphere I breathe. There is the soft-spoken intimacy and subtle, ironic inversions of perspective in Hans Christian Andersen and his universal way of losing himself in the world of detail. There is the melancholy sensitivity in Herman Bang, a certain mildness of inflection, a hush despair, always so close to his characters that you can hear them breathe in the

silence of their rooms where a clock chips away at eternity.

The living-room and not the world is our stage, for Denmark has spent most of its days on the outskirts of History. We were only grazed by the tragedies of the century now behind us, hence our strangely numb sense of distance between our emotional interiors and the thunderbolts on the horizon. If anything, this is my Danish theme for you, political as well as philosophical. But more often than not my novels could take place in any modern Western society where rigid cultural patterns have given way to the bewildering impermanence of urban life.

This is why becoming translated has been such a redeeming experience. I don't see myself as a particularly Danish writer, European perhaps, but that sounds far too pretentious – especially for a Dane. Escaping labels is any writer's concern, and I am just as touchy as everyone else. 'Escapism' would be the only reliable exception, so please, don't read me for the rustic charms of my exotic 'Danishness'. As the very cosmopolitan yet very Danish poet Henrik Nordbrandt once said, himself a great escapist: 'What's wrong with running away if you can afford the ticket?'

Another major poet has defined poetry as that which is lost in translation. But I am just a storyteller,

and for me it is the other way round. If there isn't something in there that will survive even a lousy translation, I don't think it is worth bothering. Writing in a small language such as mine is really to act out the paradox of the novel, if you will allow me one last generalisation. Most of us write in our mother tongue, and there is an ambition in any novel worth writing or reading to transgress the contingency of one's own kinship, culture, etc. and become recognised – in any sense of that word – for the way you explore the singularity of individual experience.

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An extract from

PERSIAN BRIDES

Dorit Rabinyan
Translated from the Hebrew by Yael Lotan

Miriam Hanoum and Her Daughters

THE SKIN ON the faces of Miriam Hanoum and her daughters was as taut as the animal skin on a tambourine frame. Their black eyebrows were as thick and wild as a young man's hair, and when plucked revealed a greyish forest of needle-pricks. There were no deep fissures like knife-cuts in the soles of their feet, as in the rock-hard soles of the village women, who walked barefoot, letting the dust of the roads and plantations settle in their cracked flesh. Nor did swollen veins run down their thighs like mountain streams.

Miriam Hanoum had learned from her mother Shirin to neglect the house and pamper the body. When her children were still in her womb she took pains with their skin and its odour. She ate citrons, rubbed her belly with powdered myrtle and jasmine oil, and nibbled cinnamon sticks. After they were born she tucked aromatic cloves in their armpits and

in their fat creases, and once a week until they were grown she would smear their bodies with spring-flower honey, which is famous for its fragrance. The children would hide in their room for fear of the bees, and lick their sticky skin with their little tongues. In the evening Miriam Hanoum would bathe them in boiled water, rubbing their limbs with date fibres until they shrieked with pain, and then spread soothing beeswax on their skin. Their cheeks reddened, their weight increased, their sweat smelled sweet. When Shahin Bozidozi left Omerijan, that was the smell he took from the folds of Flora's skin and carried in his wanderings.

About Miriam Hanoum it was said that young men fainted on her wedding night. It was said that even after she had borne Homa and Moussa, and was already carrying Flora in her belly, she was still receiving delayed love-letters from lads threatening to commit suicide if she dared to marry another.

Her daughters were also famous for their beauty. Before Homa fell from the roof and grew the hump on her back that drew mockery in the alleys, the gentile boys would run after her, forelocks flying, paste a loud kiss on her cheek and run away crowing with delight. And when Flora passed by the sesame-oil press of the brothers Nasser and Mansour, the two would come out, their black hair glossy, and dance around her with tiny steps and hungry eyes,

cooing like demented pigeons: '*Baba*, *Baba*, *mashallah*, what a beauty, come to me, *azizam* Flora, come to me . . .'

Miriam Hanoum's house stood between the house of Fathaneh Delkasht and that of Fathaneh's sister Sultana Zafarollah. Fathaneh and Sultana would both peer from their roofs into the Ratoryan house, and their eyes would meet, grinning. When they sent their children to climb on the windows and spy into their neighbour's yard, or when they climbed on chests and cooking pots to get a view of it, Miriam Hanoum would throw things at them and wish them blind. She believed it was only their evil eyes which had caused Homa to fall off the roof, and Flora to be unlucky in her marriage. These witches have been studying the curves of my daughters' breasts since they were olive-sized, she said to Nazie, and in the end the crows will peck out their eyes.

'The day will come,' she warned, 'when Sultana and Fathaneh will crumble a rock with their envious eyes, the foundation of our house will collapse, and their ceilings will fall down too, may God carry them off, and then we shall all die.'

Sultana Zafarollah's husband flew carrier pigeons from the chimneys on his roof, while on the paving stones of Fathaneh Delkasht's garden yard strutted peacocks with staring eyes in their fans. Her husband sold their flesh to gentiles in the village, and

their feathers to gentiles overseas. Like the peacocks, Fathaneh walked about the village in colourful Bokhara gowns, waggling her backside like an outspread fan. Over the almond tree alley hovered the peacock feathers of the Delkasht family, the Zafarollahs' pigeon feathers, and the feathers of the geese and chickens which Miriam Hanoum's husband sold in his butcher shop, and which she used to stuff pillows and quilts.

In their youth the sisters on either side of the low stone walls were friendly to her and let their children mingle with hers, like the feathers in the wind. Fathaneh fed the peacocks their mixed grain, her sister watered the pigeons, and Miriam Hanoum emptied her feather-filled sacks into a steaming pot under the almond trees. The heavier feathers would sink to the bottom and the fine goose down floated to the top. When one of the women was unclean, her neighbours would do the cooking for her, even taking special care with the dishes, so that the diners would say that her hands were blessed, and note how separate her rice grains were and how succulent the meat. And when one of them carried a heavy burden the others would say, 'Here, love, let me help you, *mashallah*, by night he climbs on your belly and now you have to carry this on your back,' and they would all laugh.

In sunshine and in wind the almond alley hummed with women giggling wildly behind their hands, their

gowns crumpled and sooty, whining naked infants perched on their tilted pelvis as on a baby seat. They wiped the children's runny noses with their headkerchiefs, and the cooking grease from their fingers with the chadors. Over the cackling of the fowls and the shrieks of the children, the neighbours also chatted with Mahasti, Miriam Hanoum's sister-in-law, Nazie's mother, whose house stood across the alley, and into which Homa and her husband moved when it fell empty. But as the children multiplied like the chicks in the alley, and Miriam Hanoum's daughters grew and matured, envy and the overcrowding drove the neighbours apart, and their bitter hate infected the cooking smells.

Together with the other village women, Fathaneh and Sultana sang mocking rhymes about Miriam Hanoum, laughing into the palms of their hands, but secretly they envied her Flora's beauty. 'That one, if she lost one night's sleep from worry, would turn from a ripe fig bursting with honey into a hard dry one,' they would say. They were especially provoked by the perfect menstruation of the Ratoryan females, whose sharp odour filled the alley and made people dizzy. They counted the days of the discharge admiringly, and would secretly burn myrtle twigs and stand on tiptoe over the flames, naked from the waist down, their legs apart, and pray that the smoke penetrating their wombs would make their days of

uncleanness as easy, regular and sharp as those of Miriam Hanoum and her daughters.

About Miriam Hanoum they said that she was too lazy to love her husband, and that he had impregnated her in her sleep, while she dreamt that she was sailing on the waves of the Caspian Sea. They said that she had cunningly given him her urine to drink, which made him cleave to her. About Homa they said that she was lucky, because being lame she was too eager for pleasures, and avoided pissing for days on end in order to push her fingers in there and masturbate all night long. They gossiped about Flora too, and also envied her, but they all enjoyed hearing her rolling laughter and smelling the honey scent of her body. Even Fathaneh Delkasht said to her that her ovaries were small and tough as nuts and, smiling, patted her round belly as if it were a watermelon. Fathaneh's smile always hovered like that of a puzzled, doubt-ridden person, because she was born without lips around her mouth. Lacking the red folds of flesh, Fathaneh seemed to be smiling against her will.

The women's envy drove Miriam Hanoum apart from her neighbours, and she withdrew into her house, proud and fearful, with her collection of curses. She would scoop out the eyes of the chickens her husband sold, preserve them and set them in bits of beaten silver, which she hung as good-luck

charms on her neck and her children's. In this fashion she sought to ward off her neighbours' evil eye: imprisoned in a ring and hanging on the breast, it was less terrifying. But the further she withdrew, the more they gossiped about her. In a place where pride is the worst sin, Miriam Hanoum barricaded herself with her braids wound around her head like a crown. She cast her eyes far over the heads of the women, above their sagging shoulders and lowered brows, and the hen's eye swinging between her breasts pierced their hearts. Homa, too, who lived not far from her, in a mud-brick house across the alley, closed her door behind her and devoted most of her nights and mornings to desperate efforts to conceive. The village women did not pursue her, but only listened closely and relished her moans.

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THE ART OF HUNGER

Paul Auster

What is important, it seems to me, is not so much to defend a culture whose existence has never kept a man from going hungry, as to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force is identical with that of hunger.

ANTONIN ARTAUD

A YOUNG MAN comes to a city. He has no name, no home, no work: he has come to the city to write. He writes. Or, more exactly, he does not write. He starves to the point of death.

The city is Kristiana (Oslo); the year is [*c.*]1890. The young man wanders through the streets: the city is a labyrinth of hunger, and all his days are the same. He writes unsolicited articles for a local paper. He worries about his rent, his disintegrating clothes, the difficulty of finding his next meal. He suffers. He nearly goes mad. He is never more than one step from collapse.

Still, he writes. Now and then he manages to sell an article, to find a temporary reprieve from his misery. But he is too weak to write steadily and can rarely finish the pieces he has begun. Among his

abortive works are an essay about the crimes of the future, a philosophical tract on the freedom of the will, an allegory about a bookstore fire (the books are brains), and a play set in the Middle Ages, 'The Sign of the Cross'. The process is inescapable: he must eat in order to write. But if he does not write, he will not eat. And if he cannot eat, he cannot write. He cannot write.

He writes. He does not write. He wanders through the streets of the city. He talks to himself in public. He frightens people away from him. When, by chance, he comes into some money, he gives it away. He is evicted from his room. He eats, and then throws everything up. At one point, he has a brief flirtation with a girl, but nothing comes of it except humiliation. He hungers. He curses the world. He does not die. In the end, for no apparent reason, he signs on board a ship and leaves the city.

These are the bare bones of Knut Hamsun's first novel, *Hunger*. It is a work devoid of plot, action, and – but for the narrator – character. By nineteenth-century standards, it is a work in which nothing happens. The radical subjectivity of the narrator effectively eliminates the basic concerns of the traditional novel. Similar to the hero's plan to make an 'imperceptible detour' when he came to the problem of space and time in one of his essays, Hamsun

manages to dispense with historical time, the basic organising principle of nineteenth-century fiction. He gives us an account only of the hero's worst struggles with hunger. Other, less difficult times, in which his hunger has been appeased – even though they might last as long as a week – are passed off in one or two sentences. Historical time is obliterated in favor of inner duration. With only an arbitrary beginning and an arbitrary ending, the novel faithfully records the vagaries of the narrator's mind, following each thought from its mysterious inception through all its meanderings, until it dissipates and the next thought begins. What happens is allowed to happen.

This novel cannot even claim to have a redeeming social value. Although *Hunger* puts us in the jaws of misery, it offers no analysis of that misery, contains no call to political action. Hamsun, who turned fascist in his old age during the Second World War, never concerned himself with the problems of class injustice, and his narrator-hero, like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, is not so much an underdog as a monster of intellectual arrogance. Pity plays no part in *Hunger*. The hero suffers, but only because he has chosen to suffer. Hamsun's art is such that he rigorously prevents us from feeling any compassion for his character. From the very beginning, it is made clear that the hero need not starve. Solutions exist, if not in the city, then at least in departure. But

buoyed by an obsessive, suicidal pride, the young man's actions continually betray a scorn for his own best interests.

> I started running to punish myself, left street after street behind me at full blast, pushed myself on with suppressed shouts, and screamed mutely and furiously at myself whenever I felt like stopping. Meanwhile I had gotten to way up in Pilestrædet Lane. When I stood still at last, on the verge of tears from anger at not being able to run any farther, my whole body trembled and I threw myself down on some steps. 'No, hold it,' I said. And to torture myself properly I got up again and forced myself to remain standing, and I laughed at myself and gloated over my own exhaustion. Finally, after several minutes had elapsed, I nodded, giving myself permission to sit down; but even then I chose the most uncomfortable spot on the steps.

He seeks out what is most difficult in himself, courting pain and adversity in the same way other men seek out pleasure. He goes hungry, not because he has to, but from some inner compulsion, as if to wage a hunger strike against himself. Before the book begins, before the reader has been made the privileged witness of his fate, the hero's course of

action has been fixed. A process is already in motion, and although the hero cannot control it, that does not mean he is unaware of what he is doing.

> I was at that moment fully conscious of playing a mad prank, without being able to do anything about it . . . However estranged I was from myself, so completely at the mercy of invisible influences, nothing that was taking place around me escaped my perception.

Having withdrawn into a nearly perfect solitude, he has become both the subject and object of his own experiment. Hunger is the means by which this split takes place, the catalyst, so to speak, of altered consciousness.

> I had noticed very distinctly that every time I went hungry for quite a long time it was as though my brain trickled quietly out of my head, leaving me empty. My head grew light and absent, I could no longer feel its weight upon my shoulders . . .

If it is an experiment, however, it has nothing to do with the scientific method. There are no controls, no stable points of reference – only variables. Nor can this separation of mind and body be reduced to

a philosophical abstraction. We are not in the realm of ideas here. It is a physical state, brought into being under conditions of extreme duress. Mind and body have been weakened; the hero has lost control over both his thoughts and actions. And yet he persists in trying to control his destiny. This is the paradox; the game of circular logic that is played out through the pages of the book. It is an impossible situation for the hero. For he has wilfully brought himself to the brink of danger. To give up starving would not mean victory, it would simply mean that the game was over. He wants to survive, but only on his own terms: survival that will bring him face to face with death.

He fasts. But not in the way a Christian would fast. He is not denying earthly life in anticipation of heavenly life; he is simply refusing to live the life he has been given. And the longer he goes on with his fast, the more death intrudes itself upon his life. He approaches death, creeps towards the edge of the abyss, and once there, clings to it, unable to move either forwards or backwards. Hunger, which opens the void, does not have the power to seal it up. A brief moment of Pascalian terror has been transformed into a permanent condition.

His fast, then, is a contradiction. To persist in it would mean death, and with death the fast would end. He must therefore stay alive, but only to the

extent that it keeps him on the point of death. The idea of ending is resisted in the interests of maintaining the constant possibility of the end. Because his fasting neither posits a goal nor offers a promise of redemption, its contradiction must remain unresolved. As such, it is an image of despair, generated by the same self-consuming passion as the sickness unto death. The soul, in its despair, seeks to devour itself, and because it cannot – precisely because it despairs – sinks further into despair.

Unlike a religious art, in which self-debasement can play an ultimately cleansing role (the meditative poetry of the seventeenth century, for example), hunger only simulates the dialectic of salvation. In Fulke Greville's poem, 'Down in the depth of mine iniquity', the poet is able to look into a 'fatal mirror of transgression' which 'shows man as fruit of his degeneration', but he knows that this is only the first step in a two-fold process, for it is in this mirror that Christ is revealed 'for the same sins dying / And from that hell I feared, to free me, come . . .' In Hamsun's novel, however, once the depths have been sounded, the mirror of meditation remains empty.

He remains at the bottom, and no God will come to rescue the young man. He cannot even depend on the props of social convention to keep him standing. He is rootless, without friends, denuded of objects. Order has disappeared for him; everything

has become random. His actions are inspired by nothing but whim and ungovernable urge, the weary frustration of anarchic discontent. He pawns his waistcoat in order to give alms to a beggar, hires a carriage in search of a fictitious acquaintance, knocks on strangers' doors, and repeatedly asks the time of passing policemen, for the single reason that he fancies to do so. He does not revel in these actions, however. They remain profoundly disquieting for him. Furiously trying to stabilise his life, to put an end to his wanderings, find a room, and settle down to his writing, he is thwarted by the fast he has set in motion. Once it starts, hunger does not release its progenitor-victim until its lesson has been made unforgettable. The hero is seized against his will by a force of his own making and is compelled to respond to its demands.

He loses everything – even himself. Reach the bottom of a Godless hell, and identity disappears. It is no accident that Hamsun's hero has no name: as time goes on, he is truly shorn of his self. What names he chooses to give himself are all inventions, summoned forth on the spur of the moment. He cannot say who he is because he does not know. His name is a lie, and with this lie the reality of his world vanishes.

He peers into the darkness hunger has created for him, and what he finds is a void of language. Reality

has become a confusion of thingless names and nameless things for him. The connection between self and world has been broken.

> I lay awhile looking into the darkness, a thick massive darkness without end that I wasn't able to fathom. My thoughts couldn't grasp it. It struck me as excessively dark and I felt its presence as oppressive. I closed my eyes, began to sing in an undertone, and tossed back and forth in the bunk to distract myself, but it was no use. The darkness had taken possession of my thoughts and didn't leave me alone for a moment. What if I myself were to be dissolved into darkness, made one with it?

At the precise moment that he is in the greatest fear of losing possession of himself, he suddenly imagines that he has invented a new word: *Kuboaa* – a word in no language, a word with no meaning.

> I had passed over into the sheer madness of hunger; I was empty and without pain and my thoughts were running riot.

He tries to think of a meaning for his word but can only come up with what it doesn't mean, which is neither 'God', nor the 'amusement park', nor 'cattle

show', nor 'padlock', nor 'sunrise', nor 'emigration', nor 'tobacco factory', nor 'knitting yarn'.

> No, the word was really suited to mean something spiritual, a feeling, a state of mind – couldn't I understand that? And I try to jog my memory to come up with something spiritual.

But he does not succeed. Voices, not his own, begin to intrude, to confuse him, and he sinks deeper into chaos. After a violent fit, in which he imagines himself to be dying, all goes still, with no sounds but those of his own voice, rolling back from the wall.

This episode is perhaps the most painful in the book. But it is only one of many examples of the hero's language disease. Throughout the narrative, his pranks most often take the form of lies. Retrieving his lost pencil from a pawn shop (he had accidentally left it in the pocket of a vest he had sold), he tells the proprietor that it was with this very pencil that he had written his three-volume treatise on philosophical cognition. An insignificant pencil, he admits, but he has a sentimental attachment to it. To an old man on a park bench he recites the fantastic story of a Mr Happolati, the inventor of the electric prayer book. Asking a store clerk to wrap his last possession, a tattered green blanket that he is too ashamed to carry around exposed to view, he explains

that it is not really the blanket he wants wrapped, but the pair of priceless vases he has folded inside the blanket. Not even the girl he courts is immune from this sort of fiction. He invents a name for her, a name that pleases him for its beauty, and he refuses to call her by anything else.

These lies have a meaning beyond the jests of the moment. In the realm of language the lie has the same relationship to truth that evil has to good in the realm of morals. That is the convention, and it works if we believe in it. But Hamsun's hero no longer believes in anything. Lies and truths are as one to him. Hunger has led him into the darkness, and there is no turning back.

This equation of language and morals becomes the gist of the final episode in *Hunger*.

> My mind cleared up, I understood I was about to go under. I stretched out my hands and pushed myself back from the wall; the street was still whirling around with me. Bursting into sobs of rage, I fought my distress with my innermost soul, bravely holding my own so as not to fall down: I had no intention of collapsing, I would die on my feet. A cart rolled slowly by. I see there are potatoes in the cart, but out of rage, from sheer obstinancy, I take it into my head to say they weren't

> potatoes at all, they were cabbages, and I swore horribly that they were cabbages. I heard quite well what I said, and I swore willfully time after time, upholding this lie just to have the droll satisfaction of committing downright perjury. Drunk with this unprecedented sin, I raised three fingers and swore with quivering lips in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost that they were cabbages.

And that is the end of it. There are only two possibilities left for the hero now: live or die; and he chooses to live. He has said no to society, no to God, no to his own words. Later that same day he leaves the city. There is no longer any need to continue the fast. Its work has been done.

Hunger: or a portrait of the artist as a young man. But it is an apprenticeship that has little in common with the early struggles of other writers. Hamsun's hero is no Stephen Dedalus, and there is hardly a word in *Hunger* about aesthetic theory. The world of art has been translated into the world of the body – and the original text has been abandoned. Hunger is not a metaphor; it is the very crux of the problem itself. If others, such as Rimbaud, with his program for the voluntary derangement of the senses, have

turned the body into an aesthetic principle in its own right, Hamsun's hero steadfastly rejects the opportunity to use his deficiencies to his own advantage. He is weak, he has lost control over his thoughts, and yet he continues to strive for lucidity in his writing. But hunger affects his prose in the same way it affects his life. Although he is willing to sacrifice everything for his art, even submit to the worst forms of debasement and misery, all he has really done is make it impossible for himself to write. You cannot write on an empty stomach, no matter how hard you try. But it would be wrong to dismiss the hero of *Hunger* as a fool or a madman. In spite of the evidence, he knows what he is doing. He does not want to succeed. He wants to fail.

Something new is happening here, some new thought about the nature of art is being proposed in *Hunger*. It is first of all an art that is indistinguishable from the life of the artist who makes it. That is not to say an art of autobiographical excess, but rather, an art that is the direct expression of the effort to express itself. In other words, an art of hunger: an art of need, of necessity, of desire. Certainty yields to doubt, form gives way to process. There can be no arbitrary imposition of order, and yet, more than ever, there is the obligation to achieve clarity. It is an art that begins with the knowledge that there are no right answers. For that reason, it becomes essential to ask

the right questions. One finds them by living them. To quote Samuel Beckett:

> What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be a new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else . . . To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.*

Hamsun gives the portrait of this artist in the first stages of his development. But it is in Kafka's story, *A Hunger Artist*, that the aesthetics of hunger receives its most meticulous elaboration. Here the contradictions of the fast conducted by Hamsun's hero – and the artistic impasse it leads to – are joined in a parable that deals with an artist whose art consists in fasting. The hunger artist is at once an artist and not an artist. Though he wants his performances to be admired, he insists that they shouldn't be admired, because they have nothing to do with art. He has chosen to fast only because he could never find any

*From an interview with Tom Driver, 'Beckett at the Madeleine', in *The Columbia University Forum*, Summer 1961.

food that he liked. His performances are therefore not spectacles for the amusement of others, but the unravelling of a private despair that he has permitted others to watch.

Like Hamsun's hero, the hunger artist has lost control over himself. Beyond the theatrical device of sitting in his cage, his art in no way differs from his life, even what his life would have been had he not become a performer. He is not trying to please anyone. In fact, his performances cannot even be understood or appreciated.

> No one could possibly watch the hunger artist continuously, day and night, and so no one could produce first-hand evidence that the fast had really been rigorous and continuous; only the artist himself could know that; he was therefore bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast.

This is not the classic story of the misunderstood artist, however. For the very nature of the fast resists comprehension. Knowing itself from the outset to be an impossibility, and condemning itself to certain failure, it is a process that moves asymptotically towards death, destined to reach neither fruition nor destruction. In Kafka's story, the hunger artist dies, but only because he forsakes his art, abandoning the

restrictions that had been imposed on him by his manager. The hunger artist goes too far. But that is the risk, the danger inherent in any act of art: you must be willing to give your life.

In the end, the art of hunger can be described as an existential art. It is a way of looking death in the face, and by death I mean death as we live it today: without God, without hope of salvation. Death as the abrupt and absurd end of life.

I do not believe that we have come any farther than this. It is even possible that we have been here much longer than we are willing to admit. In all this time, however, only a few artists have been able to recognise it. It takes courage, and not many of us would be willing to risk everything for nothing. But that is what happens in *Hunger*, a novel [published] in 1890. Hamsun's character systematically unburdens himself of every belief in every system, and in the end, by means of the hunger he has inflicted upon himself, he arrives at nothing. There is nothing to keep him going – and yet he keeps on going. He walks straight into the twentieth century.

All quotations from *Hunger* are taken from the Sverre Lyngstad translation, Canongate, 2001.

An extract from

THE BLIND OWL

Sadegh Hedayat

Translated from the Persian by D. P. Costello

Writing to My Shadow

THERE ARE SORES which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker.

It is impossible to convey a just idea of the agony which this disease can inflict. In general, people are apt to relegate such inconceivable sufferings to the category of the incredible. Any mention of them in conversation or in writing is considered in the light of current beliefs, the individual's personal beliefs in particular, and tends to provoke a smile of incredulity and derision. The reason for this incomprehension is that mankind has not yet discovered a cure for this disease. Relief from it is to be found only in the oblivion brought about by wine and in the artificial sleep induced by opium and similar narcotics. Alas, the effects of such medicines are only temporary. After a certain point, instead of alleviating the pain, they only intensify it.

Will anyone ever penetrate the secret of this disease

which transcends ordinary experience, this reverberation of the shadow of the mind, which manifests itself in a state of coma like that between death and resurrection, when one is neither asleep nor awake?

I propose to deal with only one case of this disease. It concerned me personally and it so shattered my entire being that I shall never be able to drive the thought of it out of my mind. The evil impression which it left has, to a degree that surpasses human understanding, poisoned my life for all time to come. I said 'poisoned'; I should have said that I have ever since borne, and will bear for ever, the brand-mark of that cautery.

I shall try to set down what I can remember, what has remained in my mind of the sequence of events. I may perhaps be able to draw a general conclusion from it all – but no, that is too much to expect. I may hope to be believed by others or at least to convince myself; for, after all, it does not matter to me whether others believe me or not. My one fear is that tomorrow I may die without having come to know myself. In the course of my life I have discovered that a fearful abyss lies between me and other people and have realised that my best course is to remain silent and keep my thoughts to myself for as long as I can. If I have now made up my mind to write, it is only in order to reveal myself to my shadow, that shadow which at this moment is

stretched across the wall in the attitude of one devouring with insatiable appetite each word I write. It is for his sake that I wish to make the attempt. Who knows? We may perhaps come to know each other better. Ever since I broke the last ties which held me to the rest of mankind my one desire has been to attain a better knowledge of myself.

Idle thoughts! Perhaps. Yet they torment me more savagely than any reality could do. Do not the rest of mankind who look like me, who appear to have the same needs and the same passions as I, exist only in order to cheat me? Are they not a mere handful of shadows which have come into existence only that they may mock and cheat me? Is not everything that I feel, see and think something entirely imaginary, something utterly different from reality?

I am writing only for my shadow, which is now stretched across the wall in the light of the lamp. I must make myself known to him.

SADEGH HEDAYAT was born in 1903 in Teheran. In the 1940s he studied existential philosophy with Sartre in Paris, where he committed suicide in 1951. Generally recognised as the greatest Persian writer of this century, he brought his country's language and literature into the mainstream of contemporary writing.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Karel van Loon

Q What inspired you to write *A Father's Affair*?
A I have wanted to be a writer ever since I could read. But for a long time I doubted if I would ever be able to write fiction, simply because I didn't think I would be imaginative enough. So I started off as a journalist, published several non-fiction works, before I set out on a more literary track. I first wrote a collection of stories based on travels I had done and things I had experienced as a journalist: about the bloodbath on Tiananmen Square in Beijing (1989), where I did a story for a weekly magazine about a group of students that I had followed all week, and with whom I spent that horrible night on the square until finally the tanks drove us off. About the Gulf War, the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Contra war in Nicaragua, crime in Leningrad, an uprising of the Batak people in Borneo, Indonesia. The stories were mostly fact, partly fiction. They won me my first nomination for a literary prize, which boosted my confidence that maybe, just maybe, I could be successful as a literary writer. For *A Father's Affair* I set out to write a 'what if' story. What if, at the age of nineteen, my girlfriend at the time had really been

pregnant, and it had not been a false alarm? What kind of a father might I have been, what kind of a relationship might I have had with my child? From here, the story slowly took shape in my head. I imagined the father having to raise his child by himself. Then, one fortunate day, I had this idea of the father finding out that he was not the biological father – I suppose it came from toiling with the idea whether it made any difference if your child was biologically yours or not. It immediately felt like a great idea to pursue. So I did. And never looked back.

Q How do you explain the 200,000 sales (or is it more?) in the Netherlands for this book? We know it won the Dutch equivalent of the Booker Prize, but that wouldn't normally generate quite so many sales . . .

A I think, with the new cheaper edition out for the holiday season, sales are up somewhere between 210,000 and 220,000. I am pretty sure that my book is the best-selling Generale Bank Prize-winner ever. As you say: winning a prize helps, but doesn't necessarily lead to such huge sales. I think there are two important factors contributing to the success: firstly, it's an intriguing plot that seems to appeal to just about everybody. Secondly, the story is written in a light tone which makes the book a pleasant read for both experienced and inexperienced readers.

People who have read it seem to like to give it to others.

Q Your Dutch publisher said that your book sold to far many more men than women. Has the feedback from your readers confirmed this?
A I think there is a misunderstanding here. What they may have said is that it seems to be a success both with women and men, whereas many books are rather more sex-specific.

Q What are you reading at the moment?
A *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth.

Q Is there a book that you wish you'd written?
A *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje.

Q Which books are on your bedside table at the moment?
A Besides Roth there is *Misconceptions* by Naomi Wolf, *Franklin* by Thomas Lieske (2000 winner of the same book prize I won, although it has a new name these days), *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* by American philosopher Ken Wilbur, and *Taliban* by Ahmed Rashid.

Q We hear that you make many public appearances in the Netherlands, not always book-related. Could

you tell us something about them?
A I am a friend of Jan Marijnissen, the Dutch MP and leader of the Socialist Party of the Netherlands. Together we wrote a book on the Yugoslavian wars and the role of the Western nations therein. I am also co-author of the *Atlas van de Macht* – a study of economic powers in the Netherlands, and of a rather critical book on genetic engineering (*Herman, the Biography of a Genetically Engineered Bull*). Because of these publications I am sometimes asked to give my opinion on these various subjects. I have also been rather critical about the present war in Afghanistan, and the way the so-called 'War Against Terror' is being conducted. I have been called 'the conscience of the Left', which is of course a typical journalistic exaggeration. But it gives you some idea of where I stand.

KAREL VAN LOON's first novel, *A Father's Affair* is published by Canongate in August 2002 (see p. 88 for further information).

An extract from

FOUR MEALS

Meir Shalev
Translated from the Hebrew by
Barbara Harshav

The First Meal

IN 1952, ABOUT a year and a half after her death, Jacob Sheinfeld invited me to the first meal.

He came to the cowshed, his shoulders drooping, the scar on his forehead gleaming, and the moss of solitude darkening the wrinkles of his face.

'Happy birthday to you, Zayde.' He put his hand on my shoulder. 'You'll please come to me tomorrow for dinner,' he said, and turned and left.

I was then exactly twelve years old, and Moshe Rabinovitch gave me a birthday party.

'If you were a girl, Zayde, we'd make you a bat-mitzva today.' He smiled, and I was surprised because Rabinovitch didn't tend to talk in 'ifs' and 'what ifs'.

Oded, Rabinovitch's older son, who was already the village truck driver, brought me a silver-plated Bulldog model of a Mack diesel. Naomi, Rabinovitch's

daughter, came specially from Jerusalem and brought me a book titled *The Old Silver Spot*, with pictures of crows and the notes of their calls. She kept kissing and crying and hugging and stroking until I was filled with embarrassment, desire and dread all together.

Then the green truck appeared, collided, as always, with the mighty stump of the eucalyptus where big scars, mementos of all the previous collisions, could be seen in its flesh, and another father burst out: Globerman the cattle dealer.

'A good father doesn't never forget a birthday,' declared the dealer, who never failed to fulfil any parental obligation.

He brought some premium cuts of beef ribs and bestowed a sum of cash on me.

Globerman brought me money for every event. For birthdays, holidays, the end of every school year, in honour of the first rain of the season, on the shortest day of the year in winter and on the longest day of the year in summer. Even on the anniversary of Mother's death, he would thrust a few shillings into my hand, which horrified and disgusted everybody, but it didn't surprise anybody because Globerman was known throughout the Valley as a greedy, coarse man. And in the village people said that five minutes after the English expelled the German Templars from nearby Waldheim, Globerman showed

up there with his truck, broke into their abandoned houses, and looted the crystal and porcelain dishes they had left behind.

'And by the time we got there with the wagons' – the narrators were enraged – 'there wasn't anything left.'

Once I heard the Village Papish scolding Globerman for the same thing. The word 'robber' I understood, '*Hashbez*' I guessed, and '*Akhen*' I didn't get.

'You stole! You plundered!' he rebuked him.

'Me steal? I didn't steal.' Globerman chuckled. 'I obtained.'

'You "obtained"? What does that mean, you "obtained"?'

'Some of it I obtained by pulling and some of it I obtained by dragging. But steal? Not me. I didn't steal nothing,' roared the dealer, with a laugh I can still recall clearly to this day, many years after his death.

'I'll tell you what's the difference between just a gift and a gift of cash,' he said now in a loud voice so everyone would hear. 'To think up what gift to buy somebody *iz a lokh in kop*, a hole in the head. But to give somebody cash *iz a lokh in hartz*, a hole in the heart. Period.'

And he closed my fingers around the money and declared: 'That's how my father taught me and that's

how I'm teaching you. It'll be just like you yourself was born on the *klots*, the butcher block.'

Then he pulled out the flat bottle he always carried in his coat pocket and I recognised the smell of the grappa Mother loved to drink. He poured a lot of liquor down his throat and a little bit of liquor on the fire, roasted the ribs he brought, and sang aloud:

> Zaydele went walking down the street
> Went with a penny to buy himself a treat
> Oh, Zaydele, it's only a deceit
> The penny went off and there's no treat
> Daddy, Daddy, he is bold
> Mommy, Mommy, she will scold
> They'll beat poor Zaydele till he's out cold.

And Moshe Rabinovitch, the strongest and oldest of my three fathers, caught me and tossed me up in the air over and over again, threw and caught my body with his thick, short hands. And when Naomi yelled, 'And one to grow on,' and I soared for the thirteenth time, I saw a swarming cloud of wings threatening to cover the village.

'Look,' I shouted. 'Starlings in summer!'

And at first glance, the raging nimbus did indeed look like a flock of starlings that had lost its sense of time. But it soon turned out that, thanks to the

swings of Moshe Rabinovitch's strong hands, I saw the locusts rising on the Valley that year, 1952.

Moshe's face became melancholy. Naomi panicked. And Globerman said for the *n*th time: '*A mentsh trakht un got lakht* – man makes plans and God laughs.'

Within five minutes the dull drumming of the Arab peasants was heard beyond the hills, coming out of their houses to the fields, armed with screaming women, long sticks and noisy, empty gasoline cans to rout the enemy.

Globerman sipped more and more grappa from his bottle and served Moshe more and more meat, and in the evening, when all the children went to the fields with torches and bags, spades and brooms to kill the locusts, my third father, Jacob Sheinfeld, came, laid his hand on my shoulder, and invited me to dinner.

'All the gifts are nothing. Money gets used up. Clothes you rip up. Toys get broken up. But a good meal, that stays in your memory. From there it doesn't get lost like other gifts. The body it leaves fast, but the memory slow.'

That's what Jacob said, and his voice, too, like the voice of the dealer, was loud enough to reach everyone's ears.

'A strange bird,' that's what they called Jacob Sheinfeld in the village.

He lived all by himself, he had a little house, a garden which was once well-tended, and a few empty canary cages, relics of an enormous flock that was now dispersed.

His field, which had once boasted a citrus grove and a vineyard, vegetables and fodder, was now leased to the village for common cultivation. His incubator he had already closed. His wife, who had left, he had already forgotten.

Jacob's wife was named Rebecca. I knew she had left him because of my mother. Never did I see her, but everybody said she was the most beautiful of all the women in the village.

'What do you mean, all the women in the village?' the Village Papish amended. 'All the women in the Valley! All the women in the country! One of the most beautiful women in all the world and in all times!'

The Village Papish was one of those admirers who is devoted to female beauty, and in his house he had splendid art albums he used to leaf through with washed, caressing hands, and sigh: '*Sheyner fun di ziebn shtern* – more beautiful than the seven stars.'

Like a distant, glowing nebula, Rebecca was sealed in his memory and in the common memory of the village. To this day – even after she had gone off and re-married and come back in old age, and managed

to bring Jacob back to her before her death – they still talk about her here. And whenever a handsome woman comes to visit or a new baby is born who is very beautiful to behold, memory immediately compares her with that reflection of the beautiful woman who once lived here, whose husband was unfaithful, and who went off, and left us all behind, 'wallowing in ugliness and desolation and the black soil'.

MEIR SHALEV, one of Israel's most celebrated novelists, is the author of three other works of fiction – *The Blue Mountain*, *Esau* and *The Big Woman* – all of which have been notable literary and commercial successes in Europe and beyond. His novels have been published in over ten countries – most recently *Four Meals* was awarded the Juliet Club prize in Italy. Shalev is also a columnist for *Yediot Achronot*, a leading Israeli newspaper and is the author of five children's books. He lives in Jerusalem.

BARBARA HARSHAV has translated books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction for twenty years. Her translations include works from German, Yiddish and Hebrew, including Shalev's second novel, *Esau*.

FORTHCOMING ATTRACTIONS

Lucca

Jens Christian Grøndahl

Translated from the Danish by Anne Born

'What a splendid, moving novel this is! Parts of it are simply divine.' *Jyllands-Posten*, Denmark

This superb novel was a sensational literary bestseller in Grøndahl's native Denmark. His style is seductive and irresistible, its complexities so subtly managed that *Lucca* becomes effortlessly but endlessly satisfying as a literary read.

Lucca Montale, a 32-year-old Danish actress, is rushed into hospital in a provincial Danish town after a motor accident. She is severely injured after a head-on collision with a lorry. Robert, the doctor responsible for treating her, is obliged to break the news that she may never see again.

Robert and Lucca are both suffering the after-effects of love. He has sought refuge in controlled resignation since his divorce. She has rushed into dramatic, desperate acts. Grøndahl masterfully deploys a dual narrative, switching with astounding insight between the stories that the two protagonists relate to each other. The result is a love story of immense emotional and philosophical reach – compelling, elegant and astute.

EXTRACT

He stood waking up under the shower for a long time. It felt as if the hot water slowly made his fatigue crackle and fall away from him in invisible flakes. His own life was the same, almost. He went to hospital every morning and came home in the late afternoon, but whereas previously he had spent his leisure hours vegetating and listening to music, now he helped Lucca become accustomed to her new existence. He had stopped playing tennis and not only because he had no time. His friendship with Jacob had cooled after he had kept him waiting in vain at the tennis courts one summer day, and after Jacob had stood in his garden an hour later and seen him through the window talking on the telephone. One day when they were together in a queue in the hospital canteen Jacob had asked Robert what he was up to with his former patient. Someone must have seen them together in town, although Lucca seldom went out.

To spare her pride he tried to help her as little as possible. He cleared up discreetly after her small accidents and behaved as if he had not noticed them. Now and again, before she was familiar with the house, he took her arm cautiously when she was about to run into a door or crack her head on the open door of a cupboard, and that episode with the

vase was not the only time he'd had to put a plaster on her, like a clumsy child. She said that herself. That it was like learning everything over again, just like a child. At first he'd had to help her in the bathroom in the morning. He guided her under the shower and took her hand to show her how to regulate the water. Her nakedness made them shy and very correct.

He turned off the shower and opened the window to let out the steam. It resembled the smoke from a fire as it billowed up and blew away into the cold, damp murkiness.

'Grøndahl sets the scenes so that we are enthralled and stimulated and he simultaneously, with astonishing accessibility and clarity, twists and turns some very modern mirrors.' *Politiken*, Denmark

'A powerful reading experience and I am amazed at how Grøndahl forges his story into a Leonardian wheel that rotates in perfect balance.' *Observer Media Intelligence*, Sweden

'One of the most intense and convincing books I have come across, centred on the crucial theme of modern literature . . . namely the problem of identity within modern society . . . some of Grøndahl's mastery lies in the perfect timing of his narrative [in

which] he produces a completely novel literary rhythm.' *Dagbladet*, Norway

'Seldom has anyone depicted the labyrinths of love so unsentimentally and yet so beautifully.' *Lanstidningen Sodertalje*, Sweden

JENS CHRISTIAN GRØNDAHL is one of the most celebrated and widely read writers in Denmark today. Born in 1959, he was trained as a film director. His literary work includes eleven novels, essays and several plays and has been translated into 15 languages.

ANNE BORN has translated many works of Danish, Swedish and Norwegian literature, including Grøndahl's previous novel, *Silence in October*, for which she received extensive praise.

Husband and Wife

Zeruya Shalev

Translated from the Hebrew by Dalya Bilu

WINNER OF GERMANY'S PRESTIGIOUS CORINE INTERNATIONAL BOOK AWARD, 2001

'A breathtaking narrative journey through the hell of a crumbling marriage . . . Written with a cool eye and a big heart, this is a love story for the twenty-first century.' *Die Welt*, Germany

Na'ama Newman wakes up one morning to a new reality. Her husband Udi, formerly a healthy, active tour guide, announces that he can no longer move his legs. The paralysis is diagnosed as psychosomatic – Udi has gone on strike and Na'ama must cope with the crisis, while balancing the demands of work and motherhood.

The plot moves swiftly from this starting point, and Shalev depicts the complexities of intimate relationships with daring perceptiveness. It is a unique and intense novel, compulsively readable and extraordinarily insightful.

Husband and Wife displays the same feverish lyricism and breathless pace that characterised Shalev's acclaimed first novel, *Love Life*.

EXTRACT

On tiptoe I return to the bedroom, stand silently next to the bed, inspecting the beautiful body lying on it in perfect openness, a body that has nothing to hide . . . His thin legs are still, but his mouth cracks in a sigh, the taut lips of an ageing boy lost in his wilted face, swallowed up in the caverns of his cheeks, under the precise lines of his eyebrows. Looking down sorrowfully at the face whose beauty has dulled overnight, everything the same sandy colour, a uniform yellowish grey, like a livery that cannot be removed, a uniform of sun and dust, I try to heal him with my look, anxiety crawling over me like a hairy caterpillar. Is this the moment I always knew I would not be able to escape, the moment that breaks life in two?

. . . In a minute he'll wake up and try to pull me onto the bed with his edgy, aggressive abrasiveness, I know exactly what you need, he'll inform me, why aren't you willing to accept what I want to give, and this time I won't begin to argue like I always do, I won't present him, earnest as a fledgling curator, with the catalogue of my disappointments, I'll take off my nightgown and jump into bed as if I'm jumping into a swimming pool, all at once, without testing the water, why not, we're husband and wife, after all, and this is our only slice of life.

'Shalev has the cruel, audacious sincerity to touch the most painful places . . . The courageous will find here a sensitive, richly laden novel that will leave them trying to restore their balance after the wild ride.' *Kol Ha'ir*, Israel

'Passionate reading . . . clever and witty . . . No short quote could capture the orgiastic design of the prose. There is an irresistible frenzy in the language . . . one puts the book aside, convinced that this spring, no other book will compete with Shalev's masterpiece.' *Die Zeit*, Germany

'When I began to read, a kind of enchanting calm descended upon me . . . This book deserves to be read at least twice . . . I really think and feel it is a classic.' *Ma'ariv*, Israel

'A literary discovery, as a narrator of elemental powers, whose coursing language washes up fragments from the deepest recesses of human existence. Time and again she tears open the borders between the inner and outer world.' *Die Welt*, Germany

Also available by Zeruya Shalev:

Love Life

Translated from the Hebrew by Dalya Bilu

An international No. 1 bestseller and multi-award-winning novel, *Love Life*, as Fay Weldon said, 'is like nothing else'.

In a novel of formidable force and shocking immediacy, a young married woman's turbulent affair with an older man rapidly evolves into a feverish, lyrical exploration of the anatomy of obsession.

When Ya'ara meets Aryeh, her father's boyhood friend, she is instantly drawn to his archly assured presence. She quickly forsakes her devoted and well-meaning husband for this powerful and mysterious older man, but as their heated affair intensifies, Ya'ara finds that the things in Aryeh that attract her also repel her with equal intensity.

Love Life is an intelligent, seductive and provocative novel about relationships that marks the debut of an important new voice.

'Brutally honest and often brilliant . . . a wise and sophisticated talent.' *Washington Post*

'Beautifully written.' *Independent on Sunday*

'Shalev's tale tells the story from Ya'ara's point of view with impressive intelligence and searing candour. A fine novel.' *The Times*

'A shimmering, open, intelligent and touching novel.' *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

ZERUYA SHALEV has a master's degree in biblical studies and is chief literary editor of an Israeli publishing house. Her first book, *Love Life*, is being translated into eleven languages and has won three awards. She lives in Jerusalem.

DALYA BILU is a well-known translator of Hebrew literature and has been awarded a number of prizes for her work, including the Times Literary Supplement/Jewish Council Award.

Rembrandt's Whore

Sylvie Matton

Translated from the French by Tamsin Black

'A work of unobtrusive beauty, unforgettably true and poignant.' *Le Figaro*

This internationally acclaimed novel is the fictional monologue of Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's last mistress. It combines all the qualities of a naturalist tragedy, historical novel and exposition of seventeenth-century Dutch society. Matton has researched not only Rembrandt's life and works, but also contemporary Amsterdam and the Black Death to provide an intriguing, intimate and privileged view into the painter's life.

Above all, this is Hendrickje's story. A sensitive innocent, she escapes the harsh realities of her garrison home-town to become a servant in Rembrandt's household. She soon becomes his lover and closest confidante, filling the void in his life resulting from the death of his wife and two of their children. 'Reborn at twenty' in Rembrandt's studio, enlightened by the positive values of beauty, truth, love and art, Hendrickje is fated to discover the hypocrisy and fickleness of Amsterdam society, which ostracises her and precipitates Rembrandt's final collapse.

In a serene, sensuous style of writing, Matton paints a powerful fictional portrait of this impassioned relationship in the fascinating context of a turbulent era of Dutch history.

'This incredibly affecting work is both a story of a great, troubled, bohemian love affair and a hugely detailed historical portrait of a tumultuous period.' *The Scotsman*

'Matton digs deep into Stoffels' psyche . . . her writing is as beautiful, honest and emotional as the portraits of her subject which, of course, is just the way it should be.' *The Big Issue*

'Matton deserves some reflected glory for this lyrical and well-researched "memoir".' *The Independent*

'This book is a work of art in itself. It will make the average Dutchman blush with shame that any Frenchwoman knows more about our culture than we do.' *Telegraaf*, The Netherlands

'The writing is as careful and subtle as the master's paintings.' *Magazine Litteraire*, France

EXTRACT

He's put down his brush and palette. He comes out from behind the canvas, his steps coming towards me. Approaching me, his hand grows, it smells of blue pigment and a mixture of oils of cloves and poppy seed. Then it replaces a lock of my hair, stroking my ear as it passes. I look down at the floor; no, I won't let you see the drops of pink perspiration under my eyes and above my lip. You lean towards me. A great shadow, you close in on me.

. . . I pose now for Rembrandt. For hours I stare out of an open window, gazing far beyond my thoughts into nothingness, or into the dark depths of the kitchen; I spend hours not moving, leaning on a broom handle, just changing my weight so the cramps pass from one leg to the other. Time stands still, my body grows cold. In his paintings, I'm born again.

I can hear him sniffing the paint, the sour odour of the oils cooking. His brush stirs the paste about on the palette, spreading and scratching the wood or the canvas. Then he comes over to me, one hand under my chin, wanting to see his model closer to. His eyes wander, reshaping my face, which changes colour. I'd like to leave my pose and put my arms around him, around you.

SYLVIE MATTON is the author of a previous novel, *L'Econduite* (1997). With her husband, the artist and filmmaker Charles Matton, she worked for two years on a feature-length film on the life of Rembrandt, which was premiered in Britain in 2001.

TAMSIN BLACK is a freelance translator and lives in the French Alps. She studied French literature in London and Paris, where she was awarded various prizes and scholarships. This is her first translation of a work of fiction.

A Father's Affair

Karel van Loon

Translated from the Dutch by Sam Garrett

'A whodunnit of the heart, compelling, touching and peculiar.' *Michel Faber*

What happens to the father of a 13-year-old boy when he discovers that he has been infertile all his life? That intriguing question is the starting point of *A Father's Affair*. On his quest to discover the biological father of his son, the protagonist, Armin Minderhout, takes the reader on an extraordinary journey, one in which he is forced to reconsider everything he has ever believed in. When he finally finds out the name of his ex-wife's lover, he wonders whether his best friend Dees hadn't been right all along: 'It may be harder to live with the answer than to live with the question.'

With the page-turning suspense of a 'whodunnit', *A Father's Affair* probes the eternal question of how well we know the ones we love. Touching, at times extremely funny and erotically playful, it is a story of universal appeal – a stylish, acutely insightful and utterly captivating read.

'Written in a passionate, charged style. The novel leaps forward as if spring-loaded . . . an exciting, very moving novel written with great talent.' *De Volkskrant*, Netherlands

'Don't miss this passionate story about love, grief, sex – and the relationship between father and son . . . van Loon is wise, funny, entertaining and profound. If you want to be reminded of what it means to be human, read *A Father's Affair*.' *Bergensavisen*, Norway

'A small masterpiece . . . compelling from beginning to end, tense and witty.' *Elsevier*, Netherlands

'Van Loon applies himself to a classical literary theme and gives it staggering light.' *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, Germany

'Completely original . . . combines the finest elements of a psychological thriller and literary read.' *Elle*, France

WINNER OF THE 2000 GENERALE BANK LITERATURE PRIZE

Extract from the jury's report

The most remarkable aspect of *A Father's Affair* is the insouciance of its tone. Although the plot is dramatic, the structure complex and the subject-matter at times philosophical, the novel has a lightness that one might almost call miraculous. The book appeals to the imagination, is titillating in a somewhat rough and masculine way, and creates music. All this happens at the same time, yet the book is never over-wrought or a strenuous read. Even the more scientific extracts are elegantly incorporated, at times so virtuoso that they attain a humoristic quality. Karel Glastra van Loon is very good at writing ordinary sentences, which in their coherence have an extraordinary effect. The novel touches the heart, evokes smiles and laughter, and captures the reader's attention on every page. The intensely charged atmosphere makes reading this book a very rewarding experience. The novel is a compelling read, but also continually throws the reader off-track. That is a rare combination. The story is dramatic and moving, but never sentimental. The descriptions of the characters' relationships are proof of the writer's psychological insight and

sensitivity. The climax is as surprising as it is convincing. In short, the book has style.

KAREL VAN LOON is the author of two bestselling novels and a collection of stories based on his travels which was shortlisted for the ECI prize. He has travelled widely as a freelance journalist and television programme maker. He lives in Amsterdam.

SAM GARRETT has worked as a literary translator as well as a freelance journalist. His recent translated works include *The Cave* by Tim Krabbé (Bloomsbury) and *Silent Extras* by Arnon Grunberg (Secker).

I'm Not Scared

Niccolò Ammaniti

Translated from the Italian by Jonathan Hunt

WINNER OF THE 2001 VIAREGGIO-REPACI PRIZE FOR FICTION

The hottest summer of the twentieth century. A tiny community of five houses in the middle of wheat fields. While the adults shelter indoors, six children venture out on their bikes across the scorched, deserted countryside.

In the midst of that sea of golden wheat, nine-year-old Michele Amitrano discovers a secret so momentous, so terrible, that he daren't tell anyone about it. To come to terms with it he will have to draw strength from his own imagination and sense of humanity. The reader witnesses a dual story: the one that is seen through Michele's eyes, and the tragedy involving the adults of this isolated hamlet. The result is an immensely powerful, lyrical and skilfully narrated novel, its atmosphere reminiscent of *Tom Sawyer* and Calvino's *Italian Fairy Tales*.

'Ammaniti is a born story-teller (as one would say when faced with the incomprehensible dribbling of a football player or the unreachable high notes of a singer). And like a football player and singer, it is futile to ask why they are so talented, so we won't ask him why he writes . . . we'll just limit ourselves to admiring him, hoping he will continue in the future.' *L'Unita*

'The fine qualities, the real surprises in this novel lie in . . . giving the reader the heat of the burning summer seen through the eyes of a child who allows himself to be overrun by the matters of the world and who, little by little, becomes aware of being able to do something.' *La Repubblica*

'Readable in one breath . . . moving, impressive, amazing. It reminds you of Italo Calvino, but a Calvino warmed by a humanity that is not afraid to roll around in the mud . . . A deeply Italian novel, set in a very authentic south Italy, just as everything in this novel is authentic, painfully tangible in its odours and its childhood malice.' *Panorama*

EXTRACT

The Scardaccione family was the richest in Acqua Traverse.

Salvatore's father, Emilio Scardaccione, the lawyer, owned a lot of land. Loads of people, especially when it was harvest time, worked for him. They came from outside. From far away. On trucks. On foot.

Dad too, for many years, before he became a truck-driver, had gone to do seasonal work for the Avvocato Scardaccione.

To enter Salvatore's house you went through a wrought-iron gate, crossed a courtyard with square bushes, a very tall palm and a stone fountain with goldfish, went up a marble stairway with high steps and you were there.

As soon as you entered you found yourself in a dark windowless corridor that was so long you could have cycled down it. On one side there was a row of bedrooms that were always locked, on the other was the hall. This was a big room with angels painted on the ceiling and a large shiny table with chairs round it. Between two pictures with golden frames there was a display case containing some precious cups and glasses and some photographs of men in uniform. Near the front door stood a medieval suit of armour holding a mace with a ball bristling with

nails. The Avvocato had bought it in the town of Gubbio. You couldn't touch it because it was liable to fall over.

In the daytime the shutters were never opened. Not even in winter. There was a musty atmosphere, a smell of old wood. It was like being in a church.

Signora Scardaccione, Salvatore's mother, was very fat and barely five foot high and wore a net over her hair. Her legs were swollen like sausages and always hurt and she only went out at Christmas and Easter to go to the hairdresser's in Lucignano. She spent her life in the kitchen, the only well-lit room in the house, with her sister, Aunt Lucilla, amid the steam and the smell of *ragù*.

They looked like a pair of seals. They bent their heads together, laughed together, clapped their hands together. Two big trained seals with perms. They sat all day long in two armchairs which were worn out, checking that Antonia, the maid, wasn't making any mistakes and not resting for too long.

Everything had to be tidy for when the Avvocato Scardaccione came back from town. But he hardly ever came back. And when he did he wanted to get away again.

NICCOLÒ AMMANITI was born in Rome in 1966. This is his third novel and he has also published a collection of stories. His books have already been translated into French, German, Spanish, Greek, Russian and Polish and *I'm Not Scared* has been sold to 15 countries. At thirty-four, he was the youngest ever winner of the prestigious Viareggio-Repaci prize.

JONATHAN HUNT was born in Portsmouth in 1951. He has taught at the universities of Munich, Cambridge and Turin and has worked as a literary translator for several years. He currently holds a research post at Turin University and divides his time between Italy and Britain.

Bénarès

Barlen Pyamootoo

Translated from the French by Will Hobson

'Redolent of the canvasses of Edward Hopper, the ghostly silhouettes of Beckett or the most pared-down writing of Camus or Faulkner.' *L'Express, Paris*

Bénarès takes place over one evening, an evening in which the narrator joins his friend Mayi on a trip to Port-Louis. Their mission? To pick up two prostitutes with the money Mayi won playing poker the night before.

This journey from, and then back to, Bénarès, the small Mauritian village in which they live, becomes symbolic of everything in the lives of these two young men. Very little happens and the travelling is done as much in the mind as it is on the road.

Out of the simplest of journeys, Barlen Pyamootoo has constructed a beautiful, immediate tale of remote lives, vividly evoking his birthplace and portraying, with subtle humour and pathos, the universal need to connect and share a sense of one's place in the world. The result is an ambiguous, touching and troubling debut novel by a writer of exceptional talent.

BARLEN PYAMOOTOO was born in Mauritius in 1960. In 1976 he moved to Strasbourg where, after completing his literary degree, he because a part-time teacher. In 1994 he returned to Mauritius where he currently runs a publishing house. His second novel, *The Tower of Babel*, will appear in France in 2002.

WILL HOBSON is a translator and contributing editor to Granta. A graduate of the Ecole Nationale des Chartes, his translations include the winner of the 1997 Prix Goncourt, *The Battle* by Patrick Rambaud, *Sans Moi* and *Taking It to Heart* by Marie Desplechin and *The Blue Wolf* by Homeric.