



Blackberry Heaven

Plot Summary

Nebesa v robidah (Blackberry Heaven) is a novel in stories that come to life as raindrops, in medias res, passionately, wildly, sometimes peacefully, lazily, at other times euphorically. The novel surprises with a range of narrative styles and poetics, from situation comedy to countryside humour, from urban quarrels to post-war difficulties, along with wonderful love stories.

At three o'clock in Amsterdam, Jana, a young Slovenian student, Bepi, an old Italian fisherman, and his sacred fish with whiskers and a white belly, meet at a flea market. Each of them carries a piece of the novel and these pieces intertwine wildly.

Jana, a girl from the Slovenian countryside and a student in Amsterdam, is forced to babysit a Chinese-Dutch child to make a living. Jana carries within her stories from the Slovenian countryside of the early 90s, from the period right after the declaration of the independence and the middle of the harshest transitional rush. She was a member of the last generation to become Yugoslav Pioneers, at the same time bowing to the pressure of her schoolmates and signing up for the religious education. The author plays humorously with the sacred/profane duality of the countryside during the Yugoslav socialism (time of Jana's childhood), combining it with the reality of Amsterdam (Jana's present). We meet town clowns, the old grumpy post woman, conservative president of the local community, the Newcastle troubadour Geordi, the Turkish neighbours, the Chinese grandmother of the child she is babysitting ...

And then we meet Bepi, the old Italian fisherman, born sometimes between the First and Second World War in Latisana, lost his parents under unclear circumstances (wild post-Second World War times) and then went on to travel the world. Bepi's stories are tales of travels in South America, seeking gold, sacred fish and sacred rivers, Asia and Mekong, Peruvian old ladies with long hair and a blond he fell in love with. Bepi is now in Amsterdam, taking care of his seven-year-old granddaughter, whom her mother simply shipped to him from India.

And now? When the young Slovenian student Jana, the old Italian fisherman Bepi and his sacred fish with whiskers and a white belly, meet at a flea market in Amsterdam at three o'clock, the consequences may be ENTIRELY UNFORSEEN.



Sample Translation
(Prologue + first pages of Part One)

Nataša Kramberger

BLACKBERRY HEAVEN

Novel in Stories

Translated by Polona Glavan

She bought apples instead of a bicycle.

Three kilos, twelve apples, and the woman at the stall laughed along with her raincoat.

- They're even better when it rains.

In Amsterdam, at three o'clock, raindrops were falling over the world and on the raincoat.

Puddles were growing over the bridges and over the market.

Thieves were selling bicycles by the canals:

- Fietskopen!Fietskopen!

She bought apples instead of a bicycle.

Her great grandfather was a musician, playing horn at baptisms and funerals.

He grandfather was a grave digger, and a bailiff for TV subscriptions before that. He would seal TV sets of those who did not want to pay and of those who did not like to watch. He did it with tape and wax.

Her mother wrote funeral speeches. And read them, sometimes wearing a black blouse and sometimes black shoes.

She did not know where to look when the bus came and its door opened. She pushed her backpack and her bag inside and her mother said:

- Got the money?

Instead of nodding, she remembered that elderflower was about to blossom. Then Lojz passed by and screwed it all. He asked if they had a sip of brandy to spare and her mother told him to wait, and she was looking at the elderflower and at the birches and at the slope and down the long road, and then Fanika shouted after Lojz:

- Will you stop begging, you goddamn fool,

and then the driver stopped being kind to them too, let's get the hell out of here, he said, she did not even make it to the bus, she did not even tell her mother that she had enough money, and besides.

And besides.

And besides.

And it was always like this.

...

...

But what really matters is, her mother said on time, that you always carry a kaleidoscope in your pocket.

She bought apples instead of a bicycle. Three kilos, twelve apples, and the woman at the stall laughed. Her raincoat laughed too, and it was raining in Amsterdam, it was raining cats and dogs, and she said:

- Where did you pick these, madam, these deliciouses?

Everybody had gone away, my, how it poured, washing down on Amsterdam so that it would melt had it been not made of stone, the lady was shaking her head, she did not understand any English, she did not understand any Slovenian, she understood nothing, just Dutch, and she was all soaked anyway, I'm sorry, miss, she said, I don't understand.

Then she gave her a bicycle bell, she did not really have a clue why, but it did not matter, my, how it poured, and she went.

Standing in the rain with apples and the bell in her hand she was looking over the wet bridge and saw a man at the end selling a single fish.

Living, living.

With whiskers and a white belly.

If you went through the Pakaraima range to the mountain of Ayanganna, you would come across the river of Potaro flowing to the river of Essequibo. It passes over the waterfalls of Kaieteur and, by the waterfalls of Tumatumarum, brings plenty of gold and diamonds. At the Tumatumarum waterfalls, men and women and children sieve gold and diamonds and sometimes, there in the Potaro River, among the mulch and the gold, they become surrounded by holy fish, with whiskers and white bellies.

- Señor, are you alright, señor?

If you went to the mountain of Guosongmucha in the canton of Zadoi in the autonomous prefecture of Yushu in the province of Qinghai, you would come across the river of Zajaqu, which becomes the river of Lancang Jiang, also called Dza Chu, the rock river, crossing the province of Yunnan, which means south of the clouds, and changes its name to the Mekong, where fishermen once caught a huge river beast, with whiskers and a white belly, and then ate it, because the beast was holy and it made them live longer and made their lives happier, too. None of the fishermen knew where the Mekong, called the holy river, came from, because the Mekong crossing the province south of the clouds and Tibet before that and the province of Qinghai before that springs in the mountains far and high and covered by snow. So nobody knew for a long time where the holy river sprang and how it was called at the very beginning. Not long ago, only a while back, it happened that some travellers, following eagles and ducking from avalanches, went all the way to the spring and said that there was no doubt, the Mekong was first called Zajaqu and came from the mountain Guosongmucha, which is in the clouds.

- Señor, are you alright, señor?

Nobody goes fishing in the holy river of Urubamba under the holy mountain of Macchu Picchu in the rainfall, because the river is mighty and waters are wild and Inca spirits take the fish for themselves and for their Inca sons, raising currents taking them underground and to the sky. Any man throwing its float in the river at such time would be damned, along with the float, he would get carried away by the holy river of Urubamba under the holy mountain of Macchu Picchu, the Inca spirits taking him underground or to the sky. He could not see the current under his feet, he could not hear the rains coming, and he did not know where to look when the old woman shook him so hard that it made him sick to his stomach:

- Señor, are you alright, señor?

Instead of nodding he remembered that grapes were about to ripen at home. Then the rains came over him, even more rains, and the old woman told him to wait. Then she rose and she was like a dove, shaking her head like a dove and rolling two long plaits of black hair in her fingers and tucking them under her hat like a dove. Then she went away.

- Eat, señor, eat,

the old woman was good to him, peeling boiled potatoes and putting them on his plate, and then there was another old woman dressing his leg and the third old woman keeping guard of his float as if it was magical, as if.

As if.

As if.

And so on until the departure.

...

...

Old women by rivers are important, he thought at the time, because of their links with other old women.

At three o'clock she stood in Amsterdam with the apples and the bell in her hand, looking over the wet bridge and the man at the end was selling a fish, a living fish, with whiskers and a white belly.

- Oh, sir. How much for this fish?

- Oh, miss. How much were these apples?

- Oh, ... a fortune for a kilo.

- Oh, ... , for four apples?

Oh, she said, we can play maths as well, sir, we can do Playful Arithmetic and finger multiplication, we can stand here speechless until the rain stops, and if we let your fish go now that the world is so watery it may indeed swim up to the sky.

Oh, said the man, sorry, miss, I see, pardon me. Are they any good?

- Even better when it rains. So how come it's alive?

- What, the fish?

White, whiskered and a zigzagging tail, and if you looked at it at the right moment and through a kaleidoscope, it said:

- Now what?

PART ONE

In the afternoon

the sun would always slant over the church and the clock would always read ten past two. It was ten minutes behind, the clock on the church tower, and they would play at the village stream, something resembling a cesspit, down there under the bridge which was once almost carried away by the flood and could not be passed for two days. Grandma still gets vertiginous when she has to cross bridges; back then, the water carried her from the church to the chapel and took her left shoe.

In the afternoon the sun would always shine over the stones on the stream bank and algae got fried if thrown over them. The two of them stood right by the water, the first one said, now what, and the other one said: don't worry, I know how it's done.

They were a funny combination by all means, both from the first A grade, and sometimes they went to the stream. The first one was a little short-sighted, she wore silly red glasses on a silly string, which was, according to the optician, extremely practical for little children and no hindrance in games. The other one was a small mouse from the sacristy, she wanted to become an altar boy but was not allowed because she was a girl.

In the afternoon they would go to the stream and as they were frying algae, the one from the sacristy said, listen, how come you're not christened. Jesus, will you listen to yourself, said the bespectacled girl, I'm just not (she had no clue about how to explain that her mum celebrated Tito and built the plumbing system throughout Benedikt as a member of a voluntary socialist youth brigade, while her dad, also a red, believed in the theory of religious rape, as he called the christening of two-month-olds). So you don't have a mum and dad, probed the little Christian, we all get the holy mother Mary and the father God when we're christened. My mother's name is Mary, too, said the bespectacled girl and the church mouse punched her on her nose. You really don't know a thing, you don't even have a name, you stupid, all people on Earth are given their names by God at the holy christening.

So the first one said, now what, and the second one: don't worry, I know how it's done. At ten past two by the church time the sacristy mouse yelled, in the name of the father and son and holy spirit I christen you with the God's name Saint Jane. She poured half the stream over her head, which made Saint Jane's hair smell of cesspit for the next three days. The Earth got a new God's child and the sun was still slanted. But I don't want to be Saint Jane, said the child. When you're two months old, nobody asks you what you want to be either,

said she who knew how it was done. Anyway, as if it matters, the name is but a mere formality.

In the evening when the sun was gone the church tower clock still read ten past two. Doing exercises from Playful Arithmetic, Saint Jane thought, blimey, that poor creature was really badly hit by the religious rape.

Two days later at ten past two she enrolled in the religious class out of mere formality. Mother Mary almost saw the Lord with shock.

In the afternoon

she always brought lunch in pots from her job and the little one was always home. There were three, the pots with lunch, and today it was mashed potatoes with chicken stew. All teachers were given school lunch as a part of their salaries and for all family members; they could eat it in the school dining hall or take it home. The school dining hall always reeked of overcooked pasta and pig hooves and the old cook would always force too much on her: take it, take it, for the lil'un to grow.

She stood in the centre of the kitchen in her flat and the lunch pots were steaming. Under the window, Zastava 101 was steaming, too, the new washing machine still sticking from the trunk and four men arguing around it. Plugs, said the school caretaker, engine, said the gym teacher, water, said Roškarič. She put the lunch pots on the stove and cursed the plugs which had burned out, and the engine which would not start, God knows why. She fetched sparkling water from the balcony, took wine from the fridge and brought spritzers to the men.

- Hinko!

The old cook howled from the school, Hinko!, you lazy drunk, come and change the gas tank. The caretaker took a glass of spritzer and downed it, phew, watery, he leaned over the engine and dragged on his fag, yes, yes, plugs/engine/water, for sure, then he straightened up, swung the glass towards the lawn and sent the last drops of water and wine flying, let out a cloud of smoke and raised his hand towards the cook, hey, will you stop yelling!, I'm coming in a sec. Then he raised the glass to her to get another spritzer, more wine – less water, while the other three lifted the washing machine from the trunk. There was no customs control, it was their deal with Drejč, had the smoke not risen from the hood just behind the border, it would have been over in no time. Fortunately the road went downhill

from the Austrian border, they let the engine run idle, got pulled for a while and only the last hill required a bit of a push.

The washing machine glittered on the lawn in front of the block of flats and the neighbour was delighted. His wife had had twins and now they had a new washing machine, from Austria, they had smuggled it in a 101 and with the help of the right mate on the border. They had also smuggled washing powder, a twenty kilo bag, and a litre of fabric softener. To our health, he howled, to mates.

She poured them another round – spare plugs are under the seat, Hinko – and the old cook once again shrieked from the school:

- You goddamn bastard, if you don't come this minute I'll stick the gas tank down your throat!

The caretaker did not mind her any more, he changed the plugs, topped up the water and oil and the engine started. He waved his empty glass over the lawn, well, I told you, plugs it was, he flung himself flat on the lawn and lit a cigarette. He left the engine on so that the 101 was running idle for a while. The entire human contents of the building had gathered in front of it by now, the washing machine was sparkling white like the laundry and nobody could understand how they could fit it in the trunk of the 101.

- Tied with one rope only! By God...

She picked up the empty bottles and went back in. The pots with mashed potatoes had grown cold and the flat was full of chicken stew. She glanced at the clock: I've got to collect the little one from my mother's, how-lucky-that-the-car-started. She turned on the gas on the stove, minimum flame to stop the potatoes from burning. She fixed up her hair, on the way, with two blue clasps. She prepared plates, three, the girl was not eating. The girl had already had lunch at school, with her mates, after the classes, she should have been home by now: I went to buy a small lined notebook and then I went to the religious class with Natalija and Simona.

...

I went to buy a small lined notebook.

And then I went to the religious class with Natalija and Simona.

To the religious class.

Re-li-gious.

...

The church tower clock read ten past two, the inhabitants of the building were having a party in front of it and the girl left a note that she had gone to the religious class with Natalija and Simona.

Mister

priest was very young because the old one had kicked the bucket, this is when grandma had taken her to the church where they all sprinkled the dead man with wet twigs placed in the bowl of water. Grandma said that the water was holy because it had been blessed and that the twigs came from an olive tree growing at the seaside. Everybody around the dead man was praying and some old hags were crying. Then the altar boys brought a smoking dish and the church started reeking. Grandma crossed herself and one of the hags passed out.

The young priest wore a black tunic and a wooden cross on a chain over it, he stood by the door to the presbytery controlling whether everybody had put on their slippers. She did not bring them, blimey, Natalija and Simona had not said a thing.

- Why did you leave your bag at home, you should have brought it with you.

- Mister priest, she has no slippers.

- Mister priest, tell her that she has to go in barefoot.

- Mister priest, look at my new earrings.

The church mouse stood right in front of the priest and stepped on her toes. She had her ears pierced in Maribor last Saturday and the holes were festering, but it would go away in two weeks. Her earrings were small and round with diamonds in the middle. Not real, fake, like in the movies.

- Mister priest, she hasn't been christened.

She took off her shoes and went on barefoot, she almost said good afternoon but just managed to catch what Simona had said, the floor was covered in mud because of yesterday's rain and she had a hole in her sock. Holding the small lined notebook in her hands she stood by the church mouse and looked at the priest, who was very young and wore a black tunic and a wooden cross on a chain round his neck. He nodded and smiled at her. Without knowing why, she took a little bow, bending her knees ever so slightly, and said like everybody else:

- Praise Jesus.

- Madam,

she said to me, be careful or it'll be the same as with my sister, when her husband died she forgot to take his money from the bank and after half a year they took it all, there were twenty years of pension on his account and it all went to the dogs, be careful, madam, right, but your husband drank,

right, such people spend it all, she said to me, she did not even shake my hand, and anyway, I had an Ikebana in my arms, fourteen yellow gerberas, and I cried like a drunk on the grave...

Astonished she stood in the middle of the kitchen, bringing new and new tissues and finally a toilet roll. She was perfectly quiet, leaning on the stove, while the black clad widow was crying, sobbing, crying, shrieking, talking, talking, she was leaning over the table, over essays collected today in the fifth grade, over tests and over the newspaper of the teachers' union, Mrs Marija, Mrs Marija, no offence, please, but I feel like hanging myself.

The bell did not ring and the knocking was too silent, as the door opened, she stood in front of her wearing only her bra, she was changing the Hoover bag and the apron with the logo of the socialist youth brigade action snagged against the radiator. Sorry, she said, I'm cleaning the flat.

The woman at the door was just staring at her, covering her mouth with a black handkerchief, tears running from her eyes. Mrs Marija, she said, I feel like hanging myself.

She was the former mistress of her son, eighth year, her first generation, the boy had an F in maths and was very good at gym, he wanted to be a policeman, Mrs Marija, Mrs Marija, we're left all to ourselves, he left us the whole farm, thirty bulls and fifty pigs, I feel like... No offence, please, Mrs Marija.

She said, don't be silly, she made Turkish coffee and sat down next to her. The woman must have been still young, her eyes were immensely blue and terribly terribly deep, she put away her essays to stop the ink from smudging even further, she threw away two bulks of tissues and said:

- My condolences.

Turkish coffee was slowly settling in the cup, the silence was good to them, the widow was staring blankly, sobbing in short intervals, thanks for the coffee, she said once, I really needed it, and once she remembered that she had to buy a hundred watt light bulb at the store.

- The whole neighbourhood laughs instead of helping us. Why I let him go to the pub each evening, but it's not true at all, he wasn't a drunk, Mrs Marija, he put up the farm all by himself and he loved the little one so dearly, he made him the owner of the new tractor so as to make the boy more fond of the land, and now the boy's got an F in maths and it's already the second semester...

She couldn't have been much past thirty, no, no, she must have been her own age if not even younger (oh God, with the son in the eighth year), her eyes were so blue, terribly terribly deep, and if she wasn't crying her face would have been astonishingly beautiful. She told her, feel free to call again, we'll have a chat, and please don't worry about maths, the boy's smart enough. The woman got up and turned towards the living room, she watched bookshelves and said almost voicelessly:

- Mrs Marija, no offence, but may I... borrow a novel or two. I used to read... and now my nights are... lonely, anyway.

The dismantled Hoover still stood in the hall and two bags lay beside it, one empty and one full of dust. The apron with the logo of the socialist youth brigade action was hanging on the radiator and the bell tower clock read ten past two. None of them knew what to say but they were not embarrassed, they looked eyes to say goodbye, everything was silent, in the middle of the hall,..., when there was a bang outside on the staircase and the door jerked open:

- Mum, mum, the priest's angel got stolen from the altar.

In the morning,

once in a fortnight, she would go to the store and to the post office. She would put on her leather shoes and blue suit, tying a scarf on her head. She would put a leather wallet in her leather handbag, as well as bills for electricity, water and television, and a linen handkerchief. For the last three months, she would add spectacles for the near-sighted. Just in case.

- Pep, I'm going, Pep!

She went to the pantry to collect her shopping basket and spread a cotton cloth on the bottom, putting the bag on top. She looked in the mirror; a lock hung loose on her forehead, still raven black. She fixed it up, on the way, with two blue clasps. She wiped her face with her handkerchief, oh-my-God-how-I'm-sweating. She picked up her bag and the basket and set off.

- Pep, you hear me, I'm going!

She locked the door and placed the key under the asparagus fern. She walked down the stairs slowly, clutching the banister and followed by all nine cats, one of them had had kittens only the day before, God knows where they were, the cat must have hidden them over the stable.

- Oy,

shouted Pep, from the pear tree, plum tree, tractor or lime tree, from God knows where,

- Going yet?

The road down the slope was not paved and the gravel had been washed away by the storm. Going up the hill she passed the stable and the lime tree, the walnut tree, and found Pep standing by the cesspit.

- Will you stop shouting, you goddamn fool, I can't even see where you are.

Then she laughed at him and he laughed back at her. Bugs were buzzing around the lime tree and chickens were scraping in the dung. One of the cats had followed her and now it stopped in the sun. Pep touched his right brow with his index and middle fingers, briefly, as a sign of salute. He had a linen worker's cap on his head and beads of sweat had collected in his laughing wrinkles. She went by down the ruined road, slowly, holding the shopping basket in her hand.

The sun was shining on the stable and the gravel, tarmac starting at the bend. The cat turned and came back, bugs were buzzing in the lime tree. Still holding the fork in his hands, he now leaned on the handle. He could see her in her blue suit, from the bend to the willow, past the chapel and as far as the transformer. Then came another bend and she disappeared behind the cornfield.

God

bless, she said, the small office reeked of dampness and paper, which made her sneeze each time she stepped inside, achoo, bless you, achoo, God bless, the fat postwoman at the counter was stamping letters slowly, Mima Kraner and the Štefaničes were queuing, Easter cards, this year's, stood on the stand. They were the same each year, rabbits, eggs and golden inscription Blessed Easter Holidays, last year they had first offered the musical kind, with music which started playing when you opened the card and stopped when you closed it.

She closed the door and the queue opened in curiosity, Mima Kraner stepped towards her immediately, with the leather bag in her hand, God bless, she said, you come to collect your pension. The young postman behind the counter went mad at the old postwoman, where the hell have you put the parcel for the Žerjavec, I placed it on the shelf just a while ago and now it's gone. The postwoman stopped stamping, watch your tongue, young lad, she shifted a little in her chair and continued stamping.

And she said, God bless, achoo, God bless, achoo, bless you, Mima Kraner took three cards from the stand and came up to her, God bless, you come to collect your pension.

- You haven't chipped in yet, have you? I'm doing it today, I came to the post office to see how much pension I'm getting, and then I'm taking it there, it won't do, we're two and the pension's only one.

- Chipping in for what?

- For the priest, for the angel. Goddamn gypsies, Mara told me she'd seen them hanging around the sacristy, I told her, why on earth didn't you shoo them away, stupid hag, they've got no business hanging around the sacristy, so help us God, no more than a month before the first communion and no angel at the altar. How lucky we've got such a young priest, he'll fix it soon, though I heard, you know, that he'd been kicked out of his previous parish for drinking, but he doesn't look like a drunk to me, he's such a good talker and supposedly good with kids, he's too good, why, no wonder he got robbed. What was I trying to... you haven't chipped in yet, have you?

The young postman found his parcel under the counter, right by the postwoman's feet, and his moped had conked out outside because he'd left it on for too long. Now how the hell am I supposed to start it, watch your tongue, young lad, what was I trying to... you haven't chipped in yet, have you? She took the handbag out of the shopping basket and the wallet out of the handbag, how much for these cards, she asked Mima, I've got to write to my sisters in Germany. The Štefaničes were just finished and the postwoman said: next. Oh, that'll be me! Mima jumped up, turned to the counter and said no more.

-God bless, how much for these cards?

When the postwoman paid out her pension and wrapped two cards with white envelopes and stamps in the white paper – for your sisters in Germany, right? - Mima had been gone. The postwoman leaned all the way forward, even rising a bit from her chair, sighing, oh-my-God-if-only-I-was-younger, and propped herself on the counter:

- Stupid hag, thinking her pension will buy her heaven. It's only this morning that the priest told about the collection for the angel, and off she goes bringing her money. And not that she's got enough for herself, the priest said that each household should participate at least fifteen marks per member, we can't expect the diocese to cover it all, and besides we need a new mortuary. Not bad at all, the new priest, though I heard, you know, that he was kicked out of his previous parish for getting off with a girl, but he doesn't look like a womanizer to me, he's such a good talker and supposedly good with kids, he's too good, why, no wonder he's popular with women. Well, what was I trying to... when will you chip in?

Her great grandfather was a musician, playing horn and clarinet at baptisms and funerals. At the last wedding he attended he was bitten by a hornet and he died with the clarinet in his arms, in front of the bride who was young and fair and rosy-cheeked.

Her great grandfather had seven children and her grandma was the eldest.

Her grandma was the eldest daughter in the family. When she was young, she had long hair, strong as rope and black as raven, and her skin was clear like the sky. Each Sunday she scrubbed herself with chestnut soap and on the photograph taken in lower secondary school she stood under the Jonathan apple tree and laughed like heaven.

Her grandmother bore four children and her mother was the eldest.

Her mother was the eldest daughter in the family, she taught Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian, wrote funeral speeches and toasts for fiftieth birthdays. As she read them, she sometimes wore a black blouse, sometimes black shoes, sometimes her hair was permed.

She did not know where to look when the bus came and its door opened. She pushed her travel bag and sleeping bag inside and her mother said:

-Got your passport?

Instead of nodding, she remembered that acacia was about to blossom. Then Fanika passed by and screwed it all. She asked if they had a sip of brandy to spare and her mother told her to wait, and she was looking at the acacia and at April and up the long tarmac, and then Lojz shouted after Fanika:

- Will you stop begging, you goddamn hag,

and then the driver stopped being kind to them too, let's get the hell out of here, he said, she did not even make it on the bus, she did not even tell her mother that she probably had her passport, and besides.

And besides.

And besides.

And it was always like this.

...

...

But what really matters is, her mother said on time, that you do not have a hole in your pocket.

(And besides.)

- Stop, stop here, for God's sake.

- Why the hell should I stop, there's nobody waiting.

- S-top!? For-God's-sake?!

By the small hut substituting the next stop there was a car waiting and then her mother. She overtook the bus at the last moment and wore rollers in her hair. Without saying a word, she put them in her hands: her passport, her scarf, a kilo of grandma's apples.

In the evening,

at ten past eight, she was crossing the bridge over Oudezijds Voorburgwal canal when suddenly a sharp night set in instead of the cold, ssssss, ssssss, the darkness. She took the next breath just a bit shallowly, to hide a jerk of panic. Then she winked three times, long and firm, to make the darkness go away. Damp stench of piss rose from the canal and thieves were hissing: »Bikesss, bikesss.« The red light district over the bridge was no more red, just slimy and scary. The lamps by the road were silent, the stone houses were cold and trams stood still. The narrow streets grew even more zigzagged and someone started screaming like mad. She took the next breath just a bit shallowly, to hide the thumping in her veins, she squatted down by the child and said: »Don't worry.«

When Europe was out of electricity, Amsterdam was pitch black.

The silent hum under the bridge was flowing towards the sky as if the water was the only remaining living element, the occasional bicycles and their drifting lights whizzed past. The few lights on the few bicycles which had functional lights. She was squatting there on the bridge in the remote centre of Amsterdam and the child stood in front of her, his mother was Chinese and his father was African, he was born there and she was his babysitter. Looking at her under his eyebrows he pursed his lips, don't cry, don't cry, oh please, the wind was howling up the canal and black circles came up before her eyes. The child was squeezing her index and middle fingers, wearing a cap on his head. Pursing his lips he looked like a girl, and he was tiny for his two years. Looking at her under his eyebrows he waited for her to go on, until he bent his knees ever so slightly, ever so slightly he squatted and leaned forward, he leaned against her forehead so that his black curls spilled into her mouth and

her breath grew even more shallow, he squeezed her neck with both his palms and pressed against her cheeks, then turned his face up so that she inadvertently followed his gaze:
»Jana, maan!«

When you locked your bike with a single lock in this town, you really risked not to find it again. This much she was sure of, she had been looking up and down on the railing by the Oudezijds Voorburgwal canal for ages, certain that she had left her bike here, no no, here, she carried the child now piggyback now in her arms, down cycling lanes and over bridges, past streetlamps, cafes and under scaffolds, over the canals, until the child grew heavy as a stone and the city was engulfed by pitch blackness in a single moment. In total darkness she was now guessing the way to the tram stop - but they're not running anyway, they're standing still, how can we get anywhere - and cursing her lock for being so thin and just one, and thieves who had chosen her of all people. The sharp night was pressing down on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal canal instead of cold and the child was talking to her in a language she did not understand.

»Jana, maan!«

When Europe was out of electricity, her bicycle with child seat was stolen in Amsterdam.

»Jana, maan!«

He laughed at her, leaning against her cheek, looking at her under his eyebrows and pointing his index finger at the sky. Maan, maan, how come you don't understand, he was laughing and pursing his lips, his mother was Chinese and his father was African, pursing his lips he looked like a girl, in the middle of the darkness and the silence he jumped higher and higher, on the bridge, over the canal, tiny, tiny, small black curls were sliding from under his cap and he found her so funny, her, only her, on a remote bridge without electricity, he was pointing at the sky, Jana, Jana, it's the moon, the moon, maan.

When she first came to baby-sit in the house at Overtoom street he was four months younger and even tinier. She entered and he greeted her by her name, "Tag, Jana," as instructed by his mother for the whole day. He stood still in the opposite room, she was at the front door, he stood a long time looking, looking, looking, first from behind the doorframe, then from behind the closet, from behind the sofa, uncertain, he made another three steps towards her and when she did not stir he ran to her in a childlike gallop, tugged at her palm, down, down, and planted a wet kiss on her face. »Jana!« When his mother was gone, he was crying until she put Lion King in the DVD player. He sat down on the floor in

front of the TV, with tear-stained cheeks and a red nose, barefoot, with pursed lips which made him look like a girl, he pointed his finger at the lion cub on the screen and then he never cried again. Soon he noticed that they did not speak the same language, sometimes he would explain things in Dutch, sometimes in Chinese, sometimes in an African dialect, and she would reply in English, in German, in Slovenian, he would repeat after her and grow, teaching her to repeat and understand, the words, the sentences of extreme importance, say eat, say drink, say Lion King.

»Maan, maan, Jana, maan!«

In Amsterdam without electricity the silence was unbearable and echoes were dull. The water rippled under the bridge so that she found the city even more unstable, as if the bridges wobbled on the water, in all that darkness, in all that emptiness. She got a terrible fit of vertigo and felt as if she was about to be taken by the flood: it would carry her from the red light district to the tram and take her left shoe. Suddenly there was nobody left in the streets, no steps, no bicycles, no cars anyway, these do not run in the centre of Amsterdam. She looked at the child who now tugged at her index and middle fingers all impatient, and before she could feel a fit of panic – now-what-now-what – it finally dawned on her that maan meant moon.

When the city was illuminated by lights and neon signs, all that was left of the sky was a brown fog, smear, filth, smog. If you looked up after a clear day you could sometimes see that the air was ripe for stars, but these always dissolved in the city lights and you really could never tell whether it would rain tomorrow or another sunny day was due. The child was dancing on the bridge, laughing at her, she feared that he would fall down on the road after all this revelry, him breaking something, that was the last thing she needed! She ran after him and picked him up, leaning against the railing by the road they looked up, at the sky which was totally totally black, with black black clouds scattered all over it and hanging over the shy shy, white white, silver silver... moon. It was but a bit short of full and if there were no clouds the whole city would glitter silvery. She was standing on the bridge over Oudezijds Vorburgwal canal, not having a clue about how they were going to make it home, as the boy was watching the moon his eyes were closing and his lips were pursing into a smile. The hum under the bridge was rippling towards the sky as if the city had shaken in its foundations, bicycles were tied by the canal locked with two or three locks, with two or three chains, the lamps were silent and candles were flickering in the windows.

When Europe was out of electricity, Amsterdam was much more romantic than otherwise.

»Baby, baby, bikesss?« The voice hissed from the darkness, coaxing and totally stoned, the junkie was bent forward and the bicycle was not too bad, fifteen euro, brakes alright. She got sick with the sudden weight of the child, he had fallen asleep in her arms and every now and then he slipped to one side, to the other, like a sack of wheat. The junkie came right up to them with the bicycle, big wheels, crossbar pointing down, she should have grasped it by the handlebar, she should have grasped it firmly so that he could not snatch it back once she had paid the money, once the notes had been in his pocket, you have to grasp a bicycle firmly so that junkies do not snatch it right back, so she had been told, so she had been advised, so the guidebook had said, it had also said that one should not buy stolen bicycles, never buy them because it was against the law, illegal, it meant supporting stealing junkies, thieves making money, the turnover, never buy them, and anyway, the bicycle is without a dynamo and the light doesn't work, and where will you put the boy, you can't hold him in your arms and pedal in the dark, she got sick with the weight of the child, he hung over her shoulder like a sack of sand, she turned to the other side, "Bastard," she spat at the guy as she remembered her lost bike and everything, "Bastard," and off she went, without thinking, on foot, straight to the red light district.

Corseted ladies were lighting candles in the windows and tourists lit their way with bicycle lights and pimps had long-life torches and the red light district was vibrant and loud and bright. The air was still slimy and scary, but a bit less sharp and a bit more alive. People here found the power cut amusing and a drunk was howling like mad, hysterically waving a rainbow PEACE flag over his head, to our health, he howled, to the end of the world! The muscle in her left shoulder was jerking painfully and the child was sliding lower and lower, weighing three tons, lower and lower as he was sleeping.

At Nieuwmarkt square a herd of citizens bleated frantically in front of the metro station, from the metro station, in the metro station, police were signalling with sirens and animal panic spread across the square. What was attacked and by whom, the metro standing still. The second herd of citizens was still caught in the train underground and firemen went down to the tunnel to get them out. Someone saw a rat, I swear, half a metre, I swear, eyes like walnuts, smirking in my face!

She stepped towards Amstel street, on damp cobblestones, past a disgusting façade with faces made even more scary in the scattered light, its arch reminding her of Kraner's hut which had been gone.

Back when she practised piano, at the school by her home building, when she was seven and even eight, alone, in the evenings, because she did not have a piano at home, the village darkness was black like death. Each time she left the building she tiptoed into the night. On the road, in the valley, there was no living soul to be seen, only frogs and owls, oo-hoo. Bushes pressed towards the road and you never knew what was behind them. She only had to go fifty metres and she ran, ran, ran, each time, from home to school, up the stairs devoured by fruit trees, up, up, up, to the platform, to the school door, she unlocked it with the key she had got from the school cleaner, an old and kind woman, she opened the door and locked herself in and the bushes out. The school hall was dark and long and the light switch was right on the other side because electricians had made a mistake in their plans. In pitch darkness she ran past the door of the first grade classroom, second grade classroom, past the door of the boy's room and the girl's room, as she felt the staircase rising on the right she could also feel the switch. Light.

The music classroom was on the second floor and the light switch was always at the end of the hall and on the top of the stairs. She was completely out of breath, up the stairs, down the hall, up the stairs, each time in the dark, as far as the next switch. The staircase was three times wider than by day and three times longer, too, and insidious silence stood behind her back. The halls were three times higher than in the broad daylight and dragging on forever. When she finally reached the next switch on the floor above, the neon lights came on slowly, flickering and lazy, bzzzzz, oblong tubular bulbs glowing a bit pale but enough. She waited for the beam of light to reach across the staircase and then ran back, to the switch below, to turn off the lights on the lower floor.

When you practise piano, at the school near the block of flats, when you are seven and even eight, in the music classroom, alone, in the evenings, because you do not have a piano at home, when neon lights are on in the classroom and it is pitch black outside, the notes at first seem too bold to press the keys with all your strength. You are all alone in a hollow room, at an enormous school locked in pitch blackness. So you sometimes press on the foot pedal of the piano, which makes all sounds a bit quieter, totally quiet, only that the pedal of the school piano was broken and only half functional. The pedal makes the notes a bit milder

and the sounds rhyme with the night outside in the village. When you finally forget about everything in the brightly lit classroom, you release the foot pedal and the piano resounds at the top of its voice, the G major scale penetrating the window panes so that it can be heard over the square in front of the church, making your playing the soundtrack of the village evening. The child's prelude from the classroom on the second floor plays on the empty lawn, dark, in the bushes, black, over night gardens, music, in front of the pub, in the fields, in the meadows, by the stream, in Kraner hut, which is scary, and in front of the bus bringing late workers and big pupils from Maribor. Sleepy passengers step off the bus to the black village and as they walk home on gravel paths, past the lush bushes and wild forests and fruit trees, the piano is playing, do re mi fa so la si do, the black F sharp key out of tune because someone struck it for so long that it got broken.

When piano plays in the dark, in the silence of the village, it can be heard much farther than otherwise.

The music classroom had to be locked. The key had to be taken to the faculty room. The faculty room was on the third floor. Beside the faculty room there was the attic. Darkness. In the attic there was a skeleton. She saw it once, when the school secretary went looking there for some felt tip pens she was supposed to take to her teacher. The skeleton was bony and therefore dead, hanging on a stand under the sign: HUMAN. She hung the key to the music classroom on a little hook in the faculty room, feeling like screaming with terror. She watched closely: the door to the attic remained closed. Do re mi fa so la si do, she ran downstairs, do si la so fa mi re do. Out! She locked the school with the key she had got from the school cleaner, an old and kind woman. She closed the door and locked herself out and the skeleton in. On the way home she was smirked at by Kramer hut, which was old. It had two arches looking like a muzzle and threatening to devour her. When she was fourteen and came home one Friday at three, the hut had collapsed by itself. Forever.

»Biii-biii-biiiiib!« She burst on the first road with cars and circles of light rose before her eyes. Amstel street in the middle of Amsterdam was glittering, long beams, short beams, brake lights and fog lamps, cars illuminated the atmosphere and gathered in a queue in front of traffic lights, black. The boy in her arms slid down to the other side like a sack of cement, in a nervous traffic jam it was utopian to look for a taxi or bus, she took a deep breath and crossed the road to the bridge over Herengracht canal running parallel with Amstel street and barricaded behind the lapse of light.

How tall they are, the houses of Amsterdam, how narrow they are, so close together that you cannot tell where one ends and the next begins. If there are candles burning in their windows, their shadows stretch over the ground and the other side of the canal, up the cramped facades, narrow and long, one next to the other, one within the other, how they swallow one another up, the houses of Amsterdam, when there are candles burning in their windows and there is a power cut outside.

Carrying the child in her numb arms she crossed Herengracht canal and Keizersgracht canal and Prinsengracht canal. Then she stood still. Vondelpark rose before her, spacious like Amsterdam, in the night which stuck in her throat like a fishbone. The boy was still sleeping, soundly and with the weight of hundred tons. Damp frost now struck besides the sharp darkness and fog wafted from the endless black park opposite her. Decorative bushes were now stretching towards her and the child, and long boughs and fruit trees and grim maples and birches, black. Then thin tones came from there, from somewhere in the middle, like from beyond, uiii, tuiii, liiii, out of fog and darkness, thin whining, uiii, rippling. The sound was followed by the image. The entrance to the park and an elderly artist in front of it, wearing a purple tunic and a cross on a chain round his neck. He sat cross-legged on the ground, his fingers rubbing the rims of about a billion crystal glasses filled with water to the half, to the quarter, to two sixths.

Thin, thin glasses, narrow, narrow rims, fragile, fragile crystal, "Miss, a city serenade, just for you!", uiii, tuiii and liiii.

She could not feel her arms anymore and the child slid down even further, weightless when asleep. She winked three times, long and firm, to make the artist vanish. But he was still there and screams and shrieks were rising from behind the bushes, someone was singing the Ode to Joy and a trumpet was playing a march. She looked up, towards the moon, but it was behind the clouds, blazing bats juggling over the park instead. Vondelpark was taken over by circus people or fools and beasts, uiii, tuiii, liiii, "Miss, a city serenade, just for you!" she took the next breath just a bit shallowly, to hide an imminent explosion inside her, she squeezed the child and said: »Don't worry,« as he was sleeping. She turned back to the Nassaukade ring road, uiii, tuiii, liiii, the cars whizzed past with glowing lights, biii-biii-biiiiiib!, she stood on the very edge of the roadway, with the child in her arms, waving, fanning her arms, stop-stop-stooooop!, and when an empty white taxi finally pulled up, she said: thank you very much, dank u wel.

(And besides.)

- Stop, stop here, please.

- Here? we're not there yet, miss.

- Stop, please stop now...

By the tram stop she leaned against the street lamp, gasping for breath. She just managed to jump out of the car before she was sick, the night had stuck in her throat like a fishbone and some disgusting taste made her guts turn, the taxi driver was smoking Lucky Strike, the heater was set to the maximum, the scent of vanilla was wafting from the freshener and the child had peed warmly in her lap. When nothing would come out of her anymore, she lifted her hands: just a moment, please, I've got flashes in front of my eyes.