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LITTERÆ  
SLOVENICÆ  
*Slovenian Literary Magazine*

11/2019/LVII/148

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Sebastijan Pregelj: *A Chronicle of Forgetting*  
Original title: *Kronika pozabljanja*

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*Print run*  
500

*Published by Slovene Writers' Association, Ljubljana*  
Dušan Merc, President

Ljubljana 2019

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji  
Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

821.163.6-311.2

PREGELJ, Sebastijan

A chronicle of forgetting / Sebastijan Pregelj ; translated from the Slovene by Rawley Grau ; with an afterword by Tanja Petrič.  
- Ljubljana : Društvo slovenskih pisateljev = Slovene Writers' Association, 2019. - (Litteræ Slovenicæ : Slovenian literary magazine ; 2019, 148)

Prevod dela: Kronika pozabljanja  
ISBN 978-961-6995-59-7  
COBISS.SI-ID 302862080

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*A Chronicle  
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by Tanja Petrič*

DRUŠTVO SLOVENSКИH PISATELJEV  
SLOVENE WRITERS' ASSOCIATION

LJUBLJANA 2019



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Eventually, usually, everything basically comes out even.  
In the end, normally, everything is basically all right.



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*Part 1*



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## An Unusual Assembly

**A**n unusual assembly of people has gathered at my funeral. Even from a distance you can tell they don't go together. Or maybe they do. Maybe the fact that they are so different from each other makes them go together even more. I don't know. This diverse assembly, no more than twenty people altogether, forms a semicircle. In front is an open grave, and in the concrete niche, an urn. There are some ashes in the urn. That is all that remains of me.

The people who have gathered here were dear to me. I loved each of them in my own way. Some I have known a long time, others just a short time. But time doesn't mean so very much.

Standing right in front is Konstanca. A tall, beautiful woman, she is wearing a long black coat that would be too warm in the middle of the day, when temperatures still reach twenty-five or more degrees Celsius, but in the morning it makes sense. In her right hand she holds a lace handkerchief, which she uses to wipe away tears. Every so often she gazes at the sky, as if searching for me up there; then she lowers her eyes and again stares at the ground.

Next to her is her daughter, Rina. She's here because she doesn't want her mother to be alone on a day like this. She's afraid for her. She thinks that the loss, the void I left behind, cannot be good for her. In the past few months her mother has told her a lot about me,

about us, about our plans. Rina didn't take her mother entirely seriously, but she didn't tell her that. She gave her no indication that she found it hard to believe what her mother was saying. But she was glad that her mother had met somebody, at her age; she was glad that her mother had found a new friend at the nursing home and had no time to retreat into the past. Before the move, Rina had worried about how her mother would accept her new home, even though they had talked about it countless times and agreed that there was no other option. Also, Konstanca was healthy and strong; only her memory had started playing tricks on her and those anxieties had come which come with old age and are nothing special if you take them for what they are. Rina's main concern had been that her mother wouldn't find the right company, that she wouldn't fit in or make friends with the other residents, and would more or less be alone and lonely. She was afraid that her mother would withdraw and gradually lose herself in memories. But as things turned out, there was no reason for her to be afraid. Konstanca made new friends and had less and less idle time. Eventually, she was checking her watch even when Rina was visiting. If Rina asked if she needed to be somewhere, she'd say no and in the same breath ask her to stay a little longer. Rina got the message and couldn't help but laugh. She was happy and had no more worries. But now the worries and fears are returning. Rina feels them coiling around her neck and slipping down her spine, all the way to her pelvis, then down her legs to the soles of her feet. But she will never say anything about this. Instead, she'll come for longer visits; instead, she'll try to cheer her mother up or at least distract her with stories.

A few steps away is Adam. He was an intern when I first met him; now he's the director of the law firm.

I love Adam like a son. Adam has been glancing at Rina. He's wondering who this woman is, although in fact he knows. He likes her.

Standing between Adam and Rina is a gaggle of old people. Maks is in front, bareheaded in a green track-suit. He's holding a chess set under his arm. He mumbles that we are falling like chessmen. Not a good match. But we're not giving up, he thinks with resolution. Beside him is Franc, a kind of assistant to the caretaker. Franc keeps thinking about the chores waiting for him at the home. There's plenty to do. He hopes the funeral won't take too long. He hopes that after the funeral they won't make him go out for coffee. Although coffee would be nice, but not at the cemetery snack bar, where everything smells of chrysanthemums and death. While he's thinking this, his stomach starts growling. He's hungry. He thinks about how undertakers don't give much thought to the living, only to corpses. If they thought about living people, they wouldn't schedule funerals so early in the day. When's a person supposed to eat breakfast?

Next to Franc is Bernard, an artist who has just had the idea of adding a new cycle of paintings to his body of work; he'd call it, *We Are Here. Alive*. It's possible to stand up to death, he thinks. Just look at us! He feels excitement in his chest, a slight itch in his fingers. He can hardly wait to get home, put a piece of board on the easel, and start painting right away. He would paint the faces of the living. Of course, he concedes, death will win in the end, but until then, there are still lots of living people I can paint. And the paintings will remain and bear witness to the fact that we once existed.

Next to Bernard is the duty nurse who has been assigned this morning to accompany the residents. I have never seen her before. I don't know her name.

She seems friendly and patient. There are a few more people behind the duty nurse. They keep to the back because if they stood next to the grave, death would be too close.

To the left of the grave is Musa, who is from Sudan, a cook. He says that, ultimately, what's delicious is simply having something on your plate, and that love tastes the same everywhere. Next to him is Rabia, from Pakistan. She has shiny lines on her cheeks from crying. To her left is Makemba Alisa, from the Central African Republic. Makemba Alisa is swallowing back tears. At one point, her right hand cautiously seeks out Rabia's hand. Then the two women hold each other, as if to instil courage and strength in one another.

Behind Makemba Alisa is Joseph, a Filipino; he repaired the television a few days ago. It's an old television, but it worked perfectly for a long time. Every evening, after the doors were shut and life settled down, Musa would sit in front of the TV and watch cooking shows. He'd watch them late into the night. He couldn't believe how many cooking shows there were; he loved the channels where master chefs from all over the world did nothing but cook all day. When the television stopped working, Musa was beside himself. He didn't tell anyone that he missed watching TV, but we all knew it. His eyes were sad, and his words were few and dry. Even the food he prepared had a different taste; it was bitter. Franc and Joseph opened up the television set and looked inside. Joseph found some diagrams on the internet, and then a shop that sold parts, and ordered some. In less than a week, the postman arrived with a small package. Now that the television's working again, Musa, just as before, watches cooking shows every evening late into the night.

Next to Joseph is Luminita. Luminita is from Romania. She is considered a missing person. She hasn't

done anything to make the officials who compile the lists think anything different. She told me she doesn't want to change her status, especially now when, after such a long time, she is breathing and thinking more easily again; now that she finally feels alive again. She told me she feels as though she put everything weighing her down in a big suitcase, which she left in a locker at the railway station, and then, on the bridge guarded by four copper dragons, she threw the locker key in the river, where it was eaten by a fish, which was eaten by a bigger fish, which was eaten by an even bigger fish, and so on, from the river to the sea to the ocean. Luminita is holding a bouquet of summer wildflowers in her right hand; she picked them this morning in the meadow behind the home. Her wrist is sore from holding them.

Next to Luminita is Vesna, the social worker sent to us from the centre. She is a young woman, not yet twenty-five, and looks even younger, with the face and body of a child. She has big, frightened eyes in the middle of her face, like a deer's. She completed her studies a few months ago but, like most young people, wasn't able to find a job, so now she works as a volunteer. She hopes that this will give her the experience she needs and maybe in the future lead to a chance for full-time employment. Vesna and Luminita have become close in the past few weeks. Vesna doesn't seem as shy as usual, and a few times I saw Luminita with a smile on her face. Vesna has to pee. She's wondering if she has a bladder infection. She went to the bathroom before leaving the home and now has to go again. How awkward. Where can she find a toilet among all these graves?

Standing apart from everyone else is a young man. He stands there a while, then wanders over to a nearby bench and sits down. From there he watches the assembled group. If Aida, the cleaning lady, had come to the

funeral, she would remember him – at least once she saw him leaving my room very early in the morning. She doesn't know who he is. I didn't tell her. I myself don't know who he is. The man seems satisfied. He is thinking that in the end everything is basically all right, that everything basically comes out even.

When the funeral music starts up from the loudspeakers, it interrupts everyone's thoughts. They all look straight ahead; they're waiting for what's about to happen. One of the four uniformed men who have been standing behind the grave walks up to the microphone and, as his job requires, says a few words. Then he runs his eyes over the gathered crowd, as if checking to see if anyone has something they want to say. He silently counts to thirty. Since nobody steps forward, he turns to the men behind the gravesite. At his signal they join him. They stand there in silence. One of them is holding a wooden pole with the national flag, which he waves a few times over the open grave. Then he rolls the flag onto the pole and the men leave.

The people who have gathered here gaze out in silence a few moments more. Each of them is wondering if it's over now and they can leave, or if they should really stand there a little longer out of politeness.

The old people are shuffling their feet as if the ground is cold and the chill has penetrated their shoes, but actually it's fear. This morning it wasn't death who came to them, but they who came to its garden, as if to provoke it, to invite it to stop by again sometime. Mostly they are thinking that it's a good thing this is behind me. People are not afraid of death; they're afraid of the pain of the final moments. And they're afraid of not knowing where they are going or what it will be like there, if there is anything there, and if there isn't, then what? For me, who has crossed the threshold between

here and there, they think it's a good thing regardless. Besides, I was lucky. I died in my sleep. People want to die in their sleep, but most of us don't have such luck.

Makemba Alisa, Rabia, Musa, Luminita, and Joseph are also shuffling their feet; they too are quivering from the morning chill.

Only Konstanca stands quietly and does not move. Rina is patient. She stands next to her and waits. Every so often Adam glances in their direction. He had decided to walk over, say hello to Konstanca, and meet the woman who is with her, but not now. It will have to wait a bit.

