

An abstract painting of a woman's face in profile, facing right. The face is rendered in shades of green, yellow, and blue, with dark, expressive lines for the eyes and hair. The background is a deep blue with some lighter, wispy clouds and small white dots. A grid of thin black lines is overlaid on the lower part of the face and neck. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

Transfigured Night

Libuše Moníková

Translated by Anne Posten

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Afterword by Helga G. Braunbeck

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of the libretto for Leoš Janáček's *Věc Makropulos*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Libuše Moníková (1945–1998) was born and raised in Prague. She studied English and German literature at Charles University and wrote her doctoral thesis comparing Shakespeare's and Bertolt Brecht's versions of *Coriolanus*. She left Czechoslovakia for West Germany in 1971, and she would teach literature at several universities there. Upon publishing her first novel in 1981, she began to devote herself to writing full-time, going on to publish six novels (one unfinished), a number of plays, two volumes of essays, and a documentary screenplay. Although her work features a strong connection to Czech culture, she wrote in German, saying, "I adore Czech. That is why I write in German - I have the necessary distance from it which makes it possible to write about things that touch me directly." This intellectual and emotional distance was especially valuable for her first novel, *Eine Schädigung* [An Injury], which concerns the rape of a young woman by a policeman. Her third novel, *The Façade*, was published in English in 1991 and hailed as "wildly imaginative." In her writing, Moníková combines her encyclopedic knowledge of world history with artistic techniques from film, music, painting, and dance. She died in Berlin and is buried at Alter St.-Matthäus-Kirchhof.

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1.

Malovanka, Marijánka, Drinopol: the third stop from Po-
hořelec, formerly known as the “Memorial of National
Literature”; the names have been changing in quick suc-
cession for a while now. Strahov Monastery was given back
to the Premonstratensians as part of the restitution; who
knows how long the National Literature will stay there.
The old name Pohořelec—scene of the fire—has remained,
a reminder of the frequent blazes here in the suburb of
Hradčany. I get off. The 22 tram continues on, past the
“Chestnut Tree” inn where the Social Democratic Party was
founded, on to the Street of the Pioneers, home to the old-
est male monastery in Bohemia and St. Margaret’s church,
toward Bílá Hora, “White Mountain,” where the army of
the Bohemian Protestant nobility was destroyed in battle
in 1620. Last stop.

After November 1989 the Street of the Pioneers was
renamed Patočka Street in memory of the philosopher Jan
Patočka, co-founder of Charta 77, who died at seventy of a
stroke after eleven hours of questioning by the StB, the se-
cret police. A police helicopter rattled above his funeral in
the cemetery of St. Margaret’s, drowning out the speakers.
Anyone who approached the cemetery was filmed, anyone
who wanted to enter had to show identification and was
put on a list.

I get out at Drinopol, maybe from *drnopal*: “wood-burn-
er,” “coal-maker”—there might have been a charcoal pile
here once. I never used to think about names at all, they
were taken for granted, if not always clear; back then this
unclarity was familiar. Now I’m not sure of a single word. I
cross the street, past the inn on the corner, and up the steep
steps to Strahov Hill. Here the streets continue upward at
a more leisurely pace. The building I’m looking for is on my
downhill side, I can already see it. Never lose altitude: old
mountain climbing wisdom.

I haven't been in this area for a long time. I continue along the ridge. The streets turn into paths: narrow, convoluted, ending in orchards and shrubbery where refuse has collected. Plastic, discarded bottles. There's hoarfrost on the rusty green grass. An icy staircase, the railing broken. I pull myself up using grass and brush, avoiding branches and thorns. The familiarity of old shortcuts and cut-throughs—overgrown trails, crumbling stairs, blocked paths, no winter maintenance: enter at your own risk. Who else's?

I reach the stadium.

There's also another way, when coming from the city. Via Petřín, the *Laurenziberg* in German. This could have been the site of Josef K.'s abandoned quarry; now the ground has been leveled—a vast plain, with one of the largest stadiums in the world, surrounded by three smaller ones and other athletic facilities. The stadium stands on the far side of Petřín, facing westwards, away from the city, not visible from the Charles Bridge; from there you can only see the observation tower. This panorama path behind the observation tower, with the Vltava in the valley and the slopes and orchards of the Malá Strana at one's feet, is pretty.

The third way, the shortest, leads behind the Memorial of National Literature, running parallel to the Hunger Wall, directly to the stadium: a wide street, *Spartakiádní*, with the defunct Dlabačov station, where special tram lines and rerouted trams brought gymnasts to the republic's greatest sports festival every five years for weeks on end.

The tracks, the platform islands still exist, the stairs that lead, via iron bridges, to the Street of the Spartakiad. No more trams run along turning loops. Sometimes a defective tram car is parked here and then disappears; no one embarks.

The stadium is abandoned, as are the paths between the various facilities: Street of the Walkers, the Runners,

the Discus Throwers, the Fencers, the Riders, Street of the Athletes, the Motorcyclists; the simplicity of the names suits the size of the complex. The gates, closed off with barbed wire and security fencing, still feel gigantic. The bleachers, which I reach after climbing over multiple barriers, are decrepit, the benches and steps broken, the concrete brutally bare of plaster, as if the building is meant to keep the masses in check—Piranesi's *Carceri*, not designed for humans, airier but similarly dismal under the overhangs.

I hear cries from a thousand throats; soldiers streaming in through the portals at a gallop, their bare upper bodies sweaty with heat and exertion, their skin gleaming in the sun.

Strahov Stadium, where I twice tumbled as a school-girl at the "National Spartakiad"—that mass gymnastics festival so beloved by the Communists. The first time with a cube: red for girls, yellow for boys. Since we weren't evenly split in my class, I was a boy for gymnastics purposes, with a yellow cube, red gym shorts, and a white tank top. Strahov Stadium could hold 16,000 gymnasts and 220,000 spectators, which regularly made the Soviet delegations—I never saw a Russian walk through the city alone—pale with envy. The performances were sold-out throughout the Spartakiad.

My mother sewed and pasted together my first cube out of gray cardboard. It became so weak and dented from all the holding and tossing that several times it caused the cubes stacked on top of it in a pyramid to come tumbling down. Then I finally got a proper cube for the performance—in the wrong color.

The highpoint of the gymnastics show was always a stunt in which the whole group created a design, the tumbling bodies at rest, the gymnastics equipment pushed together—then the next movement, from inside to out, from

left to right, and the mosaic would unfold into a new design for the spectators in the stands, a kaleidoscope of insipidity accompanied by swelling music from the loudspeakers and versification. About the beauty of our country, about peace, the threat of war from the West, and how we had to be ever on guard. Then running back to the white place markers, pivoting, and doing the next figure, cubes raised.

The second time, five years later, as a *dorostenka*, an “adolescent,” with a white plastic hoop: similar movements, similar patterns, just less angular; we were fifteen. Outside of practice we used the hoops to experiment with hula hooping.

As we marched through the gates, Slovaks and Moravians among us—for many of them it was their first visit to the capital; the next group already streaming out of the barracks in the heat, gathering for their performances, the children wound up: crying fits, diarrhea, sunstroke, thirst—I read the motto over the portal: Socialism has triumphed here! From then on we weren’t just the ČSR, the Czechoslovak Republic, but the ČSSR; it was 1960.

Every level of society and all ages participated in the Spartakiad: pre-school children hopping around a maypole with their leaders, or those in the alternative program with their parents, illustrating their carefree daily lives, and pensioners who didn’t want to be left behind, former head gymnasts.

The gymnastics of the women: forty- and fifty-year-old workers and employees who met regularly after work to practice their routines, pressured and spurred on by the factory’s squad leaders, but also taking perceptible pleasure in the change of pace, in moving their bodies, away from their families and housework. Their program was even simpler than the hoop routines; their props were colorful cloths, stuck into their elastic belts. The more advanced

among them swung clubs, but the movements were the same.

For a year we practiced once a week, at first without music, then intensively in the last six months. Regular gym class in school was cancelled: no ball sports, no pommel horse, no races. We stood on the place markers and waited for our entrance; then run two meters to the left, turn, two meters to the right, turn, pivot to the left, pivot to the right, lift and lower the hoop, roll it over the back of the hand, run to the left, to the right, back to the marker, turn. The real task was finding the right marker again at the end.

Only when watching other groups—we were given a few tickets to the morning shows as a reward—did it become clear how many slip-ups there were, how many strays who couldn't find their markers; the others went on with the routine, the lost ones ran to and fro, trying to push others off their markers, sometimes it was *their* marker. And the deputy secretaries in the stands, heavy from long sitting, watched this frenzy in ecstasies, clapping with enthusiasm and emotion.

Choreographers, composers, and poets earned well from the state commissions, likewise the industry that provided the uniforms: leotards, tricotine skirts—red, with dashed white flowers, elastic at the waist, the same size for all adults; special sizes were snapped up immediately. The skirts were worn even in the city; the closer to Strahov, the more scantily-clad the women.

The people in gym shorts could be seen on the streets: *dorostenky* in short jerseys, who thrilled the soldiers looking out the barracks windows of Hradčany; but old women too, workers with varicose veins, their bellies spilling out over too-taut belts, flabby thighs and upper arms, sweaty armpits, laughing, walking through the streets in collective euphoria as if it were the most natural thing in the world. In their Moravian slang, they called out to each other:

“baby!” and “děčka!”—“chicks!” “kiddos!” After the district and regional Spartakiads, Strahov was the highpoint, their homeland was a vast place.

The shamelessness was contagious. Women, who performed trivial movements and hops in the stadium, united in their anxiety not to make a mistake, laughed giddily when they were teased by the men outside.

The Spartakiad was a celebration of exhibitionism, awakening the used-up, lifeless bodies.

What was striking in both sexes: the varicose veins, the statewide predisposition to weak connective tissue, the various levels of wear and tear.

The women, broken by work—by family, children, and men. The men, broken by beer.

The young people looked different.

As an alternative to routines with hoops, there was a mixed program with girls and boys together, with gymnastic interludes, technically more challenging. All participants had to be able to do at least simple flips and be in good shape, the tempo was faster.

“*Zapalte ohně na horách, zapalte ohně v lidských srdcích!*”—“Light fires in the mountains, light fires in human hearts!” An emphatic female voice recited the introductory verses, the tribute to *our* Slovaks and their national uprising, with allusion to the traditional fires in the Tatras, cherished as shared folklore—then drums, and the gymnasts swarmed out, spread across the whole field. Riotous applause: even the entrance was thrilling. At the end, near evening, they lit their torches, more impressive than our hoops.

But the soldiers were the highpoint. In white gym shorts, tanned for their performance. The closed circles of bodies turned in opposite directions: the inner circle to the right, the outer to the left, their limbs wove into the base of a pyramid, the next ones climbed onto their shoulders,

forming a second level, then another circle, a third level. And at the top stood someone who jumped; he climbed up the bare shoulders of the others and jumped, and his comrades below formed a corridor and caught him. Over the years several people died during training and plenty more were hurt: badly caught, the white shorts transformed into mud-smearred tatters over the course of the performance; the program was only interrupted in the case of heavy rain.

Pictures kept secret for thirty years show faces contorted with effort and pain, feet crushing the fingers of those beneath them, slipping into faces and pulling hair, smushed noses, gashed eyebrows, bloody foreheads. The hundreds of thousands in the stands stood in their places and shouted in rapture.

At the first Spartakiad in 1955, the bleachers were lined with emblems made of papier-maché, the crests of the people's democracies: the Polish flag drawn as a coat of arms, next to the Romanian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, East German, Chinese. The huge letters, legible from far away: *CCCP*. Next to every crest waved the Czechoslovakian and Soviet flags, in close communion.

Folklore ensembles danced on the lawn as a prelude: women with three or four skirts layered over each other, and embroidered bodices, starched blouses, boots, bows in their hair. Accompanied by cimbalom and violin music. Folklore—that was something from Slovakia and Moravia; Bohemian folklore had never been very fiery.

Recordings from the fifties, recently shown on television, provoked a wave of emotion and enthusiasm, so that the program directors considered running them a second time, accompanied by explanatory, off-putting commentary.

The living images of the Spartakiad. One could have made different images than bouquets and pyramids out of the thousands of bodies all devoted to the shared cause: flags,