

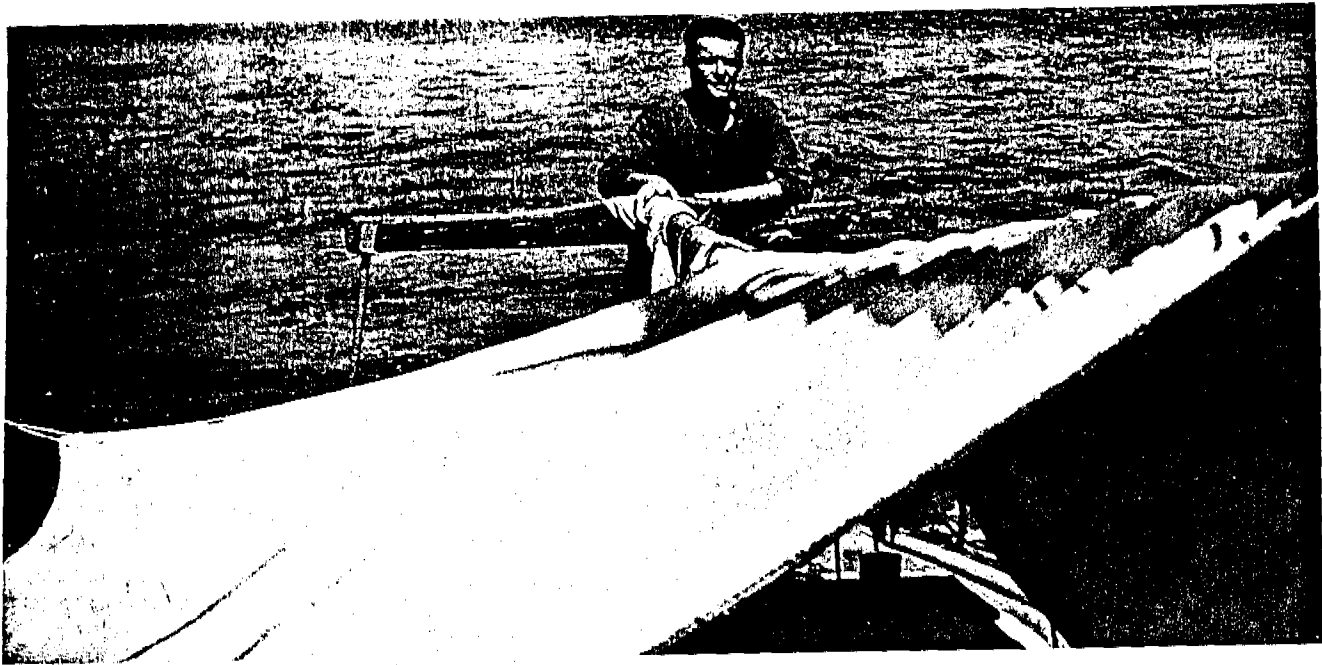
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# DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN

## *The Other People on the Moon*

(Grebeni)

Antun Šoljan



**T**he more Angel and I sailed, the dirtier the sea became; or perhaps it was just that we saw it all the better. Our eyes, once misted by sleep, had been rinsed by disappointment, by a deluge of worthless fragments. The rubbish of the ages, not a bit better than that of today.

Ever longer and thicker patches of oil floated on the surface, and the bottom was ever greyer with washing powder; instead of jelly-fish, transparent plastic bags bobbed across the layers of the sea. The headland was smeared with a layer of crude oil. Along the shore were tins, pieces of paper, gnawn bones.

The sea sparkled, but it was from the broken bottles on the bottom.

I recalled that at school we used to pride ourselves on the Adriatic dustman. He was something like an ecological Veli Joža to us. What we filthied during the day, he would nicely take away to Italy by night. So we could be as filthy as we had a mind to be, and our sea was always clean as clean; while in Italy, it was all somehow dirty. We were getting our own back for the Venetians, for Zadar, and the rest of it.

But today, if all the ecologists in the world, however many of them there are, were to take brushes in their hands, they still would be able to do nothing with this coastline. Obviously, Italy has no sea left at all, just a puddle. But it turns out that they are messing us about again: with the

help of the Po and their industry, they're dirtying our sea, especially in the north.

Nobody ever mentions the Adriatic dustman any longer. We often wonder what will become of it. Of the sea, the land, of all of us? There's no answer. Soon there'll be not only no bays to swim in, but no air to breathe. Beside the filthy waters of the Adriatic, we sat down and wept.

»The sea,« I said to Angel, »will gradually get filled up with waste; new geological formations are taking shape on the sea bed, the remains of our civilization, whole drowned cities with washing powder sifting round them, already waiting for their future Schliemanns. Or at least

for us. The collectors. The Plyushkins.«

»Maybe we shouldn't be wasting our time on amphoras,« said Angel practically, »but be turning right off to plastic bags and beer bottles. Empty bottles are already more expensive here than anywhere else in the world.«

The sea, I thought, would get filled right up to the brim, and everything would be land. The globe would be as smooth and flat as an apple. All the contour lines would coalesce in one inextricable net. There would be nowhere to go.

»It's only when you stay a long time in one place,« I explained to Angel, »that you can really see how the world is going to the dogs in front of your eyes.«

In Rovinj, the Adriatic dustman had long since given in his notice. Now we have just the one marine dustman, a genuine one though, in his place. Appropriately, he is called Drago Muljo, and for as long as he's been on the job everyone has imagined that it is a nickname. But it's his real name. Every morning at six o'clock he reports for duty; he wheels his dustcart down to the sea and with his great rake drags from the sea duty-free liquor cases, broken fish crates, bags full of trash, and driblets of tar that float like the suckers of underwater monsters.

Like the Adriatic dustman before him, Muljo is not satisfied with his social position. He will shortly either give in his notice or resign from his Herculean tasks. So tiny in the face of the great sea and its filth, Muljo curses in hexameters and pitilessly swipes the sides of the yachts anchored in the port with that great rake of his, so that the sleeping beauties let out startled cries and the terrified owners shoot out of the hatches.

»Dirty pigs,« thunders Muljo, picking out just one of the plastic bags from among the thousands floating there, one that had attracted his particular attention on this occasion. »Fascist bastards. I'll give you a Ballantine in your balls. Too bad, Tuborg. They're all stuffed to the

gills, do nothing but piss and crap. You're ruining our sea. Oh, for a bout of rough weather to drown the lot of you.«

And in fact, in answer to Muljo's particular prayer, a bit of rough weather from the north does come now and then to help him in his work and drive all that trash towards Italy, right back up the Po for them. Then Drago Muljo will strut in front of the whole town, as if he had personally picked up every little piece of muck.

But as soon as a *maestral* blows, all that trash flows back into the harbour. Muljo is waiting for it, solid as a rock, and knows his old foes.

»That's the third time this week that crate has been here,« states Drago. Perhaps it is just that all rubbish is the same, and there is so much of it that it seems to be repeating itself, or maybe it goes in a circle, circulating the whole globe. And only Drago Muljo is left to grapple with it.

I trust Drago Muljo to do it. Who else could I trust anyway? There is no one else. We have picked him, and given him the job. He in turn has put bouts of rough weather in charge. And this is the only chain of responsibility we can see. All the rest is just airy-fairy.

Unless perhaps one day the Great Dustman should really come down from up there; maybe he's even now rolling up his sleeves for the work, to send down one terrifying bout of rough weather to clean the whole world of filth. Once again the sea will be clear, the shores virginal, the woods green, the sky blue and the air pure. Sometimes I feel the urge to stand at the edge of the sea, like Drago Muljo at the edge of the harbour, to raise my hands to the sky, to call down that rough weather, to have it scatter all these turds.

»Zec, Zec, don't talk rubbish,« said Angel. »Clean sea, pah! You can't make a living out of that. What else are we doing now but burrowing in rubbish? They threw it out then, we are throwing it out now; there were just fewer of them. But what a crowd there is now, mate. It's terrifying, how many of us there are. And there's such a general pillage; so

grab what you can while it's your five minutes. And whatever goes by the board, let it go to bloody hell. There's always one and the same question: how to get yourself in on the universal grab. Clean sea, who cares, we'll swim in pools. There has always been a mass of turds, the question is how to get out on to the surface from under them. Other people are going to be fighting tooth and nail, and we'll make out we're too polite; they'll be drilling for oil and we'll be protecting the environment. What is so bloody marvellous in this shitty world; the whole universe is open before us, we've only got to take it.«

»We should have gone in for astronautics,« I said, »and not amphoras.«

»Anything,« said Angel, »anything except amphoras.«

He was dissatisfied with our entirely unspectacular results. He could have said like Cortez: I came for gold, and not to plough the earth like a peasant.

»Do you remember that Ferda?« asked Angel. »Konjović? Konjhodžić?«

His questions had a hallucinogenic power. Ferda's forgotten, gingery, freckled face emerged from the magma of memory.

»He's as rich as a pig,« said Angel. »Wallowing in loot. Made it on the new roads.«

»What roads? Didn't he read law or something?«

»Read! Fellow had a gift for roads. Eagle's eye. As soon as they began to build a new road, he'd be able to guess all the places along the route where there'd be accidents. Other people bought plots along the road to open bars, but he bought what they call the black spots. Summer comes, and he's right on the spot. The foreigners fly off the roads right into his arms.«

»What are you saying? You mean he robbed the dead?«

»That too, that too. Stripped any worthwhile pieces off the cars. Had a network ready for it. But that's not all. The survivors, if there were any,

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got a complete service. Package deal. Bed. First aid. Legal advice. Buying in the wrecks. Everything you can imagine. Your clients come to your back door, all by themselves. The whole business is done in your yard.»

«Didn't they get on to him?»

«As soon as there was a suspicion, he'd move somewhere else. He had a prefab just for the purpose. He used to buy land in the names of uncles and friends. The whole trick was in mobility. As soon as he had worked out one mine, he'd be on his way to a new one, first here, then abroad. I saw him myself now when I was in Zagreb, representing, he said, some foreigners in the courts. Traffic business.»

I simply couldn't imagine Ferda in the role of prosperous lawyer, let alone in that of scavenger. Who knows, maybe he can't imagine me in mine. If he should ever happen to think of me.

Angel interpreted my abstraction in his own way.

«You just wait and see. And we'll strike it lucky too,» he encouraged me.

By now it was a little difficult to believe in that. How many places had we already crossed off the chart? We were taking them off one by one, like the leaves from a calendar. We were diving deeper and deeper, only to deepen our disillusion. Everywhere just fragments or rubbish tips.

Angel was more and more morose and nervous. We were ready to give up, but didn't dare admit it to one another. Angel dug in, and drove himself like a slave.

And now, on the Grebeni, I wasn't feeling up to anything, so I lay on a rock while Angel swam. The Grebeni are three high, narrow islands in a row between Silba and Premuda. The cross on the chart was placed about half a mile north east of Middle Greben. That's where Angel was.

Angel was swimming in straight lines, up and down, up and down, systematically searching the bottom.

How many suchlike areas had we already criss-crossed? Angel didn't have a tank; he dived now and then to be able to see better whenever something seemed to be a possibility from the surface. His snorkel threw out a little jet, his black diving jacket glistened in the sunlight. He was to come for a tank, and me, only if he saw something surefire. We had already put in too many diving hours, we'd go crackers.

I partly kept my eye on Angel, partly gazed at the sea. The occasional ship passed by on the horizon, always very far off, always on its plotted path. None of them swerved aside. None paid any attention to us. Now I was watching a power boat, a mighty twin engined beast, some Bertram or Ghibli, with a high bridge and tinted glass, swishing smoothly over the surface, trimmed with aials and white mustachios of foam, a Panamanian flag, and the long blonde hair of the tanned bird sunning herself on the bow like a figurehead. And there was an awning, an awning — and I could almost see the waiter serving drinks to the spoiled Panamanian sitting in the cockpit, scoffing champagne and caviar for breakfast. It was the boat of our dreams, but it wasn't coming for us, not even in our dreams. For a long time, I had had no influence or authority over my own dreams. The ship departed, veiling itself in its own sea-spray, a gigantic water beast, with turned up nose.

While we were messing about on the slimy sea bed, and picking up scraps. Nothing, said I, like the servant girl in the *Beggar's Opera*, our ship would come too, and with cannon. It'd pull us out of this Adriatic appendix. From the trash heap to the stars. It was a good job there was that: that the dream could come true. If only with teeth and claws, as Angel says. One day, one would come under the right flag, from the stream of beauties that was passing us by. We had to have some luck too.

Suddenly, Angel waved his arms, leaping out of the water almost to his waist, and shouted something. I jumped to my feet and looked to see what was the matter with him. If he

had been diving with bottles, I'd have thought he had got the bends.

He swam towards the shore as if in a race.

«Get kitted up, Zec,» he panted, as he floundered in the shallows on his flippers, »and say a prayer for your old man's soul. This is it, we've got it. Cross your fingers.»

«How many?»

«Tons. A whole field. An Eldorado.»

«Deep?»

«A bit more than twenty. I didn't get to the bottom. But you can see it, pieces, whole ones, handles, the lot.»

I found Angel's enthusiasm infectious. My hands were trembling as I threw on my gear. We harnessed ourselves to two twins we had filled up in Sala, and which we had had no need for since then. But we had known from the beginning; one day, we too had to be lucky. We armed ourselves with thin steel levers.

Then, like two black aircraft, through the thick green atmosphere of the planet, like two black angels dropping slowly from the sky of the surface to the earth-bottom, Angel and I dived, parallel, diagonal, harmonious as in an exercise. Angel followed the configuration of the bottom, which he had memorized.

After the rocks of the shore, there was first of all a stretch of sand and sea-cucumber beneath us, and then a region of grass, sabre-shaped, tall, zinc green. And then, unexpectedly, the grass stopped, and the bottom became rocky and cut by canyons, and dropped sharply into the deep.

Angel was wagging a little in front of me. Our armoured heads were swathed with plumes of bubbles. We circled for some time. Angel stopped, hovering, a metre or so above the bed, and then stretched out a long black arm. At the beginning I could see nothing. Some metres in front of us was a hollow, like any other, only its bottom was schistose and white.

And then, coming up, I could see: the hollow was oval, and thirty me-

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tres long, a white oasis in the dark green rocks. But what was on the bottom was not mere etched shale. It was a whole drowned city built of pots, necks, handles, plates. The bellies of amphoras rose above it like cupolas. Their shapes merged into one another in tight embrace. There was a whole relief, dancing in front of our eyes, like a colony of great amocbae. The bottom trembled in a whole gamut of colours, of silver and grey and white. As if the bottom were rising. These were those bubbles of the earth the witches in *Macbeth* talk about. The earth was turning its rich womb out in front of us. Everything around us was about to sputter, slower, burst into leaf.

But it was all rigid. Just a shoal of damselfish, with their forked tails, black spots against the white, flew above the drowned city like a flock of swallows. A dead city on the moon. And it was shaped like a crater, the hollow. I had no feeling whatever of the force of gravity.

But while I was looking from above, in the practical part of my mind it was clear to me how it had formed; the ship had gone down on the rocks, and when it had rotted, the funnel of the hollow had pulled all the cargo down into itself, and then squeezed it into this tight mass. But what did explanations matter? Lord, what there could be here. There could be anything. Cretan pots, Etruscan vases, Turkish jugs, Moorish majolica. This was a collector's ship, that had sailed through the centuries. And now we would collect the collector's treasure. I couldn't keep my eyes on one spot, they wandered hungrily over the commingled forms.

We dropped tremblingly down in two or three flipper strokes to the bottom. I checked the depth meter, time. Twenty five metres. Angel, a black and oddly coiled creature, had already begun burrowing.

I carefully touched the first piece that seemed complete. It poked out of the plaited karst with one handle and a side. It looked like a large, longish amphora, partly covered in a hard thick crust of silicates. I tried to free it, to dig it out from under

with the sharp end of the lever. But it wouldn't penetrate the karst at all. There was no sort of hole to get it in, to be able to exert my strength. I struck, at first cautiously, and then harder and harder. I only managed to scrape off a fine dust. When I tried to extricate the handle, it simply shattered, fell to pieces in front of my eyes. The bits and pieces slowly sank to the bottom.

I moved a little further off. All was petrified, overgrown with worm casts, with a thick sediment of primeval life, grown together into a mass harder than cement. It was only with the utmost effort that a piece of it could be broken off. Everything shivered into powder. I looked for any sort of opening, a beginning, a hole from which to start unravelling this tangle.

But there was no hole. Right on the very edge of the hollow even, the pottery had ingrown into the stone, was itself stone. I looked helplessly around for Angel. I saw him straining against the bottom with his flippers, attempting to break something off. He was surrounded by specks which floated in the water. Nothing. Nothing.

I held on to the rock and looked frantically at this ploughland of ours that would bear no harvesting. And I knew that there was nothing whatever to be salvaged from it.

I glanced hither and thither over the field; the petrified forms, the fossils, the sediment. Which architects of delusion had built this submarine city? Which Martians had drawn these pointless canals?

And, as in the darkest hours one needs to be something of a visionary, I experienced a vision. From this petrified hoard, in which there was nothing to be found, from the many amphora necks, as if from a whole storehouse of Aladdin's lamps, like some white smoke that twists, curls and then comes into being, our white fairy appeared in the middle of the scene of the robbery, an enigmatic smile on her face, and when she was sure that I had seen her, stretched out her hand as if to take me to some richer trove, and when I

had reached out, and was ready to confide in her again, naive as ever, I saw that the hand was showing me a large, curly, well-nigh baroque fig.

And then I knew; my visions were no mere fortuitous play of the nervous system. They were too systematic; my specific dendrites had opened unexpectedly like the petals of a nocturnal flower to give a true picture of things.

»I never have visions,« Angel had said to me, »a thing either is or it isn't.«

Lord, but what an ungrateful pig man is. I slandered our white fairy, forgetting to allow for the habitual ambiguity of her dealings with us. How else could we have stayed in her power? Like a true ruler, she always showed us a fig with one hand, and with the other fed us some morsel or other, promising that in the end she would give us something really substantial.

Angel and I were returning like a routed army, stopping sulkily at our amateurish diagonal decompression stations, that is, we were heading for the shore, and climbing at the same time, until the depth meter showed fifteen, or twelve, or nine. According to Henry's law, dangerous little bubbles of nitrogen were wandering in my blood, my poisoned, embolous blood; but in my mind, according to another and crueller law, were collecting the still more dangerous bubbles of disillusion and bitterness. Which was why I was cursing our white fairy. A witch from *Macbeth* and no fairy. I had a good mind to shoot straight out of the sea, even if I were to explode like a champagne bottle.

And then, at a mere nine metres, close to the place where the anchor of our dinghy lay, while I floated and gazed vacantly around me, the bottom underneath looked somehow familiar. Tall sabrish grass with little oases of clean sand. That square of submarine landscape I had dreamed of so clearly. And that was why I went right up close to it, close enough to touch it with my hand. Even the sea-cucumbers and snails

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were disposed exactly as in my dream.

And in the very spot I had dreamed, as if I had put it there myself in the dream, among the sabrish grass, buried in the sand, lay the handle of an amphora, the ear of a sleeping princess. I had only to stretch out my hand.

She was peeping coyly out of the sand, as befitted a maiden taken unawares. There was no doubt that I was the betrothed who had been allotted her. Her gentle little tummy made a womanly little mound under the sand.

I circled round her. I had almost stopped breathing. I glanced cautiously around, and prodded with my lever in the sand, to see if there were any more of them in the vicinity, but kept one eye constantly on her, lest she should escape. She was alone, and for me alone.

As gentle as a groom on a wedding night, I carefully began to uncover her. I tried hard not to stir up the sand too much, for it was fine and light. I stretched my fingers slowly underneath her; she was not caught anywhere, nowhere overgrown. Now she could be seen clearly in her entirety; she looked large through the mask, but she couldn't have been more than forty or fifty centimetres long. Oh, but she was ugly, my bride. She was completely encrusted, layer upon layer of mussels, worms, sediment; and completely shapeless, like a piece of the rock. Her other ear, if she had one, had disappeared completely into the mass. It was difficult to say at all what she was. But I believed it was her. I had dreamed of her.

I took her with two hands. She was rough and heavy. Her throat was shapeless, a dark, wide hole. Holding her by the neck, I turned her cau-

tiously upside down; sand snowed lightly down through the neck as if through an hourglass. We both decompressed, became free. I placed her in the crook of my arm, like an infant, and carried her slowly and ceremoniously towards the surface. At six meters, Angel looked at her, prodded her, and shrugged his shoulders.

Outside, on the rocks, Angel threw down his gear, sat on a rock and, resting with elbows on knees, looked at the sea and swore quietly. Not just any sort of swearing; he swore systematically, fundamentally, thinking up every sentence; he swore through his teeth, without raising his voice.

I placed that shapeless piece of stone with a handle on a flat piece of rock, took my narrow chisel and hammer out of the tool kit and, embracing my princess between my

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legs, slowly, cautiously, began to broach her encrustation.

Angel watched me contemptuously.

»What are you wanking about with that blessed jug for?« he said gloomily. »You're always messing about with trivialities. That's not how it's done. A whole piece of that bed has got to be cut out, and then carved up on dry land. All or nothing.«

»You need to have a whole diving team for that,« I said, chipping.

»And so? And a caisson, if necessary. Everything can be arranged.«

»It'd only be worth it if the jugs were full of gold.«

»Maybe they are.«

»It's too much,« I said absently, »just for the mere hope.«

»It's not hope that's needed. It's organization,« claimed Angel. »Modern methods, not this messing. You're like a dog, you've found a bone, and you're satisfied, gnawing.«

Angel would not countenance defeat. Maybe he had already experienced it too often. This time he drew the line. He wasn't satisfied with messing. He thought up a whole joint stock company, production lines, machinery.

I wasn't listening to him any more. I fiddled and gnawed. It was like a stone in the hands of the sculptor, full of hidden shapes. Cautiously tapping, I ran my fingers over its secrets. And I could already see what Angel could not see; under the worm-casts, the petrified algae, and the shells, under the silicon crust, there in one place, not bigger than a small coin, little spots of blue and gold glaze were glinting out of a white surface. They gleamed like patches of blue in a dreary sky. The sun could see them as well, and sparkled gratefully in the glaze.

I freed another little piece of the neck, a part of the handle. And I didn't dare to touch any more; partly so that I shouldn't harm it, and partly because it would have been blasphemy. She was just peeping out of the stone, like a female statue which

lives and blissfully nests in stone, displaying to the outside just a bare shoulder, only a gleaming hip, only to the few.

I had no need to go on; now I had eyes which could see into the stone. I had fingers which could creep under it and touch the smooth enamel. The golden stalks intertwined with cobalt leaves, and heraldic griffons inhabited this forest of ornaments, with other animals and birds behind them, lions, all in deeper and deeper regions of the glazed lustre, less and less discernible, turning at last into a mere flicker of light and shade, *bianco sopra bianco*. Her coarse exterior was merely the mask which had protected her from the sea and from thieves. But in front of me, she removed the domino; I was, it is true, just an eye, but what an eye. And what was she: a long necked white lekythos, a Kashan wine jug, a Turkish pot, a faience urn, an albarello from Valencia? It was not important. It wasn't that everything could be, but that it all was. Whence have you journeyed, oh my bride? From Boeotia, from Baghdad or Barcelona? It was not important. I welcomed you. What story do you bear me? Of Odysseus' lips that have drunk from you, or Fatima's hands that have decked you with the tree of life? Unimportant. For me, majolica, you are most extremely *istoriata*. You live in the stone like a kernel in a walnut, like a kaleidoscopic light in a crystal, like time in a clock.

»What the devil's up?« asked Angel. »You seeing ghosts? I can tell you, I can't see anything at all.«

I took hold of her as if she were of brittle chalcedony, and placed her on a rock pedestal between the two of us. I turned her round to show her off to advantage, like a flower arranger placing the finishing touches to a bouquet. I stepped back a pace to see her the better.

Angel gazed in amazement, now at her, now at me. He didn't see what I saw. From this raised position she flashed out messages. The sky rearranged itself so as to form a whole with her. Together with Angel and me, she formed a triangle, *parmi les*

*fauves*. We squatted in front of her like two savages gazing at the artefact of an unknown, higher civilization, being tamed and ennobled by her against our will.

Angel was mad. He was disturbed, like all realists, when he had to deal with something that could not be seen, poked or bitten.

»What is it, Zec?« he asked me nervously, reaching for the last straw of his senses — belief in my expertise in this to him unknown region. »Can you recognize anything?«

»Never mind what it is,« said I, not taking my eyes off her, and exaltedly quoting what someone else had said, about whom, was it Cezanne? So raw, and so marvellous.

»I can't see anything,« said Angel panickily. »Is it worth anything? Is it old?«

»What can I tell you? It can be anything, from the first to the fifteenth century,« I said expertly. But I knew that both he and I needed, for once, something concrete. »Let's put it like this. When we weigh up the pro of our hopes and the contra of the balance of probabilities, this could be an alhambra.«

»What's an alhambra?« asked Angel impatiently.

»A vase, hispano-moorish. There are only nine in the world. This is the last one, the tenth, the one that those who believe in the symmetry of things expected to exist. And lo, it exists.«

»Zec, don't mess me about.«

»Didn't that remnant of Moslem blood in you whisper anything?« I persisted. »This detail of the glaze was enough to open my eyes for me. This is an alhambra.«

My eyes shall be refreshed with your shine, I murmured to her, while I looked at her on the stone in front of me.

Angel approached her with uncertain, dubious respect, and took her in his hands.

»Stone, stone. I can't see anything apart from this handle, and these two or three spots you've scraped

away. « His voice was disappointed. « And how much do you suppose it's worth, this jar. That is, if it is what you say it is, an alhambra. »

« I don't know exactly, » I said. « It depends on the market. On its condition. Fifty, a hundred million. Could be anything. If you find some mad collector, even more. »

Angel left stone upon stone, and waving his arm, sat down tiredly.

« Now it's clear you've gone mad. Or else you're unforgivably taking the mick. »

Angel would not believe. Maybe he just didn't know any more.

« Do you know how much the Met paid for a single Greek krater a couple of years back? A Euphronius apparently. And a krater's just a vase, nothing more. »

« How much? »

« A clean million dollars. »

« Plenty, » admitted Angel, « for one fucking vase. »

« By the size of it, this could be a krater too. Maybe it is. »

« You're crazy. »

Angel arranged tins, bread, onion, a bottle of wine and water, a knife, on the stone around the alhambra. Among all these things, the alhambra seemed to be from some other world, unwanted, inedible, a clumsy hunk of stone that had been a few moments before glowing like living lava and that was now dying before our eyes.

I lay down alongside Angel.

« Even so, » said Angel, some time later, champing, while we consumed our picnic in the shadow of the stone, « maybe there is something inside it. You can never tell what it might be. Maybe there'll even be some doubloons inside the jug. Maybe there'll even be someone idiot enough to buy the jug itself. »

*Translated by  
Graham McMaster*

# Rhinoceroses

**Antun Šoljan**

Some time at the beginning of this war, flabbergasted by the events, we stared helplessly at the television all day long. Not only did we watch ritually all the news but also the programmes in between, hoping or fearing we would miss something. So at one moment, unintentionally, I saw Pavarotti.

That Pavarotti was singing while all around tanks were roaring, struck me as insensitive; the mere fact that a concert was being given seemed obscene; the audience listening to him obliviously seemed to me like a sheer insult to people dying at the front. It felt like an injustice. There, of course, I myself was being unjust. We know that such is the nature of human suffering — as the poet would say about Breughel's painting — while Icarus is falling from the sky, a peasant is peacefully ploughing his field and a horse is scratching its behind against a tree. What can you do: life always goes on, people have to sing.

But when I heard the announcer say that Pavarotti was singing for rhinoceroses, I was really shaken. It was a benefit concert for rhinoceroses.

At the same time while Saddam Husein was exterminating the Kurds, and the Serbs the Croats, it seems that rhinoceroses were endangered too. They were being exterminated, it seems, by our species. We as a species seem to have had a bad conscience, so the United Nations organized a concert and Pavarotti sang sweetly to clear it.

Now, I am absolutely for rhinoceroses and I know they should be looked after, and even sung for. But what could the Kurds or the Croats have thought about it? Which zoological species did they think they belong to? Which society for the protection of animals could they have turned to? Competing against rhinoceroses did they stand a chance with the United Nations?

I am, I repeat, all for rhinoceroses. But one can look upon rhinoceroses in this or that way. Ionesco, for that matter, wrote about them before ecologists in one of his plays, but not as a species endangered by people, but as one that endangers people. I am for rhinoceroses, but when they, as in Ionesco, begin to invade houses, occupy streets, trample on all that is human and push out people, enormous and thick-skinned, a bit like tanks, then I think they should be stopped and put in their place.

Please don't get me wrong. Otherwise, I am in favour of giving rhinoceroses all the rights they are entitled to, the rights of the species they belong to, but not more than that.

And when they are in the zoo and when Pavarotti sings to them tenderly to make their captivity easier, let it be remembered that the bars of the cage separating us have been placed there not only to protect them from us but us from them too.

As it is, we still live in a world in which it is not clear who is inside and who outside.

*Translated by Maja Šoljan*