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Blackberry Heaven: A Novel in Stories (*Nebesa v robidah: Roman v zgodbah*)

Nataša Kramberger

An excerpt translated by Kristina Reardon[1]

Translator's introduction

This excerpt from Nataša Kramberger's 2007 novel *Blackberry Heaven: A Novel in Stories* (*Nebesa v robidah: Roman v zgodbah*) is in some ways unusual. The original garnered international acclaim for its poetic fluency and poignant, repeating visual motifs (such as water, fish, and apples, to name a few of the most memorable). It was nominated for the Kresnik Award in 2008 and won the European Union Prize for Literature in 2010; on its website, the European Union Prize novel description praises the way that Kramberger's interlocking narratives "consist of multiple fragments and events that come to life as raindrops plunging in medias res, straight into the heart of the narrative, without introduction or explanation." Critic Barbara Korun called it a "cosmological novel" [kosmogoniči roman] in the afterword of the original Slovenian-language publication, noting that "the fates of the main characters intertwine, merge, and separate like waves in a river" [se usode glavnih junakov in junakin prepletajo, spajajo in ločujejo kot valovi v reki] and that these "narrative waves" [pripovedni valovi] do not lead to a particular plot-based destination or ending but instead circulate themes and moments like water (2007: 267). Likewise, critic Matej Bogataj wrote in the afterword of my 2020 translation that the novel is written in three parts, "as echo and variation" (2020: 254) and that as readers, "we are masterfully led by the author through a labyrinth and through Romanesque narrations, whereby [Kramberger's] editing process emphasizes repetition and variation, which can be described as looking at the same thing from different angles" (2020: 253). The novel's logic is one of association. As a translator, I worked to analyze the text in terms of linguistic patterns, ensuring that I translated

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the same word pairings the same way each time they appeared throughout the novel so that the unity of the text was upheld.

One way of describing the novel would be to explain that it takes the reader through two main characters' perspectives, anchored in Amsterdam in the present day during a power outage. These characters include a young Slovenian woman named Jana, who holds a babysitting job under the table in Amsterdam, and an Italian grandfather named Bepi, who is picking up his granddaughter from the airport. Each moves through an Amsterdam that triggers memories of their pasts and homelands. And it is the way that their lives intertwine in Part III, playing on moments narrated in Parts I and II that brought them there (even as their minds drifted decades into the past through free association) that draws the narrative tightly together.

But what happens in the novel? It is, in some ways, impossible to explain succinctly. On the one hand, it is about abstract things: memory, consciousness, connection, grief, longing, and laughter. On the other hand, it is about material plot moments: a power outage in Amsterdam, a flood, an issue with visas, the sale of a fish. Bogataj draws these disparate pieces together when he explains: "The unity of [the novel's] fragments gives the narrator consciousness, which, by association and dream logic, moves from her homeland to the streets of Amsterdam, in the dark, due to power outages, and to canals there, where she picks up pieces of other stories" (2020: 256). It is one of these stories—with a sense of narrative logic all its own—that I choose to excerpt here. The book is "a novel in stories," and thus the presentation of this one story both makes sense so that the reader, who may not know or read the original, can digest a fragment which could well stand on its own. In this way, it both perfectly represents the trajectory of the novel (comprised of fragmented stories, overlapping flash fiction if you will) and does not at all represent the novel (this is just one piece of a narrative, a memory that only tangentially links to the main characters' motivations and quests).

I present this excerpt as a story all its own, yet also because it also features a space where I felt I had to take some creative liberty as a translator. This scene is set in the style of classroom that Jana might have experienced as a child growing up in the former Yugoslavia. There were subtleties to render to the contemporary Anglophone reader: the teacher was referred to as "Tovarišica," which I translated as "Comrade Teacher" to inflect her name with clarity (so that the reader knew who the teacher was) and the parlance of this moment in Slovenian history, which begins with a typical oral hygiene lesson for the time. The classroom visitor, "Ščetka Betka" remained Betka—but "ščetka" was harder to render in rhyme as in the original. I debated changing her name to keep the rhyme, or simply translating more literally (Toothbrush Betka?) but landed on "Brushing Betka" to try to preserve both the meaning and some semblance of a sonic style: choosing alliteration where there was once rhyme. Meanwhile, the rhymes that the children repeated felt

like miniature poems; rhyme itself was remarked upon the in text and seemed important to preserving the sing-song voices of the children repeating them. Here is just one example of such a challenging line:

The original	A somewhat literal translation	My rhyming translation
Sem Repko, zajček mlaaad, si zobke čistim raaad, posebno še zvečeeer, po jedi venomeeer. Mi za kolačke niii, le repa mi dišiii, moj dom sta dol in breeeg, zobje kot-be-li-sneeeeeeeg!	I am Repko, a young rabbit, I like to brush my teeth, especially in the evening, always after eating, I'm not for cakes/cookies, my tail smells, my home is down below and in the bank, my teeth are like white snow!	My name is Repko and I'm a little rabbit, brushing my teeth is my favorite habit, especially at night, after I've taken my last bite. I don't put cookies in my belly, my tail is kinda smelly, I live in a hole deep belooooow, my teeth are white-as-snoooow!

Thus, while Repko's original rhyme might be translated more literally than I chose to, I sought to maintain the rhyming and sing-song voice above all not only because it preserved the childlike tone but also because of the humor it introduced. The final translation clung to the basic images of the original, while linguistically departing in small ways to develop a rhythm. This felt particularly important here and elsewhere, as Kramberger does not employ traditional punctuation marks to demarcate lines of dialogue or speech. Rather, she often uses mere commas and braids observation with lines of dialogue (sometimes from multiple speakers) in single paragraphs. In part, this helps the reader come to terms with the free associations and memories that she is evoking from previous moments. But it also presents a difficult challenge for the translator who hopes to make these distinct lines of dialogue visible to the reader in a language without case endings which help distinguish such features (though some instances appear intentionally unclear in the original as well).

Developing rhyme and, in other places, stylized cadence, became critical to the process of marking dialogue as such—even without the traditional bounds of punctuation. This further became important because, even though Kramberger's sentences as written in Slovenian were longer than typical in English, I felt it imperative to preserve their length. Indeed, I kept sentences in their original length in this novel, where in other translation work, I might—depending on context—break a particularly long or difficult sentence into two to clarify with punctuation where thoughts begin or end in ways that are not grammatically available in English the way they are in

Slovenian through case endings. The length of Kramberger's sentences felt evocative of the memory or free association she sought to conjure, and they contributed to the "narrative waves" Korun prasied and the labyrinth-like structure Bogataj noted.

Elsewhere, in keeping with the colloquialisms of the original, I attempted to render them in ways that were equally sensical and colloquial in English. For example, when Comrade Teacher says: "Kaj naj z vami, saj niste resni, idite se solit…" I worked in English language versions of set phrases that would make Comrade Teacher's words feel both conversational and responsive to the ruckus that the little rabbit song and other antics had caused in the classroom. "Kaj naj z vami" became "What are we going to do with you"—a close approximation of the original—while "idite se solit" ("go salt yourself" in rough translation) became "take a hike"—a departure in content from the original but a translation that would make more sense to an Anglophone audience which would likely find itself confused by the mention of salt, as there is no corollary expression in English. With no room for footnotes in a novel, and not wanting to add in explanatory language in a moderately fast-paced scene with lots of dialogue, these small approximations may leave some bilingual readers of my translation disappointed that some fine details were filtered out in small places—but which I hope has made the translation upbeat and analogously humorous for Anglophone readers who do not know the Slovenian language or culture.

I could remark upon a number of other shifts of this nature in this passage and in others in the book, but suffice it to say that these recalibrations, if I may call them that, were made primarily in scenes that felt full of energy and humor—where quick turns of phrase would push the reader to laugh or smile. It is, in my experience, far easier to translate a unity of content and tone in sections of translations that are purely serious and do not contain wordplay or comedic energy. More typically excerpted passages from this novel center on more serious scenes; indeed, the segments I found excerpted on the European Union Prize for Literature website (in Polona Glavan's excellent English translation) came from the first pages of the novel, which only contain hints of the sort of situational humor that this excerpt portrays in its fullness. Knowing that readers might easily search and find these other lyrical excerpts, I chose this scene for its playfulness, for its wit, and for Kramberger's astute ability to capture both the adult's and the child's perspective at once. Bogataj remarks on Kramberger's comedic impulse, arguing that she drafts "believable and realistic scenes, filtered through a witty sieve" (255). Bogataj's metaphor feels particularly apt when I think about the process of translation, itself a sieve of sorts through which words, concepts, and tone are all filtered.

Of course, wit and humor are notoriously difficult to translate, both culturally and linguistically. Mark Twain famously remarked that choosing the right words when one writes is imperative—indeed, the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. And Virginia Woolf has been quoted

as saying that "humor is the first gift to perish in a foreign language." Inevitably, in translation, some lightning will become lightning bugs and vice versa, particularly if one tries to resuscitate wit, wordplay, and humorous energy in the journey between disparate linguistic shores. Translation, to be clear, is an act of interpretation—one which each translator might navigate differently depending on their own close reading but also the exigencies and rhetorical constraints in the audiences for whom they translate. Yet the difficulty of translation even in this light-hearted section feels useful to excerpt so that bilingual readers might see patterns and choices laid bare in the juxtaposition between languages in a segment which, at the end of a jocular set of moments, turns characteristically inward toward a pervasive, repeating motif: that of the blackberry itself, from which Kramberger's title is derived.

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