

uncommon noun meaning roughly “wrong path.” (Thomas Mann used it in *Tonio Kröger*.) “IRRGANG,” Wolf repeated. “This would be a good title for a future project... The title was too precise, it remained solitary. A solitary title seeking its text. I knew it was out there, that text, written in invisible ink.” But what was visible to Christa Wolf, “written in invisible ink,” will never be visible to her readers. For the curse that haunts

the seer, the Cassandra, is to see not only what others cannot, but also what she herself does not wish to see. “Perhaps it is our task to gradually diminish the blind spot that apparently sits in the center of our consciousness and thus goes undetected, working our way inward from its edges. So that there is more space that is visible to us. That can be named. But...do we want that. Can we want that. Is it not too dangerous. Too painful.” ■



ORINAN ROTEM
Untitled, by Max Neumann

The Ravaging Nothing

by BEN EHRENREICH

Like many Americans—or at least many among the exceedingly small tribe of us who have been bewitched by the humor, audacity and unrelenting bleakness of László Krasznahorkai’s prose—I first encountered the Hungarian novelist by way of his compatriot and longtime collaborator, the filmmaker Béla Tarr. This was in 2000, when, although the bookstore business had not yet fallen into protracted death spasms, gloomy and dense Mitteleuropean films were nonetheless easier to come by here than gloomy and dense Mitteleuropean novels. Still, if Tarr’s films were more talked about than seen in the United States—*Sátántangó* (1994), his acknowledged masterpiece, is seldom screened because it stretches to seven and a half hours—my few attempts to

Satantango
by László Krasznahorkai.
New Directions. 274 pp. \$25.95.

Animalinside
by László Krasznahorkai and Max Neumann.
New Directions. 39 pp. Paper \$20.

speak Krasznahorkai’s name aloud in public only ever provoked confused and slightly worried glances, as if I had choked on a bit of my tongue, or spat out something nasty.

Krasznahorkai co-wrote the screenplay for *Sátántangó*—which was based on his 1985 novel of the same name—but like most of his ten books of fiction, it had not yet been translated into English. The Germans might treasure Krasznahorkai (who spends most of his time in Berlin), the Hungarians too; but we were too busy with our own nastiness—build-

ing prisons, robotic weaponry and free trade agreements—and thus, until this year, only two of his books appeared in the United States. I found him through Tarr’s gorgeous *The Werckmeister Harmonies*, from 2000, which quickly led me to Krasznahorkai’s novel *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989), on which that film was based.

The world it introduced was in flashes almost familiar. In its whimsy, its metaphysical longings and its provincial claustrophobia, the novel felt haunted here and there by the ghost of the Polish writer Bruno Schulz. It was possessed as well, though, by something far more sinister, a violence that was not circumstantial but ontological—something Schulz, bless him, did not evoke in his work. The plot of *Melancholy* is fairly simple: a carnival arrives in a small Hungarian town towing “the Biggest Whale in the World,” led by a mysterious demagogue intent on sowing chaos. The local forces of order are equally monstrous, but Krasznahorkai devotes most of his attention to two dreamy outsiders: the Schulzian Valuska, who wanders the streets contemplating “the mind-bending vastness of the universe,” and one Mr. Eszter, who is obsessed with tuning his piano to recapture the “pure tonalities” excluded by standardized modern harmonics.

Plot, as in all of Krasznahorkai’s work, is not what matters most. The life of his fiction resides directly in the labyrinthine paths taken by his sentences. Except in their length, which can be epic, they share little with those of other modern masters of the deferred stop. They aren’t fueled by the breathlessness and harshness that prolong Thomas Bernhard’s, or by the grinding “gotcha!” vertigo of David Foster Wallace’s. Krasznahorkai’s sentences are snaky, circuitous things, near-endless strings of clauses and commas that through reversals, hesitations, hard turns and meandering asides come to embody time itself, to stretch it and condense it, to reveal its cruel materiality, the way it at once traps us and offers, always deceptively, to release us from its grasp, somewhere out there after the last comma and the final period: after syntax, after words.

In 2006 New Directions generously doubled the quantity of Krasznahorkaiana available to the English-speaking reader, publishing the poet George Szirtes’s translation of the novel *War & War* (1999). A single sentence—the longest runs to seven pages—spans each of the book’s numbered subchapters. A hapless archivist named Korin travels to “the world-famous city of New York,” intending to immortalize a manuscript (“a work of astonishing, foundation-shaking, cosmic genius”) he claims to have discovered

by posting it on “that peculiar sounding thing, the Internet.” Korin’s sad tale and the story told in the manuscript—which spans continents and centuries—intertwine as the archivist’s philosophical obsessions begin to take living form in the structure of the novel:

from now on he’d have to abandon his “sick hierarchical view of the world,” explode “the illusion of an orderly pyramid of facts” and liberate himself from the extraordinarily powerful and secure belief in what was now revealed as merely a kind of childish mirage, which is to say the indivisible unity and contiguity of phenomena, and beyond that, the unity’s secure permanence and stability; and, within this permanence and stability, the overall coherence of its mechanism, that strictly-governed interdependence of functioning parts which gave the whole system its sense of direction, development, pace and progress, in other words whatever suggested that the thing it embodied was attractive and self-sufficient, or, to put it another way, he now had to say NO, an immediate and once-and-for-all NO, to that entire mode of life.

It took until this year for *Satantango* (now minus the accents) to be published in English. I’ll stop complaining soon, but the Germans have been able to read it since 1990, the French since 2000, the Bulgarians since 2001. Once again, we owe a debt to New Directions—which will be releasing Krasznahorkai’s most recent novel, *Seiobo* (2008), later this year—and to the intrepid George Szirtes. Those who came to Krasznahorkai via Béla Tarr’s films will be shocked at *Satantango*’s brevity. Its twelve chapters, each consisting of a single, unbroken paragraph, add up to just under 300 pages, or about a page for every minute and a half of celluloid.

But Krasznahorkai, by revealing little and doing so in tiny dabs, suggests a world much larger and more complex than the one he actively describes. Most of *Satantango* is set in a collapsing and rain-drenched factory town, referred to in the text only as “the estate.” From scattered hints we gather that the once-booming estate was precipitously abandoned, the mill dismantled, and that “those who had somewhere to go cleared off as fast as they could.” We’re left with the few who stayed behind: three miserable couples, a lame machinist named Futaki, the unnamed landlord who tends the local bar, a closeted former headmaster, the foul-mouthed Mrs. Horgos and her offspring—a thieving, sadistic teenage boy, his sweetly simple-minded sister

Esti, and two older girls who sell their bodies in the ruins of the mill—as well as an irascible, corpulent and alcoholic doctor who spies on the others from an armchair by his window, recording every last detail in a futile effort to combat the creeping decay of memory.

The novel begins with startling news: two yet-unseen characters—Irimiás and his sidekick, Petrina, towering figures whom the villagers have long believed dead—are returning to the estate, “resurrected”! Most of the wretched estate-dwellers regard Irimiás as their savior, the only person capable of delivering them from the muddy purgatory in which they’re trapped. “It’ll be cushy for us,” Futaki gushes. “A real golden age!” Of course, things don’t go that way... for anyone. In one excruciating chapter, little Esti, neglected and abused, kills her cat and then herself. Her death haunts the rest of the novel, but *Satantango* is not a gothic horror; no one seems to mind that she’s gone. (“The little whore!” swears her mother on realizing that she’s missing. “Fuck her!”) The child’s suicide becomes the opportunity for some high-flown oratory from Irimiás, but even that is transparently a con (“all that stuff about the retard,” muses Futaki. “So she ate a lot of rat poison, so what?”). No one is punished, except in the sense that everyone here is already condemned. When Esti’s ghost at last appears, it’s as absurd as it is uncanny: briefly alarming, but no more so than the ubiquitous spiders that, when no one is looking, weave cobwebs around chairs and tables and even sleeping drunks.

The Soviet bloc was still intact when Krasznahorkai was writing *Satantango*, which makes it hard not to read in Irimiás’s homecoming a mischievous invocation of Fyodor Gladkov’s *Cement* (1925), the ur-text of socialist realism, in which the valiant comrade Gleb returns from fighting in the Red Army to find his hometown’s cement factory—and, allegorically, post-revolutionary Soviet society—idle and in disrepair. Gleb overcomes all obstacles, bringing new life to the factory and rousing the wayward masses to rouse themselves (“We are cement, comrades; the working class”). Irimiás, upon his return to the estate, mouths a tartly revisionist utopianism, promising “to establish a small island for people with nothing left to lose, a small island free of exploitation, where people work *for*, not *against* each other.” But he is no comrade Gleb: he and Petrina are returning from prison, not from heroic military adventures. They are not the saints the villagers believe them to be, but small-time hustlers and police informers who, in a bind with the cops once again, have come

back to the estate for the sole purpose of robbing its inhabitants (“the bumpkins,” Irimiás calls them) of what little they have left.

Irimiás is quick and sharp-tongued, a tall, clownishly dapper figure with a hooked nose, a “dazzlingly loud red tie” and pointed shoes of “a blinding bright yellow.” Petrina is glum and buffoonish, “jug-eared,” with “dull, button-like eyes.” They are not the only characters with commedia dell’arte and Punch and Judy antecedents, and *Satantango* is on one level an intricate and mud-puddly bit of metaphysical slapstick. (When the Horgos boy takes up with Irimiás and Petrina, dark Three Stooges-esque high jinks ensue.) But, tall and dapper trickster that he is, Irimiás also recalls a more sinister figure, and is recognized as such: “Welcome, Lord of Misrule!” a barman greets him. The novel’s title seems to confirm the hunch that the estate and its environs are situated less in any historical or imagined Hungary than in some hell. If they are, though, this is the hell in which Satan is trapped and nearly powerless, and God just another bitter drunk. Irimiás isn’t having any of it: “Heaven? Hell? The afterlife? All nonsense,” he tells Petrina. “There’s no sense or meaning in anything.... It’s only our imaginations, not our senses, that continually confront us with failure and the false belief that we can raise ourselves by our own bootstraps from the miserable pulp of decay. There’s no escaping that, stupid.”

Ah, decay. This is a László Krasznahorkai novel, which means that everything is rotting, that less than halfway through the book, the narrator can safely declare “everything was all over now, forever.” (See *War & War*: “All is ruined, all is brought low”; or the script for Tarr’s latest film, *The Turin Horse*, which Krasznahorkai co-wrote: “Everything is ruined.”) There are the aforementioned spiders, the estate’s slow collapse, the rain and mud, the mildew that covers the walls and the clothes in the cupboards no matter how often they’re cleaned—the whole “infernal arrangement whereby the world decomposes but is at the same time constantly in the process of self-construction,” by means of which, the doctor observes, “all that mason might build, carpenter might construct, woman might stitch, indeed all that men and women had brought forth with bitter tears was bound to turn to an undifferentiated, runny, underground, mysteriously ordained mush.”

Even the stability of the narrative decays. Point-of-view flits from person to person, sometimes repeatedly within a single sentence. The voice of the narrator slips into those of his characters. Their dreams mingle with the waking world and with one another’s dreams. With each chapter, the narrative steps

forward and backward in time and sideways and back, like the steps of a tango. And like a tango it circles in on itself, enclosing itself, sealing itself off from all possibility of escape. “We think we’re breaking free but all we’re doing is readjusting the locks,” rants Irimiás. Even the spaces between words rot out, and language turns to ooze: “nothingchanged-outsideitwasneithermorningnoreveningitjustcarriedondawnortwilightwhichever...”

In 2010 New Directions printed 2,000 copies of a slender cahier called *Animalinside*, a collaboration between Krasznahorkai and the German painter Max Neumann. Six years earlier, Neumann had given Krasznahorkai a gift: a painting of a doglike figure in black silhouette, stretching, trapped within the perspectival lines of a simple drawing of an empty room with a door in one white wall. The dog, oversized and floating, makes no sense within the pictorial logic of the image; it is at once expelled from and confined by the frame. Krasznahorkai responded with a short text, which Neumann answered with another painting. *Animalinside* records their complete correspondence: fourteen images and fourteen texts. The prints are lush and crisp, the translation (this time by Otilie Mulzet) deftly elegant.

All fourteen paintings depict that same decontextualized, doglike silhouette: in a cage or floating free, in duplicate or quadrupled, beside a man reading a newspaper or another holding a bat. Krasznahorkai’s taut, almost explosive texts resemble prose poems more than short stories or conventional novella chapters, though they do not pretend to lyricism. (I was reminded of Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*.) That dark animal becomes protagonist and narrator, slipping at times between the first and third person. There is no plot to speak of, but there is momentum, exploration, a sense of gathering menace. The themes are instantly familiar: “the unspeakable horror of that instance of awakening when the condemned comes to realize that he has been excluded from existence, and there is no way back... there is no escape, and everything hurts.”

Animalinside presents Krasznahorkaian metaphysics in highly concentrated form. The title notwithstanding, the eponymous animal is not an animal and is neither entirely inside nor out. It is not quite death, if death is conceived as passivity and silence, and not quite meaninglessness, if meaninglessness is understood in terms of absence. It is larger than the universe, strong enough to “smash all the stars in the sky.” It has no fixed form (“I have no eyes, no ears, no teeth, no tongue, no brain tissue, no hair, no lungs, no

heart, no bowels, no cock, no voice”), but it is suffused nonetheless with hatred, hunger, restlessness. It is the force that in *The Turin Horse* is called “the ravaging nothing.” It is coming for you, and it is already there inside you. Only once in the text does it reveal its name: “One day I shall come, and I shall lacerate your faces, because I am ruin.”

So here we have it, the thing itself, the operating principle of the cosmos: ruin, which in earlier works Krasznahorkai named “chaos” or “decay.” It is the active destruction

toward which all things tend, a sort of impure negativity that can be depicted only obliquely, by circling around it, through reversal, contradiction and deferral, the favored tools of Krasznahorkaian syntax. I can imagine no more appropriate god for the late-capitalist, polar-ice-caps-melting, borderless-war-and-prison-camp world that we increasingly inhabit. Its outlines remain fuzzy. Sometimes it looks like a dog, sometimes like a tiger or a bear. One thing is clear: it intends to devour you, you and everything you know. ■

Mother Natures

by JENNIFER SZALAI

When a close friend of mine heard that I was writing something about motherhood, he—a resolutely feminist “he”—told me candidly that books on the subject provoked a kind of “sigh” in his “soul.” As much as I wanted to dismiss his response as the prejudice of someone who has neither a child nor the anatomy to give birth to one, I confess that his words might as well have been mine. Books about motherhood so often turn out to be books about mothering—which is to say, manuals on how to do it or memoirs on how it was done, with barely a sense of a world outside the home, or even Berkeley or Park Slope. On special occasions, China or France or the !Kung San of the Kalahari Desert might come up for consideration, but then the discussion will still revolve around breast-feeding and sleep-training techniques, while bigger questions of politics and culture are brushed aside.

No doubt being a new parent can be so discombobulating that what many mothers may want most is a book that’s immediately useful, whether by way of advice or commiseration. In *Raising America* (2003), Ann Hulbert’s history of American parenting manuals, she notes that child rearing is an “American fixation, especially since the start of the twentieth century and particularly among the middle class.” The market for expert guidance thrives on parental anxiety and uncertainty—and because mothers have traditionally shouldered most of the child-rearing duties, that anxiety and uncertainty has generally belonged to them. Hulbert traces how advice

has oscillated between strictness and permissiveness, with the fashion for one emerging in reaction to the other. Even Dr. Spock, often portrayed as the original guru for indulgent parents (in the 1960s, conservatives pilloried him for having nurtured a generation of student protesters), wasn’t entirely consistent throughout the numerous incarnations of *Baby and Child Care*; in the second edition, he discussed the dangers of letting a child rule the roost and encouraged mothers to assert more control.

What distinguishes the American tradition of “parental guidance” from those of other cultures is precisely the lack of a firm tradition, which is perhaps why child-rearing manuals—which offer clear prescriptions to the exhausted and confused—tend to flourish here. Many Americans live in a different city from their parents, if not a different state; with one or two siblings, often close in age, they may have had little to no experience with infants while they were growing up; and for those who are the children of immigrants, the ways in which their parents were raised might reflect the historical and cultural practices of another country—practices the children believe impractical or undesirable. In other words, the usual methods of transmitting child-rearing practices from generation to generation are less prevalent here. Add to this the cacophony of expert voices and passing fads, and you get a population of American mothers who have been exhorted to do one thing as well as its exact opposite.

This extreme variability shows how parenting books reflect cultural tensions that affect mothers and non-mothers alike. Motherhood is intimately connected to assumptions about mothers and fathers, about women and men, families in general and society at large. Feminists have been saying

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