

Biography: Inga Gaile (1976) is a Latvian poet, prose writer, playwright, performance artist, and theater director. With her unique brand of humor, she explores inner states of being, her own experiences, the everyday lives of women and stigmatized groups of society, while promoting equal rights. Gaile uses the genre of the confessional poem as a means of self-identification, looking retrospectively at her own life and the trauma of repeated sexual violence, thus facing and coming to terms with this experience so that she could re-imagine herself as a person. She has won several awards, including the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2015 and 2020 for *Can the Back Row Hear Me* and *The Beautiful Ones*. Inga Gaile is an active participant in the feminist movement in Latvia and is a founder of stand-up comedy group Women’s Stand-up.

Synopsis: In this novel, Inga Gaile tries to understand how she and her contemporaries have been influenced by two tragedies of the 20th century: Nazism and Stalinism. It is the author’s attempt to tell a story about people who managed to stay humane despite the impossible circumstances, guided by a hope to live more freely. One of her themes is that the dual value system—good/ bad, beautiful/ugly—is limiting for humanity. The novel has three parts, each with a female protagonist. First is Violeta, who is imprisoned in the Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1941. The protagonist of the second part is Magdalēna, who is also a protagonist in Gaile’s first novel, *The Glass Shards*.

Excerpt

1941

The siren goes off, which on any other morning would mean it’s time to wake up. Roll out of the bunk, see if the woman you fell asleep next to is dead or not, straighten the bedsheets,

put on your underwear—which is supposed to be clean, but which is impossible to clean because we have to wash it in cold water, without soap, and it never dries. One of the guards makes us line up and walk past her, our skirts hiked up. Anyone wearing dirty underwear, or not wearing any, is punished. They want to re-educate us. Turn us into proper ladies. Only the Polish women, gypsies, and prostitutes have no hope of that. The prostitutes and gypsies, who don't know how to behave, live in the penal block, which is where I wound up, too. The guard we call The Hyena, who's the reason why I'm in the penal block, hates me. Because I'm pretty. That's my asset. That's what my aunt would say; she raised me after my mother died of tuberculosis. And my mother didn't leave me any other assets. Only my looks. My aunt said: Violeta, that's a lot. A woman who is born beautiful has drawn a lucky card, Violeta. That's what she told me. Looks like she was wrong.

My little friend is here too, the Jehovah's Witness, which I'm not supposed to call her here, which is exactly why I only call her that, sometimes even calling her my little friend of Jehovah, but out loud I call her Tiny, mentally adding *Jehovite*, so that the Lord's true name—which she whispers to me to remind me what it is, and that there is a global conspiracy to keep it hidden from us—reaches this corner of hell some way or another. And so Tiny, wanting to thank me for all I've done for her, offered to roll my hair in paper strips. My curly, wheat-yellow hair lit up all of Ravensbrück, and a ray of my beauty struck such a painful blow to The Hyena's graying, thin-haired head that she immediately sent me to the penal block. To teach me how to behave. She didn't get the chance to shave my hair off, though, because they discovered Katrīna had once again escaped.

The siren is screaming, get up, get up, time for roll call. But this morning the siren is meaningless, because we're already awake. Because every last prisoner is awake. As are the guards and the guard dogs. Everything living is awake.

Only God is still asleep. You're asleep, God, God, you son of a bitch, you're asleep.

Unbearable pain shoots through Violeta's legs, all the way up to her crotch. She staggers. A guard, who is holding the leash of a dog that's wearing a kind of rain coat with a swastika on it, shouts: "Stand straight!" At night, the gray figures of the prisoners are illuminated by spotlights to keep them standing straight. The spotlights are still on.

Well, Violeta, be a star, stand straight. Straight. The whole camp is standing. When the guards aren't looking, Violeta sits down. She sinks to the muddy ground, knowing she may never get up. The Tiny Jehovite doesn't dare sit again, she's afraid of dogs. The big Polish woman had dozed off and hadn't noticed the guard coming, and they sicced a dog on her. Now the Polish woman's leg is torn up and she can't stand. "Clean my wound. It'll get infected and then contagious," she howls. The Polish woman is smart. The idea of a contagious infection scares them. The doctor comes out and cleans and bandages the wound; the Polish woman moans. The doctor is a plump man. Violeta could eat the doctor; she hasn't eaten in three days. Only had a bit of water. If she ate the doctor, she'd only share him with Tiny. The rest of them can eat the guards. Most of whom are bony. Human flesh supposedly tastes like chicken, Linens told her. Why were we talking about that? And when? Violeta remembers lying in bed, smoking, her head on his shoulder. One cigarette would kill me now, Violeta thinks. But I'd also kill for one cigarette. They have been standing

like this for three days, as a lesson, so they see what will happen to the rest of them if one of tries to escape. It's the morning of the third day.

It's a morning that doesn't deserve to be called a morning. It's five in the morning. Dark. The sun isn't up yet. Violeta knows what time it is because the sirens always go off at five. They let the siren go off today just to torture them more. If it was a regular day, the prisoners would go out into the yard and stand for an hour, maybe two, while the guards went through roll call to see if they were all still here. Present. That they hadn't died overnight or crawled under the floorboards somewhere, or escaped—like Katrīna, thanks to whom, thank you, thank you, truly, no, not thanks, thanks is a word that will never again be used in this world, no; it's her fault that this isn't a regular day.

Even though there are no regular days here. Are there? Is it possible that what's happening here is supposed to happen? Maybe they really want to teach us how to behave? Maybe? Is it possible? Cleanliness, patience, order. A woman is the source of all things beautiful. And if that source is filthy, then everything that follows from it will be filthy as well. Maybe that's why they humiliate us, make us stand in front of the barracks with our skirts hiked up if our bunks aren't tidied the way they want, or why they shave our hair off if we've taken the liberty of styling it? Because a woman doesn't also have to be a prostitute. A regular woman. A regular day. A regular camp for regular women where they can become better . . . All for what?

I always thought that my real life had yet to start. After I'd been kissed, after I'd been chosen, after that . . . after that . . . Here, time is frozen, and there are no choices to be made. Maybe on the outside, Violeta thinks. No, probably not. Even on the outside every

day had been filled with fear. Fear that the worst would happen, that she'd do something wrong, get dirty, look bad, get a run in her stocking, not be asked to dance. She was always asked to dance, because she was beautiful. Violeta had learned that. Violeta was beautiful because she did things right. If she kept her mouth shut. Linens left her because she'd started talking about marriage. That's why, right?

Violeta won't think about that. If she starts to think about when and where she went wrong, then she'll have to think about what she did wrong to wind up standing here on this night that she can't call daybreak, in this quagmire of blood, in this yard. She doesn't have the strength for thoughts like that. She's here with other women. Others. With people who aren't people. With women. It's strange, but this kind of unity . . . it exists, but it's something she hasn't experienced before. Not like the beatings, not that thing that has no name, but that has beat the word "thanks" off the face of the earth, not that. Though this is also the first time she's experienced that kind of beating. Her aunt would spank her for misbehaving, but what they did here . . . What she was experiencing for the first time here was . . . Violeta wants to use the word "friendship." She can't remember, because she's not supposed to go there, there where she is being kissed, there where she is returning the kiss, and more—no, she can't go to that place because she needs to survive, but that place, that time, where Linens was kissing her, did she have friends back then?

Not that the women here would be her friends. But there was something, a touch, yes, a touch, caresses, words, not even words, a whisper in her sleep, when she had nightmares after her punishment, someone took her hand, put a palm on her forehead, maybe it didn't happen, because it's prohibited, but she knows that it happened. It

happened. Had it been the Tiny Jehovahite? Yes, it had definitely been Tiny, who was now swaying beside her.

Everything hurts. Katrīna, I'm going to kill you, Violeta thinks. Katrīna, you daughter of a whore. The guards and the dogs are at the farthest end of the camp. Violeta sits down; the big Polish woman sinks down next to her, moaning. "Tiny, sit," Violeta whispers. "Your Jehovah would allow it." Tiny shakes her head. She's terrified of dogs.

Violeta knows that there are other women in the camp who do go to that time and place where she never goes, who whisper about revolting, talk about how they're not the scum of the earth, the guards are wrong. But not Violeta. She doesn't need it. She already got into trouble. She already revolted. Now she just wants to survive. That's all that matters. Survival, no matter the cost. Before that whole singing business they'd even offered to make Violeta a kapo. That's how well she knew how to behave. But she turned down the offer. Some black darkness within her screamed that it would go against her desire to survive. And then they punished her. Not because she turned down the offer. But also because of it.

She had been scared they were going to kill Tiny, she didn't know at all how to behave, she put too much faith in that Jehovah of hers, who would, any minute now, tear open the overcast skies, come down from the heavens in a golden chariot and spear all the guards onto his sword. Spear all the guards on his golden sword, along with all their dogs.

All the Jehovah's Witnesses had to do was denounce their religion and they'd release them. But Tiny never did, because she had faith in you, you son of a bitch. And now and again she'd sing while working. They were prohibited from singing any time the guards didn't want them to sing. It had happened before. They had been made to march around

the barracks twenty times, the snow lashing at their faces, and sing "Raise the flag, the ranks tightly closed," because The Hyena thought they hadn't been working fast enough. And just when they finally remembered all the words in the first verse, shouting the words syllable by syllable—because almost none of them could speak German—a terrified-looking guard ran up to The Hyena and whispered something into her ear. And with the proclamation that they were the scum of the earth, and thus didn't deserve to sing such a sacred song, they were spared. That time.

But overall, singing was prohibited. They were prohibited from doing anything that Violeta didn't understand what they could or couldn't do. She always tried to do things right. Now she no longer knew what was right and what was wrong. She even had a hard time understanding what was so bad about styling her hair. Like a prostitute. Too seductive. But who was she going to seduce here? All the guards were women. The SS guards? Oh, Yahweh, better not to think about that. But Violeta couldn't imagine what was so bad in that little, sweet fool singing as she stitched together pieces of burlap. And Tiny had just crooned and crooned. The guards could have just sent her to the penal block, but they didn't. The bastards probably figured that she'd simply seclude herself in a shared solitude with her beloved God, and that would be that. And that not even withholding food, if you could call it food, would bother Tiny. And so they sent her to get whipped. The second time they hit her she'd lost consciousness. They hadn't had a doctor present; they must have assumed that because Tiny was young she was also strong. After that, they always had a doctor check her pulse halfway through the whipping, to see if she could take any more. We don't want to kill you, no, no, no, because we need something to fuck and that will bear us

new cannon-fodder. We simply want to remake you, fix you, so you won't sing. So you, damn you, wouldn't even think to hum unless we ask.

Violeta knows her strength to be angry comes from sitting. The earth feeds her, it nourishes her. Her, a worthless animal that doesn't even know how to have clean underwear. It's the worst for those women who are still menstruating. They give you a piece of muslin when you get to the camp. You have to wash it and use it again each month. It's dark-gray and absurdly coarse. Those who are menstruating during this current punishment have fainted. Two were taken to the medical barrack, but once the women started dropping like flies, the first two were came limping back. It's no use pretending here. Stand. Violeta suddenly thinks she can see that this all stems from a desire . . . For what? To bring order to the chaos. To act rationally? That's good, right, Violeta? Then she could understand them. Then it comes from the desire to control the dark, weighty power that could kill us all. As long as we're not dead when that power arrives.

When Tiny had been singing again while working and The Hyena came into the room, Violeta had acted irrationally. It was honestly stupid, what she did. But Tiny wouldn't have survived a third whipping. She would have died. And so you got whipped in her place. Though there was a sense of satisfaction in that her plan had worked. When The Hyena had stepped into the workshop where the women were sewing with fat needles, stitching together pieces of burlap, and Tiny was singing with her back to the door, Violeta burst into song almost at the top of her lungs. She acted that way sometimes. Like a fool. Spitefully and indecently. Violeta won't go to the place where she could analyze her personality, but her thoughts wander there on their own and calculate, determine how she should have

acted for none of this to have happened. She shouldn't have slept with Linens, but with the owner of the sewing shop—maybe he would have been able to protect her. No, she should have protected her virtues, found a husband, use her beauty to charm, have children and raise them. That's what she should have done.

Then she wouldn't have to stand here. Right? Violeta can't stand filth. That's what torments her the most. She knows she smells, knows what her urine and the urine of the other prisoners smells like as it trickles down their legs as they stand there.

The women in the penal block of the Ravensbrück concentration camp stand in striped uniforms, emaciated, half of them with their heads shaved. The other prisoners are standing there, too. Violeta's vision fogs over, her legs are swollen, she gets the feeling she should stand up. She was right: the guards with the dogs are nearing the penal block. What day is it today? Violeta thinks. It's the third day, she thinks. But what day is it, what day? The third day of this life, but of the normal camp life? I just called camp life normal, she thinks.

No, I can't say that, she thinks. I can't say that I'm thinking, she thinks.

What's happening to me is not thought. It's a painful crackling in my veins that brings me a strange relief. My place in this world are these small streaks in the ocean of my brain, invisible, bloody and clouded streaks. These thoughts.

Tiny falls over. Both of them still have hair. Their heads aren't shaved. They're beautiful. A woman is beautiful if she herself believes it. An animal roars inside and out. Violeta has a red triangle on her sleeve and on her chest. Red triangles are for political prisoners. One of Violeta's grandmothers would be proud. Don't be silly, Violeta, there's no way she would have been proud. Fine, I'm just trying to keep a sense of humor, Violeta says

to herself. Quietly, of course. Quieter than quietly. Silently, even. Should I try getting Tiny back on her feet?

They're standing here because Katrīna escaped. For a second time. Katrīna has a black triangle. That's not a good thing.

How odd that even here, in this hell hole, you can talk about a situation being good or bad. You can make comparisons. Understand the rules. Try to follow them. Repress your human nature. Ignore all need for respect, acknowledgement, physical contact, praise, love, the need to use the toilet, to sit. Because there's one need left that matters: survival.

Maybe Katrīna Weitz's need for freedom is stronger than the need to survive? Because she can't be that naive to hope that they won't find her. And if they find her, that they'll let her live. Doesn't she think about those things?

Maybe she's a saint?

Saint Katrīna walking the tightrope.

Saint Katrīna dangling an axe above us.

Katrīna is a gypsy. And a tightrope walker.

Once, a million, million moments ago—when the world was still alive and beating—Katrīna, dressed in a gaudy, tasseled mini-skirt, and long black stockings that could rob teenage boys of their innocence if they simply looked at them, would walk the tightrope above the tipped-back heads of those very same boys.

Now Katrīna has escaped again. They whispered about it to each other—how it could have happened—as they stood on that first day, while the guards were off doling out food to the good prisoners, the ones not on the penal block.

She had crawled out the small window that looks out onto the fence, and placed an old blanket over the top of the fence. She'll also get in trouble for misusing the blanket, Violeta cackles inwardly. Though, Violeta thinks, I think Katrīna made very good use of it. That way, when hoisting herself over the blanket, Katrīna hadn't been electrocuted. Violeta's aunt used to say that gypsies were greedy and stupid. Case in point. Was Katrīna's instinct for freedom so animalistic that nothing would stand in her way? Was it her greed for freedom that drove her? And what would happen if they didn't find her?

Violeta hates Katrīna, because the muddy ice knife stabbing her on the morning of this third day in the yard of Ravensbrück concentration camp cannot be broken, not even with Violeta's sense of humor, now turned to stone.

I hate you, Katrīna, because if it weren't for you, my little friend wouldn't have collapsed into the mud and the creature she fears even more than The Hyena wouldn't be barking at her. If it weren't for you, they'd shave my hair and send me outside to work, and at night I'd come back here, get food and something almost like coffee. I hate you, Katrīna, because if it weren't for you, I wouldn't smell this bad. I pray that you're dead, Katrīna, that they find your corpse, at peace, so I can finally sit down without being afraid of getting torn apart. If it weren't for you, Katrīna, I wouldn't have this fire raging inside my head, and instead would be able to repeat over and over the prayer Tiny taught me, but which I've completely modified because I can't talk to you, who are outside this camp, Yahweh, you who have left your followers here in complete despair. But I have to pray to someone. And that's why, God, or whatever your name is, help me and let today, though it doesn't have to be today, be the day that I die. Amen.

I have a red badge on my chest, but I'm praying silently. Because one day, on a day like that, when I was whipped twenty-five times for singing, I saw myself from the outside. And what I saw made me freeze. I saw that God exists. But that he can't do anything to help me. Can't help us. He can do even less than I can, Violeta thinks. Poor, poor God. Poor, poor God.

What are they going to do to us if Katrīna gets a way this time? If she finds someone in one of the nearby summer cottages to help her, someone in this quaint town of Fürstenberg, where it's impossible to hide? Maybe she'll try to swim across the lake, maybe she'll drown, become one with the water, while back here they'll kill us one by one? They'll put the Polish women in the medical barrack, where they'll inject them with bacteria that'll turn them into walking bags of pus that can't take a step without it hurting. They'll nail the Jews to crosses. The Russians and prostitutes will be whipped to death. And we—the artists, lesbians, nuns—we—the beautiful leftists—will be used as slaves, some of us will be fucked until there's nothing left of us. And that, unfortunately, is not a metaphor about our souls. Will there be anything left?

Violeta is standing, Violeta is standing, Violeta is standing, Violeta is still alive. The Hyena, barking as madly as her dog, is trying to get Tiny to stand up.

After Violeta had been whipped for singing, she had signed that document denouncing her God—she suddenly remembers this. So why is she still here? The guard whips Tiny with the lash, and keeps the dog reigned in—for now. Violeta's insides explode with pain, she coughs and collapses onto the urine-soaked snow, hoping that The Hyena will

turn her attention to her. But no, she's picked Tiny as her current task. Violeta howls, but not even that draws The Hyena's attention right now.

Don't judge, the words suddenly echo in Violet's mind. Don't judge. This thought alone causes another wave of pain to wash over her. What? What did you say, you, who isn't real?! You who once, two years ago, were my soul? Because God says nothing.

Don't judge, something inside her whispers. Oh, now you want to talk all of a sudden, you snake? I want to be in you, and I'm here to stay. Who are you? Who are you, you who dares tell me I shouldn't pass judgement? Because then who will? Who will judge her? Who will judge this monster that's beating a vulnerable child, whose only flaw was that she has faith in her God and who has such a short memory that she's able to sing in this hell hole? Who will be the one to judge?

You don't know what you would do in her place, continues some black, slimy, horrible thing inside Violeta. You don't know what you would do. And in her delirium, Violeta understands that this thing isn't talking about Tiny, but about The Hyena. You don't know, Violeta Dofina, what you would do if you were in the Ravensbrück concentration camp guard's place. So don't judge.

1941

Johanna Krīdenere stands and looks out of the large second-story window of her beautiful Fürstenberg home. She doesn't know who she is, she doesn't know what's happening, she doesn't know why black ash rained down before her eyes, down on the pretty metal fence,

fir trees, and snow in front of her house. It's still dark out. It's early morning. She doesn't know what's happening. She doesn't even know that this is her house. Her body is still strong, but her mind is fading. She stands by the window and waits for morning to come. Because she can't sleep.

Her husband, Kaspars, has come crawling back to her again. Home. This time he's claiming something completely unbelievable. Says he's her grandson. But Johanna doesn't have a son, much less a . . . It's clear Kaspars has gotten himself into some kind of trouble. Either he has gambling debt, or a pregnant mistress, or something else, something very bad.

The man who claims to be her grandson is sleeping in the bed in the room where she is standing. He's fast asleep. An empty bottle of wine sits on the nightstand. Johanna suddenly knows what she's going to do: she'll go to the notary and tell them she's had it with this sluggard, she wants a divorce. But first she needs a cigarette. And then she only has to make it past the maid, who has been told to guard Johanna. The maid is sitting in the kitchen, wearing an odd uniform and knee-high boots. She calls Johanna "Frau Knīdenere" and asks her if she'd like something to eat. She acts polite, but each time Johanna wants to go outside, the guard's eyes take on an animal gleam—like a fox or a wolf she sticks out her nose and snaps with glittering canines: *nein*. She's not allowed.

But right now it's early morning. Maybe she won't be up yet. See, the way I see it is, see, the way I see it is, I, Johanna Krīdenere, the way I see it, no one in the entire world has the authority to tell me what I should do, where I should go, what I should eat. Because I am . . .

Johanna goes out of the house, she walks slowly, very slowly; she has a cane. She steps out onto the porch. She opens the door and . . . For a moment she thinks she's gone blind. She reaches out her hand to touch what she sees in front of her, what she can't touch. It's fog. The yard is all fog, gray, thick, almost opaque. That means it will snow, she thinks. How am I supposed to find my way through this dense stuff, this grayish mousse? One step at a time, Johanna thinks. She's already at the bottom of the front steps. She feels her way forward. The shed should be right around here. She's cold but she can't turn back. She has to move forward. She flounders along, kicking her feet out, clad in slippers, she has to move forward. Hanna, Hanna, Johanna isn't a crier, she moves confidently, to her father's delight. Her father calls her, a smile on his face: come on, Johanna, come. Johanna pulls herself free of a pair of sun-dappled arms and takes a step forward. And then another, and then another. Good job, Johanna, my daughter, like a grown man, not a little girl, Johanna. She walks. She's forgotten where she's going. She looks back; a thick fog swirls behind her, obscuring the house. She has gone through the gate. She can't turn back. She has to move forward. She stands, wrapped in a gray blanket, and is overcome with terror. An immense fear. She doesn't understand where she is, where she's going, or who she is.

What are tree roots? Are they my hands? What is earth? Is it my blood, thick and slow?

What is cold? Who is it for? Who needed winter? And money? My father is rich, but what good does that do me now? I'm rich, but where is all my wealth, my furs? Who am I?

She walks forward through the fog. Feels her way slowly. Despair overcomes her. Then she decides to go back. But there is no back to go to. Only thick, viscous fog that gives

no reassurance. She panics and freezes. Where is she? Where am I? Where's my daughter? I had a daughter, didn't I? Didn't I? Bring her to me. They brought her. I wanted to nurse her, but it was so incredibly painful, and then I put my trust in an experienced wet-nurse, whose breasts weren't even as big as I had initially imagined they would be. Did my husband have a thing with her? Where's my daughter now? Bring me my daughter.

She moves like an animal, this girl, she runs and falls. She's on her knees. What for? She prays. Help? Help for what? What's happened? Well, now you've finally done it. Didn't I tell you to listen to me? Didn't I tell you not to marry him? I'm afraid, so very afraid. What are you doing? What are you doing? Powerful hands pull and tear at Johanna's dressing gown. I'm cold. I'm so cold. Damn child. Where are you? Where? Help me, Ilze. Is that you, Ilze? I can't see well. Where are you?

The fog envelopes Johanna's half-naked body. She falls to her knees and feels around for her daughter's warm body. It was just here. Just now. Where did she go? She can't feel her hands or feet anymore, but her heart pounds in her own body, with its white skin covered in brown age spots. She urinates on herself, the warm stream trickling down her leg. She tries to take a step forward; it's hard to.

"Johanna," she hears someone call. It's Kaspars. She tries to cover her breasts, but he doesn't seem to notice her nakedness. At least he doesn't say anything about it. He just smiles. She realizes her fingers are blue. Like blue flowers in spring, the entire clearing by the house covered in blue flowers, and the sun warms them, but nothing pleases the new mistress of the house. She's in a bad mood. It all hurts so much, if only her mother were alive, if only mother were here. "Johanna," he calls and motions to her, his expression is so

warm and clear. What happened? What are you trying to tell me, Johanna tries to say, but her lips won't move. She realizes she's trembling all over. "Come on," Kaspars says, "come, lie down, rest, my dear." My dear? What's next. She wants to do what he says, she takes a step, but can't move. She collapses and crawls to a hollow by a large tree root, probably made by floodwaters from the lake. "Put your head on my lap." What is he thinking?! But Kaspars looks so young, so handsome—only his clothes are odd, like back when Latvia was still independent. "Come here, I'll cover you up," Kaspars says and puts a fur coat over her. No, I'm so hot all of a sudden, she pushes him away. Somewhere a dog barks. Kaspars disappears, and for a brief moment Johanna sees clearly into the distance: gray streaks, gray streaks of smoke, she doesn't understand what she's supposed to do, all is quiet in the church, her father is buying Latvians, she doesn't understand, a red cross in the lake, the arc is complete, a bird eats from her hand, Latvians know how to die well, they see themselves as part of nature, we Germans, we don't know how to do that, her father raps her fingers with a switch, her blue fingers, her flower-petal blue fingers, what is my destiny, you're my destiny, my dear, he's only marrying you for your money, nothing else, nothing else, nothing else, come to your senses, come to your senses. My superiority, where is the superiority I've spent a lifetime nurturing? Where is it? My pride, my jewel, my strength. You are special, Johanna. Oh, stop, don't be silly, my dear, what's special is this tree root my blue fingers are clutching. The root is bent like the arm of our savior on the cross. I'm not at all afraid, not at all. I just want to say goodbye. I never got to say goodbye. And something became a bit . . .

And then she's fully awake. For a hundredth of a second. I never got to, she whispers. I'm so sad I never got to. If only I were young again, then I'd go and . . . but I'm not young. I'm at

Inga Gaile "Skaistās" [The Beautiful Ones]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

the lakeshore. I can't move. I remember Ilze, my daughter, Kārlis, my grandson, I remember Kārlis has a child from some crazy woman in Latvia. The woman's name is Magdalēna. Jesus, you'd like that, my dear, wouldn't you? What else could I have done? I see gray barracks on the other side of the lake. I know that this is the end. Couldn't you have waited a little longer, God? I didn't even get to have that cigarette, Johanna whispers with a chuckle.