

Biography: Kristīne Ulberga (1979) is a Latvian author of novels for youth and adults. She studied theology at the University of Latvia. Her inspiration to write for young people came as a challenge to create novels that would encourage young people to read contemporary literature. Her works have been awarded Jānis Baltvilks Prize, Raimonds Gerkena Prize and the Annual Latvian Literature Award. Ulberga has also published several short stories in Latvian literary magazines, newspapers, and anthologies.

Synopsis: The novel *Santiago* tells the story of a woman who invites her friend's seventeen-year-old son to go on a pilgrimage with her to Santiago de Compostela, ostensibly in an attempt to help him get over a drug addiction, but in truth to ensure she has a companion for a trip she is scared to undertake alone. They start in Paris and hitchhike all the way down to the Spanish border. The novel is told in 22 chapters, each representing both an Arcanum from the Tarot Arcanology of Light and a single day's journey. The mismatched couple are ill-prepared for the trip; neither ever having climbed a mountain or embarked on such a long journey. The woman struggles to tolerate the young man's lack of animation and passivity, yet she cannot simply abandon him along the roadside. While travelling, they meet an old man named Liberty (based on a true story) who has already undertaken the pilgrimage fourteen times and is now doing it for the last time in his life. While walking, they discuss their pasts and life in general, their path frequently crossing that of Liberty's. Right up to the very end of the pilgrimage, the woman seeks to uncover the mysterious secret Liberty conceals and, in her quest to do so, discovers a secret hidden within herself.

Excerpt

Dad.

Sculpture.

It was early morning and we were sitting at a little table, drinking the fourth coffee in a row. Free of charge. There was no way we could leave when they were serving free coffee. We couldn't as we didn't want to. The little round table in front of the guest house might have been the place where time stood still at the moment of morning coffee. But we were just the same as the neverending morning coffee – itching, searching. Firm. There's nothing worse than treading water when you're desperate to pursue your own path, yet forced to stop. And I wanted to go and relocate that thicket behind which my inner palace was hiding. There, in the big room, I would light candles and invite the Lord Almighty and his servant to sit with me. I had to go.

The road out of town led through a ford. Bags over our shoulders, we jumped over slippery stones so as not to get our shoes wet, although we longed to dip our feet into the cool water to soothe our burning blisters.

'Why should a road go through a stream like this? How silly!' Alex grumbled.

'It's the old medieval road.'

'They could at least put a plank over it...'

'To make things easier for the pilgrims?'

On the other side of the stream, we stepped into soft, cool muddy slime. Our feet sank into it up to our ankles. It was impossible to walk round. When we reached the side of the field, Alex picked handfuls of grass and cleaned his shoes.

'No one cares what you look like. Will you just stop it, once and for all!' I laughed.

Alex didn't reply. I noticed that his eyes were wet. We put our bags down, our shoulders having reached the very zenith of pain. Our backs felt like unhealable wounds that would

never scab over. I looked at Alex's shoulders and they were red-blue, just like mine. The boy sat down in the grass. He looked ready to collapse and remain where he fell.

'Take your shirt off,' I said.

'What?'

'Take your shirt off if I say so!' I repeated and fished for the ointment I had bought on the roadside from the pocket of my bag. Unwillingly, Alex did as I said.

For a while, I studied the bluish flesh on the boy's neck and shoulders. I felt uneasy touching him. Such a young lad. Alex looked a little embarrassed, too. I reminded myself that I had known him as a baby in nappies. I had washed his bottom and dressed him. Are these mature, grown-up people the same as the ones we dandled on our knees?

I smeared the ointment over my hands. It was transparent, like beef jelly, but smelled quite floral. I touched Alex's skin. He shivered. Possibly in pain. As gently as I could, I massaged the cream into the boy's skin. If it didn't heal soon, we'd have to leave the bags behind on the side of the road.

'Now your turn,' Alex said unexpectedly.

'What?'

'Take your shirt off.'

Despite my aching shoulders and back, I still looked at Alex with suspicion. The young milksop wanted to get his hands on a woman.

I took off my shirt, leaving my bra on.

'Push down the shoulder straps or I can't rub your back properly.'

A hot, heavy sensation flooded into my cheeks. I did as he said. I flicked my shoulder straps off. Now they hung down to my elbows. I turned my back to Alex. I heard him scooping up the ointment, warming it between his hands and taking a silent breath.

His palms, warm and damp, slid awkwardly across the top of my shoulders, the nape of my neck and over my shoulder blades. I no longer felt any pain and wished he would stop.

'Your shoulders are so tense. A friend of my mum's taught me how to do massage. Wait...'

Painfully, his gauche hands unexpectedly dug into my shoulders. I cried out. Mercilessly, he pressed down on every muscle with me screaming the whole while. The scream came from the very deepest, darkest depths, from deep within the thicket hiding my palace. I screamed hoping that the palace would take pity on me, make some move towards me. We had covered scarcely a hundred kilometres. We had another eight hundred to go.

We got dressed again and put the bags back on our shoulders. It may just have been my imagination but Alex seemed more grown-up. If that was the case, I could afford to be weak momentarily. Even if only for a couple of minutes.

The road led into a forest. More of a narrow path than a road. Eucalyptus trees grew there, soughing. Alex wanted to pick a fragrant leaf or two as a memento but the lowest branches were as high as the tops of mighty Latvian firs, the trunk as smooth as an electricity pole.

'I will not leave this forest until I have some eucalyptus leaves,' he said and, dropping his bag to the ground, wandered off amongst the trees searching for a branch, broken by the wind. I sat down and lit a cigarette.

When Alex was born, his father came to the maternity ward in the hospital, hung a silver cross around the baby's neck and left. He said that Alex's mother had cheated a baby out of

him. He said he was not the sort to be tied down with a child. He said that a man shouldn't have ties holding him back, preventing him from achieving great things. The family is redundant, stripping you of the energy you need to make the world better, to bring light into the darkness. Children are a black hole, sucking up the energy you might have put to better use.

Alex's mum, in love with his dad, forgave him. She thought long and hard about black holes and didn't understand a thing. She prayed to God who had created those black holes, asking Him for some enlightenment on love and light. Later on, she found she was rather proud of the cross hanging round her son's neck. Other dads didn't hang crosses round their children's necks. Although other dads sat with their children in the evening, worn out and, after their beer, took their mothers on their sides, exhausted. No God, no mysticism. Whereas Alex had been acknowledged by his father through God. A cross round his neck. While his father uplifts the world. He pulls the jack out of its case, sticks it beneath the kingdom of the faithless and lifts it up. Alex's cross had slipped onto the outside of his shirt and glinted in the sunlight as he searched for eucalyptus leaves. While his father glinted for other people somewhere else in the world.

'That was cool, your dad coming to see you off at the airport, wasn't it?' I shouted into the eucalyptus growth.

'A long way away.'

'Yes, really.'

Alex was a naïve child, one who didn't know what it meant to love a father and what it meant to despise him. He didn't know there were fathers and what they did. He had lived his life listening to his mother talking about his father build a better world. For others.

The miraculous ointment soon had an effect. My shoulders eased as I rubbed them against the smooth trunk of a eucalyptus. I wished Alex would try to climb a tree. That way, I could sit there longer. My eyelids drooped, the borders of my wakefulness looming in a close fog of unconsciousness. The next stage, usually involving the sinking into silence, was disturbed by the clinking of metal mugs.

Here he was. Swinging like a clock pendant, counting its last years and hours. Liberty's feet were covered in mud up to his ankles, making his steps even heavier but the enormous backpack seemed a little lighter.

'How are you getting on repaying your debts?' I lit a cigarette without moving an inch.

'My friends' widows were both happy and sad. I'm ditching my torch and inflatable pillow.

What about you? What are you looking for in this bewitching forest?' Liberty tilted his head and looked at Alex, slouching round the eucalyptus grove lost in thought.

'So paying a debt to the widow of your sadly deceased friend counts?' I asked, reflecting that most of Liberty's friends and travelling companions might well be dead. Perhaps the old man could turn the contents of his bag out right here in the eucalyptus forest, to be snatched up by passing pilgrims. Someone might find something handy.

'No, young lady, it doesn't count. When you're as old as I am you'll understand that we repay debts for our own sake's and not for that of others. My friends would have done quite

well without all those torches, pillows, boots, pens, money, tonics and other bits and pieces.'

'So you still hope to go to paradise after you've repaid your debts?'

Liberty rolled his bag off his shoulders and panting loudly, sat down next to me, propping his back against the tree trunk.

'Paradise? What's that?'

'The origin of everything. A place where honest, good and just people go. People that repay their debts, for instance, and don't hurt anyone as they wander through the world.

'It's a pity you are no longer a child. Grown-up,' Liberty said. 'Because children always have enough of everything, apart from sweets, of course. I think you believe in paradise, don't you?'

'Our souls must go somewhere in the end, mustn't they...'

'Then I imagine sperm-like souls, streaming in a big mass towards their final destination to merge with the light. But since there are very few good, just people, let's assume that all the other souls end up in hell. The bad ones. Those that, in their lifetime, were angry and offensive, would rage and cry, leaving behind debts, hitting, spitting, seeking revenge, running away, growing sick and tired, eating too much, being lazy, making passionate love, saving money for a new house, chilling out in front of TV, not helping their parents, unable to love. Who is it that might end up in so-called paradise, after all? No, something is not right here. And souls, young lady, are nothing but invisible human parts, aren't they? And so it turns out this life on earth is just a prelude to ending up in paradise, doesn't it?'

'Yes, it does.'

'Then I have an analogy for you. If I'm a drunkard that gets drunk every evening and I kill my time waiting for the working day to end and the sun go down so that I can grab my bottle again, can it be assumed that I have lived at all? I'm waiting. Waiting all the time for evening. And if man originally came from paradise then we know what to expect. And he waits, living carefully, so that he can sneak back into paradise. No, my girl, I will not be going to paradise considering the life I've lived.'

'But why give all that stuff away?'

'I've decided to die without possessions. I've almost emptied my house. A bed, a cupboard, kitchen units and that's it. I gave all my books away to friends and charities. One rarely reads the same book twice.'

Meanwhile, Alex was coming towards us, his pockets full of the eucalyptus leaves he had scooped up. The sun, peeking through the canopy of leaves, warmed our shoulders and bare limbs. I no longer desired to search out my dark thicket. Liberty's voice, like the background noise of a radio on the windowsill of a homely kitchen mingled with the wind through the eucalyptus leaves. I closed my eyes.

'What do you know about the forest, young man?' I heard Liberty's voice.

'I'll going to take some eucalyptus leaves back to my friends,' Alex answered.

'Why not do it the other way round and bring your friends to the forest?'

'Once, back in the crazy days of my youth, I think I might have been on my second pilgrimage, I gathered some eucalyptus leaves from the forest like you and almost killed myself doing so. I wanted to take them back for a friend of mine.'

'What happened?'

'It's a long story and I don't have time to tell it to you now. But I do urge you to be careful.

There is a large city up ahead known for gobbling up people as well as their best intentions, inner harmony and peace. You'll find everything there, from stylish cafés and things of great beauty to a sense of great heaviness that descends with the evening when you get there.

You'll see that for yourselves. Don't allow the cold lips of the city to whisper in your ear. It will murmur its designs to you, but you must stick to your own plan if you have one. If all goes well, I'll see you in hospital!' Without turning, Liberty extended his arm towards the treetops and waved.

'Will we all meet in hospital?' Alex was shaking me by my shoulder. 'Did you hear him? That old man must have a screw loose. An enchanted forest and all that other nonsense.'

'I can't work out how he managed to overtake us. We are walking at a good pace, not wasting any time, yet he keeps popping up with that huge bag on his shoulder.'

'Very odd man. Did he say I shouldn't take leaves from the forest? He can go to hell.' Alex pulled a handful of leaves from his pocket, studied them thoughtfully then shoved them back in.

We ate a chocolate cookie each then hauled our bags back onto our shoulders. The pathway through the forest was long and pleasant, leading uphill slightly along a path of velvety sand. After a while, the eucalyptus grove gave way to trees with low branches of foliage, elms and maples. Alex galloped off into the undergrowth as he had spotted a mushroom. He held it aloft as if it were a national flag, eager to find more. After walking for a further hour, we reached a precipice. Catching us off guard, we both lost our breath, from fear and surprise.

Down in the deep valley below us spread the city, looking like the upturned palm of a living

hand laid down on a rocky mountain. Every so often, the enormous stone butterfly fluttered, quivering slightly, as if long ago it had alighted there to drink from the ocean then never flown on. Although it was only early afternoon, artificial light shone in certain areas, cars like lazy parasites moved along the imprint left by the butterfly. All along the winding road, now the path before us led downwards. It was the first large city we had encountered. Unthinkingly, Alex tossed the mushroom aside and stared. I knew that, as pilgrims, we would have to cross this cement shrine without using any means of transport. I knew that the city would smell like an enormous pancake stuffed with shrimp, meat, cheese, potatoes, bananas and God knows what else. The smell of coffee would drift around every corner to taunt us, hungry and penniless. The city would torment us, whispering in our ears that we were only at the hundredth kilometre, luring us to its airport where we would find cheap flights home. Before it was too late because, you see, we deserved to live like normal human beings rather than starving, exhausted wretches, covered in unhealable blisters, filthy, going who knows where. But Alex didn't think. His eyes shone and his bag had become lighter. Before we reached the highway, Alex sat down to clean the last remnants of mud from his shoes.

'Why do you wear a cross round your neck if you don't believe in God?' I heard myself asking. Alex got on my nerves. The big city had made me ask him that.

'What do you mean why, it's a gift from my father.'

'Well, it's a symbol of Christian faith. And as far as I know, you don't believe in God.'

'I told you, it was a gift from my father.' Alex, I noticed, had turned surly.

'So what? What else has he given you?'

'A bike, maybe. I'd have to ask my mum. Why do you ask?

I didn't reply. Perhaps the old man was right. The city was a devil that set about its business well before we started mingling with its affluent, fresh-smelling inhabitants, all consumed with haste and laziness. I felt like offloading onto Alex all the loathing that had built up inside of me. I wanted to destroy him and send him home. It was the city at the hundredth kilometre of our trip to do that. Not me.

'My leg hurts. I don't know if I can carry on with this,' Alex announced unexpectedly.

'What? All of a sudden?'

'Yes. It's really hurting. I need some ointment on it. And can you roll me a cigarette, please.

I'm out of tobacco.'

We stop at the bottom of some steep stone steps. Like the trail of a cunning, very hungry worm, the steps led upwards - straight to the city centre where shopping centres, stylish cafes, boutiques and meat - smoked, semi-smoked, grilled and sundried – sprouted from fertile cement flesh. I suddenly longed to cram my mouth full of meat. I wouldn't say no to some potatoes, either, but we only had chocolate cookies in our bags. It might have been the idea of the unobtainable meat or something else, maybe the city itself, but something made me snap and I yelled at Alex.

'Do you want me to wipe your bottom for you, too? As I did when you were little?'

Alex shrugged.

'We haven't got any money, don't you get that? We've only got enough for cookies, white bread and oranges! There's no money and that's that!' I started shouting while Alex

propped his bottom against the window ledge of a little shop. Whistling merrily, the city wind blew between us.

'So should I go home?' he muttered.

'Go wherever you damn well want. You're a free agent, aren't you?'

The afternoon was ruined. Head bowed, Alex dragged behind me, limping.

I walked aimlessly, rather hoping that with my wandering I might banish this hostile city wind as it would have to latch onto some church corner where it would either be purged or blend in with the crowd or else disappear into a shopping centre where hatred or joy were of no relevance to anymore. Like a whipped dog, Alex dragged a little behind me. He was still the same boy I had invited to come with me, scared to go alone. He was the same boy who couldn't possibly be slowed down by hunger, his mother had always had a hard time, since well before he had been born. He was the same boy whose mother was helped by God and whose father had put a cross round his neck. If now I had been visiting his mother in their tiny flat crammed under the eaves, Alex would have come into the kitchen and sat down with us only to be told by his mother that she wanted to talk to me in private and he, as obedient as a wolf cub, would slink back to his enclosure. I liked visiting Alex's mum. She was an artist. She used to draw when she was younger but, in recent years, she had started making plastic beads for jewellery. Despite being very hard-up, she bought a small electric oven to harden the necklaces and earrings she made, although she never used it to cook pies or roast dinners. Alex didn't like them, didn't need them. Ever since early childhood he would get up onto a chair to get egg noodles out of the cupboard. He ground them up like yielding sandstone, put it in a cup, poured boiling water over the lot then disappeared off to

his room. All the while his mum would sit, talking to me about God, getting me to try on the earrings she had made, showing me the oven-hardened beads. They were the loveliest plastic modelling clay beads I had ever seen. Every word Alex's mother said turned into a long story which, by the time it reached its conclusion, the beginning had become irrelevant. The beads were the same. Their beauty had no beginning. Just an end.

I liked Alex's mum because she spoke so reverently of God, fearful of criticizing or offending. She spoke of Alex's father the same way, quietly and calmly. Her eyes were always sad and tormented. Yet serene, resigned to her fate. I pitied her every time we met.

Now I pitied Alex.

'This is for you, to last until the end of the trip. Don't ask me for more until the end of the trip. Buy ointment or coffee, it's up to you. I have my bag and stomach, you have yours.

That's it!' I gave the boy a fifty Euro banknote without looking him in the eye, knowing he would look as mournful as his mother. A look that won every battle.

Alex put the money sadly into his wallet and later cheered up a little. We bought some tobacco and a supply of cookies.

'I'll get you a coffee,' he said as we dragged ourselves through narrow, endless city centre streets lined with cafés packed as tightly as hungry orphans.

I didn't refuse. I chose the most basic type of coffee. I was filled with pity again.

We sat down outside. A photo of New York in cold blue shades decorated the table top. I placed my cup of coffee on a sky-scraper.

'We've only done one hundred kilometres. We have eight hundred left to go. There is a big airport here. I could write to your parents, get them to wire you some money for a flight home ...' I said without looking Alex in the eye.

'Are you trying to get rid of me?'

'No, I'm not. I'm just offering you an option.'

'I don't get it. You invite me along then try to get rid of me?'

'I'm not trying to get rid of you. I'm just saying that it's going to be hard, it'll get even harder. And I can't embrace your adversities – I'm having a tough time of it myself.'

'Who is asking you to embrace anything?'

My breathing had become faster, pushed by despair or anger. I wanted to flip my coffee cup so it would fall from the skyscraper and break into tiny shards.

'We won't be able to do it,' I said finally, pushing my feet against the city paving slabs. My blisters were hurting so much I wanted to scream.

'Why do you think that?' Alex sulked.

'Because we have very little money, everything is hurting and I for one have lost sight of why I'm doing this at all! Why? I don't know. I want to show off, show that I can do it. That's all. I don't want to die doing it or accidentally kill you!'

'We can walk separately if ...'

'No, we can't. You are underage and I'm responsible for you!' I cried. People on the surrounding tables were craning around look at us. 'Let's go!' I jumped to my feet and pulled my bag vigorously up onto my back. The weight pressed on my shoulders, my feet were sore, my knees shook. I had no strength left.

Yet we still tried to find the sign for pilgrims set into the city's paving slabs, a place where church spires rubbed shoulders with the glass sides of shopping centres. A yellow arrow or a shell. We looped up on steps with railings, turning, whirling, deceiving ourselves in the hope of escaping from the aroma of delicious food and homely peace – these things had become alien to us and we now found them irritating. Especially when darkness fell. The smells grew stronger but the people relaxed. We kept walking.

Alex kept quiet, a little aloof. He kept behind me, rather than in front. Like a child who wanted to be taken by the hand, to be carried or at least for me to drag his bag at times of weakness. As we came out of the thicket-like town, the pilgrims' arrows directed us snake-like up the mountain where the poor people had made homes for themselves. Shabby wooden huts towered on both sides of the road, as if their owners had never caught a golden fish or else, if they had caught one, then behaved like the most common of people. The facades of these hovels were hung with birdcages of differing sizes, their inmates glued to the bars, wings spread wide, little faces pressed up against them. I thought to myself that I would willingly switch places with those birds. Go on! Let them fly eight hundred kilometres. Let them paint Santiago cathedral white with thick bird muck as they reached their destination whilst we flattened ourselves against the bars of the cage, our feet scrabbling against scarce bedding.

The birdcages on the old shacks multiplied in number the further we marched up the mountain. In the moonlight which, unnoticed, now drenched us, there were no more shacks. Only birdcages, leering at us. They were intended for large parrots, small canaries,

turtle doves, painted sparrows, swifts and swallows. There were a couple of empty ones. For us.

'Do you fancy spending the night in a birdcage?' I asked.

'Yes,' Alex answered in a flash.

Reflecting deeply on our own destinies, we hadn't noticed the line of children following in silence behind us. Muffling their giggles, they crept along, bowed under the weight of imaginary backpacks. Every time we stopped and looked back, they froze trying not to laugh. The little Spanish girls were devilishly beautiful with their lean, strong limbs, silky black hair and mischievous eyes. The children's laughter and chatter, incomprehensible to us, pushed us onwards. Liberty was right. I was an adult, my hair was lank, my limbs were tired and the little bit of mischief I had left was kept for special occasions. The children had woken the caged birds with their laughter and now the din, like a slapdash marching band, drove us onwards and upwards with increasing zeal.

Suddenly, because of the noise or maybe exhaustion, I found myself back in a courtyard of my childhood – my limbs strong, my hair shiny, maybe even a little too mischievous. I kept marching, swinging my arms in time with my steps. Other courtyard children were walking behind and in front of me. We were dirty and raggedy, our elbows and knees bruised. Three soldiers dressed in mustard coloured uniforms walked in front of our entourage, boat-like hats on their heads, only their ships had no masts and red stars glistened at the front. The soldiers had bags slung over their shoulders and spoke an unfathomable language. When we grew tired of marching, we stuck our tongues out and hollered. One of the more daring boys picked up a stone and threw it under the soldiers'

feet. They pretended not to notice, kicked it away and carried on talking loudly in their incomprehensible language. Despite my smeary mouth and mischief making, I knew it was not their fault that they were soldiers. They had been called up to serve in a foreign land, no – not so much called up as dragged by force, they lived and spoke as they could. On their days off, they would roam around in their heavy boots and smelly feet, failing to fall in love with our sun and the tram rails running along the pavement. Our parents told us they were bad so we hated them with all our might. This meant mimicking them, calling them names, throwing stones, punching them and then running away. Sometimes, a daredevil would pick up a thin reed and take a swipe, trying to knock the ships with no masts from their heads. Sometimes it would work and then we would all run after our playmate who would disappear off to examine the distorted ship in peace and quiet. He let us touch it however keeping the red star for himself. It was shiny and smooth. We thought that it was painted using the real blood of enemies, taken by the soldiers on the battlefield. I swear we had no idea that the soldier was then made to stand on watch for three days and three nights because of the lost hat, without even being allowed to blink. We didn't know that he had to guard a door of strangers as we, after throwing his hat in the rubbish, set about striking his star. We didn't know that he, too, was someone's son. The children behind us were also someone's sons and daughters, people who were sick of smelly travellers waking up their parrots day and night, looking so tired that exhaustion started to cling to their wooden huts, transforming them into shacks.

When we reached the top of the mountain, the children darted back down into the darkness, shrieking as they went. A well-lit house bearing a green cross and the pilgrim's

shell then emerged before us beside the precipice. Lounging on the steps were people looking as if they had not an ounce of energy left in them. They slumped like sculptures created without inspiration. Gathering the last of our strength, we went up the stairs and into the house that was to be our cage for that endless black night.

Whether in a dream or in reality, someone led us to a dormitory where we took our places, both of us grabbing a slice of twilight to embrace as we slept. We couldn't find or rather didn't bother looking for any bunks which were free both top and bottom. Alex made himself comfortable on a bottom bunk and I chose one at the far end where none of those slumbering had started snoring. I took a sleeping bag from my bag and tossed it onto the top bunk. I wanted to sit alongside the sculptures for a while with a cup of tea and cigarette. As I was turning to go, something stopped me in my tracks. I heard a sound I was sure I would never hear again my whole life long if I never returned here. My eyes alighted on a scene I was certain I would never see again. Neither would my nose smell anything similar. My nose would certainly not wish to return to this room. The breathing in and out of nearly a hundred tired people, lounging in their beds, friends whispering, sudden coughing, snoring, teeth-grinding and stinky feet mixed with the last squirt of expensive eau-de-cologne. Many of those sleeping on the bottom bunks had fallen into their beds fully dressed, curling up in a ball or letting their legs dangle over the sides. When an animal or maybe a person started groaning, I was suddenly reminded of Liberty's last words about seeing us in hospital. Going out into the corridor, I saw a sign reading "Pilgrims' hospital". I discovered that in a tiny room, euphemistically called a kitchen, I could get some hot tea and plenty of inedible biscuits. I stuffed my pockets full of provisions and poured some tea.

Like sad friends, the mountains were inviting me outside to play. I turned into one of the sculptures. Smiling, I told the mountains to count to ten as we were going to play Hide-and-Seek, I told them to find me, a small living body amongst billions of other such bodies. I saw them swaying their snow-covered bodies. 'You shouldn't have asked me to play!' I called out to them in response, noticing as I did how the sculptures shifted and looked in my direction. What were they? What were those primitive people trying to convey when they made these images and figures out of clay, gesso and who knows what else. Tombstones, too. Sculpture is a God, a God standing still, a person stuck, an artist, holding firm. Sculpture is a ready-made stencil for God to use – "You don't have to do anything, just blow life into the stone, just touch it, push it slightly to move the frozen matter forwards a little." That was how gods pushed each other in myths, how people pushed gods, how gods pushed people. All that just to achieve perpetual motion. A short rest then movement again. Only, it might take an age for anyone to come up with the idea of turning the sculptures back into metaphors as indecision was so characteristic of gods and, because of them, of people, too. Besides, a sculpture never wants for anything - its heart arrested, comfortably immobile.

I jumped to my feet and took off my shoes and stinky socks. I went down to the sink and had a wash then rinsed out my socks and hung them on a bush to dry, leaving my shoes outside to air.

I crept back to my bed and I was about to fall asleep. Who knows why I found myself half-expecting to hear swaying steps and the clinking of metal mugs. Instead, all I heard was a child that suddenly started crying, soon joined by another. A man swung down from the top bunk as swiftly as an ape and crouched down next to the children. He pulled their covers

back up, cuddled and hugged them. They went on crying all the same. In no time, some of the bunks started creaking in irritation. Someone flashed light into the corner where the cries were coming from and I saw as the father desperately tried to hush his children. He was patting first one and then the other, whispering endearments but they still kept crying. Then, unexpectedly, he pulled away from the children, squatted on the floor and started singing. At first, his voice was coarse and low but then it loosened up and circled languidly through such calming notes that the beds stopped squeaking and the children stopped crying. The song may have been about a homesick traveller or maybe about a virgin who leapt from a pirate ship, giving herself up to the sea in the hope it would push her homewards. There was no doubt that he sang about home. A melody in minor means home. A painful, compelling, lulling-to-sleep minor. Soon, all noises other than the man's song were wiped from the room. The children had fallen asleep and he stopped. For a while, he remained kneeling down, then he quietly got to his feet and climbed back into his bunk. But I couldn't get off to sleep. Not because of my far away home. I didn't have a real home. As quietly as I could, I climbed out of my bed and found Alex. I grabbed hold of his shoulder and shook him.

'Has your dad ever sung a lullaby to you?' I whispered.

'What?'

'Has your dad ever sung you a lullaby?' I asked, this time a little louder.

'What are you on about?' Alex had pulled himself up to a sitting position.

'Or...'

Kristīne Ulberga "Kariete uz Santjago" [Santiago]

Excerpt

Translated by Žanete Vēvere-Pasqualini

'No, he hasn't. But he has a great voice. Everyone says so,' he muttered and fell back onto his pillow.

As I went back to my bed, I knew that most of the people there were not sleeping but thinking of their fathers. Maybe of their homes, too.

My father worked a lot. He didn't sing. Like all fathers.