

Biography: Leons Briedis (1949 - 2020) was a Latvian poet, novelist, essayist, literary critic and publisher, as well as a translator of various important works of prose and poetry. Besides the tens of books of poetry and prose of his own, he has also compiled the bulky and impressive Anthology of 20th century Spanish poetry, and is an author of many essays, articles, lyrics for well known songs, librettos, as well as translations of plays staged in theatres across Latvia. Because of the Soviet Regime, he suffered from various pressures preventing or prohibiting his poems from being published. Nonetheless, he has always been a relentless promoter of international literary contacts and ties between poets and translators. Leons Briedis has been nominated for countless honours and awards.

Synopsis: The novel *The Widower and She-Wolf* belongs to the genre of magical realism. In his first novel, the much loved Latvian poet, Leons Briedis, skilfully blends reality and fantasy, recounting tales of life, love and destiny based on his very personal experience. Describing this novel, some critics have drawn parallels with "The Magic Mountain" by Thomas Mann. In order to recover from the loss of his wife, a widower spends time in the Romanian Carpathian Mountains, spending the night in an abandoned hunters' cabin. The only living creature to keep him company is a she-wolf he names Forestling. As his consciousness flows in circles, just as memories tend to, he draws comfort from nature - paying attention to every little detail of a plant or animal he comes into contact with. His story is dynamic and full of self-irony, a patchwork of life events and different cultures.

Excerpt

It was the middle of a June night. After having slept a while in a ditch, he clambered out on all fours and started to crawl slowly up the steep slope. Beseeking his shaking legs to find the way, he now pushed up doggedly, as if his legs were moving him upwards of their own accord. His face was greeted with a bright, fresh coolness that revived him slightly.

He had to walk for a good hour. Up and down, every so often descending into gullies which required all his strength to climb out of. No footpaths. Clearly, no one had walked this way in a long time. About an hour later, when he had finally started to breathe normally, having got a little more accustomed to the bracing, intoxicating mountain air, he reached a shallower glade. He bent down and touched the grass. It was covered in cool dew. He couldn't overcome the urge to unbutton his shirt, which was sticky with sweat, and tossing it roughly aside fell face down into the grass where he rolled to his heart's content. He felt better. He even tried to drink the dew, managing at least to refresh his lips. Running his hands through the dew several times, he then slid them over his cheeks, rubbing until they grew sore. In the distance, a cuckoo called. He looked up at the light sky where white flames flashed here and there, coming closer before growing distant again, and the sweet sound of a song reached his ears.

'I'm going mad. I'm mad, mad, mad...' he suddenly thought.

'I am mad!' he finally exclaimed, almost with a sense of blessed relief, and closed his eyes.

The sweet sounds kept growing louder and then quieter again. They continued to flutter - it almost seemed as if they wished to descend upon the earth and nestle up to him.

He clenched his teeth.

'I will not succumb,' he uttered feebly, yet full of resolution. 'It must be the alcohol...Really, am I going nuts?...'

White flashes rose in the sky and gradually floated off somewhere, taking the sweet, soothing, inviting sounds with them. A delicious, sweet smell coming from afar assailed his nose. He knew it well, he could distinguish it from all other smells. He had spent enough time in his country in summer to know it immediately. In this part of the world it was just

like that – honey like. He licked his dry lips unthinkingly, picked up his shirt which was now slightly damp with dew, threw it over his shoulder and set off towards it.

Having circled around a copse of new, green fir trees, he came to a dry and sandy slope where an entire brushwood of cleavers had grown amongst the piled stones. Tiny leaves on the whorl, little, yellow flowers in drooping racemes. He touched the bare trunk and felt stumpy thorns against his palm.

'Self-defensive bitch,' he sneered bitterly and unthinkingly plucked one yellow-flowered cleaver. 'What am I to do with it? Chase my bitter thoughts away? I won't make garlands like young girls, I won't throw them over house roofs to find out whether I will get a wife or not. Where on earth would I find a house up here in the mountains? I don't even have a hat to stick it on so to show it off to other guys at Saturday night dances.

*But he didn't throw the cleaver away. He carried it, fondling it gently in his hand like a yellow walking stick to pull apart the moist darkness. He had a long way to walk. Suddenly, beyond a hill, he noticed a cabin of roughly-hewn logs. It was built atop a heap of stones about a foot in height, no doubt to prevent the gushing spring floods of melting snow from sweeping it away, carrying it down into the valley in its wake. Five or six wooden steps led up to the house. The roof was covered in pine wood chippings. He knew that in Romania, such cabins were known as *cabanas*, usually used overnight by tourists and hunters.*

Wisdom of old told him that the key had to be right there under the stoop. Soon he found it. It took him a lot of fiddling to get the key in the lock but it finally cracked open and, pushing the door with his shoulder and tripping slightly over the high threshold, he pretty much collapsed into the narrow, dark single room. It was more or less empty, not even a wood burner. Just a small window and in front of that a small table and a stool with just three legs, the fourth lying broken nearby. The floor creaked treacherously with every step he made. In

the corner, there was a wooden bunk with a fat, straw-filled sack on top of it. No sheets, pillows or blankets.

'Why is all this happening to me?' he thought to himself, feeling totally drained.

In exhaustion, he dropped the cleaver to the floor and, still clutching the key tightly in his fist, staggered straight over to the bunk. He fell onto it, curling up, still fully dressed and with his sandals on his feet, where he dropped into a deep, tormented slumber comparable to a feverish nightmare.

Towards morning, she came to him in his dreams for the first time since her death. At first, there was a white, speckled flare flickering high in the sky, accompanied by a sweet song. Gradually it grew brighter and twinkled more strongly, growing larger until it descended in the shape of a barefooted girl dressed in a long white dress, wearing a bright yellow cleaver wreath on her head. She laughed aloud playfully, seeming unusually joyful and happy, even a little uninhibited. She dropped her dress. He, too, undressed and they made love. It seemed to go on forever but then, without concluding, she abandoned his dream as suddenly as she had come.

Through his light sleep, seemingly shrouded in a frozen crust of autumn snow, he heard a wailing sound coming from somewhere close by:

'Hoo, hoo, hoo!'

At times it changed to an even more heart-breaking and piercing sound:

'Who-who, whoo!'

It might have been a woman wailing!

"Is that an owl?" This was the first thing that came to mind in the morning as he woke up. 'It must have landed on the roof of the cabin ...'

He came to with a jolt and looked at his wristwatch. It was twenty to six in the morning. The sun had already been up for an hour. He rose from the bunk like a broken man, every bone in his body aching unbearably. He went over to the small window and tried to open it but it wouldn't budge. Maybe it was not made to open because of forest animals. The waxing moon like a pale yellow cheek had risen shortly before. The movements of the sun and moon are never the same, so the two can be spotted together during the day, too, like heavenly lovers - a man and woman who, despite being together, still go their separate ways.

It was now Friday evening, the fifth evening - Thursday – now well and truly over.

Something suddenly made him start. He heard a strange, unexpected noise outside. Having risen fully over the mountains, the sun was now trying to break into the narrow room through the tiny window. He scrunched up his eyes. He had a hellish headache, his mouth had dried up and his tongue wouldn't do his bidding. He could still hear the noise. It sounded like someone walking round the hunters' cabin, trying to get in.

'To hell with it all!' he carped sourly. 'I really hope no one finds me here!'

He unclenched his fist and the key fell to the blackened, creaky floorboards with a silent thud. Without even wiping the sleep from his eyes, he staggered to the door and flung it open. The strong mountain air hit him so hard in the chest he was barely able to remain standing. At first he couldn't see anyone outside then suddenly, just a few steps from the cabin, he saw her. For a moment he was awestruck, standing stock still on the threshold as if spellbound. The burning flames of two questioning eyes bore into him, piercing him to the bone and sending a shiver up his spine.

'Is that a dog?' he thought. 'What a scraggy thing! No, I don't think it is.'

Then, a moment later,

'Who are you?'

And then,

'You could very well ask the same of me ... a question I don't have the answer to.'

Then it came to him. It was a she-wolf; mangy with tatty fur, weak and feeble. He could see her rib cage heaving. She must have had to survive on small rodents, hares, squirrels, birds, maybe also a few weasels. Where had she come from? But that was a silly question, up here in the mountains. Wolves had always lived in these parts. Perhaps she had been separated from her pack or had been cast out of it. Maybe she had lost her mate.

What is it, forestling?

It was the first thing that sprung into his head. He was puzzled as to where the word had even come from. He must have heard or read it somewhere...but no matter! It wasn't important.

'What?' he asked spitefully, grumpily, challengingly, trying to hide his nerves, fear even. 'Have you come to check out the new arrival who is ruining your peace and quiet? You probably don't even know what a human is? Perhaps I'm the first you've ever seen? You wolves, though, have our scent in your blood from the day you are born ...'

Her eyes had a look of sadness about them, no doubt the sadness of hunger.

'Will you come inside?' he asked waveringly and froze.

She didn't move an inch, didn't shiver, didn't lower her sad, inquisitive eyes from his face.

'Shall we stand here and stare at each other for long?' He was the first to give in.