

Biography: Inga Žolude (born 1984) is a Latvian prose writer. She studied English literature at the University of Latvia, and upon receiving the Fulbright scholarship attended Southern Illinois University in the USA (2008 - 2009). In 2015, she obtained her PhD. Žolude is a member of the Latvian Writers' Union since 2010. Her works have been translated into numerous languages.

Synopsis: *A Solace for Adam's Tree* was a winner of the 2012 European Union Prize for Literature. It brings together 13 short stories that are all united by an idea that is profound and compelling: to have a conversation about life and death. This short story collection reflects on different scenes of life in urban and rural areas in modern-day Latvia. The author's rich and ripe language describes a bright and panoramic view of the past, present and future. A very specific pattern of Žolude's writing (also demonstrated in her first novel) is her skill at destroying any borders between reality and fiction, known and unknown, national and global. Žolude's stories strongly reflect the atmosphere of 21st century Europe. The collection of the short stories is partly autobiographical, and the author has reflected on the loss of her closest people and the experiences that the notion of death has brought forward.

Excerpt

A veranda. Crumbling, cracking, slanting askew, wooden floorboards bleached in the sun from brown to gray; when it rains, the veranda becomes black here and there, black vertical speckles breaking out on the boards like icicles. But it's summer. The door has a large handle,

large round polished wood. But the handle isn't even necessary, as the door is completely slanted. The handle can only be used to throw it open. Then it bounces in the vibration

when its lower edge is pulled with force from where it comes into contact with the threshold.

Inside are old cotton curtains, cut into pieces, each piece hangs in strands over its own windowpane. And between the window pane and curtains there are bees, flies, giant horseflies, but mostly bees, as there's a beehive right below it. And there are gooseberries right there in front of the door, and, when they're overripened and sweet, so sweet, and start to turn sour inside their fuzzy round husks, that is the moment when all the bees are drawn in by their sweetness. But right in front of the veranda's slanted doorway is a living tree, a cypress. A tall, thin, unpruned conifer with soft, smooth needles, warm as skin. The veranda has three steps.

Stone steps, distinguished by notches and their resulting cracks. By day the veranda's door stays open, and especially when the gooseberries are ripe, this is the very moment when the bees come inside. The door is open, I'm sitting on the steps, the stone is warm, and its pattern leaves tiny grooves in my knuckles, like the red, scaly skin of a fish. And there's a footpath that runs from the steps off in each direction to the left, barely visible in the growing grass to the right, meandering up to the paving stones, bare as a clay path, in the rain really is like a clay path a nonpath. The footpaths lead around the building. When the bare path turns the corner, there's a large tub of water. A rectangular metal bath, the bottom overgrown with algae, and little water creatures squirm acrobatically. In the rain all of it overflows from the edges of the bath onto the clay nonpath.

But it's summer. The weather is nice. I'm sitting on the steps. If I hear any footsteps, I know that a visitor will appear any minute; you can only hear them when they're just around the

corner. That corner is terrifying. I grow stiff whenever I hear someone coming. It could only be godmother or godfather: the kids, Oma, the dogs all have a different sound. The corner is terrifying, it has two windows and they're higher than they are on other corners, the water overflows the tub and the whole corner is swept away along the clay path. And these are the only bare empty windows in the building. Like ghost windows. No one lives there.

Though when we moved in, or rather when godmother and godfather and the kids moved in, there was a dog that lived in that room. Crazy Aldis's crazy dog. It was tied up in that room, or maybe it wasn't tied up, probably just a collar thrown over him or a chewed up leash holding him around the neck. He ate and shat right there. The windowsill was all destroyed. And the room was burned black too. Like a sauna. A dog sauna, where he whined all summer in his wolf coat and gnawed at the windowsill, dancing in his own shit. Perhaps when the door was opened, the dog ran out into the unfamiliar light of day, and threw himself into the forest or the lake. Or maybe he'd jumped through the empty window before that, pushing off from the burned out windowsill through all the glass and right there on the ground where the tub now stands, where everything flows right past, perhaps the ground sunk in where he left, and that's why the whole corner now floats away along the path.

Later on godfather put a saw in there. It was a splintered wood table with a jagged wheel in the middle. I was afraid to be alone in that room, for I knew that you could saw off your hand with that thing.

But it was summer. Godmother went down to the greenhouse to gather tomatoes and always returned with stories of snakes. Grass snakes lay in the greenhouse's gangway and

warmed their black pipe of flesh. That's why I was afraid of snakes in the flowers. They could bite your hands.

But no it was winter. I remember because my hands were cold. You couldn't pull them out of your jacket. It was probably spring, since I was already wearing a jacket, but it was snowy. Or maybe it was snowy from the last snow of spring. When the road no longer leads back into the cold. Everything is melted, the ground is relieved, slowly its pores begin to open, but then it snows over again. And freezes over. And the road once again leads you back into the cold. I don't know how old I was.

And the tree was brown, brown, not bleached gray. And, now I remember, the white curtain was spread out inside, only lighter, finer, like the bee trap on the veranda. And it the cloth inside was so white, ruffled, shining, like an antique skirt, like a duke's collar. It looked like crepe paper. But it wasn't crepe paper. It was stiff, slick, tough. Cloth. It definitely wouldn't be comfortable to sleep in something like that. So cold that you're surrounded by cold and the wintery frost outside. Winter turned to look back at us it had already gone away, but then it

came back, its eyes couldn't see, anyway. Its eyes couldn't be, anyway. Two large candelabras stood guard, candles dazzling from their limbs. And they burned, not growing cold, but by no means warm. The cold of the chapel, like some sort of deathhouse really. And the flame therefore seemed more severe, more stable, in the warmth the candles burn more ethereal. I see myself from the edge. Grandma in the blue velour coat with the fake panther lapel that I brought her from the megastore in Lithuania, her eyes sad and sunken under the black kerchief with its cheap, brown pattern. The kerchief could really be prettier.

I see myself as if from the edge. She is at that age when her skin has become a bit paler, two age spots on her cheek, skin like parchment. And yet all of it is red and tearstained. And she just keeps on crying and crying. Everyone just nods and nods their heads like flowers. Everyone just bows their heads and just cries. And suddenly we exchange glances from opposite sides and let out a laugh from the very ends of our braids, so that the candles flicker in their limbs, but, thank god, don't go out. It cuts like a knife through the chapel's coldness and the acoustics our laughter from the ends of our braids is like a pocket in which a knife is hidden, the knife they'd use to sacrifice us for this procession. Our mouths are shut, but the laughter sounds in our throats, a guttural vibration, like the mouthharp accompaniment of Mongolian throat singers. She wants to sink into the ground with shame over her granddaughter's morbid naughtiness. In there with grandfather, they place a flask, money, a comb, and perhaps some other things too. Someone wanted to put some flowers around his head on the lining of the coffin, but someone else objected, I don't remember either who was who and who said what and whether or not they pinned the flowers to the white fabric. Pretty soon we saw all of it in the photographs. Grandma took the photographs out of the third drawer on the right in the wall unit. Next to them on the left was a drawer where the table settings for special occasions were kept in their original packaging hard cardboard boxes lined on the inside with white or gold material, the same material that ran through the inside of the coffin. The drawers were askew, one overlapping the other; after the wall unit was shifted, when everything was taken out of it, no one could put it back into its original configuration.

The packet of photographs was rather thick:

- snow. Sand and snow crisscrossed, weaving in and out. People, unknown and familiar, in black coats.

- women in black kerchiefs, men in fur hats. Everyone was wearing patterned knit gloves on their hands, some were mittens, some had fingers. They hold flowers in front of their torsos.

God knows what flowers could endure a cold like that.

- just a grave. All covered with flowers. Tall like a throne, like the kaiser's chair.

Really the cold was a boon to the flowers. They lasted as long as they would if they were alive, in the frozen ground, until the temperature changed and they were blackened and extinguished.

In the photograph you could make out the ribbon of the funeral spray.

Mama had also ordered a funeral spray without a ribbon, with a red anthurium. They beat like red hearts from her to grandfather. Two hearts with and without rhythm.

I definitely had flowers too.

- I was in thick, brownish tights, a black skirt, a blue jacket and a black beret. I was squatting. In front of Mama. In front of the grave. In front of Oma. Behind me unknown and familiar people in black coats, kerchiefs, and fur hats.

- great auntie bids farewell to Groppa. She cries. Behind her unknown and familiar people in black coats, kerchiefs, and furhats.

- Dzidra bids farewell to Groppa. She cries. Behind her unknown and familiar people in black coats, kerchiefs, and furhats.

- Wilma bids farewell to Groppa. She cries. Behind her unknown and familiar people in black coats, kerchiefs, and fur hats. And her daughters are right there with her at the funeral. The youngest and I let out a laugh in the chapel. I'm convinced that it was her, she was the one who said it.

- all of Dzidra's children bid farewell to Groppa. They cry. Behind them unknown and familiar people in black coats, kerchiefs, and fur hats.

- godfather bids farewell to Groppa. He cries. Behind him unknown and familiar people in black coats, kerchiefs, and furhats.

There isn't a single picture of the violinist. And is there one of the priest? Whether the path was strewn with needles, I don't recall.

How did it all end... How did it all end? We wiped ourselves with cloth handkerchiefs with pink and green edges, we carried a few of them in each pocket. But they didn't do any good as we wiped them damp on our crying faces.

There was a feast at home. Did we love Groppa's soul or our own? Meaning, most of us, the children, the ones like me, we didn't yet understand anything. We laughed again in the other room, where Zeta told us dirty jokes, half in Russian, half in Latvian. Grandma blew in like a breeze, though she came into the room slowly, not suddenly, and reprimanded us, saying that it isn't polite to laugh at funerals. And we had to stop. But did we hush?

I hardly remember anything from the feast. But I remember several scenes from other feasts in the same room:

: everyone sits like always around the table in the middle of the room, pulled out well before the party; the middle section, as if framed inside it like a loom, was branded with a huge antiseptic green stain exactly like the one Gorbachev's and the one dad has on his cheek; normally this section is used as an ironing board cover it in a flannel blanket and voila! Then the table is set, often with two tablecloths, as one would be too short.

: during the day the kitchen is hell's cauldron. Something frying or cooking up on all the burners at the same time. I like grandma's homemade meatballs most of all dark brown, crispy, sizzling in fat, not even the ones Mama makes can compete with them. When the plate of meatballs is sitting on the table, the little old dog steals one from the top and gets a scolding, but the meatball is gone, so they nobley leave the plate to her, where she guiltily but happily sentences them to death.

: they drink vodka. And black currant juice.

: there are smokers in the kitchen. They hadn't yet gotten wise about passive smoking, and I was under foot as they exhaled smoke in small groups and tapped their ashes into palm-sized, handpainted pink cornet seashells. And the only light in the kitchen came from the bulbs outside or from the bathroom, when someone went in there to go, since the bathroom and the kitchen were connected by a narrow horizontal peephole on the outside, through which you couldn't see anything unless you climbed up on a stool, but no one did that, and anyway the stools had all been carried into the room to serve as seats.

: later everyone breaks out into a card game of zolīte. The table is cleared, only the vodka is left, a shot of which you had to drink with each "zolīte" if the "head" loses more than 31 points, then you have to do it standing and some red pepper dip. There are many players, and while one plays, the others sit, and then they go around in a circle. I fidgeted in Mama's lap and bothered her/learned to play, the men drunkenly attempt to get me to tell them what cards Mama is hiding, but I'm not allowed to say, and I don't say, instead I happily tot up the kitty, organizing the stacks of coins by size and color.

They hardly ever played cards at a funeral feast.

And then: emptiness. Nothing else happens. Everything happens in life just as I

remember it now, as it's now been since the event, since we're less one, not like when we were together, I was still tiny and I don't remember much. I have so few memories from that time when we were all together. Before Mama in her astrakhan fur chose not to put the heartshaped wreath of red anthurium on Groppa's grave. Only a few flickers, a few scenes and a few photographs. The moment, too, when we found out about it. We're in the old apartment with the musty walls what did one musty wall say to the other musty wall?! I'll meet you at the mildew corner! I'm on the side that's Mama's bedroom, the closet door is open, I'm poking around the closet, we already have a telephone, red, screwed into the wall, it rings, and Mama speaks into it, now everything becomes clear. I poke my head out of

the closet. A similar scene comes to mind I'm waiting in line for the toilet, I can't hold it in anymore and I piss on the floor, the lower half of my body is out of sight behind the open closet door. The piss flows between the brown, gapped boards and cracks, like mercury from many the broken thermometers.

An animal is and then isn't. But a person is and then is. In the beginning he is real himself, but later he is in us. Sitting there like a flame. Like a flash, no matter who remembers him he lives simultaneously in so many. It's an image we create for ourselves. Good people, when they die, don't turn into ghosts and scare you, they are gone, silent and far away in the happy earth, where they sit at the table with Oma's tomatoes and gaze at us with loving hearts, big and mealy like an ox heart fresh from the greenhouse.

For a good while, I don't know how long exactly, but maybe half of his life, grandfather has been between two worlds the world at the top and the world at the bottom. He's secured an infrastructure between both. He had a job almost in the center of the city, not far from the school; in the middle of a large fencedoff area was a miserable hut where he would go and disappear for a long time, sometimes all day, as if that shack were an endless labyrinth you could get lost in for days. But when I went there myself the first of two times, it turned out to be something that I couldn't even imagine the shack over the ground was small, like a little mushroom in a green field, but it went deep on the inside, and under the ground it was spacious, I couldn't make out its boundaries, as it was a labyrinth of pipes and cables, knots and tangles filled this catacombs, where it always growled, buzzed, trembled, and sprayed water from tubes of varying thickness. And he had a companion. With a red face. And in the middle of the mess of their workshop, we ate lunch. Between hardened newspapers and

oily rags we spread out tomatoes from Oma's greenhouse, where she went as if she was going to a sauna to inspect the tomatoes and break them off at their bare armpits. The velvety green stems broken off at the armpit like a blade chopping it off and cutting it out. Groppa carries buckets of water from the well, where I once threw the pet cat on Zeta's urging and received a scolding from great auntie. That summer, hoeing potatoes, Groppa threw the hoe into the furrow and said: "I've had enough, I don't need any more." And that summer he was found dead in a holey boat with a fishing rod and a tin can at the edge of the lakeside where there were leeches, which is why I swam without touching the ground, so that my feet wouldn't touch the soft, muddy bottom of the lake.

But leeches probably don't feed on the dead. So they harnessed the horse, rode it off to the lakeside, lifted Groppa into the cart and covered him with a red flannel blanket. Red is the color of fire, that's why I'm afraid of fireflowers, because they could burn your hand. And they carried Groppa home and put him on the veranda on the thin wooden planks, where he lay all night, and in the morning they washed his body. And the corpsewashing soap stands in the cupboard next to the photographs of the funeral; it must be saved, it can be used to treat deadly illnesses in the living.

And so he calmly and obediently lay on the veranda, bees buzzing at the window pane, they don't sting the dead, even when incensed at being unable to get through the invisible pane, beyond which is the tansy, from which they drink their nectar. And that's why I'm afraid to pick tansies, as they're full of bees and you can get stung. But I picked all the other flowers. I liked quakinggrass, butterfly orchids, cornflowers. I took the black cloth umbrella from crazy Aldis's crazy dog's room and went along the path to the field and picked flowers, the far

field, where wild strawberries grew on one edge, I watched as a horse rolled on the ground, I pet him afterward. After that I got a scolding from godfather, the horse was enraged, apparently he's afraid of black umbrellas. But I only wanted to be a lady from the 19th century with a bouquet of yarrow flowers in the fields of paradise, as up to my ears in nature as in God.

I was small then. But one week an aunt arrived from abroad and told me that she and my grandfather climbed the tall cherry trees in the country. Such sweet cherries there had never been anywhere else, only in that one place. And fifty years later I climbed those same cherry trees, they grew in the same place, beyond the cellar, beyond the outhouse, beyond the plump raspberries. They sat there all day, each in his or her own tree spitting pits on the ground, she ripped her new bathing suit and got a scolding from her mother. That's where I got my fear of heights that followed me my whole life. Not in the cherry trees, but right next to them, what could it be, an alder? where I climbed up and couldn't get down, and sat for many hours.

Perhaps it was that same summer when Groppa said I was his favorite granddaughter, when he took out the fantastic notepad and pen that others weren't allowed to touch, and we both drew! And every summer Groppa went on a day's spending spree with his wages or pension.

Then he came home, or rather dragged himself home, head nodding and rocking from one side to the other, the forestrands of his gray hair stood up and nodded with his head like a cock's comb, his fly open, and he spoke in stern manly words with Oma, they fought, he sat

down at his place at the kitchen table and fell asleep, Oma asked me to climb under the chair and fish out the mickey of vodka from the underside corner of the table.

A charming childhood. A threehour long bus ride every Christmas. We went inside Oma and Groppa's house. At first it seemed warm and lovely, then later we began to sense that it was only 13 degrees in the room. Oma put the washtub full of boiled water in the room to warm it up, later we went to sleep in our warm flannel underwear and sweaters. But first we decorated the Christmas tree, it was already set up, secured at its base and placed in its spot in the middle of the room. On a lower section of shelf tiny, colorful sugarplums are gathered together in one bunch like seashells. We get in the bath, me first, then the next person bathes in my water, I play with the red plastic warship from Mama and Mama's brother's childhood.

The first and only picture of us together:

: Oma in a red dress, the color of strawberry jam, the cleavage of her breasts held together with a brooch two twigs with red stone flowers in the middle; Groppa (possibly in suit, I don't remember); me in front between the two of them, hair pulled back in a pigtail, pink shirt with a row of little embroidered flowers on the front, an extremely angry facial expression. I only went with them to the photo studio when they had to get new passports and needed new pictures.

And then the three of them Oma, Groppa, and the photographer persuaded me to take one picture together. Thank God they persuaded me. I look at that picture about once every two

years. I want to look at it every year on Groppa's birthday, but I don't know when his birthday is, and I'm embarrassed to ask Oma or anyone else, since he's dead, it stirs up all these

memories. He is dead, but I don't even know when his birthday was.

: he came to me today in a dream. He was younger, I remember, and he had black hair, I'd never seen his hair colored, as long as I remember him he had thin birchy silver hair that stood out at

the sides. We were arguing in the dream, he swore he'd smash my face in if I kept up the argument. I woke up from crying so hard, honestly.

When grandma was little, her grandma told her that in the world was a tree not from which we came, but that which makes us turn. By "we" she meant herself and my grandma. Eve was made from Adam's rib, and they were both under that tree and remained in sin. And it wasn't God who drove Adam and Eve out of Paradise, but Eve, having reduced Adam to ruins, who left Paradise, carrying this tree on her back. And it was Adam who had grown on this tree. And I would have to carry this tree and my mother too.

This tree is different for everyone. For one it blooms, for another it withers and in the wind and rain it gets scrubbed gray and speckled, like driftwood, and for others the branches grow out bending to the ground, they droop down over the back, head, and eyes of the one who carries it, and she doesn't see the road she's carrying it on. For another, it's a pine tree with prickly needles that grows on her back, but for another, its parasitic woody vines, and

over time they girdle the carrier, binding her so tight that she can no longer move and grows right there into the earth.

Today she told me to get her a nightgown. Just like her old one. Cotton. But not an old lady one. A proper one.

I had looked up what "metastasized" means in the dictionary several times, but I couldn't remember. I sort of understood what it meant, but if someone were to ask me I couldn't define it. It's like when... It's like when... Basically I imagined it like tiny asterisks in the body, some kind of thickening of the tissues, clubmoss that branches out like rays and intertwines yellowishred. Something like that. Maybe you can feel them. Or maybe you can't. And I couldn't really ask her if she could feel them or couldn't. And she couldn't really know how to say. It was inside another person, not on the surface where you could check. The new nightgown, lying beside her, you couldn't feel it. Them thickening, I thought. Asterisks.

Every Friday I had to meet him; every Friday he drove to the laboratory. There he had an awful procedure performed on him. During the operation they put small soluble tablets into his lungs that killed the asterisks. Then he woke from the druggedstate and was in a delirium. He thought someone had stolen his socks. He didn't understand where he was. That's why she always ran out of the house so she wouldn't meet him. And her eyes were cried empty and around her eyes were puffy bags.

While we drank a cappuccino, the ambulance took him home, socks placed in the outside pocket of his bag so they wouldn't get lost. As we ate delicious cakes, I thought about how he looked wrapped in gauze like a mummy, his whole chest girdled. Surely blood oozed out. And the sweet sour smell of the hospital. Saliva trickling from his mouth. Think of the delicious cake in front of you. Not of gauze.

She couldn't take it any more. But I said that she has to take it. I said that God is with him, that God will be gracious to him, you must have faith. And I wanted to take her into my lap and pet her, as if I could wipe away all the pain with the palms of my hands. Make it as if it had never been.

When I left for my sister's, her two children gave a "hey" and pulled me over to play with them. The oldest boy was already grown up, seven years old, he didn't listen to anyone, they showed me the things that they had drawn and fashioned at their little dwarf school. The youngest boy was a real darling, sat in my lap and ate mandarin oranges segment by segment, quiet and calm. And there under her heart she had a third little child. And I so anxiously wanted to invite her off to the side, go somewhere outside and ask her if she knows what's happening. You know that Adam has cancer? You know that Mama's unwell? But don't say that to her!

Don't tell her that you know! She just needs support right now. But I couldn't. There wasn't an opportunity. And anyway Mama forbid me from telling anyone. And I couldn't imagine how that little child in her stomach would feel if I were to stand them both in front of me

and say something so awful, to speak the word "cancer" in his direction. I felt like I could act far worse than I wanted to. I wanted it to be better; it turned out like it always did.

Why are you drinking? You're not allowed! She said when he came home from his weekly procedure. You're not allowed, she said, pleading frantically, because what else, what else! What's the point of grass and alcohol on top of it all! It won't work! Do it for me, think of me, I, I'll be alone, and I need you so much! Remember, remember everything that we had. Remember how we met! Remember!

And I remember only a small part of what I know. It's 1990. We lived in a wooden house next to a composer who was so tall that he had to bend in half in order to get through the door. I was always hanging out the window, the ones I saw the tanks drive past. Freedom and death, two concepts which at that age I couldn't possibly understand. And one night they both come home and my sister and I each get a pineapple! Pineahpple. Ah! We ripened them for several days in the refrigerator, then cut them in half and ate their aciduousness until our teeth peeled and the tongue was raw like a sore. Then another night they come home and he gives us a box with those zephyr cakes with chocolate glaze. This time we managed to save our treasure in the refrigerator for nearly a week, each day eating them only one at a time.

Husband, do you remember how we got together!? It was Christmastime, when Christ had already been born, we knew that "yes" is the real answer to everything that life hands us.

"Yes," you said, "in sickness and in health," you agreed "until death do us part." But it's not

death that will part us... It's your surrender, but you can't surrender. And he answered but, when I drink, I don't feel pain. A pain you can't even dream of. There is SO MUCH pain! It's not a part of my body that hurts, but I hurt. I hurt everywhere. As if there was electricity being conducted through me that's burning the gas that's smothering me. It's so incredibly difficult.

She thought of love, of being together for many happy years. He wondered why he had to suffer so much, but the torch still shined in his hands, its light shining on mother, she who so very much didn't want to let him go. He was her Adam and her light bearer, her Prometheus.

He remembers sitting at the wheel of the car and surrendering himself to the road, his favorite cassette blasting on the car stereo, he drives over one border and another, and another. They call each other every other day. She stays home with her daughters, he heads to work.

After a month he comes back in the middle of the night. She leaps from bed and embraces him. No matter what kind of person he might be, he wants to be embraced in the middle of the night after a long absence. She puts the coffee on, but neither of them drink it, as she's carried away listening to him tell about how it all went.

I wake up and see the light on in the kitchen, hear someone speaking in there. I get out of bed. It's the end of 1990. He's brings me rollerskates and tapered pleated jeans from abroad; I wear them a few times out of respect, on the few occasions that they won't wreck

my style. A few days later, Mama and I try my rollerskates in the courtyard, she leads me by the hand, I trundle along with her.

There's an emotional upheaval.

They always fight about the same thing. They've agreed to go somewhere, but he's gone off to the store and disappeared, then comes back drunk. Or simply about drinking at any moment. In the end they don't go anywhere. For two days they don't speak, then she takes her daughters and heads out for some sad form of entertainment, the whole time thinking of showing how they both could have been elsewhere making each other happy.

He doesn't remember the little store around the corner, where Nina and Daria sold shots of vodka. That's where all the neighborhood men gathered with their dogs and gabbed. Until their wives sent a child after them or went themselves to collect their tipsy husbands. My Mama never went to collect him. He always came back on his own, always ready with flowers or something delicious or a stuffed animal.

Drinking! It's all because of drinking! If you weren't drunk... who knows how it could be.

Magical days and amazing nights with friends in the garage, there are drinks, there's pepper dip, posters of naked old ladies, a portrait of an unknown woman, conversation about diapers and car races at Biķernieks.

Magical days and amazing nights in Jūrkalne, sleeping in tents with a fire in a stone circle,

grilled fish, sauce made of freshly gathered mushrooms, sea and sun, sand and the two of

us, Adam, burnt by the sun, embracing each other on the mattress at night. And we talk about our trips together to the Italian islands, pasta and paella, seafood and calamari like stars hung on a string by their countless tentacle legs, spread out like they've metastasized through lung alveoli.

The final trip they take on their final Christmas they don't speak. It'd become hard for him to even speak, but he has to speak, has to speak, he has so much he has to try to say, words crisscross his brain, flow through brain canals at the speed of light, at the speed of light time shriveled, death approaching. Chaotic conversation about everything that comes into his head, everything that his memory raises from its archives, the words knitting into regularly formed webs. They don't free themselves, these webs bind them, each in its own way. Life and death knit together. She would be bound in Adam, she will be with Adam, he will grow in her even when he is dead, so many years together, such a love, such mourning, and from then on she'll carry his body everywhere with her. He is bound by death's rope, death is already taking him, slowly but surely.

They go on a trip at Christmas. She's afraid, she's ashamed, she asks me what to do and I answer that she has to go, it might be the last time, they have to use their time together. And they went. Everything is good, they stop along the way to walk around the mustsee places, at night they drink wine and talk, they don't bring her credit card to the Christmas evening feast,

everything goes wrong, this Christmas everything falters without support, they lie in the hotel's white sheets stiff from use, watch television, lying in each other's arms, he falls asleep watching and starts to snore. She lies at his side as it rises rhythmically and alive, warmth rising from flesh on flesh, it's so good. Christ is born.

In the morning he goes into the shower, she hears a noise, after an embarrassed second she opens the door that, thank god, isn't locked, and finds him lying on the floor. She breathes into him, slaps him, shouts, throws water on him, cries and can't lift his heavy body, begs, snivels, slaps him, breathes, calls for a doctor, no one hears her in the hotel room and no one understands her language, the doctor doesn't arrive.

He comes to.

There's an emotional upheaval.

It's not an upheaval at all. It's a relief, good fortune. And a horrible fear that had become a reality. The whole day he lies in the bed as he doesn't have any strength. She doesn't know what to do, if she should return home or stay, at home at least the doctor is within a reasonable distance. She takes care of him, feeds him, medicates him with the medication they brought with them. They stay a few more days in the hotel room, then return and don't tell anyone anything, as if it didn't happen. At the time they don't know that he only has a month and a bit left.

Now it's completely clear what happened, only a fool wouldn't see. There's no return, no way forward, a crumbling bridge to be crossed every morning that still waits for them both, carrying Prometheus with his fistful of light that burns in his palm. Adam is alive, and he is her light. It seems that if she weren't there, darkness would fall.

It's the same time next year before Christ's birth. He is dead, but at her feet she has two dead bodies. One body is unliftable, heavy, it's wrapped in a long, long shroud, from his knit together web of words, she stands it on its legs but it's too heavy and it falls to the ground, as if of its own volition, she struggles, snot and tears flying, pawing at the piece of earth where it's just the three of them, legs stuck in the damp fertile mud, clumps of earth stick to the hands, all that's missing is blood. The other is too light, airy, you can't hold it in your hand, when you close it, all that remains in your hand is a pinch of some sort of matter that burns the palm, he turns to the light, in his hand, they will carry each other. So she struggles between the two, finally choosing to put the heavy corpse on her back, a bent old lady with her husband on her back and the other over her head, hair burnt off and palms burned up by the light, they travel around the world in the time that she is still allowed, her husband on her back turns to dust, on her back grows a tree. Dimdaru damdaru, golden oaktree.

It's the twentyfirst century, just over the threshold. January passes. The shortest and longest month in her life. In January her daughters live like they always do, dealing with their own existential life problems. But she lives in the infirmary. Since the war it's been abandoned and empty, its rooms are dismal and cold, every day it crumbles more and more, but she

stubbornly washes and dries the sheets and makes the jumbled up bed clean and white, there is only one bed here, and in it he lies. He is of full mind, he speaks, but he is weak, he sleeps a lot, when he wakes, he cheers her with his stories, his words, each word like a love bomb and when it explodes she takes shelter on his chest and listens as his heartbeat rhythmically lifts it.

This January is the worst January. This is the wrongest January she's experienced in her life. And the beginning of February. That's when everything ends. Time is squandered, strewn about, scattered, in no way permanent, as immaterial as the incense for anointing the deceased. If she had known, then surely... surely she would have done differently. Talked more, been home more, not gone to work, not gone anywhere, so as not to leave him alone. Feelings alternate, form and deform. She cries out of pity, she groans out of pain, she lies prone on the ground out of incomprehension, she pounds her fists on the floor and hooked rug out of anger and shouts: how could you?! why did you have to die? She calls an ambulance even though she is aware that he can no longer be saved, and yet, pathetically, she hopes that there's a chance the ambulance can still revive him, and she has to try everything, it's not possible to so easily deliver a person into nonexistence. He doesn't come back to life. She doesn't come to for a while, but when she regains her movements and her will, she seeks out string, whetstone, bows, bandages, gauze and ties him to a rock. But his earthly remains are taken to the morgue. For several hours she does or doesn't do anything, cries or remains silent, she doesn't remember, she hasn't told anyone anything about these hours, it's as if they didn't happen at all or maybe it's just so very personal at the root of her

backbone, as deep as roots in the earth that no one has seen, only sprouts pushing out above the earth, this great loss, a piece taken out, as if one of her fingers.

Then she picks up the telephone and calls those closest to her to tell them this funereal news. She calls us, doesn't say into the phone what happened but it's neither hidden nor restrained in her voice. Everything is understood. And there are no words to say. There aren't any such words. Everything that you could imagine saying is inappropriate, everything is nonsense and a paltry solace. And to not speak is nonsense too. The emptiness eats up everything just the same nearby people, the present, the future, words even. And no one knows what the person left behind wants. She wishes that she hadn't gone out to the market, or that she'd been home twenty minutes sooner, and perhaps everything could have been averted by being there on time, to react, to reanimate him. She blames herself. Even though it's not her fault, months will pass until she shakes the blame off her shoulders. And even if you don't want to say anything, there's no time to be silent you must get the funeral plans under way, informing relatives, friends, and acquaintances, listening to sympathy you get so mad! they all have something to say, but everything that they say is the same, banal standard phrases of sympathy that they couldn't feel, they're only saying words to relate, worthless words of encouragement, for the heart doesn't want to be encouraged, it is open and bleeding only he holds his ethereal palm under her heart and it collects her ethereal heart blood, in the other hand he has light questions about it, how it happened and why, that you have the strength neither to listen to nor to answer, to them it's just information, but her hands, the very ones in which Adam died, or at least grew dim, giving warmth back to his body, where the fingertips still burned from massaging his heart,

pinching his muscles, and scraping his flesh, not allowing the scene to disappear from before her eyes she holds Adam in her hands and understands that he is no longer alive. And that is the last time that she holds him in her hands, from then on she'll only have the chance to touch him when she sends him off. And when was the last time that she'd held him in her hands any other way? Still alive. Too long ago, not even yesterday. She needed to lock him in her embrace and never let him go, there's always too little of another person, especially if there's no longer the chance to get anything from them.

She watches how mother sits for a moment, not doing and anything and not saying anything after she's called everyone she had to inform. Evening has come. And ahead is night.

So then there's still something ahead. The first lonely night. From then on this isn't simply loneliness, when you know that a person will soon return, they're just detained or went too far away, nor is it that loneliness when you're left separated and you begin to realize that the other one won't be coming back to you. This is an incomprehensible, unfair loneliness. And who could fall asleep tonight in this kind of loneliness? No one, which is why she begs her daughter to stay with her, lying next to her. She agrees, it's the least she can do for her mother at the moment, and she thinks for a while I must become Prometheus. But I can only bring you a fraudulent light.

Light's reflection. Far off rays from a dead star. I lie in his place not as myself but as a sarcophagus. Every night your god of sleep puts his postmortem mask on me. And I can't breathe. We people aren't intended to take each other's place. When one of us leaves, that space remains empty, and only with time, with every minute does it become smaller, until

the emptiness heals. The path on which you walk a thousand days there and back, the path on which only you travel, will grow over, and there's no longer any point walking it late at night, in sad and despairing moments, to look for footprints, as the path comes to an end, it doesn't lead anywhere, no one will approach along it, no one will be carrying lights, the light is enclosed in a torch and burns for you in the unreachable distance. She doesn't fall asleep for a long time, but neither of us is pretending to be awake anymore. So. Here. Now. I've remained. You are gone. Why just now? Why today? I don't believe that you're no longer here. I feel like soon soon you'll return home, put your jacket on the clothes rack, pull off your shoes, drink half the carton of milk in the kitchen and lie beside me, snoring loudly at night, and you'll be alive.

She feels Adam next to her, turns to her other side to embrace him, but sees a completely different person there her daughter in carefree sleep.

She doesn't refuse her mother. The next night she's there again and lies down beside her. And so for two weeks they don't fall asleep right away, each in her mind thinking about existence, past and present. Existence. What is existence? Everything is nonexistence. And how could it be? For two weeks I'm pretending that I've fallen asleep in front of mother, and pretending to be Adam, Prometheus, whatever is whatever is needed for there to be a solace.