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Jelena Lengold – Serbia

Vašarski mađioničar (2009)

Fairground Magician

Publishing House **Arhipelag**

Biography

Jelena Lengold (b.1959) is a storyteller, novelist and a poet. She has published five books of poetry, one novel (*Baltimor*, 2003) and four books of stories, including *Pokisli lavovi (Rain-soaked Lions*, 1994), *Lift (Lift*, 1999) and *Vašarski mađioničar (The Fairground Magician*, 2008). She has been represented in several anthologies of poetry and stories, and her works have been translated into several languages. Lengold worked as a journalist and an editor for ten years in the cultural department of Radio Belgrade. She currently works as a project coordinator in the Conflict Management programme of Nansenskolen Humanistic Academy in Lillehammer, Norway. She teaches about topics such as dialogue, interethnic tolerance, discrimination, negotiations, human rights and peaceful conflict resolution. She lives in Belgrade.

Synopsis

The Fairground Magician tells stories about love fulfilled and unfulfilled, about things that are visible in the everyday world and about values that are perceptible only in exceptional moments. The narration assumes various forms, from apparent realism to various other genres, such as crime fiction, thrillers and erotic prose.

Depicting the inner conflicts of her protagonists, Jelena Lengold often creates intertextual dialogues with similar characters from global literary history or with recognizable symbols of modern culture. Memories, intimations and premonitions are in these stories infused with a tranquility that accepts destiny, even when efforts are made to change it, like in the stories 'Pockets Full of Stones' or 'Downfall'. In addition, eroticism as a natural ingredient of human life, as an integrated tension consisting of two inseparable sides – body and soul – energise stories like 'Love Me Tender', 'Fairground Magician', 'Zugzwang', 'Wanderings', and 'Aurora Borealis'.

In *The Fairground Magician*, Lengold is a lucid observer of minute details and subtle emotional shifts. In stories like 'It Could Have Been Me', 'Shadow', or 'Ophelia, Get Thee to a Nunnery', she manages to vault the wall between the bodily surface and the human interior in a very distinctive way. No matter how common are the situations she depicts – whether it be the motives of forlorn lovers, broken marriages or unfulfilled expectations – Lengold is in a constant search for the authentic, finding it within sophisticated irony, a distinct trademark of her fiction.

Vašarski mađioničar

Jelena Lengold

Lutanja

Baš kad je žena sklanjala sa stola tanjire i posudu za salatu, mačak se pojavio. U jednom skoku preskočio je dvorišnu ogradu i uputio se ka svojoj činijici sa hranom. Tačno je znao gde ga čeka njegov obrok. Žena uzviknu radosno:

– Hej, evo ga Lola!

– Rekao sam ti da će se vratiti – čuo se glas iz kuće. – Uvek se vrati.

Muškarac je izašao na prag kuće i pružio ruku da prihvati posuđe koje je njegova žena nosila. Nasmehio se:

– Mačori se uvek vraćaju po svoj komad mesa, valjda toliko znaš o nama.

Uzvatila mu je jednim od onih osmeha čije puno značenje razumeju samo ljudi koji dele isti krevet. Oboje su neko vreme stajali tu, kao u zamrznutom kadru, i posmatrali svog velikog žutog mačka. Mačak je glasno i halapljivo dovršavao svoju porciju. U jednom momentu, kad je valjda osetio da je sit, okrenuo je leđa svojoj činiji i počeo pažljivo da se oblizuje. Prvo bi olizao svoju šapu, a onda njome prelazio po svim delovima svog gipkog tela. Savijao se u nemoguće lukove i uspevao da jezikom dotakne i najudaljenije tačke svojih leđa, stomaka i repa.

– Izgleda da je okej – reče žena. – Deluje mi da je čitav, ne fali mu uvo, ne fali mu oko, rep je ceo, izgleda da se gospodin Lola i ovaj put izvukao.

– Ma naravno – reče njen muž ulazeći u kuću. – Ti previše brineš za njega. Skuvaću nam kafu.

Žena se vratila za sto, u hladovinu velike lipe. Bio je topao aprilski dan. Lale i narcisi svuda unaokolo, to je bilo njihovo vreme. Zapalila je cigaretu i prelazila pogledom po bašti. Gledala je žbunove koje bi trebalo orezati, mesta na kojima joj se činilo da fali još poneki cvet, onda je ponovo gledala u Lolu, koji je sada već sasvim spokojno ležao na pohabanom ćebetu, žmirkajući ka njoj svojim žutim očima. Znala je da će uskoro da zaspi i da će zatim spavati satima. Uvek je tako bilo. Ljudi nikada ne spavaju tako spokojno, pomisli ona sa pomalo zavisti. Čak ni kada su deca. I onda im u san dolaze kojekakva čudovišta. A Lola je spavao savršeno bezbrižno. Tek pomalo bi se naziralo njegovo disanje, ritmično kretanje njegovog stomaka gore i dole. Ponekad bi mu se, od neke muve ili bubice, trgnulo uvo. Ponekad bi, ne otvarajući oči, ustao, izvio leđa, promenio pozu i nastavio da spava. I to bi bilo sve. Nije imao nikakvih briga. Nije mislio o onome što je bilo juče, nije imao planova, nije ga mučila zavist, nije imao nikakvih ambicija, nije osećao strepnju. A ko zna, pomisli ona, možda se ja varam, možda i on ima neke svoje mačje brige? Ipak, ova joj se pomisao činila malo verovatnom. Lola je, ovako usnuo, izgledao kao slika i prilika apsolutnog spokoja. Sit, umiven i bezbrižan. Savršeno bezbedan u svom dvorištu. Upitala se da li on uopšte zna šta je to bezbednost. Ili zna samo za strah, u trenutku kada ga oseti.

Posmatranje mačka uvek ju je na neki neobičan način umirivalo. Volela je da sedi pored njega, da spava pored njega, da gleda film pored njega, da jede dok on jede, da čita knjigu dok on drema sa glavom na njenim papučama, jednom rečju – volela je kada je mačak tu, u njenom vidokrugu.

Ali kad ga nije bilo, uvek je strepela. Kada je lutao unaokolo, po okolnim dvorištima, po trotoarima, po maloju brezovoj šumi koja je počinjala odmah iza njihovog zadnjeg dvorišta. Ko zna gde je sve Lola odlazio, mislila je ona. I svaki put je strepela, sluteći najstrašnije scenarije.

Zaglavljjen u nečijem podrumu tužno mjaučje danima i noćima i niko ga ne čuje.

Proždire ga komšijin ogroman krvožedni pas.

Upada u potok, ne uspeva da izađe i davi se.

Penje se na drvo jureći pticu, skače do najtanje grane i onda pada sa velike visine i sav se polomi.

Napada ga banda velikih glavatih uličnih mačora koji ga mrze zato što je lep i čist i uvek sit. Mora biti, slutila je, da ovi većito gladni mačori znaju da je on srećniji od njih. Nekim čulom osećaju to, bila je sigurna. Jedino nije mogla pretpostaviti da li ove osobine Lolu čine privlačnijim uličnim macama, za kojima je povremeno jurio, ili, naprotiv, one više vole one ogrubele, pune ožiljaka i ratnih trofeja? Ko bi razumeo mačke. Ko bi razumeo žene. Ko bi razumeo bilo koga...

– Evo kafe – reče njen muž i stavi dve šoljice na sto.

Seo je preko puta nje i posmatrao je. Ona je ćutke i dalje gledala u mačora.

– Nećeš valjda opet... ?

Ona ga samo pogleda i slegnu ramenima.

– Molim te – reče on – pokušavajući da zvuči smireno – toliko puta smo već o tome pričali. Molim te, nemoj više...

– Ali svi kažu da bi to bilo mnogo bolje za njega...

– Svi! Koji svi? – prekinu je muž usred rečenice, gotovo vičući. – Ko su ti svi, zaista?

– Nemoj odmah da vičeš. Veterinar. I drugi ljudi koji imaju mačke. Svi kažu da uopšte ne bi lutao kad bi bio kastriran. Bio bi više vezan za nas i stalno bi sedeo tu, u dvorištu.

– Da, sedeo bi tu kao neka stvar. Kao preparirana mačja lešina.

– Ne preteruj...

– Ja preterujem? – Ispio je svoju kafu gotovo u jednom gutljaju i nervozno lupkao prstima po stolu. – Slušaj, stvarno mi je muka da više razgovaramo o tome. Nećeš kastrirati ovog mačora! Nećeš, i tačka! I nećemo više o tome. Zaista. Zaista. Hajde da sad, ovog trenutka, promenimo temu.

Lola je za trenutak podigao glavu i lenjo pogledao u njih. Da li on uopšte sluti o čemu pričamo, pomisli žena. I, ako bi znao, da li bi uopšte mario?

Već sledećeg trenutka mačak se izvalio na leđa i nastavio da spava. Usta su mu bila pomalo otvorena, virila su mu dva oštra očnjaka, vrh jezika mu je visio iz usta. Izgledao je kao da je mrtav, pomisli žena, užasnuta. Došlo joj je da ode do njega i pomeri ga. Nije želela da ga dugo posmatra u ovoj pozi u kojoj joj liči na mrtvu mačku. Videla je u svom životu nekoliko mrtvih mačaka i sve su izgledale baš ovako, pomalo iskeženo, kao da su se u svom poslednjem, samrtnom času nekako gorko nasmejale sopstvenom mačjem usudu. Kao da su svetu, na kraju, poslale baš ovakav osmeh, sa očnjakom koji sija u pozadini.

Šta bi bilo kad bih mu rekla da razmišljam o mrtvim mačkama, pomisli žena. Šta bi bilo kad bismo jedni drugima govorili sve o čemu mislimo? Ili još gore, kad naše misli ne bi mogle da se sakriju? Možda bi onda ljudi uvežbali tehniku čistih, bezbednih, transparentnih misli?

Ona pogleda u njega, smešeći se, i shvati da je njegovo lice i dalje ljutito.

– Zbog čega se sad smeješ? – upita je muž.

– Pokušavam da mislim samo čiste misli. Misli koje bi svako mogao da čuje. Šta misliš, da li je to moguće?

– Ne verujem da bi želela da u ovom času čuješ moje misli.

– Zašto? – upita žena i dalje se smešeći. – Zar su tako užasne?

– Mislim – počeo on polako, kao da vrlo pažljivo bira reči koje će izgovoriti – da ti zapravo želiš da imaš potpunu kontrolu nad njim. Ne želiš da bilo gde ide, ne želiš da ima bilo kakav život izvan ovog ovde. Želiš da on neprestano leži tu na pragu i uklapa se u ambijent savršenog doma. Eto to mislim.

Žena skupi džemper oko sebe. Odjednom joj se učinilo da je dunuo neki oštar vetar i da je zahladnelo. Pogleda u lišće lipe. Bilo je potpuno mirno. Nema vetra, pomisli ona, nema vetra, umišljam.

– Ne, nije tačno. Znaš i sam da nije tačno. Ja samo želim da on bude bezbedan.

– A šta bi, po tebi, bila cena te bezbednosti? Jedan besmisleni život u kome nema ni želje, ni izazova, ni opasnosti, ni rizika, ni borbe, jedan život u kome će se sve svoditi na to da se on dobro najede i onda legne da spava? Jesi li sigurna da znaš koliko zadovoljstva mu možda oduzimaš zato što ti hoćeš da budeš spokojna?

– Zadovoljstva? Ne vidim kakvo je zadovoljstvo u tome što se neprestano tuče s drugim mačorima i dolazi nam ovamo sav u ranama i onda mesecima moramo da ga krpimo i lečimo? Kakvo je to zadovoljstvo?

– Otkud ti znaš – reče njen muž – nikad nisi bila mačak. Ne možeš da znaš.

– A ti si bio?

Otvorio je usta kao da će da odgovori, ali nije rekao ništa. Samo je tako sedeo par sekundi, otvorenih usta, a onda ustao i otišao do stepenica. Seo je na prag i pomilovao Lolu po glavi. Mačak se u dva poteza smestio kod njega u krilo i nastavio da spava. Bilo mu je lepo, videla je to. Bilo mu je dobro tu, u nečijem krilu, nisu mu bile potrebne nikakve tuče i lutanja.

Ćutali su neko vreme, ona je polako dovršavala kafu, njen muž je rukom lagano prelazio po Lolinim leđima, čulo se samo kako mačak prede i kako se vrapci svadaju negde u krošnji lipe.

– Zašto ovo nije dovoljno, ne razumem? – reče ona tiho, više kao da pita samu sebe.

Ne prestajući da miluje mačka, njen muž, isto tako tiho, reče:

– Zato što tamo, izvan ove ograde, postoji čitav jedan život koji treba istražiti. Onjušiti. Ugristi. Ogrebati. Zato što svaki mačor ima pravo na svoje rane i na svoja lutanja. I ako s tim ne možeš da se pomiriš, onda je bolje da nikoga i ne pokušavaš da voliš. Nikada.

Sada joj je definitivno bilo hladno. Ustala je i ušla u kuhinju. Mehanički je stala pored sudopere i počela da pere sudove od ručka. Napravila je puno pene i razgledala, sa zanimanjem, balončice koji su se pravili na njenim dlanovima i nestajali pod mlazom vode. Sve to bilo je i pomalo smešno, mislila je. Sva ta njegova borba. Kao da ona ne zna. Naravno da zna. Svi ti odlasci i dolasci. Sva ta preterana pospanost. Naravno da zna. Uskoro će i telefon da zazvoni. Naravno da zna. I on će ponovo negde da ode. I neće ga biti satima. Naravno da zna. I on bi morao znati da ona zna.

Kasnije, kad je njen muž već zatvarao kapiju za sobom, ona mu doviknu sa praga:

– Ne zaboravi da kupiš sijalicu kad se budeš vraćao, pregorela je u kupatilu!

Njegov se glas već gubio, ali ga je čula, ulazeći u kuću:

– Okej, ako radnje još budu radile...

Mačak je nečujno ušao u kuću za njom.

– Šta kažeš na jednu viršlu? – upita ga ona.

Lola nije kazao ništa. Ali izgledao je kao da nema ništa protiv viršle. Pažljivo je iseckala viršlu na komadiće, ubacila sve to u činiju s malo tople vode jer mačak nije voleo hladnu hranu iz frižidera, sačekala minut, ocedila vodu, probala prstom da li su se komadići viršle ugrijali i tek onda dala mačku da jede. Jeo je halapljivo, kao da nije pre samo sat vremena radio to isto.

– Eto vidiš – reče ona mačku. – Znam ja odlično šta tebi treba. A kad to pojedеш, ti i ja idemo do veterinara. Neće te ništa boleti, dobićeš finu malu anesteziju. I sve će biti gotovo za nekoliko minuta. Je li tako?

Učinilo joj se da je Lola klimnuo svojom žutom glavom. To joj je bilo sasvim dovoljno.

Skinula je sa ormana korpu u kojoj će da ponese mačka i pošla da se obuče.

Fairground Magician

Jelena Lengold

Translated from the Serbian by Rusanka Ljapova

Wanderings

Just as the woman was removing the plates and the salad bowl from the table, the cat appeared. In a single leap he jumped over the yard fence and made for his food bowl. He knew exactly where his meal awaited him. The woman shouted joyously:

– Hey, there’s Lola!

– I told you he’d come back – a voice replied from inside the house.

– He always comes back.

The man came out onto the threshold and held out his hand to take the dishes that his wife was carrying. He smiled at her:

– Tomcats always come back for their slice of meat, you should know that much about us.

She responded with one of those smiles the full meaning of which is understood only by people sharing the same bed. They both stood there for a while, as if in a freeze-frame, watching their big yellow tomcat. He was finishing his meal loudly and voraciously. Then, presumably feeling full up, he turned abruptly away from his bowl and started licking himself meticulously. He licked his paw first, and then slid it over his entire lithe body. He contorted impossibly, managing

to touch even the remotest parts of his back, belly and tail with his tongue.

– He looks OK – the woman said.

– He appears to be in one piece, his ears and eyes are all in place, his tail is intact, Mr Lola seems to have got away with it this time as well.

– Why, of course – her husband said entering the house.

– You worry about him too much. I'll make us some coffee.

The woman went back to the table, in the shade of the tall linden-tree. It was a warm April day. There were tulips and narcissi all around, it was their time to bloom. She looked at the bushes that needed pruning, the places that seemed to lack a flower or two, then she looked at Lola again, who was lying quite peacefully now on a worn blanket, blinking at her with his yellow eyes. She knew he would fall asleep soon and sleep for hours. It always happened like that. People never slept so peacefully, she thought with a little envy. Not even while they were children. Even then, all sorts of monsters appeared in their dreams. But Lola slept without a worry or care. One could see him breathe, the rhythmic up-and-down motion of his belly. Occasionally, one of his ears twitched away a fly or some insect. Sometimes, without opening his eyes, he stood up, arched his back, changed his position and went on sleeping. And that was all. He had no worries. He did not think about what had happened the day before, had no plans, was not plagued by envy, did not have any ambitions, felt no apprehension. And who knows, she thought, maybe I am wrong, maybe he does have some tomcat worries of his own? Still, it seemed highly unlikely to her. Asleep as he was, Lola seemed the perfect image of absolute calm. Full up, licked clean and carefree. Perfectly safe in his own yard. She

wondered whether he knew at all what safety was. Or perhaps he knew only fear, at the moment when lie felt it.

Watching the cat always calmed her down in some strange way. She liked sitting next to him, sleeping next to him, watching a movie next to him, eating while he ate, reading a book while he dozed on her slippers, in a word – she liked having him around, within sight.

But when he was not around, she always fretted. While he wandered around, through the neighbouring yards, across pavements, through the little birch wood that started right behind their back yard, she fretted. Who knows where Lola went, she thought. And each time she fretted, imagining the worst scenarios.

Stuck in someone's cellar, he meows mournfully for days without being heard.

The huge neighbour's bloodthirsty dog devours him.

He falls into a brook and drowns.

He climbs a tree in pursuit of a bird, jumps onto the thinnest branch and then falls from a great height, breaking every bone in his body.

A gang of huge, big-headed street cats attack him; they hate him for being so good-looking and clean, and always well fed. It must be, she surmised, that these perennially hungry tomcats knew he was happier than they were. They felt it with some sense or other, she was sure of that. The only thing she could not fathom was whether these characteristics made Lola more attractive to the street pussycats he chased from time to time, or perhaps they preferred those rough tomcats full of scars and war trophies? Who could understand cats? Who could understand women? Who could understand anyone...?

– Here’s coffee – her husband said and placed two cups on the table.

He sat opposite her and watched her. She remained silent and kept watching the cat.

– You’re not going to...not again?

She just looked at him and shrugged her shoulders.

– Please – he said, trying to sound calm – we have discussed it so many times. Please, not again...

– But everybody says it would be much better for him...

– Everybody! Everybody who? – her husband interrupted her in mid-sentence, almost shouting. – What do you mean, everybody, who are they really?

– Please, don’t shout. The vet said so. And other people who have cats. They all say he would not wander around if he were castrated. He would be more attached to us and would sit here in the yard all the time.

– Yes, he would sit here like an object. A stuffed cat corpse.

– Don’t exaggerate...

– Me, exaggerate? – He drank his coffee almost in a single gulp, nervously drumming his fingers against the table. – Listen, I’m really sick of talking about it. You’re not going to have this cat castrated! That’s final! And I can’t talk about it any longer. Really. Really. Let’s change the subject this second.

For a second, Lola raised his head and looked at them lazily. Does he have any idea of what we’re talking about, the woman thought. And if he knew, would he care at all?

The very next moment, the cat rolled onto his back and went on sleeping. His mouth was slightly open, two sharp eye-teeth and the tip of his tongue protruding. He looked as if he were dead, the woman thought, horrified. She felt the urge

to get up, go over to him and move him. She did not want to go on watching him like that, looking like a dead cat. She had seen a few dead cats before, and they all looked like this, grinning slightly, as if they had smiled bitterly at their feline fate at the last moment. As if, towards the end, they had sent the world a farewell smile just like that, with an eye-tooth glistening in the background.

What would happen if I told him I was thinking about dead cats, the woman thought. What would happen if we told one another what really was on our minds? Or even worse, what if it was not possible to hide our thoughts? Maybe then people would train themselves to think pure, safe, transparent thoughts?

She looked at him with a smile and realised his face was still angry.

– Why are you laughing now? – her husband asked.

– I'm trying to think pure thoughts only. Thoughts everyone could hear. What do you think, is it possible?

– I don't think you would like to hear my thoughts right now.

– Why? – the woman asked, still smiling. – Are they so horrible?

– I think – he began slowly, as if choosing his words with great care – that you actually want to have total control over him. You don't want him to go anywhere else, you don't want him to have any other life away from here. You want him lying there on the threshold all the time, fitting the atmosphere of a perfect home. That's what I think.

The woman pulled her cardigan closer to her body. All of a sudden it seemed to her that a cold wind had started blowing and that it had grown colder. She looked at the leaves of the linden-tree. They were quite still. No wind, she thought, no wind, I'm just imagining things.

– No, that's not true. You know it isn't. I only want him to be safe.

– And what do you think would be the price of that safety? A pointless life without any desires, challenges, dangers, risks, fights, a life reduced to filling his belly and then sleeping all day. Are you quite sure you know how much pleasure you may be depriving him of because you want to put your mind at rest?

– Pleasure? I don't see any pleasure in his constantly fighting other tomcats and coming back home all scarred, and then we have to patch him up and heal his wounds for months. What sort of pleasure is that?

– How would you know, – her husband retorted – you've never been a tomcat. There's no way you could know that.

– And you have?

He opened his mouth as if to reply but said nothing. He just sat like that for a couple of seconds, with his mouth open, and then got up and went over to the stairs. He sat down on the threshold and stroked Lola's head. With a couple of swift movements, the cat shifted onto his lap and went on sleeping. He was contented, she could see that. It felt nice to be there, in someone's lap, he needed no fights and wandering.

They remained silent for a while, she slowly finished her coffee, her husband slowly caressed Lola's back, the only sound to be heard was that of the cat's purring and of sparrows quarrelling somewhere in the crown of the linden-tree.

– Why is this not enough, I don't understand – she said softly, as if to herself.

Continuing to caress the cat, her husband said, just as softly:

– Because over there, on the other side of that fence, there’s an entire life to be explored. Sniffed. Bitten. Scratched. Because each and every tomcat has a right to his wounds and his wanderings. And if you can’t live with that, then you’d better not try to love anyone. Ever.

She was definitely cold now. She got up and went into the kitchen. Mechanically, she stood next to the sink and started washing the dishes remaining from lunch. She made a lot of foam and looked with interest at the bubbles forming on her palms and disappearing under a jet of water. All that was a bit funny, she thought. All that fighting on his part. As if she didn’t know. Of course she knew. All those comings and goings. All that excessive sleepiness. Of course she knew. The phone would ring soon. Of course she knew. And he would go off somewhere again. And he would be gone for hours. Of course she knew. And he ought to know that she knew.

Later, when her husband was already closing the gate, she shouted to him from the threshold:

– Don’t forget to buy a light-bulb on your way back, the one in the bathroom has burned out!

His voice was already fading, but she heard him going into the house:

– OK, if the shops are still open...

The cat entered the house noiselessly after her.

– What do you say about a hot dog? – she asked him.

Lola said nothing. But it seemed that he had nothing against a hot dog. She carefully cut it into small pieces, threw the lot into a small bowl with a little hot water, for the cat did not like cold food from the fridge, waited for a minute, poured out the water, checked with her finger that the hot dog pieces were warm and only then put the bowl in front of the

cat to eat. He ate quite greedily, as if he hadn't eaten only an hour before.

– See – she said to the cat. – I know full well what you need. And when you're finished with that, we'll go to the vet. It won't hurt a bit, you'll get a nice little injection. And everything will be over in a matter of minutes. Right?

It seemed to her that Lola's yellow head nodded. That was quite enough for her.

She took the basket in which she would carry the cat down from the cupboard and went to get dressed.



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