

***Unidentified Hallucinogenic Object* by Paulina Bukowska**

“I want some slippers.” I hold out a handful of coins to the tiny woman holding the mop.

She turns around abruptly, adjusts her headscarf and looks me up and down through squinting eyes buried in wrinkles.

“What?”

“Slippers.”

“So go buy em – what am I, a machine? Come out me mouth, do they?”

She thrusts the mop into the bucket, splashing drops of dirty water on the people moving in a circle, regularly applying handkerchiefs to their teary eyes. Hidden in pockets here and there are velvet roses, packets of cigarettes and melted chocolate, and plastic teddy bears clutching blood-red hearts torn from their own ribcages. The plastic teddies want to live, but no one will listen to them.

I manage to tame the machine. Without dithering I put my hand in its belly and triumphantly pull out a small packet – an entry pass for the world of people teetering on the brink. What’s it like to look into the eyes of death? Can you see life in them? Occasionally someone crosses to the other side and doesn’t come back, flies off into the unknown, leaving his heavy body behind in remembrance. The heavens hang above us, but there’s no one calling out of them; aeroplanes break through the clouds without ever reporting any angels’ voices. The metro and shopping malls have been dug down in hell, the sinners have become addicted to it, descending into the underworld en masse to scatter the seeds of life that push their way through wall after wall, getting ever nearer to the centre of the Earth.

It’s some sort of nonsense.

I open the door a crack. I find her in the same position she was in when I left. She notices me and smiles, I’m burning, the weight of my heart sinks violently, pressing my feet to the floor. I can feel my calves trembling, each individual cord moving my jelly-like skin and forcing my knees to bend.

I know I have to breathe. I know it's not the time to scratch my head. I'm standing at a crossroads, giving myself directions to get to the loveliest parts of the city I'm planning to visit. I'm heading off on a well-worn path.

"Well then," I mutter to myself, getting my mouth muscles to clench into a narrow gap.

The pillows are wet with saliva. There's a flowerpot with no flower in the window, some crayons tied with a multi-coloured ribbon on the side table, and a chair with a hoary, male, hunchbacked burden of indefinable age. With my hands under my buttocks I sway from side to side and shuffle my trailing trouser legs.

That smile.

My legs get tangled and knotted as I stiffly hold out a hand offering a carrier bag; I chew my bottom lip as I watch her short fingers move.

She fishes out a red-and-yellow strawberry, and fruit juice trickles from her mouth. I can feel a sweet cobweb clinging to me. My stomach tightens, I'm clenching my hands and feet, I'm rotting like an apple core, reducing my dimensions.

There is no heaven. The angels are hail beating against the aeroplane windows, high-speed lumps of ice that threaten people with the finger of God, asymmetrical balls compressed out of dusty storm clouds. I can see the pips digging into her gums, a simple, human smile of friendliness and matt pupils with no bright starlight in them.

"I almost slept with her."

I can feel disgust leaking from my nose, the colour of her hair and the pallor of her cheeks are annoying me, and her gestures are obstructing my lips as they twist into a distasteful grimace. I spit out my poison and aim the stream of it at her red-soaked mouth, pressure tears at my larynx as I squeeze her small belly. I can't bear her life, as it hangs above the bed, suspended in red liquid.

She gently presses the green and yellow fruit, crushing it with the tips of her fingers. Once she has squeezed out the raw juice, she throws away the injured skin and sucks the remains from her hand.

"I almost slept with her. But I couldn't."

She laughs fluently, as if the sounds were flowing along a stave spattered in black cherries, specially made for tragi-comic situations. I'm ejecting facts like the last of the toothpaste from the tube, though I don't want to brush my teeth at all.

She seizes another fruit, bites it and looks sour, ruining her face like a used lemon.

I grab my nose as a stream of blood pours from it, colouring all the green strawberries red. I devour them, knowing they are partly me, I stuff them into my veins and get them into my circulation. My heart beats out the aroma of fruits, rhythmically pumping the tiny pips around my lungs and liver, and carrying the rancid seeds to my testicles. I become the one-hundred-percent pure father of natural sugar-free sex.

For a long time she says nothing. Her face mellows, recovering its cheerful tone, her features soften, and wings sprout from her shoulder blades, showering me in warm fluff. Like a stone idol she solidifies in a blissful position, merely radiating an invisible, palpable light.

I get up and, carried by an alien force I quickly slip away, to avoid disturbing the serene beauty flowing down her snow-white body.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones