

NEVA LUKIĆ
THE PARROTS

Translated by John K. Cox

ONCE UPON A TIME we were walking along the creek where the buildings are almost as high as the sky.

It was dusk. The summer is loudest at dusk.

Various kinds of sounds reached us from the windows, including the sounds of birds mixed with heavy metal music and a child crying.

We didn't know where the sounds were coming from, as there were too many windows all crammed together. It was a nightmare of noises—a zoo.

We went on walking past the line of windows, which seemed endless—like a Great Wall made of windows, only it was longer than that Wall. Windows never stop; everything begins and ends in windows. Worlds are depicted by them, worlds watch each other in them, worlds emerge as different through them. This is all due to the army of windows and their discipline, without which we could not breathe. They are gills that we drill with our monolith noses—false openings to freedom.

We all have our own windows, right?

“I'll open the window, the air will flow in, and the sky will open up . . .”

We all carry around a window under our biceps that is like an “extra eye.” And believe me, the purpose of life is to collect as many windows as possible. And in that case, you'd have fresh air coming out the wazoo! You should get your hands on an entire skyscraper of a million windows just for yourself! Snatch up as many buildings as possible, yoo-hoo! What happiness!

All sorts of sounds tumble out of a window, but for people on the outside it's quite a bit harder to penetrate one. It's difficult to throw a ball through, or letters, or keys. It's not easy to return things to a house, but in the opposite direction it's a breeze. You jump, and you're done!

That's when we saw him—not while we were thinking that previous

sentence, for I actually think we were not thinking then, or, if we were, our thoughts could not have been simultaneous. We were just looking at windows, all similar, none of them topped with cornices. They only differed in size, as some were square and some were less square. When we think back on it now, we think we actually walked for such a long time because we wanted to get to windows that were different—to some dirty checkered curtains, to cactuses growing underneath some of them, to sculptures of frogs, snakes, or dragons encircling them—but nothing happened. It was all the same bald-headed windows, and behind them the hidden bald and less bald people, sometimes without any front teeth.

Then we started watching him. We think it was “then,” although nothing had happened. It was an ordinary building, and don’t you go thinking that night had already fallen. No, no, it was twilight. There was still sun on some of the windows. The rays are what beautify them in the absence of decoration. On his balcony hung a cage with a parrot that was out for a stroll inside it. In fact, that was the thing that drew our attention, as it started to squawk: “Thieves! Thieves! You’ve got no way to climb up here!”

At first we thought he was addressing us. There are people with such strange voices! And besides, what’s the difference anyway between the voice of a parrot and that of a human? Everything is just sounds, ha ha! We began bouncing around on the balcony; we were happy to have come across some strange birds. He—and we observed him at this for several minutes—was standing there reading newspapers on the same perch as the parrot. He even rocked back and forth when the wind came up. We were a bit weirded out, and that’s why we didn’t ask any questions in that moment, but soon we realized that this window was a blessing and that a human being was at any rate more interesting than a parrot, whatever the bird was like. He was wearing a suit, and onto his head he had plopped a hat. A red bowtie was wrapped around his neck. His feet were bare, and his toes convulsively clasped the little bar. We kept giving little coughs, and then, with that strange modulation in our voices that’s impossible to describe—that slightly inane intonation that echoes in the human head for a while—we said: “Excuse us!”

That did not have much of an effect on him.

“Excuse us,” we said in unison, once more, twice, three times. Nothing. The man didn’t care. He was calmly reading his newspaper. We were able to make out the headline in bold letters on the back page: “Instead of carpets,

they planted grass in the apartment.”

Soon the parrot started repeating: “Excuse us! Excuse us!”

Nothing. He just continued reading the newspaper while swinging on the crossbar.

For the next thirty minutes (no exaggeration) we stubbornly repeated over and over our “Excuse us” beneath that balcony. Even the parrot ceased and desisted. We were worse than that gross bird. True bird-people. Excuse us, excuse us! And he was swinging there, like hair in a breeze . . .

Soon we took it to the next level, as they say. Without any kind of arrangement between us, we started pelting the man with stones. Like the members of a sect, we all in the same moment raised our hands in the air and swayed back and forth. We wanted something; our desire for it was vicious. A few little stones hit him in the forehead, but he didn’t react then either. Nothing could throw off his rhythm. We couldn’t let it go, though; that’s all there was to it! Our path had not led us here for nothing . . . In a city in which all windows are the same, our path had led us to a man who was different. He had to tell us what he was doing on that bar.

No, he kept on reading his newspaper in silence, and we got fed up with throwing rocks. Fatigue catches up to a person from that. Your spine starts to ache.

And . . . thus . . . we were now behaving like total jerks! We began to steal his thoughts. We fired off all kinds of sentences so that he couldn’t concentrate on the ones in his newspaper, such as: “What’s so interesting in the paper, huh? Tell us, please!” Or: “You mean it isn’t obvious that you have changed into the most ordinary parrot on a balcony? Here, parrot! You live in the humblest of cages with five hundred other birds, some of whom are above you and some of whom are below you! It’s a true beehive! Look—a bee up on top of you is hanging out her laundry. Can you smell it? Don’t the clothes smell nice?” We tossed out several such asinine lines.

Then, all of a sudden, we started to laugh. A wave of laughter washed over us. *Ha ha ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, haha!* We practically threw ourselves to the floor and began rolling around.

“But you know,” we said as we caught our breath, “we get it now. You are a worse parrot than that other one right next to you.” And we fell once more into a fit of laughter. *Ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha! Jesus H. Christ, that was sooo funny!*

“You . . . you . . . you . . . are wearing a suit! A parrot in a suit! Come on,

take it off. If nothing else, birds are naked. And they can fly, if you open their cage doors! But what are you going to do, you freak, on that little balcony of yours in your little tweed suit with a tied tongue and a bow tie around your neck? Sing, bird! Start cooing!”

By then, we were totally, completely out of breath. We were incapable of laughing anymore because of how worn out we were. We started gawking at that strange man, who had certainly been rocking for days already on his balcony. Certainly all his neighbours considered him a lunatic. For sure they all looked away when he raised his hat in a sign of greeting. Therefore, he felt no need to respond to us at all. But, well, he had to respond to our questions. We’d spent a lot of time looking for this window!

We gawked at him in silence, gaping and watching. We stood there, perplexed. Soon—you’re not going to believe this—he set down the newspaper and . . . yawned. This perked us right up, as if he’d absorbed all of our fatigue, and we started up again.

Well, we didn’t get around to starting up immediately because he elegantly opened the door of the cage. The bird flew away without saying a word. All you could hear was the flapping of its wings. Then he conscientiously closed up the little cage. It looked odd, empty as it was. We were astonished and starting to glare at him. We thought that the festive, ceremonial moment had arrived. He was finally going to say something. Nope. He began to twirl his arms, as if he were preparing to do the long jump. The man loosened up, stretched, and then leapt. That completely threw us out of whack, but we were not scared off. Instead, we hunched over his body like hungry dogs. Our own bodies were full of adrenalin that was seeping out of us in the form of sweat. We drew our heads close to his body so we could catch his smell better, and then we started up again: “You didn’t take off your suit, you idiot! You birdbrain! You have to be *naaaked!*”

Another fit of laughter came over us . . . We recalled, all three of us, in the same instant, the poet Ivan Gundulić. Of course without discussing it. “He who would be on high / is now down below, *tra-la-la-la la!*”

We were yelling at the top of our lungs. Nowadays when we think back to that, we can’t believe how wicked we were. We are not of a mind to advance any theories on why things happened that way or to justify our behaviour; the facts are what’s vital. But it really rained on our parade when that sort of high-pitched voice of his intoned: “And whoever is down below, he rises on high.” With a bit of spit he cleaned the blood from his elbow, he used his

hands to brush the muck from his knees, and he went into the entrance of his building.

In our delirium, we found ourselves conversing with each other. We did not know what to do.

“How did he survive that?”

“Even after jumping from the second floor.”

“But nothing happened to him.”

“So. Nothing happened.”

“How can that be?”

“It just is.”

Soon we turned our attention to him again with more shouting, even though he was no longer at the window.

“Yes, every person’s worth is measured by the number of windows he has. Nine windows—nine lives, like a cat. Every window—a new chance! That’s the only reason that having windows even matters. Surely you have at least two windows. That’s why you didn’t die. It’s just that you have to be super careful when you get down to the final window. The best thing you could do now would be to do a test run and go try out some other window. Any window can be yours, at least for a short time, if the owner invites you in as a guest . . . And as for the parrots, where does that voice come from anyhow?”

Those were the last things we said. We picked up the biggest chunks of stone from the ground that we could find and launched them towards the windows.

We needed to shatter all the windows.

After ten minutes of this, we heard police sirens in the distance. He had been gone from the window for a long time.