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CALL ME
ESTEBAN

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CALL ME ESTEBAN

Proposal for a Book in Translation

Original Title (Bosnian): **Zovite me Esteban**

Author: **Lejla Kalamujić**

Title in Translation: **Call Me Esteban**

Translator (English): **Nataša Srdić**

Publisher: Dobra knjiga (BIH)

Literary Agent: Katja Urbanija (rights@goga.si)

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Rights Sold: German, Macedonian, Polish, Slovenian

Full English translation available.

About the book

In the 19 stories from this prize-winning collection (the “Edo Budiša” prize for the best short story collection written in a language which doesn’t require translation into Croatian, 2016.) we follow the protagonists emotional journey from unreliable memories of her untimely departed mother, to her childhood with an alcoholic father who is never around, to grandparents who slowly fall apart and die before her eyes, to the dissolving country in a changing world, to her discovery of her sexuality, and the anxieties of making a living.

The motif of the mother seems to haunt all the stations of the journey like an omnipresent spiritus movens and it unobtrusively leads us through the protagonists emotional life, acquainting us with Sarajevo from before, during and after the war, the “cool crowd”, interethnic marriages, Šid as a place of exile, hospitalisation at the psychiatric ward – with Eros and Thanatos.

Lejla Kalamujić’s collection is an authentic testimony of the fate of a family. The writing of this testimony is an act of courage of sorts, an act of facing up to that which is darkest and heaviest in humans.

About the author

Lejla Kalamujić, born 1980 in Sarajevo, graduated at the Department of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Sarajevo. She is the author of the two collections of short stories *The Anatomy of a Smile* and *Call Me Esteban*. She is also author of the contemporary, socially engaged drama *Ogress, or How I Killed My Family*. Her second book *Call me Esteban* won the Edo Budiša Prize for best collection of short stories and was short-listed for the European Literature Prize in 2015. She has won many literature awards for short stories and was awarded various residencies and fellowships.

Her stories have been translated into English, German, French, Macedonian, Slovene, Polish, Romanian, Albanian and Lithuanian. She contributes prose, essays and reviews to various magazines and web portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries in the region.

About the translator

Nataša Srdić (1984) is a literary translator from Serbian into English and vice versa. So far, she has translated books by David Brooks, Rodge Glass, Claude Lalumière, Maurice Gee, Will Self, Allan Wilson, Alexander Trocchi, Srđan Srdić, Bojan Babić and Lejla Kalamujić. She holds a doctorate in philology from the University of Belgrade.

Sample Chapters

What is a Typewriter to Me?

A rainy morning, I don't feel like going anywhere. I'm sitting on the sofa, leafing through a newspaper. Kiki has curled up beside my feet, purring. On page 28 there's a headline in bold type:

WORLD'S LAST TYPEWRITER FACTORY SHUTS DOWN.

It's Tuesday, 26th April 2011. I read on:

The end of the era of the typewriter, the main piece of the 20th century office equipment, is drawing near. In Mumbai, India, the last typewriter-producing factory has ceased operations.

My mum was a typist. At the time that is said no longer to hold good. In a short life which lasted for 22 years. She died on a distant Friday, on 20th August 1982. I was two years old.

In my life there's no memory of my mother. She's merely a tale, a sacred one, of the genesis, of the intimate primeval origin. While my peers were lulled to sleep with fairy tales, I listened about her. Her death was talked about quietly. There would be a murmur only at the mention of an anecdote or a yarn from her life. Then the bygone time would set the vocal cords ablaze. It would roll in between the tongue and the palate, along with the air transforming into words, then sentences. The tales followed her wanderings. It didn't matter if sometimes one tale refuted another, if there were contradictions: the sacred is untouchable, it is to be believed.

It was a time of work drives which earned you kidney inflammation. It was a world in which typist competitions were organized and runner-up prizes were brought home. Runner-up because a girl was crying since my mum had been faster and better. To console her, the jury conferred the trophy on the tearful girl and sent my mum home with a runner-up certificate. Besides the certificates, she has been outlived by a bathrobe, a wedding ring, a party booklet and a typewriter.

In my grandma and granddad's flat the typewriter was a relic. A souvenir carefully kept in the bedroom wardrobe. Only my persistent pleas could wheedle it out onto the table. Grandma and granddad would sit next to me and let me type. The walls echoed the sharp sounds. The ink would impress the shapes of letters, at first randomly picked, onto blank paper. And then words, sentences... As far as the end of the line, when I would bring the cylindrical roller back to the beginning using the lever. I would type on and on for a couple of hours. When my little fingers started to hurt, we would stow the machine away in its small plastic case, in the deep silence of premature death.

Was it then that I warmed to writing? I do not know. But I know that I liked typing brief pleasant and unpleasant occurrences from her life. When she broke a window in the living room, pretending not to have anything to do with it. Or, even better, when she ate a whole pork leg and then stared into the empty plate in grandma's hands in utter amazement, constantly repeating: "Where's it gone?"

I don't know why the news from India bothered me. I don't even know why I climbed the ladder and took the dusty plastic case down from the wardrobe. Who knows when I last touched it. Soon it will be thirty years' anniversary of my mum's death. I think about it as I feed a blank sheet into the machine and type:

What is a typewriter to me?

Waiting for Pigeons

Dad loved pigeons. After mum's death, the two of us returned to the family house in Vratnik, where we lived with nanny and grandpa. And pigeons. And an occasional cat that would sneak into the yard at night, curl up and purr insidiously under the dovecote. Grandpa didn't really find such cohabitation agreeable: feathers, grains, stench all over the place... But life was supposed to be re-built, knocked together and patched up like that dovecote made of old wire and planks.

Grandpa was busy in the garage for days on end. Sweating, in a tight T-shirt with a swollen belly peeking underneath, he spent hours sawing, sanding, riveting... He placed the dovecote on top of the wall facing the garden. We had a large ladder, but I was forbidden to climb it. "You'll fall and kill yourself!" nanny would reply to my pleas.

For this reason, any climbing of mine was a secret adventure. I moved stealthily, taking care not to make the wooden bars creak under my feet. And the cats? They would dart and jump onto the wall. Their claws would tap quietly over the jutting parts of the façade. They would tumble down, yowling. Only the deftest ones would manage to clamber up at night. A pigeon or two would suffer: in the morning dad would find them bleeding, with ripped throats. They kept death, that monster, under their hats, away from me. They would bury the dead pigeons in the garden, covering the freshly dug earth with leaves.

At dawn, dad feeds various seeds to the pigeons. He re-fills them fresh water, they drink, and then with their wet beaks they rise up among the clouds. They all leave at the same time: they for freedom, dad for work at the Post Office. I am awakened

by nanny's voice and the smell of food. Nanny is constantly on her feet, music crackles from inside the old radio. Nanny starts to sing; this way, she says, she works faster and better. As she stirs the lunch on the cooker hotplate, scours the sink or wipes the dust on the bedside table, songs follow one another – this is how nanny deftly combines the life of a housewife and the dreams of being a singer.

I have breakfast in my pyjamas. My eyes are so sticky that they hurt. I carry a couple of slices with a spread on a copper plate into my room. I sit down on the bed, tuck my legs under the quilt, place the plate in front of me and bite off large chunks of bread. I take time to chew, looking out of the window. When I'm done, I get dressed in front of the big mirror. There's a photograph pinned to the frame. In it, dad is smiling in blue overalls. There are wires and pliers in his hands. Dad establishes telephone connections, bonding voices. Similar to the way pigeons re-connect worlds in their flight. I pull on my sock in a rush. A massive stone table is waiting for me in the garden. I lie on it, spread my wings and search for pigeons. The highfliers pierce the clouds, the rollers turn around relentlessly. Hours go by. My eyes are woven into the sky. Into the heights, where those who are no longer alive are said to reside.

Panic breaks out when I spot a falcon. I jump to my feet, waving my hands, whistling and shouting, but my voice can't be heard up there, at the heights. I run to fetch nanny and grandpa.

"The falcon's gonna eat a pigeon!" I shout. Grandpa hurries from the garage, nanny descends the stairs. They clap their hands. Nanny keeps saying "Shoo!" to the falcon. When the celestial chase calms down, luckily for the pigeons, grandpa curses birds, feathers, doves' droppings... Then he asks nanny about the time. As he goes back to the garage, she shouts to him: "He'll be 'ere in a jiffy, you'll see."

I enter the house when the sun rushes towards the west. The

smell of food evaporates into the air. The radio is off. The clock ticks away.

Shadows steal in through the windows. I pull the curtain apart and peek in the direction of the dovecote. Only Miki is there. He's a rock dove. An excellent flier! When he walks, he waddles slightly. The way dad sways on his way back home at night.

- See how late it is, and no sign of him – grandpa begins.
- Almost 'ere.
- You said the same thing three hours ago.
- Perhaps he had to stay at work.
- He's at the tavern, I know. Same thing every night.
- Silence has its own voice.
- Ah, I ain't gonna let 'im in tonight.
- Don't speak rubbish – says nanny.

The shadows swell. Along with them I sneak out of the house like a cat. The dovecote door is still open. Step by step, I climb the ladder. One bar, two, three... It's quiet up there. And you can see better. I stand so, waiting for the pigeons to return.

In Vain Do You Wake Her

*She must have said: let him look for me and see that I'm gone
That woman with child's hands, whom I love
That child who fell asleep without wiping the tears, whom I
wake*

In vain, in vain, in vain

In vain do I wake her

– Branko M.

I'm lying in bed, pressing my eyelids, my eyelashes itching. I'm soothing my pupils. I pretend to be asleep. I pretend I won't hear the noise from the kitchen, which is about to begin. I know it is. Grandpa's going to yell when he comes home drunk, nanny's going to cry, aunt's going to escape into her own world. It's all black inside my eyes, like a profound scabby sky in which never-fulfilled wishes dry out. The noise! It was. It's over. Anger has flown into steps. The old boards of the house in Vratnik creak madly. Then comes silence and with it a couple of steps: they hesitate clumsily in front of the door to my room. Come on in at last, I think to myself, still taming my pupils.

We're lying on our backs. Small and big arms folded on the pillows. We lean our heads on them. You wake her up. You speak slowly, about your dead wife, about your beautiful wife. Every now and then it crosses your mind that I don't remember her, and then you explain, in great detail. As always, you take skirt after skirt out of the wardrobe where her clothes still hang. Navy blue, white, olive green... You take them with your fingertips which pinch the hems like clothespins, you spread them out and fold them up, eyeing them, unflinchingly caressing each with the

palm of your right hand, as if removing the dust. I will never put them on, I don't say.

You're still talking about her. About your dead wife, your beautiful wife. It's late. Your voice is quieter and quieter. The words melt on your tongue. You stumble, getting lost. You're a child that falls asleep without wiping its tears. I watch you sleeping, unaware of the fact that one day I'll grow to hate you. Not because of you, no way. You were a weeping, lost brat. I'll hate you because of all of them who yell and make noise. Who swear at you in the street as you wake her. I'll hate you because of the kids' unskilfully hidden glances, their arms nudging and pinching each other, because of their hardly audible sniggers as we play marbles, at the moment your swaying body comes into view at the far end of the street.

The room gets suffused with R-OH atoms, like a shore with water when the power of the Moon wanes. My mother's name smells of alcohol. I inhale it evenly as I stare into the ceiling. The pigeons sleep in the cage.

We would destroy the room in the years to come. We would peel off the wallpaper by ourselves, then call the decorator to scrape the walls clean. I would clean up thoroughly, stuff a 30-litre bucket with rubble and lug it up to the skip. Going down the road, I would smell your tears for the last time. Dragging myself towards the dump, I would picture us yet again lying with our hands on the pillows, like we used to. We stare into the ceiling, and you wake her with tears in your eyes. Her, your dead wife, your beautiful wife. However, I will already know then: I hate you.

I hate you because the sky is profound and scabby, and you can't help it at all.

Call Me Esteban

My first summer at the seaside after the war. I and my seven-year-old cousin Haris, who's never been to the seaside before. The holidays in Mali Drvenik have been organised by his school. The other first-graders are accompanied by their mums, and I'm in charge of Haris. Damn it, that was the only option. His mum Melida works in a supermarket, with no free workdays nor weekends. We all live on her wages and grandpa's pension. We'll be paying for the summer holidays in instalments. It's important that he's here, with his schoolmates and teacher.

I'm in the first year of my studies. Philosophy, literature... I've got a large room which smells of lavender. In my suitcase there are more books than panties. What I've read collects in my head like a rain cloud ready to relieve itself and melt in the heat of the day.

On the beach, the mums relax in a pack. They drink coffee, lick ice cream, shout at the kids. They never cease chattering... When they notice me with me a book in my hands, they put soft, wistful smiles on. Their smiles are lost on me. I smile shyly at them, hurriedly immersing myself in the paper and letters. I ruminate about a mother who has lost her son.

It was in the film *All About My Mother*. She, Manuela, had her Esteban, who was killed by a car on his birthday. Esteban had wanted to write a novel about his mother, and Almodóvar has made a film in which mother mourns her son. I saw the film at the Meeting Point Cinema. That evening, I headed straight back home. I climbed a steep road in the old district, towards my motherless house. Esteban's figure flickered before my eyes. I pictured him soaked, in an anorak and jeans, with a wet paper

pad in his hand. The road I was treading is called Širokac, and it's really steep. At the top of the road I paused to catch my breath. In doing so, I turned around towards the lowland. The city was sinking into the dark, and it crossed my mind what it would be like if my mother were alive today, and if I had died on that distant night, seventeen years ago?

On the beach the sun is scorching. In the shadow of the pine trees the mums cool themselves with fans. Sweat trickles down their necks, their thighs are moist, their voices lower and lower. The kids run riot over hot stones. They throw things at one another, chasing each other, the teacher yelling at them. Every now and again kids step into the shallows with no permission, wetting their legs, their arms, turning towards the shore and sticking out their tongue at the others. The teacher runs after them, the mums let out a shout.

Dreams turn into salt on the skin. I'm reading Márquez. Short stories. One of them is titled "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World." The skin on my forehead wrinkles when I realise his name is also Esteban. The sun leaves the defence zone of the parasol. The spongy mat absorbs the sweat from my skin. I take a pen from my rucksack. I circle any mention of the name in the story.

"Esteban, Esteban, Esteban..." The blue ink dries quickly, isolating the seven-letter word like cordoning off a crime scene.

Gabriel's Esteban is clad in marine algae and shells, wrapped by the smell of the sea. Who knows how long he was carried by the water. Dead, he was washed ashore at a hamlet which would become his sacred tomb. I touch the hot neck with my palm. It's sunburnt. It hurts. I want to take shelter. Accidentally I glance directly at the sun. Bright, searing and white, the way it shines only in the south, it distorts my image of the world. It twists it the way Almodóvar's camera did immediately after the thud of the boy's body against the expensive car's windscreen. Manuela's

rush, the rhythm of her heels as they beat on the asphalt, vibrates in my mind.

When the blindness was gone, I spotted my dead body on the sea surface. It was dragged along by tiny waves, the way a funeral carriage is drawn by a noble horse trot. When I was washed into the shallows, I was noticed by the kids. They let go of bickering and mocking. Small stones slipped out of their hands. They ran up to me. They looked me up and down, pulling at my nose, plucking my hair, sticking their little fingers into my ears. They flicked algae from my arms, poured sand into my open mouth, beat me on the chest.

Playful, euphoric, they attracted their mums' attention. When the women made out a dead toy among the small bodies of their children, they started running, beside themselves. They all rushed, marring their bare feet on the sharp stones. Their long light dresses lifted in the water. They floated around their hips like multi-coloured sea weed. Mothers picked the leech from my arms, brushing the tangled strands of hair from my face. In flustered voices, they ordered to their children: "Hurry up, call her!"

She had a white dress on, which made both her hair and eyebrows appear even blacker. Everyone fell silent at the sound of her footsteps. The kids and the women drew back. Slowly but resolutely, she approached my body. Her wrinkled face towered over my livid cheeks. The sun was burning. She took my head and placed it carefully into her hands, like an egg into a nest. It was my mother. At the threshold of her old age. She lowered her lips onto my eyes, and then licked a drop of salty water off my eyelash. "This is Esteban!" she said. The other women looked at one another. "No other than Esteban!" she uttered a wail. When they heard this, the other women gathered around me again. They howled out loud. They pounded on their cheeks, pulling at their hair, ripping off their dresses...

“This is Esteban”, my mother uttered yet again, kissing me on the cheeks. All the other women started nodding. Like a flock of agitated birds, they pressed tight around my mother. I felt her lips, moist and warm from weeping, kissing mine. The others followed suit, caressing me, kissing each part of my body. Time was ticking away, the sun was going down.

And that was it. A perfect death, which suits me very well.



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