Jehona Kicaj

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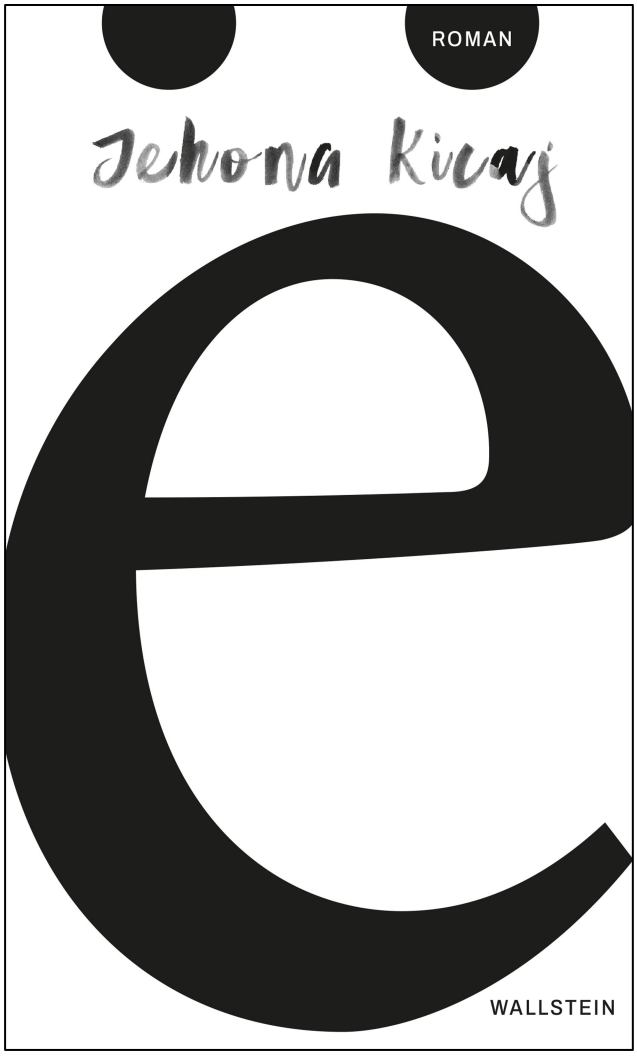
Novel

Sample translation by Eleanor Updegraff



Contact:
Lena Hartmann | Rights Manager
rights@wallstein-verlag.de

I wake up, and there is a shard in my mouth. It feels like a small piece of gravel. I spit it out in the sink and I see: it's a splinter of a tooth. When I look at my teeth in the mirror, there are hardly any that aren't cracked or worn down at the edges. Every morning I wake up with pain in my jaw and neck, unable to open my mouth without a loud crack. It sounds like a bone is breaking.

When I demonstrate the cracking sound to my dentist as he holds a finger under my cheekbone, he looks at me seriously. 'You're suffering from bruxism,' he says. 'When you grind your teeth, your muscles contract rhythmically, your teeth press against one another and the grinding movements of the lower jaw result in abrasion – damage caused by wear and tear on your teeth. Again, please.' With every loud crack, the young dental nurse grimaces. 'That strange sound indicates severe damage to the cartilage in your temporomandibular joint. The articular disc normally moves in conjunction with the mandibular condyle when the mouth is opened and closed, but grinding your teeth has caused pathological changes to the physiological position of the disc. It's what we call displacement.'

Doctor Ludwig pauses. 'Give it another ten years and, in the worst case, you won't be able to chew or speak without pain. Over time, that disc will be completely destroyed; there won't be anything left between the mandibular condyle and the temporal bone, so the bones will be rubbing directly against one another.' He suggests it's a product of stress, asks if I have a lot on at the moment. 'Could be,' I say, and I promise him I'll do

relaxation exercises before bed. I look up at the bare ceiling and wonder whether I'm supposed to feel fear or relief when I imagine no longer being able to speak. He makes casts for a tooth guard and says I'm to come back in two weeks.

At home, I press my forefingers into the dips beneath my ears until the pain travels up to my temples. I'd have liked to have told him: Recently, I read that the mouth can be understood as a prison. 'The teeth are the mouth's armed guards,' I read, 'and the space is extremely confined. This is the archetypal prison.' I'd have liked to have said: I kept the words imprisoned for too long, and now it's too late.

Elias once said to me, 'You always think things all the way through before you speak.'

The truth seems to be: I grind down every single word before I say it.

'Your German stands out. You sound like a professional speaker. Your pitch, your pauses, that precise articulation, the way you emphasise certain words – it reminds me of the dubbed voices they use for female anime characters,' Elias said to me on one of our first walks. I asked him what he meant by that. 'Well, everyone talks in a way that's somehow unique and unmistakeable. They all have their own pitch and speed, their own rhythm. And certain words and phrases they use all the time. But with you . . .' He thought for a moment, then said, 'It all sounds so perfected.'

In this incidental comment, I recognised a truth I'd never seen before. I told him I hadn't learned German from lists of vocabulary but in front of the television. As a child, I'd sit alone on the red arabesque-patterned carpet, my face just centimetres away from the screen. I studied the contortions of people's mouths with great

concentration, and I tried to link them to the sounds I heard coming from the speakers. When I started kindergarten a few months later, I heard those vaguely familiar sounds coming from real mouths. I was astounded, and when my sister asked how I liked it there, all I said was: *Këta po folin si ata në televizor* – 'They speak the same language here as they do on TV.' I kept hold of her hand, didn't want to let go.

I first encountered German in cartoons and anime series. I found my way into a new linguistic space through the interplay of moving pictures and changing voices. Through close watching and listening.

'*Gjuha huj*,' I said to Elias, 'can mean two things in Albanian: *foreign language* but also *foreign tongue*, and sometimes I feel as though I'm still speaking in foreign tongues. Perhaps that's why you think I sound like a voiceover artist.'

'That's not what I meant,' said Elias, shaking his head.

'But I mean it,' I said. My pronunciation of words is set before I even voice them. Fundamentally, speaking is still a process of mimicry for me; just a reordered sound sequence of things I've already heard or read. And sometimes I wonder how much of myself can really exist in my words, when originally I acquired them from drawings on a screen.

I learned early on that I had to keep silent as soon as we reached the Serbian border. Your mother tongue could be a danger if you spoke it in the wrong place. As soon as we saw the first sign indicating the border, we turned off the music and hid all the Albanian cassettes under the car seats.

We said nothing. We stopped speaking long before the border guard gave the sign to roll down the window.

Only my father talked to him. He could speak fluent Serbian; like many others of his generation, he'd learned it at school and later in the military. I couldn't understand a single word, but I heard the uncertainty in his tone. He didn't hesitate for a moment in answering the policeman's questions, and yet he chose his words carefully. Then his tone suddenly shifted, and I heard that particular roughness enter his voice. Whenever he sharpened his tone like that, whenever I recognised that altered sound, I knew something was going to happen.

I remember how my mother's hands shook when Baba told her to give him the passports, how she wasn't able to undo the zip on the red leather bag that contained all our documents. She handed him the unopened bag with her head bowed. I remember the cold gaze of the border guard, which he fixed on us as he stared down through the car window; the way we all had to get out and unpack the entire car. I remember the loud noise of the stamp he applied to our passports only after we'd slipped several banknotes into them. He didn't hand the passports back; he just pushed them away, as though they were worth nothing.

At the border between Kosovo and Serbia, I saw my parents humiliated for the very first time. That border experience still comes flooding back to me whenever I go through passport control.

As a teenager, whenever anyone asked if I'd been to Berlin before, I said no. I was still a child when we went to the Serbian embassy in Berlin to have our passports renewed. That was shortly after the war. We spent all day at the embassy. I'd been given the time off school. I remember I was so tired I lay down on the floor among the shoes of the other people waiting there. Our names were called after six hours. I remember the Serbian official's harsh

pronunciation of my name. His uniform was black. The passports were dark blue, with gold lettering that read *Republic of Serbia*, even years later. My place of birth was written in Serbian. Today, in my German passport, it's written in Serbian still: *Suva Reka* instead of *Suharekë*. I'd waited an entire day to be able to prove my identity as a Serbian. For me, that trip to Berlin didn't count.

When I'm asked where I *originally* come from, I want to answer: I come from a place that was made a wasteland. I was born in a house that burned to the ground. I listened to lullabies in a language that was stifled. I want to answer: I come from speechlessness.

I learned early on to pay attention to the absence of speech. When we visited my mother's childhood home for the first time after the war, I was eight, maybe nine years old. I hadn't yet grasped what had happened in the years since our last visit. In the intervening time, I'd heard Mama crying only occasionally. Mostly she'd be sitting by the telephone in the hall, waiting for a call from the relatives who had stayed. I'd only sometimes seen images in the news. And only once had my mother exhorted me: 'Come and have a look what happens to children and babies back home.' I hadn't followed her into the living room; I'd simply carried on playing. Only the tone of her voice echoed inside me: distraught, bewildered. As though she hadn't been able to reconcile it: seeing first those children's corpses and then me, playing blithely in the next-door room. As though she hadn't been able to grasp the fact that we were saved, because the ones we'd left behind – the others – had not been saved.

That evening in my mother's childhood home, we sat together and drank *çaj* – just the same as we'd always

done before the war. I sat on one of the patterned cushions on the floor surrounded by my relatives, a group of people at all stages of life, and I studied their faces. It had been years since I'd seen them, and I tried to decipher the lines that had worn themselves into their foreheads and cheeks. What kind of worries, what kind of fears left behind such traces? I couldn't find an answer to that; I had no idea. I was sure there'd been some kind of transformation, sure that something had happened, but I didn't know what it was. *Gjyshe*, my grandmother, was the only person who sat on a chair, in the middle of the room. She didn't take part in the conversation, just allowed her gaze to travel over the people around her, again and again, as though to make sure.

I was waiting the whole time for one more face to appear: my grandfather was missing. Again and again I looked at the door, hoping he would come in, but he never did. I left the room and pretended to go to the bathroom, instead sneaking into the other rooms in the house. 'Perhaps he's asleep,' I thought, 'and the others just forgot to wake him up.' But all the rooms were empty.

When we said goodbye, it was already the middle of the night. I hoped Grandfather would forgive us for leaving without having said hello to him. I still don't know why I didn't ask where he was.

On the way back to my father's village, no one said a thing. We'd been driving only a few minutes when my brother applied the brakes, stopping the car by a large commemorative plaque that stands to this day in front of the village school. I remember countless names and a couple of engraved faces illuminated by the headlights. They stood out against the grey stone. My father and my brother got out, took a couple of steps forward and stood very close to the plaque. I watched the backs of their heads; I saw they were inspecting every line.

After a while, they returned to the car. My brother said: 'His name's not there.' The return journey was silent. I heard nothing but the roar of the engine. I opened my mouth to ask where Grandfather was and whether we'd see him again, but the words never made it out. Something was holding me back, holding the words back, and I don't know what it was.

Years later, my aunt and uncle provided blood samples for a DNA test, but matching bone fragments were never found.

Applying for a traineeship, I go looking for my graduation certificate, a copy of which I have to send in along with one of my birth certificate and a criminal record check. I get the folder in which I file away important documents and letters out of the cupboard. I search for quite a while, and at some point I come across a transparent wallet that's bulging from all the paper I've stuffed into it. I pull out individual pages and am astonished by all that I find: a children's road safety certificate for passing a cycling proficiency test in Year Four, a certificate of participation in the annual federal sports day, my letter of recommendation for grammar school, a short newspaper article about my year's school-leaving exams. I've meticulously saved all the documents that proved my participation or mentioned an achievement by name; like a mother proud of her child. As though ever since childhood I've had to assure myself of what I've achieved, as though I wouldn't believe in even the smallest success if I didn't have written proof.

In this clear-plastic sleeve I also find my primary school reports. Four years' worth of half-yearly and year-end reports neatly sorted and held together with a staple, which has left traces of rust on the paper. I extract the staple and spread out the sheets in front of me. The

reports from Years Three and Four have my marks for each subject arranged in two columns; those from the lower years only contain text of roughly a page in length. 'Your first school year has come to an end,' I read, and: 'You ought to be very proud of everything you've learned and how hard you've worked. In class you only put your hand up sometimes, but any time I asked you a question, you always knew the answer. Within the larger group setting of the class, you've remained very shy. You're such a kind and clever girl, and your classmates accept you. You know and are capable of lots of things, and you don't have any need to hide away. You have no reason to be afraid.'

I stroke the slightly yellowed paper. Stroke my name, which has been spelled wrong, and my father's shaky block capitals, which always looked so different from my teachers' signatures. For four years, I didn't put my hand up, even though I almost always knew the answer. I hoped that my silence would make me invisible.

You have no reason to be afraid. I read this again, and I look back up at my place of birth, handwritten, and the date: January 1999. My teacher has entered them both on the same line. And yet she wasn't able to imagine how many reasons there were, back then, to be afraid.

There was a children's song; we sang it at primary school. I don't remember all the words any more, but at the end of each verse we sang 'hello' and 'goodbye' in a different language. There must have been seven or eight languages in all, and there were national flags printed next to the song text, only they were in black and white and barely recognisable. Turkish was the second language, after German. '*Merhaba, güle güle*, hello and goodbye,' went the refrain; I remember its rhythm. I remember that Leyla, my best friend, was called upon. She had black hair

but much preferred it with blonde highlights. We almost always sat next to each other. Leyla was to read those three Turkish words out loud for everyone, and then sing them. Our class sang them back to her, a magnified echo. I remember her proud smile, her white, slightly protruding incisors. I admired those teeth and used to think of them like butterfly wings. The other verses followed. Frau Wagner, our teacher, pronounced the foreign words for us and asked a volunteer to start singing each verse. The next language was Yugoslavian, she said, and we didn't we have someone here who spoke it. She looked at me, but only when the others followed her gaze did I understand she actually meant me. I blushed and stared down at my piece of paper. Under the musical score which I couldn't read was a sequence of letters I'd never read before in my life: *Dober dan, doviđenja*. That was my language, she said. I read the lines again, couldn't understand where she'd got that idea. I opened my mouth but I didn't have the words to explain that this wasn't true. And so I tried to form syllables from the letters that were written there. I spoke quietly, barely audible. The class looked at me sceptically and repeated my uncertain words.

We moved on to the next verse, and I looked for Albanian words in all the lines that followed. I wanted to find them, wanted to say loudly: 'Here, this is my language.' But Albanian didn't appear anywhere in that song.

We sang that song often, and each time I sang the Serbian verse for the others. Each time, they sang it back to me. That verse was supposedly mine, its words my language; and I didn't have the words with which to say that my tongue wasn't familiar with those sounds.

[End of sample]