

MARJAN STROJAN

*A Sudden Death Delayed*

I was trying to do three things at once. To read the time away, to smoke less, to ride somewhere far away. The blue lights were coming on in the first class carriage. The red Chinese lantern sank into the poplars. Awkwardly, into my pleasant compartment a poet was trying to get, whose book I had just put down. It was lying spread open on a pull-out table like a dead bird on a deserted beach, its lines shyly facing the board under the window, meaning the world. In it were bridges with canals silently rising and falling, there were tufts of highway grass and waterway traffic signs shooting up. “Stai caminar fin Trieste?” barked a young man in army fatigues, proceeding onwards, or rather backwards (considering the direction of the journey).

He was looking older than his picture and as if out of touch with his comings and goings. He must have had a suitcase, which now, having found himself a place to sit, he was eager to return to and bring in, when he saw the book. “Stai aspettar fin Torino?” barked another young man, who could not get on past the poet (nor back, considering the direction of the journey). “Entra! Entra!” He inspected his own face on the covers, some twenty, thirty years younger, cut out and blown up from the photograph, showing him in a circle of the unknown standing in front of Louvain University. He mumbled an apology, nibbling (characteristically) the corners of his moustache, slowly closing the sliding door to shut himself off from me, or rather, to shut me in from him. I did not recognise him immediately.

I felt I had seen him before, that having found a vacant seat in my compartment, he was only gone to come back with his luggage. “Lei è molto gentile, ma io non posso

essere capita,” said an elderly blonde to her younger companion, who, shoving herself through the door and obediently choosing a seat opposite hers, could not take her eyes from the book. “Non si tormenti, la prego, quando ha saputo che era sposata...?” It was lying there, facing its windowpane negative. Where there had been crows, the young night was by now setting in, turned upon itself, flying away on the reflection of the covers, illustrating the glazed glass with the ornaments of an evening. Portogruaro, it was an international train, calling at all stations. I saw him again in the morning, leaving the train as if descending into someone’s embrace.

By then of course I had no doubt who he was. I too would not care to share a compartment with a stranger who knew so much about me, and carried an image of my younger self round the world with him. I watched him disappear among the platform crowd into a neon mist at the exit. I wondered what he was doing now in Milan. “Molto gentile,” repeated a woman behind me whom I was trying to help from the train with her bags. Not really looking for him I stared down the far end of the platform, then returned to my own world. Skimming through life on the inside slip of the cover, I noticed he had died five years ago. I remembered a poem of his, describing his own death, and how young I was when I first read it. It described the pre-war oarsmen and the steamers at Vevey. For the first time, that night, I was only a step away from immortality.

*Translated from the Slovenian by Alasdair MacKinnon*