Sunday Bells

By *Anna Kove*

A translation of the German translation from Albanian by Zuzana Finger, by *Bradley Schmidt*

WHILE TRANSLATING THE NOVEL *THE LAND OF GREEN PLUMS* [*HERZTIER*]

I grew up in Enver Hoxha's Albania, a country where it was forbidden to be afraid or even show fear. Communism didn't like a scaredy-pants. If you had shown your fear, you wouldn't have been an equal member of society. The "new humans" created by the Enver Hoxha's dictatorial system had to be strong in the face of the many enemies of socialism who, through the dictator's paranoia and that of the entire system, fed this paranoia, not only acting within the borders of self-isolated Albania, but equally within the system and society.

When I was entrusted with the translation of the novel *Herztier* by the Nobel laureate Herta Müller, the confrontation with this engulfed my senses. I was seized by a true panic and it robbed me of my sleep. It was a completely new, unsettling experience, and it couldn't be traced back to the concern of not being able to cope with a literary text that presented challenges with its complexity: *Herztier* is built upon strong metaphors and captivates with its poetic prose, rich with idioms that sometimes come from the German and sometimes from Romanian, and real situations often mix with the surreal. This book touched me with its very first sentence: "When we don't speak, said Edgar, we become unbearable, and when we do, we make fools of ourselves." (Translation by Michael Hofmann)

Under Ceausescu's dictatorial regime, Romania is comparable to Albania under Hoxha's regime. I knew the characters from *Herztier* even before I met them in the book. They were old acquaintances from my past, who'd died long ago. Now they came back to life in my memory, accusing me – why hadn't I done anything to save them? Lola, a central character in the novel, is a student, just as I was at the time. We both lived in an open prison, in the misery of a small student room, where even the walls had eyes and ears, where we fried eggs on the clothes' iron, borrowed each other's clothes and ate the few poor meals in the student canteen, where party propaganda droned from the loudspeakers in the choral singing of the working class from breakfast to supper. Lola, a student despairing of the murderous system, depersonalized and exploited, hangs herself with her roommate's belt – it could have been my belt. The feeling of responsibility, even guilt, for not having saved her gave me no peace. As a student, I too was a victim like Lola, but now, in translating, I became equally a silent witness to a crime. With the characters' fears, I was reliving my own fears. The shadows of the past and the dictatorship not only milled around in the lines of the novel and in my memories, but also took possession of the reality of my life in the present. Should I keep silent about it or talk about it? I began to write about it. A childhood scene:

"This land left God when you were born, my child. This land was cursed."

“But why, grandma? What do you mean, ‘it was cursed?’”

“A country where bells no longer ring is cursed,” she said. “You were born during Holy Week. But we no longer celebrated religious occasions in public. That night we did, hidden in the joy over your birth. On Easter Day, your mother secretly had you baptized in a church in southern Albania. That night, someone had thrown red eggshells in front of the party secretary’s door. The news spread like wildfire. The small town froze with fear. And because someone had spied on us celebrating, your mother was summoned to the informant’s house, which was called the ‘Committee of the Party of Labor’.

‘Report to the Party’, she was prompted, ‘did you celebrate Easter?’

‘We were only celebrating the birth of my daughter.’

‘And why did you throw the red eggshells at the party secretary’s front door?’

‘I didn’t throw anything.’

‘And why did you have your daughter baptized in secret?’

Oh dear, how had they found out about that?! She didn’t answer any more questions.

They placed a piece of paper and a pencil on the table and told her to write down the name of the priest. They told her that she wouldn’t leave the room, not even to breastfeed, until she wrote down his name. Sometime when it got dark, locked in the “Ministry of Internal Affairs,” she began to have tearing chest pains from the milk congestion and a high temperature. Around midnight, she was found lying unconscious on the floor. She came home from the hospital the next day. You cried a lot during the night. We couldn’t give you anything to drink because you were still nursing. I took a little sugar, a pinch, put it in a white cloth like a pacifier and every time you cried I put it in your mouth, you sucked on it and calmed down. I prayed to God that the little sugar wouldn’t run out before your mother came back. We were very poor. Eventually you calmed down. But you wouldn’t drink from her breast either. You always started and then you cried out. The milk must have become bitter. They probably poisoned your mother’s blood and milk during the night of mental torture.”

We were a frightened people. We lived in the cruelest dictatorship of the former communist bloc and were extremely isolated. The borders were impenetrable and many escape attempts ended fatally. Most of the victims have no grave and their mortal remains have disappeared. Through my childlike eyes, I saw the bodies of young men killed in escape attempts being dragged through the streets and pelted with stones. Post mortem. How can you throw stones at a dead man? Albanians venerate the deceased. They pay more tribute to the dead than to a living person. The system had raped the best traditions not only of life but also of death.

Translating *Herztier* became a confrontation with this dark past, repressed and hushed up by the whole society. We here in Albania did not kill the dictator, as happened in Romania, nor his cruel wife (who was over ninety when she died a few months ago),

nor their criminal collaborators. We did not make the files of the state security agents accessible, as was the case in other ex-communist countries in Eastern Europe. A reappraisal of the bloody history of the dictatorship has not yet taken place. The former party officials sanitized their files and concealed the truth. Some of them went to the West with forged documents and pretended to be persecuted, while they were the persecutors. The past has not passed in my country; the networks of the former state security officials are still influential.

The atmosphere of mistrust and intimidation described by Herta Müller confronted me with my fears, the traumas of Albanian society. My way out was through storytelling, through overcoming the repression. The result is the story collection *Kambanat e së dielës* ("*Sunday Bells*"), published in 2019. We must overcome displacement. *Herztier* showed me the way, and I wish and hope that my translation will also change Albanian readers.



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Born in Podgradec in 1968, **Anna Kove** is a well-known poet and translator from Albania. She studied Albanian Language and Literature at the University of Tirana (1986-1990) and continued her post-university (master's) studies in "Media and Intercultural Communication" at the European University Viadrina (2002-2004) in Germany. She is the author of many volumes of poetry and prose, including *Where were you St. Valentine*, *Burning Water*, *The Nymph of the Lost Tree*, and *Sunday Bells*. As one of the most respected contemporary authors in Albania, she has been honored with numerous awards, and as a translator has also been awarded many prizes and scholarships as a translator.

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