



the
NEUSTADT PRIZES

In partnership with



2016 Neustadt Prize for Literature
Lesson plans to study the work of the
2016 Neustadt Laureate
Dubravka Ugrešić



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A GUIDE TO the Neustadt International Prize for Literature

The Neustadt Prize is the first international literary award of its scope to originate in the United States and is one of the very few international prizes for which poets, novelists, and playwrights are equally eligible.

THE PRIZE AT A GLANCE

FOUNDED IN 1969

Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti won the first Neustadt Prize (then called the Books Abroad International Prize for Literature) in 1970. The prize assumed its present name in 1976.

OU & WLT

The prize is based at the University of Oklahoma and is managed by the university's international literary magazine, *World Literature Today*.

THE PRIZE

The prize consists of \$50,000, a replica of an eagle feather cast in silver and a certificate. A generous endowment from the Neustadt family ensures the award in perpetuity.

Journalists often refer to the prize as the "American Nobel."

THE NUMBERS

NEUSTADT/NOBEL PRIZE CONVERGENCES

In the prize's 45-year history, 30 of its laureates, jurors or finalists have gone on to win a Nobel Prize.

Neustadt Laureate	Nobel Laureate	Neustadt Finalist
Gabriel Garcia Marquez	1982	1970
Carlos Fuentes	1987	1976
Quintana Roo	1990	1980
Thomas Strydom	1995	1985
Isabel Allende	2006	1996
Julian Barnes	2009	1999
Michael Ondaatje	2017	2007
David Shields	2019	2009
Michael Ondaatje	2017	2007
Michael Ondaatje	2017	2007

NEUSTADT LAUREATES SINCE 1970

Since 1970, 57% of the Neustadt laureates have been poets, 30% have been novelists, and 4% have been playwrights.

GLOBAL COVERAGE

Europe (29%), Asia (17%), North America (16%), Africa (13%), Latin America & Caribbean (8%), Oceania (5%).

"...There are very few literary prizes indeed which are international. Among these a place apart is occupied by the Neustadt Prize." — Octavio Paz

THE NEUSTADT AS A NOBEL PREDICTOR

Aside from José Saramago, each of the 30 Neustadt laureates, jurors, and finalists received their Neustadt recognition before going on to win the Nobel.

NEUSTADT PRIZE LAUREATES SINCE 1969

A FINAL DOSE OF INTERESTING FACTS

DIVERSITY FROM THE BEGINNING

By only the third awarding of the Neustadt Prize in 1974, the juries of the prize had already totaled 34 jurors from 25 different countries. Their nominated finalists wrote in 53 different languages!

TRANSPARENCY AND INTEGRITY

There's nothing veiled about the Neustadt Prize. The identities of both the jury and the finalists are made public before the announcement of the prize at the Neustadt Festival, which is traditionally held in September or October.

Many Neustadt-affiliated authors have gone on to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, but 1984 Neustadt juror Elie Wiesel is the only one to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Author of nearly thirty books, his humanitarian goal was for the world to remember and learn from the Holocaust, of which he was a survivor.

To date, only four countries (Canada, Colombia, India, and Poland) have been represented by more than one Neustadt laureate.

Sources:

The Neustadt Prize for Literature is awarded annually by the University of Oklahoma. The prize is managed by the University of Oklahoma's International Literary Magazine, *World Literature Today*. The prize is based at the University of Oklahoma and is managed by the university's international literary magazine, *World Literature Today*.

www.neustadtprize.org

About the Neustadt International Prize for Literature:

The Neustadt International Prize for Literature is a biennial award sponsored by the University of Oklahoma and *World Literature Today*. The prize was established in 1969 as the Books Abroad International Prize for Literature, then renamed the Books Abroad/Neustadt Prize before assuming its present name in 1976, The Neustadt International Prize for Literature. It is the first international literary award of this scope to originate in the United States and is one of the very few international prizes for which poets, novelists, and playwrights are equally eligible. Biennially, an international jury of outstanding writers is selected and convened to decide the winners. The members of the jury are determined by the executive director of *World Literature Today* in consultation with the journal's editors and the president of the University of Oklahoma. Each juror nominates one author for the prize. The jurors convene for two to three days at the University of Oklahoma for their deliberations.

The charter of the Neustadt Prize stipulates that the award be given in recognition of outstanding achievement in poetry, fiction, or drama and that it be conferred solely on the basis of literary merit. Any living author writing in any language is eligible, provided only that at least a representative portion of his or her work is available in English, the language used during the jury deliberations. The prize may serve to crown a lifetime's achievement or to direct attention to an important body of work that is still developing. (The prize is not open to application.)

The Neustadt Scholar Program at Colorado Academy:

Colorado Academy hosts an annual writing competition for Upper School students, whereby winners are selected through a process of positive elimination, modeled after the Jury deliberation process for the Neustadt prizes. Members of the English and history Departments collaborate to select two to four CA Neustadt Scholars based on submissions modeled on and/or connected to the work of the Neustadt/NSK laureate for that year. The CA Neustadt Scholars attend the Neustadt/NSK Festival at the University of Oklahoma, their work is published in various journals by Colorado Academy and *World Literature Today*, and they participate in workshops with the winning authors and/or jurors.

Background information on the 2016 Neustadt Award Winner, author Dubravka Ugrešić:



“A writer with a profound understanding of the spiral of artifice that is writing, Ugrešić’s work insists that literature is never still. She has a way with sub-clauses, with parentheses: her writing argues with, fights against itself.” (Source: “Writing in a state of national emergency: On Dubravka Ugrešić, <http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/>).

Over the past three decades, Dubravka Ugrešić has established herself as one of Europe’s most distinctive novelists and essayists. From her early postmodernist excursions, to her elegiac [a mournful quality] reckonings in fiction and the essay with the disintegration of her Yugoslav homeland and the fall of the Berlin Wall [in 1989], to her more recent writings on popular and literary culture, Ugrešić’s work is marked by a rare combination of irony, polemic, and compassion.

Following degrees in comparative and Russian literature, Ugrešić worked for many years at the University of Zagreb’s Institute for the Theory of Literature, successfully pursuing parallel careers as both a writer and as a scholar. In 1991, when war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, Ugrešić took a firm antiwar stance, critically dissecting retrograde Croatian and Serbian nationalism, the stupidity and criminality of war, becoming a target for nationalist journalists, politicians, and fellow writers in the process.

Subjected to prolonged public ostracization and persistent media harassment, she left Croatia in 1993. In an exile that has in time become emigration, her books have been translated into over twenty languages. She has taught at a number of American and European universities, Harvard, UCLA, Columbia, and the Free University of Berlin among them. (Source: dubravkaugresic.com).

A note about the essay mode of writing and the use of satire, relative to Dubravka Ugrešić’s writing:

Fortunately *World Literature Today* executive director Robert Con Davis-Undiano wrote a piece titled “Back to the Essay” (2000) in which he ‘desalinates’ and ‘demystifies’ the essay for all writers by identifying that the essay is, “... among the great prose documents of the Western tradition since the late sixteenth century, many are essays,” and, “...essay writing [is a...wager]

on ‘opportunism,’ adaptability, a willingness to respond to circumstances and invent something new.” To prepare to read Ugrešić’s work and to write this assignment, it is important to remember that the writing falls under the category of “essay” and the task is to write an essay with, as Davis-Undiano calls it:

- a “wager on ‘opportunism’”
- a “response to circumstances”, and
- a need to “create something new”

These are very helpful points to consider for a number of reasons: 1) secondary school students spend a lot of time writing in this mode for their classes; 2) Much of Ugrešić’s work, especially from *Karaoke Culture*, are essays and operate in the European tradition of the essay, just as Davis-Undiano describes; and 3) the first writing assignment in this packet calls for writers to compose an essay. Students need to be reminded that, “Essays, perhaps unique among literary genres, helpfully mirror the culture back to itself in an immediate and powerful way. Hence, the hampering of that function – losing the main “current” of the essay – has significant implications” (Davis-Undiano).

Finally, Ugrešić coupled with the essay employs the literary strategy of satire as a type of cultural criticism through her essays; therefore, it is important for readers of her work to recognize that her pieces do not exist in a cultural vacuum. In his afterword to Dubravka Ugrešić’s *Karaoke Culture*, David Williams goes in-depth about her satirical approach by engaging the same in the form of “postcards” about her as a writer and more specifically an essayist. Students may find it helpful to read the following excerpts to learn more about her style and to gain important context to this mode:

2. In ‘Karaoke Culture’, the essay that opens and defines this [from the book titled *Karaoke Culture*] collection, Dubravka Ugrešić writes that as a cultural critic (a “dubious guild”) she is, in karaoke, ready ‘to see more than just desperate squawking to the backing track of “I Will Survive”. As she maintains, ‘karaoke supports less the democratic idea that everyone can have a shot if they want one, and more the democratic practice that everyone wants a shot if there’s one on offer.’ Mauerpark karaoke celebrates *feeling über alles*: the worse the performance, the more enthusiastic the crowd. One struggles to imagine the skinny Canadian tourist squealing Prince’s ‘Kiss’ and doing one-armed push-ups in the loneliness of his bedroom, but give him the Mauerpark crowd and he’s ready to go. Anonymous and amateur, the Canadian tourist doesn’t ‘display any artistic pretensions, or any particular concern about authorship.’ His creation is neither plagiarism or imitation,’ because both terms belong to a different time and a different cultural system.

And...

6. Ugrešić the essayist has always been a switch hitter. Within collections, and even within individual essays, she writes alternately as elegist, diatribalist, satirist, ironist, and on occasion, moralist. Her first essay collection was published in 1993, and in the original Croatian was called

Američki fikcionar (*American Fictionary*), but the book appeared in English as *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan Wars to the American Dream*. In response to Ugrešić's notes on couch potatoes, organizers, shrinks, and jogging, a reviewer for *The New York Times* wrote "judging by this book, Ms. Ugrešić saw little of the United States, made few friendships of any depth and watched television a lot." Much got lost in translation with that change of title (Williams).

In these two postcards from his afterward, Williams [satirically] points out that her essays use satire and have high expectations of the reader, in which the reviews from *The New York Times*' Paul Goldberg clearly did not demonstrate the same understanding. Readers need to be aware of Ugrešić's intellect and how she uses her craft to accomplish more than writing; she attempts to "see" and by extension to show the reader more than they knew or thought before reading her work.

Works cited:

Davis-Undiano, Robert Con. "Back to the Essay: World Literature Today in the Twenty-First Century." *World Literature Today*, vol. 74, no. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 1-5.

Goldberg, Paul. "Phone Calls to Zagreb." *The New York Times*. 25 June, 1995.

Williams, David. "Postcards from Berlin." Karaoke Culture. Open Letter Publishers, 2011.

Lesson #1 - writing an essay modeled on the work of Dubravka Ugrešić

Step #1.1 - Reading and analyzing short stories

In her collection of short stories *Life is a Fairy Tale*, Ugrešić operates on “...the poetic assumption that *literature* is mainly dealing with *literature* and not with reality” (“Writing in a state of national emergency: On Dubravka Ugrešić, <http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/>). Read the stories from *Karaoke Culture*: “My Digital Life”, “Cans of Tuna Fish and the European Classics”, and “No Place for Sissies”. Fill out the chart below to help you understand what the author is saying about her world at the time and identify specific details from the story that she uses to accomplish this:

“My Digital Life” [July 2010]	“Cans of Tuna Fish and the European Classics” [February 2009]	“No Place for Sissies” [April 2009]
Using inference, outline possibilities for how life <i>feels</i> for Ugrešić at this point; include page numbers: - - -	Using inference, outline possibilities for how life <i>feels</i> for Ugrešić at this point; include page numbers: - - -	Using inference, outline possibilities for how life <i>feels</i> for Ugrešić at this point; include page numbers: - - -
Identify three examples of metaphor, mood/tone, irony, or imagery in the essay and explain their significance: #1 - #2 - #3 -	Identify three examples of metaphor, mood/tone, irony, or imagery in the essay and explain their significance: #1 - #2 - #3 -	Identify three examples of metaphor, mood/tone, irony, or imagery in the essay and explain their significance: #1 - #2 - #3 -
Central Theme of the story:	Central Theme of the story:	Central Theme of the story:

Step #1.2 - Thinking about your “world”

Use the box below to brainstorm, free write, draw, outline, or a combination of all of these strategies to brainstorm about how you feel right now about the world around you. Get down lots of information and be specific: what’s your favorite song right now? show? food? movie? article of clothing? what have you read recently that moved you? Look around your home, your “real” and “digital” life, or your daily routines and find what is new. Is it really new or are you seeing it for the first time right now? The point here is to get down as many details as possible that reflect what your tone, mood, and/or sensibilities are right now.

Write, draw, outline, etc., here...

Next, think about what’s going on in the world that strikes you as particularly challenging or positive, harmful or beneficial, dire or hopeful ... you get the idea. Write down several specific incidents or events that come to your mind and how they make you feel, operating under the assumption that feelings can connect what is below the neck [emotions] and what is above the neck [cognition]. Try to write about what you do and don’t do in connection to or reaction to the ideas you list?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Step #1.3 - time to write!

Drawing inspiration from the scaffolding above, write an essay in which you *SHOW* exactly what you think about what it is like to live in America right now, today. Consider writing about a real event that has happened during your lifetime and one that you know well; or, write about an event that you make up. Keep your essay focused; don't write about EVERYTHING from the scaffolding exercises and eschew accidentally using "Chekhov's Gun", extraneous detail.

Things to remember: use clear nouns, strong verbs, eschew modifiers where you can, keep your tense consistent, avoid passive voice, have a clear beginning and a clear ending. Most of all, have fun! In terms of length, format, and style, use Ugrešić's pieces as a 'model'.

"Nostalgia is dangerous because it encourages remembering." - Dubravka Ugrešić

ALSO BY
DUBRAVKA UGRESIC
IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

ESSAYS

The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays
Have a Nice Day:
From the Balkan War to the American Dream
Nobody's Home
Thank You for Not Reading:
Essays on Literary Trivia

FICTION

Baba Yaga Laid an Egg
Fording the Stream of Consciousness
In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories
Lend Me Your Character
The Ministry of Pain
The Museum of Unconditional Surrender

KARAOKE CULTURE

ESSAYS

DUBRAVKA
UGRESIC

TRANSLATED FROM THE CROATIAN
AND WITH AN AFTERWORD
BY DAVID WILLIAMS

(WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM
ELLEN ELIAS-BURSAÇ AND
CELIA HAWKESWORTH)

 OPEN LETTER
LITERARY TRANSLATIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

CANS OF TUNA FISH AND THE EUROPEAN CLASSICS

I'd be hard-pressed to claim that Europe is coming apart at the seams. All I know is that a friend of mine, a Dutch writer, decided to put aside his career as a writer for a while and actively stand up to the imminent crisis. He opened a how-to-survive-the-recession advice center. Work is booming, and the newly minted "crisis coach" has no complaints. Except that his own transition, he says, sounds like a bad joke.

Another Dutch friend of mine, a journalist, lost her job. She turned the living room of her apartment into a kitchen. She makes pâtés and sells them to fine restaurants and specialty food stores. Her work is going well, and she has no complaints. The only thing is, as she remarks with a tinge of melancholy, *she is up to her elbows in meat.*

Seen from without, everything seems to be in its place. Venice hasn't sunk; the tower in Pisa stands firmly aslant. But every now and then a seam rips open somewhere: immigrant youths go wild in Paris

suburbs and smash everything in sight, the young of Athens are in a frenzy, and then the northern dominoes topple: Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn. For the wild and embittered players in these *incidents*, the media word is *hooligan*. This word, by the way, was in lively usage during communist times. Back then they called boys who sported Elvis-Presley haircuts hooligans. European *hooligan* outbursts are treated in the media almost as if they are meteorological phenomena, like a sudden hurricane, for instance. Once the hurricane has passed, the media stitch up the seams as skillfully as if there had never been seams at all—until the next hurricane strikes.

Internet sites about the world recession have the drawing power of porno sites. I can't say the recession has much to do with pornography, but I do know that Charlotte Roche's book *Welands* has had a Botox-like effect on the European masses: The worry lines have been smoothed on German faces. Every country has its Charlotte Roche. This is how ordinary people forget for a moment that they have been, or will be, laid off; they forget their worries about their children and how to get them through school, about evaporating welfare funds and the future, which no one, besides the blessed who have drowned in *denial*, imagines in the form of tourist ads for travels in the southern seas.

Ordinary Europeans ooze solidarity. The circulation of human cargo—thanks to the fall of the Berlin wall (Europe is celebrating the 20th anniversary this year!) and the benefits of globalization—is greater now than ever. First Polish plumbers went off to fix plumbing from Dublin to Madrid, then Romanians flooded European train stations with their accordions. Young Moldovan teachers joined the western European prostitutes who were soliciting on every corner of Europe; Bulgarian women are fine maids in the homes of

western Europe; Albanians are clever traffickers and pimps; Serbs and Croats are trusty drug smugglers; Croatian women are sought as caregivers for the Italian elderly, while Slovakian women tend to the elderly in Germany and the Netherlands. Ordinary people, the *Westies* and *Osties*, have struck up a dialogue.

If Europe is not coming apart at the seams, the idea of European multiculturalism is showing its cracks. Romanians pelt a Gypsy (because he is a Romanian just as they are); Hungarians flog a Romanian (thinking he's a Gypsy). Dutchmen trounce a Moroccan; Moroccans thrash a Dutchman. Italians clobber a Romanian, an Albanian, or whomever they can grab. The number of Europeans complaining that Jews are getting the cushy jobs in banking and politics is mushrooming. Apparently this is because of Gaza and the recession, they say (history clearly is not the teacher of life!). The young, self-appointed champions of national values, in some places called street gangs, elsewhere (as in Hungary) called the young guards, go after someone every other minute: The Russians go after people with non-Russian faces, Croats thrash a tourist (thinking he's a pedophile), Serbs clobber a Gypsy (claiming he's gay), Bulgarians beat up a Turk, Austrians a non-Austrian, the Italians a Moldovan, and Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian master of life and death, has forbidden people to die. People are edgy, but for now, as far as the analysts are concerned, these are merely *incidents*.

Ordinary people in the West and the East are sinking slowly into the underclass, according to the sociologists. They're losing their faith in banks, courts, institutions and politicians, though a majority of them gave their free votes, what a paradox, to those same politicians. Indeed, some western European politicians, (those transitional leaders of the people who thumped the nationalist drums, the

semi-criminals and criminals, the profiteers, smugglers of cigarettes and guns, the liars, compromisers—don't offer much hope. Political apathy and a deficit of social imagination are on the rise.

Europe is holding on tight despite it all, and even if seams were ripping, all were magically re-sewn on the day of Obama's inauguration. Many Europeans roused from their political lethargy, put down their bottles of beer, and listened to Obama's address with rapt attention. Obama (briefly or not?) united millions of legal European citizens of non-European origin; he united the French, the Moroccans and Dutch, the Walloons and Flemish, the German Turks and Germans, the Serbs and Croats, the Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims. Even the Slovenes momentarily forgot their quibbles with Croats over the Adriatic on the day of Obama's inauguration. What was the trick? Obama succeeded in doing something not a single European politician has been able to do. People believed him. Obama gave the word *change* back its credibility; he gave solemnity to the word *hope*; he made the word *future* real. Obama brought back forgotten values. One of them is *decency*. With Obama, many not only feel better, they have, at least for a moment, become better.

Europe and America are bound by an umbilical cord. Like my friends, I prepared for the recession. I ordered many tins of tuna fish from a Yugoslav dealer in Amsterdam who supplies the diaspora with products from home. Adriatic tuna is the best; the tins are square, flat, and thin. You can pack an entire library with them: the European classics—Proust, Kafka, Joyce—in front, and behind, tins of tuna. Like in Russian homes during communism: in front, the classics of socialist realism, and behind, the dissidents.

February 2009

CAPTAIN, SIR, WE HAVE PLENTY OF COFFEE!

The lips pursed in the shape of the letter "O." "Pu"—a little door bulging with pressure from within. A mouth full of morsels. O-pulence. "Lence"—rings like a brass bell. The word swells, then pops like a fountain gushing with sprays of gold coins. Opulence: rivers flowing with milk and honey, plump pancakes dropping from the sky.

"What image does the word *opulence* evoke for you?" I ask a friend.

"An American refrigerator!" he shoots back.

The American refrigerator is an accurate representation for many Eastern Europeans—especially those Yugoslavs who watched American movies from their earliest childhood—of the mythical "horn of plenty." The image of that vast American refrigerator, so full to overflowing that food tumbles out of it; the picture of the *fridge* (what a warm, soothing word!) out of which the half-awake American pulls a plastic half-gallon jug of milk or orange juice and chugs it down; or removes a whole tub of ice cream, brandishes a soup

spoon, and sitting cross-legged on a comfortable sofa, clicks on the TV and slurps the ice cream from the tub as if it were soup. This has been etched on the imagination of Eastern Europeans for generations as the clearest and most appealing image of wealth and ease.

There are as many notions of opulence as there are people! To know what it means to be full, you have to be hungry; to know what wealth is, you have to be poor. In an episode of that old American mammoth soap opera *Dynasty*, Joan Collins's Alexis and her lover Dexter are soaking in a jacuzzi, sipping champagne. Dex scoops something up with a spoon from a bowl and downs it.

"Hey, go easy with the spoon," says Alexis, chronically vulgar, "that's caviar!"

The director probably thought it gauche to zoom in on the salty roe, yet the audience still needed to register the couple's indulgence, hence Alexis utters her improbable sentence. Out of place in the scene of luxury, of course. The champagne, the caviar, the jacuzzi: simple symbols of opulence the media have foisted on the imaginations of the poor in America and all over the world. Yet during the famines that followed the Red Revolution, many Russians had so much caviar that they were sick of it; there was absolutely nothing but caviar to eat. Those who were short of a spoon scooped it up with their bare hands.

Poverty knows affluence best. Maybe that is why one should go rummaging around the open markets, the flea markets, the big retail chains for the poor, and see the pile of "garbage" that the poor spend their money on. Because "garbage" is the most precise expression for a poor person's general impression of opulence. Perhaps it is only in

this context that we can make sense of why the Vanderbilt family imported, brick by brick, lavish sixteenth century Italian rooms and built them into their "cottages" in Newport; and why today's rich Russians blast great holes in the Montenegrin cliffs to build villas that are reminiscent of the Guggenheim Museum, with swimming pools from which the swimmer gets an eagle's eye view of the azure of the Adriatic.

Peer into a poor apartment where the largest wall in the living room is wallpapered with a lavish sunset. Or into the little city gardens done in plastic grass with a flock of plastic flamingos and plastic frogs swimming in a plastic fountain. Peek into the stores selling gilded nylon brocade, synthetic lace, polyester silk and satin. Check out the Eastern European hot springs that date from the communist period, where weary Western retirees purchase accessible pleasures: a swim in the shabby pools, a massage with the hotel masseuse, a pedicure.

The idea of opulence is the *meeting point* between the poor and the rich. We all encounter each other at that place, as if it were an old abandoned railway station at which trains never arrive or depart. We came to the station, it seems, when God banished us from paradise. For opulence exists only in paradise. Everything else is a substitute, regardless of whether the silk is real or synthetic.

There was a popular ad for *Franck* coffee on Croatian television back in the early nineties. A space ship with its crew. Sudden turbulence. The horrified expressions on the astronauts' faces signal that the spaceship will never return to earth. A stewardess wearing a Gagarin costume steps into the captain's cabin and smiles brightly: "Captain, Sir, we have plenty of coffee!" An explanatory line of text

runs along the bottom of the screen: "The first Croatian expedition into outer space." The ad was a nostalgic evocation of a time of turbulence on the former Yugoslav market when there were coffee shortages, while at the same time announcing that a new Croatian future was coming in which there would always be coffee. For three things signified opulence in Yugoslavia: coffee, detergent, and cooking oil. Yugoslav women went over the border by bus on day trips to Trieste or Graz to buy their supplies. For no apparent reason one of the *must-have* items on the list was raisins. My mother's cupboard at one point was nearly bursting with little packets of them, and I nearly burst with pity for my mother.

Opulence is kept shut away in the realm of the imagination. For death usually lurks just beyond it. (Moths will get into it! Mice will nibble it! Fire will reduce it to ashes! People will snatch it! The banks will go bust! The money will be gobbled by inflation!) There is nothing lurking beyond poverty but the necessity of survival.

When I was a child, we lived in a small town near Zagreb, a couple of miles from the Zagreb-Belgrade highway. In summer the traffic of Turkish and Greek guest workers on their way home from Western Europe inched along the road. One day the local police knocked at our door and asked my mother to help as an interpreter. That very day the Bulgarian ambassador to Mali had been on his way home for a hard-earned summer vacation, and just where the exit splits off the highway toward our town, the ambassador had collided with another car. His wife was killed instantly; he and his two little girls were unharmed. There were many formalities to attend to, far too many for the local police, but the poor man and his children also needed to be cared for. So the Bulgarian and his two little girls were our guests for several days. When the ambassador departed, he left behind two

large sacks of peanuts he had been taking to Bulgaria in the trunk of his car. He probably felt it no longer appropriate to deliver them home along with the news of the death of his wife. Perhaps this was his expression of gratitude; he had nothing else to give us. None of us had ever seen or tasted a peanut before. Our whole neighborhood roasted peanuts with us in the oven, shelling the unsightly husks and nibbling at the unusual oval seeds for months. From the horn of plenty, peanuts showered down upon us.

I have disliked peanuts ever since. Opulence should be left where it can do the least harm—in the realm of the imagination. I make an effort, as much as I can, to steel myself to its siren call. That *Captain, Sir, we have plenty of coffee* will do for my daily dose of happiness.

June 2008

NO PLACE FOR SISSIES

When God created the world, and donkeys, dogs, monkeys, and man along with it, he gave each a lifespan of thirty years. The donkey knew life would be hard, so he asked God to shorten it: God sliced off an eighteen-year chunk. The dog and the monkey had similar complaints, so theirs were cut short too, the dogs' by twelve years and the monkey's by ten. But as for Man, he felt thirty years too few and asked for more. So God went ahead and gave the greedy one the years he'd taken from the donkey, the dog, and the monkey. Now greedy humans would live for seventy years. The first thirty years are the human years, the ones we enjoy, happy and healthy; then come the difficult donkey years, when we have to carry others, and receive only kicks and blows for our trouble. The dog years follow, the twelve toothless years we spend growing in the corner, with no teeth with which to bite. Finally, there are monkey years, the ten years we spend as old fools, mocked by young children.

The Brothers Grimm heard that story from a peasant and recorded a version of it as *The Duration of Life*. I read it (or something similar)

when I was a child. My socialist readers were bursting with didactic stories, proverbs, puzzles, and other forms of oral literature. Naturally I've now forgotten all of them, but ever since I've had an aversion towards folksy aphorisms. I can't stand those little pearls of wisdom you find in Chinese fortune-cookies either. I don't like people who parrot folksy sayings; they're usually old and half-senile.

Man is an insatiable being, and our haggling with God over the duration of our lives continues to this day. With all our might we try to usurp God's throne, to take the question of our lifespan into our own hands, a tendency that goes on apace. There's the pharmaceutical industry, the cosmetic industry, the self-help industry, not to mention the tons of products designed to both prolong our life and improve its quality. People spend enormous amounts of time going running, working out at the gym, dieting, frequenting health food stores, going to the dental hygienist, the sauna, meditating, cutting out stress and meat, consuming healthy fats, reducing unhealthy fats, cutting out sugar, working on their mental health, practicing work-out routines, relaxing, quitting smoking and drinking, gulping down water, having regular health checks, speed-walking, avoiding tomatoes, eating more tomatoes, carefully reading product labels, learning exercises to prevent wrinkles and firm the buttocks, starving themselves, steam-cooking, detoxing and botoxing. All told, were Hitler to today rise from the grave, it would warm his heart to see the millions-strong masses of potential *Übermenschen*, optimistic and disciplined, glowing with rude health and physical vitality.

Longevity is currently right up there on the ladder of our civilizational values. Flanked by the media, the Croatian President recently offered his personal congratulations to a woman who had just turned 104. Why? Because she is the oldest Croatian woman alive.

Premature death, particularly if it's due to terminal illness, is no longer seen as lucking out in the divine lottery, but as a personal failure, like a self-induced bankruptcy. The more benevolent treat untimely death due to sickness as a kind of genetic affliction, which is also seen as a kind of personal failure. We should have chosen forebears of better genetic material. Today life is like a marathon of uncertain duration, at the end of which—providing we aren't disqualified by a higher power—the head of state might be waiting for us, a bouquet of flowers in hand.

By and large, in the past fifty years life expectancy has dramatically increased. Today every Tom, Dick, and Harry is eighty years old. There are experts who maintain that this increase in life expectancy will result in a tectonic global disturbance more dangerous and alarming than global warming. Yes, people are living longer, but their pensions are increasingly precarious, and when they do have one, it's too meagre to live off. People are living longer, but a longer life means greater susceptibility to illness, and the health services in many countries often refuse to treat the elderly. People might be living longer, but their children are so overworked, struggling to support their own children, that they have neither the time nor money to look after their parents. In many countries, rest homes, just like prisons, are in seriously short supply, and the expensive private ones are raking it in as a result. The state is keen to see private rest homes prosper, but lacks the desire or means to monitor them. If we then factor in the global economic crisis, things look all the bleaker.

In many cultures euthanasia and geronticide were inescapable rituals. Such rituals were often innocuous (leaving the windows open so the draft would hasten death and allow the soul an easier departure, or sealing the house shut so the soul wouldn't have anywhere to hide),

but could also be quite pragmatic and efficient (murder, incineration, starvation, drowning, abandonment, being throwing off a cliff, etc.).

A Serbian newspaper recently ran a story about two sisters from the village of Lučica near Požarevac. The old women had no means of income and survived on scavenged scraps. When one died, the other apparently lay down beside her, took a sharp object, and began slicing flesh from the soles of her sister's feet. Suspecting something amiss, the other village residents called the police. Asked why she didn't declare her sister's death, the old woman replied: "What would I have eaten then?" Other newspapers reported the story of a poor Italian family who hid their deceased grandmother in the fridge for months. They didn't declare the old woman's death, as doing so would have meant forfeiting her pension.

These kinds of stories probably fall into the category of sensationalist modern folklore, but they could also prove a bleakly comedic foreshadowing of the near future. Faced with the dilemma of feeding their children or their parents, that the poor will revive a form of geronticide can't be ruled out. In wealthier countries, as a result of both expensive gerontological services and the general economic crisis, a different practice is in evidence. The practice is still very hush-hush, because people would rather keep mum about it. The Swiss and Germans pack their parents onto one-way flights to low-cost Thailand, where the Thai medical staff nurse them until their deaths. Funeral services are included in the package. In one hit, cash-strapped children combine the recreational and the functional, returning from holiday with parental ashes in their luggage.

Croatian entrepreneurs are on the ball. One is currently building a rest home for Swiss clients, while another apparently already has

a contract with the Japanese. It turns out that it's cheaper for the Japanese to send their parents to Croatia and visit them twice a year than to have them cared for in their exorbitantly-priced homeland. In the years to come, hundreds of elderly Japanese might make their way to Croatia. The Japanese will end their days looking out across the idyllic rolling hills of Croatia, slowly letting out their souls like little shriveling balloons. That is, until the day our overheated and overcrowded planet hastens things along.

April 2009

Lesson #2 – rewriting a classic

Step # 2.1 - Analyzing the story

The structure of Ugrešić's story, "Who Am I?", should be very clear when at the end you read, "I'm Alice! Move over a bit. I'm sleepy..." This story is a retelling, a revision of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; on one hand it is very similar and on the other it is not at all the same. Using the "T-Chart" below make a list of what is similar and what is different:

What are the similarities and differences between "Who Am I?" & *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*?

Similarities	Differences

Step #2.2 - More context and examples

Below is the introduction to a novel by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*. Read it, think about and identify specifically what you think she accomplished by revisioning the Russian myth by the same name. Without reading the novel, what you need to know is that in her retelling she challenges what a myth is, what function it performs, and she forces the reader to wonder what is "sacred" about a myth and what happens by rewriting this type of classic. After this, you will choose a classic with deep meaning to you, so contemplate while reading the following excerpt, and enjoy!

From the intro to *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* -

"You don't see them at first. Then suddenly a random detail snags your attention like a stray mouse: an old lady's handbag, a stocking slipping down a leg, bunching up on a bulging ankle, crocheted gloves on the hands, a little old-fashioned hat perched on the head, sparse grey hair like a blue sheen. The owner of the blue hair moves her head like a mechanical dog and smiles wanly..."

"Yes, at first they are invisible. They move past you, shadow-like, they peck at the air in front of them, tap, shuffle along the asphalt, mince in small mouse-like steps, pull a cart behind

them, clutch as a walker, stand surrounded by a cluster of pointless sack and bags, like a deserter from the army still decked out in full war gear. A few of them are still 'in shape', wearing low-cut summer dress with a flirtatious feather boa flung across the shoulders, in an old half-motheaten Astrakhan, her make-up all smeary (who, after all, can apply make-up properly while peering through spectacles?!).

"They roll by you like heaps of dried apples. They mumble something into their chins, conversing with invisible collocutors the way American Indians speak with the spirits.

"At first they're invisible. And then all at once you begin to spot them. They shuffle around the world like armies of elderly angels. One of them peers into your face. She glares at you, her eyes wide, her gaze a faded blue, and voices her request with a proud and condescending tone. She is asking for your help, she needs to cross the street but she cannot do it alone, or needs to clamber up into a tram but her knees have buckled, or needs to find a street and house number but she's forgotten her spectacles... You feel a pang of sympathy for the old lady, you are moved, you do a good deed, swept by the thrill of gallantry. It is precisely at this moment that you should dig in your heels, resist the siren call, make an effort to lower the temperature of your heart. Remember, their tears do not mean the same thing as yours do.

Because if you relent, give in, exchange a few more words, you will be in their thrall. You will slide into a world that you had no intention of entering, because your time has not yet come, your hour, for God's sake, has not come."

Step #2.3 - Time to rewrite a classic

In this writing assignment, you need to choose a 'classic' myth, fairy tale, urban legend, or even a piece of literature, broadly understood, that you know well and rewrite it. The more experience you have with it, the better. Search your experience to rewrite your 'classic'. Have fun with it; make this therapeutic, cathartic, humorous, serious, light. Play with the tone, play with the images, try different word choices. It is important to keep in mind that well-crafted, "random details... [that] snag[s] your attention..." For this piece you will need to be brief, be specific, go deep into the details without making your *writing* sound too much like *writing*. An important note about this assignment: rewriting a classic is not plagiarism as long as you acknowledge and make clear where you get the idea; to avoid any idea of plagiarism make sure to change details, characters, settings, etc.

OTHER BOOKS BY DUBRAVKA UGRESIC
IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

The Culture of Lies
In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories
Fording the Stream of Consciousness
Have a Nice Day
The Museum of Unconditional Surrender
Thank You for Not Reading

DUBRAVKA UGRESIC

Lend Me
Your Character

TRANSLATION BY CELIA HAWKESWORTH AND MICHAEL HENRY HEIM,
REVISED BY DAMION SEARLS



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Normal · London

WHO AM I?

*Baba Yaga hatched an egg.
—Alexei Remizov*

I live under the covers. Dreams besiege me. Dreams suck me in, drag me down to terrible depths, spin me round like a tornado sweeping everything before it, and toss me out in a complete daze.

The night before last a man came into my apartment, made straight for my desk, snatched the typewriter, and hurried towards the door. "Hey, where do you think you're going?" I yelled. The guy got scared and ran away. I don't know who it was and why he wanted my little Olivetti. And I can't explain why that dream upset me so much. But still, ever since then I've been taking my little Olivetti to bed with me. I don't dare leave it alone.

Dreams, as I say, besiege me, devastate me like a tornado sweeping everything before it. In the morning I'm muddled, I don't know who I am, events are all mixed up, the times are confused, what's present and what's past. And the most exhausting thing of all is being afraid of falling asleep. I sit in my bed as in a train, my head falls onto my chest from exhaustion.

I keep a small bookshelf next to my bed. The books in the blue covers are the ones I keep rereading, I know them almost by heart. I never read the green ones. That's why I covered them in green, so as not to make a mistake.

I take a small blue book from the shelf and read. Thoughts like little fish in a fishbowl knock against the dome of my

head. Bloop. Bloop. I've stuffed little wax balls into my ears. I live next to the highway. The noise is unbearable. That would not be a problem, the wax balls work well; the problem is that this unfortunate position makes me very vulnerable. Anyone could come wandering into my apartment at any moment. If *wandering* in describes what happens to me.

Last night, for instance, a truck turned into my apartment. It's not the first time a vehicle has turned off the main road and stopped in the middle of my room. I was lying in bed with the covers up to my chin, motionless. The driver rolled down the window, struck his neck out like a turtle, and shouted to me.

"Hey little girl! Come up here!"

"I'd really like to know who I am. Tell me that first, and then we'll talk about it. If I like being your answer I'll come up, if not, I'll stay down here till I turn into something else!" I said.

The driver stared at me and knit his brow. He had no idea how to respond.

"Bleh!h!" he said eventually, sticking his tongue out at me. He charged out of the room at full speed.

The worst thing is when someone lives in a small apartment, where one room has to serve for everything, especially if that room faces a highway. Then there is no good way for them to protect themselves from the outside world. I know what I'm talking about, I'm someone with a single room, and it faces a highway.

I take a small blue book from the shelf and try to read. My thoughts knock against the dome of my head like little fish in a fishbowl. Bloop. Bloop. I relax and feel that I'm about to

fall asleep. But then through my half-closed lashes what do I suddenly see floating into my room but a streetcar! What annoys me most is the repetition. Repetition is the wicked stepmother of creation.

The streetcar driver jumped out of the cab, patted me lightly on the shoulder and said: "Sorry, Kosta, give me a glass of water and I'll move on!"

I got up obediently, went to the kitchen, turned on the tap and filled a glass with water.

"There you are! Only I'm not Kosta, you know . . ."

He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and parted me cordially on the shoulder.

"Me too, Kosta, me too!" shouted the passengers.

And what could I do, I filled the one and only glass I had and passed it up, filled it, spilled it, passed it up, repeating the actions as in a nightmare. Threatening pools were forming on the kitchen floor. "Me too, Kosta, me tooooo!" The streetcar driver looked at his watch.

"Thanks, Kosta, thanks a lot!"

"Thanks a lot, Kosta!" the passengers repeated after the driver.

"My name's not Kosta!! Will you just get lost, huh?!" I yelled. *Get lost!*, that's what I yelled, pushing the streetcar out of the room and shutting the windows.

I went back to bed, pulled the covers over my head and looked for the little hole. Whenever I feel bad, I look for the little hole in the cover and peer out through it. I peer through it for a long time until slowly, out of the depths, a little church emerges. The church is small, pot-bellied, with small round blue cupolas. I often wonder where exactly that church is. Sometimes I'm afraid it might disappear, but it's always there. That's why I never think to mend the little hole in the cover.

If I patch up the hole, I'll sew up the church as well. That's how I live, under a cover with a hole in it.

I carefully moved my eye away from the hole. I surfaced from under the cover and felt that something was wrong, as though I had pulled myself into myself, like a telescope or something.

I picked up the small blue book again. My thoughts were circling slowly and serenely like little fish in a fishbowl. And then I heard a soft tapping on the window pane. I got out of bed, went over to the window and opened it. A triple-decker chicken flew into the room.

"Hey, Chickie!" it said.

"Hey!" I replied, confused. The triple-decker chicken was a foot and a half taller than me, and I'm 5 foot 7, but I always lie about the last inch.

The chicken went straight to my fridge.

"Your fridge is empty again!"

I looked in. It was true, a few eggs, butter, milk, and some bread were all that was there.

The chicken strutted irritably around the room, its eyes checking out my books. Then she picked through an ashtray full of stubs, found one, and lit it.

"What's up, Chickie, do you not know who you are again?"

The chicken asked kindly.

I didn't say anything. I looked at the chicken and blushed, wondering why I always blushed like that in front of her. I quietly took my little blue book and propped it on my chest like a prayer book.

The chicken scratched the floor, flapped her wings as though shaking dust from them, and then fluttered onto the windowsill.

"What can I say, first get rid of your inferiority complex. I could ask you which way is south from here, but I won't, because I'm afraid you wouldn't even know that!"

I smiled feebly, then went cautiously over to the window to close it but the chicken was still on the windowsill.

"And fill up that fridge, for goodness sake! Jesus, it's so boring at your place! There's nothing to talk about, and not a bite to eat."

I mumbled something like *yes, yes, of course, I certainly will*, and waved for a long time.

I waved absently, so that for a moment I forgot where I was, at a railway station or an airport? I waved for so long that I even forgot who I was actually waving to . . . When I remembered, I was overcome by fury.

I slammed the window shut, firmly resolved never to open it again.

I went back to bed. I ought to change apartments, that was it. Move to some more peaceful place. A place with a landscape. Why do people have such problems finding somewhere to live? Even a worm lives more decently. It crawls into a fresh little house, which it steadily eats up. When it's done, it looks for a new one. They say that the worms in cherries move in at the flower stage. From the very start, that is. Every worm is born with its own little house. Every cherry gives birth to its own little death. Its own little deathlet, its own little wormlet.

Under the covers my own breath warmed me. I lazily reached my hand out and felt a body. The body wriggled. I let my hand wander further and felt under my palm soft curves, smooth skin, a woolly beard. Suddenly it began to make noises.

"Don't you grunt at me!" I chided the body. "That's not at all a proper way to address me!"

"Good morning!" said the head of the Temporary Lover, pressing itself warmly against mine.

"Who are you talking to?" I asked.

"You!" said the head. You, said his hands entwining with mine. You, said his thighs rubbing against mine. You, whispered his lips pressing against mine . . .

I felt a strange pulsation. Plink! Plonk! Plank! I seemed to be growing. Where were my hands? I stretched my arms out as wide as I could and wrapped them firmly around the Temporary Lover. At the same moment I shook from a violent blow to my chin. My head had suddenly fallen, my chin struck my foot. My chin was now so closely pressed against my foot that I was hardly able to open my mouth. I wiggled my jaw. Done! My head was free. I looked along myself, seeking right and left, but there was no sign of a shoulder! All I could see was neck, long and slender, stretching endlessly up and up. Goodbye, feet! Where are you, and where am I! And where have my shoulders got to? And oh, my poor hands, where are you! How shall I find you!

As I no longer had the slightest hope of reaching my head with my hands, I worked out that I could look for my hands with my head. I saw them opening the fridge and taking out the eggs, milk, and hunk of bread, and the left hand going back for butter. Then they put it all on the kitchen table and closed up like a telescope.

I felt myself coming back to myself. I smiled at the Temporary Lover. He smiled back.

"I could eat a horse!" he said.

I went into the bathroom. I took a long shower, first with hot then with cold water. The cold water solidified my outlines. I heard the voice of the Temporary Lover coming from the kitchen.

"I'm not going to lie, I sentence you to die! Lie I shall not

just, die I say you must! Just not lie. Just must die! I'll not lie!
You must die! Must die!"

I went into the kitchen. Five hysterical eggs stared at me from the dish. Their empty shells gaped at me from the trash. The Temporary Lover and I sat at the table and had breakfast.

"How handsome you are!" I said.

I watched my lover

- a) slice bread,
- b) spread butter on the bread,
- c) eat bread and butter.

I made coffee. The sun beat relentlessly on the windows. I watched as the Temporary Lover put the coffee into the cup, he put the milk into the cup of coffee, he put the sugar into the milky coffee, with the little spoon he stirred, he drank the coffee and he replaced the cup without speaking to me, he lit a cigarette, he made rings with the smoke, he put the ashes into the ashtray . . . How bright he was! Lit up from within. I moved closer to him and kissed the smooth skin of his lips. My lover grew warm and soft, softer and softer, smaller and smaller, thinner and thinner. My lover was melting. All I could hear was a whistling sound that had the tone of his voice:

"Ah, love . . . love is a sweet little sound that makes the world go round!"

All that was left of the Temporary Lover was a little pool of tepid water. I wept. My tears fell on the remains of the omelette and melted butter. Why, I thought. Who am I? If I only knew whether I had been changed in the night into something else. Was I just the same when I got up this morning? I remembered feeling a little different. But if I wasn't the same then, do I have the slightest idea who in the world I am now?

I stared for a long time at the little pool of tepid water, in which the sun was sparkling, and I wept. Then I dried my tears, took a rag and wiped the remains of the Temporary Lover from the floor. I got dressed, sat down at my desk and began to think what I was going to do that day. First I would devote myself to affairs of the mind, I thought. Maybe, as a mental exercise, I could translate some sentences from some foreign languages. And I translated one on the spot. *The magician was tall. I liked that sentence; I liked the fact that the magician was tall. I don't like magicians of average height, and I simply can't stand small ones.*

My reflections about small magicians were interrupted by the thought that I really ought to be at work, which I had completely forgotten, drained as I was by my dreams. I dialed the number of the office.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hello? Who's that?"

"That's just the trouble! If I knew, I'd come to work. But I don't, so there's no point. Doesn't that seem logical to you?"

"Who is this? Is this a joke?"

"No one. I just wanted to tell you I can't come to work today, because I don't know who I am. If I knew I'd come right away! Can't you see?"

"You're crazy!"

"Pray don't trouble yourself to say it any longer than that," I said and put down the receiver.

Then I thought that I ought to stop and think. All these recent events are devastating me like a tornado sweeping everything before it. I am completely muddle-headed, I no longer know who I am, everything is mixed up. I don't know whether I am talking in the past or the present tense any more, I don't know

what has really happened and what was only a dream, I am afraid of falling asleep, I am afraid of staying awake. I ought to put things in proper order.

I took a pencil and wrote the sentence *Buy buttons* on a scrap of paper. It seemed to me that this sentence gave meaning to the day ahead of me. When you have something to do, however trivial, it means that you are not completely lost. Then I wrote *Buy thread* on the same scrap of paper. Not because I needed thread, but so that I wouldn't forget the sentence *Buy buttons*; I was doubly reinforcing my intention to buy buttons, that is, even if in a roundabout way.

Calmer now, I took the scrap of paper and put it in my purse. Then I went over to the window to open it and felt my foot knock against something.

There was a great big ugly egg on the floor. I picked it up and put it on the table. You lying triple-decker chickens! Whenever it visits me, it always lays an egg secretly in the hope that I'll take care of it. But no! Not this time! One of these days, you feathered con artist, one of these days I'm going to fry your offspring into an omelette! I shook my fist in the vague direction of the window.

But then I calmed down, I stroked the egg, put it to my ear. All right, I thought, I'll take care of you, I'll give you to someone as a present. I wrapped the egg in tin foil and put it in a plastic bag. Then I dialed Filip's number.

"Hello?"

"It's me,"

"Oh, it's you! What are you up to?"

"Nothing. I'm mad at an egg, or rather a chicken. Although actually I'm not mad at all any more, I've calmed down. Filip, I have to buy buttons because of the thread and I wondered if

we could meet. I think there's something wrong with me . . ." I said all in one breath.

In a little while I saw Filip waiting at the appointed place, outside The Golden Half-Shell restaurant. No, I thought, it would be silly to speak to him before I saw his two ears or at least one of them. When I saw the left one, I ran joyfully to him.

"Your hair's outgrown you, it needs cutting," said Filip.

"Filip . . . something's happening to me, I've changed," I burst out as soon as we had sat down.

"Hmm, so, you think you've changed?"

"Yes," I exclaimed. "I'm afraid I won't be able to explain it to you, because I'm not me any more!"

The waiter came up. Filip ordered grilled trout and two glasses of white wine. When the waiter left, I went on:

"It's not good, Filip," I said dejectedly. "I can't remember lots of things I used to, and the worst of it is that I'm closing up, like a telescope. I feel small, there's hardly enough left of me for a human being, and a very small one at that. I've never been as this small before, never. That's how far it's gone, Filip! It's gone so far that I'm having eggs laid at my door!" I said, remembering the egg in the plastic bag. "Something tells me I'm going mad, Filip!" I burst into tears.

"It's okay, calm down," said Filip. "How do you know you're mad?"

"I just know," I said stubbornly. "A dog growls when it's angry and wags its tail when it's in a good mood. I growl when I'm in a good mood, Filip, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Wouldn't you say I was mad?"

"Hold on, slow down," Filip soothed me. "Start from the beginning and go on to the end, and when you get to the end, stop."

"I can't," I said, "my words have all scattered . . ."

Filip stroked my hand. "It's really not as bad as all that. Just be the way you would like to seem to others, or to put it more simply: never think of being other than it could seem to others that you are or could be were you not different from the way you were so it seems to others that you are different."

While Filip was talking, I felt myself sinking. Through a fog I saw the waiter bringing two trout on a dish. The trout were strangely flat, as though made of cardboard; the head of one was laid beside the other's tail.

"Off with their heads! Off with their heads, at once!" I heard Filip's voice. Calmly, the waiter cut the heads off the trout, and I saw Filip's left ear disappearing from his face, followed by his right ear, then his nose.

"I'm going to faint! I'm going to faint!" I whispered in a feeble voice.

"Their heads are gone, sir!" I heard the waiter's voice.

"Get me out of here, Filip!" I said feverishly.

Filip took me by the hand and led me out into the street. I breathed deeply and after a while calmed down.

"You're hungry. You haven't eaten anything," said Filip, taking a crust of bread out of his pocket. I took the crust and gnawed it. The air was soft and pink with the setting sun. I took Filip's arm, and felt that at last I was myself again and whole. And then it occurred to me that maybe the man I was walking with through streets pink with the setting sun wasn't the real Filip, but someone else, a Mock Filip.

"Filip," I burst out, "I'm in a hurry! I've still got to buy some buttons!"

I dashed off toward the streetcar stop with all the strength I could muster, leaving a flabbergasted Filip behind me.

In the streetcar I began to think that there was really no

longer any doubt I was crazy. For if I didn't know who I was myself, how could I know that Filip was a Mock Filip?

When I got out of the streetcar, it was already dark. The stores were closed. Never mind, I thought, I'll buy buttons tomorrow. I didn't feel like going home. The very idea of finding myself in my noisy, nightmare room again appalled me. Then the comforting thought occurred to me that I could visit Marble, after all I hadn't seen her for two whole days.

When Marble appeared at the door, I said as naturally as I could:

"Happy birthday, Marble!"

"How did you know it's my birthday?" Marble asked, surprised.

"I didn't, but I've got an egg and I thought how good it would be if it was your birthday today and I could give you the egg . . . Here!"

She took the egg without much enthusiasm.

"Come in," she said. "It is my birthday."

I went in, a little put out. Marble hadn't shown much gratitude for such a big present. There were three of Marble's friends at the kitchen table. The table was large enough, but the three of them were all crowded together at one end.

"No room! No room!" they cried out when they saw me.

"There's plenty of room!" I said sulkily and sat down on the opposite side of the table.

"Have some wine!" First offered in a friendly tone.

"I don't see any wine," I said.

"There isn't any!" said First.

"Then it isn't very civil of you to offer it!"

"It isn't very civil of you to sit down at someone else's table without being invited!" says Second.

"I didn't know it was your table!"

"She's right!" said Third. "It's not our table."

"As far as I know it's Marble's table," I said.

"You don't know much," said Third brusquely, "and when you don't know one thing, you usually don't know anything else either."

"Marble!" I shouted. "These three are insulting me!"

"Which three?" Marble asked appearing from somewhere.

"These three," I said, pointing to First, Second, and Third.

"Oh leave me alone," said Marble sharply. "You know I never could abide figures!"

What's going on, I thought to myself, everything's curious today! It would be best not to open my mouth again. I'll sit here for another moment or two and then make an excuse and be off. It must be late by now.

"What's the time?" I asked politely.

"Six!" said Second. "It's always six o'clock here!"

"How come?"

"Simple. We're killing time and we began at six."

"Oh do talk sense!" I said angrily. "I don't understand what you mean by these jangling words, and I don't believe you do either!"

"Now, now, don't be cross" said Marble soothingly. "Take some more coffee."

"Mind what you're saying! I've had nothing yet, so I can't take more!"

"All right," said Marble. "I'll make some more coffee, and in the meantime have some jam."

Marble got out a jar of jam and put it on the table.

"Plum!" said First.

"Apricot . . ." said Second.

"Cherry," said Third.

I looked at them. It was really dreadful, the amount these creatures chattered, I thought.

"I think you might do something better with the time," I said, "because it really hasn't deserved to be wasted in meaningless chatter."

"If you had grown up in a house, you would have made a dreadfully ugly child, this way at least you're rather a handsome pig!" snapped First.

That was too much. I got up.

"Marble!" I asked, "which way should I go to get away from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said Marble calmly.

"I don't much care where I get to . . ."

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go!"

"Just as long as I get away from here," I muttered.

"I'm prepared to bet you'll succeed in that," said Marble.

"Oh, we're prepared to bet you'll succeed in that!" guffawed the three chatterboxes.

I slammed the door of Marble's apartment and rushed down the stairs to the front door. No matter what happened to me, I'd never go there again, I thought irritably. That was the stupidest birthday party I was ever at in all my life, I grumbled to myself, hurrying toward the streetcar stop.

On the way home I thought about the day that had just gone by, but I couldn't remember anything. Then I remembered the eggs; it all started with the eggs I had taken with me. It was a good thing I'd left it with Marble. It had been horrible at Marble's. I felt as though I'd been there before, like in a hole, like in a jam jar.

I unlocked the door of my apartment with a sigh of relief. I went in and right away started looking for a pencil and paper

so I wouldn't forget that tomorrow I really must *buy buttons*. Suddenly my eyes met the two large green eyes of an unknown man who was sitting thoughtfully on my bed, smoking a cigar. I stood there stupidly holding the scrap of paper and pencil in my hand. The stranger and I stared at each other for a long time. Finally the stranger took the cigar out of his mouth and asked me in a drawl, "*Who are you?*"

For God's sake, I thought, this was really too much! Now a total stranger as well. Where am I? In someone else's apartment? In some foreign country? Who am I? And what can I tell him: that I hardly know, that I may have known when I got up this morning, but I must have changed several times since then.

"Who are you?" the stranger asked.

I waved my hands in confusion, trying to catch my breath. The words stuck in my throat . . .

"I think you ought to tell me who you are first!"

"Why?" the stranger replied calmly.

I didn't know what to say.

"Who are you?" the stranger repeated the question, puffing smoke from his cigar.

And then, all at once I felt as whole and peaceful as an egg. I walked straight to the door and locked it. I wound my alarm clock, got undressed, put on my nightgown, turned out the light, and got into bed.

In the darkness I heard my own calm and confident voice saying, "I'm Alice! Move over a bit. I'm sleepy . . ."