

Elsewhere, Just Not Here

Mykola Riabchuk

I have completely forgotten what he looked like. It's strange, but today I remember only that he was a man already old, wearing wire-rimmed glasses. He appeared to be a foreigner, and he had a rather unusual title: elephant herder. What kind of elephants, he didn't say. He said only that he and his herd roamed the whole planet.

"So, what are you doing here?" I asked.

"Nothing. My elephants weren't allowed into your country, so I have nothing to do. I've just stopped here for an hour, to take a look around. Then I'll go on."

"Where are the elephants?" I asked in wonder.

"They're waiting for me at the border," the man explained.

"You think they won't cross it on their own?"

"They won't," the herder affirmed. "My elephants are very smart. When they met Salvador's elephants, you know what they asked? 'Who painted you?' Ha, ha, ha! Can you imagine that?! Not 'What are you doing here?' or 'Why do you have such long legs?' But 'Who painted you?!'"

"So what did Salvador's elephants answer?"

"Nothing. They didn't answer each other at all. They just asked questions."

"What questions?" I wanted to know.

"How long ago my elephants had left Africa. What the weather's like there. Does the Ivory Coast team play good soccer?"

The man smiled and tilted his head to one side. Then he cast a glance around the empty café and stared through the transparent wall.

"It's time to go," he said.

I held out a ballpoint pen, the only thing I had in my pockets to give him—the other things in them were my room key and last month's trolley and tramcar pass.

The herder swiveled on his stool to face the glass wall and in a few short strokes he sketched some elephants and flowers on it. Clearly, these elephants ate nothing but flowers. They were strolling languidly on the grass, on the leafy trees shining through the glass, on the anxious people hurrying somewhere with their briefcases. No one noticed the elephants—their bodies were nothing but outline.

"This is a souvenir for you," said the man, and off he went without a backward glance.

I sat and peered at the wall. Alongside the elephants were a pair of

Hutsuls, a man and woman, that someone had drawn before. They were sauntering through the very flowers that were the elephants' favorite food.

"And so what?" I thought to myself. "Let them..."

From my small plate of salad I picked out a round slice of radish and rolled it across the table, like a wheel with a red rim.

This café was always empty, even in the evenings. It was called the Friendship Café, and it was located in the students' quarter. They ate their meals in the dining halls and to relax they went to their dorm rooms.

Today a young woman came running in and took a seat at a table near mine. I went over and sat by her.

"This is the third time you've been here. It's time we met," I said.

She raised her eyes, amazed.

"Really?"

"I am Hector Rashid Angeles, Jr., a professional boxer."

"Who?" The amazement in her blue eyes didn't fade.

"Actually, a former professional boxer. And you, are you a student?"

I had seen her here a few times. She always ordered coffee and drank it slowly, all the while cradling a German textbook of some kind. Along with the textbook she carried a "German-Turkish Dictionary." A different one every time, I noticed, and each one thicker than the last, though it might have only seemed that way.

"I'm a teacher."

"Oh. Excuse me then."

"Nothing to excuse. Your guess was almost right. I finished last year, in Spanish and Polynesian philology. But you can't do anything with that."

"Well, I recently left professional boxing. My dream is to herd elephants and travel."

"But we don't have any professional boxing," the teacher countered.

"I worked with Midge Killer himself. He was always saying, 'Drop your manager and come join us.' I kept refusing. Then one time, at his villa, he set a python on me."

"What! He did that, himself?"

"What do you mean, himself? He was the python's owner—it was trained."

"There's no such thing!"

"I remember it as if it were yesterday," I went on. "He said, 'Look, it has your manager in its belly.' And I really did see humps in the snake's body. And I began to imagine my manager sitting in its belly, having rolled himself up into a ball, and then myself as an embryo positioned just like him. It's better not to imagine things like that. The python began to move straight at me. He had shining skin with odd-looking patterns on it. His look was hypnotizing me, but then I turned my back to him and ran. I fled through the bushes and over the metal enclosure."

The teacher listened to me attentively, without the hint of a smile. Then she said:

"Maybe you're a professional soccer player?"

"No," I said. "I remember as if it were yesterday. I remember the lush greenery and the python with the patterned skin, looking like it was painted."

"Like an Easter egg?"

"Like a sketched elephant," I said.

After that, the teacher and I often met at the Friendship Café. She actually did bring ever thicker German-Turkish dictionaries with her. She'd write down several words from one and sit lost in thought, absentmindedly sipping her coffee. Then she'd write down the same words from another dictionary and think.

"Why do you do that?" I couldn't help asking.

"I can't translate the text," she said. "I've been trying for a whole year." I nearly laughed.

"Is it worth getting so perturbed about?" I asked.

"Certainly," said the teacher. "The text is from a school textbook. Listen: *'This currant bush of yours, is it white?'*

'No, it's black.'

'Then why is it gray?'

'Because it's red.'

That's the literal translation."

"So, what about it?"

"It's absurd!"

"To my mind, it's a pretty original dialogue."

"In a school textbook?!"

"Why not?" I said. "Children's education should keep up with the times."

"That's not it," sighed the teacher. "The translations the dictionaries give are all imprecise. Or maybe in German the words are some kind of homonyms."

She wrote four words in block letters on the café's glass wall. I've forgotten what the German words were, but I remember they were four adjectives: WHITE, BLACK, GRAY, RED.

That's how they were translated. Or maybe as something else. Maybe the teacher confused German with Spanish. Or Polynesian. Then, too, words that mean one thing in German might mean something entirely different in Spanish. Or they might mean nothing at all.

After that, I didn't see the teacher again. Just like the herder. And lots of other people.

But at the Friendship Café they don't wash the window very often. If you're lucky enough to get there in time, on the glass wall you'll see a pair of stylized Hutzuls, a herd of blue, or, to be more precise, transparent elephants, and four colorful, apparently German, adjectives.

As if all these things had something in common.

Translated by Uliana Pasicznyk

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