

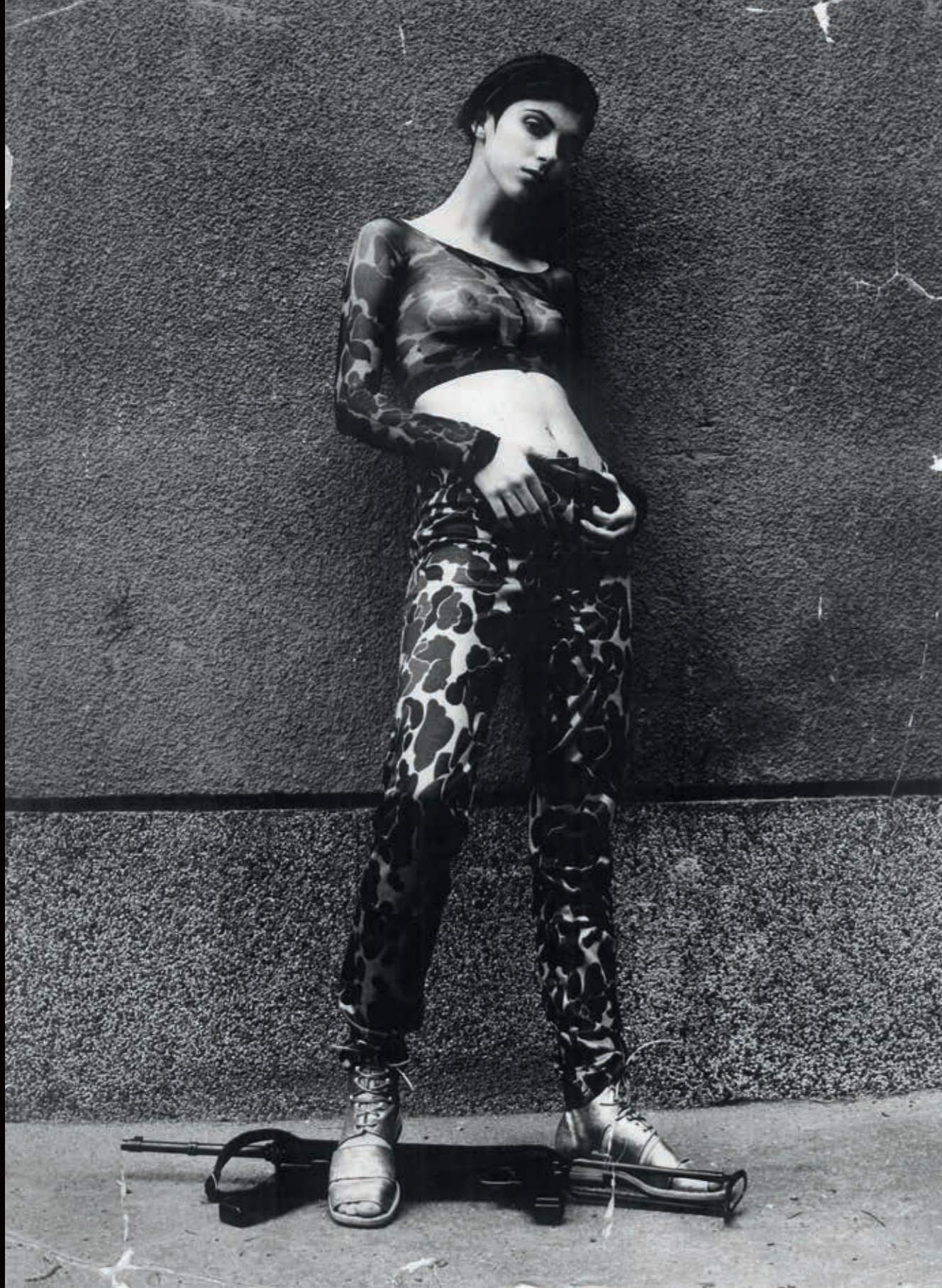
Gender Equality and Other Stories

Rumena Bužarovska

I remember my aunt, smiling, gentle, small, telling me a story about something that happened when she was a little girl. She was on her way home from the ice-skating rink. It was getting dark. As she headed to her building with her skates in her hand, she heard steps behind her. She quickened her pace, but noticed that the steps behind her had also quickened. She turned and saw a man following her. She dashed forward but the man raced after her. Near her apartment building—in an urban, densely-populated Skopje neighbourhood—the man caught up and grabbed her. “And then,” my aunt says, “gathering all the strength I could muster, I shouted with the faintest, quietest voice you can imagine, ‘heeeeelp!’ and the man let me go and ran off.” The young girl that is my aunt suddenly felt powerful because the man had fled because of her voice, so she chased after him, menacingly waving her skates. At one point, it dawned on her: what if he started to chase her again? “I was such an idiot,” I remember her saying. Still, I remember my admiration for her.

I also recall how I admired her for another story. She and a friend (was it Žane?) were walking through the city. In my recollection, or, more precisely, in the image her words created for me, the two of them are on the highest point of the Stone Bridge in the centre of Skopje (I’m sure I’m getting this a bit wrong). They are approached by a pervert, an exhibitionist. My aunt, one of the rare people in the family who would tell me stories connected with womanhood and sexuality, had explained to me that an exhibitionist is a person who feels compelled to show his sex organ to women. She had portrayed him to me (most likely) as a man in a coat who, without seeking permission, reveals himself. The man was a known exhibitionist in the city, my aunt told me, and people usually ran away when he flashed them. But she and Žane were both nearsighted and wore thick glasses, so when he exposed himself,

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they just drew closer to him so they could get a better look and then burst out laughing. That scared the wits out of him and he ran away. I don't know if I'm retelling these stories exactly right because my aunt told them to me more than thirty years ago, and my memory surely deceives me, but my mind has anchored the story in pictures from which it can't escape, no matter how differently the story was told. But I'm certain of the basic facts: a man grabs a young girl, she yelps "help," he runs away, but she chases him with her skates; two women with thick glasses encounter an exhibitionist and try to get a better look at his sex organ, laugh at him, then he runs away. From today's perspective, I'm certain that my aunt was trying to teach me how to deal with everything that would happen to me throughout my life as a girl and as a woman. I would be followed, my movement would be restrained, I would be attacked, public space would be inaccessible to me, and I would not be able to complain, since no one would believe me, since I would be accused of enjoying presenting myself as a victim. Instead, I would have to learn to silence the stories in which someone wanted to harm or kill me, or to turn them around and laugh in the face of my timidity, turning it into strength. I was also taught from other women in my life that the way I should deal with these things is in a "feminine" way: keep silent, but somehow through "cunning" find a way to get my own way. But to get my own way, I understood later, would mean: to survive, to not be physically assaulted, to have moments of peace in which, for example, I could watch a true crime show on my own, nibble chips under the blankets, and feel safe.

When I was twelve, I saw for the first time that my body meant something I wasn't aware of, something that provoked in me a feeling of shame and responsibility from which I still feel the consequences. And 27 years later, I'm still battling the idea instilled in me that I'm guilty for the violence that was inflicted on me. I was walking along the tree-lined road behind my building in the middle of the summer dressed in shorts. Suddenly I heard music and in the middle of the intersection a car stopped with two men inside. They opened their doors and started cat-calling, but then, to my relief, they drove off. I felt dirty and imagined that my shorts were the problem. For a long time it didn't occur to me, and not just to me, but to our whole society, that perhaps it wasn't the shorts, but that it is simply not normal to catcall a 12-year old girl, nor is it normal to do that to a woman at any age.

Little by little I got used to this feeling of shame, fear, and discomfort. The biggest problem for me was the restriction of my freedom of movement. It seemed that all of society, including my own family, told me that I had to stay home to survive, to not be attacked (the end result of this is the ironic fact

that—according to a United Nations report—it is precisely the home that is the most unsafe place for women). And so, movement into public spaces, especially alone, was a tremendous challenge. Most of the assaults I've experienced in my life—someone grabbing my behind, or my breasts, or my crotch (forcibly, while running past, or from a bike; always, always, always, without exception, men)—were on a street, most often near my home. On the street in front of my apartment building. In the area between the bus stop and my apartment building. At the bus stop itself. I don't know how many times my behind—whether I hid it under a coat or under a jacket—was "a reason" for someone to slap me and nonchalantly move on. We all know what happens when we protest: it's not like in my aunt's story, where the attacker flees. If you shout at the attacker, confront him, or run after him, they will very simply either accuse you of lying, or if you persist, beat you up. I then started experiencing harassment on public transport. My mother and I were once in a crowded bus. Behind me, a man with an erect penis pushed and rubbed himself against me. I shoved him back. My mother noticed something had happened, but I didn't tell her what because—after all—I shouldn't disturb the people around me, and I also knew that my mother, as woman, couldn't protect me, so why should I rattle her even more? More striking, once while I was sitting on a bus, looking out the window, I turned my head to see a man right beside me holding and rubbing his penis directly in my face. Just a few years ago, I was spending a month in Berlin and every day, literally every day, I had incidents in the metro. Once a man persisted in speaking to me and demanded that I give him my attention, but when I asked him to leave me alone, he menacingly stood up, called me a whore, and stormed off into the next car. In case you are wondering what I was wearing: a long black coat. I had, in the interim, grasped that clothing is not the provocation. The provocation is the female body in whatever form. It is treated like a moving piece of property, something to be used and then left behind. Like loot, or some exotic prey that happens to be riding on the bus.

For a long time I had difficulty telling these stories, especially when not in written form, because my experience—and the experience of all women—is so normalized and accepted, that it seemed like I was complaining simply because I exist. of the ugliest accusations were that I was complaining because, in fact, someone had paid attention to me, and that I didn't know how to accept a compliment, that I was killing the flirtation, and that, ultimately, I hated men. And so, the telling of these stories and others about the impossibility for women to move in public spaces and all the protective mechanisms we use in order to get from point A to point B without being killed (like Sarah Everard,

kidnapped and killed in the middle of London on the evening of March 3, 2021, by a policeman) was considered until recently to be an infantile and affected much-ado-about-nothing. Thankfully, this collective gaslighting that governs all patriarchal societies (are there other kinds?) is declining. I live in an era in which I will experience, and do experience, drastic change and a tremendous gain of freedom, an era in which the female story can be told and heard. As a writer I have always engaged in reading and writing. Growing up, I had difficulty in identifying with, and developing empathy towards, a wide range of characters who, in real life, do not deserve such compassion. This was due to the fact that the canon was male—hence the narrators of the stories were male and nearly all the experiences were of white men. Through literature I learned how it was to live as a white male and how to love and be loved by one. I came to identify with a male character—which is key in literature, to be able to walk in someone else’s shoes and to experience a life that can never be yours, thus developing an understanding of difference—but for the most part it was expected and deemed natural that I would identify with the passive, muse-like, female characters who fainted, fell in love and, if they were bad girls, killed themselves. Hence, I became accustomed to enduring and understanding all sorts of male provocation because I was seeking the cause for their weakness, which was often just simply privileged and unjust aggression.

It took me some time to understand that our tolerance for violence and aggression also comes from not having the opportunity to tell the story. It is simply this: whoever tells the story has the power. The narrator decides what kind of world will be represented, what kind of world will be archived in the history of human experience. Therefore, I feel I am witnessing something immense when I see the stories that have surfaced since the movement #metoo took off, a movement which has also spread here under the hashtag #segakažuvam (#now I speak up) which also addresses experiences of sexual violence and harassment. There is, in addition, #segakažuvam #kadeneodam (#now I speak up #where I don’t go), which addresses the experiences of women in public spaces. Very shortly thereafter, the movement #ženeujavnoprstoru (#women in public space) spontaneously appeared in Croatia, in which women told similar experiences about the harassment and violence they experience outside, on the street, on public transport, in the park; and recently, following the Serbian movement “Pravda za Mariju Lukić” (“Truth for Marija Lukić”), the most massive and most shocking movement under the hashtag #nisamtražila (#I wasn’t looking for it) appeared, inspired by the actress Milena Radulović’s personal and brave testimony of having been raped. This most powerful movement for sexual equality is radically changing—has

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by Christina Kramer

already changed—the world. It is not coincidental that these changes happened precisely through the telling of stories. Stories have always been a means of reality, but also a way to pass on experiences, and thereby also creating history. Another way women are taking over the narrative is by being increasing present as female authors on a global scale. This shouldn’t surprise us when we have in mind, first of all, that most often, on average, the majority of readers are women, and it is therefore entirely unsurprising for them to want to identify with stories different from the standard white male narratives. This surge in female authors is also seen in our region where mutual support among female authors has developed in the absence of support by state associations, awards, and institutions still dominated by privileged men. An author friend recently told me how the editor of a journal tried to impose a question on the female journalist who was to conduct an interview with her. The question was along these lines: “Do you believe there is an incestuous hub of young female writers advertising each other on Instagram?” How can one answer such a question riddled with the anxiety over losing the undeserved and state-awarded privilege that has silenced women’s voices for centuries? One can’t. Such a question doesn’t deserve an answer. And the creators of the state policies that have existed until now will become extinct, like dinosaurs. We will watch and we will not mourn. I sincerely feel privileged to live at a time when I can witness how the narrative is being taken over by those who, until now, have been silenced and taught to be unseen, unnoticed, to occupy the smallest possible space so as not to be punished with psychological or physical violence. I want to believe that a time is coming in which my aunt’s story about the pedophile who attacked her in front of her building, or the one about the exhibitionist who felt that he was strong and terrifying just because he owned a penis, will have a different ring. In this new version, women won’t have to fight off these bullies on their own, using everything they have at their disposal, including their humour. Such a new story, I would like to believe, will not have the opportunity to occur. And if it did, I would like the perpetrator to be thrown in jail where he belongs, and for the story to be told without the female narrator being judged as unreliable regardless of her age, appearance, or sexuality. And I believe those times are coming. Perhaps it will take a few more decades, but the process is underway, and it is irreversible and inevitable. I am proud to be able to experience it, and that now, here, everywhere, I have the opportunity to tell my story.

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Rumena Bužarovska is a fiction writer and literary translator from Skopje, North Macedonia. An author of four volumes of short stories translated into several languages, her collection *My Husband* has been published in the USA, Germany, Italy, Hungary and the former Yugoslav republics, and has been adapted into three stage productions in Ljubljana, Belgrade and Skopje. A 2018 resident of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, she is a professor of American literature and translation at the State University in Skopje. She is the co-author and co-organizer of the Macedonian women’s storytelling initiative PeachPreach.