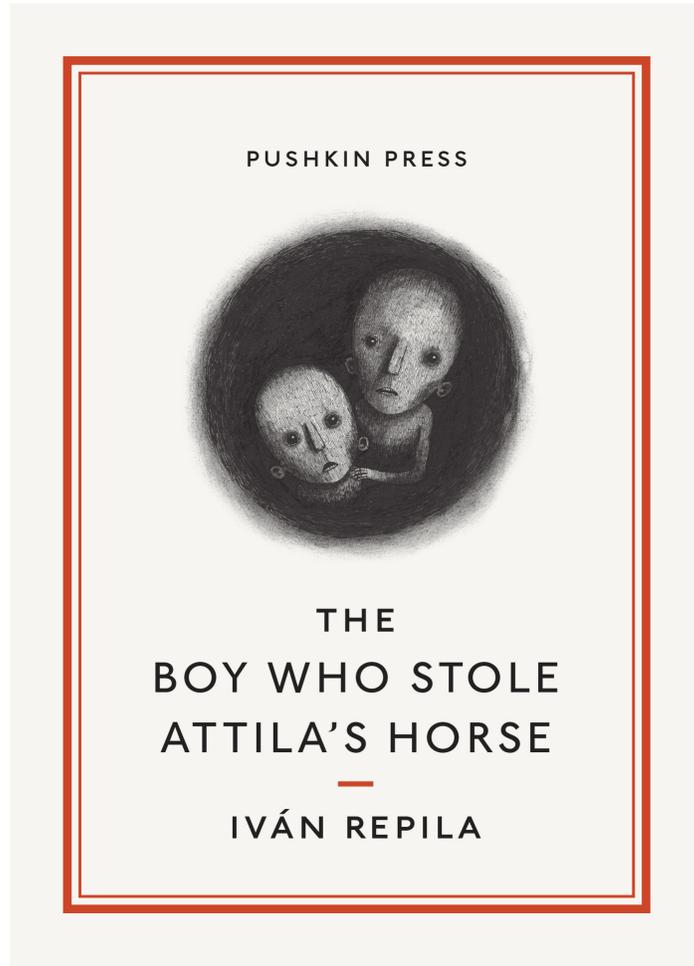


THE BOY WHO STOLE ATTILA'S HORSE

By Iván Repila
Translated by Sophie Hughes
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The Boy Who Stole Attila's Horse by Iván Repila, a young Spanish writer, is a powerful allegorical novel in an elegant translation by Sophie Hughes. *Attila* has echoes of Beckett and Cormac McCarthy, but is very much its own thing—a fable for the early 21st century of a Europe in decline.

It looks impossible to get out,' he says. And also: 'But we'll get out.'

Two brothers, Big and Small, are trapped at the bottom of a well. They have no food and little chance of rescue. Only the tempting specter of insanity offers a way out. As Small's wits fail, Big formulates a desperate plan.

With the authority of the darkest fables, and the horrifying inevitability of all-too-real life, Repila's unique allegory explores the depths of human desperation and, ultimately, our almost unending capacity for hope.

This excerpt is the first chapter of the book, courtesy of the publisher, Pushkin Press, London.

<http://pushkinpress.com>

‘It looks impossible to get out,’ he says. And also: ‘But we’ll get out.’

To the north, the forest borders a mountain range and is surrounded by lakes so big they look like oceans. In the center of the forest is a well. The well is roughly seven meters deep and its uneven walls are a bank of damp earth and roots, which tapers at the mouth and widens at the base, like an empty pyramid with no tip. The basin gurgles dark water, which filters along faraway veins and even more distant galleries that flow towards the river. It leaves a permanent muddy peat and sludge specked with bubbles that pop, spraying bursts of eucalyptus back into the air. Whether due to pressure from the continental plates or the constant eddying breeze, the little roots move and turn and steer in a slow, sad dance, which evokes the nature of all the forests slowly absorbing the earth.

The older brother is big. With his hands he digs up lumps of sand to form a step strong enough to hold him, but when he lifts himself up in the air the weight of his body defeats him and the wall breaks.

The younger brother is small. He sits on the floor with his arms around his legs, blowing on a fresh graze on his knee. While thinking that the first blood always falls on the side of the weak, he watches his brother fall once, twice, three times.

‘It hurts. I think it’s broken.’ ‘Don’t worry about the blood.’

Outside, the sun continues its loop and is eclipsed behind the mountains, drawing an afternoon shadow like a curtain over the well until it’s barely possible to make out the pale cheeks, the eyeballs, the teeth. Attempts to carve a way out through the wall of earth have proved futile, and now Big is on his feet with his fingers hooked into the belt loops of his trousers, focused, searching the day’s end for the answer to an enigma which fades as darkness falls.

‘Up you get. You might be able to reach the edge if I put you on top of me.’

Small shudders, but he isn’t cold.

‘It’s really high. We won’t reach it,’ he says, standing up.

Big takes Small by the hand and in one move lifts him up to his shoulders, as if they were playing at grown-ups and being as tall as a man. They steady themselves against the wall and from this position Small realizes that they won’t be making it to any ledge.

‘I don’t reach. It’s really high.’

Big grabs Small’s feet firmly so he can lift him and increase their height by the entire length of his arms.

‘What about now? Now do you reach?’ ‘No. Still no.’

‘Are your arms stretched?’ ‘Of course!’

‘Hold on then,’ he says, and Big propels himself upwards and jumps as high as gravity and his legs allow him, emitting first a puff and then a kind of animal pant, full of rage, which his throat finally turns into a cry for help when they fall to the ground, hitting their elbows and backs against the soft mulch at the bottom.

‘Was it close?’

‘I don’t know. I had my eyes shut,’ Small says.

At night, the rustle of the forest is accompanied by a nagging buzz, the din of invisible jaws that inhabit the space like an amorphous mass. The brothers hug one another stretched out on the driest side of their

new country, on a pelt of thick roots that enfolds them unresistingly. Neither of them sleeps, how could they?

At sunrise the well is a different color. The dry earth on the higher part is composed of copper sediments, brownish- grey scars and yellow pine needles. Further down inside the well the earth is damp, black and blue, and the tips of the roots have a purplish glint. The sun is warm, and only the birds respond to the silence. Small's intestines gurgle under his hands.

'I'm hungry.'

Big rouses himself and tries to focus his vision with the turn of his neck. His sleep-stiffened muscles stretch from the Achilles tendon to the annulus of Zinn.

'We'll eat once we find a way out. Don't worry.' 'But I'm really hungry. My stomach hurts.'

'There's nothing to eat.'

'What do you mean there's nothing to eat? We've got the bag.'

Big remains silent for a second or two. The bag is in the corner of the well, rolled up in a muddy ball. Neither has touched it since they got there.

'The food in the bag is for Mother,' he says firmly.

Small pulls a face somewhere between resentment and resignation and gets up, supporting himself first with his hands on the floor, then on the wall. His brother lets out a pained sigh.

'We're getting out of here right now.'

They stretch out their limbs for a while, study the position of the sun to work out the time, and shout, calling for help. Afterwards, they grope the walls. They search them, scratch them, probe them for jutting fragments of rock, hardened snags, holes. They go on shouting. They repeat a few of their moves from yesterday afternoon, but barely raise themselves a couple of meters before they plummet back down to the bottom of the well. They dig up the earth looking for objects they might be able to use as a bridge: a large root, the remains of a trunk, anything. With each hour that passes they shout less. When the sun declares noon, pointing at the boys with his marble fingers, Big makes a decision.

'Hold on to my hands firmly. I'm going to throw you out of the well.'

Small suffers a fit of panic. The prospect of being thrown out of the well, as if he were a stone or a gun or any old object, makes him feel extraordinarily small, but his brother's resolve prevents him from protesting. After a few seconds of to and fro they manage to adopt the position required for the move; with their hands gripping on to the other's forearms they take slow breaths to quell the riot in their hearts, unsettled by the mystery of the exertion to come.

'I'm going to start spinning now. Don't be afraid. When you feel your legs lifting off the ground, let yourself be carried. We'll spin a little bit more to pick up speed and then I'll call out loud for you to let go of me. Have you got it?' Small looks at his brother, amazed, as if seeing him for the first time. The image of his shattered body crosses his mind for an instant, leaving the taste of coins in his saliva.

'Are you sure?'

'I'm strong and you're small. I think I should give it a try.'

Then they take their positions: Big spreading his legs to steady himself when the speed picks up, Small with one knee on the ground so that he isn't dragged along, both of them gripping with such force that their knuckles blanch. And without another thought they start to spin. Big pulls his brother upwards so the rotation is clean and goes on spinning, and Small is raised a hand from the ground and he spins, another hand and he spins, until with the next spin he's virtually horizontal, with his eyes

closed and his clenched teeth making dents in his gums; and still they spin, faster and faster, with each spin mapping a bigger circumference, and when it seems like they are at the point of falling, exhausted and breathless from so much spinning, Small slips down to the ground, but doesn't touch it, then soars back up at an angle, and they repeat this twice more, and in the final ascent Big shouts Now, and lets go, and with his eyes still closed Small breaks free and he takes off from the earth towards the sun like a comet of bones, and for just a few seconds he is flying, but he smashes, literally smashes into the wall, producing a dull crunch that drowns out any cry; and then, unconscious and bleeding from the mouth, he falls the few meters that separate him and the floor and lands on the dizzy body of his brother, like a circus act that ends in a bundle of piled up flesh, and no applause.

When he recovers, Big rinses the blood off his brother and cheerfully announces that apart from a few broken teeth and some bruises, it's nothing serious. Small protests: 'My whole body hurts. That didn't work. And I'm hungry.'

Big feels responsible for Small's injuries. He looks at him pityingly and ashamed, and then looks up at the spot against which he'd smashed him only seconds before. He gets up. Looking closer he sees the marks from the impact, the dent in the wall of earth. The cast has held the shape of the top half of his brother: the head, the torso, the arms. The missing teeth that they couldn't locate are probably still biting into the hollow. A smile spreads across Big's face. And though he knows he has had to use every ounce of his strength for that throw, a dark something awakens in him, a kind of mechanical resourcefulness that connects sequential layers of thought; a conspiracy of scattered images comes together and gives form to a pattern that is painful, but real. Afterwards, glowing with excitement, he goes back to Small. It's been twenty-four hours since they fell.

'I've had an idea,' he says. And also: 'But you have to make me a promise.'



Iván Repila (b. Bilbao, 1978) is a Spanish writer celebrated for the originality and depth of his prose. He worked in cultural management and as an editor before turning to writing with his highly praised debut novel, *Despicable Comedy*. *The Boy Who Stole Attila's Horse*, his second book, is his first book to appear in English and has received international acclaim.



Sophie Hughes (b. London, 1986) is a literary translator and editor. Her translations have appeared in *Words without Borders*, *Asymptote*, *PEN Atlas*, and the *White Review* and her writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Literary Review*, *Dazed & Confused* and *Music and Literature*. Hughes was awarded the 2015 British Centre for Literary Translation prose mentorship.