

National Translation Month Premiere

A Boat on the Lake: Short Short Stories by David Albahari

Translated from the Serbian by Ellen Elias-Bursać



National Translation Month continues today with another premiere: for the first time we're featuring translations from the Serbian language. We are thrilled to share a selection of **short short stories by the acclaimed writer and playwright, David Albahari, translated by the award-winning Ellen Elias-Bursać**. These short shorts were selected from Albahari's book *Male priče*. They are intriguing and fun, reading almost like prose poems—always leaving us wanting more.

We'd love to hear from you! Follow us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), tag us [@TranslateMonth](#) and share using [#TranslationMonth](#), join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. We hope you'll join us and celebrate your favorite translations of writers from all over the world throughout September.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

REAL STORY

This is it, thinks the narrator, at last a real story. For years he has been waiting for it, skulking behind hedges, holding his breath at closed doors, peering through windows, shimmying up trees, crouching by a fence, but never was the story real, not till now, not as real as this one, both ornate and bold, exalted and plain, simple and tangled, yet so lucid, so precise and all embracing, full of pain and longing, memories and forgetting, that the narrator feels it can't possibly be written down, and instantly the story vanishes, the narrator, too, disappears, and after him are left only emptiness and silence, as there always have been and always will be.

A BOAT ON THE LAKE

Once long ago, while we were walking by a lake, we heard someone call from across the water, but the night was so dark that we couldn't tell where the voice had come from. The next morning, when the fog lifted, we saw an empty boat. It rocked, abandoned, mid-lake. To this day we don't know who was on the boat that night.

FLOOD

With his last ounce of strength, the man grabs for branches hanging over the flooding river. He thrusts his feet to wedge them against the steep riverbank but the water is strong and swings his legs up into the air. The man feels his fingers slipping down the damp leaves and stares at his hands as if he hopes this will help them hold their grip. His gaze drops to his wristwatch and he is amazed to see he's been in the water for less than five minutes. As he'd struggled against the torrent he flailed with arms and legs and ducked the branches and garbage snared in them, convinced he'd been battling the surging waters for years. It would have been better, he thinks, not to have a watch, but he can't take it off, he has to see the slender second hand carving seconds from the time he has left until he releases first one branch, and then the other.

NIGHT ARRIVAL

The boy fears a night-time arrival. The sounds he hears in the dark definitely come from someone digging a tunnel to his room. The boy doesn't know who this is or where they're coming from, but judging by how loud the digging is, they haven't far to go. The boy knows

they'll be there in two or three nights, just as he knows exactly where, under his desk, the parquet flooring will quietly rise until he can make out the gleaming eyes of the stranger. He has tried to explain this to his parents, but they dismissed it and said he is too big for such silliness. I'll show them silliness, whispers the boy, furious, they will see who's big and who's little. So when the segments of parquet flooring beneath the desk begin to shift, he no longer feels fear, only joy.

WHOM TO BELIEVE?

The girl explains patiently to the boy that there's no point to suffering any more and whatever work they do to make a go of this will only make an already bad situation worse. Why waste our time, she tells him, after all each of us is better off going our separate ways, we have our lives ahead of us. What's the point of life, the boy says, without her in it, if she really does go, he knows he'll kill himself. The girl tells him he won't, she cannot believe he'd do such a thing, she kisses him on the cheek and off she goes. The next day, when they find the boy dead, she says again and again that she can't believe he'd do such a thing and repeats this to anyone willing to listen, repeats it ten-fifteen times a day, and when there's no one left to say it to, she says it to herself, first softly, in a whisper, then louder and louder, as loudly as her voice will go.

PLAYING THE GAME

In a train compartment on seats by the window sit a man and boy, most likely they're father and son, engrossed in a game. Both of them are counting, and when one of them reaches a certain number, they look at each other and laugh aloud. The game lasts for a time, and then the father reaches for his bag and takes out two books, one for him, the other for the boy. They both begin reading, and from time to time the boy laughs merrily, as if the game is still on.

SILENCE

At first no one notices the woman with the accordion. Some of them are eating, drinking, dozing, talking softly; who cares about the woman with the accordion. Then the woman unlatches the accordion, takes a seat in a corner and begins to sing. Her voice is angelically lyrical, crystal pure yet gruff, and soon silence takes the room as they listen with rapt attention to the voice that first sings of how life used to be, then of how life will be years hence, and then

sifts through memories, and the people sitting in the room suddenly know she is singing about each one, and somehow—nobody can pinpoint how—she seems to know a little about every last one of them, nobody is spared and the people rise to their feet, huddle together and bow their heads, prepared to receive absolution or a curse or whatever is their due, no one complains, at least not for as long as the voice carries on, as long as life is a song, and after that nothing matters, silence will do.

EMPTY PLACE

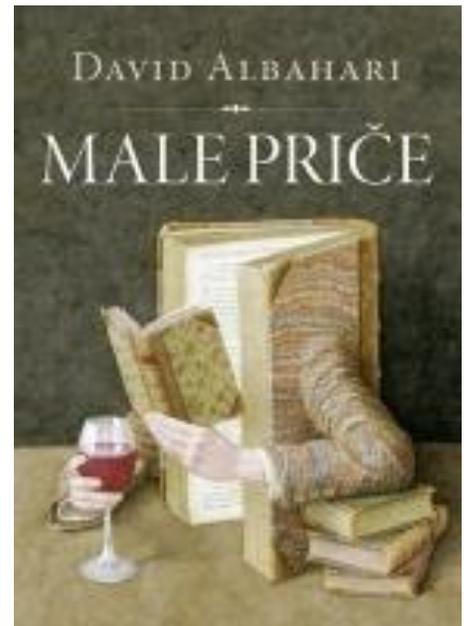
For the last few days Aaron has been doing nothing. Sits and waits. When someone asks him: “What’s this about, Aaron?” he blinks and says, “Nothing. Sitting and waiting.” There are those who say Aaron feels he is going to die and is waiting for the angel of death to come and fetch him, while others say Aaron is playing them for fools and should be removed at once from where he’s sitting and where he has become the town laughing-stock. The papers have reported on him, the local TV station broadcast a half-hour report, there’s talk of reporters coming from the capital city, and someone said that even the parliamentary deputy has taken an interest in Aaron’s fate. “What *is* Aaron waiting for?” asks the deputy at a parliamentary session and proposes a committee be formed to investigate Aaron’s case in depth and make substantive proposals for the future. Meanwhile, an association of Aaronists is founded and demands that Aaron—or the place where he’s sitting—be named an official landmark, but the discussion goes no further because the day before yesterday, early in the morning, Aaron stood up and walked away, and until, at least, just a minute ago, he hasn’t been back.

CALLING FOR HELP

For half an hour Marijana has been calling for help, but either no one has heard or no one is paying attention to her shouts. At moments she thinks the first reason is the more likely one so she makes an effort to shout louder, so loud that her throat aches, but then she feels it’s all in vain, nobody’s listening, and whether she shouts or not makes no difference. She stops until she starts picturing herself dead. At that she starts shouting again.

BOREDOM

Nothing is more awful, says the woman, than when you ask someone if they love you, and then you see a grimace of such boredom crawl across the person's face that you'd be happiest forgetting you exist, but the question is out there, the words are hanging in the air like freshly washed laundry on a line, and all you can do is wait for an answer that means nothing, by then, anyway.



About the author

David Albahari was born in Serbia, lived for many years in Canada, and is now back in Serbia again. He has published thirteen books of short stories, fifteen novels, six books of essays, a book of three short plays, and two books for children, many of which have been translated into other languages. Of these, two collections of his short stories, *Words Are Something Else* and *Learning Cyrillic*, have appeared in English, as well as the novels *Tsing*, *Bait*, *Snow Man*, *Globetrotter*, *Götz and Meyer*, *Leeches*, and *Checkpoint*.

About the translator

Ellen Elias-Bursac translates fiction and non-fiction from Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. Her translation of David Albahari's novel *Götz and Meyer* received the 2006 ALTA National Translation Award. She is the president of the American Literary Translators Association.