



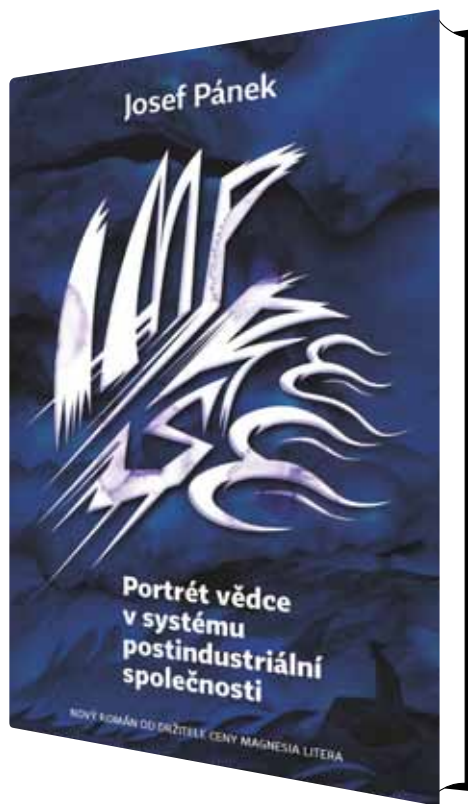
**WINNER OF THE TOP CZECH LITERARY AWARD
(2018)**



ARGO HIGHLIGHTS **LITERARY FICTION**

Portrait of a Scientist in a Postindustrial Society

by **Josef Pánek**



A gripping, provocative, and darkly ironic manifesto for anyone disillusioned with the contemporary world of science

Portrait of a Scientist in a Postindustrial Society is not a conventional novel but a furious, sprawling, and often abrasive monologue – a howl from the edge of reason. Through the protagonist's self-lacerating voice, Pánek creates a searing portrait of the modern intellectual: alienated, brilliant, paranoid, sometimes hypocritical, yet still clinging to the belief in science as a force for truth in a corrupted world. He exposes how research today is driven by money and media attention, while genuine insight is left to wither.

Pánek's distinctive style, giving the impression of a hurried and spoken form of language, flows naturally, maintaining the tension and heightening the absurdity of a chaotic world. The readability and believability are bolstered by the author's experiences as an émigré, thanks to which the novel reads almost like a travelogue.

"A singular, uncompromising voice that challenges the norms of scientific and literary discourse alike. An experimental, expressive style rarely seen in Central European fiction."

— *Critics' podcast*

Josef Pánek (b. 1966) earned his master's and PhD in Prague, then worked in Norway and Australia before returning to Czechia. He debuted with a short story collection, *The Opal Digger* (2013), and his second book, *Love in the Time of Global Climate Change* (2017), won the Magnesia Litera, Czechia's highest literary honor, in 2018. The novel has been **sold to 12 countries**. His latest work is a portrait of a scientist undone by truth – and by a system that no longer wants to hear it.



foto © Jan Kříkava

Portrét vědce v systému postindustriální společnosti

📅 April 2025 📖 192 pages 📄 sample EN

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English summary of the book

Jakub, an unkempt Czech astrophysicist in his forties, arrives in Dublin to present a groundbreaking astronomical theory: contrary to accepted models, the Milky Way will not collide with the Andromeda galaxy, but with the Large Magellanic Cloud in approximately 5.1 billion years. His discovery redefines both the structure and fate of our galaxy. But triumph quickly turns to disillusionment when his manuscript is rejected by a top scientific journal—not on scientific grounds, but through vague and dismissive peer-review comments like “I don’t like it.” Shaken and furious, Jakub abandons the conference and drifts into the ruins of Dublin’s industrial periphery to drink, unravel, and reflect.

What follows is a chaotic, poetic monologue—one long day and night of walking, drinking, remembering, and ranting. Jakub’s thoughts spiral through childhood traumas in communist Czechoslovakia, institutional violence, philosophical digressions, and a brutal reckoning with the current state of science. He recalls being punished as a gifted but unruly child, silenced by teachers and misunderstood by his mother. His estrangement only deepened through military service, academia, and the scientific establishment.

To Jakub, science has become corrupted—a careerist system where innovation is crushed by mediocrity and conformity. Peer review is portrayed as a mechanism of suppression, anonymity used to eliminate competition. Scientific conferences are not forums of inquiry, but corporate-sponsored spectacles filled with networking, ego, and shallow performance. Jakub compares himself to Galileo and Copernicus—visionaries exiled for their truth-telling.

Throughout his journey, he collides with others who challenge or expose his

worldview. His girlfriend, Lenka, calls from Prague to accuse him of hypocrisy—scorning materialism while living off grants, advocating nonviolence while training in Krav Maga. Their argument escalates into a breakup. Later, a receptionist named Beatrice recounts her own history of systemic sexual abuse, mocking Jakub's intellectual crisis as a privileged man's luxury. Their lives intersect painfully but incompletely.

Jakub wanders through Dublin's decaying infrastructure—razor-wire fences, rusted train wheels, empty ports—and fixates on a childhood memory: a submerged, broken railway wheel beneath a bridge in Prague. It becomes a symbol of his inner world—beautiful, broken, and self-destructive. In a pivotal scene, he returns to the conference center and is denied entry for not displaying his badge. A celebrity scientist mocks him, and Jakub walks away rather than conform.

In bars, alleyways, and abandoned places, Jakub debates students, workers, and strangers. Some see him as a madman; others admire his clarity. Through it all, he grieves the decline of science, art, and truth under a collapsing postindustrial civilization. War is normalized, education hollow, and even scientific discovery has become a commodity.

Yet amid the bitterness, the novel ends on a fragile note of hope. Sitting beside the river, hungover and lost, Jakub remembers advice from more pragmatic colleagues: survive within the system, do real work in secret. He considers that others like him might still exist—scientists committed to truth, working quietly within the machinery. He decides to stop drinking, return to his hotel, and submit his paper again—not for glory, but for the idea itself.

Portrait of a Scientist in a Postindustrial Society is not a traditional novel. It's a furious, sprawling, often abrasive monologue—a howl from the edge of reason. Through Jakub's self-lacerating voice, Pánek crafts a searing portrait of the modern intellectual: alienated, brilliant, paranoid, sometimes hypocritical, but still fighting to believe in science as a force for truth in a corrupted world.

English sample

translated by Bruce Bybee

The celebrity screamed, "What are these provocations you're throwing at me?"

"Yeah, exactly," the guard nodded. "I told him twice already that he doesn't look right, his badge isn't visible, and I didn't let him through; and those ripped jeans of his, that t-shirt, and that filthy jacket. Oh yeah, and he's got something with his hands; some kind of injury; and when he talks to you up close, you'll smell the booze; yuck. He's probably hammered too; likely why he's babbling about, you know...?"

I defended myself: "And what's a guy with a gun doing here, in a conference center (I pointed at the guard)? It's completely ridiculous: take the forum for instance, the very place we're standing in right now, originally a word from the old, ancient Greeks for a space of free & public gatherings, public polemic and discussion, and today it's about presenting the latest scientific discoveries, which belong to everyone in the world! The lay public funds science with taxes, so it should have the freedom to enter and attend the conference, that's why this, i.e., this exact spot (I pointed), is called a forum; instead, we've got armed guards, entrance for a hefty fee and with a sign hanging 'round your neck, in a white shirt and pressed trousers; or maybe a full-on suit, huh? Are we scientists or politicians? Meanwhile, I haven't slept or eaten in four days, I'm just drinking, mentally at rock bottom, 'cause I'm powerless, 'cause they killed my discovery and probably want to steal it from me, even though what they killed is still 750k ly away (I pointed towards my cloud through the glass roof of the conference center), otherwise our entire nearby universe, incl. our own and neighboring galaxies, wouldn't even function! And they're gonna kill it! We've been observing the structure of our galactic surroundings with telescopes, both ground-based and on satellites 'round the Earth, for centuries, and no, no, it does not behave according to current, established, standard theories, and no one had an explanation for it until we, i.e., me and my co-authors, came along, and still, they killed it and rudely cussed us out that they won't allow it, that it's wrong, that we're liars, that they don't like it! OK, they don't burn people at the stake for revolutionary discoveries anymore! Except now it continues by other means, where instead of fire, we have a one-sided anonymous peer review process for scientific publishing. And now, to top it all off, a prominent and famous scientist (I pointed at her, i.e., the celebrity, frowning and glaring at me) is going to explain to me in one sentence that it's all fine, for god's sake!"

The celebrity frowned, "What's this ideology you're throwing at me?"

I didn't back down: "Sure, keep on repeating that the armed security at the conference center is here 'cause of the homeless, the terrorists, and others, so they don't intrude, and I'll tell you, with complete logic, that OK, yes, it's partly 'cause of them, but mainly 'cause of business, 'cause only where there's business, are there weapons, and here, it's already approaching the kinda business run by those who start wars and created terrorism, various people, e.g., owners of currency-issuing banks and multinational corporations, who you don't know and will never meet, the ones you catch fleeting glimpses of in the media, news that pops up and disappears, one of the vilest & most insidious phenomena of our (modern) world, as a device to manipulate the public and to thereby achieve & maintain power over it through fear & dread for their lives, i.e., basic, instinctive human reactions to mortal threat, and further through both mental and physical weakness, intentionally caused by an excess of passive and mentally undemanding entertainment through electronic media, consumerism, hyper-processed foods, and relative comfort. Yes, catching terrorists and driving out the homeless means public recognition, voters, and electoral victories, i.e., power, but not for politicians, they're mere pawns, who publicly, through democratic governance and laws, carry out what others create, i.e., the system of the modern world, and only those are the ones with power, the ones who spark revolutions, coups, wars, and pogroms in the struggle for power, they only care about power, they don't give a damn about climate change, global migration, the unequal distribution of the world's wealth, or pandemics, for them, these are just tools in their fight, they profit from them despite needing nothing more, just wanting more than others have, i.e., more power, so they secretly fund terrorism, suicidally carried out by mentally ill and fanatical individuals, as we occasionally catch glimpses of in media reports, the fact that innocent people die 'cause of it, in vile, treacherous ways, with no chance to defend themselves or escape, is a tool for them to manipulate the public and maintain obedience. Have you never once thought, what if there is no other way than having these sickly ambitious but simultaneously stupid people in power, real power, these celebrities of public and social life that the broad masses in their ignorance—caused, among other things, by a lack of access to scientific knowledge—uncritically admire and worship for their material wealth will always, by necessity, abuse rather than use scientific knowledge and render it counterproductive, and what if our work and ideas are therefore pointless and misguided...? That you'll never get anywhere, not to the old Celtic tower or the lighthouse, not to the sea or the port, just like you'll never reach freedom or a life without fear, when in our modern world we are left only with fences and walls topped with barbed wire, private property marked NO TRESPASSING, armed guards, cops, cameras, and EXIT ONLY signs, even here at a scientific conference in a conference center?"

The celebrity objected: "What is this paranoia you're throwing at me? Why are you dragging the general public into this, what do they have to do with science, man? This member of our security team might actually be right that you're drunk. Go get some sleep first, man, then come back. I refuse to continue this

conversation. The general public is, for understandable reasons, forbidden from entering the conference center, and that includes anyone who hasn't paid the participation fee; that's entirely justified. Please," she turned to the guard, "escort him out. You have my permission—as you can see on my conference badge (she gestured to her belly) (hanging there was her participant badge with her name and below it two wide stripes—a purple and a silver—indicating a keynote speaker and mentor, along with a brown stripe of a member of the conference's organizing committee), I have the authority to have any inappropriately behaving individuals removed from the conference center, and beyond that we have a conference code of conduct and the center's house rules in place. Please." She pointed at me.

The guard—I couldn't believe my eyes—put his hand on his holster and stepped towards me; I stared at him wide-eyed and yelled: "Have you lost your mind? We're at a conference center! You're seriously gonna pull a gun on me—here, of all places? No way! I'm not going anywhere!"

The celebrity stepped in: "Wait, wait, wait, we do not want a scandal (it's bad for business). You (she turned to the guard) please take your hand off that holster before someone notices. And you (she pointed at me) stop arguing about the obvious; wear your participant badge visibly, i.e., around your neck, like any normal scientist; your discovery does not exempt you from your obligation to follow proper conduct at the conference center as anywhere else. Yes, yes, you may have made a groundbreaking discovery, I'm not ruling that out; but you must understand that anything of that sort shakes up standard, established theories, and that generates resistance; surely you understand that, don't you? You're causing problems with that alone; and now this; have some sense, man."

I defended myself: "No, I won't wear that 'round my neck. I'm neither a sheep nor a walking billboard. If I followed the rules, I'd never have made the kinda discovery I did."

"Yes—and just as easily, you could become a thief, a murderer, or a terrorist, and defend it by claiming you made (she waved her hand to the sky) some kind of discovery! Judging by how you behave, they probably rightly, completely justifiably refused to publish your discovery. No: you, like everyone else, even e.g., me, a prominent scientist with achievements, must follow the rules."

"For god's sake, surely you understand that this is about which rules; as a scientist, you should know it's necessary to distinguish, not to see things black and white. And we are scientists here and this is about science; although...I'm not even sure about that anymore! Not even about which rules, since almost none of them actually work! Our social rules led to the creation of racism, terrorism, religious hatred, hooliganism, wars and their export; rules in science have led to its commercialization and conventionality, and thus to its partial

dysfunction. Our universe, e.g., does not behave according to our rules at all! It behaves completely differently! And my discovery is proof of the failure of our established rules. That's why you all oppose it so fiercely."

The celebrity frowned again: "What are these philosophical musings you're throwing at me? Philosophy has no place in the exact sciences, man!"

I buried my face in my hands; lamenting: "And that's what a scientific celebrity in astrophysics tells me! Do you even realize that nearly 100 years ago, our colleagues like Bohr, Pauli, Einstein, Heisenberg, and others already understood that their discoveries touch on things like the nature of human life and its meaning, and that it's up to them to interpret, i.e., philosophize, 'cause laypeople, incl. philosophers, can't understand the mathematical language of physics...? No, this makes no sense. No!"

I lifted my head, turned in silence, walked across the forum, and exited the conference center (through the EXIT ONLY door), making my way along the line of my colleagues, i.e., scientists in my field from 'round the world, waiting to enter the center. Every single one of them had a garishly colored conference participant badge hanging 'round their neck on a wide ribbon, covered in loud, colorful ads. Their line stretched all the way to the Liffey, c. 1 km.

They were looking me over: I had no badge hanging 'round my neck and a scuffed—but not filthy, as the guard had claimed—leather jacket and torn jeans.

It struck me: Jesus, it's exactly like when they used to punish me in kindergarten by taping my mouth shut and making me kneel in the corner because I talked during nap time and didn't want to sleep!

I told myself: "And yet I didn't do anything wrong: just discovered an intergalactic cloud with the mass of a small galaxy, still out there, just beyond our own galaxy in the direction of M31, about 750k ly away; it's there because it's determined by the laws of physics—it's simple, natural, and beautiful, otherwise it wouldn't work. But down here on Earth, it's as if completely different, nonsense laws apply, even though it's still the same physics, same universe, same energy, yet it's as if it wasn't like that at all!"

I walked along the line of my colleagues from 'round the world (trailing me with a silent gaze) all the way to that pretty, white, modern-styled bridge over the Liffey and crossed it; bought a bottle of whiskey at the nearest shop on the other side, made my way to my old spot on the riverbank across from the

conference center, and sat down there on a rusty white pipe cover; in despair, I didn't understand anything and had no idea what had just happened or what I was to do next.

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Ministry of Culture Czech Republic (gov.cz)



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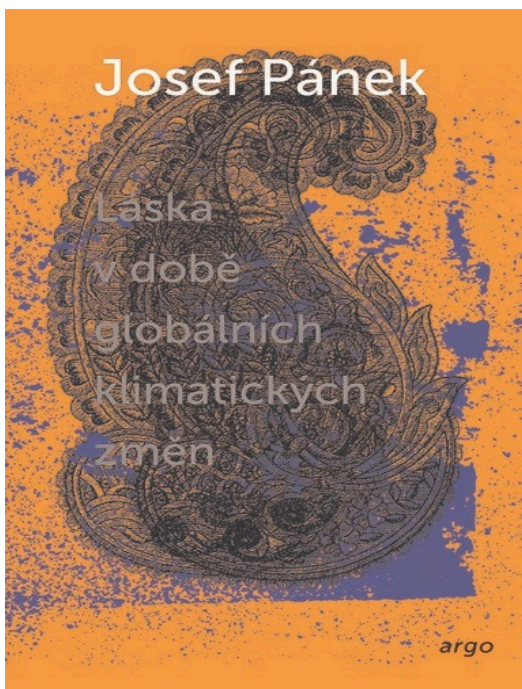
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ARGO HIGHLIGHTS LITERARY FICTION

Love in the Time of Global Climate Change

by **Josef Pánek**



We are all a little racist in this global village called Earth

In *Love in the Time of Global Climate Change*, Tomáš travels to Bangalore for a scientific conference – and finds himself lost in translation between continents, cultures, and his own inner selves. As he navigates the chaos of a globalized world, memories of a past love in Iceland resurface, forcing him to confront everything he thought he had left behind.

This is a novel about displacement, modern loneliness, and the invisible lines between East and West—told in a voice that is urgent, searching, and unmistakably real.

“Pánek’s novel disconcerts the reader with its linguistic abrasiveness and the self-destructive, self-centred approach of its main protagonist. It’s as agitated and intoxicating as the exotic city in which it takes place.”

— *novinky.cz*

“Pánek’s fascinating style makes his work unique among Czech and international prose dealing with expatriot themes.”

— *Respekt*

Josef Pánek (b. 1966) earned his master’s and PhD in Prague, then worked in Norway and Australia before returning to Czechia. He debuted with a short story collection, *The Opal Digger* (2013), and his second book, *Love in the Time of Global Climate Change* (2017), won the Magnesia Litera, Czechia’s highest literary honor, in 2018. The novel has been **sold to 12 countries**. His latest work is a portrait of a scientist undone by truth – and by a system that no longer wants to hear it.



Láska v době globálních klimatických změn 📅 February 2017 📖 pages 📄 samples EN/DE/FR

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Love in the Time of Global Climate Change by *Josef Pánek*

summary

The protagonist, Tomáš, travels to a conference in Bangalore. He is a man struggling to pull himself together after a divorce, a scientist forced by our hectic, globalised world to learn to work with others and suppress his individuality for the sake of research. A more or less chance encounter with an attractive Indian participant at the conference leads to a night of intense passion, both in terms of sex and conversation. While the ending may seem predictable, the author's playful treatment leaves it to the reader's imagination to decide what has really happened. But one ought not to dwell on the plot too much, since what is more important in *Love in the Time of Global Climate Change* is that Pánek's writing continues a tradition of Czech literature that started with Bohumil Hrabal and can be traced to more recent writers such as Emil Hakl. This pedigree is apparent in the author's relentless verbosity, story-telling for the sheer pleasure of story-telling, the verbal deluge sustained for pages on end, alternating between outright bragging and masochistic (self-)denigration. At the same time, Pánek's writing shows a kinship with writers such as Josef Škvorecký, particularly in the portrayal of life "elsewhere", i.e. outside the Czech environment.

Pánek's protagonist Tomáš is brilliant at ranting about the ways of the world, his job and the global academic establishment, with its impact factor journals and grant funding. He also relishes discussing and analysing the Czech national character and xenophobia, or pondering the various guises taken by racism in today's global village. His sarcastic comments often eschew political correctness: "There's a good reason why, before going to India, you're told that black females are dirty. Those who tell you this are the same people whose parents grew up during the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia." Despite this undiplomatic language, Tomáš suggests that racism is outmoded, that notions of homeland, nation and race are vestiges of past centuries. Pánek's character defies pigeonholing: he has lived in South Australia, his ex-wife is Colombian, one of his best friends is Chinese, and during the conference he goes drinking with a Hungarian and sleeps with an Indian woman. Can he still be regarded as being "just" Czech or is he more of a "European"? Tomáš is aware that he is doomed to remain an outcast, a loser, a psychologically deprived individual typical of this day and age. He doesn't really know where home is, since in our globalised era of globetrotting lifestyles people like Tomáš are more at home in hotels or various temporary abodes. And although he's not lacking in make it any-thing (or precisely because of that: take

your pick) he is ultimately discontented. Uprooted and unhappy with himself, he is left alone with his phobias and memories. The phobias prevent him from getting a proper night's sleep in India (because of the incessant noise and smog) or having a drink of water (for fear of falling ill). At the same time, he is annoyed by the contented and placid nature of the people of Bangalore who go about their business smiling and have found peace of mind in their karma. While he can't really communicate with the people he meets in India, he also has problems communicating with his exwife, who lives in Australia with their two-year-old son. He is dismayed to learn that the son's first word wasn't "Daddy" but "idiot", but he can never be sure if his ex-wife is telling the truth or not. Her sinister, spiteful messages only exacerbate his general sense of unease. And while globalisation facilitates physical contact, the constant connectedness also leads to misunderstandings, as people no longer listen and everything carries the same weight, whether it is fact or fiction. Everything unique is disappearing, erased by things that are shared. The combination of a homeless nomad with a mildly autistic commentator on world affairs creates an explosive mix. Pánek's character relishes in self-denigrating accusations, self-pity and nostalgic reminiscence. If it weren't for Tomáš' one-night stand, the book might offer just an interesting but one-sided look at our world and an individual in it, another example of what has become known as expat fiction. However what makes Pánek's book stand out is that he doesn't stop at taking his character on a journey to a distant place to open his eyes to reality. Halfway into the novella, he does something unexpected: loosened up by the "conference sex", Tomáš discovers in himself a dormant desire to recount stories that may seem trivial but are actually crucial. At this point, we are suddenly taken back to the 1990s and follow Tomáš as he hitchhikes his way through Iceland. A greater contrast between the permanently teeming Indian megalopolis and the quiet, deserted northern landscape would be hard to find. By acknowledging his nomadic condition and retrospectively making sense of things that happened over thirty years ago, he is able to find his own inner peace, akin to the karma of the Indian culture but which had eluded him hitherto. Admittedly, this sudden finding of peace doesn't last long, if for no other reason than Tomáš' propensity for irony and seeing everything as relative, especially the great, enduring notions such as love, truth, happiness and even, ultimately, replace with home. Readers should take note of this novella, which takes Czech literature into the European league despite an intentionally misleading title that may make it sound "unbearably heavy".

– Michal Jareš

Love in the Time of Global Climate Change by Josef Pánek

Translated by Mike Baugh

8

Then at the conference you don't see her all day.

Ok, just between us, it's not like you weren't looking for her, quite the opposite, but you never ran into her.

You just didn't.

And now imagine that I'm not you, and you aren't you, and it's all about you, and you're really sorry. You are. Imagine that, ok? So it's the brown woman, who your colleagues said is dark and stinks, and only cares about getting the hell out of India.

Ok.

You bump into her that night when everyone is heading to the opening dinner of the conference, when the buses rattle their way into the Indian Academy of Sciences. Jesus, those buses, it's like they're made out of rusted cans, they shudder and shake like they're alive, and you, like the other participants at the conference, come out just to hear what's making all the racket and confirm that you've never seen anything like it before in your life. You haven't. And they, the organizers, want you to get in, please go in, they tell you, flashing you the broadest and brightest smiles, and all of them have brown faces and speak to you in the most mellifluous English, and when you respond, hey, it's fine with me, man, you sound like you're operating a bandsaw. You see her the second you step onto one of the buses, because she's sitting in the first row and there's an empty spot right next to her, so you sit down and the blue and orange of her sari are as loud as the rusted-out jalopy, and you ask her, what do you do...?

And she tells you, protein allostery. Spatial conformation. Her doctoral thesis is on the relationship between protein function and allostery, etc.

You talk among the clamor of the engine, because the driver is grinding the gears and revving the engine, and the whole heap of tin cans shakes and in it she sits in her formal sari, and you just cannot shake the thought that the colors perfectly match the giant Fanta can you're sitting inside, and you saw her in that slum right behind Queen's Road, and you sit next to her on the black bench-seat right behind the driver who cannot reach the absurd and curved gearshift that goes almost to the ceiling, he can't touch it at all, but occasionally he'll kick it with a bare brown leg, but it doesn't help, the bus doesn't even move, and the driver, brown as a boot, kicks the ever-shaking shifter, and the engine roars in the tropical heat.

And you yell at her, why are you doing a Ph.D.?

Because, she tells you, I want to get the hell out of India.

And it's not like they didn't tell you, before you left for India, that the one thing women in India want is to get the hell out of India.

You tell her.

I know, she says. And you, because you are not from India, cannot appreciate what I have told you just now.

And it's not like you didn't do your doctorate 14 years ago just to get the hell out of the Czech Republic, so it's not weird to you.

You tell her.

And she tells you that she is not surprised.

And that surprises you, and you tell her.

And she shouts to you that she knows that your country is a formerly Communist country, so everyone must have wanted to get the hell out. And you ask her what she discovered that will get her the hell out of India, and she tells you that she discovered that the reason bacteria appear alive or not alive is the difference in conformation of a single protein, as if the bacteria can do whatever they want.

She tells you this in the rusty, shaking collection of tin cans, where you can see grass and trees flowering and ornate bushes through the rusty metal frames of the non-existent windows and in the non-existent doors, and you have it on the tip of your tongue what's so right about her, you want to tell her this revelation that it's like she's in a cage, but then it really hits you that the bus doesn't have doors and it doesn't have windows, and you realize that from this rusted and dangerous heap of cans, the likes of which you've never seen before, you can step out anytime, you don't have to ask if they can open the window for you or the doors, or if it's your turn, you can stay and keep going, or you can simply fall out, it's all up to you, and at the same time it's always at your own risk, and you realize that European buses are so air-tight it's unsafe, while here in this heap of cans you're as free as a bird – which is absurd since birds in the sky follow invisible paths – but instead you tell her, that's great, you must be famous.

She answers that yes, she is.

Yes what? you ask.

I am famous. I have a phenomenal list of publications. But – so what? Do I really have to say it...?

Say it, you say.

I am famous today but tomorrow I won't be, kiddo, so while I don't give a damn about fame, I need to use it while I've got it. For what? you ask, and she explains, For a good life, kiddo, and not like in that Europe of yours where everyone longs for fame but almost nobody gets it, and for the one that does it brings everything but happiness. You're 43, even though you look about ten years younger, and she tells you, I, same as you, kiddo, never forget that science is just something they push on intelligent and receptive people to keep them from digging into stuff they shouldn't dig into. You yell to yourself and you yell to her, And just how do you know that I know that...?

I looked up, she yells, your publications on the internet, and the bus moves like a sloshed collection of rusty cans from the relatively quiet grounds of the Indian Academy of Sciences onto a road where the cacophony, chaos, and smog of real Bangalore traffic instantly crashes through the non-existent doors and the non-existent windows of the bus, through the ragged holes in the rusty can, and you are sitting right at the doorway on the black bench-seat, and the asphalt speeding past the non-existent door mixes with the rosy Bangalore dust and the poisonous exhaust of Bangalore traffic, and she sits at the window and you try to peek down her sari to look at her breasts, but she notices and wraps the top-half of the sari around her shoulders and chest, hiding herself underneath it, and you tell her that you weren't staring because you're an asshole, the type of guy who would pay for an underage girl in an Indian brothel, or even her, but, Jesus, the complete opposite, you were just looking beneath the yards of colorful fabric for what you photographed five days ago at the half-collapsed gate at the entrance to the Alliance Française de Bangalore, which to you looked like the entrance to a garbage dump or a junk yard, when you saw how beautiful she is, and now you're scared, scared that her beauty is getting away from you by some detour, just like the beauty of the receptionist in your hotel, but which...? Which...? You ask yourself.

You have no idea what the detour is, none!

None!

And meanwhile, as you damn well know, it's just your genes, what you got without wanting it, without standing up and choosing them, you know that some racist, fascist, or neo-Nazi who bases everything on his genes, would laugh right in your face, without knowing what genes are, without knowing what he bases everything on, without having any clue about the relationship between genes and instincts, but you know it, you know all about it,

everything there is to know – molecular genetics is your field – but right now, all that science of yours, what, is it doing for you?

What?

Meanwhile if a white girl, some bleached out English girl, a freckled Australian, or a pale Swede sat down next to you in the bus, you'd already have an erection, thinking of nothing but casual sex, because the three-quarters of a year before you traveled to India has been a dry spell.

So.

But something doesn't fit here, no! your mind screams out, but you have no idea what, and at the same time, you catch yourself praying that your own genes will betray you, as if you had gotten it without wanting it and being able to choose it, but incessantly, without even thinking about it, without thinking about it at all, you're looking at her sari trying to find the shape of her body underneath, like you don't want to even listen to them, those glorious genes of yours, which you didn't choose, which you would like to fight to the death in this stinking, rusting bus, as if you could suppress them, change them, and you remember clear as day – a simile that doesn't work at all in Bangalore, which under its veil of smog, its *ghoonghat* of smog, appears as if dirty, faded shades have been drawn before everyone's eyes, to the point that when you took her photo around midnight at the entrance to the Alliance Française de Bangalore, when she wore just an ordinary sweater and ordinary jeans, there was still some streetlight left and the glare reflecting off a nearby bonfire, rank and toxic as it was, appeared so gorgeous to you, and now you bitterly regret deleting her picture, and you cannot help thinking about how when you lived in Australia for three years, you flew back to the Czech Republic to see your family for Christmas, to the place where you were born and raised and learned your mother tongue, and you told your best friend from childhood that your girlfriend in Australia was from Bogota, from Colombia, and he said, ughh, you're dating some dirty brown indian, and – really, literally – he turned up his nose, despite never even seeing her, and you were so shocked at his way of thinking that you just stared at him with your mouth agape, for your colleagues at the university, your good friends, your girlfriend and future wife, were 75% Chinese and Colombian (6), one was Mexican with an Indonesian wife, and Lawrence Lau was from Singapore, and others were South American, so you knew that it's not just the age of multimedia, electronic communication and global climate change, but also the age of global emigration, and you knew it because you were living it, and had already known for a long time that racism isn't just nonsensical morally, but was already technically impossible, that it's technically impossible to live day-to-day without Indians and Chinese when a sixth of the world is Indian and another sixth is Chinese, and every big city in the world has a Chinatown, and three of your best friends were Chinese, whom you liked to tease on occasion about communism in their country, because you knew it just as well as them, and then on occasion you'd feel bad about it, and on occasion they'd go out for a beer with you because communism had brought you together – your past and their present, until they moved to Australia – and now the thought-process of your best friend from childhood shocked you so much that you didn't even tell him that your girlfriend from Bogota isn't brown, that she isn't indian, that her dad is Irish and that her mom is German, that her grandfather is Irish and her grandmother is German, that her great-grandfather is Irish and her great-grandmother is German, that her grandparents sailed to Latin America for opportunity, just like you flew to Norway and Australia, just like your girlfriend and future-wife left Colombia to study in the USA and Australia, so you went home drunk to your parents' house, where you were born and raised, and where your brother lives with his family, and you tell him, ok, yeah, your girlfriend is Colombian, and he gets mad and forbids you to be with her, and you say, what are you, nuts? she's beautiful, she's smart, and he tells you, and I quote, "You're not bringing any Machu Picchu gypsy into this family!" And you stand there staring at him with mouth agape, this is your brother, and you have a grandfather whose mother was killed in front of him by the Nazis, and when you think about this, you burst out laughing until you fall onto the floor, and your older brother tells you, You didn't just come home drunk, you came home from Norway and Australia a fucking idiot! And you were a professor of molecular genetics at the University of Queensland in Brisbane,

Australia, and you laughed and laughed because the absurdity of the racism was topped off by the paradox, which you didn't even try to explain to your brother, that your girlfriend and future-wife is just as white as he is, that she is from Colombia (not Peru!) but has Irish and German blood going back at least three generations, fluently speaks three major languages – Spanish (her mother tongue), English, and German – and taught you English, your second language, and that you didn't speak a single word the rest of the visit, Czech disgusted you, you never wanted to utter another word in that language of ignorant hicks, and you just counted down – in your mind – the days until you could fly back to Australia, and you still didn't understand that the place you were born had long ceased to be your home, no, you only realize it years later when you return to the Czech Republic from Australia, and you will never feel at home there, even though your wife told you exactly that in Australia, over and over, and it had no effect, and she left you, but more about that later, and now you, in Bangalore, India, you already know what she wanted to tell you, and the only thing that is important to you, that you want so badly, is for this Indian woman riding beside you to arouse you, but inside you, in your very depths, nothing is aroused, nothing is happening at all.

Then it occurs to you: What if it's because she's dark?

What if they're right? You think.

What if your best friend from childhood, your older brother, the neo-Nazis, the racists, the fascists, what if they're all right, and you with all your science, your genes, and instincts can just go fuck yourself.

And she tells you that from the entire conference she only really liked today's morning lecture about how to extract meaning from specialized literature. She tells you that the morning lecture is proof of science's ineffectiveness. It shows, she tells you, that all over the world science, 50% of the time, is bogged down with bias, from group interests and autotelism, it shows that it's been a long time since science strayed off course from the objective world, that it just follows the flow of money, just like everything in the world, and that includes art – the romance and magic of science is dead and gone.

I know, you say. And sincerely and dreamily you gaze out the non-existent windows of the bus, out the non-existent doors of the bus, through which the stench of exhaust penetrates, and you breathe with the one part of your lung that has remained undamaged, and the pink and ever-present dust from the streets of Bangalore flow around you, and the din, and she bares her soul to you.

Meanwhile if some pimply Polish girl, or a Czech or Hungarian, or a freckled English girl or Australian, since you haven't had any action for the year before this trip to India, the dry spell has been a full-on drought, well, if any of one of them were sitting next to you, you'd be thinking of nothing but casual sex, and the objectivity of science and the beauty of art would interest you not one bit.

Now the bus rumbles into the campus of Bangalore University on the outskirts of the city.

She gets up and gets out, and you get up and get out, but right before you do, through the non-existent doors of the bus and through the non-existent windows of the bus a gust of fresh air blows in and you suspiciously inhale, then you take in more and more, the campus is covered with grass and dew, you're far from the city-center on the outskirts, and for the first time in your life you delight in breathing, for the first time you savor the taste of the air, you could just inhale and exhale until you die, and meanwhile she's waiting for you in front of the bus, and you breathe and breathe and you can't inhale enough, and still you keep trying, you keep trying to make out the shape of her ass under that sari, and she notices and she tangles herself up in that heap of fabric even more, and more and more buses arrive at the campus, rumbling and shaking they stop and go quiet one after another, and through the non-existent doors appear more participants from the conference, and you ask her if she would like to take a walk with you...? Yes, she tells you, I would, and you still can't catch your breath, and she asks you, what are you doing...? You explain, I can't breathe in enough. And she asks you, why's that? And you explain, for the first time in five days I'm

breathing fresh air; she laughs and wonders, why's that? And you ask, can't you feel it? No, she answers you. And you ask her, do you ever go out to the five-meter high stone fence topped with broken glass that surrounds the campus, but not to just look, but to breathe...? And she tells you, yeah, of course, see we're different, I'm from India – I'm just teasing you. And she tells you, get used to this because it's the future.

What's the future? You're scared.

This, she tells you. This that's behind that wall – one day it will be the entire world.

Jesus Christ, you say.

And you better get ready for it.

Jesus Christ, you say.

But don't worry, she tells you, you've got a five-day lead.

And you?

365 x 26 days.

And you ask her, where do you want to get the hell out of India to, when you get your doctorate?

To the US, she says.

Why there?

Because, she tells you, I already have a job there—for part of the year. I mean I am famous after all. Unofficially, I have the rank of an associate professor.

And then she's quiet.

You just walk. You have the perfectly watered lawn beneath your feet.

Then she says, Why don't you tell that none of it's going to work out...?

Because, you tell her, you have to figure that out yourself.

It's just, she says, that I already know that, because what's behind that stone fence – and she points to it – I'll never rid myself of it. Am I right?

And you tell her, yeah.

Yeah.

Same for you?

The same for you, how you never rid yourself of your older brother, of the racists, of your best friend from childhood, of the neo-Nazis, of your first mother tongue. And what good did it do that you learned a new mother tongue, and you can do accents in English? What good did it do that you can speak English like a sailor and then like a professor? Still, it'll always, always, always just be your second mother tongue. It's the same principle, you tell her, which brought me back from Norway and Australia and Chile, although I had university positions in each of those places and learned how to conduct scientific research, but now I'm in the Czech Republic at the Academy of Sciences punished for being a good scientist, well, better than the world average, same as under the Communist regime when I refused to join the Communist party, because, you tell her, one of the greatest paradoxes in life is that the worse the misery, the stronger it binds you to it, it's impossible to explain, but it works that way 100% of the time – and now you point – and what is behind that wall is awful. If I had to choose between communism, which I lived under for 23 years, and that – hell, I don't know.

But I know, she says.

You know what? you ask.

That it's easy, she answers, to explain.

You ask, how?

It's because you have no idea what misery is.

What? you ask.

Because despite studying at university under communism, you still think that misery was your Communist regime. You still think that misery is beneficial because it throws obstacles in front of you. You think that either you surmount them because you are strong enough, or are crushed by them because you're weak. Still – even when you're here inside the campus with me looking out past the wall with its barbed wire and broken glass and the soldiers at the entrance – you naively believe that you can run from misery. You're still mistaking misery for the aggressive consumerism of your safe comfortable Europe. You still think that your older brother is racist, your best friend from childhood is a neo-Nazi, and that

your mother tongue is repulsive. And despite all that, on day 1 in Bangalore, you can't even buy bread.

How do you know that?

Ha, she says, I know. Look, even though I live in the USA half the time, I'm not the one who can't manage to buy water in India. Who's suffocating in India. Who wanders into an ordinary Indian neighborhood and thinks that he's entered a slum. Who's never seen an Indian slum in his life, and can't even imagine one. Who had to photograph a girl in jeans his first day in Bangalore to keep from crying.

I didn't cry.

Ok, she says, who would have died of hunger if the hotel didn't send him room service.

And you laugh.

You say, and you don't even know that I couldn't even get to the conference.

And she laughs and asks, really?

No. And you don't even know that the hotel had to send someone to the airport for me.

Yeah?

Yeah. Maybe there will be a shortage in education. Maybe there will be a miracle in education in India.

You know full well, she tells you, that there won't be.

Why not?

And she explains to you, that everyone can get an education in India.

And it's on the tip of your tongue why the campuses of the universities in Bangalore, all you've seen so far, are all found behind high stone walls and why soldiers guard them, and why the castellated walls are topped with broken glass, but you manage to swallow it down in time.

And she explains to you that a €50,000 education in India costs 60,000 rupees (about €1,000).

You can get a scholarship, she tells you, but the majority do not.

Your family can support you, she says, but most cannot.

And the most absurd thing, she says, is that you can't work while you study.

You're surprised, why's that?

Because at Indian universities you have mandatory attendance, you have one single time to take an exam, and that's it. Otherwise, she adds, the level of education in India is very high.

Traditionally, you add.

Traditionally, she replies.

And it's on the tip of your tongue – if that's not the reason – why the campuses of Indian universities are surrounded by walls and patrolled by armed guards, but you manage to swallow it down in time.

And that's the reason, she tells you, why the campuses of Indian universities are surrounded by walls and patrolled by armed guards, and why you're shit out of luck if you don't have money.

And in the end she tells you again, since you're not from India, you cannot appreciate what I've just told you.

You don't know how, but you wind up in the university library. It's beautiful. The library has glass walls from the floor to the ceiling, and the building is circular, and you see the sun setting, you're in the Indian tropics and soon the moon will come out and present itself to you from an angle you've never seen it at before, which you tell her, and she tells you, well try not to piss yourself, kiddo, and you ask her, aren't you from India, don't you look out past that stone fence way too often...? And she tells you, yeah, I do.

It's late and you're alone in the library.

Yeah, well.

And now, if there were the chance, you wonder if you could kiss her, if you could do it.

And now, if there were the chance, you ask yourself if you could caress her breasts, if you could do it.

And you feel... nothing.

And now, if there were the chance, to touch her face, stroke her hair, could you do it?

There's a reason they told you over and over, before you went to India, that brown girls smell.

There's a reason they told you over and over, before you went to India, that brown girls are dirty.

They told you this, the children of those who grew up under the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia.

Those Czech and Moravian neo-Nazis.

And you, in all the five days you've been in Bangalore, you haven't seen the people not smiling at each other, haven't seen them yelling at each other, pushing each other in the street, punching each other, and then last night when you came back to the hotel, traffic was backed up at an intersection, and all the drivers, including the drivers of public buses and tuk-tuks, were working on the car that had broken down and wasn't even blocking traffic but had been dragged off to the side of the intersection, but the intersection was blocked by the drivers kibbitzing and playing mechanic and their abandoned buses and cars, and their passengers just waited and chatted, and the scene was softened by the haze from the exhaust. And when you started talking to the tuk-tuk driver, you told him that in the five whole days you've been in Bangalore, you haven't seen people getting pissed off with each other, cursing, shouting, fighting, and shoving each other.

The driver answered you over his shoulder, you would see that, sir, just 7 kilometers outside Bangalore.

Wait, what?

Fights, stabbings, murder.

And the driver weaved his way between the traffic of Bangalore like he was enjoying a game of Russian roulette, the whole time flashing a broad and brilliant smile at you over his shoulder.

No wonder the campuses of Indian universities surrounded by gates topped with barbed wire and broken glass and patrolled by armed guards, just like she told you.

And now in the library, you tell yourself, no, she isn't turning you on at all, you couldn't even bring yourself to kiss her if the chance arose, to even touch her, etc., and under her sari you can't even make her out, i.e. her ass, her breasts, why the hell do the women even wear those? And at the gate of the Alliance Française de Bangalore, which reminded you most of the entrance to a dump, a junkyard, or some ruins, you took her picture just because she was wearing completely normal, boring jeans and a sweater, the 1 photo you've taken in your life, and it's just coincidence that she was in it, you tell yourself, and now you quickly say goodbye, it was nice meeting you, you tell her, but I should finally get back to the conference I came all this way for and finally meet up with my friends.