

Biography: Inga Žolude (born 1984) is a Latvian prose writer. She studied English literature at the University of Latvia, and upon receiving the Fulbright scholarship attended Southern Illinois University in the USA (2008 - 2009). In 2015, she obtained her PhD. Žolude is a member of the Latvian Writers' Union since 2010. Her works have been translated into numerous languages.

Synopsis: *Materia Botanica* was written as a sequel to the novel *Warm Earth*, picking up exactly where *Warm Earth* left off—just after its protagonist Daniel is in an accident. In *Materia Botanica*, Daniel wakes up in the hospital after the accident and finds a letter from his ex-girlfriend, Kira, and their son. He decides to return to them. He leaves his family home once again, a decision with which the rest of his family—especially his current partner, Voo, and his sister, Nelly, to whom he is tied with strange and intimate strings—are not happy. Nevertheless, he goes back to Kira and their son, and their reunion renews their bonds. But their new idyllic life is interrupted, first by Kira’s pregnancy with their second child, and then by the arrival of Nelly, who is too dependent on Daniel. The strange intimacy between brother and sister flourishes once more, threatening to ruin his newly rebuilt family life. However, Daniel searches for a way out, often finding refuge in nature as he immerses himself in botany, but at times his immersion is too deep, as Daniel starts to think of himself as truly one with nature. He embodies the metaphor of a family tree, with its roots, branches, fruit, and seeds. Captivating are the unusual plants and their manifestation in the novel, both within Žolude’s language and in the mind of Daniel.

Materia Botanica manages to resolve the conflicts in Daniel’s family, who were the main focus in *Warm Earth*, and turns the spotlight on Daniel’s life in a continuation of his personal and intimate path of existential pursuit. But the narrative does give voice to the other characters, as they reflect on events in their diary entries, giving readers a close and intimate view into each of their minds.

Excerpt

1

Him or me. Me.

Him or me? Asked Albert. Me, Nelly answered.

By "me" she meant *me*. So she had picked me. I didn't know that, I didn't know anything, since at the time I was – to use the medical term – in a coma. More accurately, I had already come out of the coma, but not out of the hospital, and no one knew if I ever would. That is, if I'd ever be able to leave on my own strength and if I would ever walk again. But I could still see. That was important. That is the most important. My hearing had also been spared, but I didn't admit that to everyone. If this "him or me" conversation had happened in my presence, I could have just as easily made them think that I couldn't hear them. Honestly though, at first I spoke only with Nelly. I asked her how it happened.

What? You mean – it? She asked.

I mean... it.

She thought I already should have known how and why it happened. She wasn't even there.

No one was there, only Voo.

The "him or me" conversation happened while we were still in the hospital, when everyone knew that I could hear and could walk. At present I was back home and each time I could walk farther and farther. I hobbled calmly all the way down the hall, then just as calmly

continued through the yard. I cut a dangerously sharp exit through the far fence with a pair of pliers, as I could no longer pull myself over it. On the other side of the fence I sat down and looked back. A different world.

They live in such a narrow world.

Somehow I managed to prop myself up and go back.

2

Her or me. Her.

Her or me, she asked. Her, I answered.

Nelly made me choose between her and... Kira.

Sometimes I couldn't even work out how we arrived at this choice.

The thing was that since I'd come to from my weightless condition – that's what I used to call it – the connection between me and Voo had been disrupted, and nothing could make it new again. We were on two different planets. If they came close to each other, they'd annihilate each other. Sometimes I looked at her with pity. I watched secretly as she dressed, and her habits annoyed me, her unconstrained, even simple motions. I don't know how I hadn't yet told her that. That and so much more. In those moments I remembered that not long before I was in the hospital pretending to be deaf, and immediately I turned away – I no longer saw nor heard her. Other times her well-intended caresses flooded me

with warmth from the tips of her fingers. Still even then I didn't entirely believe in myself, these seemed to me to possibly be nothing more than distant and fading memories.

Kira appeared as if from the heavens. From the beautiful anthracite, pyrite colored heavens, where rouge-coloured clouds eddied, sprouting like roses. Through which a bird, content in his own solitude, flew in and out with such wide open wings that for a moment it might be mistaken for an airplane. Countless times I'd taken such planes, countless times I wasn't a bird either.

Maybe on that day I'd imagined that I was a bird. That's how and why it happened.

But that's not how and why it happened, I made it happen. I made myself jump, maybe to slide into heaven.

Yes, of course! More like a knife! Thickly and with finality it stabbed.

I wasn't even in control of myself. All kinds of things control us, but I wasn't in control of myself. Here's how it could have gone: I definitely said something like "Darling Voo, come, let's go look at the waterfall." In that moment I was even in control of her. And then I let go of her hand (if they'd been joined) and walked purposefully forward, stepping over the guardrail, I was absolutely and completely not in control of myself, I made myself continue walking forward until there was no longer a foundation and I didn't grab onto the streams of water.

Perhaps Voo saw me not stopping, and lurched after me, clutching her belly, but it was too late. Later she ran back for the others, but I was no longer there. They stood carefully at the abyss and reasoned.

They wailed.

The noise of the water swallowed their lamentations.

That's how it could have all gone.

But now it was like this – I don't fly and I can barely walk, it would be better for me to stay in one place all the time. Like a hunk of wood.

I might feel good only in the company of similar one-leggeds. How could I assemble those cripples around me?

Only angels come.

They send letters.

A letter from Kira came in my name, but didn't get to see it. Strange, something happens, and everyone around you imagines that they can start to screen your mail, and only bring to the hospital the ones they deem most important, the ones that wouldn't upset me further. That's what happened with Kira's letter. And the tucked-inside addendum from Gilles. It's possible they held a family meeting over its delivery, discussed what to do with it, even

Albert – how could he not! – participated with his paint-stained fingers. The letter was passed hand to hand, slid over the table, pages jumbled out of order, the carelessly torn envelope lost in their haste. After the debate, the pages were tossed onto the table, since no one truly owned them, and before lunch, Sally gathered them, folded them up, and tucked them under the weight of a crystal nut dish. The one from which I always plucked out the macadamia nuts (*Macadamia integrifolia*) first; when they were gone, then I ate the Brazilian nuts (*Bertholletia excelsa*), etc.

When they brought me home from the hospital, the house had been rearranged so that the dish was no longer there. I would have paid it notice had I known it contained a letter addressed to me, but I didn't know the letter had been sent. I had come back, (the doctors had returned me to among the living), and the very least I knew was how I had to live.

The first few days, for about a week, they let me be capricious. My whims were to avoid engaging in conversation, it was made unequivocally clear that they weren't to give me any help walking, and more or less leave me alone, and that Voo shouldn't come near me.

We slept in one bed, I balanced on my edge, she – on hers. There were abysses on both sides of the bed, and the most unsurpassable one was there in the middle.

Sometimes it seemed to me like a water reservoir full of stagnant water, thickened in dregs like porridge, plants preserved there in its aspic – you couldn't tell if they were alive or not. Its surface marred by flies and other insects.

But beyond the fence, where I withdrew into my solitude, butterflies flitted in pairs, alighted on sparse leaves, poorly supported with the sap of life, joined at the rear end and fertilized each other. Myriad leaves sparkled in the prickly hot rays of the sun. It was that kind of feeling. Something prickled me too. I didn't know what. Later I returned to this moment and believed that it was Kira's letter that gnawed at my innocent ignorance. As if it were calling to me from my ignorance of its existence.

It prickled me at night too.

It was quite a dull pain in my leg that passed only after medication, even a gulp of water I drank down bit poisonously at my throat, prickled Voo's choking, somber presence, the nape of her neck in the dark. And then still that dream.

I'm standing on the train platform, the train arrives, I get into the wagon next to Kira, she has beautiful breasts, big expensive jewels, she kisses me, I kiss her, she closes the door, we make love right there.

I'm enduring abstinence like a man.

I'd forgotten that I'm a man. That's how I've been classified.

Maybe that's the reason for this vision. I don't want to fuck Voo in the present, so I'm fucking Kira in the past. Suddenly I remember everything sensually.

I can't get to sleep all night. I watch how darkness fades, how the light, bubbling, floods the room inch by inch and spreads itself out, drawing in the remnants of dawn and illuminates everything.

3

In the beginning I touched her platonically. Nelly didn't even notice. They thought that I was getting better, I'd started to be in her proximity more and more. Our eternal faith. She came with me through the cut in the fence. Our secrets.

With her, I could walk even farther. And I always returned to the dream. That I was making love. Nelly spoke, but in my mind I was undressing a woman, her breath in the distance, I shuddered, she shuddered.

The innocent walks began to wear me down. Bored me. Nothing happened that I was craving for. But Albert started to call her back and didn't let her leave, so that she could serve him, close up the tins of paint and wash the brushes.

During those times I roamed about in solitude. I hugged the trunks of trees, pressed close to them, tightly and strongly, held their hands, interweaving my fingers with their branches. I stood like that among them under the warm day's sunlight, almost melting us together. At some point I felt compelled to plead with them to let me go, and when I limped back home, the windows were lit and it was already dark.

Nelly started to speak at first, come to me, Albert couldn't forbid her – all of them in the room – mother, father... Voo glided unnoticed along the walls, closing the curtains, but I noticed how her glance tugged its sightlines over me.

Albert had become nervous, seemingly because of his exhibition. Some curator from California was there for the week hunting, somehow they met, he got to see Albert's paintings and wanted to stage an exhibition.

When he was home, Kira's letter stood under the crystal dish, visible right there with the photos she chose to include of Gilles – going to sleep every year on the night of his birthday. In one of these monochromatic images Gilles was missing his front teeth. As Albert pulled his paintings into plain sight, the curator noticed the photographs. Only once he had drawn attention to them did the others intuit that they were postcards, not just printed photographs. The verso of the cards mentioned an exhibition where the images had been displayed.

- Your girlfriend? – The curator meant Kira.

Albert was confused, he saw that this little photograph of a child had captivated the curator, even though none of them had paid any attention to them.

Some child.

When I finally (much, much later) got the letter, the photographs immediately drew me in.

Albert faltered – Not exactly...

- Fantastic work. – The curator again spoke of the photos. – I didn't think she was still producing. – He flapped the little cards.

- She's a family... Nelly interjected, - a friend. A family friend! Isn't that how you say it? –

Nelly laughed.

He wanted Kira's return address, but the envelope had been thrown out. Albert bit his fingers, grimy with paint (they were always like this, even when the color wasn't obvious), worried that the deal over his exhibition would be blown because of this little bastard, the pictures the mother had taken of the boy and flung shamelessly into their mailbox. What did she want out of it? Albert was annoyed by all of it.

At bedtime, he spoke little to Nelly, and then only grumbled – her family had almost destroyed his career.

- My family?! – Nelly shrieked sharply. – I hate her for turning up like this too. What does she want – to take Daniel away?

A horrible jealousy and reunion exploded that night in their sheets, everyone heard it ambivalently. That was the last time they made love. My night was peaceful, in the darkness on the floor lay a bluish worm of corridor light that had wriggled in from behind the door.

The next morning Nelly flew to me, she surely would have told me everything, if not for that conversation behind the door: "Him or me!" Albert had said something like that, afterwards Nelly swam into my room, as gentle as a carp, releasing the deepest darkest terrors, hers and mine, spreading a cubic meter of my lonely nighttime reflections over our anxieties through the door, she had brought oxygen. Albert didn't come in, he was already gone by

the time Nelly had opened the door. So then theoretically I wasn't a witness to it all and theoretically I didn't know anything that had happened.

But now I lay on Nelly and Albert's bed, completely naked under their crumpled grayish covers that I'd gathered like a used napkin or crumpled up note.

What was written there.

I want you.

I want you. I want you.

Don't shiver.

I was shivering. I know that it's warm, yet I was shaking like the leaves of a *Populus tremula*. Nelly didn't know that I would be here when she came back. May she come back soon. May she come back before someone else. No one knew that I was here. I shivered completely silently, and an enormous chill came over me, and I peered under the covers, and I saw my damaged leg lying there, imagining how I would move it, when I stretched it between her legs. Yet she still didn't come.

I lay my cheek on the bed and glanced around the room laterally, my arm fell down and I walked my fingers over the floor, where I noticed several of Nelly's hairs, plucked out over a fortnight like tapeworms, then my fingertips felt a piece of paper, and I pulled it from under the bed.

It was the letter from Kira. Here were Gilles' photographs.

My eyes still transfixed on this discovery, I had gotten out of bed, dressed and left the sheets untidy behind me. In the kitchen I realized I didn't have my cane. Not very kindly I made Sally go look for it in Nelly and Albert's chambers, where she retrieved it.

I threw open the screen door, it thudded behind me as I rowed over the yard as best I could, raising the dust, blades of grass entangling themselves around my cane, and stumbling, I nearly ran face first into the wires of the punched-out fence.

I lay on the earth, I cried on the eroded soil, and the sun blinded me so much that I almost couldn't read.

That's where Nelly found me. I tried to hit her with my cane when she wanted to pick me up. I'll split your head open like a cocoa bean! – I shouted. And she wasn't afraid. She deserved more for her treason. Did she think it was treason too?

Him or me?

Him or me? Answer!

Like that, in the hospital behind the door, under the blue glass light Albert had pressed her against the plasterboard walls.

I pulled myself home on my hands. I didn't want to get up, I wanted to be disabled. Let them see what they'd driven me to.

You, you yourselves shoved me!

I would have shouted.

But no one appeared, no one dared show themselves. They had all been on the same side.

Nelly had tried to explain something to me. The disturbance would have come at the detriment to my recovery. They had succeeded in protecting me from the disturbance, but I was subject to it now anyway.

Now I knew, clearly, that the continuation could only happen there. It wouldn't have been possible anywhere else. I chose to leave, to head there, where I was called.