

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: Daniel - the central character of the novel exists in front of constant choices between time and space, reality and imagination and between two women – Nelly and Vu. The opportunities to choose resemble an endless game, but within the game itself – will a choice always exist? A courageous story about the nature of incest. Instead of admiring the detail, it digs deep. The author has attempted to pierce the seemingly flirtatious veil of taboo and present a story cleverly resisting bringing the naive 'for and against' of physical love to the front (while marginalised, descriptions of these are as colourful and lively as the text of the whole novel); instead she uncovers the deeper and much more painful reason of loneliness and the monsters it creates – the lack of soulful warmth and a yearning towards warmth of the earth. One could describe it as gravitation, but in fact it is warmth that keeps us attached to the ground. It is exactly the warmth that lets us be, makes us be with one another, and makes us hold one another. So we live – keeping warm.

Excerpt

So how is it now? How are things with Albers? According to Nellija, he is a person with beautiful ideas and sweet, deep thoughts. Or maybe he is not, but he knows how to make one believe he is. We were at a restaurant, he was attentive towards me. He would like to continue seeing me; he wants to show me various interesting places, for example, the grave of Morisons. He said that once you are there, you are overcome by a feeling of eternal life

and love. And he said he would be willing to paint me. It is not what you think, I would not even have to get undressed, he would be painting me with clothes on – a portrait with hunting dogs just like the kings in old days, he would draw out the tiniest lace, every strand of hair, every fold of the garments so that he could be looking at me attentively and for even longer.

Suddenly we both listen up as we hear someone walking. It could not be Vu as she always sleeps as if she had been stuffed with sleep, like dead. It must be the parents. They are mother's whispers that I hear – she has woken Sallija and is asking her to lie down by our door and listen to our conversation. We put blankets and pillows in front of the gap under the door so she would not hear a thing, but we do not even want to talk any more. We turn off the light. We are sitting in the dark like two urban cats on a manhole and await the morning, the very dawn that will commence a new day and new adventures. Before we nestle in the bed, I tell her whispering quietly that after all, I would like her not to date Albers, as he is not what he pretends to be, he is not gentle, he is deceiving and he is an artist. Artists always live – live out certain things and people empty, so that they can draw all that in their colourful plots just like the prostitutes he was talking about in relation to the red and blue.

I am not going to my room. I am sleeping next to Nellija in my yellow nightgown. I know we cannot sleep - both of us. I just know everything that is going on inside her, I am her heart, her brain, her every organ, her skin and her hair. It was just tonight that I realized that she does not belong to me, no matter how much I would want her to. That is unfair. I never wanted the stuff she was telling me about tonight to happen, but it just did. Vu appeared

from nowhere and I have no reason to ask her to leave. But I could do, so that Nellija and I would be at the same starting point; but I know what Nellija wants and I cannot give it to her, I simply must not, no one would forgive us.

In the morning someone tries our door. It is probably Vu on her way to work. We are not concerned; I pull the blanket over my head to quieten my breath so that listening at the door, one would only hear total silence. Today we are unavailable; today we simply do not exist. And just a few moments later I realize I am alone – I am sleeping alone. Nellija is not there. At first I thought she had gone to the bathroom, so I lie and wait for her to return. She does not return for a very long time. Then I jump up – her clothes are not there, her shoes are gone. The window is open even though I know very well that we closed it at night. I bend across the windowsill and try to spot her somewhere down there in the street, but of course she is not there. I know that should I decide to go looking for her, it must be done straight away before both of them have managed to escape half-way across the world. I quickly put on socks and climb out the same window. I jump on to the street and run in the direction of Albers's house; I am wearing a yellow nightgown but I have no time to go back and change. I run like a yellow butterfly, nylon tangling between my legs. If certain institutions were to see me now, they would catch me like a stray dog, make me have treatment, but I would say – no, no – I am only saving my sister from all sorts of perverts! They would glance at me and laugh, out of all people, who would say such a thing! Mommy's boy! In a women's nightgown! A paedophile that cripples the psyche of small girls! For that you are going to get it, you psycho! We will teach you a lesson! They would rip Nellija's nightgown off me and make me sit naked holding my testicles in my hands,

while they pass the nightgown around , smell it, wipe their hands or bottoms in it, and finally standing in a circle, piss on it. Then they would leave it in the street; they would kick me so painfully and bloodily that I would not be able to hold my balls in my hands any more – I would hold my head to protect myself, but they would kick everything below my waist and then bring me to the precinct. Perhaps Nellija would later walk down the very same street, recognize her nightgown, pick it up soaked in strangers' urine, put it in her bag and at home wash and iron it, fragrance it and put it on my bed so that it would await me when I return.

I really do not care what anyone thinks of me. I am running to Albers's flat. I am running in my socks. My feet hurt. I reach the flat and pull at the door. I knock yelling 'don't touch her, don't you dare!' Albers opens the door and I rush inside. Nellija is sitting calmly and sipping coffee. I run to her and stop not knowing what to do, what to say, how to reprove her for leaving me. I stand like a pole and then slap her. I flinch myself. I say 'please, please forgive me! I did not mean that!' Albers wants to interfere but says nothing. Nellija also remains quiet and just takes my hand and strokes with it the very cheek I have just slapped. That makes me even more confused. It is so quiet, every one ready to launch at one another, but we are all standing like frozen.

I feel they could tie my hands and hit me in my face as much as they like in the sort of wicked revenge one can overdose on like drugs, gain pleasure from humiliation. Albers would tear off my nightgown, I would plead him not to, to not touch it, to rather save it and give it back later, but he would not listen, he would undress me, throw the yellow night dress into the red paint canister, take a brush and paint my penis blue. Then they would

photograph me laughing at my organ being in the colour of sadness. He would pull the nightgown out of the paint, it would have soaked red, he would drop it on the floor like a rag and in a few days it would have dried into a ball. They would untie my hands; I would pick up the red dried rag and go home naked, holding it in front of my blue penis. At home I would scrub the paint off until it bleeds, hide from Vu what had happened; I would not love her any more, at that moment I would not love anyone any more. Look – love, it is insanity, it is a disease which paralyses the brain.

We calm down. All three of us are sitting in the room drinking coffee. Albers says 'I have just asked Nellija to marry me. She has agreed.' That is it; I am outside her conscience, her mind, outside her body - banished.

Later we all go to ours. Albers gives me his clothes and shoes. On the way we visit a shop and Albers buys three bottles of champagne. We come home, Nellija asks Sallija to prepare a celebratory dinner. I change into my own clothes. Once Vu has returned, we all sit down in the dining room and Albers solemnly announces to the others that he and Vu are getting married. A storm of applause follows, they are asked for autographs, flowers are thrown at them and carols are being sung, champagne is popped open and there are fireworks outside the window. Mother and father exchange looks and ask 'Daniels, when do you and Vu plan to follow in your sister's footsteps?' Thank God, at that very moment Sallija brings in the food and puts fried liver in front of Vu and now also Albers. 'I am not fond of liver, thank you very much', says Vu a hundred-something-eth time. Albers says 'it's ok; I will have your portion.' I sit at the table cutting the food on the plate, the pieces I just leave on the plate, time after time stuffing something in my mouth after all, I drink Albers's damned

Inga Žolude "Silta zeme" [Warm Earth]

Excerpt

Translated by Suzanne McQuade

champagne and suddenly I cannot understand any more if it was just my imagination or did Albers and Nellija really paint my penis blue and where is my nightgown? I ask Nellija to open the window – I cannot breathe in this aroma of fried liver, a disgusting smell – imagine - some evaporated internal organs! While she carries out my request, I go into the toilet to have a look at myself, I open my zip and take into my hands that what could be blue. I keep my eyelids squeezed shut thinking that if it were blue, it would mean they have indeed humiliated me. With my eyes still shut, I put it back unexamined.