

Eva Baltasar

*Permafrost*

translated by Peter Bush

Sample translated from Catalan  
Original title: *Permagel*  
Published by Club Editor (2018)  
Foreign Rights: Bernat Fiol  
SalmaiaLit  
C/Consell de Cent 407, 2  
08009 Barcelona  
(+34) 626 081 038  
[bernat@salmaialit.com](mailto:bernat@salmaialit.com)

It feels great, here. Finally. That's heights for you: a hundred vertical metres of glass. The air's air with a higher degree of purity and that's why it seems harder too, at times almost reinforced. A kind of ironmonger's smell wafts by. The noise layer hangs below, soot-like, latent, the thinnest, oily eye crackling, a sort of shiny black gift. Not a bird flies by. In fact, they have their own strata too, between us and our, say, gods. A habitable void between the loftiest lines of the pentagram. At this point, I am and am not. Perhaps I'm putting myself on display, a visible, rather annoying blur on a spectacle lens, an unpleasant blotch on this chill-out zone. I take in air, I force it to become mine through my activated tubes. I am alive and still giving off heat, inside, I must be really pulpy. Outside I'm more than I seem, practically a pastry-shop item, a shiny, warm, waxen thing, seductive like an opening line. oblivious to me, each cell reproduces itself, and, simultaneously, reproduces me, transforming me into a proper whole. If all those microscopic bits stopped working, if only for a few seconds... Indivisible wholes also deserve a break, like me, like all the geniuses in this country. Working with them compels me to assimilate them, to be like them, an impersonal little goldfish, inside this lovely glass tank. Pleasantly decorative. Some restaurants place fish like these on every table, inside a tiny glass bowl. They are really decorative. Relaxing. They are very lively yet, even so, there are people who use their habitat as an ashtray. The poor little things die, poisoned by the biocidal chemistry of butt-ends. But that's all they are, right? Decorative items. Futile lives.

How pure the air is! There's so little humidity and I love it. Humidity is always out to penetrate the body's most vulnerable parts. I can't stand it. I can't coexist with humidity, I can't cope, it filters through to my most unsuspected places like sticky, freezing lava, and occupies unknown crannies, makes me conscious of them and they feel disconcerting. Some body parts are like over-sized pieces of furniture you can't handle. Apparently, you can't take them to bits and they would be too dangerous to remove. They must have a function, somebody must have embedded them within me, but I can't stand them and I only escape their pressure by ignoring them. Walk on with your

eyes shut, don't clash into their exultant mass. Move on with your eyes shut, that's really amusing! I hadn't thought about eyes. Birds fly with their eyes open and, if they let themselves drift, it's on stable currents of air. Suspended there, yet at the same time in motion, like puppets. They can allow themselves a look. But if an item falls... say, if a small bird falls from the nest, does it fall open-eyed? Do birds have eyelids? Or tear-ducts like a granny's, that seep nonstop? They're certainly not human eyelids. Perhaps they're more like a Japanese screen or those little slide-down curtains over aeroplane windows, and can be activated as or more quickly than ours, in a flash. I now wonder if I will open my eyes. Or if they'll open for me. Mine won't be just any old fall. I mean it won't be random, it will be intentional, my willed intent, an order that's already written. When the time comes, the only issue will be its execution. Eyes anticipate, explore the world, then the body responds. What sense does it make to prepare the body for death, seconds before it happens? Death strikes the body like love. So let it strike unawares.

## 2

“When you're older, you'll understand,” mother never tired of repeating. I can't have been growing fast enough. Even though she forced me to gulp down glasses of milk, tall, wide glasses that looked like animal mouths, fat as my face, and left a green tiara on my forehead where the rim rested. You could pour so much milk into those glasses mother always had to open another bottle to fill them to the brim. “Drink, drink just like a kitten,” she'd say, “like a kitten, stick out your little tongue and lick up the lovely milk.” Litre after litre of milk until my insides were all white, lined with the skin of the milk, that clung to me like wet, greasy sheets, that stuck to the walls on the back of my skin. Mother's milky receptacles wiped me out, made me less of a person, even less of a girl. I was half-girl, half-milk receptacle, a kind of sopping churn. When I finished drinking, I didn't dare move, I could feel the milk slurp in my stomach. No, it wasn't slurping, it was sloshing perilously, like water in a bucket hit by a sudden jolt. Then it descended, like water down the pipes of our neighbour's toilet. Exactly that, but inside me. I felt the milk

sluice down the remains of supper, leaving everything as if freshly painted, clean but viscous. This vision was so powerful it forced me to stay put, stock still, and my breathing faded again. I could only do one thing to cope with the state I was in: read. I sat on the only chair in my bedroom. My desk was white pine and covered in white child-proof material. “That’s for doing your homework,” rasped mother the second the carpenter finished installing it. “No painting, no inscriptions, don’t for one moment think of using the craft knife. By the way, where *is* the craft knife? Shouldn’t it be here? In the jar? With the scissors? Find it and put it back in its proper place.” With the scissors? I didn’t understand that, I still don’t, it makes no sense.

I’ve positioned myself on a threshold, I live on this threshold, I’m waiting for the moment to abandon this threshold, my temporary house. Temporary like all housing, in fact, like bodies. I don’t take my medication, chemicals put the brake on, only let us progress at a harmless rate. They represent advance redemption, keep sin at bay, or rather perhaps teach us to give the name of sin to that exercise of freedom in a state of peace – prior to death, naturally. Mother medicates, father medicates, my sister initially didn’t, but then she did, she grew up and got it. Medication is a constant temporary solution, like the low watt bulb that hangs in our lobby. Twenty years with a gloomy lobby, and how easily we got used to seeing so little there! “We put halogens throughout the flat but forgot the lobby!” Laughter. “But best of all, we didn’t notice until yesterday!” Twenty years had gone by, twenty years putting lipstick on three times a day, half a centimetre from the mirror, twenty years groping for keys. I thought that was normal, when you’re a kid, normality is your home. The normality that shapes us. You grow up sheltered by its boundaries, become part of its body and the same goes for a brain as eager and malleable as mud. Then you take years, many blows from the hammer to shatter the blindness, when you’re trapped inside that tight nucleus that’s wasted ninety percent of the good stuff you had to drill through. Get out, now, if you can! And be happy, while you’re about it, like everyone else. Medication: what’s the choice. But not mine, better to move on, ferally, towards the threshold and decide. After a while you discover that thresholds let you live, straighter-backed than ever, a sliver away from nothingness, and not only is it possible to live there, but you can grow in different ways. If it’s all about survival, resistance may be the only way to live intensely. On this threshold, now, I feel alive, more alive than ever.

I'm at home. In fact, home is the spare bedroom in the flat my sister rents. It's a plain room and bare as a cell. There's a mattress on the floor, an orange plastic wardrobe behind the door and a cupboard for odds and ends. I kill sleepless hours rummaging through the contents of the cupboard. Threadbare clothes and white hotel towels, along with a few of my sister's photo albums. It seems strange to see her with friends I don't know. The lives of two sisters are identical until one grows up and then the other seemingly does her best to do things on the sly. Especially filling the gap left by her sister by getting to know other people.

I scrutinise the photos, there are twenty of my sister with a blond, pale-skinned youth, a golden blond like a lioness. They're alone in thirteen, and hugging in seven. Of course, that pallid youth, with a lioness's tawny gold, pink eyelids and a schnozzle as firm as a gymnast's butt, is a product of Scandinavia. I remember she did her Erasmus in Denmark. It might be a Danish fling. The youth looks at my sister and she looks at the camera. I feel a touch indignant because I know so little about my sister's life. I choke that feeling down, and think how my life has developed along similar lines to hers, on the margins of our family, I mean. I wonder if there is a reason. I'm sure there is. We both felt that imperious longing for intensity, which life shared with one's family only dilutes. The family is a wonderful dissolvent! It's impossible to keep retain that nucleus at one's side. Certain individuals can only develop as amputations. Now when I think of the parents, they were the octopus's head, and my sister and I, its spreading tentacles, its pink and lilac tendrils. She is truly sick, an ectoparasitic organism that needs to be coupled with a male partner to preserve the balance of her mind. But she laughs, much more than I do. And she seems present in those photos, brazenly so! Not me, I always looks as if I'm an add-on. As if someone more infantile and much more powerful than all of us had a cut-out full of images of me in multiple poses, and cut along the dotted line around my figure, and then stuck them on photos of other people who right now would claim they know me. That's yours truly, the strange one everyone recognises, the one who seems fake, beneath a strip of short, manicured grass. I've a tough hide, impermeable as a boat's hull, but it's not fake, it really isn't: the hardness of the ice preserves a habitable world, only it's just dozed off.

She's French, indeed Marseillaise, like the national anthem. The key to her beauty resided in the fact that she was French. I was in love with her nationality, a second face with perfect features that melded into the first like an almost transparent film, but with all the charm of the great classics. She was Roxane and shorter than me, thinner than me, more intelligent than me and more high-minded than me. She also had more qualifications: a doctorate in literature and higher certificates in English, German and Italian. Moreover, she was a wonderful pianist. She had a piano in her house, in a big room I expansively called the piano room, and played long pieces from memory. She was someone mother would have described as from a good family, and this good family thing was present like a coat of varnish. Yes, was in every gesture she made, however slight. When she opened a door, for example, she moved her chin in a particular way, slightly raising it to one side as she lowered her eyes, and I was always under the impression she assumed that someone was waiting there, ready to give way to her. It's hard to describe, but it was so obvious when I saw it! She liked mountain-climbing and, even though I couldn't then imagine ever being without her, the first time I saw her naked body I thought that all my future lovers would previously have had to be fans of climbing. Her muscles were vibrant and perfect, under a covering of supple, spotless skin. Every position she adopted in bed constituted an anatomical, plaster-cast study of unique precision, as exciting as a first visit to a Buonarroti. I remember her abdomen, still and suggestive like a turtle shell, the tensed arcs of her arms, buttocks, legs and calves, compact as thinking skulls, focused exclusively on me, on my pleasure, on inducing my heights of pleasure. Before and after I have never fucked over so many nights. And right through the night, I mean, five, six and seven hours of non-stop fucking, usually with her on top. "Speak to me in French," I would say. And she said things I understood and others I didn't, that I had no need to understand. It was enough to hear her, to let her words penetrate my body and melt into me in strange, unpredictable ways. Her voice made me shudder violently and quickly devoured me, like a lock of hair singed by the embers of a cigarette. My whole body coiled and writhed, attacked by her accent like the softest caterpillar pierced by a beak of steel. Oh! I'm re-living that now, as I write, and a thousand cells, within me, pass on buckets of simmering

water to douse one fire after another. Swift and blind. My heart's inflamed and that pains my pleura, now so unused to these reactions. Roxanne. When I met her, she had just bought a professional-range camera. And I envied that camera that spent the entire day in her hands. Her white hands had delicate joints and smooth fingertips. Before touching the piano she spread her fingers over the keyboard, that seemed to repose there a second, controlled yet ready, like the edge of a surgical instrument anticipating a tricky operation. Then she flexed them subtly, moved them, responding to signals from neck muscles, that went into action thousandths of a second before they did. I listened and the sound of the chords from the piano penetrated me like her words, made me tremble, generating uncanny surges and a sort of complaisant jealousy. I followed the unintelligible movements of her fingers, foresaw the moment when the piece finally died. She adored Satie. "He's easy," she said. And time and again she played *Je te veux*, the first of the *Gymnopédies*, and the second *Nocturne*. "They are too long," I complained. "Only three minutes," she laughed. And she played them again. And I relished that image of my French girl playing the piano. Though at the same time I died every second. And that was an acceptable, decent way to die.

## 23

"So what's it like being with a woman? In bed, I mean?" It's well past midnight and my sister needed two whole servings of chicken with almonds and three delights special fried rice to let herself go. Or maybe it was the Coke, she's not drunk any for three years. A lethal, delayed action poison, she calls it. But this is a special night, not everyone has a lesbian sister to console her when her romance breaks up, so tonight's heart-to-heart is quite something, is irresistibly trendy, and perhaps even obscene. Ugh! My sister just has to revel in the idea that she's turning into the heroine of a series everyone is watching. Being a lesbian's sister is quite a role and guarantees cachet. "Do you want Nestea?" I ask her before dinner. She looks at me daggers, as if I'd just decided to do a deal with the Mafia. "I'll drink Coke,

for hell's sake!" she yelps nervously. For hell's sake! "Careful, it doesn't go to your head, you're not used to the strong stuff." As she's also not up to speed with the technique of drinking from a can, I pour her Coke into a tall glass, that she snatches from my hands, with a morbid glint in her eye. She feels weird, poor thing; at night she sleeps. Today, however, things are different. "What's it like...", a cute hesitancy, "... to fuck a woman?" I could swear it's the first time she has used the word "fuck"; she's completely high on Coke. "So that's what you'd really like to know, is it?" I ask with a hint of malice. But the fact is I cannot stand, I simply *can-not* stand sippy airheads, however hard they try. "You know it isn't," she retorts. I'm forced to think about her spare room, only a spare bedroom, but as essential as a fingernail. "Should I tell you about something else?" She nods, aspartamically rolling her eyes and smiling like a spoilt brat who'll never again dose on Coke, never ever. "Fine," I agree. The tactic's working. "Have you heard of action-painting? Action-painting?" She shakes her head. "Jackson Pollock?" I continue. "No." "All right." I go off to my room and come back with a monograph devoted to Pollock. It's amazing, images like these make me think twice about my idyll with death. "Is that art? Any child could do that!" snarls my sister. "But a child did NOT do that." You've got to be daft. Daft, daft, and daft again. Her spare room is too high a price to pay, but what can I do? Where can I go? The MSG in the sweet-and-sour prawns is affecting my ability to think straight, but I try, yet again. I try, I'm sure that if I try hard, I can pluck a plastic flower from the dung-heap, a plastic flower to satisfy the latent, residual curiosity of the poor aborted lesbian inside my sister's brain. "So action-painting is what you see here," I begin, "and action-painting is born from impatience." She gawks. "A moment came in the history of painting, around the mid- twentieth century, when artists ran out of challenges. They'd been fighting over a series of problems for hundreds of years: subject, depth, form, colour, realism, fidelity, light... Everything! In a manner of speaking, they'd exhausted their lines of research. And then Pollock arrives on the scene, spread his huge, blank canvasses over the ground and bang!" "Bang?" "Look at this." I show her *Number 3*, I turn pages, *Number 5*, I turn more pages, *Number 34*, so wonderful with that thinking head, all red, and two yellow semi-circles. "Look!" I tell her. "A simple, clean use of raw materials! Pure experimentation! Pollock splashed his canvasses, driven by the spontaneity of the moment. A work of art wasn't simply an end product, but art in time, art in real time, in action. Impulsive and simple like a child's



drawing, right, but with an underlying sophisticated concern, that interest in process, the immensity of life concentrated in the process. Do you get that?" "Kind of." "All right. Well now you kind of know what it's like to fuck a woman."