

“Writing on the Stone”

Csaba Béla Varga



Secret societies do not like eyewitnesses. This antipathy is mutual.

Next to the wall of the graveyard, sitting on a half-sunken bench I was waiting for the Morning Star, herald of the darkness, outrider of the morning. I had plenty of time, no urgent business waited for me in this city I used to call home once. I wasn't too afraid.

Well, I didn't have much to lose either.

I had spotted the statue at my last returning from abroad when I couldn't find the grave of my grandmother at the base of the ancient wall of this cemetery. I asked people about it. They told me that the upper part of an old crypt had collapsed when the graveyard was enlarged. One of the big machines hit and destroyed it. That is how the pale woman appeared. They realized only days later, after that famous cloudburst, which had wiped out three villages in the eastern counties, that she was made of white marble.

I went into the graveyard to say farewell to my grandmother. I was surprised when I saw how beautiful the shining female figure was. And I was not so taken aback that I couldn't read the text on her pedestal. In those days I was annoyingly vain because of my supposed importance and higher education. I regarded myself as an expert of ancient languages and scripts. But that time I was in a hurry and didn't have much time for questions. Later, I traveled half the globe and the will of Fate brought me here again, although I felt not a single spark of desire to be there.

When I returned, I already knew quite a bit about the World on This Side of the Dreams, about the Powers, and I had just started to suspect something about the Ways. I brought a bouquet of yellow roses to the place where the grave of my grandmother was supposed to be. This was the moment when I again caught sight of the statue.

The text in Latin still seemed to be gibberish for me. The groups of letters divided from each other by Maltese crosses showed no resemblance to the words of any language I knew. However, the short line under it, chiseled deep in the shining marble nearly cried out for my attention. I had learned a few things on my long quest. I stepped near the statue and let my fingers touch the text. Now in hindsight I realized that I hadn't even looked at the temptingly beautiful female shape above it.

Probably that is why I am still alive.

I was quite surprised to see the Old Tongue on a Christian holy site. The Elder Kin didn't come often to this part of ancient Europe. A long time ago, at the dawn of history, the Bronze Age People of the Spirals blocked their way at the Danube.

They only left a few marks behind, which wasn't alive in the human flesh of the later generations. The Inquisition tried everything they could to erase these marks, just like the Turkish Empire or even the heretic sects did.

Not that I blame them for it. They had every reason to act that way. Still, this stone stood here, in the shade of the church and I could read the writing on the stone.

Only me, no one else.

*"The full Moon wakes your desire,
The flow of time burns like fire.
Your bad fate is the red rooster's Moon.
Can you hear him? He calls your doom."*

Once, I read these sentences on the other side of the globe. And I knew how they would go on. I turned slowly and I wasn't surprised at all to see the huge red bird on top of the gray concrete wall which separated the graveyard from the four-lane highway. He could have been the pride of any chicken yard and sported a crest like a crown. The bird looked at me with angry stern eyes. I bowed my head and put the triple sign of Thot on myself with my right hand. The rooster kept on watching me for a while then his gaze left my face and stopped at the statue.

I felt the old one coming right before he had appeared on the muddy path winding between the plots. I knew that when he reached me, he would talk to me.

"Praised be..." he looked at me with an expectation, "...our Lord... Jesus Christ."

"Now and forever... Amen" I pronounced the word with one *m* only, but that did not seem to disturb him.

"This is a heathen statue. It shouldn't be allowed to be here."

"What is wrong with it?"

"It spoils young people. It is immoral. Lecherous. And... you know, *heathen* too."

"It is not that old," I protested. "Not older than three hundred years."

"Still, it is. It radiates the spirits of the unbelievers. It should be broken. It hosts the dead. It is strange and dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Not even the grass grows around it. Look, it is bare stone at this very place where there was a lawn not long ago. As if poison was leaking out of it. Two people have already committed suicide at its feet. A month ago, that boy. They say he was lovestruck. Two months ago, the woman. A painter. She cut her veins. And *then* the gypsies. They wanted to steal it. The next morning, they were found here, cold like stone. At the roadside, the engine of their van was still warm. Murder, it was. It was written in the newspapers."

"Did they get killed?"

"All of them. The investigator said it must have been a gang warfare. Nowadays they like to carry swords. But I am asking you..." He stopped for a second, looked around with a sly glance, then gave me a sign to lean closer to him. "So, what I really would like to know is why the hair of all the five gypsies turned white? Like snow. That's what happened!"

It started to rain. I stayed there for a long time, even after the limping old one had disappeared in the bushes.

First, I had to settle an old score, after that, ten days later I could return.

This time I was sitting on the moss-covered bench and watched the slowly fading shadow of the tower of the church. The setting sun painted the yellow wall pinkish for a short time, then I could spot my star.

By that time the graveyard had already been empty. Not many people had the habit of coming this way at all. They hadn't buried anyone here since the end of the war. Among the twigs of the dark pine tree a stunted crow made grotesque movements but when it heard the voice of the roosters, got scared and flew away. Not only one rooster was bidding farewell to the Sun, but several.

I was wearing an old Soviet officer's coat with no insignia on the shoulders and a leather hat with a broad rim. I thought it was not necessary to put any kind of sign on me, I came only to observe. Curiosity is not a serious sin.

Hopefully.

I wasn't too surprised that I had to wait till midnight. Usually, one has to wait till then. At eleven the fog came. That thick, yellow kind of fog that seemed to possess its own will to suck out life from everything that exists.

Although I was wearing a thick pullover and a coat, I started to shiver. The sounds gradually became dull, and after a while even the roar of the discotheque near the outer wall of the graveyard seemed to be a mere whispering only.

I shuddered at the thought of the hundreds of young people dancing there with no knowledge

of the thousands of their age who had been buried at that very place after the outbreak of cholera. Hopefully nothing infiltrates their room; nothing emerges from the wet cold earth. Whose feverish mind gave birth to the crazy idea to build a place of entertainment on that cursed spot?

Somehow, I couldn't imagine that I would have to wait in this disgusting soup long. Certainly this fog, with its bestial smell of rotting flesh, scared passers-by home. Even the night wards looked for asylum in the pubs instead of letting all warmth from their bones be sucked out.

And then the deep sound of the bell in the tower announced midnight. Wind came again, chased away the clouds and the fog and then with haughty majesty the full Moon appeared. In the dumping grounds not far away, the dogs started to howl.

We can call the ones who now arrived *dramatis personae* easily. They were self-confident, almost arrogant, and both of them paid attention to make a very impressive entrée.

They might have been necrophile amateur actors.

But they weren't.

The black knight entered through the huge gate, which dominated the side wall. The wrought iron wings of the door were opened by invisible hands and the dark hero walked with deliberate steps, slowly past the angels that adorned the entrance.

He radiated a halo of self-assurance and something else. An elemental menace.

With his right hand he pushed back his long cloak and his left rested at the basket of the sword. Made in Toledo, I was absolutely sure of it.

He stopped in front of the statue. He touched the Latin script with his gloved right hand, then his fingers found a rest at the foot of the lady of marble. Motionless, he admired the face of the woman.

His nemesis chose this very moment to enter the scene.

He might have seen far too many Hong Kong-style action movies. This was my first impression when I saw him making a perfect triple somersault above the fence.

After finishing the jump, he froze in an immaculate kung fu position while cutting the way of retreat of the black knight. The moonlight sparked on the shaking edge of a Chinese blade. The Asian was wearing a loose red coat and a helmet, which had a crest not very different from the crown of a rooster. On his breastplate the ancient four-armed symbol of the Sun gloomed in a golden light.

The one in the black cloak turned slowly. His hand left the foot of the woman with a hesitation, but after a while it slowly moved towards the grip of the sword. Now his face reminded me of a Carthaginian High Priest.

A priest of Baal, to be precise.

They slowly moved closer to each other. The movements followed a conscientious choreography. They felt no need for words while facing each other and that was a pity, because I really wanted to know their real names. I could swear that they had met many times before. Wolves faced each other like this.

The frosty air seemed to start glowing between them, so deep was their mutual, ancient hate for the other. Whatever they felt, they didn't allow their feelings to sweep their attention away. Sharks circled around each other like this.

The black knight could have been welcomed on the shining floor of every ballroom in the world. I had no doubt that the ladies of the upper classes would cover him in roses after a dance. On the other hand, the way the red rooster was moving would have made even the most brutal boot camp sergeant smile with satisfaction. The way he was moving was death incarnate.

At this moment I was already thoroughly scared. Seeing the two *picadores*, I regretted a thousand times not having stayed in the guest room of the *fraternitas*.

I was too frightened even to breath, so I decided to slow down. In my chest my heart was pounding in a slowing rhythm. My body was not a single spark warmer than the stone bench I was sitting on, as if I was carved out of stone myself.

As long as one could see the Moon in the sky the warriors were just circling around each other. At the very moment, however, when a ragged piece of gray cloud covered the skull-white celestial lamp, the two blades sparked to life in the blood red echo of the light from the lasers in the discotheque so damned close to us. The men launched their attack at the same time.

They were fast, incredibly fast. Chinese steel hit the blade from Toledo. The macho elegance of the neo-Latin fencing schools met the deadly techniques of the sword-masters of the Forbidden City. I couldn't really imagine that any mere human being could have even the smallest chance against either of the battling ones. But they both knew each other quite well.

The Chinese blade, sharper than any razor, moved faster than any eye could have seen, but to no avail because the Spanish knight knew exactly where to defend the thrust.

Just the same way, his effort to impale the Asian warrior in the very heart of the swastika was absolutely futile, as his adversary had moved away a thousand times from the very same slash

during their previous encounters. Neither of them backed away, neither of them yielded to the force.

The very strength and violence of their clash would have broken even the best swords of the common men into shards. It would have broken the weapon and the arm that was holding the blade as well. Just like so many times in the past.

I have no idea who helped the black knight. Not that I think he asked for any help.

Nevertheless, the help came.

More than a hundred young people paid for that with their lives.

As the newspapers wrote later, a mustard gas bomb from the World War had exploded under the floor of the discotheque.

When silence filled the place of the loud music, when lightning of the laser beams from the other side of the fence disappeared, I had the feeling that a black wind swept over the graveyard. It took only a mere minute for the leaves on the trees to get yellow and dry and it made the bats drop dead from the night sky. Had I been breathing, I would have died too. But my body quietly rested and only my mind kept me on this side of the Gate.

The red rooster-warrior nearly faded out into the dark storm. Where his body wasn't covered by thick temple-clothes or armor, his skin was boiling with blisters. Of course, that alone wouldn't have been lethal for him.

But the evil knight literally drank himself full of the black fog. As he grew, he dwarfed his enemy. The stolen life force of the dead made him unbelievably strong.

He needed only one cut to destroy his nemesis.

The black cloud was nowhere to be seen when the survivor moved at last. He gripped the body of his victim and lifted him. I could see the wound quite well, and the blood. A light brown, slowly dripping fluid, *Vitae angelis*.

Angel's blood. The most potent, most expensive medicine in the world of the living. One drop of it can cure AIDS, one glass of the elixir mixed in wine can bring back the faded years of long-gone youth. These valuable pearls were raining in a slow shower on the white grass when the body of the dying angel fell in front of the feet of the statue.

I could feel it in my own chest when the heart of the victim stopped beating. The earth in front of the marble figure became like a greedy mouth and swallowed the fluid life-force.

The woman seemed to be the twin sister of the long-gone model of the statue. Her skin was gleaming in the pale light of the Moon in the very same color as her white skirt. Around her feet

the wind was playing with the stolen ashes from the silent discotheque then it raised the fine dirt of the graveyard too.

It seemed to me that two transparent spirals emerged from under the withered grass. As they lifted higher, they became white and faded into the clothes of the woman. The pale beauty seemed to become more and more real with each passing moment. She really started being *there*.

They just watched each other with the knight. For a long time neither of them made any movement. If they talked, I couldn't hear it. Then the man opened his arms and stepped next to the lady. He wanted to embrace her. His arms went through the body of the woman, although it seemed to be as real as the statue above them.

I couldn't see the face of the knight but on the face of the woman disappointment, then flaring up anger, and at the end a deadly despair could be seen. Now she tried to embrace her beloved one, but to no avail. She couldn't succeed.

The angry knight hit the pedestal with his gloved fist. He still seemed to be as huge as he was when he slew the angel. The column cracked by the sheer force of the impact; the statue however remained as immaculate as before. He tried to caress her face, but his fingers sank under the white marble skin.

The call of the bells urged them to a swift decision.

He turned, looked at his sword, down at the earth, and then at me.

He gripped the blade under the golden basket. He was moving in my direction. The terror on the face of the lady was obvious. She hurled herself after the man, but she couldn't move away from the statue. So, she had to remain there in her desperation, she could only reach out with her hands after the knight.

He came to a halt in front of me and grabbed my face. As if acid had been poured on my face, my skin felt as if on fire. During an incredibly fast moment my heart accelerated back to normal speed. That shock nearly killed me. My senses were no more reduced to the seeing. They were unfortunately active again. The last time I sensed the stench of human bodies so close to me was in the hell that was the Cambodia of Pol Pot.

The howling of the dogs couldn't oppress the sirens of the fast-approaching cars of the fireguard anymore. My will however was not commanding my muscles. I had to endure helplessly as the dark being lifted me on my feet. His black eyes looked deep in the abyss of my mind.

*"And the king will meet the queen.
Because death is just a dream."*

The grip of his sword, inlaid with gold, hovered only an inch away from my face. I took the weapon and followed the knight. In front of the statue, the red clothes and the golden armor covered now only withered carrion. The woman was standing hunched next to the statue. Her pale, bloodless fingers gripped the feet of the statue with such force that for a moment I thought they actually sank into the stone.

The sword was light, perfectly balanced by a great weapon-smith but such cold radiated off from it that my hand nearly froze. I knew quite well what I was supposed to do, and the task was not against my liking. Not at all, even if the order would banish me for that.

They, the man and the woman, just kept looking at each other. I realized it would be impossible to hold the sword for long. My arm had already started to get numb, and the cold reached my shoulder. So, I raised the basket to my face and saluted them.

The warrior of shadow turned towards me. It seemed to be a huge effort for him even to keep his shape. He gripped his black shirt and with one sudden pull bared his chest. The woman, this unbelievably beautiful being of white marble, stepped behind him. She embraced the knight. Her small, delicate, transparent hand found a rest on the left chest of the man. Between her fingers I could see rather well the three numbers and the oddly shaped tattoo, similar to a wound. I knew where to thrust the blade.

It went through two bodies. I put all my strength into the thrust. For a second nothing happened, then I slowly sensed the beats of a non-human heart. The basket of the sword pressed the hand of the woman onto the chest of the man.

It was not angel's blood which splashed from this wound, not at all! The thin, burning fluid splashed like flames upwards on her hand. Her skin gradually became pinkish, her lips reddened, her eyes suddenly showed color. I was glad that she wasn't looking for me. I pulled the sword out of the wound. The blade was clean, it was immaculate.

The cold nearly reached my heart. I dropped the weapon and staggered away. In the meantime, the fire brigade had arrived, and on the other side of the graveyard's wall rescue started. Determined, firm voices shouted orders. I heard the noises of heavy boots. From the mountains a helicopter was approaching. The world was as it had to be.

Of course, I looked back from the gate. Who could have resisted the temptation? They were standing next to the column. They were embracing each other. She wasn't white, he wasn't black anymore. Their shapes faded away. When I pulled the wrung iron wings of the gate shut, no one was standing on the burned-out grass.

Somehow, I managed to struggle home. I escaped into a dreamless sleep. But then, at dawn, I heard in the urban heart of the great city the call of the rooster. I knew I had succeeded again in gaining a few new enemies. And of course, a good sword as well.

FICTION
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A Hungarian writer and translator, **Csaba Béla Varga** was born in 1966 in Budapest and published his first science fiction short story in 1996 in the Hungarian magazine *Galaktika SF*. He has published six novels and three educational books. In his work, he is interested in the effects of technological development on mankind and on everyday life in our near future. Married with three children, Csaba has been a freelance writer and translator since 2010. The list of hobbies and leisure activities he enjoys but is extremely clumsy at is embarrassingly long and includes hiking, Japanese go, collecting SF figures, books, comics, swimming, traveling, and yoga.