

Donald Rayfield

“Losing Lienka,” in *Literary Review*, September 2018

*Fleeting Snow*

By Pavel Vilikovský

(Translated by Julia & Peter Sherwood)

(Istros Books 143pp £9.99)

Pavel Vilikovský’s novel is a miracle of origami: an extensive and elaborate narrative unfolds from a very slim volume. The reader may be dismayed at first to learn that each chapter (often just a page long) bears a number from one to five, followed by a letter. Each number represents a thematic thread – life, language, love – and the accompanying letter indicates the order in which the chapters are to be read. The concluding chapter is allotted all five numbers. The suggestion (which few readers will take up) is that you can follow or discard any numbers you like and still keep up with the novel’s intrigue and apprehend its denouement. Equally disconcerting is the title: not until halfway through do we understand that *Fleeting Snow* is a reference to unmelted snow in shaded mountain clefts and a nod to the novel’s leitmotif of an avalanche, sweeping away the mind in dementia, languages in depopulation, love in habituation, and so on.

At first, the novel’s self-sufficient chapters are reminiscent of back-page reflections in *The Guardian* magazine in the days when they were written by Clive James and Howard Jacobson: satirical wit and autobiographical snippets, intertwined with memento mori. Gradually, however, the plot surfaces: the narrator, who has adopted a new name to assert his uniqueness, is a helpless witness to his wife Lienka’s progressive dementia. As Lienka loses her capacity to sign her name, he renames her Agraphia and, when she no longer remembers or recognises him, Eugenia. Vilikovský is able to combine banter with lament about a process as distressing as it will be plausible to anyone who has witnessed it. A handful of other characters play a part in the novel: two Job’s comforters – an academic now collecting onomatopoeic dialect Slovak words and a Zen Buddhist *sensei* – and a few women, their buttocks interesting the narrator more than their personalities.

Vilikovský has, over fifty years, produced, along with a lot of translations from English into Slovak, a body of prose fiction that normalises the absurd. But apart from this novel, the only other works of his to appear in English are three stories from his collection *Ever Green Is*. Being a great writer in a little-spoken language, as the Czech Romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha once put it, is like being a volcano in Iceland: however powerfully you erupt, nobody notices. Slovak fiction, especially when such fine translators as the Sherwoods or David Short are at work, deserves attention. Like the late Peter Pišťanek, Vilikovský has Quentin Tarantino’s skill in weaving themes and perverse humour, but, unlike Tarantino, he is also capable of compassion.