

ISTVÁN OROSZ

THE EXTRA HORN

Translated by Anna Bentley

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Short Stories



Co-funded by
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AKADÉMIA

Az „Orosz István *Pótszaru* című kötetének angol nyelvű fordítása” szakmai program megvalósítását 2022-ben a Magyar Művészeti Akadémia támogatta.

© István Orosz, Typotex, Budapest, 2023

English translation © Anna Bentley, 2023

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ISBN 978 963 493 242 0

Typotex Publishing

Established by Zsuzsa Votisky in 1989

A member of the Hungarian Publishers and
Booksellers Association, founded in 1795

Publisher: Kinga Németh

Editor: Zsuzsa Erő

Cover design: Péter Somogyi

Printed in Hungary

RUSTED FERRY AND BIRD SWING

If anything had led him to jab his finger at that particular place on the map, despite the assistant professor shaking her head, it was the ocean. How many times, while on his travels, had he propounded, “Imagine a country with no coast! None at all, not even a single metre.” “You can’t, can you?” he would add. Then, after a pause for dramatic effect, he would talk about his own little country so far away, making sure to mention that, in the course of its complicated history, there had been a time when its shores had been washed by three different seas. Registering the resulting sympathetic looks, he too would be inclined to feel it had deserved more.

The shadow of the descending plane was visible both on the water and the sandy floor of the shallow bay. The two images followed the contours of the seabed, sometimes drawing closer to each other, sometimes drifting apart. Like a huge beetle, he thought. With a wing case. Then came the tin roofs, the labyrinthine docks and the port. The city looked bigger, more complicated than he had expected. Its morning bustle rendered it inscrutable. By the time he got his luggage, he knew he would be moving on from this place too. He changed into a clean shirt in the toilets and threw away his boarding passes, no longer having any need of them. He got himself a drink from the vending machine, picked up a few brochures, then dropped them in the bin. He was putting off the moment

when he would have to step out into the alien heat. Looking for the exit, he passed a car rental office. There was no queue at one of the desks. While he had no intention of renting a car here, in the back of beyond, he set down his suitcase.

“Seventy-five dollars,” the agent flashed at him as she applied her lipstick. “Only because it’s low season.”

He went along with the game. He clearly wasn’t holding anyone up, so he began a leisurely search for his papers. He would have put money on her ‘sales smile’ soon fading when she saw the unfamiliar language his driving licence was made out in and its lack of international validity.

“Where are you staying?”

“I don’t know.”

“Itinerary?”

“Haven’t decided.”

She filled in the form with melodious-sounding place-names.

“Date of issue?” The gel nail extensions ran the length of his licence. According to the gold letters on the lady’s badge, her name was Agatha Grindlay Yasmin.

“That one, maybe?”

“Ah! Congratulations!”

“?”

“Tomorrow’s your birthday. Forty-five.” The jewelled braces sparkled at him again. “You can celebrate to your heart’s content,” she said, making the shape of a glass with her hands. “The car is insured!”

That had truly gone clean out of his mind. He smiled self-consciously. It was too late to pull out now. He would have got the car, even if he had handed over his medical records rather than his licence.

“A stick-shift, if possible,” he attempted, timidly.

In under a quarter of an hour, the white Chrysler automatic was moving along the busy eastern main road surrounded by vans, brightly coloured lorries and lots of old-fashioned cars, all American makes. He pulled over from time to time to consult the map laid out his knees and check where he was. On his left, the shore was lined with palm trees bending in the wind. On his right was El Yunque. In the leaflet provided with the car, this rainforest was mentioned as the island’s main attraction. The great chain of mountains was still waist-high in cloud. Like a great, open fan. A refreshing sight in the stifling heat. A few miles further on, having passed a lonely bridge, he did, after all, turn left. He parked among the cars standing on the neglected beach, changed with some difficulty into his swimming trunks, and laid his damp vest over the steering wheel. It was only when he got out of his car that he noticed that all the others were gutted, rusting wrecks. Rusty wire curled out of the broken concrete barrier and the benches were so buried in sand that some of them were no more than shapeless mounds.

The water, however, was the same blue as on the postcards. It came towards him in wide, creamy crests and stopped at his feet. The waves spread across the sand in a thin, almost insubstantial film. He no longer saw them as water, but as a physical manifestation of the sea’s breathing. At the beginning of each sigh ran a thread of white foam, and where it stopped, it left behind a line of tiny snails and fragments of shells. The beach was covered in a mesh of wild sine curves, continually taking shape and vanishing. Waves are mortal, but their motion is immortal – where had he heard that? He had long forgotten; it was a line of poetry maybe. Now, however, more shreds

of memory were rising to the surface. A mild body odour, the taste of goat's cheese soaked in oil, ultramarine-blue and titanium-white. He dipped his hand in the water. I'm crouching down to the ocean, he thought. It was salty, like the first time he had tasted it. The sun stood in the sign of Libra, in the centre of the sky. In the distance, dark-skinned boys were playing water polo. The warm sea breeze flung snatches of their cries towards him. He tried to swim in a steady crawl, beating the waves. He guessed when they would reach him, and with a quick dive, dodged their slap. He would buy a diving mask the next day, he decided. It would be a birthday present to himself. He began to relax – things were actually going fine.

He drove up and down the streets of the little town several times. It was still just the afternoon, though to him it felt, on account of the jetlag, like late evening. He was also keen to rid himself of the sea salt that had dried onto his skin, but he couldn't see a hotel anywhere. He was looking for a main square, a town centre or at least some kind of organising principle in the soporific monotony, but it didn't matter how many turns he took, he couldn't find anywhere that looked significantly different from anywhere else, or a place with a friendly enough feel to it to encourage anyone to open a guesthouse. He found himself, by accident, at the ferry terminal. Some kind of commotion, an accident or a cycle race, had brought the traffic to a halt. To avoid getting caught up in it, he gave the steering wheel a quick twist, taking the only turn available to him. This brought him to a square, all but deserted except for a bar in one corner, where three mestizos in shorts stood propping up the counter. All probably over seventy, they stood there sipping canned beer, whistling a colonial-era song of some sort, and passing comment on the foreigners. A young

couple with rucksacks were scanning the timetable pasted to the ticket booth, which was padlocked. They had been doing this a good while, by all appearances, and, judging by the smirks exchanged by the old men, entirely pointlessly. Sensing he was about to be the old men's next target, he asked for a bag of dried potato rings and a couple of cans of cola. These were the only things he recognised in the offerings laid out on the counter, and he thought it better not to start asking questions. As it was, every move he made screamed 'foreigner.' He put away his change, glancing about him as he did so. A sluggish fan, a flypaper, an old cash register. Above the counter, a moulting macaw huddled on a bird swing. Although the words on the sign had caught his eye as soon as he entered, only now did he grasp their meaning. The inscription on the enamelled plate had something to do with the time period in which the hotel's guests could consume their breakfast. The letters were curly, cursive.

He drained the cola, threw the bag of potato rings on the back seat, and did a circuit of the two-storey building. He found the entrance on one of the side streets. The hall was empty. The television set at the reception desk had been left on. A dance-instruction video for some South American dance he didn't recognise. The room keys, around twenty of them, were hanging up. He closed the door once again and cleared his throat, though he couldn't make himself heard over the noise of the television. Straight-backed mulatto ladies were slamming their heels onto the parquet flooring.

By the time he returned, it was getting dark. At the counter, one of the men in shorts was jabbing at the remote control. Out of the gloom, the man grinned at him as at a familiar face. Though he had seen the information sheet left out on

the table the first time he was there, he asked how much the rooms were. Poker-faced, the man gave him a price, but little more. And in the man's squint, which could also be construed as friendly, he read, 'Drive around all you want, amigo, there's nowhere else to sleep.' With his upturned palm, the man signalled that payment was required in advance.

"Upstairs, first on the right," the man said, holding out the key.

When he got to the first floor, he was pleasantly surprised. In contrast to its stark exterior, the building's interior space was remarkably charming. The square courtyard was bordered by a raised, covered walkway, painted green. In the centre of it was an improbably large fig tree which, with its spreading branches and the complicated network of aerial roots hanging from them, blocked out the sky almost completely. A bird of some sort, similar to the bunting he knew from home, was chirping away in the branches. The rooms opened onto the walkway. It was the kind of hotel failed leaders of Latin American revolutions who had gone on the run were often lured into. A strange feeling stirred inside him. It was almost as if he had had something to do with this place already. These creaking drainpipes. As if he was connected by some distant memory to the wrap-around walkway, to the apple-green paint peeling in curls like seashells. As if he had been here once before, in a dream, perhaps.

The white, dried-up dog dirt in front of the door and the musty smell in the room suggested that no one had been there for a long while. The bouquet of flowers in the huge, lead-crystal vase was withered beyond recognition and rustled when he opened the window. The tap rattled and snorted before letting out rust-coloured water. Up on the ceiling, a big, grey

propeller began sluggishly to slice up the heat in the room, heat that had been pressed into a cube. The window opened onto the ocean, but the view was completely obscured by the old ferry. It ought to have been making the crossing to Culebra or Vieques, but perhaps because it lacked a timetable or lacked passengers, it never once moved out of the frame. The square which lay between the hotel and the boat (the nearer third of which he had to conjure up from memory, as the fly screen stretched over the window meant he couldn't lean out) was deserted even now. In the middle of it, there was a guano-streaked statue of some admiral or other, and the rusting tracks of an industrial railway spur were just visible between the slabs of concrete. Occasionally, a skinny dog would plod across the square, or a car would drift through, trailing snatches of music from its radio. Once, a woman also appeared. She went to the phone box in the middle of the square and talked at length, then returned from time to time to undertake yet another interminable phone call.

He chose the bed next to the window.

Being overtired, it took him a while to fall asleep.

When he woke up, he was not alone. Suddenly alert, he listened carefully, trying to pin down where the noises were coming from. He identified the whirring of the ceiling fan, the trickle of water onto the cola cans and the soft snapping of the plastic layer under the sheet. He held his breath. He could hear the drawn-out sighs of the waves outside the window and the creaking of the ropes that held the boat to the quayside. He kept his ears pricked for a while longer. Idiot, he thought. His night waking could be explained easily enough: back at home it would already be early morning! What time was it, in fact? He fumbled around for the switch. The light blinded him

for a moment, but even so, he was aware almost immediately of the big beetle. He broke out in a sweat. Perhaps it was the symmetry that was the most alarming. Not that of the beetle's perfect body – though that too – more how it was positioned there, right above his forehead. That spot couldn't have been selected more precisely even with a plumb line. A cockroach, he thought, though it looked bigger. Of course, here in the tropics everything grew bigger. It might be some bloodsucker unknown to entomologists at home. It stood out so sharply against the white of the ceiling that it was impossible to decide what colour it was. He got the feeling that any sudden move on his part might wreck everything. For a minute, he watched the beetle in silence. That minute might also have been an hour. Then, keeping his eyes on the creature all the time, he slowly moved his head a little to the right on the pillow. After a short pause, the beetle on the ceiling moved in the same direction. He moved his head to the left. The beetle moved too.

Maybe if he put out the light, the whole thing would disappear. Maybe he would wake up in a nicer dream ... But he was scared of being in the dark. If it was a cockroach – he tried to remember back to his days in a student dorm – it would definitely have cut and run when he turned on the light. This one had stayed put. The room was as high as a funeral parlour. There was no question of him knocking the beetle down with anything, or even chasing it away. A ridiculous situation, he told himself. He would go across to the other bed, and that would be that. If only the blasted thing wasn't watching his every move! He pulled the sheet over his head while he thought up a plan, then he swung into action, moving at lightning speed. He flipped off the light. Grabbing his discarded clothes and the bedspread, he bundled them together

into a man-sized hump on the bed and covered it with the sheet. He crept quietly across to the other bed, pulled the cover up to his eyes and switched on the light. The beetle was there above him. There was a nonchalance about it, as if its being there was the most natural thing in the world. As if it had never been anywhere else. Actually, he wasn't surprised. Truth be told, this was what he had reckoned on. It had something to do with temperature, clearly. The damp rising from his overheated body was directing the creature. Its delicate little sensors could pick up even the slightest alteration in the atmosphere around it.

The cold shower refreshed him somewhat. The beetle was there waiting for him. He knew he had to sleep, that what with the journey and adjusting to a new time zone, he had a lot of sleep to catch up on, but he didn't feel drowsy at all. He tried to think about something else. He tried to recall the names of all the medications he was taking. He played with the letters of random words, arranging them into new ones. Rusted ferry and bird swing. Stirred air drew funds. Darting furry breeds win. Few grins in bed tray. Wet fan drains tube. It was like someone else was thinking his thoughts. He concentrated on his face: which way were his wrinkles were going to move? Would they move? He sat up in order to rearrange his features.

The beetle set off. It went across the ceiling as far as the wall on the left, then made its way along the top of the wall all the way to the far corner. It waited a couple of minutes, then at a less even pace than before, and with frequent changes of direction, it reached the other end of the wall facing him. This was the greatest distance imaginable between them in the room. The diagonal of the cube, in effect. While this was

undoubtedly reassuring, his discovery that the so-far largely motionless creature could speedily reach any point in the room was less so. The next stretch of wall on the right-hand side happened to be covered by pipes and wires running above the windows. He was able to hazard a guess as to when the beetle would emerge this side of them, however, based on what he had seen before. Though minutes went by without him seeing anything, he couldn't take his eyes off the bundle of pipes. He ran his gaze along them at the speed the beetle must be moving. Just when he had calculated it would, or possibly a little earlier, the creature reappeared. It waited, just as it had done in every corner so far, then suddenly turned back. The metres it had already done under cover were retraced, but this time it didn't pop out on the other side. A long wait ensued. By now it could have done the distance there and back, several times in fact. He scanned the pipes once more. Nothing. This was more unsettling than having it crouching right above him. What the hell was it doing in there? This was not in the rules! Come out and show yourself! He felt he was at an unfair disadvantage not being able to hide, while that one up there could conceal itself in the cobwebby wiring.

Reluctantly, he conceded that this was actually the best thing that could have happened. He would calm down soon and sleep. After all, for all he knew every room had large hidden beetles in it crouching behind the pipes, and up to now, in his previous life, he had slept like a baby regardless. But how far away, how incidental everything in his 'previous life' seemed! He didn't know why he put it like that, but somehow the expression felt appropriate. His earlier life. His own life, the one which at that point had still been someone else's. His thoughts had gradually backed away from the old world.

He no longer knew where the light switches were, nor could he recall how many trees stood in the square. He couldn't even remember the loathsome tune on the clock radio anymore. He thought, with some gratification, of his letterbox: it would have been full for a long time now. Invitations and flyers would be piling up around it. Notifications, telegrams, registered packages. Bills and payment demands, threatening letters saying what would happen if ... geological layers at the very bottom of an ancient, lacklustre story.

Yawning, he was just reaching for the light switch, when something caught his eye. He sensed it more than saw it, but he knew right away what he was looking at. It wasn't easy to make out, as the spinning shadows cast by the merciless, slicing blades of the fan set the whole surface of the ceiling atremble. Instead of turning off the light, he turned off the propeller. He was right. The feelers, no wider than a hair, which were protruding from behind the cluster of pipes along with the head, or rather the crown of the head, would be imperceptible from this distance, were it not that the image of the peeping Tom cast by the light on the bedside table enlarged it to an easily discernible size, like some kind of shadow-play character at the theatre. It was just annoying that he couldn't shout over to it, 'I can *see* you! The game is up, my little friend, you're out!'

He switched the fan back on and tried out its various speeds, making a show of not concerning himself any further with the beetle. He potted about, looking with contemptuous indifference anywhere but up there, tidied the bedside table, pulled the drawers in and out, shook out his pillow. Sneak off wherever you like! And wherever you can. He stole a glance upwards: no change. With feigned calm, he set to

work. He moved everything off the floor. His luggage went up onto the shelves of the dressing table. He even put his shoes on a chair. He pulled all the furniture a handsbreadth away from the wall, threw the dried-up bouquet out of the vase and filled it to the brim with water, then did the same with the plastic soap dish and the two chunky glasses he had found in the room. In each of these he placed a leg of the bed. Let's see you swim across that! In case plain water was no obstacle to cockroach-type insects like these, he squeezed in a generous amount of the nauseating-smelling shampoo he had found in the shower cubicle. When he lay back down on the bed, the vase shattered. Luckily, he found a less fragile-looking ashtray and put the fourth leg of the bed in that. He felt he had finally got the better of the beetle, or at least shut it out of his life. He tried to list every step in the evolution of the phylum from arthropods to primates and felt this was proof of his superiority. He may even have been a little ashamed that the contest was so unequal.

Meanwhile, that one up there had probably also got bored with playing hide and seek. It came creeping out to see what was going on and then stopped at a respectable distance, beyond the mid-point of the ceiling. Perhaps it sensed that its presence was no longer so important, that before long, it would be no more than bad memory. He knew that the beetle was watching him, but found he was no longer bothered by this to any great extent. He began to feel listless but was still too wound up to sleep. He cast around for some activity that would make him drowsy. Measuring the beetle. While it was clear that at this distance he couldn't reckon on a precise result, he was confident he could get pretty close. He went through all the possible methods in his mind. He recalled the

Egyptian geometricians and an Ancient Greek who had managed to measure the diameter of the Moon and the Sun. He lifted the battered little thermometer off its hook on the wall, and lifted it towards the beetle, straightening his arm like they teach you to in drawing classes. The creature's length was five notches on the scale and its feelers roughly four. He glanced around the regular, cube-shaped room. The wall opposite was just as far away as the ceiling, so that was where he needed to find something he could measure. There was a faded notice for guests, house rules or some such, fixed with a drawing pin. From this distance, he couldn't make out the words, but the seventh word along was exactly five notches on the thermometer's scale, the same as the beetle. The notice had been typed and duplicated using carbon paper. Going closer to it, he picked out the word *Derrota*, then ran his eyes over the remainder of the text. He was looking to see if it said anywhere what time he would have to vacate the room by. Though he barely understood a word of it, he was reassured to discover that no time featured on the notice at all. He would have a good, long sleep then, he decided, maybe going on until they came banging on the door. The word *derrota* in any case measured fifty-six units on the thermometer, so if the mercury column was divided into millimetres, it was about five and a half centimetres long.

"Ten centimetres with feelers!" he said aloud, clearly enough for him up there to hear it. Then he said it again, putting into his intonation all the superiority intellect enjoyed over vile biological existence. He hadn't shaved since he had been given his discharge assessment, and the grey stubble rendered his face even fiercer. With two fingers, he pushed aside the hair hanging over his forehead. Then, sensing this gesture

was also expressive of superiority, he repeated it. Exactly ten centimetres with feelers! He was completely naked.

Just then, the beetle took off. It circled the propeller, casually, as if this was the most natural thing in the world, and landed on the left-hand wall, well below the line of demarcation marked by the pipes. The rattle of the wing covers and, beneath them, the whirring of the pergamen-like membranes was recognisable even through the noise stirred up by the fan. Familiar even. He knew now that this was the noise that had roused him in the middle of the night. It could fly too! There was little point in having the bed legs in cups of water, then. This thing could go wherever it wanted. He lay back on the bed, feeling helpless. And to top it all, it was getting closer! At least, it had never come this close before. He pulled the sheet over himself. He had to frighten it away somehow. He began to flip the light switch on and off, and twist the speed-dial for the fan. Now appearing, now dying away in the lamp-light, the flailing shadows of the propeller blades drew ecstatic figures on the ceiling. The beetle became confused. It scuttled up and down and flew from one wall to the other, but there were also short periods when, despite all his efforts, it remained motionless in one of the corners. Despite this, after a little while, he had the feeling that he was able to direct the insect. If he adjusted the speed of the fan from a low setting to a higher one, then the beetle set off down the wall. If he did the reverse, the creature moved upwards. If he flicked the light switch rapidly during the downwards phase, then the beetle would depart from the perpendicular in a rightward direction; slow switch-flicking resulted in this change of direction being to the left. A mirror-image of these movements were elicited when it was heading upwards. If it took off, of course, then he

would have to start the whole exercise again from the beginning. After a few more-or-less successful experiments, he had formulated a plan of action. If he could manage to get the creature as far down as the top of the bathroom door, then – there being no more vertical surface for it to crawl on – it would probably turn inwards under the top of the frame. Then, with one quick movement, he would be able to shut it out. He went through the arguments in his head that indicated this was doable. The light was on in the bathroom, but it was weaker than the one here in the bedroom, something cockroaches clearly preferred. The distance from light switch to door was a mere three paces. If he got the rhythm right, it could be covered at lightning speed. The door shut from the outside, so pushing it would be a simple manoeuvre. Over in the bathroom, there was the steady, soothing trickle of water onto cans of cola, which could only be an attractive sound to a damp-loving beetle like this one. For some reason, he was sure that the beetle came from over there, that it made its way up at night through the pipes and sewers from the deep, dank underworld of the drains. One argument against his plan, however, was the fact that, in all the time they had known each other, the beetle had never descended as far as the top of the door, and there was no certainty that he would be able to persuade it to now, however cunningly he steered it.

He took a short break. He was now really quite exhausted and had lost all sense of time. The muscles in his neck were knotted. But he never considered giving up. He was still hoping to get a bit of shuteye, and he knew that as long as the beetle was in the room with him, that would be impossible. When he'd got his breath back, he got to work. The first attempt was encouraging. The pesky thing was maybe only a handsbreadth

from the door when it took off. The second was somewhat less successful. Perhaps, in his excitement, he had been overhasty when altering the speed of the fan. The third attempt went worryingly badly, but he could at least see exactly where he had gone wrong. The fourth was dazzlingly successful. Everything went exactly to plan and the beetle was practically at the door frame before it flew off. When, however, it did the same on the next try, he began to suspect it was toying with him. Outside, it was already beginning to get light. The rising sun had just entered the sign of Scorpio, and the designs painted on the ceiling by the lamplight were losing strength. But the beetle was now behaving itself. It strolled over to the top of the door, turned in and stopped on the boundary between the two rooms. He knew that when it went round onto the other side and vanished from view, there would be no room for hesitation; in that instant he would have to leap for the door and shut it, but until then, he didn't dare move a muscle lest he put the beetle off somehow. Here I am, eyeball to eyeball with a beetle, he thought. Who was going to blink first? Yellow lights filtered in through the grubby flyscreen. By the time he looked back, the beetle had gone. He leaped up from the bed, slipped on a pool of shampoo, and crashed onto the broken vase.

Now he wouldn't be able to push the door to. He could still hear the boom of a ship's horn nearby. Or rather somewhere very far off. Out on the open, endless ocean.