

László Krasznahorkai was born in Gyula, Hungary, in 1954. He has written five novels and won numerous prizes, including the International Man Booker Prize 2015, the 2013 Best Translated Book Award in Fiction for *Satantango*, and the 1993 Best Book of the Year Award in Germany for *The Melancholy of Resistance*. For more about Krasznahorkai, visit his extensive website: <http://www.krasznahorkai.hu/>

PRAISE FOR LÁSZLÓ KRASZNAHORKAI

“Throughout Krasznahorkai’s work, what strikes the reader above all are the extraordinary sentences, sentences of incredible length that go to incredible lengths, their tone switching from solemn to madcap to quizzical to desolate as they go their wayward way; epic sentences that, like a lint roll, pick up all sorts of odd and unexpected things as they accumulate inexorably into paragraphs that are as monumental as they are scabrous and musical” Man International Booker Prize judges’ citation

“The latest and most luminous book to appear in English by the Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai ... a devastatingly thoughtful, austere and contemplative book, written with a deep knowledge of artistic technique and human affairs that is rare among novelists” Tim Martin, *Daily Telegraph*

“Krasznahorkai is a visionary writer” Theo Tait, *Guardian*

“Krasznahorkai is the kind of writer who at least once on every page finds a way of expressing something one has always sensed but never known, let alone been able to describe” Nicole Krauss

“As always with Mr Krasznahorkai, real understanding remains beyond grasp, though a sense of illumination is pervasive. As a novelist he is a one-off, even if his work—as this book so finely shows—is universal” *Economist*

“The contemporary Hungarian master of apocalypse who inspires comparison with Gogol and Melville” Susan Sontag

“Krasznahorkai’s subject is a total disenchantment with the world, and yet the manner in which he presents this disenchantment is hypnotically enchanting. He is one of the great inventors of new forms in contemporary literature” *New York Review of Books*

“László Krasznahorkhai offers us stories that are relentlessly generative and defiantly irresolvable. They are haunting, pleasantly weird and, ultimately, bigger than the worlds they inhabit” *International Herald Tribune*

“Krasznahorkai is clearly fascinated by apocalypse, by broken revelation, indecipherable messages. To be always ‘on the threshold of some decisive perception’ is as natural to a Krasznahorkai character as thinking about God is to a Dostoyevsky character; the Krasznahorkai world is a Dostoyevskian one from which God has been removed” *New Yorker*

“The rolling continuity of Krasznahorkai’s prose slides between viewpoints, tracks back and forth in repetition and re-emphasis, steps aside to remember a different time, resembling the flux of memory, which at any moment may be jolted into the present. After many pages of being suspended in the unending, the approach to a full stop can bring a sense of dread, which Krasznahorkai most often justifies in his final phrase or two: the prose lifts us up: then we drop” *Times Literary Supplement*

THE LAST WOLF

LÁSZLÓ
KRASZNAHORKAI



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THE LAST WOLF

Translated by George Szirtes

There he was, laughing, but in trying to laugh in a more abandoned manner he had become preoccupied with the question of whether there was any difference at all between the burden of futility on the one hand and the burden of scorn on the other as well as with what he was laughing about anyway, because the subject was, uniquely, everything, arising from an everything that was everywhere, and, what was more, if indeed it was everything, arising out of everywhere, it would be difficult enough to decide what it was at, arising out of what, and in any case it wouldn't be full-hearted laughter, because futility and scorn were what continually oppressed him, and he was doing nothing, not a damn thing, simply drifting, spending hours sitting in the Sparschwein with his first glass of Sternburg at his side, while everything around him positively dripped with futility, nor to mention scorn, though there was an occasional drop in the intensity

of this feeling, moments in which he actually forgot about it and stared quite blankly ahead, staring for interminable minutes at a time at a crack or a stain on the wooden floor of the bar, since this was the simplest thing to do, that is after having dropped round the corner, immediately after waking, to start there and end there, not as though he were drinking himself stupid, for after all he couldn't even afford to do that, but rather, as always, out of sheer habit, because at some time he must have said, bring me a Sternburg *bitte*, and ever since then that is what he had been served with, as soon as the man caught sight of him, so he didn't even have to open his mouth but simply step into the Sparschwein and there was the Sternburg ready on his table, not that he took deep draughts of it of course, taking just the odd sip, just enough so he should be able to remain there, as indeed he did remain, generally for two or three hours, and even then he only left the table so as to take a turn round the Hauptstrasse with its filthy sidewalks, down toward Goeben, then out toward the Kleistpark as far as Kaiser-Wilhelm-Platz, where he would cross to the far side by the fishmongers and Humana Second Hand in

order to retrace his steps, the sidewalk horribly filthy because everyone, young and old, was constantly spitting on it as they walked or just stood, but spitting in any case, even when looking into a shop window or waiting for a bus, and that might have been why it all felt so sticky wherever he went, not like a place for walking, because as soon as you set off you feared you'd soon be stuck fast, so you needed to walk at a certain speed, at *brisk walking pace*, as he thought of it, so he shouldn't feel anything, and, what was worse, in the doorways there were pools of vomit that had frozen overnight, and the walls too were filthy with their weather-soaked, spray-painted Kurdish graffiti, and, to put it in a nutshell, the walk started and ended in Hauptstrasse, and there he was laughing, but he didn't read it through the second time, at least he didn't even touch the letter for a while, for how stupid it was, he told the Hungarian barman though the man simply stared at him, quizzically raising his eyebrows, not listening, not even hearing because the music was so loud, an especially sugary piece of Turkish pop, the kind continually being played in the Sparschwein, by either Mustafa Sandal or Tarkan, or Tarkan or Mustafa

Sandal, the choice of music being hard to explain because it was pointless the owner trying to lure customers into the bar with it, a bar selling alcohol, since the Turks tended ever more to wander in by mistake, but what the hell, he waved his hand, and looked out through the window though there was nothing worth looking at out there just some drug dealers leaning against the wall by the Sparschwein, waiting for something, the sky leaden, nothing to see, all aspects of futility and scorn, he thought, pushing the letter away from him because he didn't even feel much like screwing it up and throwing it into the nearest litter-basket, the whole thing a nightmare, he told the Hungarian barman, and laughed, but the man was paying no attention at all now, though even if he were there would have been no point in trying to explain things by saying it was some ridiculous advertisement or that it had been misaddressed to him because it was serious, and therefore impossible to misaddress, yes, serious indeed, extremely serious as it turned out, and it was just that the whole business was utterly ridiculous, because while it had in fact been addressed to him, and was genuinely from Madrid, he can't have been the

one it was intended for, since he wouldn't have been invited to Extremadura, by this unheard-of foundation, a foundation staffed by people he had never heard of, asking him whether he felt like spending a couple of weeks there writing something about the region, and what was this with "felt like"?! hadn't he been living here for years, here in the embattled wasteland of the Hauptstrasse, earning three hundred euros from one or two lectures, which was just enough to see him through on a day by day basis, so it must clearly have been a mistake which might be explained by them having sent the invitation a few years ago (it would not have been unusual for the local post office that he should have just received it) or it might be that they didn't know that the person they were inviting no longer existed, that, yes, there had been someone of that name some time in the past, the name right in that sense, but that there wasn't anyone behind the name now, no "Herr Professor," and while it was possible that some such title did once precede his name it had made no sense for several years now since there was nothing, not a thing, to connect him with a person who, while he existed, was unaware that there was

no point in thinking, who had written a few unreadable books full of ponderously negative sentences and depressing logic in claustrophobic prose, a series of books in fact, when it had long become obvious, almost immediately obvious, that no one read them of course, and, that being the case, he must long have been washed up as a philosopher, no one was making any serious attempt to understand him or what his sentences, his logic, his diction or prose might be about, and in the meantime he had practically no income, which made it impossible for him simply to give up, and they said they would pay all his expenses, his flight, the cost of his accommodation and provide a car as well as an interpreter, all “awaiting you on arrival in Madrid to drive you over to us in Caceres or Badajoz, where we could offer you a fee of X euros for your article,” this being something he couldn’t get out of his head, so he would sit on his bed with the letter in his lap imagining what he could do with so many euros, and how it was exactly like having your name drawn in a lottery, meaning, you, yes you; you, if anyone, can’t afford to reject such an offer, and you have only to do this and that thing, the whole thing being

an absolute bloody nightmare, he muttered to himself, staring out of the window, seeing only himself, an enormous mirrored bald pate, the next day having started just like the previous one, waking with difficulty then getting down to the Sparschwein, the taste of cold Sternburg in the cold bottle, the usual thing and the Hungarian barman, who, he felt, was his most intimate companion, one who nevertheless never once succeeded in putting the glass gently down before him, a failure that exacerbated his already terrible nervous state, a state that was hard to explain, but he would happily have smashed the bastard's face in, because why go slamming it down on the table every time, with the sky so overcast outside, a leaden sky yielding little light, the drug dealers leaning against the wall, the sidewalk sticky with spittle and that bitter taste in his mouth of futility and scorn as he drifted down toward Goeben then the Kleistpark followed by Kaiser-Wilhelm-Platz, then over to the other side, past the fishmonger and the Humana Second Hand store thence back to the Sparschwein, where he did not throw the letter away, it still being tucked in his pocket, but read it through, for it really was addressed to him,

HERMAN

*The Game Warden &
The Death of a Craft*

Translated by John Batki

The Game Warden

(first version)

The assignment—although exactly what he had been secretly counting on, despite a lurking fear that his retirement might make them decide they no longer needed him—in the end came unexpectedly, one might say caught him unprepared, for at the time when in the plainest terms sparing all empty formalities he thanked the “wildlife management experts for their trust,” and accepted their mandate, he had felt almost panicked, as one who reached his goal too easily, practically unhindered, without any struggle, for not only had he “privately counted” on this, but this was in fact what he had been expressly planning when

years earlier he had first entertained the idea of retirement, hoping it would bring real liberation and a certain latitude “absolutely necessary for the unimpeded unfolding of his abilities, smothered as they had been by fatuous requirements, rules and regulations.” As he himself later recognized there was certainly nothing surprising in his being chosen, though it would have been gratifying to know that it was his well-known perfectionism, endless perseverance and unflinching work ethic that convinced the authorities about his indisputable rightness for the job, but he was aware nonetheless that in selecting him the experts were paying homage to a peerless virtuoso of trapping who—as Herman more than once remarked with bitter irony—was in a way “the last of the Mohicans,” guarding the splendid mysteries of an ancient craft gradually sinking into permanent oblivion. Of course beyond the personal considerations the decision was also justified by the nature of the task: the Remete woods in question (a mere couple of hundred acres of hornbeam and oak) had for decades been absent from the forefront of their attention—all forestry activities had been focused on the vast hunting range only five

kilometers away—with the consequence that this inexcusable neglect (in Herman’s words, “the alarming laxity of the authorities”) had turned the Remete by the time of the assignment into an unmanageable and impenetrable jungle, a veritable “sore on the well-groomed body of the region” where no right-thinking hunter or hiker would ever set foot. But the matter had turned really grave only after it was discovered that in this forest left to its fate and gone feral in an almost menacing manner the incredible proliferation of noxious predators worried not only the region’s farmers but had come to seriously threaten the nearby hunting grounds. A quick decision was made to give Herman a free hand. He plunged into his task and went about his work like a stubborn shadow, “on location” from crack of dawn till late afternoon, clearing scrub, trimming trees, building salt-licks and feeders, restoring ranger trails, or, where deemed necessary, blazing new trails; using ancient ways—by reading the tracks leading into and out of the woods—he estimated the numbers of wild stock, both beneficial game and pernicious predators; relying on intuition and experience, he examined the system of trails usually taken by

animals as well as alternate side trails, resting and sleeping coverts, and finally—after it became clear that he would be up against mostly stray dogs and feral cats, as well as a few badgers and foxes—he repaired and de-scented his available stockpile of round traps, steel-jaw traps, dogcatching traps, and, while the local blacksmith, following Herman's clear and precise specifications, fabricated ten of the so-called Berlin swan's necks which, as he repeatedly told the blacksmith, he "expected to work wonders," Herman shut himself up for days in his home workshop making sure there would be no shortage of deadfall traps and snares when the need for them arose. Next came a long period of habituation until the day arrived when Herman felt certain that predators no longer shied away from his well-camouflaged traps and he decided that his plan would "go live" on the morrow. He had no doubts about success, having familiarized himself with the predators' trails, observed the directions of the wind, concocted his own de-scenting mix of ripe fish-heads, intestines, diced giblets and other scraps of offal; he employed artificial scents, a variety of baits and lures, and where needed, built chutes of sticks and

stones to guide the animal toward a trap, especially for dog-traps—nonetheless he awaited the results with anxious trepidation, for he believed that in his person “an entire profession stood to be judged . . .” and that the prestige, which in the case of a profession such as this has been fading for some time and losing relevance, would now regain its former glory. For the authorities who, by offering Herman this paid position, mostly intended to allay their own consciences without expecting serious results, were surprised to find that after two years the almost frightening primal jungle that the Remete had been was now a bright and wholesome spot of color in the landscape, and the experts could hardly believe their eyes reading the summary report submitted by Herman at the end of two years, although in view of the data they had to agree with Herman according to whom “the population of noxious predators has been reduced to a minimum while the stock of useful game has shown a marked increase.” A hastily got-up delegation, sent to express the appreciation of the authorities, found him on location engaged in setting up a deadfall trap in a thicket, but Herman’s behavior was so unsociable or,

rather, so unfriendly, that they thought it better to defer the matter to a later occasion. And when, accompanied by a brusque, rather flippant note (“No need for this!”), he promptly returned the invitation from the game managers’ and hunters’ association to their usual mid-year awards event, the authorities wisely decided that it was better not to disturb him until he’d had a chance to get some rest since obviously this was nothing but a case of severe exhaustion which, at his age—and after such prolonged exertions!—was “really not surprising” ... although in fact it was the calamitously oppressive masses of noxious predators exterminated over the past two years that caused Herman to have second thoughts. Toward the end of his second year a horrendous nightmare ambushed him for the first time: he glimpses the carrion pit in the distance ... (which in fact he himself had dug at the outset in a carefully maintained clearing, where he flung the carcasses of dogs and cats, and which had the additional advantage of its pestilential stench exerting an as it were “mesmeric attraction” on the predators that had lately become exceedingly shy) ... then, slowly approaching the pit, he becomes aware of a cer-

tain hideous stirring ... he hears frightful, nauseating sounds of slurping and sliding, popping and splaying, until ... at last he must confront in the depths of the pit the enormous putrescent hairy mass of dead meat quivering like jelly ... At this point he would jolt awake bathed in sweat, gasping for breath and staring terrified for minutes on end into the dark, and from then on not a night passed free of this recurring horror which soon began to weigh on him in the daytime as well, until one day in the course of his morning rounds, obeying the hunter's unwritten code of ethics and removing and killing the animals caught by his traps overnight, suddenly all his strength evaporated and for several long minutes he had to look on helplessly at the convulsions of a soiled mongrel in its death throes. As far as that goes he knew numerous ways of killing a trapped beast: for a small animal such as a marten he pressed down the animal's head with a stick and stepped on its chest; with foxes, badgers, cats and dogs (provided they survived the night) he first clubbed them on the nose and then with a firm motion he drove his knife between the skull and top vertebra of the stunned beast, thereby severing the spinal