



**A TAD LATE,
BUT THANKS ANYWAY**

fantázia

A Tad Late, but Thanks Anyway

An Anthology of Slovak Speculative Fiction

*The best entries from Fantasy Award 2015, literary award
for SF/F/H short stories in English language written
by authors from Slovakia and the Czech Republic.*

The competition is organised by the civic association Fantázia.



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An Anthology of Slovak Speculative Fiction

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A Tad Late, but Thanks Anyway...

Editorial by Ruzena and Ivan Alaksa

After we published the first Slovak anthology of speculative fiction in English language *Fragments of Heaven*, we decided to publish one such book every year. Our goal was (and still is) to change the fact that the Slovak speculative fiction is unknown to the world, and introduce some Slovak works of these genres to the readers around the globe.

There were 25 competing short stories in the second year of our literary competition Fantasy Award. After Mr. Mike Resnick in the first year, in our second year we got another great science fiction author as a judge – Mr. Jeff VanderMeer with his wife Ann. Other judges were: Michaela Musilova, a Slovak astrobiologist working with NASA and Erik Fazekas, editor with a big Slovak publishing house. Their assessment resulted in some further content for our e-book with the works of contemporary, more or less known, young Slovak authors.

So, with several years after releasing the *Fragments of Heaven* anthology gone by, here we are with another one. And again, we named it after one of the stories. What you are getting is a collection of twelve chosen short stories by Slovak authors who joined the literary competition Fantasy Award in 2015. As a bonus we are bringing you a short story from the most famous and bestselling Slovak fantasy author Juraj Cervenak – translation of a story from his book *The Warlock: The War with Demons*.

The first story is the science fiction *Flash of Nectarine Taste, Smell of the Fractal Ferns*: after many years, a former participant

to a space program is visited by an old friend who is not from this world. It is written by Zuska Stozicka, a well-known Slovak author of a few published collections of SF short stories.

The second story *Musical Composition* is a fantasy written by Marek Brenisin. It is about an extremely skilled musician who shows up one day at the king's court. But who is this mysterious being with her music that mesmerizes everyone?

A cleaning lady in an oceanographic research center unwillingly causes a small accident that has some far-reaching consequences... This is the storyline of the science fiction story *Prospects for Life* by author Mina Pavova.

The main title of the e-book is that of the interesting short story written by Lenka Stiblarikova, an author who owns a small publishing house "Hydra" with her friend and they publish science fiction, fantasy and horror books in Slovak. In the shortest story of this e-book *A Tad Late, but Thanks Anyway*, different objects of everyday use, but also treasures, start falling down from the sky and no one knows what is causing this phenomenon.

Daniel Klimek's story *Hard* is the winner of this year's Fantasy Award. It is a postapocalyptic story about a young boy whose world is shattered to pieces when a mysterious event causes all the people on Earth to vanish without trace. He spends the rest of his life as a wanderer, searching for the cause of the occurrence.

Home is a horror story that warns us to be careful who we go home with. An apparently harmless young woman may hide deadly secrets. Written by Patricia Grachova.

A small community of people is doing their best to survive in a frozen post-apocalyptic world of the story *Hunting Seagulls* written by Brynn Absolon.

In the fantasy story *All the Little Baby Girls* by Barbora Vinczeova, after a boy's little sister is kidnapped by some mysterious beings, his father tells him a strange and disturbing story from his past, explaining the true nature of his sister...

The science fiction *The Decision* tells the story of a man who is asked to participate in an experiment. His task is to spot the difference between two girls that seem to be identical, but at the same time are diametrically opposed. Written by Roman Kleman.

Among us there are some chosen people who can shape clouds as they wish, thinks Diana Majerova in her science fiction story *Look Up, at the Skies*.

One of the few horrors in this anthology is from Anna Olejarova who, meanwhile, became a known Slovak author, winner of the Slovak Fantazia Award. In her short story *Bloody Bones* a teacher plays a less conventional game with a gang of little spoiled brats in order to punish them. But the things turn very dark for everyone...

The last competing entry in this e-book is a science fiction named *Right* and is written by Tatiana Lajsova. In a distant future, where time travel is possible, a woman decides to retrospectively abort her rogue daughter.

The “bonus track” of this e-book is the fantasy story by Juraj Cervenak – bestselling Slovak author. He has published several book series, this story is taken from the series about the Slavic warlock Rogan “living” roughly in the 8th-9th century pagan Slavic kingdom in Central Europe. *Out of Sacred Water* is a story set in ancient times, where cutting the forest in order to extend the new sovereign’s fortress is threatening the existence of the magical creatures rusalkas.

Dear reader, we are honoured by your choosing our collection of sci-fi, horror and fantasy short stories written by Slovak authors and we hope this anthology will assemble into a colourful mosaic which you will enjoy, which will surprise you and direct your interest towards further fantastic writing from Slovakia.

We are bringing this anthology to life ... a tad late, but thanks anyway... for choosing and reading it.



Flash of Nectarine Taste, Smell of the Fractal Ferns

by Zuska Stozicka

About Zuska:

Biologist dreaming about distant worlds and peculiar life forms “out there” as well as the inside of the human mind. Most of her short SF stories (published under her maiden name Minichova until 2007) can be found in the anthology Mozaika rôznobežných ciest (Mosaic of the Concurrent Ways, 2001, Slovak, co-authors V. Bur and A. Stiffel) and several collections: Črepiny z oblohy (An Anthology of Slovak Speculative Fiction, 2007, Slovak), Astralnia (2007, Polish), Mamut farby malinového lekváru (Raspberry Jam-Coloured Mammoth, 2015, Slovak) and Ĝis tien/Až tam (That far, 2016, Esperanto/Slovak). She lives in Bratislava with her husband, two children and a sense of wonder.

Flash of nectarine taste, smell of the fractal ferns...
Strong hit to the back of the head, little bit of blood
on the tongue... A bitter chill in the fingertips. Cold
and darkness. Unearthly darkness.

“I’m so afraid, Giulian! Where are we?”

“I don’t know. And don’t be afraid, I’m holding your hand.”

“This darkness! It hurts my eyes!”

“Look for the stars. Focus...”

•••

“Surprise!” Tricchard smiled and Aarin gasped. Just to be sure, she closed her eyes, counted to five (she actually intended to count up to ten, but she didn’t last out) and opened them again.

He was still standing there, like the whole situation was an excellent joke: “I told you I would come to see you. You haven’t aged a day!”

He lied. She was twenty four years older. She collected herself, stopped the water and grasped for the towel.

In fact, she had been expecting something like this the whole time. She alone had fought for it. A friend, through whom she had secured these new medicines, had warned her. “Pre-clinical test phases are a separate issue, but when we’re talking about intervention into the biochemistry of the brain, models never prepare us for everything that can go wrong. Too many factors... You may be the one in a thousand who will pay for it dearly. Think, Aarin. Think twice. It can cost you even what little time you have remaining.”

Who would have decided differently in her position – knowing that those party-colored “candies” she swallowed every day couldn’t do more than ease the pain and withdrawal symptoms? She volunteered for the clinical trial. Uncertainty was the price for hope – plus a controlled daily routine, protocols, regular medical examinations and recording the side effects in her spare time.

The carpet silently absorbed the wet footprints. Aarin finally managed to mine the form out of her handbag and the pen soon followed. With her pretty, but slightly shaky scripture, she wrote into the “Side Effects” column: 17.5., 6.25: Hallucinations (vis., aud.). Her right hand was more and more obstinate, yet Aarin disguised it successfully. Trichard observed her with interest.

“You are a hallucination,” she remarked in light conversational tone.

He smiled. “No. Just a guest.”

•••

She tried her best to act normally. Such minute difficulties surely cannot turn her world on end. She hurried to work.

She couldn't stop working – if she eventually fell out of the cycle of her daily duties, she would start to pity herself and mental collapse is the first step to the black tunnel. No, she was not about to let that happen yet.

“Just relax and eat; I'll sit down,” he said as she poured the oatmeal and milk into the bowl. Of course, hallucinations don't eat. He added: “You didn't eat in our place either, do you remember?”

He couldn't come to visit her. After all, Tricchard didn't exist. All those years, there had been people persistently convincing her of this. Aarin wolfed down the cereal nervously and Tricchard's face still held the expression *I'm so happy to see you*. That was exactly the way he would behave, if he really came. Aarin shook her head and drunk the milk remaining at the bottom of the bowl in disgust.

“You're living healthier. You are wiser than me.”

“I'm dying. I don't know why I'm doing this,” she replied and wiped the white milk smear off her upper lip.

“Oh.” His smile was gone at once. “How much time do they give you?”

“Days, months... I don't know exactly, I wouldn't want to. Why am I repeating this? As my hallucination you surely know it all.”

“Aarin,” he grabbed her by the shoulders. She felt the tenderness and imperiousness in his touch, the warmth and weight of his hands as if they belonged to a real person. “I am me. I truly, terribly wish to, but I can't help you. Our medicine cannot compare to yours. But... I'll be with you... If you won't send me away.”

She looked into his eyes... and somewhere inside the ice was breaking. She hugged Tricchard tightly.

“You know I wouldn't; how could I...” She nestled her face into his shirt and it soaked up her tears as if it were made from real cloth.

Slowly they let the magic of the moment disappear and Aarin collected herself: "I've bamboozled you with my problems-"

"Your problems are the most important ones now."

"But that's no reason to wallow in them forever. I am such a miserable hostess. Certainly you want to see the city. I will excuse myself from the workshop-"

"You don't have to. I would like to get acquainted with the everyday life in your home, if I won't be a bother..." He was always immoderately polite, even as a strung-out youngster. That memory spontaneously made her lips try to smile.

"I appreciate the company - as you can see, I have no one. Who would live with such a...?" she unfolded her hands in a gesture of resignation, as if the condition of her kitchen could reflect the darkest corners of her soul. "Nor did I seek anybody... Do you know that I'm still in love with you? Isn't it stupid?"

"Aarin..."

...

Tricchard was simply fabulous. Fabulous in diverting attention from things which could otherwise drive her to mental states ranging from silent sky-blue ferocity to bitter auburn helplessness. Today she didn't notice all those stares - she looked at Tricchard. She didn't hear the spiteful whispering behind her back - after all she had someone more interesting to listen to.

"So this is your workplace?"

"No, it's just toxicology. They analyze all the white powder sent to O'Feelya by her fans. Let me tell you, sometimes it's pretty first-rate stuff. The lab has a specific mode of control and I wouldn't get in even if I were the last laboratory assistant in the world."

"Shadows of the past?"

"Yeah, I had to go through retraining. Now I'm in pyrotechnics. Cutting the wires." She said the last word under her

breath – a group of elegant young people in the midst of a discussion came around the corner. Aarin saluted dutifully. Tricchard stuck to the wall just to be sure.

“My bosses,” she explained, when they passed. “O’Feelya was the one in the middle.”

“Quite small for a star of the first magnitude.”

“Oh, I remember, the good sir comes from a world where singers tip the scales in tons...”

“Otherwise they surely wouldn’t achieve the right vibrations.”

Aarin couldn’t help herself and for the first time in a long while, she had a moment of laughter. Her mind was flooded by the memories of the good old days. Flash of nectarine taste... Why did the things that she experienced out of her native reality seem more real than anything before or after?

You burned out your brain, girl. You will never feel like you could before, said the doctor. Of course he used finer words. He was merciless toward the addicts, but never needlessly rude.

This morning she confessed love, laughed... Tricchard’s hand, invisible to anybody else, embraced her shoulders. *Only without him will I never feel like I did before.* Doctors can’t know the whole truth.

•••

She giggled again. The confused expression coming from Lenna in a nearby cubicle was a matter of indifference to Aarin, even when the fellow worker dashed off, as if to the ladies’ room, her steps aiming inconspicuously to the inter-phone stand.

Aarin overturned an elaborate little explosive device on her desk.

“You don’t have to worry, it’s unplugged already. They wouldn’t let anything really dangerous fall into my hands.” She removed some particular components and created but-

terflies, flowers, dogs and man-eating crocodiles on her table. When she was tired of it, she divided the components by material and sprinkled them into the boxes.

“So, when we separate all the stuff, our teammates at the other end of the hall reassemble it into even more dangerous explosive devices and mail them back to the sender. With O’Feelya’s freshest single, of course.” She answered his unbelieving expression through her laughter: “No, absolutely not; in fact, it’s all recycled.”

Lenna came back as if nothing happened, cast Aarin a couple of sidelong glances and turned her exaggerated attention to another device.

“She’s afraid of me – and she’s not alone,” Aarin sang, but it didn’t sound as cheerful as she had expected. “We could have been friends once. For the first couple of hours, we understood each other well, until she got to know who I am. In this cohesive team, secrets are as private as an influenza virus.”

“Watchout – screw!” the signal of approaching menace ran over the line of ostensibly deeply occupied workers at warp speed. Eyes fixed intently at the desktops, hands in protective gloves professionally grasped the most impressive tools to feign purposeful activity, while every other sense was focused on the movement of the man who was walking at an even pace through the the desks and partitions directly toward Aarin’s workplace.

“Is he a problem?” Tricchard asked.

“Not really,” Aarin answered in a low voice. “What can he do to me?”

The man-eating crocodile snapped and Tricchard rose his eyebrows appreciatively: “As if it came alive.”

“Yep, that’s the residual energy. You can do things with it...”

The crocodile swam on the desktop apparently without Aarin’s input. The animal devoured a fractal fern directly before the eyes of the surveillance officer and excreted its leav-

ings into the box of mixed metals. Then it attacked the hem of his uniform.

"Aarin, it seems to me that you're having a field day again," the supervisor remarked and straightened his coat.

"On the contrary," she answered with an almost earnest facial expression. "I had an attack last week, so everything should work fine for some time."

A thing which reminded Tricchard of some slightly mutated Swiss watch formed spontaneously on the desktop – the strap was literally made of crocodile. The watch ticked with deadly accuracy, and this impression was disturbed only by the crocodile snapping its jaw half a second off beat. The distal phalanx of Lenna's left forefinger was nearly cut. The man maintained his rigid demeanor:

"In the interest of security – yours as well as your colleagues' – we would rather... Not to coerce anybody... Relax, rest a bit... Take a few days off."

"If you think so," she nodded and stood up, although in other circumstances she wouldn't have hesitated to argue. But today she had a guest along and she wanted to show him the city. The Swiss watch behind her back exploded and *at the same time* organized its collapse into the box. Maybe she did fancy a little bit of exhibition.

"Don't say that it's all residual energy."

"Well, actually not. But tell me; would it sound more credible if I blamed my inordinately concentrated brainwaves?"

•••

Half-empty streets lit by the spring sun revealed the nicer face of the city. The slightly faded facades of the old houses made a picturesque pattern in contrast to the lush green background of the park. Evermore brown Styx (Aarin hadn't been willing to call the river by its proper name since her childhood) borrowed the color of the sky for today. Gulls were laughing infectiously.

“You can see the Temples over there – you can take a walk inside, if you want to. If you appreciate a couple of megalomaniacal walls covered with naive art. Not as monumental as those in your place, but I suppose you are curious about it, as a proper space tourist...”

“And what about you?”

“I... would never step inside again. I’ll wait for you at the bridge.”

“All right, Miss, don’t leave please, I’ll be right back!”

Aarin stood there, leaning against the railing over the water at a dangerous incline. For a moment, the waves unwittingly formed the inscription *Tricchard* and a couple of random hearts. She was never quite sure of what was just an illusion and what was real. Merely those things which were even seen by ordinary people as well were fully sufficient for the inhabitants of the Temples to mark Aarin and her kind as the devil’s right talons. Others made them out to be unique research subjects...

Sometimes she wished to control at least half of the peculiar phenomena she spread around. She would spare herself a number of awkward situations... Or perhaps not. Ianise, who was called Sergeant by her friends, performed far better than the others from the beginning. Once she even arranged a couple of famous battles with her tin army for some friends at a private party. A spectacle on the battlefield of a cubic meter... Probably she invited someone she shouldn’t have. Her pleasure of being allowed to work for the army in the course of re-training lasted too briefly. Some say she was snatched up by the secret service – brain programming experiments. Aarin was notified of Sergeant’s death half a year later. *Promoted to captain in memoriam*, she lost her life in service.

“You won’t meet many familiar faces on this planet any more. Outside of cemeteries,” Aarin answered to Tricchard, when he asked about the others. They walked along the sunlit riverside,

toward the historical tower of Global Television. “Just two of us survived – me and Vizionista. Remember him?”

“Of course! Giulian, wasn’t he? Awesome lad; an open mind. Is he working on some space exploration project now?”

Aarin smiled joylessly. Nothing more than dust remained of the visions of the crazy Vizionista.

“Far from it. He got married and he basically never leaves his castle. Most probably to keep the world from leading him astray again. Today he and his wife write popular science books for children. She schemes out the story part, he adds a few things on science – and the illustrations, of course. She keeps him on a short leash, controlling his pills, computer access, diet... She forces him to exercise in the garden to enjoy the fresh air. Everything has to be perfect, for his health is at stake,” finished Aarin ironically.

“A gilded cage. Does he love her at least?”

“No idea. The last time he looked more like... Resigned.”

“Do you think we could visit him?”



Aarin stopped in front of the dark brown wood of the robust carved door. Who knows why Mrs. Vizionista now adores the antique style. Maybe because it’s so romantic. The dragon head-shaped knocker cooled her hand. A soft ding-dong and hasty steps resounded from the lobby.

“Good morning, young Miss,” smiled Aarin, a little bit venomously.

The perfectly made-up face of a middle-aged woman – an observer unburdened with statistics would guess her to be at most thirty – was transformed by an expression of authentic surprise.

“Oh, *you*.”

“Were you expecting somebody else?”

“I thought it was enough to explain it to you *once*.” She stood at the threshold in a clearly defensive posture – one

hand leaning on the door frame, the other hand ready to slam the four centimeters of massive wood in the nose of the uninvited guest.

Aarin acted aloof. She knew exactly how to bring Mrs. Vizionista to her boiling point. Immediately after that, she remembered what led her to this door she had once promised to keep away from. She shifted to a reticent tone.

“He will never see me again. Neither he, nor you,” she said, glancing directly into the doubtful face of the wife. “I’m dying. I’ve come to say goodbye.”

Her intensely shadowed blue eyes widened. She wasn’t completely heartless, although she tried to make an icy expression. Aarin couldn’t overlook the small victorious twinkle. *All those lunatics are dying one by one; only my Giulian is doing gloriously – thanks to me.*

“You’ve lost weight. You look a lot worse than the last time. And you should at least try to disguise those horrible circles under your eyes... Come in,” she backed into the light, spacious lobby.

“Thank you.”

Aarin rubbed her shoes against the doormat properly before she entered this temple of cleanliness. Every insect, every disease-carrying germ inadvertently brought inside would surely die a dreadful death and she never wanted to have such a thing on her conscience.

Chatelaine led her through the large living room, up the white stairs tastefully set within the context of the interior. A prosperous woman proud of her exemplary home... Despite all effort, Aarin didn’t see the prosperous woman and respected writer, but Nissy’s annoying little sister.

“Nissy, pour that ordure into the loo, or I’ll report you.”

“This gaiety is for grown-ups and you, little one, ain’t grown enough for it yet.”

"I'm going to report you, really."

*"Alright, but in that case I will be forced to make your...
ahem... poems, if I can call them that... public."*

Of course everybody from the crew knew who she was secretly in love with. They had read her inartistic verses and amused themselves royally – even Giulian did – but heroically pretended to know nothing. The girl turned pale at first, then she turned red, turned tail and fled. When Nissy's whole family was grilled at interrogations, she stayed silent as an innocent, unsuspecting child grave.

She burst into the den upstairs without knocking:

"Dear, you have a visitor."

Although the rest of the house followed the sassy trends, this patch remained unchanged. A minuscule universe in the middle of the sterile apartment, marked by distinct signs of Vizionista's personality. Prints of subjectistic painters, souvenir sculptures from officially nonexistent countries carved by his own hand (how many times did his better half vainly try to throw them away?), unordered piles of books and all over the room plenty of scraps of paper with unfinished thoughts. Vizionista himself sat perfectly straight in front of the computer, shoulders bearing the pattern of a faded flannel shirt. Long, fine hair, thoroughly grey since a certain time, bordered the old familiar face of the befriended wolf. A wide smile and a good bit of teeth.

"Aarin!" he jumped from the desk and regardless of the stack of notes scattered on the carpet, hugged Aarin with a jolly gesture. "You haven't shown up in years! An expedition to the tropical rainforests is the only thing to justify such a long absence-"

"Nice to see you again, Vizionista..."

"Sit down," he pointed at the nearest column of books. "And talk. What's new in your corner of the cosmos?"

“Ahem...” Aarin tried the stability of the offered book set. “One clinical study. And Tricchard. Do you remember that guy from the neighboring galaxy? He re-paid me a visit.” Intentionally she didn’t look where he was standing.

“Indeed!” called Vizionista. His eyes were already systematically searching the room. Tricchard waited patiently – and finally their gazes met. “Welcome, my boy! How do you rate our decadent world?”

“I like it. Well-preserved monuments, beautiful women...”

“How did you make it?”

“Simply. For twenty-four years I tried and tried...”

“Modest as always,” Vizionista grinned. “Tell me, have you visited also other worlds?”

Tricchard shook his head dismissively: “You know, scientific curiosity was never my primary interest.”

“I understand...”

Aarin pretended she was looking through the window into the garden. To hide her disconcertion, she took over the reins of the conversation:

“I heard that Perspectiva sent the first pictures from Planet Veily... Have you seen them?”

“You don’t have to ask,” the wolfish smile faded away. Vizionista’s cultivated hands pulled an old envelope out of the paper heap, an envelope known too well to her. The high-quality digital photographs from the space probe Perspectiva paled in comparison to the aquarelles painted by Vizionista years ago. However, it was apparent that they depicted the same torn-down cities and stone vineyards. Aarin’s and Nissy’s clumsy drawings seemed truly ridiculous next to these rivals. As her fingers sorted them out, she felt a smell of old paper in her nose and a chunk of unspeakable memories in her throat. *We were fearless and so important – heroes at the threshold of infinity...*

“So we overtook the space age only a few decades,” she spoke with sudden ease. After a long time of uncertainty, she

held a substantial piece of evidence that at least something of her wasted life was real. She wondered why in the eyes of Vizionista, who believed in their dream from the first moment, only hollowness was left.

“Good it came to an end with us,” he said. “The stupid landscapes that machines can paint a couple of years later don’t have to be paid for by the lives of the naive young fools.”

Of course he was exaggerating. The planet Veily was just the first and the closest destination. Those coming later, after they had become a little bit bolder and increased the doses, would remain unvisited by a mankind’s space probe – at least until somebody invents a hyperspace engine.

Aarin let him be. She would rather dwell upon life, workshops, new pills and other meaningless things. Vizionista mentioned a publishing scheme, his contribution to the Neuroregeneration Project (*I was throwing the pills into the loo and had the best results in the group*), humorous moments in the marriage...

“Also, we are going to the botanical garden,” Aarin cut off the thread of harmless small talk. “There’s a new tropical pavilion. Tricchard will feel at home. Won’t you join us?”

She knew that it was a crazy question, but the day was crazy itself. She noticed Vizionista was surprised – probably it had been too long ago since somebody had asked him a similar question. By that time a tangle of thermophilic vegetation had arisen from broken pencils, clips, paper scraps and one green sock around his feet. When a tainted brush-cleaning cloth bloomed as a trumpet creeper flower, Vizionista burst out laughing.

“Actually, why not? I haven’t been there for ages! If you wait a while, maybe I’ll even find some outdoor shoes...” He started to rake about with his spider-like arm in the encyclopedic bookshelf.