

Matej Sternen's painting *Poppies* is brought to life in contemporary Slovenian literature in the eponymous story from the book *Closeness, As Prescribed* by Helena Šuklje. Sternen's artwork inspired the author to create a work of literary fiction in which the initial mystery of the painting's disappearance reveals a triangle of intense interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas. What kind of compromise will Dunja be forced to make to resolve her distress, and how will the others respond? The story engages polemically with our current social reality and critically illuminates contemporary times.

Excerpts from the story *Poppies*

There was nothing there, there was only an emptiness, and in the middle of this great white nothingness, framed by a grayish square, a nail stuck out. Or rather, a hook, because it was a large nail, just as the painting it once held was large. With its wide, antique frame, carved in a baroque style and covered with gold leaf, it had hung on the wall on the right in its radiant red colors like a secret message or an unspoken admission, a confession acceptable only as an allegory, an inclination that could only be permitted as a metaphor. It was a silent witness to a closeness woven a hundred years ago in a different time, in a different world, in a different life, which had left behind a trace, beauty, and mystery. And now it was gone. /.../

The painter's gaze had selected a single close-up, a cutout of the landscape, and enlarged it across the entire canvas, as if painting a bouquet that was not a bouquet. The red poppies sprouted high upwards from the lush, fresh green of the lower quarter, surging toward the sky and conjuring heart's blood, burning against a background that dissolved in the shimmering summer air. The glowing calyxes spread in a wide band from the left to the right edge, leaning slightly forward, as if reaching out to whoever stood before them. The perspective was, in fact, positioned to give the observer the sensation of lying on their stomach in the juicy freshness of the undulating meadow, face submerged in the cool undergrowth, and it was precisely this close-up view that revealed the true singularity of the work. Mingled among the slender poppy stems and unripe green heads hiding beneath the fiery blooms were white irises. Soft and still damp from a just passed afternoon downpour, they huddled on the left side of the painting, as if seeking shelter or shade. But the storm had passed, and the bright sun had replaced the clouds, the heat shimmered in a milky haze, and the cluster of white irises pressed close to the poppy stalks and leaves that embraced them from all sides. Only in the golden ratio at the bottom did a single, bowed flower stand out from the greenery in pure whiteness, bearing three fallen drops, as if the flaming petals had shed their fire to kiss the mouth of the iris. Dunja knew that this unusual combination of the poppy's wild beauty and the iris's gentle strength was impossible anywhere in nature. /.../ This was by no means a realistic painting, rather than depicting botanical reality, it spoke the language of metaphor. The extraordinary intertwining of wildflowers that brave brutal conditions with more cultivated flowers like irises revealed a stunning and powerful symbolism. And yet, there was something else. Dunja stepped right up to the canvas and closely examined the lower foliage. No, those were not poppy leaves painted there. At the very right edge, already partially fading off the canvas, grew a thistle, a resilient field weed that defies human attempts to uproot it, but also a plant we could associate with suffering, defense, and protection, and might symbolize emotional walls. A thistle is prickly yet beautiful, much like the fragile balance between vulnerability and self-preservation in unspoken love. Did the painter wish to create a bouquet that was not a bouquet, a piece of a landscape that can be found nowhere, an impossible coexistence and bond that could only be realized in dreams? /.../

Dunja realized she was standing in the middle of her grandmother's parlor, in the middle of the apartment where everything was still just as her grandmother had left it, staring at an empty wall, at a nothingness framed by a grayish square, at the wall where the painting had always hung /.../ And now it was gone.

Translated by: Jasmin B. Frelih