

Books in Review

for giving her a shiner. For her part, Serena equates the puppy with her abuser and instinctively unleashes her fury at her canine companion, perpetuating the cycle of violence and reconciliation:

When he [Niko] picked Trouble out of the litter, I thought he'd stay that same size forever, the size of an organ, sticky-soft and warm. We took Trouble home. He trembled, then ripped up the sectional Niko had bought without insurance.

"Cut it out, you fucking monster!" I screamed.

In my spot, in the closet of the guest room, he fell asleep in my arms, where he had puppy dreams.

His paws moved like levers in a field where he was free and unleashed.

By tracing these interiorities, *Driving in Cars with Homeless Men* invites readers to face the underbelly of human nature, our precariousness, and intermittent despair with determination, grit, and hard-won humor.

Kathleen A. Kelly
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Ivana Dobráková
Bellevue

Trans. Julia & Peter Sherwood. London. Jantar. 2019. 219 pages.

IN *BELLEVUE*, Ivana Dobráková, winner of the European Prize for Literature,

pulls no punches for her readers or her protagonist, nineteen-year-old Slovak student Blanka, a volunteer at an international summer camp providing care for people with mental and physical disabilities. At the center in Marseille that gives the book its title, Blanka experiences disgust at the residents' deformed limbs and uncontrolled bodily functions—as well as disgust at her own disgust. Faced with Laurence, a woman her own age with particularly severe disabilities, Blanka feels "awful, literally paralyzed by horror and helplessness," when of course it is Laurence who is *literally* paralyzed. Blanka's emotional distress shifts, however, to something much darker, as she progresses from depression to paranoid delusions to a full psychotic break.

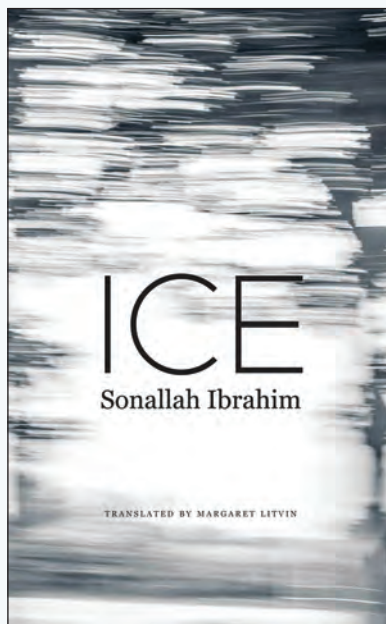
SONALLAH IBRAHIM

Sonallah Ibrahim
Ice

Trans. Margaret Litvin. London. Seagull Books. 2019. 303 pages.

IN 2016 I CHATTED with Sonallah Ibrahim about his then-new novel, *Berlin 69*. I asked him: "Did your experience in East Germany and Russia (1969–74) give you a useful perspective on Nasser's version of socialism?" He replied: "The dream was fantastic, but it remains a dream."

His new novel, *Ice*, translated by Margaret Litvin, takes a scalpel to the "fantastic dream" of communism through the eagle eyes of a wry Egyptian narrator who has come to study in Russia. The novel echoes some of the themes of *Berlin 69*: coping with paranoia and the fear of intelligence services, nostalgia for Egypt, transient relationships with foreign women, the hunt for scarce commodities, and a corrupt party elite. Unlike *Berlin 69*, however, the structure of *Ice* mimics a diary—and depends on the writer's telegraphic but carefully honed style, which gives the reader a sense of the chilling, grim texture of daily life in Soviet



Russia in the 1970s. Ibrahim lived in Moscow during a crucial period in Egypt's history, following the 1967 defeat and Egypt's 1973 victory over Israel. *Ice* is an episodic novel rather than a plot-driven one, which quietly circles around the "fantastic dream" until it has been picked clean, like a carcass.

The "dream" begins to curdle soon after the narrator's arrival to the *obshchezhitie*, the student dorm. The officials in charge of

the dorm want to place a Russian in with the foreigners so they can report on their activities. An inordinate number of foreigners are crammed in the same dorm room. The Egyptian narrator, presumably a younger version of Ibrahim, is awed by his roommate, Hans, a handsome East German and a Don Juan who attracts women and men. A constant parade of friends and acquaintances marches through the small room, along with plenty of uninhibited foreign and Russian girls, who are generous with their bodies. The reserved narrator tires of the bacchanalia and yearns for solitude and time to write, read, listen to classical music, or work his way through the Arabic newspapers about the disturbing news from Egypt. Desperate for a little privacy, he moves out of the broom closet to an even tinier abode with a cranky old Russian lady—only to jump from the frying pan into the fire. The landlady is nosy, lonely, and demanding and comments on his love life.

Shortages of goods and commodities in a state-controlled economy lead to other absurd situations and behavior. When he is getting medical treatment, the doctor clearly states that he needs a new tire for his car. On

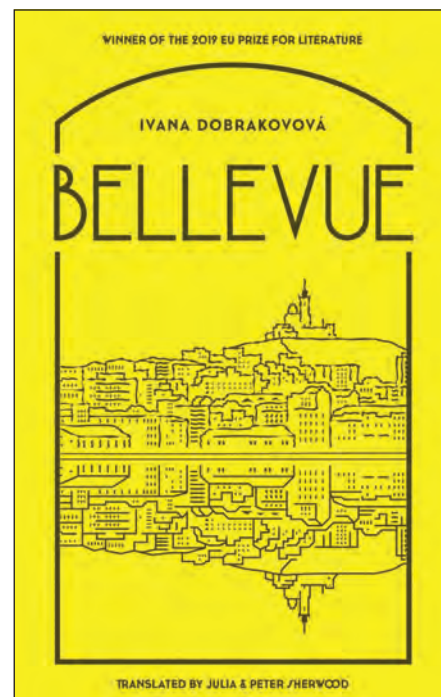
Although the novel centers on Blanka's mental illness, the passages describing the awkwardness and exhilaration of the semiflirtatious friendship between Blanka and Drago, a Slovenian volunteer, ring particularly true. As Blanka's mental state declines, her narration deteriorates as well, with irregular punctuation, a blurring of inner monologue and outer dialogue, and pronoun slippage—all effectively conveyed by translators Julia and Peter Sherwood, who do well not to make things easy for the English-language reader in moving the text from Slovak. Nor do they seek to clarify Blanka's delusional interpretation of events in relation to reality. While some of her fears, such as being sold to a harem, are clearly the work of paranoia, the various small cruelties she suffers from the other

volunteers, who cannot manage her mental health, seem all too genuine.

Page after page, *Bellevue* supplies a relentless, even tedious, account of Blanka's delusional thoughts. The reader's fatigue only plays into the novel's commentary on the limits and failures of empathy, however, which we see in Blanka's inability to properly care for the residents and the other volunteers' exasperation with her erratic behavior. One Swedish volunteer is left spent and sweating after pounding helplessly on the door of a public restroom Blanka has locked herself in. The novel shows us the uglier side of caregiving, when one gives in to frustration and exhaustion and thinks: Why can't you just be well?

Corine Tachtiris

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another occasion, he goes to a bar with his friend, Hamid, who tells him: "Secret deals are made here—timber smuggled to Central Asia, black caviar shipped to the West in tins labeled 'Herring.'" Not surprisingly, party officials get the goodies. At a Communist Party conference, the narrator notices that a party member has meat in his briefcase.

Ibrahim juxtaposes Communist Party propaganda with daily life, which underscores its hollowness. On his way to the language institute where he is studying Russian, he notices the banners: "The Party and the People Are One"; "Power to Labour"; "Long Live the Soviet People, Building Communism." Yet, after his language lesson, he eats "a piece of cabbage that smelt like dishwater, black bread, a goulash with scraps of meat in it, tea." He attends a half-hearted celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution, which was held on November 7. The narrator comments that it is dull and few students attended. The harpist who was playing "looked like a mummy beyond the grave." He observed that she looked like she was going to "kill herself on the spot," playing a piece like "Farewell to Life!" These kinds of observations are typical of

Ibrahim's sense of political irony. The narrator also points out draconian repression of freedom of expression by the Soviet state.

In between all the wild parties with Russians and other expatriates, concerts and films, and the Don Quixote-like quests for daily necessities and commodities, another story is wedged in, the story of political drama in Egypt and Palestine. The narrator works his way through a huge stack of Arabic newspapers, clipping out headlines and articles about historic events from Egypt and the Arab world. Ibrahim frequently incorporates nonfiction narrative in his fictional texts without comment.

Besides political discussions, the author also includes poignant scenes with other Arabic-speaking students who, like his narrator, feel alienated and displaced, far from home. Frustrated that they cannot fully express themselves in Russian, they seek comfort in the company of other Arabic speakers. They meet Tadros, a Copt from upper Egypt who is studying agriculture. He plays the oud, singing songs by Sayed Darwish, Mohamed Abdel Wahab, Farid al-Atrash, and Umm Kulthum. He tells the group: "We can't escape this music. It's

inside us, not only because it's splendid and beautiful but also because it's so entwined with so many moments of our childhood and adolescence."

They listen to news about war in Egypt, but violence is not far away in Moscow, either. Zoya is raped, and the narrator visits her in the hospital. He is sensitive to the problems of women and comments on underground abortions, domestic abuse, and alcoholism.

Ice is an appropriate title for Sonallah Ibrahim's novel. Moscow not only feels cold to the narrator physically but also emotionally. The narrator has plenty of sex but little intimacy, except with the fragile, glamorous Zoya. Living in Moscow is also a political balancing act, like walking on ice—the Russian secret police or spies are always lurking around. Yet, as a member of the Egyptian Communist Party, he cannot go back to Egypt, either, or he will be arrested. The dominant mood in this novel is one of deprivation, isolation, paranoia, and severe weather—literally, politically, and emotionally.

Gretchen McCullough

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