

Everything was ready. The candle flame cast a warm, very bright glow, because Maja Uluda used the best beeswax candles, and not cheap, smelly paraffin, like they did at the Academy to save money. For a moment Sofja thought that, amid the quivering shadows, there was someone else in the kitchen with her, and her heart skipped a beat from fear. She mentally scolded herself for it. After all, Maja Uluda always said that anxiety and imagination were the enemies of a true mage.

Resisting the temptation to glance nervously over her shoulder, she took one of the small chunks of salt between the thumb and ring finger of her left hand and passed it through the flame, while whispering:

*“Ignis, o ignis, purgate primam salis meam.”*

The flame flickered, and Sofja placed the warm piece of salt under the little finger of her left hand, then took another lump between her thumb and middle finger and also passed it through the flame, this time a little less deftly, because she was scorching her skin.

*“Ignis, o ignis, purgate secundam salis meam.”*

This lump, in turn, she placed under her curled ring finger. She took the third crystal between her thumb and forefinger and also passed it through the flame.

*“Ignis, o ignis, purgate tertiam salis meam.”*

She thanked the fire with a quick bow, then set about tossing the crystals one by one into the bowl, heeding that each time at least one ring formed on the surface of the water. Once again she got the feeling someone was watching her, but she chalked that up to her imagination.

*“Aquae, o aquae, tibi dono primam salis meam. Aquae, o aquae, tibi dono secundam salis meam. Aquae, o aquae, tibi dono tertiam salis meam.”*

And before the surface of the water could come completely to rest, Sofja fixed her gaze on the image of her father, picked up a fish knife and ran the blade along the inside of her left hand, damp with sweat and salt. At first she thought she hadn't done it hard enough; it took a moment to feel the warmth of blood and the burning sting of salt inside her hand.

*“Ecce sanguis meam, ecce sanguis patris meis. Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius. Sicut occultur, ita apertur. Sicut pater, ita filia.”*

Thick drops slowly fell and clouded the transparent water, but Sofja did not glance into the bowl. She stared at the daguerreotype, insistently focusing her attention on the image of her father and trying to keep

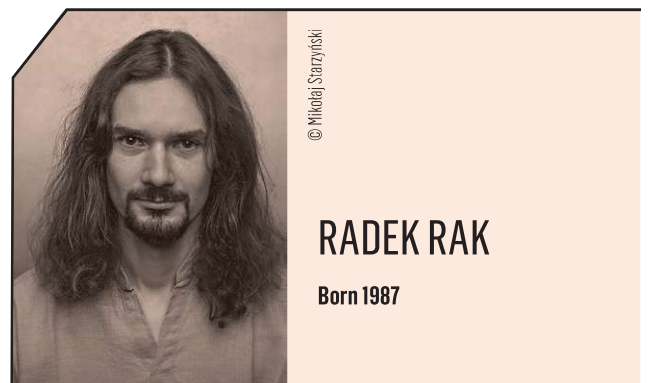
a tight hold on her thoughts, so they wouldn't scatter like a flock of sparrows. The treatises on divination warned against lacking the necessary focus, though they didn't specify why. Maybe it had something to do with the blood.

For a moment, nothing happened. Sofja felt a twinge of disappointment, but right then low buzzing reverberated out, as if a swarm of flies had forced their way into her head. Mist rose over the bowl and Sofja's mouth went dry. Now she couldn't afford to let this sight break her focus; she was afraid to even blink. It seemed like the image of Doctor Kluk was coming to life, moving, and her father was looking around, disoriented.

“Papa?” whispered Sofja. “Papa, are you alive? Where are you?”

Doctor Kluk put his mouth into a U shape, pointed first down and then up, and seemed to say something, though Sofja couldn't make out a word. The insect buzz in her head got even stronger and she thought she was about to faint. She closed her eyes for a moment, really only for a moment. And then she felt someone stroking her neck.

Excerpt translated by Sean Gasper Bye



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**Foreign language translations**

Radek Rak's short stories have been translated into Russian and Ukrainian.

**Selected awards**

Kraków UNESCO City of Literature Prize (2022)

Gdynia Literary Prize (2020) – nomination

Nike Literary Award (2020)

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2017, 2020)

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2017)