



Lisa Weeda

Dance, dance, revolution

Imagine you could end a war with your dance

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Lisa Weeda's novel *Aleksandra* caused a sensation, now she is presenting her new book *Dance, dance, revolution* - a bold novel experiment that calls on us to keep moving for peace. Because dance knows no language, no borders. It is the night in which evil is exorcised. Baba Yara lifts the pale moon out of the blackness with ease. Then she begins to dance. Baba Yara will save us! With her dance she can bring people back to life. *The bad dead*, all those who have left us too soon. Who wouldn't want that? This novel experiment challenges us to keep moving for peace. Because dance knows no language, no borders.

LISA WEEDA (1989) is a Dutch-Ukrainian writer, literary producer, screenwriter, audio fan and virtual reality director. Text is always the foundation of her work, but it is free in form and often centers on Ukraine, her grandmother's homeland. Lisa Weeda was hailed as the literary talent of 2022 by the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*. *Aleksandra*, her debut novel, was awarded the Bronze Owl Award, nominated for the Booksellers' Prize and shortlisted for the Libris Literature Prize. Translation rights of *Aleksandra* have been sold to eight countries, including Germany, Poland and France.



NEIGHBOURHOODS LIKE THIS take the longest: it's always at least fifteen minutes before anyone opens a gate, or drives up in a car with blacked-out windows. Toni senses them watching her; they stare at the van, which says BODY-COLLECTION-SERVICE in dark blue letters on the side. In their detached homes, tucked away after long driveways and lawns watered with pointless regularity, people peer at her through the chinks in their curtains: 'Which house has got one now, then?' Toni lightly presses the accelerator and lets the vehicle roll slowly into the hilly residential area. She stops between two large houses and grabs her binoculars – given to her by her mother to spot birds when she moved here: 'You were quite the birdwatcher as a child.'

Toni had left them on the dresser in the living room for a while and then, since they were gathering dust, tidied them away into a drawer. Recently, she'd unearthed them again and discovered they were handy for this. One hand on the wheel, she focusses the binoculars on a white house with blue windows – number eight – the house where she is supposed to pick up a dead Besulian. Toni zooms in on the first-floor windows: a finger wearing a titanium ring slides the creamy net curtain aside a few inches.

'People, people, what a nuisance you are,' she grumbles to herself, 'you're not unique. It doesn't matter if it's a fancy suburb, or a slum with rubbish bags on the pavement, a penthouse in the city centre – none of you gives a damn about the dead people.'

Toni's mother becomes visible in the passenger seat, she stares out of the window too. Her breasts hang down, her nipples pressing heavily through her bra and floral blouse onto the black synthetic leather covering the glove box.

'It doesn't matter for dancing either,' her mother says, 'It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor. Anyone can dance. But here they seem to think it's something to be ashamed of.'

'Mum, I'm at work.'

'So what?'

Toni groans and chews the inside of her cheek, an old childhood habit.

'I can't pick my timing, love,' her mother says with a dramatic sigh, 'death does what it wants. You know how it is.'

'As long as you keep quiet while I'm collecting this body. I have no idea if dead people can see you or not.'

Her mother leans back and folds her arms theatrically. Toni rests her elbows on the steering wheel, the binoculars still pressed to her eyes.

'Come on,' she mutters, 'I don't have all day, I'm tired.'

It was busier than ever at the drop-off points Toni had read in the cheerful daily update – *Welcome to your new workday!* – which she'd received that morning. A survey showed people were fed up after two-and-a-half years, they wanted to live, and go about their daily business hassle-free. For the first time in ages, Toni felt sad. The feeling she'd managed to suppress for more than a year had suddenly crept up on her again. It lingered, as always, somewhere between her breasts, at the bottom of her sternum, as though she'd been hit with a blunt object. I'm doing something completely inhuman, she thought, first I sat in a stupid company's dank basement and now, I've regressed even further with this new job – not in terms of income, but certainly in dignity.

That morning in the shower, she'd cried. Then she'd stood naked in front of the mirror for quite a while. 'What I told Mum and Dad was pure fabrication,' she said out loud, 'I'm a fossilised tree. I can't flower, I don't shed my leaves. Life here is no better.' When her mother had appeared beside her and given her a stern look, she'd walked out of the bathroom. 'Stop complaining,' her mother had whispered, 'you have a nice house, you have work, probably for months to come. You have plenty of savings, you'll be able to go back soon.'

When she heard they were looking for people at the collection service, she'd signed up immediately. She was tired of the administrative work she had been doing since she arrived sixteen years previously. There was something noble about the collection work: salvaging the bodies of war victims from Besulia so that they could be revived at some later date.

After a short screening procedure – nothing more than an online questionnaire – Toni had been hired.

Can you drive large vehicles?

☐ yes

☐ no

Do you have a valid driving licence for this purpose?

☐ yes

☐ no

Are you afraid of corpses?

☐ yes

☐ no

Are you emotionally capable of picking up and loading bodies (along with the donor in question) into a vehicle?

☐ yes

☐ no

Do you have a criminal record?

☐ yes (attach relevant documents to the section at the bottom of the questionnaire)

☐ no

Please sign the following set of statements:

☐ I hereby declare I will not become emotionally involved with the dead bodies

☐ I hereby declare I will take all bodies to the appropriate drop-off site

☐ I hereby declare I will not illegally deal in bodies

☐ I hereby declare I will pay final respects to all bodies during the short mourning period on each designated working day

☐ I hereby declare I will never dance the *svaboda samoverzhenia* during this moment of mourning.

The application process was so simple that it was hard to take seriously. On her third working day, during the short mourning session for the last batch of death's *diaspori*, at which all the corpse collectors on duty were present, she heard that the forms had become shorter and simpler: it was hard to find anyone at all to do the job. The workforce consisted mainly of flex migrants.

'Death is a disaster for everyone here,' complained the colleague who introduced himself as Kaspar after the ceremony, 'people in far-flung countries seem to find it much more normal. Dying, corpses, the afterlife and all that. You're not originally from here either, are you?'

'No,' she'd replied, 'but I've lived in this country for a long time.'

'Tell me more,' he said. 'Beer?'

He had preceded her to the body drop-off centre and, with a playful smile, conjured four cans of beer from one of the coolers containing DNA samples. Then he took her to burial field number fourteen. At the edge of the field, two white folding seats were illuminated by the last gleam of the setting sun.

'My grandparents, and yeah, their gravestones, are in the garden of my childhood home,' Toni had begun as she sat down. 'In the mountains. Our village did have a cemetery, mind, but my grandfather didn't want to leave the house he'd built with his own hands.'

'See,' Kaspar said, 'they'd find that completely macabre here, idiotic even! When those corpses from Besulia started appearing, I thought if we can give new life to those whose lives were cut short, everyone will join in, right? It's a dream, isn't it?'

Toni nodded. 'I don't understand it either,' she said. 'Oh and by the way, my father's buried there too.'

'Where?'

'The grave in the back garden.'

'Oh, I see.'

'He died just after I'd moved here. I visited him just one last time, fifteen years ago. I was twenty-one.'

'And your mother?'

'Also dead, six years ago. I haven't buried her in the garden yet. No time.'

'No time to go home? Where is it?'

'Upasi. South of Besulia, do you know it?'

Kaspar swirled his can of beer and took a sip.

'Claudia, my wife, has a wine guide to Upasi.'

'We have the best wines,' Toni said, 'even if I say so myself.'

They gazed out over the endless field of graves. The city skyline was visible in the distance: offices, the parliament building, banks, modern apartment blocks glinting in the orange sunlight. Toni took a sip of beer and thought of the first morning she'd driven through the city in the corpse collector's van, on her way to her first body – a young boy, somewhere in a shiny flat in the city centre. She was so panicked she'd thrown up. It wasn't because his chest and neck were full of shrapnel, nor because his young body was stiff as a board. No, this was convenient: she could easily put him on the cart because of it. She panicked at the idea that if she quit this inhuman work, she would have to take a job she was even more overqualified for. It makes no difference, she thought, I'm basically like the dead boy: of very little value.

In the bathroom where he'd been found by an elderly couple, she'd vomited into the bathtub.

'Sorry,' she had muttered to the boy, immediately regretting her thoughts, 'I should shut up, people are already treating you like a piece of shit.'

After washing away the vomit and wiping her face with a soft towel with embroidered initials, she'd given herself a stern talking-to, as she often did. She quoted the training brochure's notes on body collection: 'They are objects, returned packages, nothing more. The less you think about them being people, the easier the task.'

She loaded up the boy and spent the rest of the day repeating, 'Drive to address, pick up body, ask mandatory questions, take payment, sign form, load body, tag, drive on.'

The week following her first body went a lot more smoothly, and months later she had almost become immune to the process. Very occasionally she felt anger bubbling up: how hard can it be, she thought, to memorise a traditional dance to give someone their life back?

'Do you remember the first bodies here?' Kaspar asked, as if guessing her thoughts. 'The first collective dances?'

Toni nodded and squinted. 'It was like everyone short-circuited at first, then they became frenzied and then everything collapsed. I actually found that the scariest of it all, the collapse.'

Seven months after the start of the war in Besulia, a country hardly anyone knew and whose war had been in the news only briefly, the murdered bodies started appearing under dining tables, next to designer sofas and on beds. The bodies appeared at night, in completely random places.

'We're cursed,' a woman cried on television. She'd come home from work as an HR manager at a renowned IT company and gone to wash her face. When she turned around, she'd seen a corpse lying in the bathtub: an old man in a striped shirt and smart trousers, purple slippers on his feet.

Bodies turned up faster and faster: in gyms, libraries, houses, communes, swimming pools, country houses, starter flats, shopping centres, art ateliers, museums, and wholesalers. After the initial wave of surprise, the initial fear, a strange kind of excitement took hold. An intoxication with a hype, just like seven months earlier, when the war in Besulia was briefly world news. The hype then mostly revolved around a young Besulian woman, Anna. She'd asked the world's population for help. Her video clips were all over the internet: 'Dance,' she said, 'dance and save us'. She had piercing chocolate-brown eyes, full lips, a pretty nose and thick dark eyebrows.

Toni had watched all of Anna's videos: when the war started, she had followed the events closely. The first days felt like she was being pulled back in time: back to her own country, which she had fled long ago. From one moment to the next, it began: shots sounded in the mountains in the evening, rockets followed at night. Toni had seen streaks of white light out of her bedroom window. Shells had briefly flown up into the sky, only to land with a dull bang somewhere in the distance. For days, she sat pressed against her friends in her parents' basement, surrounded by damp-smelling crates of potatoes, sacks of beetroot and jars of pickled peppers, eggs, tomatoes and cauliflower. She was tired but couldn't sleep, she was hungry but couldn't eat.

Watching Anna's videos and the relentless attacks on Besulia, an old feeling came over her, a thought she'd had there, in her parents' clammy basement, a thought that grew each day: *no one wants to help us*.

The help Anna asked for in the videos was not complicated: 'You don't need to come and fight,' she said. 'Donations are not necessary. We don't want you to send weapons, but to dance. Our traditional dance, the *svaboda samoverzhenia*. Help us ward off evil.' She'd smiled warmly, those first few days, those first few clips. As enemy soldiers got closer to her village, the glint disappeared from her eyes. No matter how enthusiastically she addressed her followers – hundreds of thousands by then – there was something broken in her voice, her eyes were dull. She seemed unable to mobilise enough people, there was some kind of fault in the line between her plea and the reception of it.

Toni lowers the binoculars with a deep sigh. It was taking absurdly long. This neighbourhood was known as elitist among her colleagues; its inhabitants hated the fact they were getting corpses too. Just as she is about to turn on the car's loudspeaker and dial house number eight, the garden gate slowly opens. A lanky boy appears in the driveway. Two thin, milk-white legs protrude from his shorts.

'How the hell have you stayed so pale when the sun's so bright?' mutters Toni.

He waves in a strange way: arm straight up in the air, fingers spread, as if making a secret sign. She drives the car slowly toward him. For a moment she considers saying through the loudspeaker 'Oh, there he is at last!' but when she approaches and sees the boy looking so anxious, she doesn't.

'What have you got for me?' she asks as she gets out of the car.

'They arrived three weeks ago,' he says.

'They? Do you have more than one?'

The boy nods. 'Two. They were in the garage, one in my grandmother's old car, one on my father's workbench.'

'Never had that before.'

'I think they belong together,' he whispers shyly.

The garage door opens. A man appears in the bright afternoon sun. He has a wheelbarrow at the ready, four legs dangling over the edge. The boy begins to cry.

'We can't go on. I invited my friends, we danced exactly like in the videos, every night and every weekend.'

The man pushes the wheelbarrow down the driveway. He does it carefully, almost ceremoniously: one step, push the wheelbarrow, pause, another step, wheelbarrow. It is at least three minutes before he reaches his son. There are brightly-coloured cushions in the wheelbarrow. On them: two children. Their faces are covered in caked blood, scratches and blueish-green stains, as if they were made of tarnished bronze.

'Grenade?' asks Toni.

'Excuse me?' says the man in a hoarse voice. His eyes are red. A skinny man in a dressing gown appears in the doorway of the house. He walks towards the trio in his pink slippers.

'Yes,' he says, joining the group around the wheelbarrow, 'a grenade. We looked it up.'

The boy looks from Toni to the wheelbarrow.

'One morning, three days ago, we thought one of them moved an arm. We'd been dancing all night.'

'They hadn't though. We were just exhausted.'

'He can't stop dreaming about them.' The man in the dressing gown puts his hand on his son's head. The boy starts crying again. The two men give him a squeeze. 'It might have worked out in a different neighbourhood.'

'What?'

'Yeah, of those neighbourhoods with more er, community? Where people have to help each other more? Over there maybe, those apartment blocks?'

The man points to the left, over the hill, to the neighbourhood where Toni lives. She frowns. I live in one of those apartment blocks, she wants to say, I hardly speak to anyone.

'Can't you take them there, please?'

Toni studies the men at length. Other families did manage, she knows. They kept at it for days, weeks, almost non-stop, but still.

'You should have done it yourself, you know. It's all in the confirmation email. There are three communities in the country that still make an effort, day in, day out. The nearest one is three hours away.'

'Oh,' says the man in the dressing gown with feigned surprise. 'Sorry, no, we didn't read that.'

'No worries,' Toni replies. She casts one last glance at the two dead children and then hurries to the car.

'No, we didn't read that,' she mimics the man once she has shut the door. 'The nerve of it.'

She drives a way down the street and backs into the driveway. She opens the boot, on which she'd stuck a large, round sticker last week: a dark blue circle with a white, open coffin inside. An amber light issues from the coffin. Next to it are some oranges. The sticker was made by a young Besulian with a second life. She was campaigning for free rehabilitation after war

trauma. More and more resurrected people were joining her, the group growing by the week. They also recently started a branch that sends large groups of people to the body-drop-off-centres to wake up whole graveyards of corpses with their dancing – a trend started by four Besulians eighteen months ago.

'I have to ask this: are you sure you're giving up the dance?'

The man in the dressing gown nods.

'What do you think?' he says brusquely, and then, 'How much is it?'

'Five hundred and thirty.'

'I thought it was five hundred and ten.'

'Factor in processing costs, emotional labour, gravediggers, cleaners, DNA identification teams.'

The man in the dressing gown takes his credit card out of his pocket and looks at Toni.

'You have to officially confirm that you are stopping dancing before you can pay,' she says.

'I quit dancing.'

'We are quitting,' adds the other man.

"You too?" asks Toni the boy, although there is no need.

'Is this really necessary?' the man in the dressing gown snaps.

'Unfortunately it is,' Toni says dryly.

The boy starts crying even harder.



CHILDREN'S BODIES ARE the worst. It's always been that way, children's bodies are the most upsetting: awkwardly crumpled on the tarmac, head in a pool of blood. Washed up on a beach. Crushed under debris. Next to a fresh crater on a playground. Shot through the head on a dusty street; deliberately run over by a tank; malnourished, skinny and dehydrated in a desert.

When children's bodies are shown on television or online, the whole world holds its breath, life stalls for a second, thoughts and movements falter, time too perhaps. Millions of people see the same horror frozen at the same time. For a split second, everyone thinks: why aren't we there to stop it? At least, that's how it always felt to Toni - that's how she thought everyone felt. Since picking up Besulian children alongside adults, she has started to see things differently. People are quick to think: *they* did this. Or: it wasn't my act of violence, or: what were we supposed to do when it started? Should we have driven there? Laid on the ground? Dug up mines with our bare hands, fired back?

Toni drives into the car park of the body drop-off centre, and leaves the engine running. She opens the boot and climbs into the cargo area. There are 13 bodies on the 12 available shelves. The two children lie together, the boy flat on his back, the girl on her side against him, her right arm across his stomach. Toni's back hurts. She looks at the two children. Kaspar comes out of the office, pushing a mobile dissection table. It rattles like crazy on the grey cobblestones of the car park, as if an entire box of tools were being shaken. In her first few weeks of work, Toni had wondered why they needed dissection tables: did someone want to cut open the bodies, examine something in the cells, find out how they had ended up here, unravel the mystery of the so-called 'Diaspora of Death'?

'No, no one,' Kaspar had explained. 'There was just a shortage of other trolleys to transport bodies on.'

'I saw your online registration list. 'Big load today,' Kaspar exclaims almost excitedly. He looks into the trolley with his sweet broad smile. When he sees Toni resting her forehead against the shelf with the two children, his mouth tightens.

'Oh.'

'Yes.'

Kaspar looks at his watch and then back at Toni.

'If you want you can go, I'll do the rest.'

'No, no,' she gestures, 'it will be fine.'

One by one, they unload the bodies. They do so silently: lifting the dead, carefully placing them on the wheeled table, rolling them to the hygiene room and placing them there on one of the free shelves against the wall. Normally Kaspar talks Toni's ears off. Now he is silent. He doesn't even play the game which almost all the staff are doing: *which region of Besulia does the*

body come from? On the wall of the hygiene room, where corpses are half-heartedly washed and blood is removed from their skin and hair, there's a map of Besulia with its seven provinces. Next to it hangs a printed list where the newly brought-in dead can be noted; to the right of their names, the province. The duty staff guess which area each body comes from. Every week there is a new pool. After DNA tests in the room next door, where about 40 per cent of the bodies are attributed to a location, a winner is called. They get a cake, or craft beer, depending on who it is. At the end of the month, the overall winner is declared. Kaspar has never won, neither has Toni. Toni never competes.

They do the children last.

'We'll put them together,' Toni says gruffly to Kaspar as she gets out of the car with the boy in her arms. His head rests against her shoulder, as if he has fallen asleep on the way and only needs to be carried to bed. He has long blond eyelashes.

'What?'

'These should go together, see how much they look alike?'

She carefully lays the little boy down on the table, his legs straight, arms tucked next his body.

'This way,' she says to Kaspar, placing the fingers one by one straight on the cold metal.

'That's nice,' he says softly, and gets into the van to fetch the girl. He puts her head on the other side of the dissection table, with her legs next to her supposed brother's face. Then he does exactly what Toni has just done: arms straight, legs straight, fingers flat on the table top. Toni closes the car doors and turns off the engine. They roll the children inside, she pushes, Kaspar holding the bodies still by resting his large hands gently on their bellies. In the hygiene room, Toni puts the two together on a shelf, just like in the van and on the trolley. She does so as if she were arranging the flowers she buys at the market every Saturday: painstakingly moving the arms and legs ever so slightly to the side until they lie properly. Kaspar sits on one of the cleaning tables and watches, waiting for her to finish. Toni takes a step back, looks at the children's bodies, takes another step forward, moves the girl's hair neatly to one side of her head, takes another step back.

'Yes, like that,' she says.

Kaspar turns off the light. Only the air conditioner in the room is still humming.

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