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# *The Greener Abyss*

**Johanna Nilsson**

introduced and translated by

**Sarah Death**

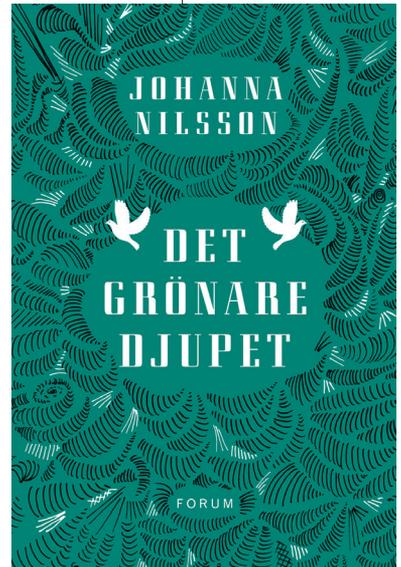
The success of books, films and TV series such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, *The Bookseller* reported, led editors to tip feminist dystopias as a 'key fiction trend for 2018'. Timely news for this novel from prizewinning novelist Johanna Nilsson, who rises to the challenge of devising a sequel to Karin Boye's dystopian classic *Kalloccain*, published in Sweden in 1940.

The protagonist of *Kalloccain* is Leo Kall, a chemist in the totalitarian World State who is forced to develop a truth serum to extract information for exposing so-called traitors. It also inadvertently lets the oppressed citizens start talking about their emotions, accessing 'a green abyss in every human being, an ocean of undamaged power to grow'. In her sequel, Nilsson charts the fortunes of Leo's wife Linda, now 59, and her pregnant daughter Laila. Linda has fled to the ultra-liberal society of Desert City, from where she and her family embark on a quest for the ideal state in which the individual is truly free, but social structures protect the weakest.

The following two extracts are taken from the beginning of the book.

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I have decided to write down the story of Desert City and its people, for the simple reason that I believe potential future generations may find my experiences and reflections useful. I write 'potential' because the current situation is so critical that I am far from certain when I lie down to sleep each night that there will be a tomorrow. The ruler of the World State is more deranged than ever. Some rumours say she sleeps in a cradle, others that she goes about all day dressed in a specially made uniform with a built-in oxygen supply, and others that she sleeps with the red button on the dressing table beside her, where she keeps it like a little heart on a silver salver under a domed cover of glass, or it might have been silver. The truth of these rumours is open to question, however, for few have ever spent time in the building with her, let alone in her bedroom. It would not surprise me if



*Det grönare djupet.*  
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A longer English sample is available from the agent.

The English translation of *Kalloccain* by Gustaf Lannestock (1966) is available in the digitised Literature Collection of the University of Wisconsin at: [uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/](http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/)

Sarah Death reviewed Johanna Nilsson's *Rebell med frusna fötter* in SBR 2003:1 and *Konsten att vara Ela* in SBR 2003:2.

she herself were the source of these rumours, for reasons I can only guess at.

She calls herself The Lady. No one knows her real name, age or origin. All that she reveals of her face is her eyes, said to be like molten metal. She is attempting to make herself a god in a state that forbids religion. But those who make it to the top are rarely consistent, and allow themselves to obey different laws from their people.

So what is it like, here in Desert City?

Before I come to that, let me introduce myself to any readers I may conceivably have in the future.

My name is Linda Kall and at the time of writing I am fifty-nine years old and have spent the past fourteen and a half of those years in Desert City. I am still married to Leo, but we haven't seen each other, nor have I heard from him, since I escaped from Chemistry City No. 4. I know nothing of his fate and although such a long time has passed I still haven't reconciled myself to the thought of never seeing him again. Our marriage was not perfect, least of all when it emerged that he had injected me with the truth drug Kalloccain in my sleep, but at least we were in agreement that we were fond of – in fact loved – each other, which in view of the way love was suppressed in the life we lived then must count for a lot.

We had three children together: Ossu, who is now thirty (if he's still alive – as far as I know he belongs to one of the World State army's elite units), Maryl, twenty-eight, who has been swallowed up in the haze of the Drug District, and Laila, who is twenty-six and lives with me.

Laila is seven months pregnant. I don't know how I can tell, but I'm sure it's a girl. The baby's name is to be Nova Aurora, Laila and I have agreed. The name means *new dawn*, for that is what this little girl will be. We shall call her Nova and I love her already – her blood derives from my blood and there's no stronger bond, however much The Lady and her sycophantic retinue go on about Your Child Is Everyone's and Everyone's Child is Yours, etc etc.

There's nothing as beautiful as your *own* newborn child. When I became a mother myself and the babies were at my breast, looking up at me, I felt such a great wave of warmth washing through me – painful yet exquisite – that I was frightened at first, because I simply didn't realise what it was. Of course I knew a mother loves her children, but that was a duty, and what I felt was as far removed from duty as one could get. I didn't reveal a word of it to anyone – not even to Leo, for I was afraid he would think it strange and decide to report me to the State.

As for me, I was born in Chemistry City No. 7, where I grew up with my parents Tior and Ada and my brother Arle, who was four years older than me. We had a flat with one living room and one bedroom, just like everyone else. Father was employed as a sanitary operative while Mother was second in command of the unit that disinfected the instruments the chemists used in their experiments. Sometimes she was allowed to bring home a glass flask or pipette that had got slightly chipped. I liked to sit looking at them, and sometimes I would cautiously play them by tapping them with a pencil. I wanted to make music. I loved music. So did Mother. Although they were banned she had a gramophone player and a record, which she normally kept hidden under some loose floorboards in the larder but sometimes brought out when only the two of us were at home. She played it at such low volume that you could hardly hear it, to avoid attracting the attention of

the neighbours.

‘Strings,’ said Mother. ‘They’re called strings. Isn’t it beautiful?’

Oh yes, it was beautiful, but it was dangerous as well. I tried to make her hand in the gramophone player and record whenever they declared a general amnesty. These always lasted a week and happened twice a year, once in winter and once in summer. The amnesty offices would take in an astonishing number of banned objects, which were then itemised on lists posted on special notice boards. I once handed in a poetry book that I had found in a wastepaper basket and then felt impelled to keep, for some reason. I had actually read the poems and found them beautiful and even moving. They asked questions about meaning and purpose, and made occasional references to a god. Looking back, I don’t think they were all that remarkable, but at the time I had never read anything like them. I couldn’t help being impressed by the unknown poet (there was no name on the slim book) who had dared to write the forbidden word *god*.

As you will realise, I had an uncommon number of deficiencies for one who was drilled day and night in being a good comrade. What I let the outside world see was in stark contrast to how I perceived myself inside.

I was terrified every time they sent me away to children’s camp, where I was taught to handle a variety of weapons, received discipline training and was made to read *The World State Guide to Community*. Every child was expected to know the Truths off pat.

I can still remember them. They are cemented deep inside me, however much I want to forget them:

1. You will love the World State with all your heart.
2. Collective need is also individual need.
3. We are all exactly alike.
4. You do not exist. We exist.
5. Your child is not yours but the State’s.
6. Community is the word before all others.
7. No sacrifice is too great to aid the State.
8. Keep a check on others’ words as they do on yours.
9. Enjoyment of your own life is only meaningful if it serves the State.
10. Informing is a matter of honour and will be rewarded with great credit! Be it your mother or father, your brother or sister, your son or daughter who has dishonoured the State, you will gladly expose their crime. In time they, too, will feel glad to have such a faithful soldier in their family.

It was no coincidence that the last Truth was described in the greatest detail. We were obliged to attend countless lectures at which informers would step forward and tell us how they had done it, how implacable they had been in the face of threats and entreaties, and what distinctions had subsequently been awarded to them in the form of diplomas, medals and sometimes even a small advancement within their own profession. There were those, of course, who would sooner have been rewarded with slightly larger flats, say, or perhaps extra rations of some particular food, but such luxury showed lack of solidarity with your comrades and was also morally reprehensible. We were informed that even the holders of top posts in the



Photographer: Magnus Liam Karlsson

propaganda ministry lived exactly like the rest of us. If we had heard rumours to the contrary we could be assured that the person spreading them was an enemy of the State.

At one of these lectures, a boy called Pyjodor whom I knew pretty well put up his hand and asked the informer who was speaking (a female comrade in her forties, the ecstatic note in her voice belied by her dull gaze) whether she knew what had happened to her son, on whom she had informed. If I remember rightly, the reason was 'unspecified but unlawful nocturnal activity outside the home'.

'He has been taken away and punished in the prescribed manner,' she said in a voice almost as chirpy as before.

'Punished in what way?'

'In the prescribed manner. I don't know any more than that. I'm not curious, either. I trust the State to do what's best for us all.'

Pyjodor looked as if he wanted to ask more, but a comrade's hand tugged at him and he sat down. There was a sense of uneasiness in the ranks. Several of the teachers went round reassuring people. I never saw Pyjodor again. I was surprised not to feel happier about that – after all, he had been impertinent and suspiciously sceptical. I thought about it for a while and decided I had let him get too close to me. We had met many times in the course of the military exercises and he had clearly shown that he took a certain interest in me. Once, when I was supposed to get over a tall barricade with the aid of a rope but was running a temperature and felt weak, he climbed alongside me, giving me his hand to support me on the way up. Another time, at one of the many parties to say goodbye to those who were leaving us or to welcome newcomers, we stood talking together for quite a time and for some reason both got a bit tearful and both admitted to missing our parents – even though we always got to go home at weekends! I was eleven, he was twelve. We should naturally have been ashamed of ourselves for not being happy that we were in the service of the State. Tears and homesickness were

only acceptable in eight-year-old new arrivals.

But now he was gone and I couldn't bring myself to feel any sense of pleasure.

It took a while, but eventually a terrible insight dawned on me: I loathed the State because it had taken him for a couple of little questions that must have occurred to many of us now and then.

This was followed by another realisation, and one which would complicate my life as a comrade still further: I didn't want to be like everyone else, and I wanted more from life than serving the World State. I didn't know precisely what I *did* want, only that entertaining the thought made me happy at quite another level from what I experienced when, say, I completed a particularly difficult exercise in my military training, or won praise for my ability to recite long extracts from *The World State Guide to Community* without a single peep at the book or the help of keywords.

These insights shocked me profoundly. They were not only awful, but also potentially lethal. I swore never to utter a single word about them to anyone else. I tried to forget that I had feelings at all. And all the while I was growing up, becoming a woman. I was judged suitable for a job in a food factory. I expressed my contentment and happiness, as one was supposed to. I was, however, entirely indifferent to my work at the factory, though I was fully competent in my role and was gradually entrusted with more advanced tasks.

By contrast, I gained a lot from one of my work colleagues, Edo Rissen.

Edo and I got on well together from the very first moment – a fact that Leo noticed and was bothered by. Edo was my superior at work, but never really behaved like one, in fact – unlike all the other bosses I've ever had – he always tried to make me feel we were equals. I knew very little about his private life. He was a good fifteen years older than me and married, but it didn't seem a particularly happy marriage and he never mentioned his wife unless I asked a direct question about her, which I pretty soon stopped doing because I could see it distressed him. They had no children and I think the fact grieved him, though we never discussed that, either. He, if anyone, would have made a wonderful father. He took a great interest in Ossu, Maryl and Laila, often asked after them and always gave me some little gift to take them on their birthdays, which he never forgot.

He, like Leo, was a trained chemist and in due course he became Leo's boss at Chemistry City 4. Leo, who had got it into his head that Edo and I shared more than a friendly relationship, was patently very uncomfortable at being forced into the junior role. Together – although it was primarily Leo's invention, Edo also contributed his knowledge – they developed, tested (human experiments were initially carried out on members of the so-called 'voluntary sacrifice corps') and finally produced the drug Kallocain, eagerly encouraged by Tuareg, the Minister of Police, and Kalippo Lavris, head of Department Seven, the highest ethical instance in the World State.

The Kallocain was later used on Edo himself when he was tried for treason – Leo denounced him, an act he later regretted, but he could not withdraw his accusations without laying himself open to suspicion.

The sentence handed down was death.

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To this day I scarcely know how I was able to get out of Chemistry City without detection, but every surveillance system has its loopholes, it seems to be some kind of inherent rule, almost like a protest against the perfect facades on display.

So among all the police eyes and ears, guards and alarms in the World State, there were a few awkward cusses who would occasionally – to break the monotony that is the unwanted by-product of perfection – turn a blind eye.

I got out, at any rate, after a long night spent picking my way along culverts with rats the size of cats; abandoned laboratories with unidentifiable liquids and gases seeping out of the walls, floors and ceilings; and ghostly, half-finished buildings on construction sites where I had to climb over rubble and building materials to get through. I was frightened all the time, of course – the woman who had instructed me on the route, purely orally, committing nothing to paper, could just as well have been one of the propaganda ministry's many spies. True enough, she told me she had known Edo, and to me she seemed a good, trustworthy person, but of course I knew that spies were skilled in the art of dissimulation, it was among the criteria for selection for one of the most honoured of jobs.

But no one saw me, and all at once I was standing beneath the dark night sky, taking my first breath in freedom. I had never seen the stars and moon as clearly before. On my previous hasty visits above ground at night there had always been so much in the way: warplanes on manoeuvres day and night, emitting huge clouds of exhaust fumes and smoke which veiled the sky.

It was a quiet night. Awfully quiet. My ears felt blocked for a moment, unused as I was to such absence of sound. When the feeling passed, I heard the murmur of the wind for the first time, something I had been told about since I was a child, but had never really believed in.

The wind spoke to me in its gentle, swishing voice. It told me I belonged to that vault of silent, velvet darkness enveloping me, and the silent, velvet darkness belonged in its turn to innumerable other vaults like that, extending into infinite space.

Domes of life within life within life.

And there was a pulse, like a heart beating, like breathing, as if everything and everyone were a single body.

The universe in me and I in the universe: *As one.*

Tears ran down my cheeks, finding their way to my neck and down inside my clothes. I felt reborn and immensely grateful. I sank down on my knees and touched the ground, not caring about radiation, toxins or the deadly desert snakes I had been warned about since childhood. Instead I thought about what the woman who told me the way had whispered as she stood beside me in front of the jars of jam in the food store and pretended to be as engrossed as I was in choosing between the three varieties they stocked.

'They're petrified, the Lady and her entourage.'

She must have practised for many years to be able to speak through a closed mouth and without moving her lips.

'Not of the enemy,' she went on. 'War is something they've mastered, though it frustrates and surprises them that they still haven't wiped out all

the opposition. No, it's people like you and me they fear. They know that we human beings are created to live out our feelings and speak freely, even if it involves differences of opinion. They know that a good leader will encourage the people to question his or her decisions and views. They also know that people are created differently, with different needs, and it's wrong to try to force us all into the same mould. They know that their time in power is limited and that a day will come when the silent movement is no longer in the minority.'

'What will happen then?' I whispered as I leant down and reached for a jar, so the police eye on the ceiling would not record my face.

She smiled and said:

'The revolution will start. I must go now. See you on Tuesday after the military exercise. The voluntary street patrol, Fourteenth Avenue, seven sharp. The yellow jam tastes best.'

She took a jar of the yellow herself and was gone. I realised I didn't even know her name. But I did know she had two-year-old twin daughters, which was why she dared not escape with me. But she would carry on the campaign from within. If luck was with us we would see each other again some day, as free women in a world where at least our grandchildren would be able to grow up without risking punishment for every slight deviation from what the authorities had decreed to be the correct way to think, the correct way to act, the correct way to speak, the correct things to know, the correct decisions, the correct aspirations – in short, *a correct life*.