Edited by:
Vojka Smiljanić-Đikić

English translation:
Graham McMaster
Irena Žlof
Novica Petrović
Erica Johnson Debeljak
Sazana Capriqi
Will Firth
Ljubica Arsovska
Elizabeta Bakovska

Language Editors:
Gwen Jones
Caryn Voskuil
Peggy Reid

Fletoret te Sarajevës

Lettere da Sarajevo

SARAJEVSKE SVESKE

Les cahiers de Sarajevo

SARAJEVSKE BILJEŽNICE

Sarajevos Litterära Tidskrift

Sarajevos litteraere magasin

САРАЈЕВСКЕ СВЕСКЕ

Sarajevos Litteraere Tidsskrift

SARAJEVSKI ZVEZKI

Сараевские тетрадки

САРАЕВСКИ ТЕТРАТКИ

Hefte aus Sarajevo

Kirjeitä Sarajevosta

SARAJEVO NOTEBOOK

NO
34
2011

CONTENTS

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

Janez Potočnik

Janez Potočnik

Our Balkans – The Fragile Heart of Our Europe

A few decades ago ***Europe*** was demolished and its people were desperate. It needed reconstruction, and it needed reconciliation. The European Union brought lasting peace, stability, security and the promise of more prosperity and a better life. Back then the "raison d'être" for European cooperation and integration was more than obvious. That original reason is just as valid today, even if we now sometimes rather foolishly take those achievements for granted.

The fact is that Europe has changed since then. It is a good place to live – peaceful, secure and rich – and many are wondering why we should continue strengthening our cooperation and integration. The rest of world has also changed, one could say dramatically, especially in the last two decades. We are more interconnected and more interdependent. Developing countries, like China and India, are catching up fast; the world is becoming increasingly multi-polar. Many of the challenges we face, such as climate change, future energy supply, potential pandemics and other health issues, shortages of food and drinking water, security... are becoming more and more global. And competition is getting even fiercer. In a way one could say that the world in which we live is more fragile and precarious than ever.

Two concepts will determine our common future life. The first is sustainability, not only environmental, but sustainability in its widest sense. We have learned from the current financial and economic crisis that economies and profits should also be sustainable. The second concept is global governance. This has become obviously necessary as the world has turned into a mutually interdependent global village and our individual and collective responsibilities have substantially increased.

The World needs a responsible Europe, a Europe that is able to speak with one voice, a Europe which can take the leading role globally when needed, for example in the case of climate change. But it is not only the World that needs a stronger Europe; we Europeans also need a stronger Europe, a Europe capable of dealing with the changed reality in which we live.

While the original "raison d'être" for our cooperation is still there and valid, new global developments are clearly an additional reason for strengthening Europe's role, an additional "raison d'être" for our strengthened cooperation.

ooo

The Balkans are part of Europe, geographically, culturally, historically, economically, in fact in every way you can imagine... The fact is that all Balkan countries would today be members of the European Union if the recent terrible war in the region had been avoided. But it was not. It happened, and it is a reminder to all of us of how fragile Europe, and especially this region, still is. The time horizon for the countries in the region has changed. Membership has been pushed back, for some more than others. Slovenia was wise enough, and lucky enough, to escape. An important message of hope and determination to continue with the enlargement policy was given to the region in a recent announcement of the target date for the accession of Croatia.

The European Union's behaviour in those critical times was far from appropriate and desirable. Its reaction to the emerging conflict was not expressed with the clear voice and determination that was needed. We should not forget that. For this reason we have a kind of moral duty and obligation to help the region and to correct some of those unfortunate facts.

All the so-called Western Balkan countries clearly have a European Union perspective. This perspective is as important for them individually as it is also for their region and the whole of Europe. It is about their peace, their stability and their prosperity, but it is also about European peace, stability and prosperity. Even if Europe's many other problems (like the current fight against the financial and economic crises) are often more visible, many of us are highly aware that enlargement was - and still is – the most successful European policy. The countries in the Balkan region should therefore "keep alive" a belief in the European Union and in Europe, while at the same time the European Union should "keep alive" the enlargement policy and process, including the European perspective of all Western Balkan countries (and Turkey, of course). What I learned as Head of Slovenia's Negotiation Team for its accession to the European Union is that the European Union keeps its promises, and that there are many friends in European institutions ready to help. Don't forget, there are even more of us here today.

There is no doubt that the Balkan people have strong potential. Just think of their unforgettable movies, literature and music, or scientific genius like that of Nikola Tesla. Who could forget the imagination and the unpredictable creativity of many of their athletes? All these people bring their unlimited talents to various areas of our lives.

I am currently responsible in the European Commission for the Environment and in my previous mandate I was responsible for Science and Research. Both areas are vital for any country's future, prosperity and quality of life.

Cooperation is like blood for our organs. In research we are trying to build a strong European Research Area, enabling an open market place for talents and ideas to circu-

late. Of course all Member States are part of that approach, but we are trying to enlarge it beyond the Union borders by associating countries with the European Framework and Research Area. Associated members have practically the same rights and obligations as all Member States. In a way, they are already members of the Union in the area of science and research. When I joined the European Commission none of the so-called Western Balkan countries was associated, and by the end of my mandate all of them were. The philosophy behind that approach is simple. It is based on the logic of integrating the region as soon as possible, and as much as possible, into the European Union. It is based on the logic of help through the strengthening of domestic capacities!

ooo

The project of ***Sarajevo Notebooks*** is unique. It emerged from the initiative of a group of prominent writers and intellectuals from all of the Balkan countries. The importance of this project is in its ability to promote cooperation and build bridges, thus embracing the idea of cultural identity, whilst at the same time recognizing our differences as a source of richness. This project not only plays an important part in strengthening regional cooperation, it reveals to the rest of Europe the high philosophical and literary standards coming from this - in many respects - stigmatised region. A region whose culture includes all the fundamental characteristics of spiritual dimensions that are genuinely European. It reminds us that Europe is also there, rich and diverse – something that is of course so easily understandable for all of us who used to live together in the former Yugoslavia.

For many years this project has gathered intellectuals from the region. On the one hand, the contributing authors promote intellectual and artistic excellence and, on the other hand, they give voice to the urgent need to adopt a democratic European spirit in reciprocal contacts and links. You provide proof, by clear example, that lively dialogue is indeed possible. And more than this, proof that such dialogue - although fragile and in need of outside assistance - can and should be developed in the region itself.

Dear friends, your mission is truly noble. You have been for years sharing the hope of understanding and cooperation, tolerance and readiness for listening and understanding others. You are building dialogue bridges between young generations of writers in the region and replacing hate with hope. Hope that we are able to live together in harmony. ***Sarajevo Notebooks*** are the lighthouse for the region and for Europe. They are bringing back that same Olympic spirit which died on the blood-stained streets of Sarajevo some years ago.

Rest reassured that also in Brussels we admire your work, your sincere fight for a better world out there, in your region, in my region. One should believe in one's own abilities, in one's own strengths, in one's own future. One should believe that borders, be they on the ground, in the air or sea, or even more importantly in our heads, can fall. And the process of European integration is exactly the process in which the borders are falling, slowly but steadily, especially the ones in our heads.

Sarajevo Notebooks are strengthening the beating of our fragile Balkan European heart. It echoes loud and far ... worthy of the support it receives!

CONTEMPORARY SHORT STORY – INTRODUCTION

Jagna Pogačnik
Enver Kazaz

photo: Kristijan Topolovec

Jagna Pogačnik

A significant switch to private life

translated from Croatian by Graham McMaster

The last decade of the 20th and the first of the 21st century, or so it seems to me from my very likely at least a little subjective viewpoint, somehow were fonder of novels than of short stories or novellas. Irrespective of everything that the history of literature has long since taught us, concerning the fact that all literary kinds have their phases and changes and fit into the general social and poetic trends and fashions, and thus go through their flowerings and their crises, in the last ten years or so a kind of *novel trend* has prevailed, fairly inflated by external, non-literary aids. The novel, that is, is still the one that the media, in their universal aim of reducing topics from the arts and writing to as few lines as possible, have somehow nevertheless been accepted and reviewed, novels on the whole getting the more important literary prizes, young writers make their debuts with novels, and figures about how individual prose titles are sold and read (at least in Croatia, but I would think it is the same in the context of the whole wider region) clearly show that the reading public, if anything, is reading just this 'major' prose genre.

But since in literature it is seldom that anything can be reduced to statistics and the laws of large numbers, clearly, all that has been said has its own big and weighty *but*. Irrespective of the real or apparent, above all, numerical, dominance of the novel, the short prose form, the story, has not in the last few years, in any segment or in any of the national literatures of the region shown any sign of surrender. Indeed, a mere cursory glance, which can be made with a very simple Web search, shows and proves the existence of many competitions for short stories, with larger or smaller prizes, works by several hands are published, festivals of a regional or larger international character are held, and many distinguished and well-reputed writers, even those who are just aspiring to be so, publish collections of tales that, I would say, constitute a section of prose literature that is even more interesting and more creative. The tale, by definition, is less apt to ingratiate itself with current fashions and trends, and because of its character does not even pretend to represent any totality or cover a more complex image of the world; rather, it addresses the detail that tells of the whole, is in a sense less inclined to enrol ideological and other admixtures in its ranks. The tale is, which is not unimportant and ought not to be forgotten when it is facilely placed on the margins of prose writing, that which shows, more directly, fewer figures and just fragments of events, and so leaves the reader the creative opportunity to fill in gaps, and leaves empty spaces in which the reader can, and indeed has to, take part, which at the time of the prevalence of writing for fun and leisure, has become a neglected and almost forgotten readerly characteristic and task. In a shorter prose form

the use of experimental narrative techniques is almost a must, more frequent than in the novel, and hence it is understood that as such it will have fewer readers and less media attention; but it is the greatest literary love of authors for whom experiment, creativity and literariness are more important than the numbers of copies borrowed in libraries or places on the best-sellers list. In today's day, the writing of the short story has become a kind of writer's extravagance, which, luckily, many important, fine and competent literary names are still willing to go in for, without keeping their thumbs crossed behind their backs. Looking to confirm this proposition is this representative selection from the currently large and variegated production of this short prose genre in the region.

Today the tale is lively, vivacious and, in terms of its formal and thematic features, important. A year or so ago in this kind of text I would have certainly mentioned the dominance of the model of critical mimesis or, put colloquially, realistic prose, which is characterised by the interest of the writers in the reality that surrounds them, and the very unambiguous attitude adopted to this same reality. The literary treatment of everyday motifs and topics, often those that fall within the domain of the crime pages, and the recognisable attitude of the narrator to them, from humour to really polemical disputation, dominated the prose literature of the region until very recent times. Literature has, with greater or lesser success, settled the problems of the wars, the transition and post-transition in the area, and has often been interested in characterising ordinary people and those on the fringes, typical representatives of recent reality, which was so strong that it appeared to be the most used inspiration for literature. The literature of the region, particularly in the tale, clearly, in some sense wrote at great length about and accordingly depleted these thematic preoccupations, but, and which is particularly interesting, did not go back to the conceptualism or escapism that marked post-modern writing, rather it soon turned to private life or intimism. The figures in stories are still ordinary people, but their life's preoccupations shaped into literary stories are on the whole not based on survival in extreme (war and post-war) conditions or facing up to the new rules of the game brought about by the new social and political system. Ordinary people in recent stories have turned away from the TV news, local politicians, corruption and the Mob, car-bombs and the disappearance of the middle class and have come face to face with themselves, their partners, families and neighbours, the intimate turbulence and the universal human problems of functioning in interpersonal relations, many of which are not the way they should be or even seem to be. When we speak of the shift to intimism, of course we are talking about emotions, love relationships of all colours and signs, which in a strange way have become once again the dominant topic of most of the authors and their tales presented here. Clearly, and it has already been spoken and written of, the literature of the region, after the great and understandable infection by reality, has recovered, and is slowly being infected by individuals and their intimate worlds, thus becoming more universal and less immersed within its local borders.

Ljubica Arsić, a prize-winning and exceptionally widely-read Serbian prose writer (this exceptionally wide reading relating above all to her big hit, guess what,

a novel - *Mango*) is, judging all in all, fond of effective and somewhat shocking stories, those that in their final stages produce a turnabout that surprises the reader. Her story "Salome" is narrated in a male voice, from the perspective of a theatre prompter, a man in his middle years, a bachelor, who is all at once called by a mysterious female voice on the phone. This initial situation, deprived of all local backdrops (except that the main character is reading Velikić's *Bremen Case,* then in fashion), turns into an uncommon love relationship, amorous, sexual and in the end very mistaken, because of which the hero entirely loses all the solid props of his life. Love, or rather, adultery, is at the centre of the attention and story of Mihajlo Pantić, who on the outlines of Dostoyevsky ("after Dostoyevsky") gives shape to the confession of a man who swaps his ordinary family life and masculine friendship (in which there is by definition always some rivalry) for the role of lover of the wife of his own friend. The account of the adultery, garnished with the trifle that the narrator's name is Mihailo Mihailović and with the fluidity of the motif of an encounter with his namesake the angel on the wall of a church, can be read on the one hand as a page-turning and simply written story of extra-marital relations, given only additional connotations by the mentioned coincidence of the names and the motif of the uncommon fetish of the narrator. Pantić's story about pain is a story of the mid-life crisis, marriage in which there is no longer any passion, habits that have eaten up life, shaken friendship and which is also universal and reduced to universally human motivations. Croatian representatives Zoran Ferić and Olja Savičević Ivančević, tellingly and almost as if by agreement, work out and continue similar if not quite the same motifs. In that master of the grotesque and the bizarre, the blackest of all Croatian writers, Ferić, the tale is focused once again on two, her and him, who are coming from a hospital after the failure of an attempt at in vitro fertilisation. Their outing to Sljeme, an attempt at getting away from what has happened to them, and the minimalist depiction of the extinction of their relationship, is emphasised with the typically Ferić motif of the burial of a pet, which they witness, a kind of specific fade-out to the story and to their relationship. Olja Savičević Ivančević, in the language, atmosphere and settings of her tale, conjures up the specific mentality and prejudices of the Dalmatian small town, and her heroine, Tereza, is one of these women whose movements everyone watches from behind their lace curtains and then dish dirt about. Tereza, pregnant, desperate and on the brink of a decision that at the end she betrays, is also directed towards another, to him, with whom she is linked by all except understanding. The sketch, a practically rain-drenched watercolour that the author gives us, is full of lacunae, but is eloquent enough as the adumbration of a woman's fate and the given local mentality. The tale of Bosniak narrator Faruk Šehić is removed from themes of interpersonal, amorous, and other relations, but not from intimism. His story about the Una River, his mother's house, starts and ends in the manner of a particular kind of poetic prose, with a mass of details, colours and sounds, offering in the first part an almost idyllic and certainly harmonious image of a certain locality. But in the next part this picture is contrasted to the image of the ruin, as the result of a very concrete (even precisely dated) act of wartime destruction, its historical repetition and the crea-

tion of the emblematic symbol of a "house on two rivers". The uncommon blend of the poetic, the psychological and the realistic is entirely detached from the elements of the kind of tale that we read in the critical mimetic model, above all by the highlighting of this poetic dimension. Goran Samardžić in "Deeper thoughts" has a propensity above all to play with his own biography – a sketch for a kind of biography, which starts entirely in that manner, with a neutral and objective third person narrator, is transformed into a fragment, short, condensed and focused on several unimportant and bizarre (from the point of view of a serious biography) details, the title of the tale being in a sense a reflection of the narrator's ironic and self-deprecating narrative position. Intimism, yes, but reduced to writing about the self as of someone else, with a focus on inessential and far from spectacular details. The two short tales of Lamija Begagić are indicators of the dialogical form and the dramatic potential as being important properties of short stories. The author records what seem to be ordinary and everyday situations, the trite talk of a couple before sleeping, a child and parent before devoting themselves to their daily activities, a director and an employee (both women) facing the sack and thus gives shape to the main topic of her tale – the possibility and impossibility of communication. In the second story, "My dear Ivana, you've no idea", the evasions and in communication are manifested by the confrontation of two life worldviews, which does not give a pair of lovers from the beginning much chance of surviving. The story "Letter" of Slovene author Mojca Kumerdej is an outstanding slice of everyday urban life and a real little study of loneliness and the obsession that springs from it. The heroine, after an attractive female neighbour moves into her tower block, focuses her life on her, going through phases from voyeurism, delight, identification and complete obsession and finally slight and unobtrusive indications of homoerotic love. But the feeling of slight and betrayal that she experiences from her neighbour excites malice in the heroine, playing with serious and vitally important information that she suppresses, for which reason the neighbour Elena remains the lasting and never resolved obsession of her life. In a somewhat longer form, very skilfully, flirting with some very attractive motifs, the author has written a suggestive study of urban paranoias and the need for love and acceptance, even when it borders on the destructive and the pathological. The story of Dušan Čater, "Others", a sketch from the life of immigrants, is created in the line of inspiration in Slovene literature from the theme of the *čefur* or incoming foreigner; based on dialogues and minimalism of stylistic procedures, it gives a moving and tragic story of a family. The celebration of a birthday, a family gathering of those members who have survived and ended up in the same place is an occasion for yet more proof of disintegration and the painful confrontation of what is left of their lives. The Bosnian family, scattered and broken up by the war, is most powerfully manifested in the figure of a sister caught in the wrong marriage, confused and zonked on Prozac, who has nothing to do but pick up the remains of the crumbled cake on the floor, a symbol of her and their life. Language games (switching between Slovene and Bosnian) and comical translations of a Bosnian phrase into Slovene, represent a sorry, but the only possible, way out of this world that after a worked-on past and an insane present cannot even

dream of the future. The story "Fog" by Albanian writer Eqrem Basha is the only one in this representative selection that makes use of fantasy motifs and locates the story in a Kafkan atmosphere of fog in which clocks no longer go as they should, the papers don't come out, and SWAT teams under the cover of fog carry out purges, the individual suddenly falling into some other dimension, one which surpasses terrorisation and repression. The story, based on the oneiric and the fantastic, is in fact an allegory of a repressive system, and the only one of the stories that with a transparent deviation from reality towards the surreal in fact speaks out powerfully about that reality. Andrej Niklaidis, in his story written the manner of his exceptionally and very successful novels, deals with the complex relations of mother and son. The mother in her hospital bed and the son, a priest, faced with the decision of whether or not to spend money meant for the church on his mother's expensive operation, represent just the epilogue of a bad relationship that is now culminating. Mutual accusations, a dysfunctional family, the son's decision with which the mother has never been reconciled, all this has escalated in a moment in which there is no longer much time for decision making. To be a good son and bad priest, or vice versa, this is the dilemma faced by the hero, and when the decision is finally made, time has run out, a powerful reminder that it actually happened much earlier. Two Macedonian representatives in this selection, Gabriela Stojanovska and Dimitrije Duracovski, have opted for a contemporary and intimate theme. Stojanovska wittily, via a description of how the heroine eats a banana, writes a laid-back tale of a girl caught between the conventions and pleasure and the problems of an individual approach and guilt. The way the little girl and later the young woman eats a banana, with clear allusions to the blowjob, which is read in this way by all except the girl herself, who simply gives herself up to pleasure and her own choice, is something that differentiates her from others and because of which she has to hide her little and insignificant habit from the authority figures (father, boyfriend, public). In a sense, without any big words or motifs, her story is also a story of being different and individual, which can be symbolised by very little things and habits. Duracovski too in his tale, by telling of a long-past event, a youthful infatuation, opens up one more family theme – the absence of the father, gone when he was most needed. The evocation of an event in the sense of utterance is also turned into an address to the father whose absence casts him into despair; the story grows out of a need for communication that never was.

So a fairly cursory glance at the IDs of the stories presented here clearly shows a few very clear and exceptionally telling circumstances. The short story of the region in recent times has made a powerful about turn in terms of subject, from the taking up the issues of strong reality (marked by real persons and events, as well as their consequences on the lives of ordinary people) and from the proposition that life is anyway more fantastic than literature and in any event sufficiently flexible for motifs to be drawn from it, as well as a turn away from critical mimesis in which reality is imitated, a clear and identifiable critical stance being adopted towards it. The authors of the stories at the present time have no need or desire to solve the big problems of history, ideology and local societal, social and political

anomalies in their tales. This shift has resulted in telling and in fact shared poetical departures in the direction of minimalism and a kind of emotional realism. It is significant that a genre that is actually by definition inclined to experiment actually very seldom makes use of this possibility – playing with the text, experimentation, play of language, conceptualism or inter-discursiveness just as, in only rare cases, it opts for the form of the short or the short short story. Short story writers of the region are currently in point of theme turning to intimate tales of the everyday life of the individual, the turmoils in their loves and friendships and families. In terms of formal development, they on the whole opt for linear and neo-realistic narration. The individual, after the years in which history played with her or him, can finally address himself and his loved ones, and when this individual becomes a literary figure, his fundamental function has become one in which he tests himself out in the world of interpersonal relations, communication and emotions that often go in a completely opposite direction to what he wants. Intimism, family themes, the new male sensitivity, contemporary versions of women's writing, all these are attributes that literary reviewing has in the last few years assigned to recent prose production. After reading this selection, something else becomes clear – the sketching out of a common literary context for the region, collaboration between and melding of individual national literatures from what was once a common literary space and in general the phenomenon of a regional literature does not derive from external factors (markets, joint publishing projects and so on); rather its necessity and logic is covered by what is most important, in the actual literary texts of the individual authors, in which today we can find similar poetic advances, thematic shifts and formal approaches. The selection before you is also more than a good negation of one other faulty proposition that, unfortunately, can often be heard from apparently relevant places, i.e., writing a story is not just a preparation for the big work, an exercise before the novel. The story in the region today is an entirely independent, creative and extremely ambitious literary kind that is not at all in any kind of crisis and is coming into being and developing in parallel to, and without any complexes with respect to, the somewhat artificially created novel trend.

Enver Kazaz

The universe of intimacy

translated from Bosnian by Irena Žlof

photo: Jasmin Agović

When a journal decides to do a stock-take of its literary production, it is a telling indication of their intervention in a dominant, central literary canon and of their attitude with regard to literary practice. When this is done by a magazine which is in every regard atypical, and has already established itself as one of the most relevant in the South-Slavic inter-literary community, such action inevitably destabilises the prevailing orthodoxy, the interpreted, normative literary canon. Besides, this decision of Sarajevo Notebooks is by all accounts, it would appear, unambitious. This selection of texts has no intention to collect and valuate the total literary production of the South Slavic literatures, from Slovenian in the northwest to Macedonian in the southeast. Nor does it intend to justify itself by a theoretical concept which would lead to the destabilisation and collapse of the central literary canon. Similarly, its aim is not to step out of its own editorial concept, which was perhaps best determined by the way in which the magazine was started. Sarajevo Notebooks were born out of a desire to cross borders between South-Slavic cultures established by history and past wars. And this selection is no different – it crosses borders, only those are no longer borders created by politics and ideology, the cruel practice of political power, but borders set by the academic authorities, those same ones that establish the canon and strive to reproduce it as far as possible throughout cultural practice. This means that Sarajevo Notebooks have realised their primary goal – for them borders between South-Slavic cultures no longer exist as impassable topoi, they are not points of ideological and political bans, but points of communication. The word "region" was introduced into the language and from there it entered literature from the ideological echelons, professedly ideologically neutral, but in fact constructed in the heart of neoliberal ideology in order to become acceptable to different, even conflicting national ideologies. It became commonplace overnight, precisely because of its ostensible neutrality, but in its semantics it assumes a con-

text far more than it describes it. In the South-Slavic context, the word "region" substitutes for a country which has disappeared in a dramatic historical act. Following that apocalypse, the region gradually breaks free from the centuries-old ideological shackles whose key purpose was to keep it together, fundamentally determining all forms of intercultural communication in the region.

And, whilst in the past the region had always been determined in its intercultural communication by some ideological meta-narrative, often groaning from underneath its boot, the choice which is apparent in this post-apocalyptic period does not have an ideological meta-narrative, which is not to say that it does not have an ideological platform. For a rejection of any prevailing ideology is in itself a first-rate ideological act, whereby the process of de-ideologisation appears on the social horizon as a yearning for a post-ideological state of new liberal ideas and, ultimately, unrestrained intercultural dialogue. It is therefore not driven by an ideologically defined spirit of togetherness shaped by the idea of South-Slavness which had taken different forms from its early nineteen-century projection to its Communist variants.

Under these post-ideological auspices, this selection made by the Notebooks is a very subversive act. Its subversiveness is contained in its intention to decentralise and cancel out the region's orthodox literary canon, which is primarily a national one. Its normative, self-centred nature, its ambition to be commonly accepted, stems precisely from its national determinant which is legitimised by the academic authorities as the ultimate verifier of all cultural knowledge. When a canon is decentralised and pluralised by marginal canonical norms in the context of individual national literatures, this process still remains contained within the borders of national culture.

Here, however, in the selection made by Notebooks, the national has stepped down and made place for something far greater – the uniqueness of authors guided exclusively by their sensibilities, their talent, insight into human intimacy, their horizons including those of interpersonal relationships, their drama, and different misunderstandings among individuals who are searching for themselves, in themselves and in others, whilst the object of their search keeps eluding them. And that is perhaps the best point from which to start the unpredictable duel with the central, orthodox, national canons of the region. The best, because it reflects poetical changes in the story which indicatively allude to the changes in literature as such; the best, because this selection reflects the flow of poetic and creative energies, the conferring of literary minds; the best, because the selection does not represent authors and writers who are central to orthodox, national literary canons.

The production of fiction published by Sarajevo Notebooks is such that this selection represents a kind of its easthetical crowning, and the choice of stories not only pays tribute to the new poetics, but in fact sets foundations for a new canon: the intercultural canon of the region.

Here I would like to emphasise several, I believe important poetical points. The neo-intimism on the horizon of new sensibilities, which have also promoted a new male sensibility in literature, very much reminds us of what took place in

the post-expressionist era of South-Slavic literatures after the First World War. If analysed at a macro-cultural level, it is evident that the post-war state of literature back then similarly de-heroised the male figurein the social and cultural context. But these new stories do not appear to be harbouring the same ambitions. They are born out of a legacy of the so-called (anti-)war writing which had already exhausted the work of searching for catharsis. Literature, over and above any other social discourse, was dealing with the problem of war and the ideological meta-narrative and narrative, and in that dystopian gesture, the utopia of a new sensibility was revealed, defeating the ideological narrative and the underlying culture which had produced the war in the first place, and securing its moral justification and acceptability on the social horizon – turning it into a central historical and cultural event. As far as neo-intimistic writing was concerned, its emergence was aided by novels which, by their nature, aim to capture the totality of human society. Drama and film too contributed to the demilitarisation of male identity and pacification of the cultural space. The scene was thus set for neo-intimistic writing.

This is therefore a new chronotopic situation in the writing of this region, and judging by the type of problems its characters face, the manner in which they resolve their dilemmas or by their inability to resolve them, they could be living in any culture, anywhere in the world, in the realms of the universal human drama.

This selection is therefore testing entirely new boundaries. These are no longer ideologically constructed boundaries within the region, but the boundaries of the region with respect to its surroundings. These surroundings are now a collection of all languages, because the language has withdrawn from the social, historical and cultural context and has applied itself to describing human emotions, psyches, mental dramas, ethical dilemmas and a whole range of other phenomena which are common to every culture, every society, every era, every human situation. In its neo-intimism the story has touched upon the universally human situation, seeking authentic values which are independent of the rule of any external social, ideological, political or historical power, but determined by the sphere of human intimacy.

CONTEMPORARY SHORT STORY

Ljubica Arsić
Olja Savičević-Ivančević
Faruk Šehić
Mihajlo Pantić
Eqrem Basha
Zoran Ferić
Mojca Kumerdej
Dušan Čater
Gabrijela Stojanoska-Stanoeska
Andrej Nikolaidis
Lamija Begagić
Goran Samardžić
Dimitrie Duracovski

Ljubica Arsić

Salome

translated from Serbian by Novica Petrović

When I thought about it afterwards, at the tram stop, inside the streetcar, my entire body pressed against that of an unknown woman, it seemed to me that it had never happened. The way the past appears to you anyway, when you wake up from it. The only thing that remains is someone's wanton laughter, contorted like a boiled apricot at the bottom of a freshly opened can, faces slowly melting like ice cubes inside a glass. But the ringing of the telephone late that night is still real enough. Its sound, though, is getting weaker, sometimes I hear it in the middle of an unintelligible dream in which it is the only sound there is, while I walk backward through time, my hand reaching for the phone that would bring days of happiness and unrest to me. And all that just at the moment when spring began, with a ladybird tangled in the yellow lace of ferns, down there in the Gypsy yard that my window looks out on.

There was someone in the yard, dragging crates with empty beer bottles across it, a young Gypsy presumably, who kept cursing a dog at the top of his voice. On sunny days, everyone came out, their trouser legs rolled up or trouserless, to splash about wading through muddy pools, while a Gypsy woman washed a red carpet with a hose, loudly addressing them and pointing at the sun, then at a transistor radio around which everyone would gather all of a sudden. That night, an open door would yawn suddenly, a red curtain rushing out of it, or maybe it was a red light pushing Gypsies towards the dog. It was then that the phone rang.

I let it ring for a while, then I listlessly went to answer it, assuming that it must be Bibi, the former Bibi, to whom I gave so many months of attention and understanding, all in vain. She was obsessed with fashion, she was flabby, she was angelic in a typically feminine way and rather stupid in a number of other ways. And I was rather lonely and terrified because of that, mad with lust that she quickly calmed down dusting on Sunday mornings, arranging T-shirts very neatly in the drawer and telling me sweetly what I should do when I returned late from the theatre where I was employed as a prompter, how to eat without endangering my digestive system, whom I should trust, how to maintain my composure, which occasionally disappeared before performances. Life without Bibi, I admit, became nice again, even though her spirit, endowed with motherly care and neatness, still floated around me, reminding me, like a pair of underpants too tight, when I became too obstreperous. Occasionally she telephoned when I came home after a performance, just to let me know that she worried about me, for life was nasty and I was a real naïve child, hanging about in dark corners, not caring about getting hurt, did I need anything, we would remain friends, of course. I ended those infrequent conversations

asking about her mother and if she needed any medicines, gloating, like the ultimate male sadist, over the fact that Bibi had gone blind and deaf all of a sudden, and with the force of otherworldly willpower, I sent her astral body, which spent its time tidying up old jars on my terrace, to flutter over to her place, take her by the hand and lead her to the bathroom.

I finally picked up the receiver, from which I heard an unknown female voice say:

– I knew you weren't sleeping, that you're a night owl just like myself.

– Yes – I replied, which could have meant just about anything, that I was a night owl, that I was waiting to hear what she would say next, that I was surprised at the tameness of her voice and that I would say none of the above, letting everything that I thought at that particular moment in time reach her through my breath.

– You must have made a mistake – whereupon she replied that she never made mistakes, adding that there was a full moon in our windows now, which was quite true. In my window, it had acquired a headscarf made of a curtain, so that it looked like a Spanish maid, and she added that at such times she could not sleep. She also saw my lighted window, which made me grab the phone and rush to the window, upsetting the newspaper stand as I did so, trying to find out where she was calling from. So she could see my window from her flat. Some lights lacking individuality, distant holes of pierced sky, glowed through the darkness. In any case, she could have been calling from a darkened room.

– Well, I called just to hear your voice – she said gently and softly, and put down the receiver as I stammered something about her name to the accompaniment of the signal indicating that the connection was terminated.

It happened occasionally to me that, while returning home, I sat on a bench stained with pigeon shit and bent over, leaning my elbows on my knees. Succumbing to an aural hallucination, which I had experienced for the first time in the final year of music school, I would hear the entire world murmuring pleasantly through the window, the noise of far-off cities and waves, telegraph wires vibrating, entering my ears in the manner of fine drills, which would begin to separate and distinguish between all those sounds in earnest. I heard the panting of trains and the screeching of wheels, then the voices of passengers laughing and coughing, the rustling of newspapers in their hands, water pouring into a washbasin, and then all of that gathered and tamed into a big ball, a great big roar rolling over me, disintegrating into the beating of my heart and the ticking of my watch.

And thus, that night, wide awake, I tossed and turned on the crumpled bed, shaken by the buzzing of a disturbed beehive, which affected my nerves. On account of insomnia, I started feeling feverish, the fever perhaps brought about by the Sunday tension, as well as the unknown female voice coming from outside, the way I looked upon the world myself, from the side, feeling nervous because of my inability to get seriously involved in anything.

Towards the dawn, the hellfires that were burning the hairs on my hands and legs were extinguished, so I kept scratching myself, trying to reconcile the pillow and my back, the bedsheet and my feet, dreaming, in the course of a chaotic nap, of a heavenly path that led me to a rainy morning.

The next evening she called again. Her voice trilled:

– How are things, prompter? – which immediately swept me off my feet entirely, so I asked her how she knew that I worked as a prompter in a theatre, whereupon she replied that some things were quite simply understood to be so, abruptly changing the subject to the increased humidity of the air, which made it difficult to breathe in spring. And as for you, how are you, after the rain everything's warmer and one has the impression that nothing happens, especially in the dark, which is quite unbearable. I suggested to her that we meet at the *Scene* café, which was open all night, for a drink and a nice long chat.

– For people to exchange small courtesies – she said – it is not necessary to ever see each other.

After our third conversation, I felt that she had the voice of a perfect woman. Neither fat nor thin, curvaceous enough for a man to bless the sense of touch that nature gave him. Based on her contagious laughter, I imagined the way she moved. I recognised her silences and imagined her eyes accordingly. Green, melancholy. I remembered her voice and imagined her tenderness based on it. And when she left me a message on the answering machine saying: Americans make Coca Cola, the Japanese go in for bonsai, what about you, I knew I was in love.

All our subsequent chats, her purring: so how are things tonight? – which made me start chattering away, realising, like Scheherazade before me, that the end of our conversation would mean a silk cord with which to strangle myself, a nightmare thundering upon the roof like a summer shower, or a cat's piercing scream, all that dragged me away from her real body and face. I approached her voice guided by the instincts of a blind man, feeling about in the dark, or hearing all that which we normally don't hear: her femininity and her need to make me happy, her fidelity.

On one occasion, after I had started blabbing about a world full of handsome men, she said:

– But you're the handsomest of them all!

I admit to having felt elated after that, but I also felt afraid, for I realised that not only did she know what I looked like, but perhaps she studied me from a position of safety while I moved about leisurely as if I was all alone in this world.

I decided to find her, but where was I to begin, for God's sake? Listening to music that relaxed me, I thought about how other people reacted to it. With Mendelssohn, they felt at home. Albinoni made them feel noble, with Brahms they felt artistic, for they imagined that his music could not be understood by just everyone, and then the accessible Strauss and *Don Juan*, with little melodies they could hum, rolling them inside their mouths like an hors-d'oeuvre. And then the main course, Beethoven's grand vibrational massage, the first bars of the *Fifth* would always slap me on the neck like a shovel, that's how fate smashed through the door in the work of this deaf genius. All of a sudden I thought that maybe that lovely voice belonged to one of the opera singers employed at the opera house where I worked. It just had to be so, inspiration hit me, full of greenish shades of barely perceptible nasal sensuality, interspersed with pink veins, supple like music from top to bottom.

It couldn't be La Traviata, I decided right away, she was so gangly that we gave her the nickname Banana at the theatre. Perhaps Carmen, with her big eyes, even bigger tits and pouting, sensual lips, painted with a loud red lipstick, always spilling over the edges. She was too direct somehow, for with her a man thought only of getting her into bed. Too cheap, shedding operatic tears that were way too big and flowed too slowly down her cheeks. She went through the corridors of the theatre without touching the floor or noticing anyone, looking at everything from some other era, when everyone knew everything about her talent, a time impossible to determine and far away, but certainly a time before the discovery of the deodorant spray. Or maybe, in view of that message about the Japanese, it was Madam Butterfly, with an alabaster-like complexion and a mysterious smile. She, too, was eliminated soon afterwards, after a rehearsal, when we sat together at the theatre café, where she told a Hungarian tenor, her voice fluttering like that of a sheep, of her greatest adventure in life: how, once when she was in Tivat, she had to have supper twice on account of being too shy to admit she'd already eaten. The others had voices cracked from false applause and the half-empty pit, as well as an orchestra that, instead of playing, shuddered like a hen wet through from rain. They barely managed to gather their voices together, stitching them at the seams before a performance, afraid that they would crack ignominiously, which, apart from exposing them shamefully naked, would also mean the end of their careers.

I was spending one of many similar evenings at the theatre café, where I would have two or three drinks in order to wash the dust from the sets down my throat after a performance, as well as the false smiles and shouts of approval, which they so generously dispensed to the audience from the stage. The same clinking glasses, sweaty actors trying to expiate their misery by shouting, actresses whose front teeth had started coming dangerously apart; their flirting, grandmotherly already, may have worked somehow in the chaos of alcohol and tobacco smoke, but outside, in the sun lighting the street, it wasn't worth a penny. The waiter, astonishingly businesslike and composed, without an ounce of enthusiasm, wiped the glasses and poured drinks with gestures of a supercilious creature who had no wish to participate in the general madness. He resembled a groom tending to a filly for his master. A lone baritone sat on a chair next to a column, caressing his dyed beard and sideboards, shouting something or other to those entering and going out.

All of a sudden everything grew distant. It was as if someone had poured buttermilk all over the scene. I noticed that the waiter and the actors were eyeing me suspiciously, wondering why I had not moved an inch for about ten minutes. At that moment of being completely glazed, I had a rare but very lucid perception of reality that sharpens itself in a flash of consciousness, when all thing seem clear and revealed behind a heavy velvet curtain.

Everything went quiet at once. My glass stopped in mid-air. My head drooped towards my shoulder. A match was burning in my hand when, amidst this otherworldly silence, I heard a sentence thought up just for me:

– What do you actually like to drink?

That sentence doesn't matter now, nor will it ever matter amidst the chaos of sentences that women will throw at me, but I have memorised it word for word.

It was her voice. It came from behind my back, a little bit to the side, but it went straight into my ear, almost as if by phone. When I turned round, I saw her standing next to the bar stool.

That was precisely how I had imagined her. I asked myself, overcome by blissful confusion, how I had not thought before that that voice belonged to young Salome, a soprano educated abroad, who trod so enchantingly through a pool of stage blood carrying the cut-off head of John the Baptist on a plate.

– My treat – she said to me climbing onto the bar stool – and thank you for coming to my rescue right there. Herodias spoils my concentration, she thinks that this opera was written for her only. In any case – she looked at me with the most beautiful eyes in the world – it all turned out for the best.

That night, she phoned me, pretending that we hadn't met at the café inside the theatre. Unfinished and unclear sentences wriggled about like pilchards in a net. Salome, girl, you'll be mine, I kept repeating like a loony, in a little while you'll be right here beside me, in just a little while. And until then? The slow mechanics of sitting at a table in a café, taking her gingerly by the hand, which barely resisted and initially did not respond to being squeezed, then surrendered, having gone blind, and I let go of it. We both go to cinemas and like the same actors. We read the same books. Because of her, I read Velikić's *The Bremen Case*, which was fashionable then, and throughout the evening, tipsy, I babble about the different levels that a writer builds into his characters. I give her small bunches of flowers and kiss her in the mouth for a long time, trying to slip my hand, hidden by the tablecloth, as deep as possible between her slightly parted legs, to the consternation of a lady sitting next to us, whose triple string of pearls trembled nervously on her enormous décolletage.

I never asked her why she chose me of all people. I knew that the quiet Salome, who was getting increasingly closer to me while giving me gentle nudges, liked cellar creatures who, like myself, whispered from some dark corner or other. Salome, Salomette, I murmured going to the toilet in an attempt to reduce the tension by washing my face, but only castration could have freed me from the image of her face, participating, eyes closed and mouth open, in scenes of wanton debauchery, which made my hand go weak very quickly, so that I left the toilet feeling ashamed like a snotty churlish kid.

From that evening when we had our first drink together at the theatre café, her nighttime calls grew less frequent until they petered out altogether.

In the beginning, when I walked her home, inside the dark doorway she allowed me measured kisses and lax embraces. She tried with all her might to hide the feeling of frailty and helplessness that overcame her in the course of being caressed, when she started trembling in my arms before pushing me away gently while telling me softly that she wasn't ready yet. Once, when her palm rubbed against the front part of my trousers that was stretched very tight, she withdrew her hand abruptly and moved away from me.

– Hope you didn't hurt yourself – I joked while she maintained a sulky silence, then said good-bye, which was supposed to sound cold, and ran to the elevator. But

the evenings that followed turned into a veritable whirlwind of kisses and petting, which she did with such a consummate skill at times, in the manner of a woman who was no stranger to sophisticated pleasures. Gently, taking care not to hurt me with the zipper, she would take it out of my fly, then take it with her hand, hard as it was, as if she were bandaging a little bird fallen out of its nest. She rubbed it with her palms, starting a fire with a piece of flint in the middle of the desolate Indian night. As it pulsed, she murmured or sang softly, squeezing it while it overflowed with pleasure, and in the course of those doorway orgies I occasionally wished I could pierce a hole in her waist and spill its content into it.

I was certain that she would come to my flat when I told her something serious and important for my life, thus securing her trust forever.

A strange kind of drunkenness is what it was. After just a few glasses of brandy, probably full of methyl alcohol, which I drank over the course of a festive occasion, seeing off somebody who was to do his national service, I turned totally blind, overcome by a drunkenness similar to madness. To this day, I don't remember how I reached my bed, but I do remember that, lying in it, I was entirely aware of the present that reminded me of eternity, my sagging body floating amidst that eternity like a chipped-off board, gently swaying on the grey, murky waters. My thoughts firmly gripped my head like a bandage. Around me, some sort of a rush began, whirlwinds of icy air howling and shaving my cheek, slipping beneath my back and cooling the sheet, trying to pull it off the bed with all their might. Then this air giggled, jangling coins under the bed. That must be what going mad looks like, I thought, horrified, unable to lift a finger. All of a sudden, a man appeared by the head of the bed, extremely handsome, with a smooth pale complexion, penetrating eyes black as blackberries, his long silver hair clipped in a spiral chignon. He took a hairpin out of it and silver strands of hair fluttered like a mane behind his broad, strong back. Don't be afraid, he said to me, everything's going to be all right, and now sleep, sleep. Then he lay on the very edge of the bed, for I still couldn't move an inch. Along the entire length of my body, I felt his supple body that protected me from the cold air, his satin skin that warmed, and coughed with pleasure, feeling safe because of his skin and muscles, whose touch poured fresh strength into my weakened body. I fell asleep quite peacefully.

While I was telling her this, my Salome kept getting closer to me, as if that would help her to understand me better. Little dots shone in her eyes. Her face flushed from listening to me, she asked me who that young man had been, and I said to her: an angel. And then: how about going to my place for a cup of coffee, whereupon she got up from the table first, mutely accepting my proposal.

We kissed for a long time, always embracing anew, half-dressed, for she gently resisted and stopped my hand, which fumbled incessantly with her blouse, eventually throwing it down on the floor between two strips of light. She sniffed my neck with the tip of her nose, presumably wishing to make sure that I didn't smell like a wild animal, and when I won her trust, she would wrap her lips around the tip of my tongue and suck it like a tit, giggling, while I, moaning with pleasure, was getting ready to pounce. To no avail, for when I finally managed to get her into a position

that was anywhere near to being conducive to surrendering to me, I was already overexcited and a sorry wreck on account of that. We lay naked in a loose embrace. With my lips, I sought that hot pit between the neck and the collar-bone. Then she, emboldened by a sudden rush of excitement, started kissing me, rubbing softly against my thighs, which made my hard-on return. I hastened to stick it into her. Trembling, she whispered in that characteristic voice of hers.

– Please, see to it that you take it out in time.

And then, as if she'd changed her mind all of a sudden, after just a few energetic squirms, she slipped from under me and ejected the swollen member, shaking and blue from the inrush of blood, from herself. Trying to get a modest recompense, I took her by the hand, showing her how to clasp her fingers around it, but she said that at that particular moment there was no way she could do that. I had to provide a hurried and chaotic demonstration of the act, in the course of which my concentration was spoiled by the Gypsies rushing about the yard and their drunken shouting, while Salome watched me with bewilderment and sadness.

Later, talking over a few cigarettes about strict parents who watched their only daughter vigilantly, she told me that there would be no real carnal joys until I met her family.

Salome's parents, Mr and Mrs Kabiljo, lived on the penultimate floor of a building from which my window could be seen. Dr Kabiljo's cuffs had certainly been cleaner before, but their current lack of cleanliness was made up for by dignified portraits of rabbis in elaborate frames and Sephardic aunts grouped above a chest of drawers. According to Mrs Kabiljo, who wanted to hide her Šumadian origin with these stories, these aunts of hers were real masters of dying effortlessly. All her husband's aunts died in her arms, letting out a slight *pufff*, reminiscent of puffing at scented cigarettes. The oldest one even managed to do so in a plane flying over Budapest.

My darling moved within the boundaries of this mysterious Jewish kingdom like an ethereal being made of air and moonlight, her face washed with sweet white wine.

Also present at lunch was her godfather Pavle, a sprightly oldster who held forth at the table, telling endless jokes consisting of reptilian sentences like *and I almost told him that, but actually I waited to see what he would tell me,* which were real torture to listen to, reminiscent of a painful pimple you just couldn't get rid of no matter how hard you squeezed, or a rape you couldn't finish properly on account of some enthusiastic policeman barging in on you.

While we were chatting after lunch, Salome went to the kitchen to make coffee. She returned with a pink coffee-pot whose twisted handle seemed lop-eared. She smiled while pouring coffee for me, signalling to me that everyone liked me, encouraging me to take a closer look at the things to be found in the room. On the chest of drawers, between an elaborately painted porcelain egg and wooden boxes with sleeping beauties, there stood a family photograph, probably taken at the seaside. Salome, already a young girl when that photo was taken, wearing hot pants, her tits pointed, sat on a low wall; next to her was her godfather Pavle, his hand leisurely resting on her bare thigh.

Jealousy gave me a hot, tingling slap on the cheek, my hand trembled, as a result of which I spilt some coffee on my trousers. That old pervert must have rubbed suntan lotion into her shoulders and thighs, wiped her sudden tears, slipped his hand across her pointed tits as if by accident; diving in the sea, he held her waist, gathered her hair with a rubber band, collecting runaway strands from her neck into a chignon.

Salome ran up to me immediately and rubbed the stain with a piece of cloth. From the ante-room very loud barking was heard, and a Great Dane ran into the drawing room carrying an indecently red rubber bone in its slobbering jaws. This giant animal left the thing in the middle of the room, then came up to me, lifted its front paws onto my knees and looked at me with its perspicacious canine eyes.

– Mima likes you, and she's very strict and choosy.

The silence of the dark drawing room, the old-timey pictures with pink-cheeked, bare girls who went through a thick wood towards a spring carrying a jug, a brass menorah placed in the most conspicuous place in the room, a big black piano, told me that my darling had what could be described in a single word as personality. The panting of the big dog and its tongue sticking out were a sure sign that, from now on, she would be a voluptuous, passionate lover, freed from the shame that only misted over her beauty, depriving our relationship of those wonderful moments of abandonment of which I used to dream about as a naïve kid, a randy young man, aged husband, an old lecher on his deathbed.

The late autumn afternoon danced on a leaf that had fallen on the window sill. Chattering away merrily, my Salome went to the bathroom, and I stayed in bed for a while longer, letting my imagination succumb to desire spurred by incredible joy; then I got up, went over to the window and, as usual, looked at what was happening in the Gypsy yard. There were children there, rubbing a dog with a sponge. A Gypsy lay on a mouldy, disintegrating mattress, drinking beer and squinting at the sun, and then the phone rang.

I picked up the receiver, and the phone said:

– So, how are things, prompter, I haven't heard from you in a while.

It was *that* voice. I stammered:

– I haven't heard from you for quite a while either.

– Ah – she said – problems in the family, I've been away often.

At that moment, Salome appeared before me, wearing my much too wide bathrobe which hung down from her low, narrow shoulders. Strands of wet hair framed a rather stupid smile in a plain face that would want to bother me from here to eternity. It was then, I don't know why, that the image of the flat belonging to the Jewish Kabiljo family flashed in my mind: Salome did not belong there at all, except on account of the surname that she'd received as a gift, for her real father, the one who had got Mrs Kabiljo pregnant with her, was actually her godfather Pavle Popović.

Next week I quit my job at the theatre, thus avoiding scenes involving tears and a cross-examination that was supposed to prove my unreasonableness.

Occasionally, I still notice her raincoat in a crowd. I run away from it as fast as my feet can carry me, and it chases me, catches up with me, and gets me.

Olja Savičević- Ivančević

Snow

translated from Croatian by Graham McMaster

"Tereza, Tereza," trickled down the street.

It hadn't even dawned, and the women waiting for the Albanian to rattle open the door of shop saw her hurrying with the little rucksack on her back. Some of them stretched their heads out to Duga ulica and watched the young woman (the very young woman) climb up to the bus station. The Albanian was late with the bread that morning because it had begun to snow the previous evening, and here even a simple shower caused a snarl-up in the traffic. Time froze, and space, and everything in it went stiff. The sea would not even rock to and fro. People looked through their open shutters or plastic blinds at the snow in the framework of the window like the snow on the TV screen. Through the slats of the blinds they also saw Tereza: in her canvas sneakers and new red jumper which rounded into a large ball at the front, a ball of wall beneath which slept an unborn pussycat. Not even if she wanted to could she hide it, that Tereza, who was going somewhere with the rucksack on her back. To the bus station, it seemed. She didn't even manage to button up that man's coat that she had put on, *his* coat.

Is the snow going to fall the whole day, as the weathermen say? Everyone's talking about it, for here snow falls once in five years, and never falls long enough to

stay. The palms and the flowers on the balconies beneath which she is passing have already whitened. And she thinks there's some magic in it.

Tracks of *All-star* 37s were left behind her, footprints that cut across the beach and went on as if the sand was not ending, as if this beach had climbed right up high to the road where Tereza's footsteps vanished behind the fast food shack on which *kebab* and *toasted sandwiches* were written, perhaps on further, to the highway and behind the new five-storey buildings. If she closes her eyes and squints at the hills, they are sandbanks of EPS. Sitting in the bus are several women with their noses red with cold, turned towards the foggy glass, probably cleaners and checkout assistants in the new mall on the way out of the estate. Some of them nod a greeting, others hardly notice her. She counts out change and buys a ticket from the driver. On the last seat, as usual, is Skint Sasha. Sometimes she meets him in the centre where he goes around the sidewalk cafes and cadges money, and people say: Poor old chap, and he's not even a gypsy. And they take out a kuna or two for the bleary eyes of Skint Sasha. He looks at Tereza's swelling belly and the damp light that shimmers in her dark hair and the scene drives him to some kind of happy uncontrolled winking, a tick. He likes her, all round as she is, and warm and shining, Sasha smiles every time he catches her glance. Tereza takes a five-kuna coin, a 'bear', out of her purse and presses it into his hand.

"Where to, Tera?" Sasha asks her, picking his nose.

"None of your business," she answers. But her voice is mild, her face childish, without a single sharp line."

"And stop mining," she says to him. "You'll not find any gold," she says, for she has to change at this stop, and waves to Skint Sasha.

That's how he rides, keeping warm. Today it's cold. And deaf, the sound is turned off.

For some time Tereza stays hunched under the plastic roof of the pissed-up shelter, looking up the road that took her out of the city and the estate, and then decides to continue on foot. Perhaps the bus is not running today, she thinks.

Now when there's no one to stop and ask, Tereza treads more slowly, her legs heavy, her sneakers soaked through. She wades through deeper and deeper snow. She was so thin that he called her little lizard, and now she is waddling along the road, awkward, her body unreponsive, trailing after her or letting her down. Every now and then she curses the truckers if they scare her with their horns. They're on edge after driving at night *in these conditions*. The number plates are from the south and south east of Europe. Lumps of muddy ice break off the tarps of the trucks and fall on the blacktop.

Past the petrol pump, Tereza's shallow footprints with the star on the heel are lost again, because the snow is falling faster. She vanishes behind the hangars and warehouses, where the houses and road stop, among the clumps of broom and shaggy brambles on the wasteland over which, from the west, dark clouds are boiling. The goat tracks are blocked, drifted over by that EPS that is rotting over your protuberant soft tummy, over your, you silly moo, stubborn head.

Whether it's the bitch to blame or her, Tereza no longer cares, it's time to go home. Silly moo. He told her that ten days ago, took the dog and vanished. The bitch is to blame.

The bitch is called Penelope, a pit bull, the most disgusting creature Tereza had ever seen, a monster.

It was impossible for them from the outcome.

"It's because you're a pussy, little lizard," he said.

"It's not true," said Tereza, "I like some dogs."

"Labs and huskies," she said.

Between her and Penny, as he called the bitch, grew neither liking nor tolerance, although Tereza was the one to feed her while he was in the bar *Mali raj*. He was never around, he was on his feet working for days and night. That's why he had to scrape his feet in the bathtub like a woman, thinks Tereza.

It's not the dog to blame. It's him.

The first time after, the bitch had attacked some kids, he had taken her to his relatives in the countryside, but she had come back two weeks later. They found her in front of the door, sitting and waiting. Later it was easier for her, with this instinct, probably. Every time she would come back the next day or in a couple of days. They already knew in some way that they would find her again at the top of the steps, in front of the entrance, they expected her. It tickled him, Tereza was serious. So he took Penelope to some island, but fifteen days later, with bloody muzzle and wounded paws, she was back again, on the ferry probably. That's how some dogs are, they said. She lay on the door mat, tongue hanging out.

For him it was a sign. While he was wiping the gashed paws with pieces of cotton wool dipped in grappa, Tereza leaned against the wall and watched them. He said that if the bitch survived this, he was going to have a little pit bull tattooed under the left tit. That the kids had teased her, everyone knew that. And he never once looked at Tereza.

Crazy idiot, she said to him.

No chance I'm going to bring a baby home into the same flat.

Get out of my sight.

No chance, off you go, too.

And her.

But he's not to blame. It's me. The first few days she held out without calling him. She spent the third day head over the toilet, throwing up. And the fourth. She called, but he didn't answer. Later his cell was always turned off. On the seventh she forgave them all, it was easier for them all that way. He was not to blame, nor the dog, nor Tereza. On the tenth day she set off to him to the *Mali raj*.

He had one tit left to tattoo.

She stops under a fig tree that doesn't give her any protection and here pulls off her wet stockings, takes a dry pair out of her rucksack, pulls them on. Then she wraps up her feet in plastic bags, and over that the frozen sneakers.

Here, now she's stopped, something seems strange: as if someone were following her. She takes a few more steps, and takes cover behind an old substation.

Sasha, for Christ's sake. He's walking on all fours, arms and legs stretched out. Like they did at school during gym.

"What's up with you?"

"I'm after you."

"Go back where you came from."

She sets off, he after her.

"You don't need to escort me, thanks very much; a bit more, and I'm there. Off you go now. My husband's waiting for me down there in Mali Raj."

"Is it true your husband's run off? A woman in the bus said so."

"Anyone can go where he wants, we're not in the Middle Ages."

"If he's run off, I can be your husband. I thought I could be that for you." He stood up and shook off the snow.

Tereza lengthens her stride, and then suddenly turned round to Skint Sasha, who has stopped, uncertain whether to go on after her or not. "He's in Mali Raj, works there, behind the bar. Perhaps you've seen him, a tall thin guy with a bitch, a pit bull. She's called Penelope. Or Penny."

"Not possible, no one like that there. Do you think snow's like sugar or salt?"

Tereza looks at him with her black eyes as if she is seeing him for the first time.

"What do you mean, not there?"

"Like sugar, bet you anything. Nobody says salt, why not? For me, it's absolutely like salt."

"Not there?" repeats Tereza gently, absently.

"I take the trash out for Renata twice a week from *Mali Raj*. She's got five cats, three Persians. Won't have any mongrels. Tall guys, yes, but no dogs."

Renata is the owner of *Mali Raj*. Of unknown age, maybe thirty, maybe forty. They call her Anchorwoman, because of the silicon. When she had seen Tereza she had winked towards the bar. "Just like butter, this girl of yours, me lad." And he had laughed, what else. That's why Anchorwoman pays me, he had said to Tereza, to smile.

Mouth agape to the sky, Skint Sasha was catching snowflakes.

"Do you think snow's like milkshake or white of egg or popcorn? To me it's like a big firm dollop of egg white on custard.

Tereza smiles with no joy, as if she hadn't got it. "Like polystyrene", she says, and keeps both palms pressed over her eyes for a few seconds. Then she drops her hands and places them on her tummy and adds seriously: "And like schneeknockerl too."

"Tereza, Teresa," rolled down the street.

Again the heads stretched out behind the edges of the houses watched the young woman, the very young woman, coming down from the bus station to the sea, and over the beach. Evening dropped early and quickly, and the cold barbed drizzle turned the snow into a viscous yellowish mass and slushy puddles. Clear water poured from the balconies Tereza passed beneath. The sea boiled, and people closed their shutters, but through the new plastic slats they could anyway see Tereza coming back alone, with wet hair and inflamed eyes, in her new red jumper that was nicely rounded at the front. That Tereza, she's got nowhere else to go but an empty house, they noted. In front of the door of their house, as if she had never moved from the spot, Penelope sits patiently.

"Get in," she says to the dog in a toneless voice. "Get in." And the ugly little dog gets in, sniffing cautiously, tail down, and the woman quickly shuts the door.

photo: Amer Kuhinja

Faruk Šehić

The Water Republic

translated from Bosnian by Irena Žlof

Una and its river banks were my safe haven – an impregnable green fortress. This is where I hid from people, under the green branches. All alone in silence, surrounded by the greenery. All I could hear was my heart beating, a fly flapping its wings, a splash of water as a fish leapt out and fell back into the water. It is not that I hated people, I just felt infinitely better amongst plants and wild animals. The moment I step into the lush vegetation I know nothing bad can happen to me.

Unadžik, one of the river arms, ran by my grandmother's crooked house which was slowly sinking into the layers of sand and mud that the rain-swollen river had washed up with the mighty force of the April floods. The riverbed was made of limestone pebbles covered in moss and yellow sand, a home to shells with their nacre mirrors and wriggling eels. We used to catch bullheads in the parts where the bottom was covered in stones, using a fork tied to a stick. We would release our catch into a bucket so that we could observe them and admire their slippery bodies.

Here and there you would see a fire stove or a rusty washing machine anchored to the bottom, perforated pans once used for roasting chestnuts, a selection of corroded car parts. The water was so clear and transparent that you could spot a coin in water a few metres deep, as it reflected the shine of that other coin up in the skies.

Each house had its own sewage system which ended in a concrete pipe immersed in the river and in the summer, when the water level dropped, those casted gullets, bound to the ground by mortar, would resemble stationed crocodiles which periodically spit out faeces and soapy washing-up foam. Graylings, barbells and chubs would gather at those exits, feasting on the bits of food that humans had failed to digest. Standing on the crocodile corpses fishermen would throw led attached to hooks with worms and bread on them. They would use hand-made flies covered in grease (it prevents the feathery imitation from sinking) to get graylings hooked and they would pull out their catch along with the water ball and dump them on the riverbank covered in stingy nettle. The grayling would toss and turn in the nettle tangling up the 0.16mm line and all the other flies individually tied to the main line which passed through a set of porcelain rings on the rod, ending in a silky spool of a Shakespeare or D·A·M Quick reel.

River trout with their red and black spots would float ceremoniously just above the limestone rock, usually along the other bank, suddenly leaping out with a splash and gulping mayflies which dropped onto the surface as the dusk grew. Their leaps would create shivering rings which gradually dissipated over the water's surface like smoke rings in the air of a lonely student room. As the night fell over Unadžik, dragonflies appeared, blue-black males and green females. Weightless river hussars surrounded by a cacophony of owls, coo-coos and nightingales. The river was singing its nocturno.

The river bank in winter

It is wintertime and the water has risen over the steps carved in the river bank and up to my grandmother's backyard. I dug out those steps to make it easier to get to our boat, because the river bank was quite steep. Wobbly pickets are sticking from the water which has flooded the grass under a quince tree and covered it in yellow sand. The surface of the river is rough, because its bed has become too tight. Waves are racing towards the bank, and into Gran's backyard. The water is so close, you feel you have to sink your hands in it. I had to walk all the way across the town to get to the water. Pass through lines of prying eyes – the eyes are skilfully camouflaged on tensed human bodies, pressed on like buttons, peering out from shops, windows, cafés. I am greeting the familiar faces with the cordial "Good afternoon, hello and how are you" – which, to be honest, is a small price to pay for what awaits me there. Who could love people-spools? How fortunate are moles, for they have no eyes to peer at everything. That is why I prefer moles to so many people I know.

I would feel restlessness overcoming me as I sat in our flat. I would quickly dress, angry at the never-ending winter, and embark on my pilgrimage. A ceremonious touching of the living creature river, observing bubbles of air rising from the bottom pulling along grains of sand; this whole underwater fuss of fluid storms always awakens the same desire in me: to become a fish with arms and legs.

Rain drops are draining from the roof, in the cellar the water feels at home, when it withdraws it will leave the cellar covered in sand, tree branches and leaves.

And anything else that flows with the river. The house is like a lighthouse, and through a lit up window in the living room I can still see my Gran's face covered in fine lines and the inside of the room which had refused to conform to the laws of the air bubble trapped inside a levelling instrument, and insisted on leaning sideways, whilst slowly sinking into the soft river bank.

Everything is different in wintertime, the water is different and so are the fish. The water is translucent; pale green, and yellowish, you can just about make out contours of creatures, objects and events through its thin membrane. During those times the water switches to a standby mode, and the fish do the same; you can rarely see them. And when you do, they seem washed out and tired from the cold which reaches all the way down to the river bottom. The sedges lay at the bottom gradually losing their chlorophyll.

Gran's house is a fortress surrounded by water. During the flood season, the water rises so high that you can lean out from the kitchen window and wash your hands in the river. There is a hazelnut tree just beneath the window; we use it to secure our boats. Further down is a sandy beach and a few sewage pipes covered in moss. The asphalt road above the house leads to a river island with two football fields on it. Further up the road are lines of houses, pressed against each other like grey crows in misty treetops. And there are the concrete walls whose purpose was long unknown. Now they are covered in thorny bramble bush, the spiky plants pouring down the walls like foam. It is on those mysterious walls that the moss displayed all its lushness, it was as if the North itself resided in those concrete reservoirs, where people once disposed of manure and other rubbish. Next to the reservoir is a rock, it is displaying its muscles, peering out from the flat grounds along with black locusts, sketching out an imaginary water level and the river's autograph of times far behind us.

Gran's house is situated underneath the rocks and the area of Sjeverovi stanovi. The garden is parallel to the house. Its centrepiece is a rose bush although it is not central at all, it is leaning against the fence of my Gran's neighbour Ramo who is a gunsmith. The rose bush becomes the centre of the continental world the moment it blossoms. Una is just twenty steps away. Gran is in her kitchen with the sloping floor, kneeling on a prayer mat. When she prays, the house is in perfect silence. In this house every object smells of river. When you lay your head on a pillow you can hear Una's waves and you can smell the sand, fish, shells. I can sense my diving into the river at some point in the future and it makes my palms sweat.

Gran's house is in total harmony with the water. Moreover, it is the harmony itself where Arabic prayers mix with pagan voices of river shamans. And my Gran is a fragile conductor of her God, lost in the water town on a river bank in winter. Her intimate God is the only God I ever believed existed. I can see her walking away from the bank as her house begins to float, with wings made of grape vine and windows like human eyes. The other bank is disappearing in the distance and Unadžik is now as wide as a sea. I let the house continue its journey, as sorry as I am, for I know what it will turn into at the end of its journey.

Gran's house is in total harmony with the water.

My love for the ruins

We pretended all those ruins were not there, and they were everywhere. You could not miss them. Our town had turned into a festival of ruins and we charged foreigners hefty fees for sightseeing and photo tours of our own burnt down houses, of entire residential blocks levelled to the ground. Our suffering was famous, we ourselves were stripped down more thoroughly than actors in a porn flick of the weirdest category. Our town ranked third on the list of most devastated towns in BiH. Not exactly the kind of statistics to be proud of, but we had no option but to brag about our being so crumbled down.

We could not expect all those houses, factories, and bridges to just rise overnight. Streets could not grow new skin. We moved amongst the ruins as if they were intimate testaments of our lives before the war. Now and then, rummaging through the Serb houses, someone would dig out a photo from school, a school trip or a party near the river Una. Someone would spot the face of an ex-girlfriend who stayed on the side of our enemies, the teen love turning into smoke faster than the cigarette of a soldier caught in the line of artillery fire, with no shelter anywhere in sight. Believe me, two or three puffs and you are already smoking the cigarette filter. It is the fear which burns your cigarette.

The metal bridge had collapsed on our side and they poured gravel over it so that people could still cross the Una which runs through the centre of the town. Imagine a town where the street of Marshal Tito is covered in weeds. Some say that chetniks kept pigs in the town's central café which cannot really be true because the town's centre was very close to the front line, and keeping pigs would simply not be practical. Some thirty metres further down was the town's mosque, now blown up. Its stone blocks were scattered around as a result of the final blast. The minaret was lying on top of a pile of stone debris, like a telescope the faithful once used to search for and call up to the Absolute. An orthodox church, strangely intact, overlooked the mosque which was in line with the split of military power between us and them just before we took back our town by force. As I was passing by the mosque I found a piece of stained glass, blue and yellow, from the mosque window. I put it in my pocket.

We were uncommonly fond of ruins. Nearly every day I would walk over to Pazardžik to visit what remained of my grandmother's house. Only the river Unadžik remained largely unchanged. All the houses were burnt down. The newer ones, made of brick, were lucky enough to still have walls. I was rummaging through my Gran's house with my bare hands, assuming I was standing in what used to be the living room, because that is where, just a day before the war started, I left a golden chain in a box, some photos and letters and a Remington 223 with two handfuls of cartridges. All the rooms in the house were now just a single pile of sand, roof tiles, mortar and stone. Someone has yet to invent a compass to help us navigate in those conditions. The house was no longer three-dimensional, only the grape vine survived the fire, leaning against our newly built house which we never got to move into because, on 21 April 1992 at 17:00 hours and 50 minutes

members of the paramilitary units of the Serbian Democratic Party – the chetniks – attacked our town from the direction of Lipik and the mount Grmeč plateau. During that time the Yugoslav National Army units were taking positions on the hills around the town, presumably to protect us from invisible "martians." The attack was claimed to be prompted by alleged gunfire started by a Muslim militia from the predominantly Muslim village Arapuša, which stood isolated and surrounded by the Serbian villages of the Grmeč area and the villages on the right bank of the Una river. This dreamed up gunfire resulted in injuries of innocent Serbian civilians and they had no choice but to respond with an artillery attack on the town using *all available means*. Only a blind man would fail to detect the similarity to the attack on Germans staged by the SS units posing as Polish soldiers, near a German town Gleiwitz, which resulted in the complete destruction of Poland. Arapuša was later on turned into a concentration point where civilians were kept prisoners in homes, before they were transported to real concentration camps or to the free territory.

I have only started noticing ruins now that they are gone. When there were tall bulwarks of debris rising on each side of the street the eye was used to such scenes. Gradually, the ruins disappeared. Newer, bigger, uglier houses were popping up on the ruins of the old ones, like plants sprouting out of radioactive compost.

The first time I entered the town I was coming from the direction of the town's hospital and walking through Varoš towards my building, I started choking on the bland realisation that the town I knew had somehow shrunk. My own body seemed tough and large. There were neither familiar nor unfamiliar faces in the windows of my building. No one was waving at me. The town was empty and almost dead, not a single person in sight. This is what the Earth will look like after the 3rd world war and the twilight of civilisation. Here and there a torn up net curtain would briefly shiver and then resume its numbness. Like the eyelid of a dying man.

Feeling very much unadjusted and Gulliver-like, I got to my building. It all seemed like a dream I had long been preparing myself for, but now when I was to face its realisation, I was utterly unprepared. The reality I saw was grossly surreal. Don't get me wrong: I loved surrealism in art and literature, but this particular film made me nauseous. My titan's body and this tiny town. I took no notice of the ruins. The town's park was running wild, and my building was the Gobi desert with floors and balconies whose metal fences were crumbling in rust.

Had I been the master of nature, for this particular scene I would have chosen a drizzle which would gradually gain strength and intensity as the scene progressed. A soldier wearing a BiH Army uniform would be standing in the rain in front of a building entrance above which there would be a blue metal plate with bullet holes in it which read: 89 Marshal Tito Street. He would then start vomiting.

I never joined the Communist party. I once put my name down on a list which was being circulated during a Marxism lesson, but then I changed my mind and crossed it off. I did not want to be a member of a party which anyone could join, without any background checks or tests of political beliefs. The books I read also contributed to my lack of blind faith in such a system of ideas. Seeing all those nationalists or, rather, wannabe nationalists from my high school joining the Com-

munist party was the final blow to my dream of an elite party. So it is only very naïve people that could wonder how it is that so many communists would suddenly turn passionate nationalists. The answer is very simple: they were never communists to begin with.

I am now standing in front of my greyish-green building. A wild cat appears on a balcony but quickly disappears a second later, returning into a living room. In its place is a hologram of a gypsy Homer whose lips are moving: "Give generously, aunts, comrades, friends... Give generously, may God give you good heeee-ealth... May God save your child-reeeen..." His face resembles a hologram on a Schengen visa, a circle with slices missing at the south and the north poles, from whose edges rays of light are emitted in concentric circles. He has two golden lilies instead of eyes.

The rain would wash away the contents of my stomach, carrying it downhill towards the spot where the mosque and a Catholic church once stood, and where the Orthodox church still stands. We used to shoot at its cross made of brass with our rifles, out of boredom, as we kept guard near Kareli's house, on *our* side of the Una. We shot rifles because we had no weapons of greater calibre, we had no disintegrator of all matter, to disintegrate it to subatomic particles.

My secret peacetime weapon became the piece of stained glass. When I put it in front of my eyes I see things as they were, as they are and as they will be. Never again such beautiful ruins.

A house with a gable roof

Our house on the river Una has had its fair share of ups and downs. It burnt down for the first time in 1942 during the German air strike, and all that remained of it then was a pile of ashes over which its inhabitants gathered, as if to mourn their closest relative. In time its ashes got scattered over the river, and a new house was built of travertine and river sand and wood for the staircase, and reed for the ceiling, and oak beams placed diagonally to support the walls. That was the house I remembered, and it too was to face the same destiny, only this time it disappeared in a slightly different manner, ended by a filthy careless hand which brought a lighter to a piece of paper and tossed the burning paper onto a carpet soaked in petrol which lifted the house up to the skies. *Hover like smoke in the air*, without knowing it, Celan had written an epitaph for my grandmother's house. Those were its earthly falls, but its inner world was another story; the house lived on. Its inhabitants are still living inside the airy house. In summers, the divine aroma of roasted coffee beans spills from a tin apparatus onto the porch over which the roof extends, dropping steeply over the part of the garden overlooking the river. Grapevines are climbing up the pillars supporting the roof, and water is drawn from a pitcher pump, as it gushes forth it gurgles in peculiar voices. Like a creature from the darkest depths of the earth, at last free from its shackles, it emerges into the daylight. My Gran, her face framed by a scarf of tame colours, is watering the rose bush in the garden

which sprang up from dense sandy grounds, the kind you can only find on the banks of Una. The scent of rose petals is intoxicating. Gran will use them to make a sweet, pale purple syrup which she will pour into two-litre jars. At first, petals remain on the surface but then gradually they sink towards the clear sugary bottom.

At the point where her garden ends and the backyard starts wild camomile and ribwort grow. There is a bench and a table underneath a quince tree, and three steps further is the river bank and a fiord where we tie our boats. The boats are heavy and their ribs, planks bent in the shape of a horseshoe, are pregnant with water from being in the river all their lives, used either for fishing or excavating sand. If you have a boat you also have a fiord, and every fiord bears the surname of the boat owner, just as each part of the river bank is named after the surname of the family living next to it.

Gran's second house, the one that I remember, had been sinking into the river bank for years, the side of the house facing the river, and its kitchen floor was sloping, as if the house was trying to slip into the water. Gran did not like that and she had always dreamt of a strong and reliable embankment to prevent the inevitable, the unity of the river and time, just like in the Heraclitus metaphor.

A scant but perky hazelnut tree grew behind the house, right on the river bank. I used to sit in the tree and observe a kingfisher, the heavenly coloured feathers on its neck, its black silent beak pointed at the river, as if aiming at the back of a fish recklessly close to the surface, and yet the kingfisher would remain still for hours, just sitting on a bare autumn branch, until the rain came and disturbed the clarity of the river, transforming it into a fearsome unintelligible monster with wide murky muscles which assumed different sizes and shapes of fear and discomfort. When a kingfisher plunges into the water it turns into a bodkin; it pierces the water's surface with a small splash and resurfaces with a fish in its beak, which it carries to a nearby willow branch whilst drops of water form on its greasy feathers, making the colours on its breast and neck even more intense. In the summer, the kingfisher is undetectable, hidden in the foliage of an alder, a willow or an ash tree, whose leaves turn in the wind, showing their white back-side, a sure sign of a storm coming.

The house in the winter is difficult to describe; it is covered in snow, with spiky icicles growing vertically from the edges of the roof towards the ground. This is when the fire rules in the kitchen stove, orange rinds or an aromatic root of heartleaf oxeye from Gran's cabinet quietly burning on top of it. Those who like to watch water easily give in to watching fire. Flames flicker behind the door, the stove is a space catapult which will launch us into distant warm lands where there is no snow or overflowing Una. Gran's prayer mat is the source of warmth – tanned sheep skin with white tufts which she uses five times a day to pray to her god. In her kitchen cabinet the glassware, documents with stamps of the Kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes, gold jewellery and a bottle of herb brandy kept for medicinal purposes could not care less for our perception of time, nor does the locked drawer I never got a chance to take a peek into, except for when Gran would take out her gold opal ring which changed colours as I turned it towards the chandelier light.

Winter on a river is no joy, the house becomes a sarcophagus in which we longingly await the spring and the divine summer, unless we are entertained by my uncle Šeta and his magician's tricks – he could make a coin disappear off the palm of your hand or swallow a necklace – tricks he picked up during his service in the Yugoslav navy.

Gran's house has a gable roof, it borders on two different worlds and it is leaning towards the river Una out of its own accord, that indescribable river. One of these days the house will sink into it and I will be able to see it as part of an underwater world full of nymphs and river fairies, along with the contours of my own face reflected against the deep green.

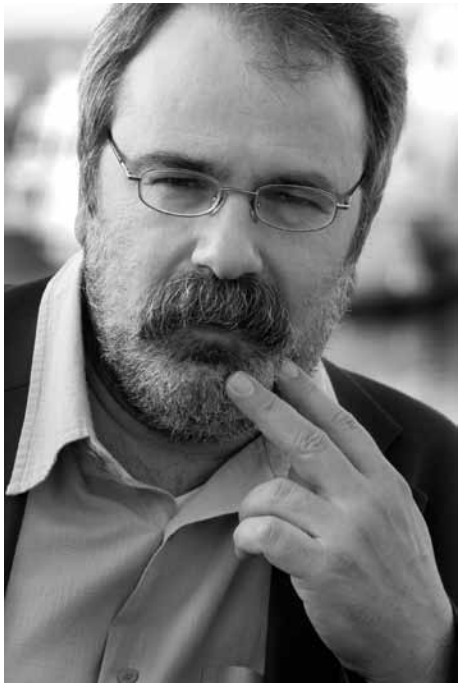
Una will still flow when my story ends.

It is this actual river that I now return to, I mix myself with its colours and its strength. The sun is already high up in the sky, reflecting the veins of willow leaves onto its smooth surface. From behind a curtain of a nearby window I hear a radio broadcast of a football match. White linen, as dry as gunpowder, is dancing on the western wind. Everything is possible and close and tangible. Over there, where the river takes a turn next to the abandoned slaughter-house, amidst the falls of bubbly water, I see a silhouette of a thirteen year old boy. Using his fishing rod he cuts through the tall grass and wild mint and he disappears in the ripples of the river.

Mihajlo Pantić

This time, about pain
(based on Dostoyevsky)

translated from Serbian by Novica Petrović



M-hm, there's something I must tell you. I know, I know, there are things that can't be told, but this is not a case of can or can't, it's a case of must. When you have something unsaid inside yourself, you have to break the silence somewhere, even within the framework of a story.

Quite simply: her man is my friend. There are half a million stories like that around us, but everyone keeps quiet about it, everyone pretends not to notice them or that they aren't happening.

They unfold in silence.

What can one conclude from this? If you think that something totally unbelievable is happening to you, bear in mind that at that very moment at least half a million people the world over, shall we say, an entire city of New Belgrade, have the same feeling, for the very same thing is happening to them.

So, her husband and I have known each other for years. A long, long time ago we went to the same grammar school. He was the most popular fellow at school, he shot free throws ten out of ten, he wrote the best essays on literature, he excelled at maths and logic. Especially logic, later on he became such a man, a very reasonable one. And he knew that which I'd always wanted to know but, somehow or other, had never managed to learn, so now I live with this feeling of having missed something important in life. Yes, yes, he knew the chords to all Dylan songs, even those Bob himself had forgotten. All of the above happened in the previous century, an era that will be remembered for the fact that, despite all the wars being waged, miracles being thought up and nasty acts being committed on an everyday basis, winged sanitary towels did not yet exist at the time.

I was not different from other people, except for one minor detail: I played both football and basketball and shot with both my left and right, be it hand or

foot, whatever the situation required, which is a good starting point for developing schizophrenia. I wrote poems, too, trying to make them look like those by Dylan, but everybody else did that.

And what was it that I wanted to say? *Ah,* yes... I almost forgot. School obligations were never a strong point of mine, it was never completely clear to me why I should have to add and multiply decimal numbers, swot lessons about segmented worms and the critique of the power of judgement, and especially why I should have to guess other people's thoughts within the framework of school papers. Oh, and I played truant when it came to logic classes, well, nothing particularly unusual about that.

And so, as I say, her husband and I have remained good acquaintances from school, almost friends, we see each other relatively often. Sometimes we go fishing together, and other times, on winter nights, we drop in at Boban's raft for a glass of wine. Boban is a friend of ours from the same block, he used to play basketball too, and now has a raft on the Danube serving as a restaurant. In winter, when the river is shackled and chained by ice, it is particularly pleasant there, we nestle in its warmth, order hot wine, and if we're in no mood for talking, we just sit there in silence, each one listening for his own pleasure to the sound of the wind howling through the deserted streets of New Belgrade ...

Other than that, we most often meet in front of the school building, where we occasionally wait for our daughters after classes. Isidora and Milena are of the same age, not in the same class but they are friends, they visit each other and already have their own little confidential girl-to-girl talks, giggling while they whisper to each other and accuse their fathers of being old-fashioned. And their fathers would do anything for them. If only they knew just precisely what they are supposed to do, for the world-view of nine-year-olds is very complex and, I would modestly have to admit, unfathomable to my powers of reasoning. I don't remember whether I've ever been nine years of age.

On one occasion, during the previous semester, instead of my friend, Marija, Milena's mother, appeared in front of the school to collect her daughter, and I immediately committed a sin against my friend by wishing to have sex with her. Of course, I'd known her before, but it was only then that I first became aware of what Marija was really like: a pale complexion, spindly figure, all condensed, just like freshly boiled milk, and as for her small feet, more of them later. And her eyes, her eyes were of the kind you could sink into immediately. Petite and somehow giving the impression of being unprotected, she looked as if she had to be embraced at any moment. What a bout of sheer irrationality, what I liked about it was precisely the fact that it all seemed so impossible. I may be exaggerating, maybe my very first thought was only to be expected: you see someone and you desire that person right away, *m-hm,* all sorts of thoughts occur to us that we cannot control or know the reason for. I suppose that all that is OK up to a point, I mean, when some crazy image, something incredible, rushes through our disturbed heads. Compared to all that horror, the desire to have the wife of someone you know, someone who happens to be a friend of yours, is not such a terrible sin. That's what I thought first, I

tell you, it's possible to think of at least half a million cases like that, but alas, the whole thing turns upside-down when it starts happening to you of all people and starts concerning you personally.

As was the case with me, now.

Moreover, what is horrible and incredible has a special way of becoming irresistibly attractive, especially when it doesn't hurt much.

Yes, no one can penetrate himself completely, nor determine the flow of his thoughts, even if he is being trained to become Dalai Lama. And as for passion, it overcomes us. We spill over our own boundaries, for who can limit his own ego, we always wish to be someone else, for example, for example, for example... at that moment I wished I could be my friend, not because he's perfect and knows all Dylan's songs, but because he has a perfect wife, Marija. It seemed to me at first that merely looking at her was enough, and then, a second later, I wished for more, and more...

... I won't dwell on memory, memory is arbitrary, we don't choose what we'll remember but that which wants to be preserved from oblivion chooses us. And it stays. Usually it's something painful, the pain returns whenever we think about that which has remained inside us. Listen, this time I'd like to say something about pain, and it is, after all, somehow connected with memory. The things I remember! Jesus, my head is a repository of arbitrarily remembered, mainly painful scenes, who knows why that is so. For example, I remember that my logic teacher had short legs, that she never knew how to match colours, that she never looked the one she was talking to in the eye, that she explained to us how one of the supreme achievements of the science of logic was the conclusion that *all white cats with blue eyes are deaf,* and that she never liked me: *You, Mihailo Mihailovič, are so confused,* she would say. And as for all the things I've forgotten, how can I possibly know - I only assume, with a degree of certainty - that I have forgotten something that is the most important thing of all.

God, this is a dream I'd like to wake up from, but it keeps on and on. The things I do to myself, the things I do to others, and the things others do to me, why, that's precisely what pain is, pure crystallised pain, there's no way for it to abate... There is, actually, but whoever feels like dying...

... yes, life unfolds the way it wants to, in all directions, mainly monotonously on an everyday basis, full of stupid little things and pointless questions, full of emptiness, until one day you go to collect your nine-year-old daughter after school and some demon, some double of yours, some fallen angel inside you inspires you, or to put it more precisely, forces you to turn what you have just thought of into reality, into pain, which is occasionally, but only occasionally, a way of attaining pleasure. I'll stop there: what I have to say, as if I were confessing, even though no one is forcing me to do so, and no one is listening to me either, could turn into a fantasy, say, about what Isidora and Milena will be doing in two or three years. My deepest urge is inarticulate and inexplicable... no, no, I'm not censoring myself, I kindly ask the court stenographer to erase all the preceding paragraphs that could be used to bring charges against me. Forget everything else apart from the fact that in front of the school I met Marija, Milena's mother, and wished her for myself. Well, that

could have happened to anyone, and it does happen. This, however, was a special moment, firstly, because it happened to me, and secondly, because that wish just about destroyed me, so much so that I cannot consider that at all to have been mere chance, unless chance is just another word for inexorability.

Yes, for fate. There's something funny about it, I'm not kidding at all. Those names, Marija and Mihailo, my name, as you've heard already is, Mihailo Mihailovič, pure pleonasm, uninventive symmetry. Speaking of names... before I tell you everything, not forgetting about my friend for a second – friends are something rare, especially after you turn forty, those you manage to get by then -, that's it, I must tell you that I became aware of my name rather late in life, make of it what you will. Maybe it wasn't my fault, maybe it was accidental, let me think about the reasons for a bit. First of all, no one calls me by my real name, and worst of all, it doesn't bother me at all; long ago I became one with my worthless, uninventive nickname. And then I went on a trip somewhere, and on that trip my hosts decided to show me this church. All right, I said, in my boring life so far I've entered at least five thousand churches, I might as well enter this one too.

Anyway, God is the same everywhere, mute and unreachable.

I'd like to say a few things about God now, I don't know why, perhaps because of Marija. It took me years to reconcile myself with the hurtful realisation that the world is meaningless and indifferent, but I still don't understand why it is horrible on top of everything else... the daily pile-up of horrors, the madness of horror, pure pain... And it is also beautiful in its meaninglessness and deformity. That is why I can only speak of God as a metaphor, the crucial question is not whether He exists but whether we need Him. If we do, we'll think Him up, and that is precisely what we're doing. And what is also of importance is how that which we need announces itself to us, say, as... as love, as beauty, as embrace... It would appear to me that it most often announces itself to us as pain, and through pain. Those who claim to have seen God, as a rule they suffered pain, and touched Him at the rock bottom of pain, not high up there... Everyday life is full of meaning that is found lacking, indifference, horror, stupidity, baseness and hurting, God is nowhere to be found. Whatever we do mainly boils down to giving and receiving blows, and causing others pain, and we all know that we need something more than that, and that which we need may be called God, may be called love, may be called anything, say, Danube, say... a sunny day. On a sunny day, my friend and I like to sit at Boban's on the raft and to watch the river flow without saying anything, lost in our own thoughts... where was I, ah, yes, we came in front of that church, I indifferent...

– Come on – they said to me – there's something you must see. Absolutely. You'll see why.

I make no bones about it, we enter. And the moment I came in, I understood what it was all about, if you can talk about understanding at all in this case. On one of the walls, towering over me, the first angel floated, wearing a red robe which burned like a conflagration.

– Hey, namesake! – I whispered. Elevated.

And that was that.

On that day when I met Marija, some of the miracle and the power of my encounter with my angel-namesake was manifested anew. It was raining, one of those slimy, dull New Belgrade rains, when you feel like a wet cloth and when you feel, with your skin rather than your thoughts, that perhaps the only truly important human issue, the one which resolves everything, is whether you'll manage to find someone you can hug... I collected Isidora in front of the school, according to the arrangement I'd made with her mother, my ex-wife, the epitome of perfection. *M-hm,* that's right. If you should think I'm being cynical, you're wrong. My ex-wife is perfect in everything, in the sense that she did everything in life correctly and in a timely manner, no matter how big or small the matter was.

May I offer some proof? All right, you know the type of people with whom everything is so unbelievably normal and in its right place, that, with time, they become faceless and, even worse, entirely unerotic, as attractive as an ironing board. On top of everything else, it lasted too long, we grew so close that, over time, we got to be like brother and sister, and what we did at night occasionally started to resemble incest, except that there's a certain amount of passion in incest, I suppose. Her entire life unfolded under full control, she always knew what she wanted and what she was aiming for when it came to her education, career... I am prepared to testify that even her falling in love was somehow planned – if the truth must be told, it was a mistake falling in love with this Spinoza, irrevocably convinced that logic was an invented science, derived from our desperate urge to invent God and to discern ourselves amidst chaos. This chaos tosses us about as it pleases, and we keep trying to impose some order upon it. And when we get the specious impression that, somehow or other, we've managed just that, when after premises A and B some sort of conclusion follows, then it all dries up...

Then come the wedding, children's birthdays, relatives and friends, choosing a place for your summer holiday one year ahead: as soon as we arrive on Mt Zlatibor, she says, well, next year we're going to Egypt, then it's shopping for clothes on a regular basis, and decorating the home, going out with her female friends-marchionesses at five o'clock every second Tuesday in the month, everything so very orderly. Every day the same. A woman-robot: she walks, works, breathes, applies winged sanitary towels and thinks the point of living is that everything should be in its proper place. Until one morning, after a spell of bodily hygiene, her husband, a proven and passionate aficionado of logical syllogisms - that is to say, me - gets out of bed feeling that, until two minutes before, he had been making love to a cyborg. Even her orgasm was perfectly normal, *ah, ah,* plus the inevitable: *it was wonderful.* Of course, there was the final kiss, before both of us jumped to our feet and set off on our separate ways, determined to read *Humiliated and Offended* in its entirety that day and, needless to say, destroy Carthage.

And so it was raining, I collected Isidora, placed a jacket on her shoulders and sheltered her under my umbrella, and she said to me that we were to wait for Milena, they had arranged to play together that afternoon. When Milena finally got out of school, Marija appeared, and so the four of us made for their building. As it turned out, Isidora had forgotten to tell my perfect ex-wife that she would be hav-

ing lunch at her friend's and that she would stay there to play with her, so I took on the role of a conscientious father and, having been cordially invited upstairs by Marija, popped in to telephone my ex. And having gone in, good manners made it *de rigeur* to have a cup of tea; I only drink hot wine in the evenings. While our daughters were playing in Milena's room, I wished, I don't know why, that I could play with Marija a bit. We didn't, though.

The first semester passed.

The drought started early, sometime in April. An attenuated voice of reason inside me warns me to watch what I'm saying, what do you mean – drought in April, April is the wettest month, cruelly so, but no, this time round it really was dry, a demonic period, not a drop of rain for days, weeks, months, right until the end of the school year. I woke up feeling as if I'd just been placed inside a crematorium, the heat well and truly scorched the earth. I interpret that as a sign from heaven, as a warning.

I saw Marija again at the school, when she came, just like me, to collect her daughter's progress report booklet from the teacher. The girls were attending the so-called recreational classes, which was actually out-of-classroom teaching, conducted out of town as well, and as for my friend, with whom in the meantime I'd gone to football matches and fishing several times, he had been detained somewhere or other in town. Marija smiled at me, and then, in a quite relaxed manner, without any hesitation, without any false despair, as if she were telling me I don't know what, as if joking, she said to me that she knew her good husband visited brothels (which, incidentally, was true, he'd invited me to join him), but so what, everyone is entitled to his little eccentricities. Then she made a dramatic pause, wondering whether to say anything else. And she said: I like your hands, and I particularly like the seriousness with which you do Isidora's homework, I've looked at her notebooks to compare them with Milena's, you don't leave any ink stains. That's true, I thought, noticing for the first time a characteristic of mine that I'll talk about later. Yes, yes, God is implacable and, after just thirty years or so, I made up for all those gaps in my education left over from my school days, so that I finally mastered the intricacies of Milan Rakić's poem "The Water-wheel" and complex mathematical operations, including the division of decimal numbers.

It's never too late.

I wanted to tell her, by way of reply, that I liked her feet. No, this has nothing to do with China, a small foot is considered to be a sign of divine harmony everywhere. I'll explain why. If, four or five years ago, you read the following advertisement: I'm looking for a girl with small feet - well it was me, Mihailo Mihailovič. I was getting divorced, and this thing with advertisements and feet was my little eccentricity, which may have had to do with the fact that my ex, the perfect wife wore size 41 shoes, whereas I wear size 43, she could wear my Chinese Nike trainers quite comfortably. Be that as it may, I only became aware of that after some while, when my desire for a change became quite unequivocal and was called – small feet. Marija fit the bill, her nine-year-old daughter already had bigger feet than her, she could no longer wear her mother's trainers.

And the drought went on and on, as if it had no intention of ever stopping.

We entered their flat with our daughters' report booklets full of top grades, suffused with those feelings of contentment with which a child who is an excellent pupil justly comes home expecting to be praised and rewarded. We felt like that with good reason, our efforts were a part of their success. As soon as she entered her flat, Marija took off her shoes, which left me breathless.

Forgive me, God, for taking Your name so shamelessly, she had the most exciting feet east of Greenwich. This is what I did: first I stared at those feet, enchanting and pure, close to the light the way Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Selatiel, Jegudiel, Barachiel and the arch-strategist whose name I bear had been close to. A great wave slowly swelled inside me... her leg, having got out of a small shoe, a child's shoe, *at that moment I thought of my daughter's shoe, not her daughter's*, made its way towards... I'm choking as I say this. And then I grabbed that foot, took a white, child's sock off it with trembling fingers, and then took Marija's big toe, a millimetre or two shorter than her long toe, which, according to my grandmother's belief, meant that she would outlive her husband, a thoroughly decent man whom I'd known for ages. I could even say, as I have already, that I consider him a friend, if a deeply hidden mutual aversion cultivated for years could be called that. And why not, friendship, just like love, has a thousand faces. I licked my friend's wife from head to toe, not neglecting a single part of her skin, neither armpit, nothing, thus purifying her of all sins, preparing her to face an angel...

... afterwards we sat and talked. That can be interesting, provided that you're listening to someone else's, not your own voice.

– I'm getting old – she said.

– How come?

– I know it's not noticeable, for now. But I get nervous, I no longer talk to my husband, I can't remember when we looked at each other like lovers last, I shout at my daughter, I don't have an orderly life. And everything hurts, nothing hurts specifically, but I feel some pain all the time.

I suppose that something of the sort occasionally happens to you, that someone utters your own sentences, and you just can't believe it, as if that person were reading your mind. This is that holy identity which enlightened me when we were reading to each other homework papers on the coming of spring and on segmented worms, our distant ancestors... hey, wait, that's precisely what I wanted to say...

– You know what – Marija continued uttering my own words, while outside the New Belgrade heat turned the city into a desert without people, its high-rise apartment blocks made up of thousands of godless monastic cells wherein TV screens shone instead of icons, spooky fortresses full of lonely souls like the two of us at that moment in time, never mind that a moment before we breathed together – you know, she said, nothing is clear to me any longer. A total, perfect, big nothing. Whatever I do, I run into pain, everything ends in pain. For example, love is just an introduction to pain, if we love someone, is it not, in the final analysis, just so that, once it's all over, we can die from pain, so that...

– You're exaggerating somewhat – I said in order to comfort her, even though *(I'm repeating myself)* I thought the very same thing.

– No, not at all. Listen, if anything was love, what I had with him was love, and then it disappeared, not immediately, it was a gradual process, a milligram on a daily basis, and so it went for years, you don't have to believe me, but eventually tenderness disappeared from our lives for good and everything became a habit, quite literally everything, making love became a habit as well, neither he nor I made an effort at it, it was mostly taking, never giving, never surrendering to the other...

Yes, that's precisely it, I confirmed to myself, the same with me. But I didn't say anything. Never mind, she did:

– And then, quite madly, thinking that we make up for something by doing so, we rush headlong into affairs like this one. Nothing personal, I'm very fond of you, and you really turn in decent homework *(she chuckled),* but everything ends in pain eventually, pain is the only thing that grows inside us, which never stops and continues to increase, as long as we are aware of ourselves, and most likely even after that.

– And worst of all – I continued – the realisation that this is so does not diminish it at all. I can explain everything to myself, I can make everything meaningful, but it doesn't mean that pain will then stop, on the contrary, it seems that pain tends to increase parallel with the depth of your insight, desperation deepens with our realisation that we were preordained for pain.

– And whatever we do are merely temporary solutions, putting out a fire by pouring petrol over it.

– Illusions.

– That's it, precisely, illusions. Nothing but illusions. Always pain anew, always some bad construction. It's supposed to justify some act of ours that we commit in order to fool ourselves that everything is all right, it's always some logical, allegedly rational invention through which we try to cheat chaos and not being able to manage, but in the end it's always pain, regardless of the fact that now we have some experience in it. Everything always starts anew.

M-hm, that's right, you can barely speak of pain, you mainly endure pain, so our conversation sagged a bit, before we found other topics and started talking about homework, giving head and a number of other things. And it immediately felt better, old age and pain await us anyway. On the way out, in the ante-room, we stopped in front of the mirror, Marija stood behind me and, petite as she was, could not be seen at all. For a moment it seemed to me that I was alone, and that all that, that scene, that conversation, even Marija's foot, was just an illusion, that I was dreaming and would wake up at any moment.

All the same, I remembered whatever she'd said about homework, how it should be written so that teachers don't realise that it was done by parents, and what mustn't be left out at any cost. School is an assembly line for manufacturing future big zombies, and what she said about giving head wasn't bad. Men are rather simple, she said, the easiest way of buying them is by giving them head. It's not too much trouble, takes about five minutes of effort, is exciting, and afterwards men are corrupted by it forever. While they are being given head, they imagine they're masters of the world. Each man thinks so, for, in fact, he is that at that particular moment. Yes, I concurred, accepting this piece of wisdom, but later on, outside, on the pavement, I wondered,

sucked out as I was, while the air around me trembled from the heat, if that was so, whether almost all men were masters of the world, that same story was happening everywhere. Half a million masters of the world, at least half a million little slobbering Hitlers this very second, while women are giving them head, imagine that the world is theirs for the taking. Perhaps the solution resides in the fact that it seems to each one of them that it is happening to him alone and no one else, and everyone thinks that he is dreaming a dream from which he'll wake up at any moment...

We said good-bye and I left Marija's flat, firmly resolved never to go there again, even at the risk that there would be no one to check my daughter's homework – mine, that is. I felt like someone who had betrayed a friend, and with good reason, guilty conscience is also a form of pain that we inflict upon ourselves. I really hate having to console someone, just as much as I hate being consoled by someone, for if the truth be told, we are all deeply inconsolable and should stay that way, that comes from our very existence, what is there to explain? Even divine creatures like Marija live their tiny, burdensome lives, full of everyday stupid little things and meaningless questions. And they all feel sorry for themselves, everybody else is better off than them, but no, I'm sick of this constant endurance of life, endless waiting for bad news. It's easier for me to deal with others than with myself. I want to wait for some good news, no matter whether it'll ever come, the important thing for me is that I'm waiting for something...

... and now I hardly know how I'll go on from there. It's best to do it in an orderly fashion. If there is any order to it whatsoever, if it's not just chaos and pain in one hundred disconnected episodes. It became unbearably hypocritical, yes, yes, I stopped going to Marija's flat, I decided to put a stop to it, it's never OK to have an affair with your friend's wife. I did so, without any explanation, but I kept thinking about her, constantly and inevitably. The drought raged in the months that followed; not even the oldest inhabitants of New Belgrade remembered such a catastrophe, the asphalt became deformed, the thin earth became as hard as concrete, the parks were burning. It was a strange time, as if a heavy fog had fallen on us all and closed us into a hopeless, dismal loneliness, loneliness amidst a crowd. Life unfolded as a desert mirage, full of burning air, which shimmered in the distance over the city's main boulevard.

I couldn't live with Marija, I couldn't live without Marija.

And another thing. I decided to tell her husband everything. In the meantime, we'd met several times, we went to see a derby that decided the championship, then attended the *Festival of Rock Veterans*, where some of our acquaintances played Dylan's songs; prophets announce themselves in very diverse ways even today. We went fishing as well, without any success, for hours we'd sit over the river, keeping mum and waiting, in vain, although there is nothing vain about this passion. And then, once when we went together to the river, my good friend beat me to it.

We arrived at our usual place at the crack of dawn. A hot day was in the offing, one of those that await us in hell.

– Well, Mihailo Mihailovič, my friend – my friend said – we're slowly getting older.

– What do you mean – getting older? – I asked. – Look at this water, death is far away.

– It is, I don't deny it, but it's getting closer. The turtle catches up with Achilles sooner or later, you remember what our logic teacher used to say.

– Whoever gives a toss about that?

– Me, for one.

– Come on, change the topic.

– All right, I will. Tell me, how serious is this thing between you and Marija?

The silence lasted three and a half seconds, I timed it, I have an inner clock. Flustered, I wanted to gain some time. I didn't know what to say. Or what one says in such situations. I only stammered:

– I suppose you know...

– I know, she told me...

... a few weeks after that conversation Marija phoned me and asked where I had been, why I never called. And so I went to her flat again. A decision is a decision, and small feet are small feet, small feet are a million times better reason than any decision, they take precedence over anything, they can even make us forget about pain for a moment, the pain that never stops, that is beneath everything, in everything, above everything, inside us and around us.

Later on, things always unfolded the same way. After leaving Marija'a flat, I always decided it was the last time, and every time she called again I rushed to meet her, it was quite simply something I couldn't resist. Moreover, when I think about it afterwards, I see that, with time, you start developing your worst characteristics, say, recklessness and selfishness, which you once believed you didn't have. Still, they manifest themselves sooner or later, first you try to suppress them and do everything in your power to smother them, but as that is impossible, for your worst characteristics are the devil's invention and are very efficient, then you slowly succumb to them, and even worse, you start enjoying them, the way I enjoyed Marija, not caring whether I was causing my friend pain. I couldn't prove it logically *(I don't know how)*, but I'm convinced that it is so: pain is non-transferrable and unpronounceable... he never said anything to me except that he knew... what the hell could he say to me at all, pain requires us to dedicate ourselves to it completely... And while he, on the days that Marija called me to her place, wandered around somewhere, I sank into his wife feeling great pangs of conscience on account of that sin. It was a sin worthy of being redeemed by my namesake, the archangel. Only he could do it, he knows that passion is stronger than sin.

And I think that God understands it, that's why he places pain somewhere close to passion.

It meant nothing to me that my friend was probably doing to someone else the very same thing I was doing to him or that someone had done to me once, so I kept on doing it out of deepest desperation and deepest passion, overstepping myself, succumbing to the embrace that outgrew me. While we lose ourselves in that holy act, at least for a moment we free ourselves from the thought that we are mortal; I hastened to see her feet and, *m-hm,* her breasts, they're something special. Yes, as

I've told you, at this very moment it is happening to hundreds of thousands of men, this desire to see breasts as soon as possible, and each and every one of them thinks that he has seen something special, but do I need to swear on this, Marija's breasts were something special precisely because I looked at them... milky Marija.

(...)

And now, after everything.

I sit here in my room, uncalled, still unaccustomed to my future life. The day is hot and stuffy, it's been like that for months, white-hot concrete, the air saturated with fumes. All of a sudden, pain disappeared somewhere, as if it had sunk into some voiceless, unreachable depth, and inside me I feel *joy on account of the fact that life is unfolding*, that I'm breathing and thinking, thinking of anything, even of the fact that I've had my friend's wife. Sounds of thunder are heard from somewhere. Little by little, clouds gather and the wind rises, I watch the air-sucker scattering dust and garbage in front of my building. Large, heavy raindrops fall onto the ground, and then the entire sky opens and a terrible downpour descends upon New Belgrade as if it were Judgement Day.

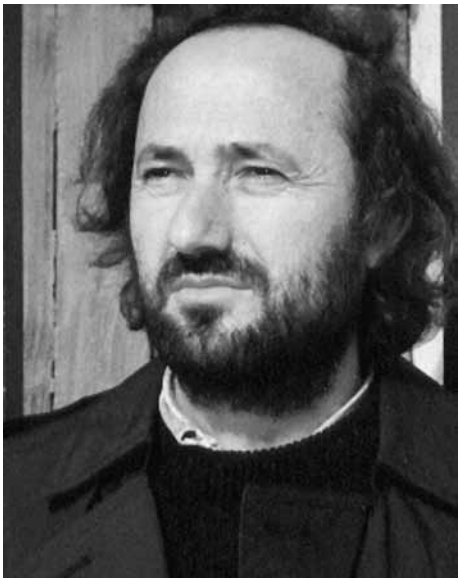
Not for nothing did Bob Dylan say: *The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.*

I know how this story of mine that I had to tell will end. In about half an hour, when the sun shines again, for it's always like that in this suicidal city, I'll open the windows wide and start to breathe in fresh air greedily with my congested lungs.

Eqrem Basha

The Fog

translated from Albanian by Sazana Çapriqi



If what happened made you think that it was all to be expected and that one day my fog obsession would certainly bring about this kind of outcome, you are wrong.

You may say that I have set about to tell you a fantastic event, a story from the dark hemisphere of a distorted consciousness, to bring out of the turbulent depths of sub-consciousness, something like a twilight zone, that lives in obscurity and other similar facades. So, what! My preoccupation, or call it what you wish: my passion and my fog obsession, is neither new nor recent and it can be traced through my coming of age. But in spite of how strong it used to be, with time it faded away and was cleared out. More so, that former vertigo in greyish pillars of smoke and in its pleats of secrecy is not at all similar; it is not even close to what I want to tell you. Anyway, it had been a while now that I had not written any verse, not even a single line with fog and it seemed as if I had overcome the fervour wrapped in mysterious threads and therefore what came about, among other things, showed up at a dry period, at the time of my general indifference and indolence, when I'd spent the day laying flat on my back dawdling, engaging in futile conversation and dialogues about chaff, about straw, the tail of the fox and the legs of the snake, with tedious television shows, with fake news and naive filthy intrigues that made me shiver, aggravating the acidity in my stomach and raising my already high and boiling blood pressure.

And again, it was foggy the day when the police stopped me on the road.

– "Where are you going?" they said.

– "To work," I answered.

– "What kind of work in the middle of the night?"

– "It is seven o'clock," I said and through the fog I tried to take out my pocket watch pulling it up along with the loop of my trousers.

– “Don’t move,” shouted one of them and taking a step backward he pointed the barrel of his submachine gun at me, ready to shoot. The other had also taken a step back to the side and just like the first one had pointed the barrel of his submachine gun and put his finger on the trigger, ready to shoot.

For a moment I froze and dropped the watch out of my hand with its lid open, which remained hanging down its long chain up to my knees.

– “Take two steps back,” ordered the policeman that was pointing his gun after he had inserted the bullet into the barrel.

Without having recovered myself fully I tried to bend down in an attempt to catch my watch that was dangling open by my knee, but his second shout paralysed me in an almost bowed position, so hunched like that I first took half a step back and then another one to the edge of the pavement where I slipped and fell flat on my back. The other policeman had sneaked behind me with lightning speed and stepped with his heavy boot on my hand, that even while falling had amazingly managed to catch the watch with its lid open. The heavy heel hurt me a lot and I yelled until I felt his stench close to my face. While he was trying to take my wallet and its content out of the pocket of my jacket he almost strangled me by pressing his knee on my throat and at the same time throwing the heavy smell of alcohol into my larynx. I had a little bit of luck here because the first thing he found was my identity card. The policeman kicked my wallet with his boot and looked closely at my ID.

– “Where do you work,” asked the one who had stepped on my hand.

– “At the newspaper” I answered while still lying on the ground with my hand under the boot of the policeman.

– “What newspaper, there are no newspapers anymore;” he shouted, never taking his eyes off of my ID.

– “At our newspaper,” I barely managed to say, just to try something that might save me from the pain in my hand and from the edge of the pavement that was hurting my back.

After having inspected all my other pockets very carefully, the policeman searched my body by touching my waist, thighs and crotch and finally released my hand and moved away.

– “Get up!” ordered the other who had by now lowered the barrel of his submachine gun and moved out of his ready to shoot position. – “What kind of newspaper starts work at twelve o’clock, midnight!”

– “But it is sev...” I tried to say while getting up with difficulty and giving another glance at the watch still dangling by my knee on the silver chain. – “It is ...” – having noticed they did not react to my movements anymore; I bent down and caught the pocket watch – seven o’clock!

– “The time is what we say it is,” the policeman who had stepped on my hand before shouted into my ear.

I looked at the watch once more hesitantly and shrugged. The policeman opposite made a movement to put his gun back on his shoulder and I took this as a sign that the control was over and that I could bend down to collect my belongings, my wallet, few pieces of paper and a small booklet, that had been taken out of my

pockets. After I took my ID from the other, I adjusted my coat and began to wipe my clothes with my hands.

– "All of you are our enemies," he said, without looking at me or making any attempts to put any light on the fog.

-"I am not an enemy," I said, but my words were swallowed by darkness and murk.

The thick fog had turned everything into smoke. Wherever you turned, all you could see were hanging lights, like yellow fruits of a withered tree, neither in heaven nor on earth, a few dried branches dangling, loaded with needles of frost, and there was no movement at all. Heralded, initially, by a sudden cold for this time of the year, the fog had been spreading cunningly throughout the town since Monday midnight. On Tuesday the dawn was wet and dark. It was as chilly as Monday, as gloomy as Sunday and Saturday but as foggy and grim as Wednesday, Thursday and the whole week to come would be. Everything was sunk and compressed in it and everywhere there was a monotonous, heavy and persistent reverberation of crows, croaking on invisible branches of high poplars along the brook, making people complain for they could not sleep in peace. Their humming and the unusual gurgling of the brook blended with the parasite sounds, similar to the roaring of military vehicles, tanks or armoured vehicles going from one side of the brook to the other and vice versa, manoeuvring or keeping at a constant level the planned decibels of this general situation of fog and chaos.

All perplexed, soiled and muddy, with no clear comprehension of what had really happened, I was heading home although I had gone out to go to work. The policemen followed me with their eyes and every time I turned my head back to look at them they raised the barrels of their submachine guns thus signalling me to keep going.

I rushed into the house. The incident pushed me into a state of a strange delirium that I could not explain to myself. Every time I looked at the watch I shrugged, confused – it never changed, it was few minutes past seven. In the lobby I turned the light on and looked at it once more, it was still the same or nearly the same. I looked at the big wall clock in the kitchen – the same, seven and about thirty minutes past. I went into the living room without taking off my shoes, I leaned against the door which I had slammed and took a deep sigh. For a long time I remained like that looking at my hand which by now had turned black on the spot tread upon by the boot and I touched it like I was making sure my pulse was still there. The beating reminded me of something so I quickly took my shoes off and rushed into the bedroom to watch the alarm clock that had awakened me from my sleep. It was showing half-past seven, too.

"Damn it" I said to myself and went to the window. It was neither day nor night outside. The thick fog had covered everything. Even the lights of the opposite building, that usually helped my orientation when I woke up early in the morning, were not to be seen. Can it be midnight or perhaps the people living opposite are not awake yet? Perhaps they too have been swallowed by the fog. Nonetheless, there was still some liveliness in the streets, it was the motion of a long column of

trucks and armoured vehicles, more noticeable from the yellow lights that seemed to be running on their own without any human direction. It was only their moving and dispersing that familiar noise, now muffled, that I had been hearing all night long all these nights, only I had thought it was the croak of the frightened crows, the muffled gurgling of the brook and the echo of the manoeuvres in distance, also muted by the fog. A big colourless flag divided by a cross in the middle was flying at the forefront of this column, but people were nowhere to be seen; it seemed like it moved directed by remote control.

The motion of the column convinced me even more strongly that it was night. It must be that I had awakened confused and got all mixed up. The columns moved only during night. Only during the night did the army changed location and only at night were manoeuvres held, only at night were strategic points conquered, only at night... Damn the foggy day, too – it is darker and more mysterious than the night. I wound up the clock with the bell at half past twelve. Then I wound it up to set off the alarm at seven o'clock. I undressed and got in between the sheets that still kept the warmth of my body. For a long while I tossed and turned trying to find connections between everything that was circling in my head and was unable to understand. I had been losing sleep for some time now and could only sleep in agony so I put a great deal of blame on my nightmares for a lot of unclear, misty affairs. At night I would get up very often and sit by the window till dawn, either counting the vaporized lights in the wide street just below the building or the tanks that came and went from one front line to another, imaginary too. Nevertheless, the change of the watch, or the stopping at one point at the same time of all of them, only to continue after a while spontaneously, remained unclear. Something out of the ordinary must have happened in the night that was extraordinary anyway, ever since the fog had fallen and had covered everything.

Later on I had fallen asleep. In fact it was not a proper sleep it was rather a delirium. My entire house was full of police while I was locked in my bedroom.

"Come out or we will break the door."

"I will not come out unless you meet my terms."

"What terms?" they shouted and banged on the door with all their strength.

"To restore the watch to the time it was."

"We have not changed any watch. They are all at the exact time they should be and at the time they used to be. Get out if you want your life to be spared or else you will be hurt."

"Why should you spare my life? It is my life. Who are you to spare it? I haven't done anything."

"Oh yes you have, we know you, we have you in our notes. You wake up delirious and make the world go round. You bring dreams into reality."

"What dreams? You want to punish me for dreams?"

"You may lose your life for dreams. Lives are lost for dreams everywhere. Those who do not dream do not get punished. We too punish you for dreams; because you bring them to life and teach them to others. You are not an exception therefore get out and give yourself up, explain everything if you wish to be saved."

"Why, are you by any chance the dream police? I will not come out unless you return my watch. You got me all mixed up, you have changed the time on my watch, you have installed nightmares in my sleep. These are not dreams they are nightmares. You have implanted them in me. If you do not go away you will kill me in them."

"This is why we tell you to come out so that we can save you. This is what we fight for, it is our intention to save you but you do not understand. We live for you we exist for you, for your well being, for your sleep. We guard your sleep and hunt your dreams."

"What good, what good, what good? I know too well your goodness."

The banging on the door became stronger and it seemed like it was going to fall down altogether. After that there was a bit of quiet and then the bell. It was not the door of the bedroom it was the front doorbell. There was someone banging at the door and ringing the bell. But no it was the watch and the alarm bell set at seven o'clock and it was ringing. Then there was a knock at the door and the sound of the bell. The watch bell, knock at the door, the front door bell.

When I went by the window the fog was still there. It was a little thinner, more transparent but still remained thick enough so that the windows of the opposite building could not be seen. "It is seven a clock" I said and stopped the alarm. But it wouldn't stop and the knock at the door continued. In fact the alarm clock had stopped long ago ever since I'd gotten out of bed but it was the front door bell that was ringing followed by a strong banging at the door. I hurried and opened it. Again there were two policemen.

– "Sir, you were supposed to be at the court room today at twelve o'clock to give your statement in regard to the charges pressed against you."

– "I will absolutely go," I answered bewildered.

– "You will go tomorrow," said one of them, "for today it is too late. It is well past twelve o'clock now. Tomorrow you will be escorted by the police. Sir, you do not honour our courts and therefore we will come to take you. Tomorrow at twelve you must be home."

They turned their backs and went away as if by command leaving a written message in my hand with no stamp or signature on it.

– "But there is still enough time," I wanted to say but I didn't for I could neither understand the state I was in nor who I was talking to. Was it a dream or was I awake, was I talking to those of midnight, those of seven or those of twelve o'clock, were they coming from my dream or from my nightmare, was it the devil or his son that had come with other business from another dream or from another nightmare, had he come with another tune, now at seven o'clock, to remind me about the trial at twelve a clock, which I certainly did not forget, for I will go and present myself as ordered the same way I did almost every week on a given day at twelve o'clock as ordered on the messages they stuck on my door every day, with no stamp or signature on them. I went close by to the kitchen window and looked down, at the entrance of my building, trying to see the policemen while going out as if to convince myself that their coming was real, but there was the fog and I could barely see the stairs, the entrance, the narrow yard and the branches of the two pine trees broken by

the storm a few days ago. Even the midnight lights could not been seen any longer. They were either invisible or rather switched off. It meant the day had come.

I got dressed and very quickly I was ready to go to work, convinced I was late but not too late to start a new day, a foggy day indeed but a day of leisure too, at least so as to get out of my dreams and nightmares of the cold night. The city resembled a vampire and my walking along the wet pavement resembled an apparition passing through the graveyard returning to its coffin after a long night of a vampire orgy. Nobody else was out there or at least there was nobody on my side of the pavement for I could not see anything on the other side. All there was to be heard were the croaks of crows, the muffled gurgling of the brook coming from far away and the crazy out-of-tune roaring of vehicles.

At the entrance to the newspaper building I met colleagues from my office.

– "I am a bit late" I said while touching their shoulders lightly , signalling thus they could go in first, a sign of respect for them.

– "Eight hours only, not any longer," – they answered derisively. – "We are going out for we are done for today and for an indefinite time too. You must have known this and that is why you did not come. You are fired anyway. The newspaper is banned due to the fog."

– "It is seven o'clo..." I wanted to say and I started to get my pocket watch out but got baffled. I opened the lid and looked at it: it was few minutes passed three, say half past three.

– "It has stopped because of the fog," I said like I was telling this to myself, meaning my pocket watch, while putting it to my ear to listen to its tick-tick, still alive and beating but all mixed up with the croak of crows the gurgling of the brook and the distant roaring of vehicles.

– "Yes, of course," they answered, thinking I was referring to something else, "it will not be published for some time. Everything is disturbed. The radio and TV are suspended. Today, several police regiments have been send to convince the workers of radio and television stations to stop their work because they did not follow the rules of the fog. The activity of the symphony orchestra has been suspended too, as well as the professional choir and the Mozart's Requiem. The members of the orchestra and the choir were beaten because they could not find their orientation in the fog, and they refused to stop their rehearsal."

– " I do not understand, the policeman told me it was midnight while my watch was showing seven o'clock. I do not understand" I said and I tried to explain what had happened in the morning or at midnight holding my pocket watch up all the time with its lid open on its silver chain as if I held up the alibi that was going to confirm my testimony.

– "The policemen are everywhere," said my colleague from the office, "and it is a special fog police which is why it cannot be seen. It is invisible, it acts quickly and unexpectedly. The local police have either been discharged or sent to do other jobs, because it speaks the language while regiments of police trained to deal with turbulent and extraordinary affairs were brought in. Purges have been carried out and some ministries shut down for an indefinite period of time. Yesterday, sur-

geons and gynaecologists were expelled from the hospital while new surgeons and gynaecologists were brought in. They are trained to perform operations and to help women give birth under fog conditions. The post office has been occupied too and new people have been brought in, by the centre for training persons, to establish special communications under the conditions of the fog and in an atmosphere of total confusion, with the main purpose of spying on violators of the order of communication. This is going to be our new way of life for an indefinite period of time. This is the fog regime and meteorologists predict it is going to last. Institutions will be changed and emergency measures of fog introduced everywhere. The management of big factories and enterprises will be substituted by a forced regime of fog management or their work will be stopped altogether and they will be preserved to reopen again on a clear day without fog. It has been declared an extraordinary situation not a state of emergency but a special state, because only those who are used to the fog or who agree with the fog will know how to walk through it. Others will be shut inside their homes, in a kind of mandatory isolation. Anyone who shall violently refuse this regime may be executed on the spot in street manifestations, where nothing is visible enough and where a network of wandering bullets has been established; or they may be put in prison. However, you seem to have escaped quite easily. You could have been hurt. Have you got any idea how many people are lost or have disappeared in the fog?"

* * *

Even though it was the time of the fog reign, we had almost been so to speak used to similar compact floods. Only this time it lasted very long so people were closed and had changed because of it. The vast majority stayed at home, and those who did go out complained all the time about many troubles and obstacles of strange and unusual types they encountered. The fog had thickened and it weighed heavily upon everybody. It had a stinking smell and pressed like the tread of brass hooves. It spread sickness and mental epidemics, depression, and a heavy psychosis, it increased aggressiveness and raised blood pressure, while distorting people who experienced cerebral haemorrhages almost at every step. The streets were filled with people drooping one hand or dragging one leg, their mouths contorted to the left or to the right all the way to the ear. What sort of an apocalypse was this? I burdened myself by wandering around with the weight of an iron cannonball in my chest which I could not take off either by coughing or hitting my chest with fists and not even by crashing into the walls of the house. "Shall this fog ever clear out?" I wondered languishing, taking pills with strong coffee one after the other, Valium, Lexilium or any other sedatives that people have discovered. The burden of the fog and all the pills I had taken put me into a deep dreamless sleep and I did not wake up until a week later. I had slept a sea of sleep sunken into a kind of deepest darkness, lost in a cave where neither birds sing, nor do bats make any noise. Who had expelled my nightmares and had me knocked out like this?

I woke up feeling a terrible hunger and strangely enough I found my table set with all the goodies of the world. I ate like never before in my life. I was satiated

and satisfied thinking about all the worldly magic of the type of 'table set' that had prepared this wonderful feast for me. It must be that my mother had come; she had the key to the house, or is it possible it came out of heaven, by magic? Soon enough I discovered a part of the mystery, when I saw the door opened forcefully, but not damaged. For a moment I turned around perplexed after all the magic that had happened to me that morning and I realised that not only was nothing missing in my home but everything was cleaned up shining bright and put in order like never before. My hole had been turned into a crystal clear palace. "You must have gotten married in the dream," I teased my alter ego, "you have slept over for an entire season and now you wake up married. Being fired from work as you are allows you to sleep in peace you also have had your table set in riches by angels and fairies of benevolent organizations. You have no need to face the fog – " inadvertently I had gone by the window. What a miracle o God! Not only had the fog cleared out, not only was the sun shining, not only was the scenery washed clean, but the gardens of heaven had been opened and all the city had come to life like never before.

I dressed in haste and immediately went into the street. O God. There were no more police, no men with distorted watch hands on their forehead, no disfigured or distorted faces, no more legs dragged along, no traces of tanks, no flags divided by a cross in the middle. Going out of the building I was pushed away by a crowd of happy children who were running and jumping with their backpacks on their shoulders. I looked at the little kiosk opposite and I saw its window full of newspapers and magazines illustrated in all possible colours. There was also my newspaper that had been swallowed by the fog. There were magazines for fun and entertainment. People were getting off and on overloaded buses going someplace and coming back from someplace else. They were carrying bags and sacks full of things and they carried books and papers under their arms. They had unbuttoned their jackets for they were not afraid of autumn, because there was a shining sun they had never seen before, filling them with hope that it was there to stay and reign all the time.

– "Oh, God" I trembled inwardly, "who has pushed me into this dream and which is the way out of it?"

Zoran Ferić

Requiem

translated from Croatian by Graham McMaster

In the sky the wild ducks were leaving for the south in a flat V shape. As if someone up there had written a victory sign horizontally. Down in the meadow, the two of them were just crawling through the wire fence that surrounded the property of the Veterinary Faculty on the northern side of Sljeme. It was one of the nicest meadows on the mountain, just over Horvat's Steps and from there one could see far off to the north, the mountains in Slovenia, and on nice days the bluish outlines of the Alps. The hole in the fence they were squeezing through was just next to the gate patched up with boards and locked with a great rusty padlock. He held her by the forearm, saying:

"Can you?" Or: "Watch out for the wire"

"I hate it when you're a creep," she said.

Then they were quiet for a bit. He made out he was looking at the towns at the

foot of the mountain, while she observed his profile. The profile of a man who had had his nose broken as a boy. Some kind of sound came out of the air. Perhaps it was the calling of the wild ducks.

"I shan't try again," she said at length.

"We can try again in three months. When you're better."

"I shan't again. Get it? Not in three months, or five, or a year. I shan't any more, and that's it."

"There are other ways," he said.

"I shan't," and she raised her voice. "I shan't because you could hardly wait for this. Whenever I get it implanted, you're always stiff with fear until I start to bleed."

"You know that's not the truth."

"You think I don't see it? Think I don't see it on your face?"

When someone dies who hasn't yet been born, he thought, it's always like this. She'll calm down in a few days and things will be like they were before again.

Then they heard some kind of sound. A car was coming up along the broad track for taking out wood that the loggers used. It was strange to see a car so far off the road in this unreal mountain landscape. It was an old Opel estate car, maroon, mud-spattered. It stopped in front of the door, and a man with a bandanna on his head got out and tried to open it. He jiggled the old padlock, but didn't manage.

"What's he doing?" she said.

He seemed to be doing it rather frantically. The whole of that rickety wooden gate shook, but the old Wertheim didn't give way. Then he got back behind the wheel, and quite simply broke it down with his car. One side of it got smashed down to the ground while he was getting in.

"I can't believe it," she said.

He was somehow pleased now that she wasn't thinking about what had trickled out of her that morning. The man in the car slowly went by them, avoiding the molehills and stones that poked out of the ground, weaving as if he were doing a slalom.

When they had come out of the hospital, she had cried out a lens. He watched her crying, and then taking them out of her eyes. She carefully took them out and placed them on tissue. As if her tears had hardened and she were saving them for a memory.

"Take me to Sljeme," she said.

"Didn't they tell you that you had to rest?"

"It's nothing," she said. "Take me to Sljeme."

And now they were here, at the spot they had come just a few times, and she had always been delighted. There was something special about the meadow, something the two of them couldn't quite fathom. The stones that poked out of the land, as if it were some landscape in the karst, the blueberry bushes, the dense pine forest that surrounded it like a wreath. The meadow was, quite simply, a place where one always felt good. But this business with the car was pretty weird. The young chap at the wheel, his orange bandanna knotted pirate-style, the big tattoo on the forearm that peered out the short sleeves of his t-shirt. Weirder still was that the young chap

seemed not to notice them at all, though he had passed within a few meters of them. He looked in front of him like a sleepwalker or someone who was really high. At one point, they could see his eyes. They were light and glassy. The Opel moved off to the left, to the forest, while they went in the opposite direction, to the rise from which they had a great view of the whole valley. He felt somehow relieved at this, although in fact there was no reason at all. They went down the track towards Horvat's Steps. They came to a great rock at which the steps started.

"Who was this Horvat?" she asked. "And why did he build steps at the top of the mountain?"

"Don't know. Every time he came, he would add one stone."

They stood at the top and looked down, but neither of them dared to descend. As if something very uncertain were awaiting them down there.

""Then, these stones," she said, "they are his days."

It struck him it wasn't a bad idea at all to turn days into stones.

"Didn't this guy have a family, someone to look after?"

She had never once gone down those steps. He had. When he was little, his father had taken him down on his back. He had carefully felt out each stone with his foot so that the two of them didn't go headlong. And only at the bottom had he understood why Horvat had made that massive stone staircase. He was a child, but it was clear to him. The beauty of the landscape entered by these steps consisted of one's not feeling one was on Sljeme. It gave a nice feeling you were somewhere else: on the Isonzo, below Vršić there, even at the source of the Sava. This something different, which could not even be seen from the meadow of the Veterinary Faculty, lifted the whole space and gave a quite ordinary mountain the charms of the Alps. It would have been hard at that moment to explain to her.

They set off back, by another track, over the clearing. Then they saw the car again. It was standing in a valley below them. A muddy old Opel estate. There was a net between the passenger's compartment and the load area. She got visibly agitated. They stopped for a moment and then saw the young man with a bandanna on his head. Quite close to the car, he was digging a hole with a shovel. They stopped and watched him as he dug. A fairly big, deep, hole.

"I don't like this," she said.

"Why do you think he's digging?"

"Let's go," she said. "I don't want to watch this."

It struck him that you can often see things like this in films. A man digging by a car. She rushed on a few steps, almost ran, as if fleeing from something. When they turned round the path so that they could no longer see the man digging, she said:

"When I think it might have been alive, and now it isn't, I could bite these stones."

At that moment he realised he could be without her. Just like that. All at once. After fifteen years of living together, it struck him that he could be without her. And that was freedom. Freedom from love, from duty, from fear. Freedom that was sometimes brought by the death of someone who hadn't been born and the freedom of a man who turned days into stones.

"Really," she said after some time, "why do you think he was digging?"

Obviously, curiosity had got the better of her.

"Well, never mind," he said, "let's go back."

"I don't know?" she said hesitantly.

He took her by the arm and they went back.

The man had made a fairly long, fairly deep hole. He was in it up to the waist, and was still working the edges. To make the pit nice. He was sweaty, he wiped the sweat from his face with his handkerchief, and he had pulled the sleeves of his shirt up to his shoulders. His right arm was patterned with a tattoo with some red details. They were close enough to see. He didn't pay attention to them

When he had tidied up the pit, he went to the car and opened up the luggage platform. They couldn't see what was inside. Then he went into the front, took his cigarettes and lit one up, played some music. Something very loud suddenly filled the valley. The sound quickly appropriated the space, climbed over the edges of the valley, entered the forest, drove the birds from the tops of the pines. Now he was standing over the luggage compartment and smoking. He listened to the music and looked unblinkingly into the luggage compartment.

"What's that music?"

She seemed to be surprised.

"Dunno. Mozart's Requiem."

Now they just stood there a bit. He was over the luggage compartment, smoking, they were by his side. Listening to Mozart. It was weird a young guy who looked like that should be playing the Requiem.

"What's he looking at?" she said.

She was still afraid, but now curiosity had completely got the better of her. She could not longer tear her eyes away from the man, just as he could no longer take his away from the trunk. In the air, together with the music, the quacking of the wild ducks could be heard. He suddenly said:

"Autumn's come."

If the shapes of the stones, the trees and hawthorns had been letters, they would have written death. The man tossed down his cigarette end, ground it out in the grass as if stamping on a loathsome bug, and then bent down to take something out of the trunk. It was something fairly big, wrapped up in a white sheet. But it didn't look big enough to be a grown person. Perhaps a child. The man with the handkerchief bore the bundle in his arms, to the sound of the music, the way a bride is carried over the threshold.

"Jesus," she said.

The sheet fell away, and two hairy paws were to be seen. Yellow. Must have been a fairly large dog. The man placed it in the grave. He stood over it a bit, and then started to fill it in. He filled it in rapidly and energetically, as if he were having a set-to with someone. He was young. Who knows, he'd probably grown up with this dog.

The mallards called from on high.

She cried again. It was as if the man were burying their child.

Mojca Kumerdej

The Letter

translated from Slovenian by Erica Johnson Debeljak

She lifted her head from the computer when she heard, among all the men's voices under her window, the sound of high heels climbing the stairs of the house toward the main entrance. A van was parked in the inner courtyard and young men were carrying enormous boxes, cartons, and chairs into the building. She spotted among the men a light-haired woman wearing a tight white dress with black polka dots,

and high-heeled white summer pumps. She recognized the sound. The previous afternoon, their slow even rhythm had echoed from the neighbouring apartment where from morning to afternoon there had been only the drone of various machines in recent weeks, the unbearable racket radiating through the old pipes and into all of the apartments in the three-storied building. Until now the new neighbour had been little involved in the moving process and, other than a stand for flowers that she had toted up the stairs after the men, had carried nothing at all. When she herself had moved into the building two and a half years ago, she had worked like a mule, lugging heavy boxes and huge black plastic bags into her mezzanine apartment; and she hadn't been wearing high heels – she never did – lacking all the subservient helpers that the blond Elena Jacobsson employed. Elena Jacobsson: that was the name written on the recently affixed label on the mailbox. All day Saturday the sounds of machines for assembling furniture came from the neighbouring apartment; the rattling of glass, the murmur of paper. She might have closed the window and shut out the noise but it was one of those exceptionally hot summers that hovered above the city concrete from May until mid-September, barely moving, like some dry ethereal mass. A summer squall the night before had softened the most recent unbearable humid spell. On Sunday morning, the sounds from the neighbouring apartment stopped. The thought that the woman was probably still sleeping from exhaustion passed cynically through her mind as she remembered a different noise two months ago. It started on Sunday, exactly eight weeks ago. The whining and yapping of Apollo, the Dalmatian, in front of the door of the neighbouring apartment, persisted even when his owner scolded him harshly. This sound was accompanied by a man's voice and a woman's voice, followed by loud knocking on the door. All of this went on until she heard a car under her window parking in the inner courtyard. Louder knocking and banging was followed by the sounds of someone breaking into the neighbouring apartment. When the people on the other side of the door finally succeeded in entering, a strange silence descended. Maybe for a second, maybe for a half a minute, time stood still, and then there was a sudden burst of more sound and noise. Lying on the bed, covered with a sheet, she knew that they had found what they had broken into the apartment to find. She jumped from the bed, threw on a linen dress, ran from her room into the hallway in front of the neighbouring apartment and almost retched, covering her mouth and nose with her hand. It was the terrible stench that had spread into the hallway over the last two days, through the badly insulated windows, under the cracks of the doors, the very pores of the building. The sharp ammoniac stink that she didn't want to recognize. The stink of death that impresses itself in your memory and which you can never forget. In the bedroom, Apollo's owner, from the first floor, stood in front of the bed, holding Apollo by the collar. The dog was trembling with excitement, and also with the fear that animals feel before a corpse. In addition to the dog and his owner, five or six other apartment dwellers and two policemen gathered around the bed. One of the policemen was talking on the telephone. The neighbour lay on the bed. Seventy-eight year old Jakob Blomstein in blue and white striped pyjamas. He lay on his back and his little dog Mina was on his chest, her snout pressing into

his face. Jakob Blomstein had planned his death down to the last detail. On a stand by the bed hung a carefully pressed black suit, a fresh white shirt, and a black hat. Jakob had lived a solitary old man's life with his almost equally old dog Mina. He was supposedly terribly ill, said the concierge with a handkerchief over her face, and had been growing increasingly forgetful lately. One evening he left the water on in the bathtub and toward morning it flooded Izmet's basement apartment and they had to call the plumber. And at least twice, she added, he forgot to turn off the stove when he took Mina for a walk, and smoke crept out from under the door of his apartment all the way to the main entrance. Soon afterward, the coroner arrived and began to study the little bottles of sleeping tablets on the nightstand. The court investigator tackled a pile of carefully folded letters. All were addressed to a son, commented the concierge, who had quickly scanned them herself and only returned them to the table when the policeman requested that she do so. Yes, apparently he had a son, added Apollo's owner, who occasionally met the old pensioner for a short walk, but there was some sort of resentment between them. Bad resentment. The son did not answer his letters, did not even accept them. A single letter was set next to the pile of letters on the table. Nothing was in it, only an empty sheet of paper, said the concierge. This comment evoked a stern look from the investigator, followed by another at the police officer for failing to properly secure the death scene. Although the window and doorway were open, the apartment was permeated with the unbearable stink of human decay, and the apartment dwellers gradually withdrew toward the main entrance from which they observed at a distance the investigator opening the unsealed envelope on which Jakob had written his son's first and last name. He pulled a piece of paper out of the envelope. A white unblemished sheet. There was nothing else in the envelope. No sentence. Not even a word. After all those letters that the postman had returned in the mailbox, Jakob Blomstein had penned his son one last letter of farewell in which he had written nothing. A letter without a single mark on it. The aged and sick Jakob, it was rumoured later, had decided to end his own and Mina's life. Mina was entirely dependent on Jakob and would have needed to become dependent on someone else's care. For the aged Jakob, and also for the others in the building, his solitary life had become increasingly dangerous. Jakob did not want to go to an old people's home because none of them would take Mina. And without the dog, he would not be able or willing to live. Therefore, on Friday night – this is what the coroner and the investigator concluded – he prepared dinner for Mina and himself, mixing in a very large dose of sleeping pills. Jakob bathed after dinner, dressed in his freshly laundered blue and white striped pyjamas and lay on the bed. He held, perhaps as he had done countless times before, Mina close to him. He laid a hand on her body and she pressed her snout against his face. And Mina, who perhaps already sensed Jakob's purpose, that this was their last night together, smoothed her little paw over his face and they slowly fell asleep.

"How is that you noticed nothing for nearly three days?" The investigator turned to the concierge, when she, like an eager fifth-grader, explained that the nearest neighbour to Jakob was the young lady in the robe who lived in the other mezzanine apartment.

"What should I have noticed?" The insulted concierge retorted to the investigator. Among those present, she was the only one the investigator addressed and to whom he attributed some responsibility.

But the investigator soon dropped this line of questioning. The case was open and shut. In addition to the empty letter in the envelope, Jakob had left the telephone number and address of his lawyer, who would take care of everything, including payment for the funeral. These decisions were apparently made on Friday, the day of the suicide, as Jakob described it, and sent to his lawyer. When she went back to her apartment, her roommate was sitting at the kitchen table. Her roommate was not interested in the story of Jakob Blomstein and his empty letter.

"He was old anyway..." She spoke casually from her position in her wicker chair, leaning back with a cup of coffee in her hand, and unable to conceal her satisfied smile.

"He left her, didn't he?"

"Finally. Last night was her last night. He's going to come and live here, with us, if that's alright with you."

"I have nothing against it," she answered, remembering how she had comforted and cheered up her roommate in recent weeks, when she doubted her boyfriend's promises that he would end the relationship with his partner of many years, how she stood by her side because she knew her. Because they lived their shared student life in this rented two-room apartment. She thought that she would also have stood on the side of the jilted girlfriend if she knew her. If they were friends, which she wasn't with her roommate. Because, in truth, she didn't have any real friends. The day after Elena Jacobsson moved into the neighbouring apartment, while drinking coffee, she dialled the number of a mobile phone.

"I don't know how old she is," she explained to her boyfriend who was also her classmate. "She's not exactly young; she's getting up there in years. She has blond hair, but not that sort of chicken colour, more the colour of ice, almost curly, almost straight, but again not completely, reaching past her shoulders." She spoke quickly, not letting her boyfriend interrupt, but eventually he did get a word in:

"Tonight – shall we see each other?"

"Not tonight," she responded. "I have exams in two weeks and I'm starting to get worried."

"We both have exams in two weeks. That's no reason not to see each other..."

"I don't have time," she said. "I'm studying. We'll talk tomorrow." She hung up the phone, and started to read one of the books that were piled on her desk in front of her. At seven thirty in the evening, she looked through the window and noticed her new neighbour.

Elena Jacobsson was wrapped in a turquoise scarf. She slowly unclasped her dress, as if she were slipping out of her body, and then she disappeared for an instant and reappeared dressed in a white bathrobe with a telephone in one hand and a brush in the other; she stepped out on to the balcony and, while speaking on the telephone, began to brush her hair. In the falling light, creeping red over the warmed plaster, she noticed how the colour of Elena's hair exploded like a sheet of hot metal. Two days

later, while returning from the library, she noticed Elena about a hundred metres in front of the house. She slowed her stride, followed her, and observed the swaying of her hips. Where did she learn to walk like that? Is it possible to even learn such a thing? That sort of walk is in the blood, she thought, as she tried unsuccessfully in her low, laced shoes to imitate it. In comparison to the woman in front of her who did not even notice she was being observed – or did she perhaps sense the gaze gliding down her back, sliding over her bottom, her legs? – she felt like a poorly raised child. Her body, as she moved, did not, as Elena's did, spiral around some unseen axis, but rather waddled horizontally, left and right, and her narrow, poorly hung shoulders were hunched. Her voice, she knew this, sounded like she was desperately gasping for air, almost suffocating, and she was never able to say what she wanted. Less than fifty meters before the main entrance to the apartment building, she quickened her pace; she deliberately hurried and soon was pushing her key into the door of her apartment. When Elena approached her own door, she looked casually at her neighbour and smiled; perhaps out of politeness or perhaps simply because she had been taught to smile in such situations. Elena might even have walked over and introduced herself, also out of neighbourly politeness, something that she had been fantasizing would happen since the first time she had spied Elena out her window. She blushed hotly under Elena's gaze and slipped through the door into her apartment and sat down behind her writing desk. She watched through the window how Elena stepped in, put down her bag, and went out to the balcony with a drink in her hand. It was dark in her apartment so Elena could not see her from the balcony. Or could she? Elena was no doubt accustomed to attention and was probably able to conceal it when she noticed a gaze upon her.

One week later, at about nine thirty, the doorbell rang and, with her eyes still half closed, she walked out to the mailboxes. As she signed for a certified letter that had come from the university, the postman asked her if she knew Elena Jacobsson from apartment number three. In the absence of the addressee, he added, certified mails are usually delivered to the concierge but the concierge wasn't home. "Of course I can take it," she said, immediately recognizing the possibility of coming into contact with Elena, and signing for the certified package. There was a stamp on it from Milan. She carried the package, surprisingly light given its size, into her room, looking at it as she turned it around, shook it a few times, and laid it on the bed. She wrote Elena a message with her name and telephone number on it, and stuck it to Elena's door. Leafing through her books and taking notes, she couldn't help glancing through the window until she finally heard the sound of tapping heels in the inner courtyard. She ran into the bathroom and looked into the mirror. She quickly ran a comb through her hair, straightening it with damp fingers, and put a touch of her roommate's lipstick on her mouth. Then she sat down to wait. A half hour later the telephone rang.

"Yes, I left you a note," she said. "If you like, I can bring the package to you right away." Shortly afterwards, she was standing in front of the open door of Elena's apartment. Elena, dressed in her white bathrobe, invited her in. The apartment was unrecognizable. There was no trace of Jakob, no scent of death. The walls were

painted a light apricot and the place smelled of the grapes piled up in the large yellow ceramic bowl in the middle of the kitchen table. Her hostess offered her freshly squeezed fruit juice, asked her about one thing and another, about her studies, opened the package, pulled swatches of various coloured fabrics from it, and, out of a box, a vanilla coloured scarf wrapped in cellophane. "Do you like it?" she asked. Of course, she liked it, because she had started to like everything that had anything to do with Elena. Elena held the scarf up to her face, looked at it for some time, pouted her lips a bit, and nodded to the place where the turquoise scarf was hung. "That one's prettier. It goes with your eyes." As Elena neatly wrapped the turquoise scarf around her neck, she smelled the sweet scent of cinnamon and mint. When she opened her eyes, Elena was nodding approvingly. "It looks good on you."

She felt overwhelmed by excitement and unease. She awkwardly held her open hands in her lap and felt she must say something. She must somehow end this unbearable moment or it felt like her body would explode.

"Do you know the story about Jakob's letter?"

Elena shook her head no and adjusted the scarf.

"The man who lived in this apartment before you left a letter for his son, with whom he hadn't spoken for years, that had nothing in it."

"It's not a letter if it doesn't contain a message." Elena lifted her gaze.

"Jakob left it in an envelope addressed to his son. The envelope contained nothing besides a folded, empty, white sheet of paper."

"So it's not true that there was nothing in it."

"I don't understand..."

"With an empty sheet of paper, the father communicated more to his son than he could with words. The son could read on the empty paper everything for which he knew his father reproached him. He saw the sentences that he had already exchanged with his father and the sentences that he knew he would have read in his father's letters. But if you throw away a letter without even opening it, let alone reading it, its internal voice, that becomes louder even when a person is entirely alone, can never be silenced. It is completely impossible."

Watching Elena's lips, above which certain words and syllables caused tiny wrinkles to form, she wondered: is it also possible to tell someone about love in that way? A way to articulate what you desire but are afraid to utter out loud?

"But who knows what happened between them? Maybe the son's resentment was so strong that the father's death seemed necessary and even justified." Then Elena roused herself and looked up at her: "I am planning a few business trips in the near future. Would you be willing to water my plants every three or four days and to collect the mail from the mailbox, and sign for any registered mail like you did today? I will arrange it with the postman."

"Of course," she answered. And then she added: "With pleasure." She thanked Elena for the scarf, took the keys to her apartment and mailbox, and left. That evening, she proudly told her boyfriend, who had brought over some study notes, what she and Elena had talked about, and she showed him the scarf.

"It doesn't suit you at all," he said to her, kneeling on the bed.

"What do you mean? If anybody would know, then it is Elena, who is a designer..."

"No doubt," he responded, kissing her gently and holding her hand: "But you're not the type for such things."

"And she is?" She pulled her hand sharply away.

"She's different."

"How different? What does she have that I don't have?"

"What do I know?" he said, and then slightly offended himself, decided to sting her. "She's... she's a woman... who a man would want to lay immediately."

"You bastard. Don't talk about her like that!"

"Come on, you know I'm joking." He softened, caressing her, holding her close, trying now to make love to her.

"Leave me alone," she pushed him away. "I'm not in the mood today."

"You're never in the mood," he retorted. "I don't even know why we're together. Just so we can exchange books and notes, just so we can study together. Whenever we talk, you show more interest in other things. Whenever I want to talk about us, you interrupt me, or you're in a hurry, or you put the phone down. And you push me away when I try to get close to you. You don't like warmth; you don't want me to touch you. Really, you don't want me at all!"

Insulted, he grabbed his bag and left. She didn't look after him. Their increasingly frequent arguments didn't really touch her. She got up from the bed, sat in the armchair, and stared into Elena's window. She stared into the apartment until the curtained bedroom of the apartment was illuminated. She watched Elena smiling in the warm light and speaking in an unusual animated manner, and then a male figure appeared behind her back, and suddenly, decisively, turned her around and kissed her. Elena stroked his hair, slid her fingers over his face, and he pushed her down onto the table so her head leaned slightly back and, still in his grip, she started to move back and forth in a repetitive rhythm. Agitated, she stood up from her writing desk, let down the shutters, lay down on her bed, and spread Elena's scarf over her face, submerging herself in the faint sweet smell of cinnamon and mint, wondering how she would live, how she would pass the years of her life. Would she have a family, children? With someone else? Would she be alone?

In the coming weeks, Elena's apartment became a haven for her, where she could withdraw from her roommate and her boyfriend, from her studies and the life that she knew and lived. Elena brought her gifts from her travels: an item of clothing, a bracelet, a box of chocolates, a decorative object. Everything that came from Elena was beautiful. And her own world had become more beautiful since she knew Elena. After each of Elena's returns, she waited with the curiosity and excitement of a child for the telephone to ring, for Elena to invite her over again. Elena thanked her for tending the plants, casually commenting on the mail while she unwrapped the gift Elena had brought her. When she was alone in Elena's apartment, she had been tempted several times to go through the drawers; to discover the little details about Elena's life, the things she didn't talk about. But she would never betray Elena's trust. She didn't want to disappoint her. And except for occasionally opening the sliding door to her wardrobe and carefully sifting

through the clothes, some of which she held up, still on the hanger, in front of herself and looked at in the mirror, she never invaded her privacy. Besides, Elena's clothing made her look like a stranger. Like someone she could never be. For the first time, she sincerely wished that she looked different than she did: not with this short brown horsy hair, but rather that her hair, when she stood in front of the mirror, would shine and flow like a bright stream of light. Elena's apartment was a world to which she did not belong and to which she could never belong. And yet she was grateful that Elena allowed her to be a little while in this space, even though, as would be revealed later, she never really was a part of Elena's world.

One day, as usual, when Elena was travelling, she unlocked the door and stepped into the apartment. She went to the kitchen table and laid down the post. She was tapping the soil in the flowerpot – still damp from when she watered it a few days before – when she heard the sound of breathing in the bedroom. She cautiously approached the door and opened it a crack. A young man was stirring on the bed; he was probably about ten years younger than Elena, which meant he was a few years older than she and her boyfriend.

"I came in here so you could straighten up in peace," he said and casually stood up from the bed, not bothering to cover himself. She saw his naked behind.

"I didn't come to straighten up!" She felt a momentary sense of hatred toward him. Did she look – in the woollen sweater that Elena had brought her from Paris and her comfortable long skirt – like a woman who comes to clean the apartment on Thursdays? She was even more angered by his indifference; he couldn't care less what she might feel at the sight of a man's naked body, and that was because he had not the slightest interest in her.

"Who are you then? You just walked through the door, which means you have a key." He was not the least bit pleasant to her.

"She didn't tell you?"

"About what?"

"About me?"

"About you? Nothing." he answered casually without even looking at her.

At that moment, she turned on her heel and returned to her own apartment. She was angry with Elena for the first time. Elena would, as she told her prior to her departure, return in several days. Elena could at least have hinted, sent a text message, so that she wouldn't have been taken by surprise. But above all she was angry because Elena had allowed such an arrogant man to enter her life. Her bed. Her apartment.

"She didn't even mention it to him," she later tried to explain to her boyfriend.

"Mention what?"

"Me..."

"Why would she tell him about you?"

"Because I take care of her apartment when she's away."

He looked away from her, avoiding her gaze.

So the sounds that she had begun to hear during the night when she slept, the squeaking of furniture that she hated so, the moving, the banging against the walls,

were not dreams. Maybe she knew that Elena returned in the night, not alone, and then in the morning when she heard Elena leave the apartment, she wanted to go and check if there were traces left in the bathroom. If the bedroom was permeated with the unmistakable mixture of bodily scents that she had first detected at Elena's one Saturday morning and later when she ran into her in the hallway. An organic fast-evaporating fusion that was utterly contrary to Jakob's scent when he was alive. Elena smells of life, she realized anxiously, catching the sound of a man's voice through the open door. This was the first time that Elena had not called after she returned. She waited, observing through the window the young man moving through the apartment, and Elena who willingly responded to each of his words, each of his touches.

On the third day after Elena's return, her boyfriend appeared at her doorway in the late afternoon unannounced.

"We have to talk." He seemed determined.

"Not today. We have an exam the day after tomorrow..." She stared into the screen so as to avoid looking at him. He sat at the table, casually leaned back against the wall, his head tilted toward the window.

"You follow everything in there, don't you? She's always under your eyes. You stalk her every movement... Oh, look, look... is that her lover? Quite a bit younger than she is. You're right. Elena has good taste: an excellent choice for a middle-aged woman; I see the guy has a very well-tended body. What can you do? If I were a woman, I'd fuck him in a second; I'd leave this apartment right now and kick down the door, push it open, push her away, grab him by the neck, and fuck him. Maybe she'd go after him at the same time; grab his dick, pull him into the bedroom, and fuck him too."

"Shut up! You're disgusting when you talk like that!"

"Really? I bet she wouldn't have any trouble with it. She takes what she wants. Rejects what she doesn't. You haven't noticed that? Just like you probably haven't noticed how good that guy looks. Because you're not interested in guys. Because you don't like guys at all."

She glared at him: "What are you trying to say?"

"You even sleep with that stupid scarf..."

"That's my thing."

"Yeah, your thing, and from now on not ours anymore; for a long time not mine. I met somebody a couple of weeks ago. I've been with her about a month..."

"What do you mean with her?"

"I mean with her. I sleep with her."

"What? How could you?" She turned angrily toward him. "You're cheating on me."

"I didn't cheat on you. You've been cheating on yourself. Our relationship hasn't been on for a long time. We've only slept together once in the last few months and it was totally obvious that you weren't into it. That a man's touch disgusts you. I'm returning your books and your notes. What can I say? Maybe we'll talk sometime... if you want to..." He turned away from her and walked out.

"Wait," she cried out, but did not follow him. Through the open door, she heard his footsteps growing distant in the hallway. At the same time, the sounds of love-

making came from the neighbouring apartment, and she stared into the courtyard and into the light that came from the window opposite. She saw her boyfriend walking down the stairs. She felt she would burst into tears. She'd been waiting for Elena's call for three days, and it never came, because of that man who was with her right now. She was seized with a bottomless anger. She grabbed the phone and dialled Elena's number; it rang and rang and rang. She covered her ears but she could not drown out the sounds from the neighbouring apartment. Worse still, it seemed that the sounds got even louder. She quickly wrapped her sweater around her and ran to Elena's door and rang the bell.

It took a long time for Elena to come to the door in her bathrobe with her tousled hair.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" She was clearly displeased but polite nevertheless.

"It's only nine. And I heard that you returned some days ago."

"Oh, of course," said Elena coldly. "Thanks for the mail. In fact, it's good you came over. I won't be needing you anymore."

"What?" She looked at Elena strangely, as if she didn't understand.

"To water the plants and that sort of thing."

And that sort of thing, she thought. Elena was treating her like an employee.

"Anymore?" she persisted, as if she hadn't quite understood. That dark-haired interloper had taken her place and pushed her out of Elena's life. Elena remained cold. Her voice was icy. Maybe she had never been kind to her at all. Maybe Elena had never really been interested in her. Maybe she had only ever been polite. Because she needed something. Because her plants needed to be watered, because she needed someone to sign for her certified mail. Elena really only needed a dog to guard her apartment, but she was much less than Mina who had been the most precious thing in the life of Jakob Blomstein. She was less even than Apollo. Elena had cared for her, fed and dressed her, but one when someone else came along, she got sick of her little pet and left her outside the door.

"It would be best if you returned the keys to my apartment and to the mailbox," said Elena. "I need them now."

She went back to her apartment and returned with the key chain. Through the half-open door, she saw the man leaning on the drawing desk. His gaze moved across her fleetingly, without greeting. Elena thanked her and said good night, without inviting her in, not even out of politeness.

In her own room, she fell on her bed, covered herself with the sheet, and cried. Sounds kept coming to her from the neighbouring bedroom, and even though she covered her ears with her hands, she couldn't shut out the voices. In the days that followed, she stared into her computer with swollen eyes, looking occasionally toward the window of the neighbouring apartment, and felt an ache each time she spotted Elena. She wished that the man would simply disappear just as suddenly as he had appeared that first morning. But he didn't show any sign of it. She watched them arrive together. Through the window, she observed them exchanging gentle touches, how she kissed him, and he embraced her. Elena should not have rejected

her so heartlessly, she thought, and she felt as if someone was ripping the raw flesh from the hollow of her stomach.

About a week later, the doorbell rang just before ten in the morning.

"Will you accept registered mail for Elena Jacobsson?" the postman asked her. She almost responded that from now on she would have nothing to do with it anymore, but she reached out her hand when she saw the stamp of the gynaecological clinic on it. Of course, she responded and signed, not her own name, but Elena Jacobsson's. She took the letter back into her room and looked at it. Was Elena pregnant, she wondered. Did she want to conceive and was going through some sort of therapy? If it wasn't that, then it had to be something else, and that could be nothing good. She went into the kitchen, put the water on for coffee, and held the letter over the steam, waiting for it to become unsealed. With a full cup, she sat at the kitchen table and pulled the folded piece of paper out of the envelope: *Dear Madam*, it was written, *Please make an appointment as soon as possible with your gynaecologist*.

When, some ten years ago, her mother had received a similar invitation, actually an urgent request, it had also been bad news. She was only a high school student at the time, and as her mother spoke to her one autumn afternoon in the kitchen, it seemed her mother's voice resonated with anger toward the whole family. Now you will see, you will get what you deserve, she understood from her mother's composed attitude. In the end, her mother responded calmly to the challenge. Years of treatment, operations, chemotherapy and radiation followed, until her mother's body finally relented and collapsed. For this reason, she had every intention of returning the notice to the envelope and re-gluing it, but at that moment her roommate walked into the kitchen.

"You got mail?" she asked without any real interest.

She flinched and a drop of coffee fell on the letter. "Oh, it's nothing, nothing special." She barely managed to hide her embarrassment. With trembling hands, she picked up the letter and the envelope and went into her room. She regarded the soiled paper. She could not hand over such a letter personally. She would not be able to remove the stain. Elena would be angry that she had opened her mail at all, especially now since it was no longer her job to pick it up. Worse still, Elena would probably assume that she had been reading her mail all along. The clinic had probably taken Elena's telephone number and would call if she didn't respond to the summons. They had perhaps even asked for her e-mail address, she thought, as she tucked the letter into her drawer.

Each time she met Elena, who was now coolly polite, or watched her through the window, it struck her that Elena did not know what she knew. That Elena never imagined that under her elegant clothing, under the surface of her beautiful body, a sickness was growing. If the man knew, he would probably leave her. Just as Elena had abandoned her. A man, especially a young man, could not stand the sight of a sick woman's body, the smell of which changed and not only because of therapy. No aroma of cinnamon or mint could take away the stink of physical decay. When she didn't see her on some days, an image of the dying Elena would appear before

her eyes. It struck her that she should go to her apartment, hand her the letter and apologize, even if Elena never spoke to her again. But the next moment, she thought that Elena was artificial, without feeling, an ungrateful slut, who deserved her illness for consorting with all those men. Elena wasn't even a beauty. From afar maybe, when she watched her through the window, or spied her on the street, but as early as the first visit she had noticed the dark pigment stains on her light skin, on her hardly symmetrical face, the deep wrinkles around her mouth, in the space between her nose and her chin. When she wasn't carefully made up, Elena looked just average. Especially since she had gained weight and her clothes clung to her around her hips and belly. Apparently, Elena had fallen head over heels for her young man. Her gestures and her walk had softened and grown subservient, her charming independence had disappeared. When she learned, and sooner or later she would, that the clinic had called, and she told him, he would leave her. Then Elena would have only her and she would forgive Elena. They would be close again. They would be close for the first time really. She would care for Elena, go with her to her doctor's appointments, visit the clinic together. She would be with her, if necessary, until the very end. Elena would never be alone as Jakob Blomstein had been alone with Mina. Elena would have someone to take care of her.

After two months, she began to notice changes in Elena's face. At first she wasn't sure and simply thought that Elena's elegant pale skin had become sandy. The day when she handed in her theses her roommate's boyfriend mentioned that an ambulance had come to the apartment building at noon.

He had watched through window as Elena had walked out supported by her man, a suitcase in his other hand. She froze when she heard this. She knew it would happen sooner or later. From the moment she had placed the stained letter in her drawer, she knew the haste with which such a disease could begin to destroy the body. Elena had been driven to the clinic and they had probably asked her why she had not responded to the summons, since she had received it, and even signed for it. Elena would then know who took the letter and would wonder why she hadn't given it to her.

In the following days, she gazed toward the apartment when only he returned in the late evening. Maybe it wasn't all that serious, the thought forced its way in, maybe the clinic had simply sent another certified letter, maybe he hadn't been supporting her on her way to the clinic but simply holding her hand. But then in the next instant, she thought that if it hadn't been serious an ambulance wouldn't have been sent at all, because nobody would have called for it. She reflected and felt a trembling certainty grow ever more strong in the cavity of her belly that for the last month had been filled with emptiness. One morning, she pulled the summons out of the drawer, stared at the telephone number for some time, and then called it. She asked if an Elena Jacobsson had been admitted into the clinic. The woman on the line confirmed but then added: "But the lady is no longer with us. She went home for treatment."

"Home? Where home?" she asked. "But how was she? Was it bad?"

But when the nurse inquired who was calling, she put down the phone and burst into tears.

Two weeks after Elena had been taken away in an ambulance, she saw the man with some workers carrying things out of the apartment and putting them into a moving van. It was cold outside and snowing lightly. When the man in the van took the metal stand that she had seen Elena carrying into the apartment a year ago, he stopped and turned toward her window. The man stood in the courtyard and stared up at her. She withdrew from the window. Maybe he saw her, maybe he didn't.

He looked toward the window for some time, then got into his car, and drove away.

At the end of March, winter was still stubbornly persisting, only a few sunbeams skimming over the freshly fallen snow. In the late afternoon, she entered the hallway and picked up some advertising brochures and one letter from her mailbox. She went into the apartment, took off her coat, and put her down her briefcase with papers from work. She sat at the computer, turned it on, and began to scroll through her e-mail. On a large manila envelope, she recognized the writing of her former roommate who had stayed on with her boyfriend at their previous apartment. There was another smaller white envelope in the first one, addressed to her, and sent to her former address. She slowly opened the white envelope and closed her eyes. She pulled from it a folded sheet of paper and wished with all her power – as she did each time she opened the occasional mail that was forwarded to her by her former roommate – that she would discover the letter that she had been waiting for.

After a few minutes, she opened her eyes. Words danced in front of them. Then she looked up and stared through the window in disappointment. For more than three years, she had been waiting for some news that Elena had survived. That she lived, however weak, with someone. That she had been cured. She was waiting for a postcard, a note, even better a long letter in which she would recognize Elena's writing even if it were permeated with hurt, reproach, disappointment, and anger. It could be just a few words. Just one word. Not even that. It could even be a white empty sheet without a single word on it. She would know what it meant. First Elena's reproachful question and then her answer, the infinitely repeating words: that she was sorry, very sorry, that she didn't give her the summons, even stained with coffee; that she regretted having accepted it and opened it at all; that she wonders everyday if Elena is alive, and actually doesn't even know what kind of illness it was; maybe it wasn't even that serious; and because of that, because she hadn't given her the stained letter, certainly.... probably... perhaps... she isn't and can't be guilty... that she misses Elena as she has never missed anyone....That she is grateful to Elena for just knowing her even though she so heartlessly rejected her later... That she wanted to see her at least once more, even if Elena didn't notice her, as she had never really noticed her... And while she nervously crumpled the invitation to some performance she had received, the tears began to flow. She opened the drawer, pulled out the turquoise scarf, lifted it to her face, and looking through it at the snowy trees and rooftops occupied by pigeons, tried to capture a faded remnant of Elena's scent. Then she wiped her eyes with the scarf, folded it and put it into the drawer. She slowly lowered her gaze and let it be absorbed by the computer screen.

Dušan Čater

Džehenem*

Hell is my natural habitat!
(Geoffrey Firmin in the film *Under the Volcano*)

*Hell
You are wherever you are

translated from Slovenian by Erica Johnson Debeljak

Anything is impossible!
Zdravko Čolić; from the song "Glavo luda" [Crazy head], album *Ako priđeš bliže* [When you come closer]

In the olden days, *malta* was collected in Bosnia. It looked something like this: at the top, at the entrance to the šeher (a town or a marketplace), there was a row of ramps which formed a sort of fortress where the peasants from the surrounding villages had to pay *malta*, an entrance fee to sell one's products at the market. Similarly, they paid a *malta* when they left the town, as a tax on the goods they sold. The thing was practical above all, the town demanding a tax so it could grow and enrich itself, and at the same time ensuring that the town was not permanently overrun by peasants who would cripple it with their provincial ways.

Sejo was sitting in the garden of one of the more frequented cafes at the so-called city beach that extends along the right bank of the Ljubljanica River. He was staring at all the people, most of whom were wearing sunglasses on their heads, and it somehow made him think of the *malta* and how welcome it would be in this place and time. However you look at it, city peasants were the worst kind of peasants. Peasants without land. There's nothing worse than that.

Blaž was sitting in the corner of the garden. A high functionary in the opposition party, he was in the company of some guys with beer bellies that were talking to every little teenager who walked by. The Saturday afternoon promenade was glistening in all its glory, the flea market slowly clearing away its junk into garages and side streets, making room for the blossoming beauties in mini-skirts, their too short tee-shirts revealing an array of tiny rings in all those youthful belly buttons. Hidden behind his sunglasses, Sejo voyeuristically watched the young meat and sipped on a stein of beer.

"Look at her! Look at her!" he heard Blaž say. "She's going by for the third time."

And a little bit later: "Hey, little one, congratulations, congratulations!"

Anything to give a glimmer of hope for a more beautiful future: school had started, the high school girls were happily showing off their Dalmatian suntans, just walking by.

La strada degli corpi bellissimi, as the Italians would say.

But any feelings of happiness were destroyed by Blaž:

"You sure know to lick it, little one!"

The dot on the 'i' was the exuberant explosion of laughter among the red-faced male company, aimed at a girl of fifteen years who was helping herself to a scoop of purple ice cream.

Old fat ruined farts, thought Sejo. I would collect *malta* from them!

He emptied his stein of beer, went to the bar to pay, sliding past Blaž. He sat in his taxi and drove off.

Destination: a new, modern apartment building, with a lot of greenery.

* * *

Sejo was sitting on the sofa when a voice came from the kitchen:

"You want coffee?"

"No. Pour me a shot," Sejo answered.

Denisa came from the kitchen and placed a bottle on the little table in front of Sejo. Sejo poured the liquid into a tiny glass and took a sip.

"You sure you don't want coffee?" she asked again.

"I'm sure."

Denisa went back to the kitchen. Probably to make that coffee. Sejo went out to the balcony with his glass in hand. He lit a cigarette, which was the only reason he was on the balcony. In Denisa's apartment the following rules applied: when you enter, you must take off your shoes and put on a pair of slippers because sweaty feet leave a disgusting moist trace on the polished wood floors, which wouldn't go with

the impeccability of the new apartment. Loud talking is not advised, yelling strictly forbidden. Probably because of the thin walls that divide one modern apartment from the other. Smoking only the balcony, obviously! And that's that. Seven floors below there were a sandbox, a few benches, and a lot of greenery. Children in the sandbox, parents on the benches, birds and beetles in the greenery. Denisa's indistinct voice came from within. He stepped away from the railing and pricked up his ears... Nothing. He went right up to the door and said:

"What?"

"I said I got a letter from Aida."

"From who?"

"From Aida, who else? Look at you. Have you totally forgotten that you have another sister? And go out on to the balcony if you have to smoke. Don't you see that the smoke is coming inside?"

She sat on the sofa and looked restlessly around her. A coffee rested on the table in front of her, served in a way that reminded Sejo of home. A little cup with an engraved metal handle, and a tiny *džezva* in which the coffee is brewed made from the same material, and of course a small dish for sugar decorated with a moon and a star. Handcrafted work, a gift from a mother for the journey into the world. Let life be sweet.

Sejo tossed his cigarette butt thought the balcony railing, watching it until it landed in the greenery below. Then he turned back to the room.

"What does Aida say?" he asked, sitting down next to her.

"Who?"

"Denisa?! Aida! What does Aida say?"

"Oh," she smiled. "Aida's okay."

"Good," Sejo said.

Denisa stood up and began to rearrange the little elephants on the shelf. She picked up one and moved it a little to the left. Then she lifted the second one, putting it in the place the first one had occupied. She took a step back and regarded the innovation. Then she placed the little elephants in their original positions. It all made it look like the little elephants were part of some damn chess game.

"If they're turned toward the north, it means that money will come into the house. At least that's what I think," Sejo said.

Denisa smiled at him:

"This isn't a house," she said.

Then she went to the other wall of the room, regarded the shelves there, dragged her finger from one end to the other, and looked at it.

"Damn dust!" Against the rules, she raised her voice and ran toward the kitchen.

Sejo leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes.

"Denisa," he said after some time, eyes still closed.

Nothing.

"Denisa," he repeated, a little louder this time.

"Yes?" she answered from the kitchen.

"Are you alright?"

"Aida's living in Steinkjer now!" she called from the kitchen.

Sejo nodded.

"And she says that she's doing fine," Denisa called.

"Good," said Sejo.

He took a long sip from his shot glass and poured another one. Twice brewed brandy and very drinkable brandy it was. He knew about brandy. Soft brandy. His father brewed it in Faletiči, on a little mountain pasture, southeast of Sarajevo where he had a weekend house.

"They have a three metre long crab in their fjord," Denisa said happily, coming back into the room. "Can you imagine that? You go to swim and on the rock above the water you see a three metre long crab? Ha ha!"

"I'd rather imagine it on my plate. Three metres," Sejo said.

"They probably got that big because of Chernobyl," Denisa continued. "Mutant. Monsters. Brrr!" She trembled. "They came from the Barents sea. Science will, Sejo, and excuse the word, fuck nature."

Then she sat again and poured coffee from the *džezva* into her cup. She put in two spoonfuls of sugar. She took one sip, swallowed, and waited a bit. Probably the taste was right, because one could observe a faint movement of her head forward and a honeyed smile appear on her lips.

"It's already gobbled up several people. Divers. Aida says that she's afraid for Ljund..."

"For Ljund?"

"Oh! Didn't I tell you he was a diver?"

Sejo shook his head.

"Ljund?"

"Oh yes," she said.

"Since when?" he asked.

"How should I know that? Probably for some time now..."

"Didn't she break up with him?"

Denisa thought about it for a while, then put her hand up to her forehead.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know what's the matter with me today. I said Ljund, didn't I?"

Sejo nodded.

"Really," she said. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's with me today. I'm completely mixed up. I think I took one xanax too many."

Sejo nodded and took another sip.

"I'm really completely...oh well, what can you do," she said and held out her hands. "And you? How are you?"

"Nothing new," said Sejo. "Same old thing."

"And?"

"What and?"

"Are you fine or not?"

Sejo looked at her.

"Comme ci, comme ça," he said.

"No news is good news," said Denisa and began to fiddle with his lighter. She lit it and let it go out. And then suddenly:

"Oh, I completely forgot..." she said and ran into the kitchen. Shortly afterwards, she came back with a big box wrapped in cellophane. "Your gift. A little something. Happy thirty-first birthday, little brother," she said and handed him the gift.

Sejo looked at the box.

"Thanks," he said. "You didn't need to."

"Open it," said Denisa.

"Now?"

"When else?" said Denisa and tousled his hair. "Look at you!"

Sejo tackled the opening of the gift. It was nicely wrapped. The transparent paper rustled on all sides and it struck him that there was no end to the wrapping. Finally a large box emerged from it. There was a big fish drawn on it.

"Open it, open it," Denisa said impatiently.

Sejo smiled and lifted the cover of the box. He was looking at a sort of plastic thing, a brown-coloured fish stuck on a plate.

"A fish!" he said.

"Take it out."

Again the rustling of paper.

"Do you see that button there?" asked Denisa, pointing with her finger. "Press it!"

Sejo pressed and the button and the fish wriggled toward him. Startled, he pushed it out of his lap and it landed on the floor. It kept wriggling on the floor, like a fish on dry land, and out of its open mouth came the words: Take me to the river, throw me in the water....

"Fuck," said Sejo.

Denisa was laughing out loud. "Isn't it great?"

"Mother fucker," said Sejo.

They kept laughing and pressing on the button. Take me to the river, throw me in the water.... Several times. And much laughter.

"Did Ljund catch it?" Sejo laughed.

Denisa exploded. She slapped her hands on her knees.

"Noooo," she moaned through her laughter.

Sejo had not seen her so happy for a long time. She had tears in her eyes. Then she slowly calmed down and continued:

"Oh, I did say Ljund, didn't I?"

"Uh-huh,"

"Sorry. Ljund is her ex, now she has some Sven, the diver..."

Sejo nodded. Denisa stood opposite him and looked at him with a smile on her face.

"Wait," she said and ran back into the kitchen.

Sejo picked up the fish, put it in his lap again, and looked at it. He touched it, examining how it was made. Why it moved, where it had a battery, and so on.

Denisa returned with a pile of photographs.

"There," she said, waving one picture under his nose. "That's Sven. Isn't he sweet?"

"Actually no," said Sejo, taking the photograph into his hand.

Denisa tousled his hair.

"Boys," she said. "Always competing with each other."

"Fuck it," he said.

"Don't talk that way," said Denisa. "Mother would turn over in her grave if she could hear you. There! That's her Samir. Do you remember how little he was when she was still with Ljund?"

She handed him the next photograph.

"Yup," said Sejo.

"How they grow. Aida says the child doesn't bother him at all, that he understands, and that's it. Finally."

"Who?"

"What?"

"Who doesn't the child bother at all?" Sejo asked.

"Yeah. Sven. Who else?"

Sejo nodded.

And then another photograph of Sven in diving equipment, and Aida and Sven somewhere out in nature. And then another one with Samir wearing skis in some sort of wilderness, etc.

"She finally found the right guy," said Denisa.

"And what else does she say? Aida?"

"That she's in Steinkjer now, eighty kilometres from Trondhaim, and that she's fine," said Denisa and started to sob.

Sejo leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes again. He knew that this family celebration of his birthday would be torture but he came anyway. He would have liked to leave, but these things meant a lot to Denisa. Family things, though the family was completely shattered now. Two children in Ljubljana, one in some Stein... god knows where... mother in the ground, the old man drunk somewhere around Novi Travnik probably. The cursed Šahinpašić family. Denisa was the youngest and it hit her hardest.

"Thanks for the gift," said Sejo and kissed her tear-stained cheeks.

Denisa smiled, wiped her tears, and then cheerfully continued:

"Do you remember when you were on television?"

"When?"

"Because of your paper about Comrade Tito..."

"Oh, that was a long time ago," Sejo said.

"You were so sweet, with your pioneer cap and the red handkerchief around your neck. And... and..." she started to laugh, "you were yawning the whole time, and we were worried that they would come after the old man, you know?"

Sejo nodded.

"How can you remember that? You were so little then."

"Oh, I remember. I was famous in the courtyard because of that."

Sejo smiled. He patted Denisa on the knee.

"And you got to go to Sutjeksa as a prize."

"To Tjentište actually," said Sejo.

"Oh?"

"We didn't go to Sutjeska but to Tjentište. To look at those monuments," said Sejo.

"Tito's little pioneer," said Denisa.

"Tito's little pioneer," said Sejo.

Denisa went silent and looked at her brother.

"You liked to read..." she said then.

"What?"

"You liked to read... books!"

"I did not," he said.

"Yes you did."

"I did not like to read," said Sejo and he looked across at the shelf with the little elephants. They were pointed to the north.

"Yes, you did," said Denisa, as if she wanted to convince him.

"In my whole life I only read *Little Red Riding Hood* and even that I fucked up," said Sejo.

Denisa burst into loud laughter. She held her sides.

Sejo looked at her and started laughing too.

"What is it Denisa?" he asked through the laughter.

She kept laughing.

"When you and Aida went for the afternoon, ha ha..." she laughed, "When you..." Then she suddenly grew serious and quiet.

Sejo had also become serious and looked at her for a long while.

"When we what, Denisa?" he asked then.

Denisa looked somewhere in front and was suddenly absent.

"When you..." she said.

"What?"

Silence. She started to crack the knuckles on her hands. Sejo looked at his sister. She was four years younger than him, only twenty-seven, but she looked much older.

"Nothing. What did I want to say? Well..." And then Denisa lifted her head, looked at her brother, and smiled wanly.

"Where is he now?" she asked, looking at his watch. "He said he'd be home at five and now it's half past..."

"There's no hurry," said Sejo. "Pour me another one."

Denisa filled the shot glass again. A couple seconds of silence. Denisa was gazing somewhere at the wall. Sejo closed his eyes. Then after a while:

"Oh! This always being late gets on my nerves," said Denisa.

"Where is he?"

"At his mother's. There's something wrong with her hips or I don't know what," said Denisa. "Lately he's there a lot."

Sejo nodded. Denisa got up and went to the balcony. She looked for him down below. Sejo went out with her and lit a cigarette. Silently they observed what was going on seven floors below.

"How nice it must be at home now, don't you think?" she said after a while.

Sejo tried to remember the courtyard at home. They were quiet and surveyed the scene. The view from the seventh floor wasn't all that good, god knows. Train tracks ran by on the right side past the new apartment buildings, the local train to Dolenjska rattled by three or four times a day. The Grubar Canal was on the other side, Golovec to the south. Beneath, a little bit to the side, was the big Mercator Centre and the Austrian Hofer, for those with less money, as the advertisements said.

"Yup," he said. "It must be nice..."

"I haven't been home for an eternity," said Denisa.

Sejo nodded.

"We could go down together," said Sejo.

"We could," said Denisa.

Sejo emptied the shot glass, took a last puff off his cigarette, and tossed it over the railing.

"Don't throw your butts down there," Denisa scolded. "There are children down there!"

"Too late," said Sejo.

"It's never too late," his little sister said and ran into the kitchen.

Sejo went back to the sofa. The endless waiting for her Blaž continued several more minutes, during which Denisa ran to the kitchen and back at least three times, and then somewhere else, and so on and so forth, into the kitchen, into the living room. At some point in her travels, the doorbell rang and something like this could be heard in the hall:

"Where have you been?"

"At my mother's. I already told you."

"For so long?"

"You know her. Once she starts to tell her stories, not even the grace of god could stop her."

"And how is she?"

"Okay."

"Is she still going to that class?"

"Pottery? Yeah. That's all she has."

"Nice."

And then he stepped into the room. Blaž. A high-placed functionary in the opposition party. He stank of beer.

"Hey, dude!" he greeted him. "You still alive?"

"Just barely," said Sejo.

Blaž clapped him on the shoulder and sat down next to him. Then he poured himself a shot and drank it in one gulp. He wiped his mouth with the bank of his hand, thumped his chest, and said:

"Soft brandy! Nothing like it!"

Sejo nodded.

"You should try some of our homemade brandy. From Horjul! Now that burns. You can hardly drink it without a wine chaser." This was a flower of Horjul humour and Blaž laughed out loud at his own joke.

"Definitely," said Sejo.

"Did you bring it?" Denisa was standing in front of him.

"Of course, I did," said Blaž, and pulled several boxes of tablets from his pocket. He tossed them onto the table. Boxes of lexaurin, xanax, tramal flew across the table. Denisa gathered them up quickly and took them into the kitchen.

Blaž looked after her for a while and shook his head.

"She's getting worse," he said.

Sejo shrugged his shoulders.

"What can you do?" he said.

"What can you do," Blaž repeated. Then he slapped his knees and stood up. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a little package. "This is a little something from me on your birthday, kid, so you won't say that we Slovenians are cheap, yeah?" He handed him the package. "Go into the bathroom and make two lines."

Sejo stood up to show that he understood and Blaž grabbed his hand.

"Kid," he said. "Not too much. It's strong stuff, okay?"

"Understood," said Sejo.

"And not a word to her, okay?" He nodded his head toward the kitchen.

"Yeah."

"If after all those pills she tried some of that, we'd have a real party."

"Yeah."

Sejo went to the bathroom, locked the door behind him, and opened the package. On the shelf beside the lipstick, mascara, powders and creams, he slowly transformed a rock from the white mass into two lines. One larger and one smaller. He snorted the larger line, sniffed two or three times, then returned to the living room. Denisa and Blaž sat on the sofa, a fresh shot glass filled with homemade brandy in front of Blaž, and Denisa next to him looking through the window with a confused smile on her face.

"I hope you flushed," said Blaž, winking at him, and heading toward the bathroom.

Sejo sat down in his place.

"Aida is in Steinkjer now, about eighty kilometres from Trondhaim, and she says she's fine," said Denisa.

"You already told me," said Sejo.

Denisa looked at him strangely, then she smiled.

"You oddball," she said and tousled his hair.

"Sejo," said Blaž coming out of the bathroom, "tell us a story from the taxi."

"Leave him alone. Don't bother him with that today. It's his birthday," said Denisa.

"So what?" said Blaž. He sat between them sniffing.

"There's not much to say," said Sejo.

"Come on, come on," Blaž tugged at his shoulder. "Don't tell me there's nothing to say. Lots of interesting things happen in a taxi... Come on!"

Sejo was silent.

"Come on."

"Nothing very exciting," said Sejo.

"No crazy chicks? No drunks, no horny couple who can't wait? No fights?"

"Don't talk like that," said Denisa.

"It's just us," said Blaž and slapped Sejo's shoulder. "Isn't that right?"

"There was one girl who got in the taxi with a piece of glass in her finger," said Sejo.

Blaž: "And?"

"Nothing really... She has this piece glass in her finger and she didn't even know it. As if it weren't the first time. She asked me to light her cigarette... With this piece of glass in her skin... And no blood, only the glass in her skin..." said Sejo.

Blaž: "And?"

"Wounded, no blood, that's it. That's everything," said Sejo.

Blaž looked at him for a while, then at Denisa, then back at him.

"But that's nothing," he said disappointed.

Sejo shrugged his shoulders.

"That's it," he said.

Blaž was still looking at him. He shook his head. Then he looked at Denina and... tsk, tsk, tsk..., came from his mouth. He lit a cigarette. He walked around the room. Then he stopped in front of the window, in front of the balcony actually, and looked out into the city. After a while, he turned back to Sejo.

"No blood, you say?"

Sejo shrugged his shoulders again.

And Blaž: "Tsk, tsk, tsk..."

"Go smoke on the balcony," Denisa said.

Blaž looked at her and then silently went out on to the balcony. He looked down to the courtyard and went: "Tsk, tsk, tsk..."

He took a couple of quick puffs and tossed his cigarette over the railing. When he stepped back into the room, he looked at Sejo, smiled and nodded.

"Now we can have cake. I worked on it all day," said Denisa and ran into the kitchen again.

Blaž looked after her for a while, then he walked up to Sejo, and whispered in his ear: "Make another two lines, will you?"

"No problem," said Sejo and went toward the bathroom again. When he stood up, Blaž boxed him in the shoulder and said:

"You're going to talk to me about no blood, ha ha ha..." he quietly laughed.

"Fuck it, Blaž," said Sejo, "that's the way it was." He looked straight into his eyes and then walked past him.

In the bathroom, he first splashed a little water on his face, then he got ready to go through the same procedure again. There on the little shelf, among all the

cosmetics, he found an old family photograph. They were all in it, his father Faruk, his mother Farah, the two sisters Aida and Denisa, somewhere near a stream. He looked into the photograph. He didn't remember either the stream or the day when the photograph was taken. He was about fourteen years old, fifteen, and in the picture he is holding up two fingers behind Aida's head. Similarly, the old Faruk is holding up two fingers behind the mother's head. He's laughing with his father and his mother looks grim. She always looked grim, it struck him. She was always worried about something. Aida acted casual, as if the whole thing bored her. At least, that's how it looked. Denisa was crying and hiding behind mother's long black skirt. He smiled. The photograph was probably taken just before the war, he thought. It was probably the last picture before we kids were sent out into the world... Alone... No, that's not completely true. We went with our neighbours, the Livnjaks, who had relatives in Velenje. First to Split, running into Serbs three times. Then up to Rijeka, and from Rijeka to Slovenia. The old Fare remained in Travnik with their sick mother... He had never seen either of them again. The mother was buried in Novi Travnik, the father.... He makes brandy, fuck it, down there somewhere. He made two lines and snorted one. He left one for Blaž next to the photograph. He took a piss and then went back into the living room.

A squashed cake lay across the floor... Fruit and cream and dough was strewn over about a metre, one after the other. Apricots, banana, frosting... Cake and some unlit candles... Denisa was squatting against the wall and sobbing noiselessly. She had her face covered with her hands and was sniffling. Blaž sat on the sofa, nodding off. He held in his hands that singing fish and pressed the button. The fish sang: take me to the river, throw me in the water....

"This should have a remote control," said Blaž.

* * *

Fuck it, everyone in our family is totally fucked, thought Sejo. In this shit... in this hell!... Hell is a global thing, an earthly thing, right here on earth! Ach! He sat in the taxi and smoked. Just smoked and blew clouds of smoke through the window. There was the Mercedes hood ornament, like the cross hairs of a gun. He looked at a children's playground through it. A couple of tree trunks were painted in a dark brown colour, probably or mostly because it held up over time, and the city planners had agreed to make rockets, jungle gyms, hanging bridges and that sort of thing. A touch of nature in an apartment complex. The achievement of urbanism. Children chased each other to and fro, young mothers sat bored on the benches, in a haze of a cigarette smoke.

Is it possible that everything is so fucked up? Sejo wondered.

He leaned his head forward on the steering wheel. Something was pounding in the back of his head. He felt sick. He sat up again and lit a cigarette with the butt of the last one. He looked through the hood ornament and pretended he was shooting the playing children. Bang, bang, whoosh.... ratatatat... When one of the kids managed to get to the top of the wooden rocket in the middle of the crosshairs, he was

interrupted by the sound of knocking. He jumped. He opened the window and a cloud of smoke floated out.

"Are you free?"

He nodded his head.

"Of course," he said.

An older man opened the back door and sat down in the back seat. The automobile filled with the sound of the fish: take me to the river, throw me in the water... The old man got a fright, jumped, and banged his head hard on the edge of the door.

"Fuck my mother!" said the old man, looking at the fish in the backseat. "What the fuck is that?"

"A gift," said Sejo.

The old man calmed down bit. He tossed the fish in the front seat and leaned back again.

"Fuck such a gift," he said with an accent and touched himself on the forehead.

Sejo could see in the rear view mirror that the old man was bleeding a bit from his forehead.

"Fuck such a birthday," said Sejo. "Where to?"

"Glinšek Square," he said.

Sejo stretched out his arm to fasten his seatbelt. He started the car. The interior of the car was filled with a thousand lights. Again he looked at his client in the rear view mirror.

"You're not from here," he said more than asked.

"Hey, kid, you're from wherever you are," said the old man.

"Yup," said Sejo. "You are wherever you are."

He shifted the car into gear and slowly drove on.

Gabriela Stojanoska-Stanoeska

Banana

translated from Macedonian by Elizabeta Bakovska

Can you imagine a prehistoric women eating bananas? Do you know how a woman nowadays eats a banana? How bananas are eaten at the plantations in Cyprus, Africa, Buckingham Palace? Do you know how a man eats a banana? How a searcher of garbage eats a banana, or a comedy actor, Bananaman? How does Alice the Chimp eat a banana? What will you think of first if you pass by a group of guys eating bananas at the same time? Are they athletes before a training?

I am curious how you eat a banana, personally (if you do eat bananas, of course). For example, how do you peel the banana? Which end do you start the peeling from? What do you feel while you peel it? What do you feel as you open your mouth wide? What do you feel when you bite it? What do you feel while you chew it? And what after you swallow it?

Let's imagine that you have attended a reception: here comes the fruit, many hands reach for the crystal bowls and the golden plated trays with fruit pyramids, one after another... will you reach for an orange, a kiwi, or a banana? Why the orange? Why the banana? Do you maybe wish for the banana, and yet you take an orange? No, you are a person who takes exactly what he wants, so, a banana then? And? Do you stay there and peel it where you are or do you go somewhere else? Does it come to your mind to take another one and offer it to your collocutor so that you don't eat alone? Or you maybe say: "How about splitting a banana, one is too much for me?" No, you reject that option, it's not polite, how will he take the peeled half? Each one should take a banana of his own or rather no banana at all. You have already taken it, started peeling it, it becomes smaller and smaller under your indifferent bites, as if you eat a cookie, and, listening to your collocutor, you have even forgotten to enjoy it, carried away by his story... but, still, it feels good in your stomach... Or maybe you mind that you are forced to listen, so you can't concentrate on its taste... or you act as if you enjoy both the conversation and the banana, and you actually hurry to get rid of the object in your hand that makes you feel that the gentleman and the lady chatting in the corner glance at you strangely... or maybe everybody looks at you and smiles... or, even more tragically, even your collocutor is sure that you have no idea what you are nodding about while you chew with your mouth full. Or, you have imagined all of this. Nobody pays any attention to you and your banana, and your palms are already sweaty, and you feel sick in your stomach... Oh no! Oh yes! You have a problem with the banana! With the ba-

nana, with freedom, with gender, with the state, with yourself, with the others, or with the whole world, if you prefer. The banana as the problem of the individual. The person, entity, subject, identity.

That's the way it goes. Everybody has his banana, *pardonne*! his story of the banana. It would have been nice if we only had bananas, without any stories about them. We would have eaten instead of rattling.

* * *

Mmmmm... juicy, bright yellow, with small black dots. So, my story. Well, I wouldn't have waved my banana before your eyes if, while I was resting my eyes on a beautiful Sunday afternoon recognizing trees and rock figures on the mountain beyond, I wasn't forced to leave the layered view of my balcony and withdraw blinded to my hiding place, my bunker, my secret chamber, heavenly chamber, kingdom, children's room, bedroom, temporary room, forced room, the only possible room or, actually, call it as you wish, but understand: only to eat a banana in peace. And I underline: nobody asks it from me, really nobody.

The question was: Shall I sacrifice the pleasure of the banana or the calm view? And I wished I could consume both of them slowly, with gusto, nibble on them with pleasure, not even thinking about this dilemma, yes, and without looking for eyes where there were none: on the deserted streets, behind closed shops, behind the mosquito nets stretched on the windows and balcony doors, beneath the hair of the grandmas chatting under the balcony. To be precise, there was no living soul interested in me, but there was a chance of a glance that made me cover up and move to my favourite, lonely little nest. There, I indulged in the process or vice whatever.

* * *

Once upon a time, there was a little girl (so the story goes), her name was Lena, she sat on her bed with her legs tucked in, "because you don't sit with your legs spread", and she ate a banana. She ate it thoroughly, as if she had never seen one. She peeled it half way. She unglued the long stripes from its upper surface, she lifted them like spaghetti high above her head and swallowed them. Then she dived into the skins and she took the softer, meaty contents of their inner sides. She chewed them although they were not sweet enough, and her mouth shrank, but she left the tastiest part -- the banana itself -- for the end. Times were such that one could not take it against her. A banana was an event, a Christmas or an Easter event, or something you get when sick. People really felt like getting sick for a banana, like the princess did for an apple... or was it the prince and the apple?... whatever. In that country there was a custom that when her majesty Banana was absent, the people ate its substitute, or lady-in-waiting, generally known as "little banana", which had no relation to it, except for the similar name. Those were the ones with an individual wrapping for five dinars and the ones sold by the kilo for three dinars per piece. Some things never change.

So the girl went for the banana. But if she eats it all at once, the pleasure will finish quickly and she decided to enjoy each gram of it, to eat it slowly, slowly, slow-

ly... Not because times were hard, but because the banana was sweeter that way. She opened her mouth wide, put the banana in, but didn't bite. She took it between her teeth and skinned its upper layer from all sides. She took it out of her mouth. She melted the contents on her teeth and swallowed it. She put the banana in her mouth again and stripped it a bit more. After several inside-out mouth movements the banana squeezed in her right hand, she reached its mid part: moist, soft and gentle under the fingers. She took banana's heart out. She was happy. She licked it, and then she bit into it. She enjoyed chewing the mushy mass, she swallowed it with sorrow and she continued in exactly the same way with the rest of the banana.

"Come on, don't pretend, Lena! Eat nicely! You don't eat a banana like that! Eat it as it is supposed to be eaten!"

"But I like it like this!" the little girl protested in defence of her indulgence and she didn't know why her father stared at her instead of doing the crossword puzzle in front of him. Not knowing how to explain the reason for this new prohibition, she merely sorted it under food-related scolding and "You don't eat a banana like that!" fell in between "You don't eat with your mouth open!" and "You don't sing while you eat, or you'll marry a Gypsy!"

Since then, the little girl ate bananas behind her father's back or where she thought nobody watched her. She ate bananas and grew up, eat a banana and grow up, eat and grow and up she grew.

Some ten years later I sat starving in my student room and I waited for my boyfriend to bring me bananas. So what if he loses at dice? Finally he brought them. Beautiful, yellow, ripe and fragrant. I took one and I started eating it my way. I forgot about his presence, because I was already chewing my nails, shaving my legs and picking my nose in front of him, and he had already entered the second phase of our love without frontiers announced by a chain of farts on his side without any announcement or apology, of course. We relaxed in front of each other, interestingly, even before we slept together, and for this event it is important to mention that we didn't even have oral sex before. Then you can imagine what was the surprise in my boyfriend's voice when he screamed:

"What are you doing? Is that the way you eat a banana?" and he startled me, as I was removing the upper layers from the banana rubbing it against my teeth and making shallow furrows that were came under my lips. Well, I was a big girl then, and I immediately realized what was going on. I became conscious about those, for me long known, mechanical movements that I usually fully ignored while I focused on the inflow of sweet mmmmm... delicious substance, and yes, I understood why he was upset. He even looked insulted. Guess why? I turned to him. Shall I do it or not? Shall I fool around? I'll be ridiculous. And yet, shall I try? How will he react? Let me sacrifice a banana. Instead of answering I looked him in the eyes and then I peeled the banana a bit more. My tongue almost betrayed my disguised shame and I hurried to stick it on the gentle banana tip. Come on, be brave. I licked it. His eyes opened a bit more. Huh, so that's it. Well, see how I eat the banana. I didn't do anything special, only continued to strip the banana bare, to its heart, more precisely, following the regular procedure. Hurrah, with my lips to the inner soft part. What

about him? Let me see. He lay on the bed, spread his legs a bit and displayed his stiffened crotch. So, you like it! Well, OK, I'll try a bit more. How does it go? Look at him with your eyes slanting, don't be ashamed, OK, and no small obscenities and tenderness outside the program, for example kiss the banana from all sides, like that, with a bit of love, and not lick it all over and swallow it as deep as you can. I made a whole movie. How soft and mushy it became. And the time when I usually bite it, removing, melting and swallowing pieces of it came, because after this treatment it could break itself and fall. Then, who knows why, I showed all of my teeth and I closed them, cutting away a piece of it that immediately went down my throat. (Freudians, here you go: envy, jealousy, revenge, drive, castration, equality, Oedipus, etc). I have never seen a more painful expression. He covered his crotch with his hand. If I had known how painful it would be for him, I would never have done it.

"What have you done?"

"Sorry." And I had no more courage to look at him. I turned my back and for the first time I ate a banana feeling guilty because of myself. And I swallowed it without joy, of course. Since then I don't take any risks. I prefer not to make any concessions and I stick to my old rule: eat the banana as you like it, but always alone.

* * *

But, let's leave my kinky banana eating. What about "normal" banana eating? What about "normal" people and who is normal?

For example, is it normal for a healthy man, in the most usual meaning of the word, the one that is called real, feels a bit unusual, uncomfortable, somehow feminine when he holds a banana in his hand and tries to eat it in a manly way. "Die hard!" but it's not so easy.

Millions of people are torn apart and open up when placed before the banana identifier. It does not come in red or blue, but always shines yellow and warns: attention, something is happening! Colours mix up inside us. The rainbow has reflected in us since forever, although we are blinded, and we don't do the same. And we shall fade out together. Yes, even without understanding that there is no need to pass under it.

* * *

In the end, just another banana-split of memories. The beach. There are almost as many people as pebbles. And different as well. And more heated than the pebbles. Though the sun is slanted and the film planned for today is finished. A bit more and it will fall into the dark chamber of the pale blue, barely visible mountain. A beautiful final photo. People at sunset. The three of us at sunset. I'm in a suka-sun position between my two friends. We eat bananas with Alec who stands with his legs spread, and Dejan lies on his side, on his hip, with his head leaning on his hand and turned to the sun. It must look nice from that height. All of the many-coloured towels, spongy, straw and plastic chairs next to each other... a patchwork canvas stretched between the two ends of the beach, between the toboggan and bungee jumps... a banner in thousands of shades and patterns. Everything is one, mixed up, almost without

boundaries. The ball of the hyperactive child of the second row of chairs behind us has stopped next to our mineral water... and my slippers have ended up next to the feet of the old lady kneeling in front of me. Hairy toes and dark red nail polish, why not? What else? The newspaper that Alec bought this morning multiplied in three sub-newspapers, a bit for each couple among the six neighbours next to him... And there is Dejan's lilo drying, separated from him by two empty wet towels, two pairs of sneakers and a big backpack. Still, something is wrong. It is a deception. It only looks good. The boundaries disappear only when the distance is big. Big enough to be acceptable. Emotional distance. Well, what does this banana want? I am eating it in a calculated innocent, indifferent, depersonalised way, and it forces me to think, to disagree with this perfect sunset. This time it shoved me into somebody else's shoes.

Lena is smart. Lena knows. Why did I have to excuse myself: "No, thanks, I don't feel like a banana now. Leave it, maybe later." Nonsense, Lena understands. She is reading through me even at this very moment. Instead of eating the banana, I encounter her thoughts in front of me, touching my own which are glued to the pink T-string on Alec's butt. He stands straight and couldn't care less. My brave friend who, in search of his sexual and general emotional freedom waxed his butt six days ago and now sits on it, shining and smooth, almost like Lena's... No, don't listen! Those four guys next to the cabin swear at him again, more and more creatively... Is it only for the ears of the girls lying next to them, oiling themselves and giggling... That's not the way to score... Alec, you are the king, you'll walk like that, like on the catwalk, waving the bag with skins in one of hand and finishing the banana in the other hand, to the garbage can in front of the cabin itself? I have no words. They stare in disgust! It's OK, they remembered to look down... To provocation, huh? You feel like knocking him down on the pebbles and beating him until the pale gentleness of his body is completely lost? You fools! What irritates you? His feminized movements? The T-string? Pink? How tragic-comic! You think that nature played with him, and actually he plays with it. By the way, with you and with me as well. Mainly with himself. My dear Alec. You couldn't give a damn if they think you are gay, when you know that you like women. Lena knows you like women. And I know it too. Your body is your problem, so you parade it. You raise it and you step on it before everybody and before yourself. You stress it and you get rid of it. Laughing on the way. You are God, Alec, although I almost had to rescue you from being beaten up, you are God. What about me? I lie here, seemingly normally, so manly, so averagely manly. Not a sign, not a move reveals me, not a single suspicious shiver. There is no mistake in my muscles, in my deep voice. I love this body that serves me well. It looks good on me. Both men and women glance at it. The ones who don't know don't notice, the ones who know don't mind. Damn it, why don't I dare to eat the banana here? And I'm so hungry. I'll burst. Huh. Who is Lena waving to?

"Sir, over here please. Three bags of popcorn. Thanks. How much?"

* * *

"So, you're buying popcorn now? You're a darling! Well... where did you put my banana? Let me eat it first."

Andrej Nikolaidis

Till Kingdom come

translated from Serbian by Will Firth

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.

Paul the Apostle, Romans 7:18-19

The cathedral bell was sounding midday when the phone rang. They said my mother was poorly. I dropped everything and rushed to the hospital.

My mother lay motionless as if she was sleeping. Her grey hair had lost all elasticity and hung from her small head like the fronds of a weeping willow. Her skin was transparent, a sheath of tracing paper around her body. A bundle of green veins reached along each arm to the tips of her gnarled, olive-tree fingers like a vine creeping up a decrepit wall.

"Don't stand there at the door," she said when she opened her eyes, "come in and give your mother a cuddle."

She'd been in the bathroom, in front of the mirror, when everything went black before her eyes and she fell to the floor unconscious. It was a lucky fall – just a centimetre or two further to the left and her head would have struck the toilet bowl.

When she woke up she was in hospital. She immediately asked them to call me, "my son", she said.

Now she gave me a list and asked me to bring a few odds and ends from her flat – things she couldn't survive without a second longer in this hospital where they "bring the old and lonely to die", as she put it.

Out in the corridor I ran into the doctor. My mother's diagnosis was bad. Cancer had been gnawing at her insides for years. An operation and the right therapy could prolong her life and give her a few more years, maybe even a decade. But that type of operation couldn't be performed here in Montenegro. They'd have to send her to Italy, and that was expensive.

"With all due respect, Father, you don't have that money," he said.

I felt more angry than sad while I walked to my mother's flat, as if I expected an exemption from the general principle of misfortune – that it wouldn't apply to me. This arrogance warranted the severest of punishments, even if I had lived the life of a saint. How many times had I replied to distressed parishioners who'd come to me and asked, "What have I done to deserve this?" with the words, "Asking that question!" "It's so terrible and unjust," they'd complain. "It is terrible, but not unjust," I'd tell them.

As usual, the key was under the mat and the blinds on the windows were down. It would almost have been a miracle if my mother hadn't had a fall, blundering through the dark all day. She painstakingly conserved the dark in her flat: she claimed daylight made her vulnerable because it reminded her of the past.

"I've been living in the shadow of my own grave for years," she said, "I only feel comfortable now in the dark."

When I visited her last – I admit it was an embarrassingly long time ago – I laughed at her habit of not throwing anything away, of hoarding old, worn-out things in the corners of the room. Growing up in her flat was like growing up in an antique shop. Occasionally I got a smack for knocking over and breaking a nineteenth-century sewing machine or a termite-gnawed stool when I played ball or ran after my electric car. "You never know when you'll need things: if not me, then you, when I'm dead and gone," she used to say to her seven-year-old.

I knew early in life that my mother would die one day. She took every opportunity to remind me. One of my first childhood memories is of me lying on my bed in the darkened room and crying inconsolably because my mother would die and I'd be left alone in the world.

Why not open the blinds, I thought to myself, but as soon as I moved towards them I changed my mind. It would be disrespectful. Instead, I turned on the light and began to tackle the layers of relics which surrounded me, in search of the items on the list.

I found everything surprisingly quickly. Everything except for Chesterton's *What's Wrong With the World*. Unlike me, my mother never thought much of his books, so I had to ask myself what was wrong for her to be wanting Chesterton. She considered him a priggish hypocrite of the English variety: "No one can be more bigoted than Christians," she used to say. So I couldn't cease wondering why this

was the book she wanted to keep by her pillow in hospital. I finally found the book after a mighty effort, and when I decided to leaf through it a newspaper article fell out. This was the answer to the enigma: my mother wanted the Chesterton book because she kept an article about Mother Teresa in it. The story, pressed like a leaf in a herbarium, presumably moved her to tears.

One hot summer afternoon in Calcutta, as Mother Teresa was heading through the slums, she heard groans coming from a rubbish heap. There lay an old woman abandoned by her son. The woman was dying in excruciating pain and couldn't stop crying. It wasn't death she was afraid of; what hurt was not the cancer eating away at her insides but the brutality of her son, who'd joined up against her with his wife. He'd fallen under the sway of that evil young woman, who induced him to throw out his mother so she'd no longer be a burden to them – they could then have the house to themselves.

Mother Teresa stayed with the old woman all afternoon, evening and night, trying to persuade her to forgive her son. The woman moaned until morning and then, before she died, whispered three words in Blessed Teresa's ear: "I forgive him."

That's typical of my mother, who's able to put on such a long and perfect scene: to preserve an article for years, to pretend it's all about her, the centre of the universe, to put it in a book which tells the difference between me and her, and to send me in a dramatic moment to get that book – actually the article in it – which will tell me what I have to do. Yes, mother, I get the message: I'm not Mother Teresa in our story, but the bad son, while you're the old woman thrown on the rubbish heap.

I thought what great satisfaction she'd derive from re-reading the article for the umpteenth time and imagining she'd ultimately forgive me, the flesh of her flesh and blood of her blood, the one to whom she gave life, for going and becoming a priest against her will, for condemning her to a life without grandchildren, and for leaving her to die in hospital without the medical care which could have saved her life.

I could have spent hours more looking through her flat, that perfect arena for the archaeology of nostalgia. But I had to go back to the hospital before the end of visiting hours.

Mother was sleeping. Taking care not to wake her, I quietly lowered the bag of knick-knacks and the illuminating tale of forgiveness onto her bedside table, and left.

When I visited the next day, my mother made a point of expressing her displeasure that I hadn't come until the afternoon. She refused to speak to me, so I sat for an hour beside her bed, while she sulked like a child who can't have any sweets. My excuse – that I had commitments, that people expected help of me and that I had to give it to them, putting their needs before mine – was not acceptable. I could have known: every mention of my vocation just provoked her wrath.

"See you tomorrow," I said, stroking her hair. "Tomorrow morning".

I had no reason to hurry home, so I dropped in at a nearby bar and ordered a glass of wine. I sat on the terrace and watched the passers-by. The square was crawling with tourists. They'd wander the Old Town for a while, marvelling and

snap shooting, and then return to the cruise ship, which would take them back to their lives. You can always recognise tourists by the way they desperately try to convince themselves and others that the region they're passing through is unique and wonderful and that they're happy amidst that beauty. Only photographs will remain of all they see and experience, yet in the end they won't know where or why they were taken there. Of all the ways of not learning about the world, travelling is the most expensive and least dignified, I thought to myself.

They jostled in front of St Tryphon's cathedral for the best angle to take photographs. Several of them pointed their lenses towards the fortress on Mount St John high above the town. They gaped at the cliff on which it was built, rising up vertically behind the cathedral, as if the whole mountain stood in its defence. How many men had lost their lives carrying quarried blocks of stone up the mountain; how terrifying must the fall have been for those who took a false step or collapsed under the weight; what horror must the other bearers have felt when they heard the scream of their falling workmate and the sickening thud as his body hit the cobbled streets of the town. What we admire we also fear, while what we love we also pity. Love comes with compassion: what we haven't pitied, we haven't loved. Love is concern – that's the whole story. Whoever looks for romance in love is living in delusion. And how misguided are those who call out for "free love"! All this talk of love is intolerable, and adding "freedom" in the same sentence obliterates everything for miles around (except for fungus and foolishness, which are indestructible anyway). Wanting free love can only mean one thing: that we want to be freed of love. Because he who loves is anything but free.

I had to think of this when I saw an old lady taking pictures with the craftsmanship of a *Playboy* photographer, pictures of... me! I took a sip of wine, stared at the tips of my shoes and basically carried out a typical series of movements to signal that she should end this unwanted photo session. But she kept me in her focus all the time, seemingly oblivious to the fact that her actions made me feel uncomfortable, which should have been plainly obvious by then. I looked reproachfully into her lens, but that didn't prevent her from photographing further. "Like possessed," I thought to myself. I gazed at the newspaper in front of me in the desperate hope that the lady would be gone when I raised my eyes. Needless to say, my hopes were thwarted. The old lady captured me from every conceivable angle; at one point she even knelt down as lithely as a young girl and a moment later climbed into a flowerbed. Finally she packed up her camera and left, giving me a smile on the way. I'm no expert, but I could have sworn it was a seductive smile. Any residual doubt was dispelled when she blew me a kiss, which caused a riot of laughter on the terrace. The waiter turned up at the table and felt it appropriate to crack a joke. The waiters on the coast consider themselves witty, for some reason, and like to present their observations with an air of philosophical authority.

"She's a bit older, Father, but like they say: An old bird makes good broth!" quipped the sophist with the tray, making sure his voice was heard all around.

I couldn't sleep that night. Evil rampaged inside me as I lay in my sweat-soaked sheets. I gripped the bed with both hands so the torrent of awful images and shame-

ful thoughts wouldn't carry me away. Some time before dawn I jumped out of bed because I finally felt the scourge of shame. I knelt beside the bed and gave myself up to prayer.

"You worry too much, Father, you're a good man," Marika said as she served breakfast.

This woman has been with me for twenty years. In fact, I'm her only family. Her husband left her after she had her third miscarriage. She was forty and had nowhere to go. That's how she ended up here with me. She always treated me with gratitude, although I was actually the one who couldn't have imagined life without her. She was a pure and care-worn soul; her words were balm to me.

Yes, dear Marika, I am a good man, I thought to myself. Last night this good man hated his mother – not for the first time by any means, nor for the last. I dreamed that I stood over her bed as she lay dying. I didn't feel pity or even a hint of the sadness that overcomes any decent man when his cat dies. My mother lay there dying and an anger raged in me: she was even abusing me with her death, I yelled inside myself – she'd done all she could to leave me with a mountain of regret when she was gone, a remorse which would stalk me like a shadow till my dying day. I'd spent my whole life oppressed by an awareness of the enormous debt I owed her. And now, as she lay dying, she was trying to make it even bigger. As long as she was alive I could hope to return that debt one day. But her death would cut short that possibility and leave only the debt, hard and heavy.

As a child I used to play football with the other kids straight after school. Time passes quickly when you're playing. Only when it was too late did I remember that my mother was waiting and would worry about me; she'd stand by the window and fear something had happened. I left the game and ran home in panic. Sweaty, muddy and breathless I entered the hall, and there she stood, all in tears.

"Don't you know how worried I was?" she sobbed as she embraced me. "Don't you know I have no one in the world apart from you?" She knelt before me and kissed my hands. "I wouldn't be able to live a second longer if anything happened to you. Promise me you'll never do it again. Promise me you'll always think of mother in future." Then I cried too; I hugged her and gave her my word, which wasn't worth a tinker's curse back then, just as it isn't today. At dinner, she was crying again. She didn't say why, but I knew all the same. We didn't speak about my father, who'd left us, but he was always there: his absence was the pause between my mother's sentences, the cold half of her bed, the empty chair at the head of the table, the part of the photograph which was cut out, the shadow which – as obstinately as I awaited it – never fell on the door of the room where I slept and never leaned over me and stroked my forehead.

There are many more memories, and they all seem the same. Each ends with my mother's care and sacrifice. As she lies dying she clutches the key to my fetters in the hands folded on her chest. I want to prise those hands apart and tear from them the chain that binds me to her. I break those fingers. They snap like dry kindling. Now her hands are wrenched open, no longer the hands of a regent – more like dead spiders turned on their backs. But the hands are empty.

That, dear Marika, is what this good man thought last night. But there's never enough good in this world, which is why he gave himself up to fantasies about theft. His thoughts left his mother's deathbed and flew to the late old Tonćo Bošković.

A week before my mother ended up in hospital his relatives came to get me in the dead of night and take me up to Gornja Lastva because he wanted to speak his last wish.

"Tonćo sent for you because he won't make it through the night. He's afraid of dying without speaking with you one more time," they told me as we went through the hall. I was sleepy and anxious because no one ever rings at my door with good news, especially not at three in the morning.

"Tonćo's confessions have become quite a tradition," I told them. "He's confided me every sin several times already; he's been dying for a decade and most of his friends and peers have passed away."

"He really is dying now," they insisted.

When they took me in to see him, Tonćo whispered me his last wish, but not before bidding the last of his teary-eyed relatives to leave the room.

"I don't believe a word they say," he told me, "I can hear them celebrating down in the kitchen now. As soon as I've breathed my last they'll be popping the champagne corks."

Old Tonćo had decided to leave a lot of money to the Church. "I worked as much and spent as little as I could," he said. He was leaving the children a lot: houses, land, boats, and some money, which he knew they'd splurge as soon as he was in the ground. He wasn't worried about them; he wanted to leave something to God. On the wall there was a picture (actually a tapestry on a local theme: several boats at sea, with Kotor in the background) and behind it a hidden safe. It contained two hundred thousand and seventy-six euros intended for God. He smiled, despite his pain, and held out the key to the safe.

"You and I know that's the best investment I can make. It is, Father, isn't it?" he repeated several times.

I was to take the money and spend it for Church purposes. There was just one condition: that I would not reveal to anyone that the money came from him. His children would hate him if they found out. He was a man of the Church – they weren't. He knew them well: they'd spend everything he left them and curse him if he gave anything to the Church rather than to them. He didn't want a commemoration or a marble slab – he wasn't that kind of man.

"If I do some good with the money, that's between me and God," he said. "The Bible tells us: *Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full*," he recited flawlessly.

Tonćo really did die that night. Since then, his money is up in my attic. I thought about where to put it, and in the end I hid it between the books in the chest which my mother gave me when I started my studies. The chest was a family heirloom and

had been in the family for generations, she stressed when she bequeathed it to me. She expected me to look after it well, and I did: I kept it next to my bed with selected books in it. Thieves would find the chest with the money up in the attic just as easily as they would in my room, of course, because nothing can be hidden – I at least should know that. Still, I took the chest up to the attic, hiding it more from myself than from thieves.

My dear Marika... This good man thought all night long about taking the money from the chest and using it to pay for his mother's treatment. I'll never be able to earn the money needed for her care by myself. When I took my oath of poverty my mother realised I was condemning her to poverty too. She always considered I became a priest just to punish her.

I can take Tonćo's money and become a good son but a bad priest. Or leave the money up in the attic and stay a good priest but a bad son. That's what I can do. However much we hide and dodge and run, in the end all the questions we've fled from boil down to just one. There are no two ways about it – it's either one or the other. The line between the two options is a guillotine which hangs over us our whole life long and which we try to avoid and end up staring at the ground. In vain: sooner or later the game is over and we can no longer deal with the "Christ or Barabbas?" question by putting in a deferral request and forming a committee of inquiry.

That was my inner monologue to Marika, who was busy around the house. She switched on the vacuum cleaner and concentrated on the floors. She didn't hear me leave the house.

At the hospital the nurses treated me like a good-for-nothing, or worse. They couldn't hide their loathing and answered my questions curtly. My mother had obviously told them the sad story about her thankless son who was returning her love by letting her die in hospital, depriving her of the cure which was within arm's reach: just one sea and one fortune away. What could I do? At least the good women would have someone to malign in their coffee break; it's my job to be there when people need me.

My mother greeted me with outstretched arms. "You kept your promise, you've put everything aside and come to see your old mother!" she said. "The doctor's optimistic; it seems my condition isn't so bad after all. It's true that the operation's expensive, but if you and I make an effort I'll be with you for a bit longer. You know what they say: a man is young as long as his mother is alive!" Then she had a proposal: "Do you think you could take out a loan to pay for my treatment? It's pretty easy to get a loan these days."

"I'll do what I can," I replied softly, which she interpreted as a refusal. She could never stand the word *no*.

"As you wish, my son," she said, and the tone of her voice changed abruptly. "I can't do anything more to help myself. Such is life: once you were small and weak in my arms, now I'm old and weak in your hands. I raised you to become a respectable man but, if you think I deserve it, go ahead and drop me into the grave. Everything I did for you – and you know how much I did –was without thought of reward. Is it too much to ask a son to see to his mother's treatment? Or does your Church think

it's a lottery: whoever's number God draws gets treatment, while the others die? I don't have to die, at least not yet. Whether I do or not depends on you alone."

"I'm a poor man, mother, you know that," I explained. "I'd give everything for you to get better. But what I can give won't count as security for a loan. No bank will lend me the fortune needed for your operation. I know, you don't have to tell me: for some people it isn't a fortune. But for me it is. All I can do is to pray that God has enough faith in me, despite my sins, to reward me with your recovery."

"So that's what it's come to!" my mother hissed with contempt and raised herself up in the bed, suddenly full of energy. "That's what you'd do for your dying mother, is it? Pray for her health? I've never been good enough for you. You've had my all, every drop of my blood, every bone in my body and every waking breath, but that was never enough: you wanted your father, the one who left you, the one who ran away from me to his bitch and never tried to get in touch with you. You wanted him, although you had me. And since he didn't want to see you, you decided to search for him. You ran away from me to your father, the Church. You'll see what fathers are like: this one will leave you too, just like the other. You hid like a mouse in a hole, that's what your Church was good for. But the adversities just keep coming. Now your mother needs help, but you'll say your hands are tied and you have your sacraments and services. If you helped me you'd betray the law you follow. You're not a son, but a Pilate. You're washing your hands of me, that's what you're doing – washing your hands of your mother! Look how clean his hands are, how immaculate! And how could they be otherwise when they've been washed with a mother's tears! Get out of here. Go and pray to your God. Get out of my room, I never want to see you again," she shrieked.

Drawn by the noise, the nurses came at me like a swarm of flies. They buzzed around me, shouting and jabbing me with insults, and finally shoved me out of the room. "Shame, shame," the hairy black nurses chanted in chorus as they sent me down the corridor abashed and despised.

When I tried to visit my mother the next day, I was prevented by the hospital staff. "Sorry, Father, but the lady was explicit: you're not to see her," the beefy security man said. She's turned the whole hospital into her audience, I thought – an audience which will testify to her suffering and my callousness. The resoluteness of that hunk in uniform barring my way left no doubt that my mother was excelling. No wonder: she'd been playing the role of the long-suffering, abandoned woman all her life.

Days passed, and still I was banned from visiting her. Although I saw through the game, she'd attained her goal: that I acknowledge my responsibility and guilt. She was my mother, after all, she was ill and needed help, and this wasn't the time to be spiteful. I called the director of the hospital and tried to convince him that the ridiculous ban on visits should to be lifted. He remained firm and cited the hospital's strict regulations, adding that my mother's request was "certainly unusual, but to an extent understandable". I realised that my mother was playing for all or nothing: either I'd arrange for her treatment in Italy or I'd never see her alive again. She was putting on an act to make it seem that her life and death depended on me, as if it was

my responsibility. First she convinced herself of this, then everyone else, and in the end I had no choice but to go along with it.

More than once I thought of going up to the attic, taking the money and putting an end to this travesty. No one would notice. No one apart from me even knew about the money... No one? No! So I couldn't do that. The money didn't exist, at least not as money of mine, so the option of using it for my mother's or my own needs was an illusion. What I termed a "travesty" was nothing less than the Devil himself up in the attic, tempting me. The morals of old stories which we easily recognise when they relate to others suddenly blur when we become the protagonist. As soon as I rejected the possibility of using the money to pay for my mother's treatment I'd want to get rid of it: give it to the poor, hand it to another priest – anything, just so as to cast the temptation from me. But then I'd be ashamed of my weakness again.

Getting rid of the money just because it tempted me would mean acknowledging my inability to resist temptation, I realised that much, despite the sleepless nights in which everything a man thinks he knows comes loose and is turned inside out, and we find ourselves in fear of what we thought was rock-solid; we find ourselves foreign and false. Then I'd feel again that all the love-thy-neighbourliness I preach was worthless if I didn't practice it as concern for my nearest and dearest. "And who is your nearest?" a voice would ask me. "Who could possibly be nearer than your own mother?" All our principles, all that saves us from going the way of the flesh, all that keeps us from the curse of death and decay, is in the flesh and blood. "Why is it that you can't get to sleep at night?" the voice would ask me. "And why, when you finally sleep, do you dream the same dream over and over again: you go up to your mother's bed and see something writhing beneath the white sheet, you pull back the sheet and see a thick, black snake coiled up there in place of your mother. What does that dream warn you of: the mother in your dreams or you who dreams them? Who does that dream reflect on if not on you, the dreamer?" said the voice I couldn't escape.

One such night there came a knock on my door. Summer rain was pouring and the fellow was as wet as a church mouse.

I know my congregation well. After all, the town's small and everyone knows everything about everyone else. But I was sure I'd never seen this man before. I gave him a towel to dry his hair. We sat down in the kitchen. I offered him a glass of wine but he declined with a jerk and a look of disgust, which made me think I'd offended him.

"My mother was an evil woman," he began his confession. "I could give many explanations, but isn't it always so that evil is explicable, while good remains a mystery? Other people didn't try to understand my mother; they simply shunned her and tried to avoid her poisonous tongue and sharp claws. But they didn't know what I knew. She was orphaned at an early age: her father was killed at the Jasenovac concentration camp and her mother died soon afterwards of an unnamed disease. After the war she was adopted by her uncle, who had searched for her and her sister for months in the ruined country which still reeked of smoke and rotting corpses. Her uncle had a wonderful wife, who treated the girls as daughters

of her own. One day she caught a bus to Sarajevo. She never came back from that trip because the bus was waylaid near Foča by remnants of the scattered Chetnik army and she was raped and killed. When the girls' uncle found out, he left them some money and a message saying "Please forgive me"... and shot himself in the mouth. She grew up in orphanages, only to marry when she was seventeen. This man deserted her after leaving her with a son. He left her with me and also with scars from the cigarettes he put out on her body. People took the scar on her forehead as a mark. My wife, for example – you guess correctly that she and my mother didn't get on – believed that the devil marks his own. In our twenty years of marriage she never stopped cursing herself for marrying the son of a woman who had evil carved into her forehead.

"I don't want to make excuses for my mother. Living with her was hard, although my wife did try. As my mother grew older, she became more and more venomous; she could spill blood with just one word. When she fell ill, I didn't have money to pay for her treatment. My wife refused to nurse someone who'd abused her all her life: she wished the old woman would die a slow and painful death. My son took her side – he was always mummy's boy, trained to hate his father from an early age. So what could I do? I left my job and took my mother to our old house in the village. I told my wife and son that I was going away for a short time, that my mother was seriously ill, at death's door, and that it was my duty to stay with her now that she was so poorly; I couldn't simply cast her out, whatever kind of person she was; I told them I'd be back as soon as she was buried.

"My mother lived another six months. Before she died she asked me to beg my wife's forgiveness for all the pain she'd caused. When I returned home I found that my wife and son didn't want me back. She had a new man and he had a new father. 'The day you left us because of your mother, you lost us. Go back where to you came from,' they told me."

"All I want, Father, is for you to tell me if I did the right thing. Was it wrong of me to stand by my mother?"

He was sitting opposite me, staring at the floor as if he was ashamed to look me in the eyes, and tears ran down his cheeks. I went up and stood beside him.

"You did the right thing," I said. He looked at me with gratitude and kissed my hand.

"Stay here, you don't need to go out again in a storm like this," I offered.

"I have to go," he replied. "You've removed the burden from my soul; now I can finally go."

"Where did you say you were from?" I called out after him. I thought I heard an answer, but his words were muffled by the howling wind and beating rain.

I didn't go back to bed. I made some coffee, shaved, put on a new robe, brought the chest down from the attic and waited in perfect tranquillity for the morning to come. Then I set off to the hospital with the money for my mother's treatment.

Her bed was empty. I almost fell unconscious. The nurse held me for a moment to steady me.

"She passed away this morning. I'm sorry."

“What happened?” I asked, but she couldn’t say. She sent me to look for the new nurse who’d been with my mother when she died.

“She’s in the wash-house down in the basement. You can take the lift if you like.”

The nurse was startled when I spoke to her. She was loading bloodstained bed linen into a machine and hadn’t heard me coming. I asked her if the woman who died that morning had left any message for me.

“Pardon me for asking, but who are you?”

“Her son.”

“That can’t be,” she replied. “It was sad to see a frail old woman leaving in such grief. All gaunt – just skin and bone – and bathed in tears. You know, Father, in my job you see a lot of things that a happy person never sees. So much pain and death pass through my hands. I wash so many human remains to give to the coroner. I no longer remember the faces and the words. All of that changes a person, and I even forget who I am myself. You and I are similar in a way, you could think. People confess to us both, don’t they? But, my good Father, I bet they lie to you there in the confessional. As long as they think they still have time, they lie. You know that, I’m sure. But people don’t lie to me: when they’re raving and delirious in the throes of death, they don’t lie. What they say, whatever they say, is their truth. So don’t lie to me, Father: tell me who you are and what you want, because I know you’re not her son. When I asked her if she had any family who she wanted me to call so she could say goodbye, she just clenched her teeth and shook her head. And last night, before she died, she kept saying one thing over and over again: ‘I should have had a son.’”

Lamija Begagić

Daily dialogues

translated from Bosnian by Irena Žlof

– Why do you women always have to name everything?

– Name what?

– Well, everything! Every single fluffy toy of yours has a name!

– But that's for practical reasons: so that I can remember who I got them from.

– Your laptop has a name!

– So I can tell it apart from yours.

– What do you call mine?

– Toše.

– What?!

– Toše. Short for Toshiba.

– I see. And yours?

– Simo.

– As in Siemens?

– Correct.

– There, you see, neither one of them is simply a laptop. You even named our car, though we only have one.

– That wasn't me, that was Ena.

– Ena is female too. When she grows up she too will acquire that sick need of yours to name everything, including him.

– Who?

– You know who. Gale.

– That's for practical reasons too: we can't always, in front of Ema for example, refer to him by his name, and we want to avoid using hypocritical euphemisms such as "your thing."

– This wouldn't be a problem if it weren't for all those other names that derive from 'Gale': Galić, Galijašević, The Invincible Gaul, from which you will naturally leap to calling it Asterix or Obelix, and if you are in a particularly good mood, Dogmatix.

– It kills monotony.

– And occasionally the erection too.

– Why?

– You baby-talk him to sleep!!!!

Our days invariably end with such conversations. We fall asleep tired of ourselves. We wake up in the morning and, as if programmed, we pick up exactly from where we left off:

– Why don't men ever name anything?

– Why should I. I named my daughter, the rest are objects, they don't require first names.

– You didn't even name your dog. He wasn't an object.

– I did. 'Doggy'.

– That's not a name.

– He responded to it. Presumably that's the whole purpose of a name.

– Gale responds too when I call him.

– Right...

We get up and get our coffee. We drink it in silence. We drink it for a long time. We slurp, we dip our fingers into it, we drop sugar cubes into the cups. We're clumsy. Ena finds us agitated.

– Why do you adults drink coffee every single morning?

– Because you eat breakfast every morning.

– Well you do too.

– Because coffee calms us down.

– Why then do you shout every time you drink coffee, and you curse the sugar cubes, the dregs, the foam, the cups...?

– Because we are edgy until we've had our coffee.

– Why then do you continue cursing through breakfast, at the plate, the mug, the milk, the cheese...?

– Because.

– Because is not an answer.

– Ena leave me alone, please, I've got a headache.

– Why?

– Because I haven't had my coffee.

– Why do I never get a headache even when I skip breakfast?

I go to work. My head is throbbing. My director barges into the office.

– You're going to use your daughter again as an excuse for being late?

– I won't. It's my fault.

– Honesty isn't going to help you.

– Neither will a lie, apparently.

– I suggest you take a break. And look for work somewhere else.

I leave exhausted by all my daily dialogues.

The key to my failure to communicate is the fact that for Dado I'm always a female, for Ena always an adult, for my director always a subordinate.

I'm trying to decide between a pub and a park. I go to the park. In the pub I would be a guest.

You've got no clue, my Ivana

Ivana hasn't got a clue about many things. She has never heard of rims, belts, hubcaps, or brake pads. Ivana hasn't got a clue about cars.

She has never heard of the Internet, she doesn't know what browsers are, she can't tell the difference between a Mac and a PC, and doesn't know the first thing about web mastering. About computers, too, Ivana has got no clue.

But this is all irrelevant now, because Ivana has got more than just a clue about Feng Shui.

Feng Shui is an ancient philosophy. It is a philosophy of living. Just like yoga. Feng Shui opens your eyes. Feng Shui is the sixth sense. Feng Shui is all around us. Feng Shui is not an aggressive philosophy. Feng Shui is the beauty of living. Feng Shui is knowing how to find your happiness. Happiness is in your home. Feng Shui just points it out, and you grab hold of it. Simple.

The position of your bed is not good. According toFeng Shui, yin and yang are not balanced. Your head is on the wrong side of the bed. You need more red on this side of the room. The wall is too white. You need pictures. Not on that wall, on this one over here, that one is alright. You've got to move this closet, it's blocking the way to the energy of the sun. You cannot keep this shelf here, it's way too dark.

Those were some of Ivana's observations when she first came to visit my place.

I was working on my computer, and she was circling around, talking incessantly. My computer was the tool of my trade. That was how I made money. That was how I bought this flat and all the furniture which Ivana has now decided to rearrange according to Feng Shui.

And that computer. It shouldn't be there. Again you're facing the wrong way when you're in front of it. You're facing the wrong wall. And there's too much white again. You need something bright. The computer goes here. That's the first thing. That's urgent. No wonder you're always so gloomy. How often are you in that spot, where you're sitting right now?

How often?

How often do you invade other people's overly white apartments? However long is an average work day. Ten hours? Twelve. Sometimes even fifteen.

Often enough, I reply.

Awful, says Ivana and looks at me with pity. *No wonder you're like that*, she repeats, and then repeats it again. The last time she says it, she says it to herself. I can barely make out the words.

The computer is not going anywhere, it's fine exactly where it is, I think to myself, not saying anything. I haven't got the slightest inclination to balance the yin and yang in my flat. I couldn't care less about Feng Shui. I'm not going to take any of Ivana's advice. I invited her over just for the hell of it, to let her feel useful. I will of course tell her I am going to rearrange everything according to her instructions. I will tell her that I am going to sleep with my head on the other side of the bed this

very evening. I will tell her that I sincerely believe that I am going to wake up the next day feeling happier. In the morning I am going to call her and tell her I am feeling a whole lot better already. That I am no longer *like that.* That at breakfast I now admire the red details on my wall and the whole thing makes me rather more cheerful. That is what I am going to say. I am going to tell her that happiness has indeed been hidden in my home and that she revealed it to me. I am going to thank her for her selfless act. She will remark that it was not her but Feng Shui that revealed it to me, and I will add that, if it were not for her, I would never have known about Feng Shui. I will ask her out to dinner. She will say that she is an excellent cook and I will go over to her place. She will make us some Japanese dish, she will start to list the ingredients and I will interrupt her, not wanting to find out that I'm actually chewing on shark gums or some other exotic crap.

Having chewed through a bowl of shark gums, we will end up in her bed with our heads on the correct sides of the bed. Yin and yang will be in balance, and Ivana and I will be in unison. After this passionate affair, Ivana will cuddle up next to me. I find it incredible how happy this post-coital intimacy makes women. I will make a little person out of my index finger and my middle finger, and let it stroll along her spine. Her little fingers will feel the red scar on my hip. She will ask the same question that all those before her have asked.

Is this from the war?

No, from barbed wire, I will respond, as I have to all those before her.

The concentration camp?, she will think, just like others before have.

No, my neighbour's garden, I will disappoint her, as I have those before her.

Women harbour a secret admiration for war scars. It is some kind of a modern fetish. I could tell her I got it in the war. That I have shrapnel lodged just millimetres from my penis. That, if she really tried, she could probably feel it every time I penetrate her. I could solicit in her that look of astonishment, a combination of admiration, fear and horror. I could trick her, if I wanted to. I could tell her: *you've got no clue, my Ivana. You've got no clue about the war.* I could make her go silent and take her little finger off my scar. Make her scared of it. Make her doubt Feng Shui. Make her think that a single scar could destroy forever the balance of yin and yang which took her years to find.

I could, but I will not.

Oh yes, I know. You will put your chair here. Make sure you upholster it with a stripy pattern. You need an oval-shaped object above your computer. It could be a picture or something. As long as it is not rectangular. The angle at which the light falls is excellent, you just need to move your computer over here. It'll be perfect!

Ivana presses on. I continue to stare at my screen.

Ok?, she asks.

Ok, I say.

Great!, she exclaims.

A couple of minutes later she's gone, but not before making sure I've remembered everything she said. Once again I lied and said that I had.

You've got no clue, my Ivana, I whispered after I closed my overly white door behind her. (*I should at least paint the door frames red. And definitely change the door mat. It needs to be oval-shaped. Anything but rectangular.)*

I went to the toilet. I scratched the scar on my hip. For some reason I feel an unbearable urge to scratch it every time I take a leak. No one knows why.

Goran Samardžić

Deeper thoughts

translated from Bosnian by Irena Žlof

Goran Samardžić was born in 1961 in Sarajevo. In 1963 his parents moved to Belgrade, to Vračar, where he spent the next twenty years. His formative period had an elemental force to it. His foundations are often weaker than what comes on top of them, so he tends to break, but he also regains himself quickly. He is alive and healthy only because of nature's partiality to some of its creatures; it cares for them and loves them as if it has some higher plan in store for them! As if it might be sorry to see such valuable genetic material disappears into the void!

In the one-time capital of a phantom country Goran merges and collides with everything that comes his way. This usually happens within the perimeters of Vuk, Kalenić, Radnički, and the Sports Centre Vračar, though he also frequents the areas of Dorćol and Čubura as well as the windy avenues of the semi-built, semi-live Novi Beograd. This is where the force of the wind runs wild. People are selotaping their hats onto their heads. It was said that *košava* once snatched a child out of its mother's arms! Some lies...

Goran hurls himself here and there as if impersonating the wind, a small wind which blows for no apparent reason. He means nothing to anyone. He uses the big city the way some animals use the forest. He climbs on top of the higher buildings to scan his habitat from up in the air. He then climbs down to inspect the grounds over which sparrows hop, those brown birds which make an impression only when in flocks and on high ground. What a fuckup. There is nothing there, only asphalt, new and old patches of it, a manhole, spit, dog's shit curled into a question mark! Then, out of some protest, blaming what he has seen and stuffed into his conscience, Goran hooks himself onto a speeding tram. His cheek and body are glued onto the rear exit door. His arm is inside the tram, up to his elbow. Although empty, confused and ungrounded in life, he still does not feel like dying. He is looking ahead, to better times. Pointy twigs are slapping his face back and forth, tickling him pleasantly. He is riding without an aim, absorbing the vibrations. He is in search of himself!

Around that time, as if in warning, a young man crawls around Belgrade, a Roma boy without legs. They were chopped off, perhaps by this very tram which Goran is now clinging to. From that position, the frog perspective, the Roma boy is pick pocketing. It is not easy to kick a creature in such a state and at such a level of existence so, when they feel his hands crawling up their legs, people generally shriek in disgust. They shoo him away as if he were a dog at their feet, not a human being cut it half by a tram. Despite this, he will have children, several of them. They will outgrow him quickly. By the age of three of four they will already be looking him straight in the eye, annoying him. Once Goran watched the cripple with deep interest as he was beating up a woman at the Kalenić market. With one hand he clung onto her belt and was repeatedly hitting her in the stomach with the other. Nature had pumped vast amounts of energy into his upper body and the woman was stumbling, screaming. Once he brought her down, that is, snapped her in half, he continued his torture at the ground level. Goran was smaller and weaker back then. He was not yet strong enough to help others.

In the summer, during summer breaks, he spends entire days on Ada. He rides his pony bike to this muddy bathing spot and the kingdom of mosquitoes. His bike has neither mudguards nor breaks. He sunbathes, swims, daydreams... exists! In his swimming fervour, every now and then he embraces human shit. Those murky waters, into which the city empties its bowels, will make him immune to dirt. Their dirt inoculates him against all future dirt. He sometimes goes to the river Sava too. All sorts of things roll in that thick, wide and greasy water. The most unusual forms of junk and waste. Once a dead cow floated by under the Sava bridge, another time a dead horse; once Goran floated by, reclining in a tractor tyre. He was screaming

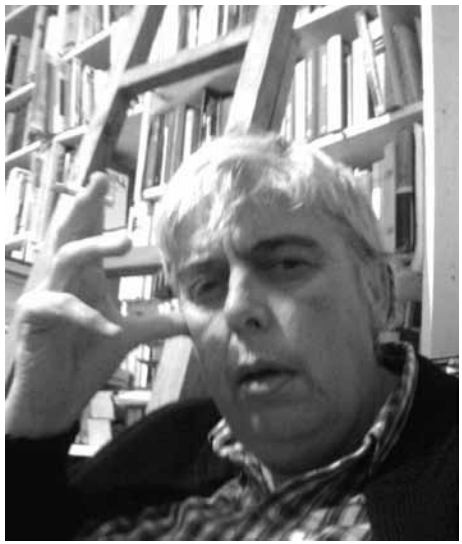
with no apparent reason or aim. Letting the people on the bridge know that he was there. He imprints himself onto the world around him.

Not even the separate or collective contaminations residing in the Belgrade swimming pools, where he goes to observe others and show himself, will take hold of him. Many go to swimming pools to wash away their dirt, or at least soak off its top layers. They immerse their feet, soaking their corns and heels. What terrifying contrasts Goran has witnessed! Hordes of baked and soaked people, ranging from babies to some really old people, and women in particular, or more precisely, women putting their bathing costumes on! My God! Once he was in a middle changing cabin, between a young woman on one side and an old woman on the other side, the South Pole and the North Pole. The young woman was changing in the direction of the south, the old one in the direction of the north, according to the compass needle. Goran carried this apparatus at all times so as not to lose his direction in life. It was one of his last toys. He was spying on them, the women, through holes in the cabin walls. Practicing for his future as a writer. He was breathing deeply, pumping oxygen into his excited being. He was fifteen at the time. Nudity impressed him. When he was not watching other people's nudity, he was carefully observing his own. At times he felt he could see himself growing up just by watching himself in the mirror. Clothing, according to Goran's view at the time, was altering people's natural fur coat. It left us with but smidgens of it, on our armpits and around our genitals. Those were in general Goran's deeper thoughts at the time...

Dimitrie Duracovski

At the bus station, Mirjana...

translated from Macedonian by Ljubica Arsovska



Her name was Mirjana – the girl I was seeing off that night at the old bus station by the temporary ticket office opposite the municipality building, a great rectangle like a matchbox with lots of windows – Mirjana Nikolich, that beautiful young girl I wondered if she was 16, but didn't ask her and never found out, an unimportant fact on that night when I was seeing Mirjana off and it was our first and last meeting, *that kind of* meeting, under the big acacias by the old bus station, a few steps from the bridge."Today is my last day here" she'd told me that afternoon by the changing booths, and also "If you want to say goodbye come to the bus station tonight, the bus leaves at 4 a.m., my sister and I will check out of the hotel so as to save on a night, we'll pack and wait for the bus there with our luggage."

Boys and girls had taken over the beach, there wasn't a single space on the fine sand, except under the Canadian poplars that cast a deep shade, some were playing cards, others were sleeping, there were so many of them, girls in particular who were reading books, lying on big towels, and there were all kinds, but we local boys, we were only interested in the girls who had come from other towns, they were the object of our desire, and my desire was the little girl from Belgrade, Mirjana, with her long straight dark hair, full red lips, and her body, still that of a growing girl, was somehow plump, rounded, no, not fat, but I felt that if I touched her I'd feel that roundness, those curves, it seemed to me I could feel her softness in my imagination. She had white skin and beautiful, almost fully formed untanned little white breasts, I saw them when I stole a furtive embarrassed glance when she was changing the top of her wet bikini, she hung it over the side of the booth but it was low and when she made that movement with her arm she revealed her breasts to me, and at that moment it was like looking at two pretty little white kittens, and I thought how beautiful it would be if I could play with them a little. She found it interesting to

sit with me on the benches by the changing booths. She didn't like the pushy boys, she thought the trite phrases they used to make advances to the girls were stupid, and indeed they were endlessly foolish, but not all the girls thought so, there were some who fell for their provincial line. That little Mirjana, she just wanted to sit like that with me, asking me from time to time, after long intervals of silence, to tell her about the people there, and what kind of music I liked, and if I'd ever tried a joint, if I was a Janis Joplin fan, because she was, who my favourite actor was, what book I'd read that summer, if I had a girlfriend, what subjects I hated at school, how well I'd done at the end of the year, what my friends were called, if I'd ever been to Belgrade, and had I been abroad, she had a million questions for me, that little Mirjana, and trembling with excitement I answered all those questions she asked so persistently, I was bathed in rivers of sweat, not from the fierce sun that was beating down on us mercilessly, but from the impossible task of answering her impossible questions. I'd go to the nearby café to buy cold Cocktas for her and me, checking if I had enough money, and we'd sip the cold drink that tasted of rose-hips and burnt sugar, and then fall silent for a while before the new barrage came pitilessly, and I was often in two minds, whether to stay or leave, but the magnetism spreading from little Mirjana wouldn't let me move an inch from the spot. Who do you like more... she'd set out on a new string of questions, a game for summer days that she was obviously no stranger to, she'd played it before, I thought, with many other boys, this wasn't the first time, who knows how many boys she'd tortured like this.... tell me, the Beatles or the Stones, that old and unresolved question that even now, at their advanced age, people of that generation haven't resolved, Beatles or Stones, an insoluble dilemma with no logical explanation, because nobody knew why the one and not the other. And whatever I said, she was for the other, so if I liked Jean Seberg she liked Anouk Aimée, or vice versa at other times. All afternoon we played the game and followed her rules, until the sun was setting and the western flush spilled over the lake, when the beaches were emptying, half-naked people were leaving, darkened by the sun, some with their skin pink, or even burnt, stupid mindless tourists, the people of this town thought as they watched and pitied them.

And she did the same thing to me on leaving,, I was to go to the bus station that evening if I wanted, she and her sister were leaving, their holiday was over, the bus left at 4 a.m., they'd check out of the hotel and take their luggage to the waiting room and wait in the park in front of the bus station.

How is it possible, I thought on the verge of tears, that she's leaving tonight, and what have I been doing all this time, all these days, I've only sat with her, sat next to her, not a touch, nothing, nothing, she, she, I kept repeating and felt the tears fill my eyes. I rushed up the stairs, going in like a whirlwind, I didn't want anyone to see me, and I didn't want to see anyone – and who could I have seen, my mother who probably wasn't there, she was most likely out shopping, or my sister who was ten and who, if she was there at all, was probably playing and most certainly didn't give a toss for her brother's suffering. And you were not there, you, you, you who should have been with me at this very time and place, you, you, to say something to me, a word or two that would ease my infernal suffering. I know, I know you would've laughed, but you

wouldn't have done it in front of me so as not to offend me, not to mock my feelings, but you'd still have laughed at my stupid suffering, but if you'd been there you would've spoken those words that would comfort me for a moment, you would've bestowed on me the magic formula all fathers know and pass on to their suffering and hopelessly lovelorn sons. But you weren't there, you hadn't been there for six years and you won't be there to the end of time, but it doesn't matter now, what does matter and why I'm angry is that you're not here now, at this moment, when I'm overcome by unparalleled suffering, a state I have never known before. How can this be, I thought lying on the bed in my room, my empty stare fixed on the white ceiling, repeating senselessly for the umpteenth time, how can this be, we've only been talking, all these past days, she was only ready for talk, I did steal some furtive glances at her on a few occasions, when she was changing in the booth, no, no, I didn't do it deliberately, it was only when she bent down and straightened up in a single movement to hang up the wet swimming suit, then I'd see her two pretty soft white kittens ready for a mischievous game and in my mind's eye I could see lower than the two kittens, her small smooth body, her belly, and below, those incomprehensible areas of the female body, at that moment so distant and out of reach of the young boy standing by that booth and holding his breath, feeling awkward and lost in the magic summer day that was slowly fading while the shadows of the tall Canadian poplars grew longer. The happy babble of people slowly dies away, everything that throbbed with activity a moment ago now subsides, the beach is left empty, miserably empty and somehow exhausted, unnecessary without its people, if you've ever seen those paintings by de Chirico you'll know what I'm talking about. But that feeling while you watch the beach only lasts a short while, until the next day when everything will be the same as yesterday and the same as all the past summer days and years and everything will return to its ordinary state.

And mind you, I'm telling this to you only, I haven't told it to anyone before, I'm only telling it now to you, the absent one, I went that evening, there, to the bus station, and she was there and waiting for me, she was alone, her sister had gone somewhere with somebody, I learned later she'd gone to see Filip, a boy she was going out with that summer, there was plenty of time before their bus arrived. She wasted no time in talking, as she'd done all those past days, no, she was like a whirlwind, in a wild trance, this small fury, the minute she saw me coming, she grabbed my hand and pulled me into the darkness of the park by the big acacia tree, and we leaned there, me against the trunk she against me, but nothing more happened than what many years later an author, Pajich, was to use as a title for a story of his, an ironic reference to Basara's novel *Peking by Night* – the well-known malicious title: *Petting by Night*, that's what was going on that night while we waited for Mirjana's bus that was to take her away from my town and from my life, forever.

But I won't go on about it, I'll just say a word or two more. When I went home at dawn, after their bus had left, I climbed stealthily to my room, looked at myself in the mirror, all red in the face, and I looked at my neck too, she'd bitten me so savagely that next morning when I sat at the table for breakfast I couldn't explain to my mum "Why, for heaven's sake, had I put on a polo neck in this heat", and I had to lie and say I had a sore throat and felt a bit cold, probably had a fever.

This micro-situation from long ago was my unwritten response to Irena's e-mail, when I told her I had dreamed about her, she asked me to tell her the dream, a strange kind of request, somehow uncompromising in bold and underlined, and the dream was related to this incident from my childhood, forever remembered, a small trauma, a little scar that hasn't disappeared to this day, you can see it yourself. But I'm telling this to you only, because it was your fault, indeed I blamed you for everything that was happening to me, but to be absolutely accurate and precise, it was not you but your definitive absence that drove me to despair, your non-being, your sudden disappearance, you won't believe it but I was even embarrassed, as a ten–year-old at the time, when I was with my friends, I don't know why I had that damnable sense of shame, but there, forty years on I still haven't forgotten it.

I wrote this to Irena, not telling her the dream, of course, on the pretext that there were too many obscenities in it, that it was indecent and I am, by nature, a shy person. Just listen to what I wrote to her:

"Date: Wed, 22 Feb 2006 09:45:26 +0100
Reply-To: <augur@freemail.com.mk>
To: "Irena" <irenamirjana@yahoo.com>
Subject: As we...

As we agreed, I sat down to write an e-mail to you and tell you my dream, although I was reluctant, there are certain obscenities and I am a shy person, but because it involved a certain Mirjana from a distant year, and because it's futile to explain dreams by some rational code, instead of being a recounted dream it's taken a different direction and all that, to explain a second or two of a dream, resulted in a solid two or three hours spent in front of the computer and a few pages of text that need a continuation, what they call a prequel and a sequel, a before and after, a part of one imagined whole.

Today Stavre, Irena and I talked over coffee, we started this conversation on various subjects, essentially that it isn't an easy or a trouble-free ride for anybody, I said I feel miserable, I can feel a pressure here, in my chest, it's something that exists in me, so many things have accumulated and piled up and all I do from one day to the next is the same, getting ready to get rid of them. So paint then, says Stavre. I don't feel like painting, that would be the easiest way but it won't help. It's about words, thoughts, feelings, emotions that have inundated me and are suffocating me, that's why I feel this terrible pressure in my chest, something accumulated that I need, just like in the dream I had, to cough up and spit out.

A dead father, unborn children, renunciation of closeness, avoidance of intimacy, no anchorage – a million unspoken words, buried and suppressed words – with all that in him how can anyone live normally, or at least fairly normally?

But where have you come from, to hear this?

D.

Does it seem stupid to you? Pathetic maybe and too banal or even repulsive?

You see? I mentioned you too – you are the dead father.

DIALOGUE

Boro Kontić

Daša Drndić

Boris A Novak

Ljubica Arsić

Aleksandar Hemon

Mirko Kovač

Taras Kermauner

Jelena Lengold

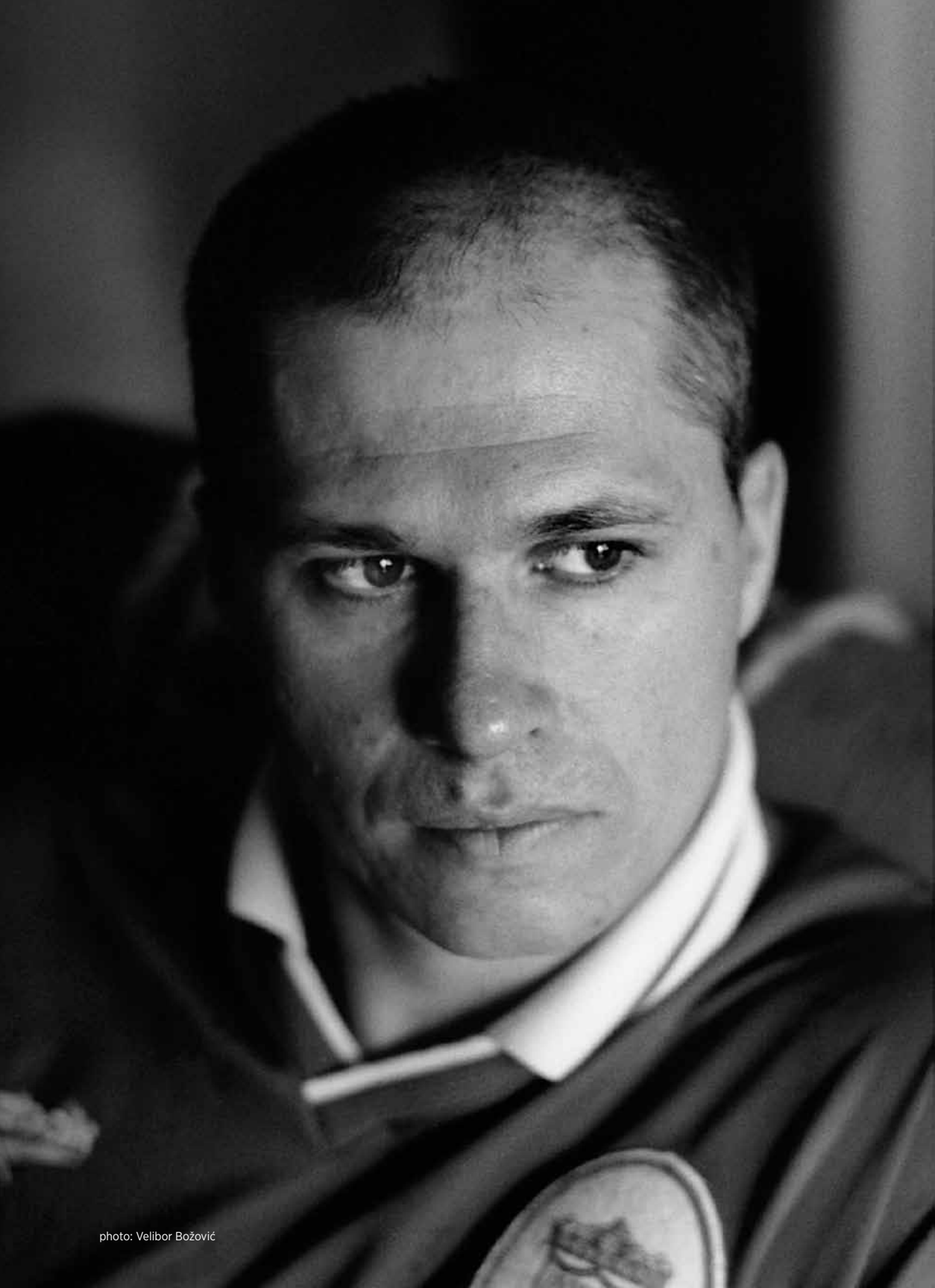


photo: Velibor Božović

Boro Kontić and Aleksandar Hemon

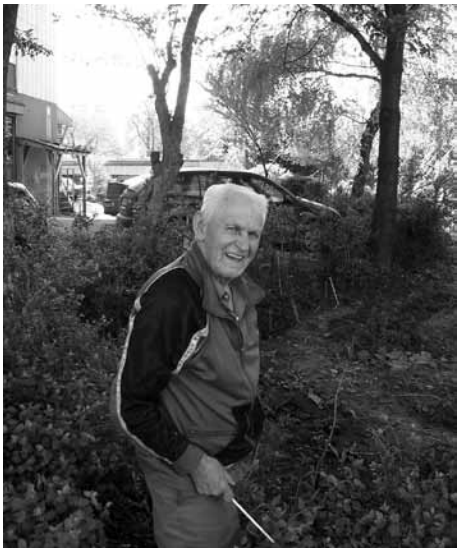
Literature is founded on the sovereignty of the individual

translated from Bosnian by Irena Žlof

Boro Kontić: A few days ago I was passing by your old Sarajevo courtyard. And there I saw it, in front of a five-story building, in a small garden (birches, fir-trees and pines...), still in one piece, a tin plaque with the inscription "88 roses for comrade Tito." The plate remained (survived) from the times of your youth. What field of thought associations opens up when I mention this fact to you?

Aleksandar Hemon: There is another plaque in that garden, right in front of my entrance, which has also been standing there for the past twenty seven years, which says: "Let us teach ourselves and the younger generations to nurture this piece of nature." I am overcome by warm feelings when I think of those plates. That inscription about a piece of nature is practically poetry, because the creator comes across as a recognisable, neoromantic sensibility – as someone who started growing old twenty seven years ago, someone who has always pined for nature, but has reconciled himself to the fact that things can only be saved in pieces and pathetic fragments, someone who is stubborn enough to be teaching himself and the younger generations the same thing for the past twenty seven years, even though it is more than obvious that not only did no one learn anything in all this time, but that the world and the town and the neighbourhood have in the meantime changed cat-

astrophically and irreversibly. I find that consistency, that stubbornness, in spite of the undeniable cataclysm, absolutely fascinating and worthy of our respect. Whatever the system of values which the plaque implies, it still persists in Sarajevo and in my neighbourhood, in spite of everything. The man who takes care of the garden is Mustafa, once a passionate mountaineer who now moves around on crutches, cutting and replanting the flowers and plants, and doing it all with a smile, unconditionally, not expecting any gratitude or compensation.



Mustafa Pirić, a man who has been maintaining the garden for decades. He turned 90 years in 2008.

BK: What do you see when you look out of the building in which you now live in Chicago, Illinois (USA)?

AH: At the moment we live in a house which we rented from a friend and which is the only house in Chicago directly by the lake. It has a small private beach. This house is an aberration, it survived by some miracle. Up until few years ago, it was owned by an elderly woman who refused to sell her property to make way for new buildings. The house is right next to a skyscraper, because that street of ours is lined exclusively by tall buildings – once there were residential houses there, but they were levelled to the ground so that skyscrapers could be built in their place. This old lady lived there all her life and after she died her children sold the house to our friend. They told me that they pulled out of her garage a car which had not been driven in over forty years. Anyway, this friend was living there with his wife until they had a child, after which the old house was no longer suitable for them. It's really beautiful out there because every morning as I drink my coffee I watch the waves, birds as they glide on the wind, the sun emerging on the horizon at dawn. However, every now and then, a damp spot appears on the wall, or the roof starts leaking. Every morning we find cobwebs on all the windows and doors, because it's quite windy by the lake, and the wind carries bugs making it a spider paradise. This morning we found the beginning of a cobweb which stretched between the window overlooking the lake and our bed. We are there on a temporary basis, we don't try to fix things, and every night before we go to sleep we execute an army of spiders. Our friend will probably tear down the house next year (his family owns a bank and invests in real estate) and build something else in its place. So we're living in a house whose destiny is doomed, and I tend to get attached to things which are doomed, which are excluded from the future, not to mention eternity.

BK: Actually, I was wondering if some kind of comparison, or perhaps a list of similarities was possible between the two worlds which, for the sake of simplicity, we distinguish as socialism and capitalism, and in which you spent your youth and are now living as a middle-aged man?

AH: Capitalism is evil, and especially the American kind of capitalism. The fall of socialism persuaded many that it was freedom and justice in the shape of capitalism that had won – and this is not the same as democracy. Socialism was not exactly a joy, but at least somewhere, behind all those illusions and lies, there was an idea of a common well-being and this is the idea I grew up with. My mother was particularly invested in this idea of togetherness, a society in which no one is excluded from progress. Our idiotic nationalism has destroyed not only the possibility of an identity and freedom outside and above the national, but also the infrastructure which would have enabled the idea of a community. So this new breed is now stealing and destroying what was once ours.

A garden in front of his building in Sarajevo where he lived till 1992.

And as for American capitalism, I think it inevitably suppresses, even assaults everything that's human about us. The logic of capital demands constant growth, constant maximisation of profit and everything that stands in the way of that logic becomes an obstacle or a target. What goes on in America with regard to the so-called War on Terror is a symptom of the conflict between capital and democracy. This is why Bush and company (and not only they – many Democrats are playing the same game) are doing everything in their power to dissolve and neutralise mechanisms of democracy and thereby enable an unrestrained growth of capital.

I do not mourn Tito's era. I was never particularly fond of our self-governing socialism, but I do hate American capitalism in a way I never hated all those socialist experiments and failures.

BK: I once saw a cartoon in The New Yorker, where your work is often published, of a girl writing to her parents "Thanks for the happy childhood. You've destroyed any chance I had of becoming a writer." You wouldn't have written such a note?

AH: Well, my childhood wasn't at all unhappy. I think it's more important that during my childhood I believed I was happy, and with good reason too: kids had a lot of freedom and autonomy, we used to play in the streets, we used to spend our summers in the country or on the coast, the world was interesting and comfort-

From the time when he played guitar.

able, Yugoslavia was going through its best period, my dad travelled a lot, my parents had a lot of friends and plenty of good times. Only now do I realise that not everything was so blissful, that my parents were not nearly as happy or as powerful as they had seemed to me at the time. In short, I know now that my childhood, just like everything else in my life, was pretty complicated, which is a good thing for a writer.

I was equally happy as a teenager and I'd always recalled my high-school years as a happy period – the tough teens. But the war changes your perspective: I now realise that a kid in my class committed suicide because he was constantly being bullied by my friends (I wasn't the one who bullied him, but I didn't do anything – not a word nor an action – to put a stop to it or to confront it). I now understand that there was a certain evil in us, a deeply rooted pseudo-Darwinistic belief that demonstrating your power, exercising it over the weak, was a perfectly legitimate thing to do. There were other things too: my best high-school friend, who I believed was as good as they come, was the ringleader in bullying all who he diagnosed as idiots, and he later became a proper Chetnik.

The problem is that as a boy I was happy enough not to notice other people's unhappiness. Now I see it, in front of me, and retrospectively, not because I'm unhappy now, but because for some reason – maybe because of my age – I pay more attention to other people. That is very good for a writer – to find other people more interesting than yourself.

BK: Your growing up, what was it like?

AH: My father was in charge of stories, my mother of books. My dad is a born story-teller. When I was a kid, he used to tell me stories from his childhood: war adventures, hiding from the Chetniks and Cossacks; entire epic cycles with domestic animals (the absolute favourite: ram Janko) and neighbours (Branko and Duja) cast in leading roles. He travelled a lot and used to bring stories and pictures from his travels. On his return, there would always be a family slideshow from his travels: pictures from Siberia or Leningrad or Libya or London, and he would be commenting, spinning a whole set of stories around each slide. One of my fondest childhood memories is that of us watching slideshows of Russian fairy tales which my dad had brought from the Soviet Union. Those weren't films, but reels of slides with illustrations from the fairy tales and a text in Russian at the bottom of each slide. My dad would be playing the slides, translating the text and probably embellishing it in the process.

My mother was (and still is) a booklover. She is the reason why we had so many books on the shelves. Whenever a door-to-door salesman came to our school selling those Disney books or any kind of children encyclopaedia, she would invariably

authorise their acquisition. Often she would return from work with collected works of this or that author or, say, ten books of French literature, because the salesmen would also come by Energoinvest where she worked. She was the one who always felt the need or an obligation to read a book that everyone talked about either publically or in secret. It is because of her that we had in our house A Tomb for Boris Davidovich and The Gulag Archipelago.

Anyway, my dad was responsible for our oral and visual culture and my mum for the written word. I generally do not believe in occupational gender segregation, but when I was in Paris I did notice something similar amongst tourist couples: the woman would carry a book, the man a camera.

As a primary school student, when he participated in '' Leagues of young linguists".

BK: G.G. Marquez was supposed to have said somewhere "everything that happened to me had happened by the age of eight." Would you say that the same period is the key primary source of memories for you too?

AH: I wish that were true, but it is not. Everything that happened to me happened from 1991 onwards. And not only that, but what happened to me over the past sixteen years made me interpret my life before that rather differently.

The problem with that cartoon from The New Yorker and the philosophy or ideology or aesthetics which it ridicules is that it implies that someone becomes a writer because there is magma of unspoken feelings, unrealised thoughts boiling inside him or her. I am a writer because I have always been – throughout my childhood as well as now, whether happy or unhappy – absolutely obsessed by language. This obsessive need to exist within language is only partly satisfied through reading, and I find writing necessary in order to digest my experience, to face the world, to interpret everything that happens to me. What happened to me in my childhood or in the last fifteen years did not make me want to write because the magma accumulated in me. I equally used to write back in Sarajevo, before the war, when I was bored and thought nothing was happening. In the sixth grade I started writing a novel (and wrote one chapter, a page and a half) which dealt with, well, adolescent issues. Even if there had been no war, or if I had lived under the siege, which I didn't, or if my parents had moved to Canada in 1976, I would have still have pursued writing.

My childhood was important to me as a framework for that battle with language in my first book, The Question of Bruno, not that I am particularly interested in rummaging through those memories all over again. It is quite possible that

I might end up rummaging through them with my child, telling her stories as my father did to me.

BK: You said that ever since your childhood you had a "need to exist within language." As a student of the primary school "29. novembar" in Sarajevo you participated in the Young Linguists League – a rather unique language competition which only existed in BiH, initiated by one of the more important, and nowadays, unfortunately, forgotten Sarajevo characters - Bato Zurovac. How would you describe this competition and your part in it to someone who does not know anything about it?

AH: Given that Bosnia and Herzegovina was what it was during the period of self-governing socialism, its official language was called Serbo-Croat or Croato-Serb. The orthography and grammar and vocabulary of that language were decided upon through various consultations of grammarians and linguists. This is what was taught in schools, we studied all these linguistic oddities, and then we competed against other schools in our knowledge of this language which basically no one spoke; our vocabulary had many doublets where one word would be considered an "eastern variant" and the other "western." The linguistic section in my school was led by Dostinja Starović, also known as Doka. She was a brilliant teacher and a tall, brusque woman, feared by many. She encouraged us (and for this I will always be grateful) to immerse ourselves into that language, to dig deep into its syntax, to understand the rules, enlarge our vocabulary and speak correctly. Our school team often won republic competitions, and I (as well as several others in my team) came through as a champion a couple of times. As the winners of team championships we used to go on prize trips around Yugoslavia, and as a champion I spent a couple of summer holidays in the children's colony Lastavica, where I also acquired my first sexual experiences.

BK: How does it work, your "system" of recollecting, sorting, recording, memorising and selecting the past?

AH: I'm getting worse at memorising facts and dates, I find it increasingly harder to recall what happened and when it happened. But then I have these distorted, involuntary memories which pop up suddenly and for no particular reason. Those are the kind of memories that Proust was to use to create his masterpiece, so they are probably more important for me as a writer than the names of the students in my primary school class (which, by the way, I can still recall).

I once read an article in The New Yorker about Benazir Bhutto, who related a story about how her father Zulfikar used to spend his days in solitary confinement, after he was arrested by Zia-ul-Haq: Zulfikar would pick a day in his life and would then try to remember everything that happened during that day, every single detail. I guess he was hoping he would be able to reconstruct at least one day in its entirety. I find the futility of any such undertaking fascinating, how utterly impossible it must be to remember everything that was part of your presence in the world that day, every sensory experience, every thought and idea, every decision and every dream.

In front of 'II Gimnazija' in Sarajevo

If you are asking me if there is a particular technique that I employ, then I must admit that there is no method to what I do – I almost never make any notes of ideas or sentences. Lately I started writing things down as I travel, but I almost never look at it when I get home. I write down thoughts and sentences of other people, quotes from other people's books. My thoughts are a process: everything I write down will become something else, a different thought. If it stays the same then it was probably not very interesting to begin with.

BK: When did you realise you wanted to be a writer? What influenced your decision? Was it something rational or was it simply an instinctive choice you had no option but to succumb to?

AH: I've always enjoyed reading, ever since I learnt how to, at the age of five. Reading has long since become not only an intellectual and psychological need (closely related to my need for solitude) but also a physical need – as I'm prone to psychosomatic neurosis, books actually calm me down. When I was a kid, my mum would always bring along a book or a magazine (Politikin Zabavnik) when we went to someone's house. Without a book, I would be climbing on top of the furniture, talking other well-behaved kids into having pillow-fights or something along those lines. With a book I was an angel, without one I was Satan. In any case, writing and reading have always been a part of the same continuum for me. I've been writing since I was a kid, all sorts of things, beginnings of stories and novels, and I always knew I would write. Which is not to say that I've always dreamt of becoming a professional writer. I didn't find that particularly appealing, and the writers of the socialist Yugoslavia did not have that neoromantic aura which my adolescent imagination required: writers were cultural workers, and the last thing I wanted to be was a worker, cultural or otherwise. When I was in high school I dreamt of studying film directing, but they didn't have film department at the Sarajevo Academy of Performing Arts at that time. Then, of course, I wanted to be in a rock 'n' roll band. Professional writing only really became an option after, having studied for a year and having passed several very difficult exams, I abruptly abandoned electrical engineering studies and switched to literature studies instead. My dad asked me then how I intended to earn my daily bread and I said by writing, though I had no idea if this were possible or indeed how I was to get there. For me writing is a vocation, in a spiritual sense, and I ended up a professional writer by pure chance.

BK: Have you ever tried writing poetry?

AH: Yes, of course. This obsession with language, the pressure of words buzzing in my head, found its vent in poetry. There was a period in my life, just after the

army, when for about three years I wrote poetry on a daily basis, and I must have written about a thousand poems in those three years. I now know that this was a way for me to tame the language which was raging inside my head. The poems were mostly meaningless and worthless, but it was a necessary phase.

BK: Would you agree that rock 'n' roll and everything which was back then generally referred to as "alternative culture" were just as important for your literary beginnings as poetry and fiction were?

AH: For me rock 'n' roll was the most important cultural medium. Besides my mother, who is an honest genuine communist, a woman who believed and still believes in justice and equality, my key political influences were The Clash, The Jam and a number of other, mostly leftist bands of the punk and new wave generation, including Yugoslav bands such as Idoli, Haustor and Buldožer. I'm not sure how we could measure this, but it is quite possible that The Clash's album London Calling was in fact the most influential work of art in my life. The late seventies and early eighties, my formative years, were a kind of rock 'n' roll renaissance – it is difficult to imagine a better period for pop music, with better, more important and more revolutionary bands. This period coincided with my puberty, which, biologically, is a revolutionary period in every person's life, as well as with our transition from hardcore Titoism toward liberal socialism, perhaps even true democracy. This transition never saw its completion, because it was sabotaged by the nationalists. So, with all that was going on, I naturally thought that the world was ripe for a change, I had a need for a radical change and all that was somehow collected and voiced in the music of those years. That was the first and possibly the last time in the history of the South Slavs that the urban culture did not only acquire voice but was also the driver of change. My ideology, perhaps even my aesthetics are rooted in the music of that time, though it has probably spread wider since then. After all, my very first published article was dedicated to Nick Cave, and some of those aforementioned poetic attempts were used as lyrics by the band I was a member of in the late eighties.

BK: The band was named after one of the characters in the Lord of the Rings? What was your role in the band? Is it really true that you once had to explain to the drummer the meaning of the lyrics you guys were singing?

AH: The band was called Strider. It lasted for about a year, that is, until I fell in love. I was the lead singer and the weaker of the two guitar players. I would bring a three-chord song and the lyrics (one of my many pointless poetic attempts) and then we would turn it into more serious, longer songs. At some point this practice got out of control and we would end up with songs of twelve minutes and four movements, like a string quartet. The drummer was a certain Dule, he was pretty good, but he liked his drink. Once he ate thirteen dolmas the size of a fist, which my mum made for us so that we had something to eat whilst we practised. Later on, he vomited for over an hour – dolma poisoning. At our first concert in Steleks, he got so drunk he forgot the order in which we were to play our songs, so several songs were a total disaster – we didn't have monitors back then so the rest of the band had no

idea what he was playing, we played one thing and he played something completely different. The beauty of it was that no one in the audience noticed it either. Anyway, one day Dule announced that he was not going to play our stuff because he couldn't understand the meaning of the lyrics, so I had to sit down with him and shed some light on this aesthetics of mine. The problem was I too wasn't quite sure what those songs were about – the stuff was coming out of me rather spontaneously and madly – so I quite brilliantly improvised my analysis of the songs, without his ever realising I was bullshitting him. I was so convincing that he too started writing poetry, and his was even worse than mine.

BK: Which books, records of that time do you think were significant or influential in your case? What type of literature, which music, titles?

AH: Well, as I said, as far as records, that was London Calling – The Clash. Of the records from Yugoslavia, those were Idoli – Paket Aranžman, Šarlo Akrobata, Električni Orgazam. My favourite and probably the best Yugoslav album of that time is Haustor's Treći Svijet. As for books, The Catcher in the Rye was my bible during the high-school years, the same goes for Raymond Chandler; I also read Bukowski which can only really appeal to adolescents. But I read all the time, I used to read through the night and then sleep in classes, and I often read during classes. Once I was kicked out of a class because I was chuckling as I read Heller's Catch 22. The books that mattered to me then were the books which fitted in with certain fantasies I had of myself. I was perhaps more influenced by the books which I could not project myself into, which were not about me, as I imagined myself back then. I was still in primary school when I read Kafka whose books I couldn't quite understand, and precisely for that reason, they prompted me to contemplate things. Later, when I started university, new horizons opened up for me: Greek tragedies, Dante, Gogol, Tolstoy, etc. Some of those were taught by Marko Vešović, who approached books with a genuine, contagious passion – he is the reason I grew to love Tolstoy, for example.

Film too was very important to me, not just because I grew up next to the Arena Cinema, watching all sorts of films from a very young age, but also because of my unrealised film-making ambitions. Hitchcock was always one of the greatest, which is why I also liked the second-rate by-products such as Brian De Palma. After the Belgrade Fest, we had a week of the Fest films in Sarajevo (in the Dubrovnik Cinema) and I would skive off school (which was also close to Kinoteka) to queue for the tickets to the Apocalypse Now and The Tin Drum.

To me back then (as well as now) everything was interrelated: film, music, literature, visual art... it's all the same thing, everything is connected. I started reading Kafka because a Bowie record or a song was somewhere described as Kafkian, and I wanted to find out what it meant. I read Günter Grass because of the film The Tin Drum.

What I remember with the utmost warmth from my life in Sarajevo is this constant search, this insatiable cultural curiosity. I was interested in everything, all the time. And all my friends were like that – there was a deep solidarity amongst

us, based on that curiosity. That is the only thing I feel truly nostalgic about, those people, most of whom you know too, who are interested in everything and who then get together, connected by this collective knowledge. That is the exact opposite of the internet, and something that doesn't happen naturally in capitalism.

BK: Let's get back to literature. Which literature is "closer" to you – Central European, Latin-American, Russian, Anglo-Saxon... or is there no difference and no segregation there?

AH: Someone once asked me who my favourite writers were and I started listing: Danilo Kiš, Bruno Schulz, Franz Kafka, Isaac Babel, Vladimir Nabokov... and as I listed them, it suddenly occurred to me that what they all have in common is the instability and displacement of identity. If I add Sebald and Michael Ondaatje to the list, this common trait becomes even more apparent. That is the tradition I relate to, and this tradition is not determined by geography, even though many of the writers on that list are in fact from Central and Eastern Europe, but rather it is defined by a historical experience which had led those writers to having to constantly contemplate their identity. This in turn has somehow led to a particular linguistic sensibility, perhaps because language became their free territory, an area of personal sovereignty.

What I cannot relate to is any kind of national literature, be it our own crypto-fascist and neo-fascist and just plain fascist kind, or that seemingly less harmful Western version of it. I detest the writers who take upon themselves to represent the entire nation or the civilisation, writers who strive to diagnose or illustrate problems of an abstract community.

BK: It is a little known fact that your first more significant literary work (The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders) was first published by being read live on the radio (the Youth Programme of the Radio Sarajevo) and it prompted numerous phone calls of delighted and excited listeners who were unable to find that character in their encyclopaedias. Was this almost Wellsian act helpful to you in any way?

AH: Well, it did help me understand some things. First, it taught me that the difference between reality and fantasy, between history and fiction, is often just a matter of the narrator's approach and attitude and that the media has an inherent authority over reality – the media does not report on reality but they create it, which enables them, as well we know, to lie without any restraint. When we did Alphonse Kauders on the radio, I first read parts of the story in three-minute chunks and then I recorded the entire story, along with sound effects, some twenty five minutes in total, and we played it on the show hosted by Zoka Stevanović and Neven Anđelić. Then we opened our phone lines to the listeners and I pretended to be a historian who has merely discovered the life and work of Alphonse Kauders. I asked the hosts not to laugh on air, no matter what I said. Most of the listeners who called in had believed that Kauders was a historical figure. The scariest and most exciting of all was that I too started to believe in the actual existence of Alphonse Kauders. At one point I started worrying that someone would call in and they would know more

about Kauders than I did. Thus I learnt that the story is good when I myself start believing in the characters whom I spent a lot of time and effort inventing.

BK: Alphone Kauders is after all an actual person, he was even featured in some encyclopaedias (a professor, forestry expert, an associate of the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Science). I would like us to use this example to illustrate your literary process of turning facts into fiction and vice versa.

AH: The story of Kauders started when I was studying for an exam in Bibliography (taught by Vojislav Maksimović, a terrible professor, and a first-rate Chetnik and criminal) and I came across a forestry bibliography published by Alphonse Kauders in 1948. It intrigued me: Kauders was collecting the material for his bibliography during the war, as his Jewish neighbours (I imagined) were being taken away from their homes and transported to Jasenovac, and then he published it as Stalin's troupes crossed the border into the country, and the veterans who were by then living in abandoned Jewish apartments were being banished to Goli Otok. I imagined a character who had no interest in history as such, all in the name of some pseudo-objectivity, rationality and science. Nowadays I would imagine Professor Kauders rather differently, probably as someone who strives to maintain some kind of professional dignity, to share his knowledge with others, this being the only thing he can offer. Nowadays I would approach him with more sensitivity.

I am not sure, though, how representative my writing of Kauders is when it comes to my method. Actually, I'm not sure I even have a method. I've recently completed a book dealing with a historical event from 1908. After I was done with my research, I let it rest for a while, allowing myself to forget the facts and allowing for the story skeleton to form, revealing the deposits of the imaginable human experience. By doing so, I have fundamentally altered this event.

My method is to give in to my own instincts and see where they take me. That is not a very good method if your aim is to progress your career.

BK: Looking at it chronologically, almost a decade had to pass between that first story and your first novel. In that decade the war happened, your study trip to America turned into a permanent residence, emigration, and your learning English as your literary language of choice. Those facts are more or less known to all your readers, but I am interested to hear what was the journey of that book (The Question of Bruno) which you started writing in peacetime and finished in an entirely different atmosphere, one that no imagination, not even that of a writer, could bring into existence?

AH: Although it is true that Kauders was written in peacetime, the decay had by then already begun: the late eighties was the initial stage of a historical disaster. Only, back then I thought that a different, better system might spring up from the ashes of Tito's Yugoslavia. There was a period of five, perhaps six years between communism and fascism when I believed, like so many of my friends, that there was a third, maybe even a fourth option. Of course, this third option was destroyed at its roots. So there are traces of hope in that book, along with a sense of a complete, ab-

solute, bloody defeat. The stories in The Question of Bruno document in a certain way this transformation from a catastrophic euphoria (Kauders is an example of that) to my having to face the fact that history never takes any notice of its victims, that literature is de facto pointless, except perhaps as an ethical standpoint.

BK: Jozef Skvorecky took up English language studies because he fell in love with Judy Garland after watching The Wizard of Oz, and he wanted to write her a letter, declaring his love for her. His only problem was that he didn't speak English at the time. Your reasons for switching into English were rather more existential? Or was that simply the pragmatism of a larger market?

AH: My reasons for switching languages were metaphysical, if you will. At some point I realised that I had lost my connection with the language I once called my mother tongue, which at the time was called Serbo-Croat. Experience alters the language, and I was cut off from the experience of people in Sarajevo which had been my primary and, at times, my exclusive linguistic context. Not to mention that the same – official - language was also the language of all those maksimovićes and bećkovićes and karadžićes. On the other hand, I had realised that I was to stay in America for a very long time, probably till the end of my life and that the language of this experience had to be English or else I was to stay stuck forever in the vacuum of nostalgia. The size of the market had nothing to do with it, because I was writing – and I still do – out of my inner need, literature is my vocation. After all, I had no idea how that market worked, nor did I think anything was ever to come out of it. Then I started writing a column for Dani and through that I renewed the connection with my mother tongue, so now I'm completely bilingual.

BK: A friend who reads you in English tells me that you use very fine language and, on occasions, even rather unusual English in an idiomatic sense. How do you feel about the language which you write in and which is not your mother tongue?

AH: The same way I feel about my mother tongue. The language I write in – actually, languages, because I write in Bosnian too – has to be planted in my subconscious mind. My mother tongue was planted there in my childhood, and English got there by some miracle. In any case, my subconscious is bilingual. I remember, in the early nineties, when I was not writing in either language but was reading like crazy, I had dreams in English and whilst dreaming, I was aware that my dreams should not be in English. Stranger yet, I caught myself remembering in English: I would recall conversations with my friends from Sarajevo and they were in English. Now I think that those were the symptoms of English being planted in my subconscious.

BK: Are there any examples in your English which could help illustrate why this language is "wider," "freer" than the language you started writing in. When is it "easier" to write in English and when do you feel it "restrains" you?

AH: The advantage of English is not in the size of the market, but the size of the language. Books have been regularly published in English ever since the thir-

teenth century, and at present it is spoken by over a billion people. The existence of Shakespeare's collected works alone is what makes it big.

For example, in my book Nowhere Man, for the piece titled Fatherland I used a lot of quotes from Shakespeare but without the quotation marks. In translations into our languages (and probably all other languages) those Shakespeare's verses are hardly recognisable, not only because many translators had failed to identify them (the Croatian translator had identified quite a few and he used the verses from the Croatian translation) but also because Shakespeare is on the margins of all those national literatures. Besides, I find Shakespeare infinitely more interesting and attractive as a source of language in which I write than Njegoš or, fuck it, I don't know, Marin Držić or Evlija Čelebija or any other member of our nations and nationalities who was merely imitating and introducing and translating the forms which had long since been established in other languages.

There is a certain melody to English language which is different from the melody of our own language, its tonalities and harmonies are much wider and more complicated, because the language has more dialects, styles, idioms, because it has more writers and they all have a different sense of the melody of English. I listen to this melody in Shakespeare and Yeats and Heaney and in countless others, and then I strive to find my own tonalities and harmonies. My favourite English verse is from Hamlet: "When sorrows come, they come not single spies,/ but in battalions." I remember more verses and more poetry in English than I do in our own language and, whenever I feel my soul needs soothing, I read poetry in English.

BK: Does your choice of language in some way reflect a desire to overcome an objective fact that you come from a "small" language?

AH: Our language is not small because it lacks words. What words we have are more than enough to say anything you may say in any other language. The problem is in small cultures, and they are small because they are organised around nations and national identities. Not enough translations are published; there is a constant presence of that xenophobic feeling of our culture being somehow threatened. National cultures are by definition provincial, and this is particularly true of these backward creations which are popping up in countries in transition, where illiteracy seems to be not only common but necessary for the functioning of the crippled states. One of the advantages of English is that it is transnational. American contemporary literature has managed to absorb a large number of writers whose mother tongue is not necessarily English, writers who are not expected to express some national essence. There are of course conflicts and attacks and confusions in American literature too, but no one is surprised by the fact that I regularly publish in The New Yorker, not does anyone deny my right to do so.

BK: Your switch over into English has for some meant the inevitable comparison with Nabokov and Conrad, who too had chosen English as their literary language. How do you feel about such comparisons?

AH: I'm not particularly impressed by Conrad's language – it's pretty stiff and a bit deaf. But no one, apart from Shakespeare, has heard the melody of English the way Nabokov had. However flattering such comparisons may be, they are totally unrealistic. When, like Nabokov, I write forty books in two languages, amongst which there are several masterpieces and a whole lot of excellent books, such comparisons may be possible.

BK: Even as a successful tennis player Mónika Szeles could not get out of a habit of fetching her balls herself. I imagine that was a consequence of her starting a career in a context where one is required to do everything. Can you recognise yourself in this example?

AH: My job is simple: I think, I sit down and write. No one can do that for me. In a way, I'm doing it precisely because there is no space for anyone else in that process – there is an inherent sovereignty, a wonderful illusion of freedom, or at least autonomy, in the act of writing. There are however certain aspects of my professional career which require my having an agent. She is the one who has to deal with publishers and contracts, she attends receptions and dinners in New York and Frankfurt, so that I don't have to.

BK: What is the country which you came from known by in your new world? Was there anyone in your literary "family" who was of some help to you?

AH: It is known, unfortunately, by the war, the fall of Yugoslavia. Balkanisation is a word which has entered the English language and it implies decay, disintegration of a whole into frail units.

And as for my literary family, Danilo Kiš is my model. And I'm not talking just about his formal or intellectual influence. With his help I have managed to formulate ways in which literature can be ethically engaged.

BK: What are those ways?

AH: Kiš knew how to stand up to history and to engage literature ethically without resorting to lecturing or moralising. He knew how to adopt supranational traditions. His Advice to a Young Writer is essentially my ethical manifesto. His story Encyclopaedia of the Dead is an ethically perfect story. I learnt from Kiš that literature, at least in the last twenty years, is based on the sovereignty of the individual. Kiš's literature derives from an axiom that every life is unique and unrepeatable. This individual sovereignty is threatened and destroyed by totalitarian and genocidal regimes. It is threatened by any form of racism. An ethical engagement of literature aims to defend or establish that sovereignty in language.

BK: "People who have 'disappeared' make up the core of my literature and are a fundamental phenomenon of the 20th century," said Kiš. What is your thematic obsession? Would you be able to pin it down? What is the core of your literature?

AH: So far this has been transcultural displacement.

Chicago, February 1997.

BK: History is one of the pillars of your literature. I would say that you have a very open, atypical, almost friendly relationship with it. What is your view of history, as a space for manipulation, a search for the truth, the rule of the most powerful, a space of freedom?

AH: If history is the sum of all human experience, then literature is the story about that experience. There is a history – with a capital H – featuring large events, large persons, large numbers. Such History does not recognise me as an individual. We (you and I and people we know), as morally and intellectually defined individuals, are of no relevance to it, except maybe as some of its many victims. But the history I am interested in – and this history is not possible without literature – is the history of the individual. The importance of such history, its necessity, is established and confirmed in personal memories, language, story-telling.

BK: Would you then say that literature is a form of battle of an individual against history?

AH: There is no battle. Maybe a fight, an unfair fight in which the best possible outcome is survival, never a victory.

BK: John Irving, an American writer, once said that the only thing which equally disturbs the writers of fiction and historians is the fact that "the world is so poor and pathetic in its ability to usefully absorb its recent past." How does this sound to you, considering our part in the world's history at the end of the 20th century?

AH: Well, I'm not sure who we are. There is no us. I do not feel I belong to any community which cannot be defined by a list of individual names. I consider myself a Bosnian only because so many people I love and respect consider themselves Bosnians, because my growing up in Sarajevo and Bosnia is what defined me. However, given that I do not belong to any of the constitutive nations - nor would I, if I were living in Bosnia, have equal rights to those of members of the constitutive nations - for me Bosnia is a geographical and emotional location. But, as a fallacy of a state which includes overtly criminal creations such as Republika Srpska, as a cynical, criminogenic, triple-headed nationalistic structure which enables those in power to openly steal from their own people, Bosnia is as alien to me as is Saudi Arabia. And I am an American too, because the American experience has also defined me significantly. But America is no better – I am constantly embarrassed for being a part of this America as it is today.

As for our part in history, someone will at some point realise that many global trends in history began with the war in Bosnia or were made more apparent through it. Take, for example, Bosnia as a historical creation whose infrastructure is completely destroyed, as a country which not only does not function but is run by people who never wanted it to start functioning, because the moment any kind of law and order is established, when that criminal-political elite is broken down, when the market starts operating, when the rich start paying taxes, the blatant exploitation of its people will have to stop, the infrastructure will have to start developing. The Bosnian political model enables continued plundering and, as such, can for example serve as a model for Iraq. Iraq will stay the way it is now for at least several generation, and so will Bosnia, like so many countries in transition. The war was just a convenient occasion, a way to break down the country's infrastructure. Modern capitalism feeds on weak countries and broken-down infrastructures. Bosnia is an ideal patient of the new world order, an excellent example of a weak, awfully regulated country which is therefore a perfect market for the epidemic of new capital.

BK: Not just in your first book, but also in general, you often use two motifs which are like threads weaved into the fabric of your literature. Spies and beekeepers, espionage and beekeeping. Is there a deeper meaning to this?

AH: I've always been interested in espionage. I find spy stories interesting: spies have complicated identities, they are characters in their own invented stories. In spy terminology, "legend" is an invented story of their earlier life, which I find fascinating, because my own earlier life sometimes seems to me like an invention. Besides, spies are somehow more real than other, so-called ordinary people, and the world which is constantly persuading itself that life without lies is possible. I find that very interesting, this situation where you keep trying to do "normal" things so that no one would recognise you for what you really are.

And as for beekeeping, that is one of the myths of my family. Beekeeping has a sentimental value for me, and it is also a legacy of a world where such kind of labour had its value.

Chicago, February 1997.

BK: Humour in your books seems like a combination of our local and English sense of humour. It is as though you have a built-in parachute which somehow cushions the "roughness" so typical of Sarajevo. As if you are trying to keep your cool whilst expecting a burst of laughter at the other end. Do you do it intentionally or does it come naturally to you?

AH: Well, I'm not sure about the English humour bit. I don't actually know what English humour is – Shakespeare's humour is very different from Monty Python's. I see my humour as a certain Eastern European, perhaps Slavic, Chekhovian sensibility. This was best described by Nabokov who said that Chekhov's books are sad books for humorous people – only a reader with a sense of humour can really appreciate their sadness. Sarajevan humour is, I think, unique, practically ingrained in the language, and it is often cruel – it tends to be based on insults and humiliation and provocations. By the way, Chekhov is my ethical idol: for him humanity is a state of constant but pardonable imperfection.

BK: One of your characters, when asked about his nationality, says "I'm complicated." In another text about Danilo Kiš, in answer to a typically local question "Which nationality does he belong to?" you say, "Mine". You also talk about your Ukrainian origins. At the same time, you had a column in Sarajevo called The Sarajevo Republic. What's the story with your identities?

AH: My identities are numerous and varied. Every reduction of identity to either national, racial or sexual is a violence against an individual. Every human being is made of layers of identity and that is what constitutes an individual, this

unrepeatable combination of layers. Ideological formations – state, nation, class – establish themselves as legitimate through a forceful assumption of the right to identify individuals, and every resistance to that process authorises them to include you in that formation by identifying you as illegitimate or illegal. Hence the multiplicity of identities is not only an ethical but also a political position – I want it to be my right to determine who I am and what I am.

Chicago, 2002.

BK: They say that, when they asked Einstein if he carried a notepad for writing down his thoughts, he said that he does not carry a notepad and does not write anything down because "thoughts are so rare." How do you write? Do you type it directly on a computer or is there a process that precedes it?

AH: The main part of creating a story goes on in my head. Some of the stories I wrote were written seven or eight years after the original idea appeared in my mind. I believe it was Kiš who said that he started writing only after he managed to overcome his repulsion for literature. I start writing only when I can no longer bear not to write, when I overcome my resistance towards writing, including my repulsion for literature. I then write with a fountain pen and I write fast and never read what I write until I'm done writing. After that I type it on the computer, and I sometimes leave out dozens of pages, and sometimes I add things that did not occur to me until that moment. And every time I write, there comes a point when I feel the story or book is terrible, I don't have a clue about what I'm doing and, at that precise moment, I know I will finish what I'm doing and it will be different from what I'd written before. In the entire process of writing – which induces a certain state of trance, a sense of an intense presence in the world – the most pleasant phase is when I'm cutting out things after I decided the story or book is completed.

BK: Does your writing require any particular conditions? Peace, space, people, atmosphere?

AH: Loud music and a certain amount of coffee are my only conditions. This can be in a bar, in a house full of people, and it can be at six in the morning, when everyone is asleep. It has to be in a city, not for the writing itself but for afterwards. When I'm in the deepest trance, I can write for about four-five hours a day. But when I'm done writing, my body is so flooded with adrenalin that I cannot sit still, I need human masses and bars and the urban intensity. I once went to a writers' colony in the state of New York: total peace, birds, does and other living things. There was an apple tree underneath my window and the silence was such that I could hear an apple fall off the tree. I nearly went crazy there. After spending three to four hours writing I would be overcome by such an adrenalin rush that I had to make some Brazilian writer play table tennis with me for two-three hours, until this crazy tension wore off. But the poor guy soon started avoiding me. Anyway, I had to chuck away everything I wrote there, it was no good.

BK: I remember a morning few years back, in Sarajevo. We were sitting in a café (the old gang from the radio) and the whole time we were there, we were trying to get you to come out and join us, but you didn't because you had to write a certain number of pages. Is this some kind of rule?

AH: I remember that too. Only it wasn't about the number of pages, there was a scene or a situation I just had to finish. When I immerse myself into this, I cannot stop writing until I'm done. I can't, for example, stop mid-sentence if I'm writing a dialogue, the conversation has to finish. Graham Green had a rule: six hundred words – two pages – every day. I can go for months without writing and I don't get worried because I think it is very important for a writer not to write sometimes. But when I start something, I have to finish it.

BK: Who is the first reader of your books?

AH: I am. But I the reader, not I the writer.

BK: How do you make that shift between the two identities, I don't suppose there is a switch you can press to transform the creator into an observer?

AH: Those aren't different identities, but different points of view. In a way, I write books which I as a reader would like to read. After all, I've been a reader for the past forty years and I've read hundreds, maybe even thousands of books, and I've written only four. My experience as a reader is much bigger and far more important and I don't find it difficult to imagine how my writing would seem to me, had I stumbled upon it as a reader. On top of that, I love meeting and talking to the readers of my books – which is not too difficult as there aren't too many of them out there – because it helps me understand how my writing appears to them. And there is rarely any radical difference in how I see my texts and how they are perceived by some anonymous reader.

From our trip for 'Lauzarus project' in 2003.
In converstation with one of the actors when we came across movie shooting in Lavov, Ukraine.

BK: Your second American book (Nowhere Man) is largely about a character which ended your previous book, Jozef Pronek. Like you, he arrives in America towards the end of January1992. How much of it is biographical and how much is fictional?

AH: Biography is irrelevant here. My imagination is such that I like best to embellish what has already happened – to me or to someone else. And when I start embellishing it, I don't stop until I believe in that character or characters, until I'm convinced that this sequence of events is real, that this world won't collapse the moment I step out of it. I truly don't recognise myself in Pronek. Moreover – and this might be dangerous – some of my memories with which certain parts of the book begin have been completely overwritten by what I wrote – they now belong to Pronek, not me. I can no longer remember what happened, I only know what I wrote.

BK: There is a character in this book, a nationalist and emigrant, a big time Serb, "son of a bitch who never pays his child support" whose name is Branko Brđanin, yet another character from our lives here, same name, same surname. He was working at the Youth radio in late eighties just as you were starting your career there. When you employ such "direct" technique, what is it that you hope to achieve?

AH: It helps me establish a relationship with the character, but that changes too. This character in the book in the end falls to pieces in his Serb-loving madness. The real Brđanin did not fall to pieces, unfortunately, and he is now managing a theatre or some other pseudo-cultural institution in Republika Šumska.

BK: Do you follow what critics write about you? Andrić once said that he had never read a single critique that he found useful. Abroad, along with an impressive collection of interviews, you can also find decent critical reviews of your work. Here, and especially in Sarajevo, (apart from praise for the success of being "one of our own" in the big world) there is next to nothing as far as critical reviews. Does this bother you or are you indifferent to it?

AH: I do follow what people write about me. On the one hand, I find it difficult to resist this vain urge, but on the other, critics are basically professional readers, and I believe it's important I know what my readers think, what they see, what con-

A view of the lake from the balcony of the house where he currently lives.

fuses them and what excites them. I am bothered by the absence of any serious critique in Sarajevo, but not because there isn't enough stuff being written about my work, but because it is a symptom of the weakness of Bosnian literature which, if you think about it, only exists within a very small circle of people, and any critique is inevitable reduced to friendly support or mean, personal attacks. I imagine literature as a public space where writers, readers, critics talk about things which are not defined or touched by other forms of art or public discourses. The absence of any serious critique is, in fact, only a symptom of a complete ethical and intellectual collapse of the public space in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

BK: You have a very pronounced interest in politics and you deal with it especially through your columns. American politics, Bush, these seem to be your favourite topics. Isn't this a waste of time for literature?

AH: For literature yes, of course it is. But I am not only a writer, I'm also a citizen, a person who is having to face, on a daily basis, the consequences of a moral and political disaster embodied by the Bush administration. After all, my displacement to America is a direct consequence of the political disaster in former Yugoslavia and Bosnia. I write columns for the newspapers partly because I then find it easier to eliminate rage from my literature. So there is therefore an occupational segregation between different forms of writing.

BK: What would you say is the key misconception of your generation? For my generation, for example, this was a belief that socialism or the social system in general "had its human face".

AH: There were many misconceptions, and some I'm not even ashamed of. The key misconception was, I think, our belief that there is a direct link between one's cultural knowledge and one's moral and ethical engagement – that someone who listens to The Clash or reads Shakespeare cannot be a Chetnik or a war criminal. Although this misconception is probably not unique to my generation. You know what half of the displaced (and not displaced) Sarajevo likes to think: the war was started and fought by rednecks, people who didn't listen to enough rock 'n' roll and didn't read enough books. I'm not ashamed of my having believed that reading books would improve one morally. But I would be ashamed to believe that now, or to think that the war was started by rednecks.

BK: In one of his interviews Doctorow (Edgar Lawrence) states that in America everything is arranged so as to draw the writer away from his work – a talk show in the morning, lecturing tours during the day and then creative writing seminars at university. How do you manage if this is indeed so?

AH: That's the price of a professional situation, and it can be overwhelming at times, but on the other hand I've travelled the world as a professional writer, I met many interesting people (including Doctorow, who is a wonderful man), I connected with Bosnians living abroad. As I said, I love talking to people, and I don't mind being in a situation which makes that possible. I also like lecturing – although I'm currently very careful about when I lecture and what I lecture, because that too is a situation of dialogue. I do not function well in isolation – either as a writer or as a person. Perhaps I'm like Mónika Szeles in that respect – I write in every situation and when I set out to write whatever it is that I have to write, nothing can draw me away from that. Not one of these books was written in ideal conditions – I was writing throughout the war and depression and divorce, through all sorts of lousy jobs, in bars, at airports, in hotels, always with the help of coffee and loud music.

BK: If I understood correctly, in the meantime you have completed two books? One takes place in Ukraine and Moldavia and the other in Chicago at the beginning of the 20th century. Is this correct and what are you working on at the moment?

AH: It's the same book – The Lazarus Project. The stories of Chicago and Eastern Europe intertwine, but everything is related to a 1908 incident when a chief of Chicago police, for the reasons unknown, shot a young emigrant, Lazarus Averbuch, a survivor of the pogrom in Chisinau who ended up in Chicago. The second book is a collection of stories I wrote as I was working on Lazarus, and it just piled up. I then collected some essays, articles and lectures I wrote in English, enough material for another book. So, I'm expecting to have three books published in the next few years.

BK: Finally, something similar to that famous BBC show where each guest is required to state their choice of music they would take to a desert island. So, which music, which books would you pack up if life were to take you to a place of solitude? Though I actually think a better question would be: which people would you wish to take with you to a desert island?

AH: I would of course take my wife and daughter and my parents and my sister and her family and a lot of friends from Sarajevo and some American friends too – enough of us to have a football league. This island would very soon become overpopulated. But for the moments of peace and solitude I would bring Bach, if not his collected works, then the St Matthew Passion. And Mozart, at least several piano concertos (21, 23 and 25). Also Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus and Miles Davis are all necessary in my life, and Ella Fitzgerald too. The Beatles – The White Album, Abbey Road, Revolver. As for books, Chekhov's stories are obligatory. Shakespeare, too. Plenty of poetry, but only a few poems by each poet – Dickinson, Yeats, Wordsworth, Larkin, Auden, Frost and many others whom I cannot exclude. What can I say? It would be very crowded.

Mirko Kovač and Daša Drndić

Stations of Memory

translated from Croatian by Graham McMaster

Daša Drndić: From the section that follows, it is obvious that you are preparing a rather extensive manuscript about your former individual and eternal Belgrade friends and colleagues with whom you lived through an exciting period in not only Serbian but also Yugoslav art, both in the fine arts and film as well as literature. Apart from Živojin Pavlović, whom else do you intend to bring to life, and why?

Mirko Kovač: I'd like to do a rather long book of memoirs, but something holds me back, and I don't myself know what it is. I admire those who are able to write memoirs, but for a novelist it's a difficult and often unsuccessful task. In his book of memories *Other Shores* Nabokov says in one place: "Mnemosyne dies in a cold room at the hands of the belle-lettriste". It seems to me somehow that I don't have the key to the writing of memoires. What I am doing now, what I am working on, I have tried to determine in genre terms like *anti-memoire,* employing this title or perhaps gimmick of Malraux's as a kind of key to make it easier. Under this heading perhaps I shall manage to conjure something up about the exciting times, but without sections that are really essays I wouldn't be able to do this. So I am combining the memoir and the essay in order to avoid one or the other genre on its own. Recently, in several instalments in *Feral*, I published my encounters with Andrić; some of my friends and readers think that these are just fragments, that there is a lot more behind them. That's the impression these writings give, that of sketches, for there is no whole. There's nothing I can do here. Even if I wanted to and were able to describe some extremely bizarre and lunatic affairs, I no longer want to, for many of these are now dead souls, and I don't want to trade in souls. What I write about late friends is only what I would be able to say about them while they were alive. And this is not enough for a book of memoirs. For example, about Kiš, there are many things I cannot write. We were close, there were no secrets between us, we confided our intimate stories to each other. I can't write about that. But if I were able to speak with him again, I would absolutely want to ask him why in his will he requested to be buried according to the Orthodox rites. In one piece, which will come out in this book of so-called memoirs, I wrote about this funeral, tried to explain it, put some unknown details into the piece, but I nevertheless sent it to Filip David to check, and he took all those private things out and told me that we cannot write even about what we would be able to tell Kiš if he were alive, and then if need be have it out with him. I mean to say that this will be a rather special set of memories, all of them plaudits, with just the occasional complaint. Only in very rare instances is truth dearer to me than a friend.

D.D.: In the piece about Živojin Pavlović you say that it's all the same to you what some of the people with whom you were very close some twenty or thirty or even forty years ago are doing now. I don't believe that you will be able to stop at this, although you write that you are lingering ever more gladly at the stations of memory. If we want to bring these stations of memory to life, I think it's impossible not to extend them to the moment we live today. You were not able to avoid this even in the article about Živojin Pavlović. For apart from your unblemished friendships with Filip David and Vidosav Stevanović, whom you still meet today, not to mention Kiš and Pekić, to whom you might be able to devote a book, there were all kinds of adventures and discussions here, conflicts and reconciliations with people that ought not to be missed out in this kind of cross-section of an exciting cultural and political scene. There is Miodrag Bulatović, Branimir Šćepanović and Borislav Mihajlović-Mihiz; there is Dragan Jeremić, Slobodan Selenić,and Bora Radović; then there is Mira Trailović, and Vida Ognjenović, the living and the dead. And you have some great stories about Lordan Zafranović, the painter Radomir Reljić and many other painters. Then there is Branko Vučičević, and the famous Francuska ulica 7 in various "uniforms" and costumes. Lord, how many days and nights, how many raised voices, bottles drunk, how many *shrewd* (using a non-Croatian word) anecdotes, revolts, big and little battles lost and won. You can write a really major work. For the thirty-year-olds in Croatia today, these names mean little or nothing and yet they would have something to say to them.

M.K.: I think a bit earlier I expressed my doubts about this big book, this story of modern times, and I don't believe it will be written. Although I'm pleased you think I could do it, it's not feasible. I'd sooner write a novel. A novel releases you from the discipline that restricts memoir writing. As long as I don't start writing, I think it's a simple story, that I could tell in an evening, into a dictaphone or before a camera, but writing is something different, at least when it's done by someone who's a novel-writer by trade. In his excellent autobiography *Love and Exile*, Singer, at the beginning, in the foreword, says that only a "spiritual biography" is possible, but by the very act of writing "it becomes fiction resting on grounds of truth".

In the book I am now putting together many people are mentioned, including those you spoke about a just now, there is something of these times, but it is all in allusions hardly touched on. If I were to describe everything I had gone through with, for example, Miodrag Bulatović, being friends with him in the second half of the sixties, it would be a scandal of a book in which I would put myself in an awkward position, for how could I have taken part in certain things, even as an observer? He is a brilliant writer, with four marvellous books, but the rest is trashy and horrible, and forgotten today; no one in the Serbia that sent him crazy knows about him, won't hear about him, and he's been translated into about thirty languages - he himself didn't know how many. In Japan his novel *The Red Cock Flies to the Sky* has come out in paperback, with a print order of about a hundred thousand. I spent almost two months with him on Mt Vogel, in Slovenia. It was there he wrote his flop of a novel *War was Better*, and I wrote the screenplay for the film *Lisice*. We often took breaks to go by cable car to the last station, and then on foot, to the peak, which

if I am not mistaken is called Šije, at a height of about 1,800 m. One day we were sitting on the peak, lounging in the grass, when he suddenly got a fit of epilepsy, about which I knew nothing. I didn't know what to do, how to help him. He thrashed head and body on the ground, foaming at the mouth. We were alone at 1800 metres, nobody anywhere, and I was completely convinced he would die and that that would be the end. I mention this detail only to try to envisage to myself how and in what way this could be described, whether it is possible at all. Or one more event, if it's not too much of a bother for you. I was with Bulatović in Hamburg, at the promotion of the book *Hero on a Donkey*, which was a smash hit in Germany. After the launch and dinner, in the late hours, Bulatović said he would take me to a queers' night club. A translator from German was with us, I think he was called Vukić; I remember him because he always carried cured sausage in his briefcase, and every now and then he would take a bit out and take a bite. And now, we go into the club, up to the bar, order some drinks. There's a fellow behind the bar and Bulatović at once gets into conversation with him. Asks him what he likes, and the lad says that he likes paying for someone to get hold of his hair and bash his head against the wall or whatnot. Bulatović says he'll do it for free, takes the lad by the hair and bashes his head against the bar. The boy is bleeding from the nose and I'm expecting some commotion, but the lad just repeats "Noch, noch, noch!" Bulatović furiously bashes his head on the bar. I'm shaking from some kind of distress, some terrible feeling, and shout out hysterically that we have to get out of there. And the three of us set off, but out of some shady compartment comes a vast, muscular guy. I think, oh, here's trouble, now we're going to get thrashed, but the guy turns to Bulatović, politely, even humbly, gives him his card, and says that he had watched the scene at the bar with a lot of pleasure. These are just a few examples, and with Bulatović alone I had a hundred things happening, but it seems to me I can't put them in a book, for my problem is writing. I expect something very different from writing, and these are just stories, anecdotes perhaps. What has no value as art doesn't interest me. If you want to know, sincerely, reading doesn't interest me either. I mean, I don't care whether someone will read my things. I write for writing's sake. I write because I can no longer run away from it. Memoirs *are* read, but usually they don't have any very great value as art, not even those of Malraux. Perhaps just a few books of memoirs have gone over this border: the memoirs of Knut Hamsun, considered to be a masterpiece; Singer's autobiography; the Marquez book *Living to Tell the Tale,* and perhaps a couple more I can't recall at the moment.

D.D.: I would think that there was no socialising of the same intensity and high charge at that time in Zagreb. If you agree, why do you think it is so? If you don't agree, then what did this socialising look like from a Belgrade viewpoint?

M.K.: I have lived in Belgrade and in Zagreb, and at one time, while I was writing for films, I lived half and half between Belgrade and Zagreb. Personally, I liked Zagreb more, it wasn't such hard work as Belgrade; often I took cover in Zagreb and recovered from Belgrade. In those years Zagreb was a province, culturally speaking. Nothing was happening, not on any level. There were gifted people, consider-

able names in the arts, but it was all somehow just dying down in itself, if I can put it like that. It was all slow, boring, resigned. There was also fear, of good and of bad. In Belgrade there was theatre, literature, conflict, the Black Wave, books and performances and films were being banned. Modernists and realists were slugging it out, and we later came upon the scene. There were heated arguments, heavy drinking, dissipation. We hung around the pubs till morning. Some cafes like Zmajko at Bajlonijeva, Tabor at Kalenić Market, Posljednja šansa and Skardarlija worked all night. When I came to Zagreb, well, if you didn't get a bite by ten in the evening, you had to stay hungry. Belgrade had the Documentary Film Festival, Bemus, the music festival, BITEF – in Belgrade you could watch six hours of Bergman's staging of Strindberg's *Way to Damascus,* then FEST, first nights, Atelje 212 and so on. If you wanted to see some Zagreb friends, you didn't actually have to go to Zagreb, they were in Belgrade because of all these goings-on in the arts. I think there was a kind of resignation in Zagreb. They felt left out, which led to a sense of powerlessness; they couldn't undertake anything, organise anything, and in terms of the arts it was a desert. There was no desire even to compete with Belgrade; it was easier and more convenient to go there and see everything. The first film that experienced political problems, which was produced in Zagreb, was a film for which I wrote the screenplay, *Lisice – Handcuffs*. Screening of it was forbidden in Belgrade, and that's where the confrontation started. It couldn't get anywhere in Belgrade, but in Croatia it got all the prizes and was pronounced one of the few best films ever made in Croatia. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean that some sort of winning-back-liberty started in Croatia with me. I am far from assigning myself any kind of importance, but from the beginning of the seventies this Croatian resignation gradually turned into confrontation, which was very good and positive.

Things are very different today. It can't all happen so fast; yesterday independence began, Zagreb became a cultural centre, and if there is nothing of real value yet, there is still potential. The weakness of Croatia is that they talk a lot and that's where it peters out. There's something of that Mediterranean chatter, it's all some empty *chiacchiere*; they don't get to grips with serious themes, with what they've lived through, but use it all up facilely in small talk. I don't recall who it was who said that the worst are those cultures and peoples that are "participants in evil at the same time as when they're victims".

D.D. : Since you live in Rovinj, from that position on the outskirts, that is, outside the centre of the Croatian arts scene in the broadest sense, how much does it seem to you lively, argumentative, avant-garde? Why, or why not?

M.K.: If the Croatian arts scene were, as you say, lively and avant-garde and argumentative, I'd probably know it even though I live in Rovinj, because I don't live in isolation. Something nevertheless gets through to me, but what gets through from the Croatian, i.e. our arts scene is not lively or avant-garde. There have been some arguments, but I can't recall about what. Ah, yes, I recall, something about some prizes, someone refused some prize or something, and some people said it was an act of morality while others moaned about the cash. Quite recently there was something

about prizes again. And yet, there are some nice books, and good writers, even some marvellous things like the periodicals *Europski glasnik, Tvrđa, Gordogan.* There are many people who are fantastically devoted to their job, but then some others appear who do the best they can to frustrate those who are doing something. There's always been on the Croatian cultural scene, probably like elsewhere, a parallel and destructive opposition to things of worth. As soon as someone succeeds, not only in art, an alarm goes off, he's got to be toppled, made an ordinary petit bourgeois, and if you've worried him or hurt him, you can gloat over it. Perhaps these are the laws of small nations, for small nations, as Kundera puts it, are just one family and everyone knows everyone else. Perhaps something is happening in the theatre, without my knowing; in film, there is almost nothing of any note, we are way behind Bosnian film, all the time saying when some Bosnian film gets an Oscar or a Golden Bear, this or that prize, that it's a Croatian film too, for some of our actors have taken part, some producer invested something. It's true, but we still don't have any films. In Croatia there's a fear of real things, and a constant flight to the superficial and the trivial. This society is shocked to the core by a list of former secret police, but only at the level of gossip, not as a real theme. There is no book, film, performance about the many dramatic fates of the secret police and the police informers and so on, but there's loose talk in the cafes – "You don't say, he worked in UDBA too, who would have guessed?" And none of it is relevant, it all just dissipates, who cares, empty patter, empty chatter.

D.D. : How are things in Montenegro? As far as I see, you are working very vigorously with the country, or at least with some people in it.

M.K.: I have to admit that I don't know the political or cultural circumstances in Montenegro, I don't follow them enough to be well informed. I've been outside the country a long time. The year before last I was there for the first time in twenty years. I've got a bit involved now as far as it is possible from this distance. I keep up some contacts, more so than when I lived in Belgrade. What I would like now is somehow to take part in the process of Montenegro becoming independent, which won't be very easy, because the Montenegrins are divided by their feelings of ethnicity, some Serbs are more Serbian than Serbs, others are Montenegrins more than they need be. Among some there is that state-forming awareness connected with Serbia, while among others, there are the traditional Montenegrin values. Pro-Serb Montenegro follows everything that comes out of Belgrade blindly, even if it's only evil, which it was during the time of Milošević. Montenegrins went to war, destroyed Dubrovnik, because they were following the will of Belgrade. That pro-Serb Montenegrin lot don't distinguish good from evil, because someone else is thinking for them. If it is fascism, as it was with Milošević, they will take it. This pro-Serb lot in Montenegro disseminates Serbian nationalism, intolerance for others and minorities; it's low on the moral scale, below any criterion of humanity. This subordinate stratum has completely abandoned the old Montenegrin virtues, like heroism and manliness. It is hard to be with such people, but I still believe that there are many more of those who want to renovate Montenegrin statehood and that they will somehow get beyond the influence of Serbia, so fatal in the past.

D.D.: Still, it's not that you have no idea who is publishing what in Belgrade and who is at work politically and artistically. Filip David, yes, I use an already done-to-death phrase, is the moral exemplar of the Serbian cultural and political scene, and you are in contact with him all the time. If nothing else, he informs you about the curiosities of the place. The curiosities of this place, Croatia, are known to us, but for readers of other former-Yugoslav milieus, you can say a bit more about it if you want.

M.K.: Dašenka, I don't know what to do with this question. Perhaps I'm a bit tired with questions. Perhaps something else might, in small quantities, be added. How the Herzgovinans, for example, adored Gojko Šušak, and they know that his mother was a Montenegrin, and then the gusle players sang that he was refined, from a good home, smart, brilliant, a wonderful general, then the last lines went approximately, "and then Stane his marvellous mother / if not from our side, but the other".

Taras Kermauner and Boris Novak

On communism and nationalism, literature and politics, Slovenia and Yugoslavia, pain and God

translated from Slovenian by Erica Johnson Debeljak

Boris A. Novak*: Despite the generational difference, we have a common heritage: your childhood and youth were also marked by the radical political engagement of your father, one of the best known Slovenian leftist intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century. Although Dušan Kermauner was one of the founders of the Slovenian Communist Party, the Party later marginalized him, probably because they could not fully trust critical intellectuals. In your autobiographical books, you have written a great deal about the long-term influence that your father had on the formation of your own fundamental characteristics. How, from today's perspective, do you see the paradoxical, dramatic, and probably tragic fate of your father? Allow me to publically say here that, during the Second World War, your father saved my cousin, Leo Čepič, who we used to call Moric in family circles, then barely out of childhood, from death in a German concentration camp. For that reason, I feel a sentimental gratitude to your father, though I never met him personally.*

Taras Kermauner: My self-reflection, the backbone of my thought process, relies on radical self-criticism, and also on the critique of the ideas, stances, and

people that I value. As a child I adored my father, as an adolescent I rejected him, and later I found him difficult; when he died, I was relieved, because an unpleasant burden had fallen from my heart. I will never have a serene relationship with my father; he defined me too much, hurt me too much. Only now when I'm as old as he was at the time of his death do I dare to admit that he never liked me. I was not a child who was easy to like; but I fear that he couldn't – and didn't – like any child. He couldn't tolerate children. He wanted to have listeners and followers. I, of course, knew how to be an excellent listener – I listened to the playwright, Ivan Mrak, for hours and hours in total silence – but a follower never. Because the Party expelled my father before the war, he no longer had people to lead. The Party, which jailed him after the war, so pressured and disoriented him that he no longer knew who or what to serve. He resorted to historical positivism, to the archives, to information and facts; but this didn't satisfy him. By nature he was a man of faith and, by preference, a prophet.

Because I am similar to him, I try to succeed where he failed; also in the role of a prophet. He assumed this role when he was twenty years old as the Party made every member a prophet; between the wars they were like members of an apostolic elite. I, on the other hand, needed half a century to find the proper role and stance of the prophet. In the same way that he was an absolutist, I was reticent; I clung to relativism, search, destruction; I searched with myself and reconstructed myself until the very end. I wanted to go through all of his defeats, I wanted to consciously absorb them, experience them, think them through, and then turn them around so I could achieve what he did not: not a victory over surroundings and society, but a victory over myself, over my lack of faith.

Was my father my primary competitor? Maybe; it is possible to think that this is true. I did not like him, but I always loved him. He is my consciously accepted destiny; I need to achieve his redemption. Not an easy task, as he was strongly unhappy, and experienced the maximum lack of redemption in his life. He lived defeat. Thank God that my redemptive theology allowed me an exit from the binary opposition of life-death, defeat-victory. Or else I would have remained trapped in the hellish circle created by my father and the Party. Many people do not understand how I am not an anti-communist. I am not because I conquered both my hatred and my love for my father. I went through both passions-emotions and came out on the other side. To a place where the Party can no longer define me. To a place where I am free in my redemptive God. To a place where I am his co-creator, which is the only proper freedom, as God exists beyond the world and oppositions that restrict man to cyclical thinking.

In Buchenwald, my father saved more than a few lives, mostly young people. After the war, some of them paid him back with interest, naming him as a Gestapo agent. Because he was not trained in the art of stoic scepticism, and too anchored in the naiveté of Marxist and domestic Slovenian eschatology, he was injured by human nature; he was mortally wounded when his then friends and colleagues completely ostracized him. (Only three remained loyal to him, and they deserve mention here: Vlado Kozak, Stane Krašovec, and France Klopčič.) We must not for-

get that the Party was not suspicious of everyone; some bought off their suspicion by becoming reliable executioners of their comrades. When the Ljubljana political police interrogated me in 1958 and 1959, a former Dachau inmate headed the organization; this was the same fellow who personally interrogated Veljko Rus.

My father spoke very little about his memories of Buchenwald; it was too painful for him. Allied bombs killed his last friend, an inmate, when he was picking turnips in a field near Weimar. When they brought in the shattered body parts of the dead, Dušan took into his hands each head, each torn apart and bloody piece of the many bodies, in order to find his friend and put him back together again. In fact, it's strange that people who experience such things do not go mad.

For me, the German killing camps have been a central theme since I was small; since the summer of 1945 when I waited day after day in Congress Square for the truck that would bring my father back from Germany. Does it not seem unusual, characteristic of one-dimensional Slovenian anti-communism, that there were so many plays written on the theme of the Dachau trials and the post-war jails, but so few about the German camps? For home guard writers, the camps to which Rupnik's men sent the partisans do not exist nor do the Germans or the occupation. Today's Germany echoes with self-critical self-reflection about the German persecution of the Jews and the concentration camps; did Slovenians not persecute Jews? We were also responsible for the liquidation of Jews during the war. As long as we attribute all the guilt to the masters – to the Germans – then we are serfs. A serf is always innocent because he is, by definition, not the responsible party. Only when we renounce the values of Purity that inspired Fascism, and the Innocent-Victim paradigm that inspired hypocrisy, do we have the possibility of becoming free autonomous individuals.

B.A.N.*: In the book of memoiristic essays* Zdrobljena zrcala *[Shattered Mirrors] (1981), you described with great literary attention the atmosphere of the first post-war years in Ljubljana. You wrote about the friends of your youth and their intense personal, intellectual, and spiritual maturation in the midst of a gray socialist society demanding subordination to one over-riding truth. Because those years, in many ways, defined your relationship to the world, in which your deep critical stance is most characteristic, I would ask you please to briefly describe your internal turbulence during these decisive years.*

T. K.: Here I would just like to point out a few details about the post-war era. I wonder: was the socialist society of that time really only gray? It was gray, but not only gray. The journalistic-political style-world was bland, tortuous, boring, one-sided, subservient, and without inspiration, but it did not succeed in suppressing all other elements. Communism was not only Stalinism; it also emerged from a grand dream of humanity after and about the New World. The Soviet model dried up that dream and made it rigid, and yet under the pressure of violent dullards, a certain vitality and determination flourished. The youth brigades were more than just Polpot-like exercises. They were an explosion of will, enterprise, force, mostly collective. It is probably safe to say that Slovenians never experienced such com-

munal pride before this time, at least the portion of the population that was victorious, and that was the majority, or at least the most visible. May 1 parades and similar performances were not just bad theatre and caricature. For me and my friends, Primož Kozak and Dominik Smole, they were almost exclusively absurdity, violence, caricature, but this was not true for everyone. Today we forget about the variety immediately after the war; this means that we ourselves use standards that are too one-sided, black-and-white, dry. While such simplification was understandable at the time we were fighting against the Party, it is a shortcoming today; anti-communism is simply a weaker reproduction of anti-Fascism.

It is true that the Party as a totalitarian instrument narrowed, squeezed, and reduced me; I dedicated decades to hating it and to hating communism. Whoever is oppressed preserves his interior life by hating. And yet if I look at the post-war years in that first light, I am grateful to the Party for giving me such a tough upbringing. It didn't want to perform that role, but it did, because I managed to harness it. It broke my father and many others; which is another thing. They were probably too close, too sincere as believers. But I, in contrast, always maintained an ironic distance to everything and everyone, even to myself; my attitude has troubled many because they think I am playing the clown. For me, being a clown means that every object is devalued, impugned, made into an object of mockery; even myself. If I am allowed to make fun of others, which I like doing, then I must – most of all – make fun of myself. In much of my work, I didn't take myself seriously. Is it necessary to take the world seriously? I take seriously only God and man, who is His co-creator: man in God. Man as an expression of nothing deserves mockery, humiliation, contempt (also self-contempt). Less pity; I dislike pity because it reveals that the one who pities does not respect the object of pity, views him as powerless. That is a feudal relationship that I reject. I take my fellow man to be so strong that he is worthy of mockery and also of hard blows. This is why my mentors were Ivan Mrak and Vitomil Zupan, hardly sentimental humanists, but rather arrogant and self-aggrandizing. I knew Zupan more intimately than others did, and I know that in his heart he was an extremely modest man. But, of course, not in front of others.

From the perspective that I describe it now, the post-war era was also full and rich. Am I allowed to say that it was more real than today? Even less gray despite – today's – seeming – shimmering and glamorous images of simulated pluralism? Then, every act of resistance against the authorities was a real act, an act of courage, risk, power. Everything can be looked at from many perspectives.

B.A.N.: *You experienced the years of your intellectual and personal maturation with a generation of comrades with whom you fomented an essential break in Slovenian cultural life after the Second World War. You were the main theorist, the thinker, the "ideologue" of the literary generation that introduced existentialism to Slovenia (first in its Sartrian and then in its Heideggerian variation). Your first book is dedicated to the creativity of this generation of colleagues:* Trojni ples smrti *[Triple dance of death] (1968). It gives a dramaturgical-philosophical analysis of three plays: Dane Zajc's* Otroka reke *[Children of the river], Gregor Strniša's* Samorog *[Unicorn], and*

Dominik Smole's Antigone. *From today's perspective, how do you look at your literary-theoretical and sociological methods of that time? And how today do you evaluate the achievements of the authors that then, at the beginning of your journey, you interpreted according to existential principles? I am thinking of Strniša, Zajc, and Veno Taufer among poets, Lojze Kovačič and Peter Božič among prose writers, and Smole and Primož Kozak among playwrights.*

T. K.: Just as my contemporary work is inaccessible, unreadable for almost all Slovenian readers – some of my books sell at most twenty copies – so was the work of this generation at that time. This claim seems almost incredible in the current environment. Zajc, for instance, is now considered a classic; he and a few others are idolized by RTV and others in journalism, but only superficially, manipulatively, reductively to the detriment of their art. In the mid-1950s, the then literary-cultural-critical pre-eminence, Filip Kalan, stated that there was no real difference between Zajc, Strniša, Taufer, Božič, Šeligo, etc; that they could not be distinguished from each other because all of their poetry and plays were so bland, gray, flat, impersonal. He claimed that I lined them up and told each of them what to write about; that it was all just ideology and chaos. Kalan had no idea how much hard work we all did together and each of us separately as individual personalities; how we had to develop our own individual positions and how much critical attention we dedicated to each other. Without the people you mentioned, I would not be who I am and I am grateful to them.

B.A.N.: *Please refresh our memory about your experience at* Revija 57 *[Review 57] and its theatrical auxiliary* Oder 57 *[Stage 57] where you even tried your hand as a director – for example, in the original production of* Otroka reke.

T. K.: At *Oder 57*, I developed a method of working that was very important to me and that I strived to bring to realization there; this method required a special relationship among collaborators: co-fertilization, co-maturation, radical openness: "monastic dedication" to a shared goal. I was able to realize this vision more fully with my colleagues at *Oder 57* (than, for example with those at *Perspektive*): that is, my religious-cultural-moral vision of a community of equal co-creators, made up of autonomous and free individuals; I described that model in theoretical discussions in *Perspektive*.

B. A. N.: *You were one of the main players at* Perspektive *and, during the last year before its forced political closure, its editor-in-chief. Unlike some of your then colleagues and co-combatants, you still have a positive evaluation of this publication that had such crucial artistic and intellectual influence in Slovenian circles.*

T. K.: The Party behaved as usual after the war: self-satisfied, all-powerful, dilettantish. It violently destroyed something that in any case was on the brink of internal self-destruction. Neither those who were politically oriented or those who were culturally oriented did not understand this. As a result of this, Jože Pučnik had to emigrate in order to avoid a second jail sentence. Janko Kos continued the battle against ludism, Tomaž Šalamun, with his *Poker*, along with Zlobec, took on

the role of Josip Vidmar and other cultural personalities who had provided cover for the Party. Zajc and Smole persisted in their desperate nihilism, Božič and Marjan Rožanc with ludism, Šeligo reduced Strniša's religious magism to new age; each went his own way. And that's how the last great era of Slovenian culture began.

B.A.N.: *You were one of the first in Slovenian cultural life to be inspired by the fertile impulses of structuralism. For some time, it has seemed to me that the analyses that you wrote in your structuralist period – if I may call it that – were closest to Roland Barthes since you, like him, opted for a more open reading rather than a rigid thought system. Your structuralist phase culminated in a radical defence of the neo-avant-garde poetic and artistic experiments in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s. With deep conviction and persuasiveness, you provided theoretical support to that era's young artists. The book* Na poti k niči in reči *[The path to nothingness and things], with the subtitle* Porajanje reisma v povojni slovenski poeziji *[The emergence of reism in post-war Slovenian poetry] came out the same year as* Trojni ples smrti*; it is dedicated to an analysis of Marjana Kramberger's* Pesmi *[Poems], Šalamun's* Poker*, Franci Zagoričnik's* Agamemnon*, and the poetry collection* Lakota *[Hunger] by Braco Rotor. With biting irony, you defended OHO before the "guardians of tradition", and above all you defended the radical research into language and poetics of Iztok Geister Plamen, and the provocative poems of the then youngest generation of poets, Milan Jesih and Ivo Svetina who then built autonomous, imaginative worlds within a liberated language. You launched and theoretically grounded the concepts of reism and ludism. Reism was more or less submerged into OHO, and ludism – thanks to you more than anyone else – became an epochal spiritual-historical marker and, in the linguistic sense, the most innovative and radical literary movement characterizing Slovenian literature from the 1960s to the 1980s and reaching its peak with early Šalamun (in which ludism has an extremely rebellious ambition), the early Dušan Janović and Jesih (I need only mention his brilliant play* Grenke sadeži pravice *[Bitter fruit of justice] as an example of "bright ludism"), and Emil Filipčič (where the commitment to the principle of the game opens up the abyss of existence which is why I call it "dark ludism"). Would you please look back at this artistic and social phenomenon, your then unreserved support of these movements and your later, no less dramatic, rejection of ludism?*

T. K.: The difference between Hegel as articulated in my - our Sartre-Marxism in *Perspektive* (namely the merging of existentialism and neo-Marxism, Heideggerianism and the Frankfurt school) and the ideas from the second part of the 1960s when other philosophical theories, such as those of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, which started to prevail, is primarily that structuralism negates the global universal Hegelian history and limits it to epochs and various episystemes, as Foucault called them, in his decisive book *The Order of Things*. With my reception-reinterpretation of Heidegger's being between the years of 1955 and 1964, I reformulated Hegel's dialectics of structures and movements. The structuralism of Levi-Strauss, which I studied in detail, allowed me to understand that there is no exit from linear thinking, or rather there is no entry into Divinity-Otherness, unless there is an exit

from linearity; first from Hegel's linear though dialectical history, then from epochal history, the history of epochs, individual *episteme* with key status, that function like contingency in Popper's neo-positivism, or even as a regression in the cyclical thinking of magical-mystical societies from the time before Judaism and Christianity. New age forced this sort of thinking forward in a number of variations.

I explained the work of reists and neo-avant-gardists and promoted it in literary life. As a critic and rebel, I had a strong influence on the literary life of that time. I entered this world from within, many of my books on reism came from this place, and thus I helped in the decisive spread of post-modernism. But that position was only one of my roles-existences, while for reists and ludists, such as Šalamun, Marko Pogačnik, Geister, Zagoričnik, etc, it was the only one. I was and wanted to occupy all the many roles-existences that define man; or as many as possible. My exemplary model, called *homo multiplex*, is exactly that. I had to think through the consequences of reism, above all with an insight about the end of metaphysics, art, beauty, linearity, etc. This insight was advanced during the second half of the 1960s by Rastko Močnik and Slavoj Žižek as well as by Dušan Pirjevec and myself. I was mostly committed to the literary production of young-new writers.

The period from 1964 to 1975 was the last big Slovenian cultural era, because in a fresh-innovative and also creative – although we didn't like that word – manner, we revealed the end not only of feudal society and thus the Church, but above all, the end of metaphysics, linear thinking, and after that also of cyclical magism. And that's how I departed from reism, for example, with Rudi Šeligo.

B.A.N.: *The next question touches on a very painful theme: your brother Aleš and his suicide. If you do not want or cannot talk about this, I will withdraw the question from the interview.*

T. K.: On one level, my brother Aleš was my *alter ego*. He was the person I loved most in my life. He was radical, he understood reism authentically, not as a game, not as something post-modern, not a simulation, but in an almost religious way as the actual transformation of man, who is a humanist, into a thing that is redemptive. He took his life with total serenity. His face, when he lay on the bed that he specially set up for it, was tranquil and almost childish. The message was that he departed a world of nothingness-mud-restlessness for a world of redemptive clarity.

Perhaps the suicide of my brother is my greatest guilt-sin. Jože Javoršek experienced the suicide of his son differently, he accused others; Pirjevec, etc. Thus Javoršek ceased to be creative. He became a servant of the re-totalizing Party founded on the hatred of the other. Tone Pavček lamented the suicide of his son, but I did not notice in his writing anything that suggested self-reflection, much less self-criticism. I have always written that I was in part responsible for my brother's death. My brother was like a son to me, I raised him, our father wanted nothing to do with him. Aleš was only two years older than my first son. Up until a certain period, Aleš was my son. I would not like to pathetically claim that I was the only one responsible for my brother's death; that would be exhibitionist excess. But I will not speak about the guilt of others; let me only deal with myself.

In a special way, my brother took what I taught seriously, also what Pirjevec taught, while I understood it conditionally, already in the spirit of post-modernism, simulation, games. My brother believed it religiously, authentically, I virtually. Even today, I continue to believe that religious sentiment must be shaped-understood beyond the authenticity that is demanded by models of identity and duality. My brother was mistaken because he equated God with an identity that is beyond life; with death. From the standpoint of my redemptive theology, for which I needed some two decades or more after my brother's death to develop, it is necessary to go beyond the binary opposition of life-death. Suicide is not necessary to bring a person to the other side. Suicide is a possibility; it is the free decision of each individual. I do not recommend it, but I would not rule out the possibility of my wife and I, for example, opting for it, in the sense of euthanasia; we talk about that sometimes.

Aleš looked around him and saw too many unhappy existences, people living in fear, in indecision, in a lack of authenticity. Maybe he looked at me that way too. Aleš wanted to make the Thing real, to show a stoic and Buddhist neutrality toward life and death. Since he was little, he was able to take pain with an unbelievable serenity; he could hold his hand above a flame until the flesh on his palm burned, and not flinch. Since an early age, he had a deformity of the hips; hence he learned to live with pain. Aleš internalized the self-destruction of the *Perspektive* group, and also the logic suggested in the title of my book *Na poti k reči in niču* [Toward the thing and nothingness]. He decided that this would be his interpretation of the thing and nothingness: that he would be sovereign, indifferent to pain and fear, confront death in order to show that death is equally as (un)important as life.

From Aleš's suicide, I learned that that is not correct; that the life-death binary opposition (duality) is asymmetrical; that life is better than death because it gives a person the possibility to redeem himself from the other-nothingness. With his suicide, Aleš renounced this possibility. He transcended the cycle of thought-action. It was the internal comprehension of my brother's death that opened up the path to Christianity for me; a few months after my brother's death – the summer of 1966 – my wife and I had both of our daughters baptized.

Aleš died for me. He died instead of me. I had to confront this part of my destiny. His action might have become a terrible burden for me, and from his side a sort of violence, if I were not able to take that action and re-imagine it as something I could understand as mercy. With this death-suicide, I was graphically shown the consequences of the thing-nothingness duality that I taught, that I did not myself experience with radical commitment but more in the style of ludism-linguism-rhetoricity. If my brother had not died for me, I might have had drifted to the place where other ludist-epigones went; I have a tendency to relieve my situation, to cheat others, myself, fate, God. My brother prevented me from taking the easy way out. In this context, he was the religious sacrifice for someone else. Because I was that someone else and I radically felt that his death addressed-redeemed specifically and especially me, it defined and made possible my continued life. It delivered a challenge to me. It spoke clearly: if you do not, Taras, use my suicide to rethink

your life, to appropriately reinterpret it in the spirit of redemptive Christianity – that is how I deciphered the message of my brother's death – my death will have been in vain. Nothing will remain of it. To love nothing means to accept that nothing inside either man – or God – can redeem anything. That does not mean life, to be and yet to destroy everything which is claimed by the model-construct of identity and duality. This means nothing and destroys the self, *kenozis*, that you transform nothing into otherness. When I understood it in that way and also started to live that way, consciously from the mid-1970s onward, Catholically from the mid-1980s onward, redemptive Christianity from the mid-1990s onward, I was able to unburden myself of my guilt.

A person cannot redeem himself. I was redeemed – given the foundation for redemption – by my brother's death; it was an absolute commitment. I am not claiming that redemption can only take place as a result of such a radical act, a death sacrifice. Maybe it can also be done with leadership, imagination, life. It is in this way that Alenka and I strive each to redeem each other – and not just our own family community. The question is if the two of us would have been able to do this had it not been for the absolute identity-transcending act of Aleš.

My brother and I were twins, or at least that's how I interpreted our relationship. In order to be able to love him, that is to dedicate my existence to the thought of his death, I cannot be exclusively hateful to him, competitive, his co-destroying twin, nor the member of the pair that solves problems with the transition into de-realisation-simulation, as post-modern liberals would have it; rather I must conceive of myself and my brother in the relationship of other-otherness. My brother is therefore in my hands. I can be the God who redeems him, or the Devil who hurls into the abyss of nothingness. Each person has both possibilities. God gives him the task-mission to save someone and nothing with that.

B.A.N.: *In the second half of the 1970s, a rupture occurred in your relationship with the literary production at the time: your previous admiration of the endless linguistic imagination of the ludists and the radical linguistic constructions of the reists was replaced with a sharp criticism of "intertexuality". Looked at from the distance of time, your criticism of "intertextuality" was probably one of the first signs of the emptying of the neo-avant-garde package into a cliché that no longer offered fresh questions and answers, but rather reproduced endless possibilities opening within the language that, because of the failure to connect with real and actually lived experience, led to a dead end. Was your criticism of "intertextuality" perhaps one of the first signs of the beginning of the spiritual search that ultimately brought you to God?*

T. K.: Intertextualism was the name-title that I gave to the second generation of reists-ludists. The theoretical-ideological basis for this position could mostly be attributed to Aleksander Zorn. What follows from my response to your previous question is that I didn't accept intertextualism as something created by the reists of the first generation, OHO, etc. The first generation overturned the humanist superstructure, they discovered completely new perspectives with marvellous inspiration and imagination, they broke down barren of identities and created the

duality of the simulated world, Šalamun with the radical destruction of the identity of language, Zagoričnik with visual poetry, body art etc, the destruction of rigidity, closedness, the self-evidence of identity. Thus they opened up capillaries, little canals that led to the other side.

The second generation of ludists couldn't do that anymore. The break-through had been accomplished, and then it became necessary for ludists to search for transcendence, or at least somewhere else, or they would mechanically begin to repeat themselves, to babble, to be satisfied with endless reproduction. At that time, people began to look for a new ethism, or authentic social-personal morals. Just look at the plays of the 1980s: Žarko Petan's *Votli cekini* [Hollow coins], Denis Poniž's *Škof Hren* [Archbishop Hren], Tone Partljič's *Moj ata – socialistični kulak* [My father – the socialist kulak], Alenka Goljevšek's *Pod Prešereno glava* [Under Prešeren's head], also your *Vojaki zgodovine* [Soldiers of history]; that trend reached its peak with the return of the ethical intimate family as a value. This is something I revealed and confirmed in my analysis not only of your *Vojaki*, but also of your poems, when I wrote about the collection *Kronanje* [Coronation] and *Stihija* [Chaos].

This dilemma was clear to you. I supported you when I felt your artistic tendencies were close to me. The transition to faith in an other-otherness God is difficult. You confronted this in *Vojaki*, in which you subverted history for the benefit of the family, first in the playful tone of the play, and then in a scene of contingency based on a game of chance; in my analysis of your play *Hiša iz kart* [House of cards], I discussed especially the role-model of the joker. Contingency does not save, but it is a necessary condition for the proper relationship to the other, as contingency is one of the means of advancing nothingness. In your last play *Kasandra* [Cassandra], you question the ethical quality of the intimate family, you open it to tragic fate that not only destroys everything but also anticipates it; you understood vision as the clairvoyance of coming evil, catastrophe, the end. With this, you supported Zajc, *Voranc* and *Medea*, you offered the antithesis to Uršula from *Samorog* who is a clairvoyant that sees redemption; Uršula rethinks death as a miracle. When I had to rethink my brother's death and my guilt, Strniša's Uršula was a special model for me.

B.A.N.: *In the 1960s and 1970s, you and Dušan Pirjevec were considered, among a certain circle of curious young minds, the highest professional and ethical authorities in the search for and establishment of new paths in thought and writing. Your followers believed that your positions complemented each other well: Pirjevec's philosophical concentration as one of the essential themes of European philosophy of art, above all of the novel, and your fertile luxuriant lucidity, with which you reflected on contemporary literature, were well-suited to each other. In your later essays, you cast your friendship with Pirjevec into a somewhat different light, frequently making a theme of the differences between you. Please, for the purpose of this interview, give us some understanding of your intellectual and personal relationship with this remarkable character.*

T. K.: Pirjevec was not my teacher. We were friends since the beginning of the 1950s, for some time even the closest friends. On one level we were competitors,

on another colleagues, and in many ways he was an older brother to me – he was almost a decade older than me – but I also didn't agree with many of his positions. These are the main features and emphases of our relationship.

Pirjevec – this was most relevant in the 1950s and somewhat in the 1960s – also did not want to emigrate, although after his release from a post-war jail sentence, he became critical of the Party-authorities; I know this first hand because we told each other everything. I introduced him to my circle of friends and colleagues: Smole, Kozak, Rožanc, Rus, etc. I also got to know his family who then lived on the Ljublanica River behind the Red House. His wife, Marjeta Vasič, is still alive. You should do an interview with her; she has much to tell if she wants to. I remained in a friendly relationship with her for a long time and have especially good memories of the early 1950s.

Dušan and I both made a decision to support Slovenian identity, though each in a different way: he was an heir to Kalan and Zupan, having the intention of making Slovenian identity more cosmopolitan. After some years of engagement with Slovenian literature, he wrote an analysis of the world novel. It was no surprise that the young gathered around Pirjevec, he opened the door to the greatest, in Vidmar's footsteps, while I offered them the unknown and uncelebrated. Vidmar never fascinated me, though Pirjevec (and Štih) did to a great degree. Most of all, I wanted to compete with Mrak. Kocbek was not successful enough according to Pirjevec.

Pirjevec suffered because he felt his limits and was not able to transcend them. He did everything he could to enter the university and teach; he had a great gift as a professor. His greatest gift was as a revolutionary leader, however, a gift that he realized during the war with an extraordinary – quick, successful – military-political career. He knew that a Revolution becomes bureaucratized, State-ized, so he was Che Guevara *ante rem*, a bit of the Trotskyite. Just look at his pre-prison work *Ljudje v potresu* [People in an earthquake], a play that sadly was never staged, which I analysed in the magazine *Borec* [Fighter] at the end of the 1980s. Thus he sensed a higher ambition in himself; he did not want to become a bureaucrat of the revolution like Janez Vipotnik, Mitja Ribičič, Stane Kavčič, France Popit; he did not want to waste his life as an assistant to Edvard Kardelj. In the beginning, Pirjevec idolized Zupan and Ocvirk, but then he outgrew them. Before jail he was obedient to Zupan; after jail, he rejected all the idols and Zupan resented it.

Certainly, Pirjevec went farther than Kalan, Ocvirk, and Zupan, but when he came to the dilemma, God or nothing, he died. His body – his person – could not take the strain of deciding. He was stymied before the personal God, though he had the talents to transform himself from Saul – the persecutor of the Christians – into Paul. Despite it all, he remained in the literary-aesthetic circle, one of the masks-constructs of nothing as being. Perhaps staying with the being-aesthetics suited him not only because he knew this was an area where he could be relatively safe from interventions from Party-authorities, but also because this was what fascinated youth and students at the time. He could not resist this desire. But it became the reduced desire of the revolutionary to fascinate the masses, the class and nation, the whole world as proletariat. He eventually renounced this, as he knew

it was the wrong direction, but he could not renounce the enchantment itself. He found a replacement for the lost revolution with the students. He gave to them, he gave himself to them, but they captured him in their trap; he was aware of this.

Pirjevec felt a great guilt inside himself. It was explained in many ways, mostly in ways that did not benefit him. However, I can bear witness to the quality of his character. He began to have nightmares, mostly during the first decade after the war, because of all of his dead and killed comrades. This is a story from 1951. After a several day drinking binge, when we were both nervously-physically deteriorated, he told me at my home on Rimska Street about the horrors that pursued him. He wondered: Why did I remain alive, why me, and not my friends? Not my little sister Ivica, who in order to protect, I brought to Koroška with me, only to have her fall before my eyes? Not my friends Kostja Nahtigal, Dušan Bordon, Karel Destovnik-Kajuh, Cvetko Močnik, and countless others? Did I really do something that protected myself and exposed others? He dubbed himself the escaping lieutenant; but when I asked if that was true, Ribič's younger brother, who didn't particularly like Pirjevec, answered: No, it's not true, he was brave, though also cautions and wise. Is that a sin? Like Stane Semič-Daki, he was tormented by the sentence that Zupan coined about Partisans: the best have fallen. Therefore I was not the best, not the most sacrificing, not the most loyal. Therefore I survived on account of others. My answer: everyone survives on account of others. Myself, as well.

B.A.N.: *Your attitude toward institutions has been critical throughout, albeit, in your biography, also "tangential" if I may put it that way: whenever you approached some institution, you ended up escaping its centre. A typical example is your directorship of Ljubljana Drama. You are one of the few examples of a truly independent soul in the history of Slovenian culture. Given the fact that you had a large family, your stance no doubt required a great deal of courage in the social and economic sense, because an independent or freelance status meant great risk in the time of socialist poverty. Although times have changed, you function in much the same way today, You are a member of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences, but your books about the Slovenian theatre are still mostly self-published.*

T. K.: I have been in institutions enough to experience-test them from the inside. Only in this way could I find out what they truly are: a critique of the unattainable is hypocritical. I have declined many offers of high positions in Slovenian society, and, of course, after 1990, because I had suitable experience from before, specifically the directorship of SNG Drama. I decided that both paths were wrong; both are only generational variations that came later: either a revolutionary struggle against institutions or the long march through institutions. Both are political, the first being the model of exclusive dualities, the second vacillating between adaptation-servitude and adaptation-diplomacy. Both reinforce the current system of authoritarian society. The best path is that of the individual person who lives in society but only uses it as a means, though not merely as a means of egotistic privacy as is the case in the wild "natural" world of capitalism. I entered into institutions willingly, deliberately, as an experiment, and then I left them also consciously, deliberately – without panic.

B.A.N.: *It always seemed wrong to me that as someone who had some ten published books that, in the professional sense, far exceeded the level of many university professors, you still had to have your professionalism formally confirmed – through a doctorate – in Sarajevo. If there were any justice in the world, Ljubljana University should have given you a doctoral degree after the publication of your first books in the 1960s. Did being ostracised from academic circles hurt you? How do you see the problem of our universities today?*

T. K.: From the beginning, my relationship to the university was ambiguous, dual. On the one hand, when I was 25, I wanted to make a career in the university, teach students my ideas; I had many of them and they were different from what was taught at the university in the 1950s. (Pirjevec managed to succeed in this area, he had a lot of influence, and that was precisely what limited him.) On the other hand, I ended up in a radical conflict with the professor on whom my academic and social advancement was dependent: Boris Ziherl. And yet I wanted and prepared the ground for this conflict. As a result, I was excluded from the university, from a job as assistant. I was both punished and rewarded. For this reason, I also look at the Party from two perspectives: it's love-hate relationship toward me became – I engineered it for that reason– the means to my maturation into a free independent individual person.

Because I didn't remain at the university, I was forced to earn a living in various careers, which made me a self-made man. I became a translator, copy-editor, editor, dramaturge, director, clerk, headmaster, journalist, even a politician around the margins; to play-survive so many roles was a gift to me. I was in conflict with society at so many junctures; but those were the moments when I got to know it better – from inside. Comrades who were more inclined toward politics and revenge tried to convince me that I was the victim of a great injustice; thank God I didn't believe them. The blows of fate were also a gift for me, because I was capable of redirecting them. I wouldn't change places with my colleagues who stayed at the university; their job-career ended up limiting them.

That I got my doctorate from Sarajevo was thanks to my friend Juraj Martinović, a member of SAZU, and also a member of the Bosnian Academy of Sciences, later a mayor of Sarajevo, an extraordinary man, wise, professionally excellent, broad-minded, and tolerant. There are few such men.

B.A.N.: *The political-police pressure and ideological control in the former Yugoslavia were not evenly distributed and their focus changed over time. Today it is hard to imagine that Slovenia – from the mid 1960s onward was one the most "liberal" republics of the then federation – while in the second half of the 1940s (the Dachau and other show trials), in the 1950s (the closure of* Besede *[Words] and* Revija 57*), the first part the 1960s (with the political cancellation of* Perspektive*, the persecution of contributors, and the jail sentence for Jože Pučnik, etc), it was one of the main centres of repression. Even later, many forms of persecution were exposed. Probably that was one of the principle reasons for the intensive collaboration and numerous invitations to other intellectual centres in the former Yugoslavia, above all Belgrade.*

Because such connections are much rarer now that the federation has fallen apart, it would be that much more interesting to hear about your experiences in these nearby but so different spaces.

T. K.: I very much liked Serbs, or Serbian intellectuals. During the years I was not allowed to publish in Slovenian daily newspapers – today I don't want to, then I was not allowed to, the difference is essential – let alone appear on RTV or lecture, I had at least one lecture in Yugoslavia each month. I participated in numerous symposia, I lectured at Kolarac University, many times at the humanities faculty, in the philosophy, sociology, and comparative literature departments, to university students and youth, at cultural centres, etc. All over Serbia, many times in Novi sad. For more than ten years, Belgrade's respectable third radio program aired my lectures during prime time: the translator Dejan Posnanović lived off this work, he was an excellent translator, the same as Marija Mitrović, I was very good friends with her and her husband. I was probably the most translated Slovenian writer at that time. I published more books in Serbia than anywhere else, more than ten. I counted among my friends numerous Serbian intellectuals: Danilo Kiš, Sveta Lukić, Vuk Krnević, Ugrinov, Dobrica Ćosić, Ljuba Tadić, Sveta Stojanović, Boža Jakšić, Vidosav Stevanović, etc. Also theatre people: the then popular Mića Tomić, Branko Pleša, Bora Todorović, the translator Roksanda Njeguš. I spent time at the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences with the vice-president Isaković. I contributed essays and interpretations about many of these figures to Serbian magazines, perhaps all of them. I was the principle contributor to some of them, for example, the Belgrade-based *Književost* [Literature] and *Književna reč* [Literary word].

Especially in the 1970s, both the Slovenian Communist Party and the cultural intelligentsia were not only repressive and narrow-minded – Zlobec at *Sodobnost* published only one of the three texts I sent him, he was giving me "monastic soup" – but also provincially limited and nationalistic, while Belgrade was the centre of cosmopolitism. I was connected to Serbian internationalists, broad-minded, tolerant, cultivated, elite and stylish; there was no one like them in Slovenia. My work was part of a collective platform for the Europeanization of Yugoslavia. It was a terrible shock for me when everything turned on its head in the 1980s ; those who had once denied such things became nationalists, narrow-minded, fanatics, violent. The same thing happened to them that would happen in the 1990s to the Catholic Church in Slovenia: the transformation from tolerant, conciliatory, and other-loving to hateful, authoritarian, and tenacious.

It appears that the same laws applied in both situations: neither the Serbs nor the Church were able to digest their experience-defeat, to transform it from an obstacle to potential, to accept the rupture of greater Serbia and clericalism as a chance for a European Serbia and for a tolerant Christianity. In both situations, an old archaic structure re-emerged that had not been overcome, absolved, reinterpreted. Over night, the most conciliatory people became fascists.

For me this was a terrible blow. I had invested a lot in this project – it was my last cultural-political platform and engagement – the common transition of the Yugoslav nation into Western Europe. I believed that Serbian-Belgrade intellectu-

als would play an important role; and in fact they did the worst. There are many reasons for this. Among them is the fact that the model Slovenian intellectual was Fran Levstik, who occupied the middle ground between the artist and the enlightenment scholar, while Serbs were divided between cosmopolitans and simple folk who remained archaic and barbaric. In the mid-1980s, Serbian cosmopolitan intellectuals fluttered off into abstractions, gradually leaving their country while tens of thousands other remained behind and adapted to Serbian tribalism or took the helm as did, for example, the then Yugoslav Minister of Information, Milan Komnenić, who pretended to be a Frenchmen but ultimately turned out to be the most parochial Montenegrin sheepherder. He was one of the few who got on my nerves even then with his phony cosmopolitanism; in 1991, he gave the public one of its main slogans: victory or death! Dobrica Ćosić was, of course, a man with an entirely different format and perhaps more characteristic of the regression of the Serbian intellectual class.

It was an added blow to me that at the same time that I broke off with my Serbian friends, I also parted ways with my Slovenian friends at the publication *Nova revija*. Before, in the 1970s and early 1980s, I was more of a political activist than they were; they remained loyal to Pirjevec and his motto known as the End of Action. After that, however, I found myself in an entirely different position, apolitical, and my friends made a u-turn and began to pursue political-state action grounded in the sacralization of the clan. Structurally speaking, they underwent the same sort of process the Serbs did, re-archaicizing regression, only it was significantly less malignant. On the path to Western Europe, it was necessary to defend Slovenian identity from Serbian barbarism, or in other words, to establish an independent Slovenian state as a frame for free independent individuals. In this sense, Slovenian nationalism was positive, though unfortunately my friends were unable to keep a critical distance from the magical ideologies on which they based their nationalism: the destiny of Nationhood, etc.

I had long before settled accounts with the Communist Party and I did the same with the Slovenian humanist and cultural intelligentsia. And so, at that time, I separated from both my Slovenian and Serbian friends. I had once been very close to both sets of friends, both had helped me through the darkest period of Party repression, had helped me to survive. When I also decided in 1991 that I had to distance myself from the growing authoritarian appetites of the Catholic Church, I would have found myself in the grip of the worst solitude had I not been able to re-conceive the situation as mercy.

B.A.N.: *On the basis of your excellent knowledge of Serbian culture, political history, and the contemporary political situation, you write in the mid-1980s, first in a magazine publication and later a book,* Pisma srbskemu prijatelju *[Letters to a Serbian friend]. Your sharp critique was applied to the behaviour of the majority of Serbian intellectuals at that time, who enthroned Milošević as their leader, and to their ideological, archaicizing mythologization of Serbian history that in many ways led directly to the eruption of the bloody wars in the former Yugoslavia that are still*

not completely over. Not surprisingly Pisma srbskemu prijatelju *was not happily received in Serbian intellectual circles. In a repeated reading of these dark pages, I was literally shocked by the hellish precision with which your predictions later came true.*

T. K.: I wrote both *Pisma srbskemu prijatelju* and its parallel book *Pisma slovenskemu prijatelju* [Letters to a Slovenian friend] during the second half of the 1980s. Both are now shrouded in silence. Nobody considers anymore that *Pisma srbskemu prijatelju* came out in the 57th issue of *Nova revija*. Although the letters were only known to Serbs from translated excerpts, they nevertheless caused a violent controversy in Serbia; rejoinders, attacks, polemics that would have filled a whole book. I did not answer one of them; I held to the principle – I still do today – that I must not enter into *mimesis* in the model of exclusive duality. The method helped me: I went forward rather than against what had already happened. In my letters, the Serbs first gleaned the substantive difference between Serbs and Slovenians. Despite their own clan-focused ideology, Slovenians chose the direction of the enlightened liberal West, a path dictated by the structures of their history-past. Serbian cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, was only a product of will, something not anchored in the social group-nation.

The Serbians never translated *Pisma srbskemu prijatelju*. I had suggested a translation to several publishers, which would include my subsequent commentary, but even the most anti-nationalist people didn't want to hear anything about it, although my letters articulate the Serbian pro-European program, the same things that the opposition, such as Vesna Pešić and Nebojša Popov, once my great friends, also wanted. This attitude suggests to me that they still cannot confront the reality of their situation, cannot engage in self-critical reflection. Not even the most progressive among them are capable of it.

It is interesting that Slovenians have also forgotten both *Pisma*, and *Pisma srbskemu prijatelju*. In both, I offer an alternative to clan-nationalism as well as to political-social-religious activism. Even today I still think that my alternative is the only one with a future. Slovenians have not come to see this yet. They instead see partitocracy, which is why I split from Pučnik, and a politism that went in the wrong direction, though many – on the right – imagined that what was wrong was only the form of the national-politics that currently occupied power. We just need to wait until the right takes power and then people, who unfortunately are rather slow or not open-minded enough, will understand the structurally wrong form of politism and society. I wrote my redemptive theology precisely for this era. I wrote my letters for this time. But I am not upset, I am not complaining.

B.A.N.: *As you noted, at the same time* Pisma srbskemu prijatelju *came out, you also wrote* Pisma slovenskemu prijatelju *[Letter to a Slovenian friend] (Matjaž Kmecl) with whom you productively collaborated since the 1950s and formed* Nova revija *in the 1980s. You attacked the philosophical concepts of Ivan Urbančič, Tine in Spomenka Hribar, and the literary practices of Jože Snoj and Niko Grafanauer, reproaching them that their ideology of "*brotherhood*" and a national-linguistic belonging which created a fundamentalist principle of Slovenian identity that eventu-*

*ally leads to "*fratricide*". Because of this conflict, you left the editorial board of* Nova revija*; I recall the time when, after the memorable 57th issue, I took over editorial leadership of the magazine in the midst of political upheaval, and I was the only, or one of the very few, editors who remained on friendly terms with you. Actually it was during this period, which must have been very painful for you, that we became real friends and we have preserved this relationship – despite our differences on various issues – until this day.*

T. K.: You were one of the few who were open to my ideas in the late 1980s and remained so. That was also clear in your literature, and especially in your most recent play, *Kasandra*, which is open to the notion of the tragic. I do not claim that you accept my positive concept. I only claim that you are not deaf-blind to it, although I would prefer that you would, in interview questions, not emphasize only the sociological or literary social sense of my work, but also the religious aspect because it is decisive. You are one of the few that I feel could understand my message, while many, with whom I was friends for some time, are closed to my ideas.

B.A.N.: *This "cultural-political" withdrawal from the circle of* Nova revija *may have also been a reflection of your retreat from the more superficial issues of social and sociological events into spirituality, intense and solitary work, and above all your encounter with God. Because you have written much about this, I will not insult you if I now ask you, in the context of this interview, to discuss this crucial transformation in your life, the moment when a convinced atheist, freethinker and sociologist accepted Faith as the deepest reality.*

T. K.: I was an atheist not only many times, but consistently in my faith in the absolute; in my own way, I am still an atheist today and will remain one. For me, the world is composed of two elements, of God and of nothing; nothing plays the role of the un-divine, a-theism. God created man and the world from the nothing that was there before creation; this is the theology of the *Old Testament*. Nothing is the opponent of God, while God is not the opponent of nothing; only gods can destroy nothing, also the feudal Catholic Church, while nothing itself destroys God, but it cannot eliminate God completely, only prepare God for self-destruction; nothing can destroy the gods in the endless competition – the holy war – of exclusive dualities. I would be blind and stupid if I only saw the workings of god; that was the limitation of the saints who were the manipulated tools of cynical confessional authorities. The nihilism of atheism is the inevitable accompaniment to redemptive faith, which only becomes possible if a man goes through nothing-nihilism to the other side; therefore also through atheism. Without an internal authentic experience of atheism-nihilism, redemptive faith is impossible, because it is based upon Paul's principle of *spes contra spes*, not on the safety of traditional being, but on the gift of the holy thing. Because of this, it is clear not only that I was a free thinker but that I remain one.

B.A.N.: *Do you perceive a difference in the behaviour of the Slovenian Church and its followers before the political changes and the beginning of the 1990s and after them?*

T. K.: I have been writing about these differences since 1991. It started in the spring of that year when I entered a polemic against the re-clericalization and re-politicization of the Slovenian Catholic Church and in support of "anarchistic Christianity" with Andrej Capuder and Alojz Rebula in *Razgledi*, and continued later the same fall in *Mladina*. My correspondence includes hundreds of letters with the best-known Slovenian theologians and priests whom I begged to engage with me and among them in a creative dialogue about the essential problems of the Church, the burning questions of Christianity as I saw them. In the beginning, I could not believe that all my positive approaches hit a wall. The Catholic Church didn't want real dialogue; they wanted the appearance of dialogue as an alibi and a means to obtain political freedoms. After it succeeded in this, it reverted to its pre-war ideology and structure, to the idea that everything it does is right – for culture, for human rights – and that it is without sin. It did, in principle, apologize for the mistakes it had made but that was just a gesture, hypocritical rhetoric that had nothing to do with its true convictions about itself.

Had there been no Vatican Two, I wouldn't have returned to the Catholic Church, although I would have undergone the same experience of coming near the otherness of God. Was it my naiveté-error to believe in the reforming power of the Vatican Council? Today I see a dilemma: if the Catholic Church is unable to build upon the foundations of Vatican Two, if it is incapable of undertaking radical internal structural and theological reform, of re-evolution, even of the reinterpretation of the Gospels – which has been understood since the apostles as partially pagan-traditional, Judaic-Roman first in antiquity then in feudalism (coming closer God is the ceaseless deepening of the contact with God as the Other, thus it is a reconstruction of human understanding of the divine word, thus it is a reconstruction of God himself who has given himself into the hands of man, offering himself for interpretation) – then the Catholic Church will become just another sect. The Catholic Church is divine, but the whole world is divine, there is no place in it where God cannot find a home.

B.A.N.: *Does it hurt you that the Slovenian cultural public, in its pursuit of other lowly tasks and superficial interests, is too deaf to hear the significance of your epochal work?*

T. K.: It hurts but it also hurts that the Slovenian public has closed off the way to redemption and thus harms itself. It doesn't harm me; it only teaches me again and again the muddy nature of nothingness. The Slovenian public is miserable today; and it has been that way always perhaps. Was the public among which Prešeren lived any better than today's public? In my opinion, it was worse, even more deaf, even more closed in on itself, a petit bourgeois and clerical community like the one depicted so well in Matjaž Kmecl's monodrama *Andrej Smole*. Was the public that accepted Levstik, Cankar, Mrak, Kocbed any better than the public today? No; perhaps today's is even slightly less bad, a little more pluralistic, the indoctrination of the unified feudal Catholic Church and Nation having been exchanged for the market that has no specific values in and of itself, and is positive insofar as it breaks

down the self-evidence of identities. The market is what I call duality. Duality is not fatally and mimetically defined according to the model against which it battles; duality is reconstructed as simulation, virtuality, fantasy, it emerges from the *klinamen* that occurs at the point of equalizing duality, at the point of Snoj's *Gabrijel*. Duality is the basis of your *Hiša iz kart* [House of Cards]; duality is the joker with all its good and bad consequences in terms of recreation as a new level in development. Duality is the model for liberal society.

B.A.N.: *Already in the 1970s (for example with the book* Besede in dogodek *[Words and event] from 1978), you opposed all the contemporary theories about the theatre that link tragedy to some final, irreversible, spiritual-historical structure of a past era. You claimed that tragedy is possible and indeed necessary in the contemporary era.*

T. K.: It was not easy to recover an understanding of tragedy. During the 1970s, epigonic light post-modern intertextualism prevailed, which mocked high tragedy. Man was reduced to language and a game, to sexual pleasure paired with a spiritual pleasure reduced to new age re-magism. Today's politism is indeed a variation of re-magism. Magic is the method by which the world is dominated. René Girard analyses Shakespeare's tragedies as plays that do not end with nihilistic despair – he wrote an interesting book about it. Even Georg Steiner, whose book *The Death of Tragedy*, an ideological theory about the death of tragedy which was the bible for those who understood tragedy as nihilism, later softened his position and reinterpreted it in his subsequent book about Antigone. Post-modernists should read this.

I also wrote an analysis as a sort of dialogue with you, as my personal message to you. What is decisive is whether you are able to find faith in the beyond, which is outside *History*, dualisms, games of cards, tragedy as fate, Kasandra's vision of the coming catastrophe. I am preparing a detailed analysis of both your plays, *Hiša iz kart* and *Kasandra*, in which I would like to have a polemical dialogue with you, discovering in your own work the possibilities-departure points for the leap of faith through the chaos of nothingness – through the rhizome – to the other side, to God.

As you see, my interview cannot be only an answer to your questions about me, but must also be an open dialogue with you, with your thoughts-positions, with your work.

B.A.N.: *You spent your life with Alenka Goljevšek whom I have deeply respected since my youth. She was my professor of psychology and philosophy at what was then Šubičeva Gimnazija. During the political reform of this school that took place in the period of general school reform, she wrote a bitter and funny comedy that was one of the most successful plays in the history of Slovenian theatre. In addition to dramatic texts for adults, she also wrote a number of warm plays and fairytales for children. As a doctor of philosophy, she wrote some extraordinary works about mythology; her theoretical analysis of fairytales belongs among the fundamental works in the field. It strikes me as very moving that the two of you understand and fulfil each other so well.*

Because this last question is addressed in some ways to Alenka, I will let her answer it.

***Alenka Goljevšek**:* Since both of you insist, you dear Boris, and Taras, I will say a few words. I have felt for a long time that life does not serve just itself, it must have some meaning, some mission that makes it precious, and I must not overlook this message, I must be alert to it. Taras and I found common ground here for there is no person on earth more alert that Taras. For a long time, I did not know how to formulate this feeling other than with the word "aesthetic": as the desire to make something like art out of your life, that the puzzle and the search would resolve itself into some sort of image. There were difficulties along the way but hope always remained. Gradually, I came to realize that it is not an aesthetic stance, but a religious one; that hope can only come from elsewhere. Today I know that Taras and I can maintain this open tension between us, because we are not two, but three: God is somehow the "buffer zone" between our sharp-edged individual personalities. Thus we entered divine freedom and our mindless search became a shared pilgrimage: he redeemed the nothingness in me, I in him, without each other we are lost. The idea that I hear around me nowadays, that man lives to be happy, strikes me as completely wrong. Man lives in order that his hard work will make him God's collaborator, his co-creator. Happiness is an afterthought, as it was for us.

Ljubica Arsić and Jelena Lengold[1]

Suffering is the greatest taboo

translated from Serbian by Novica Petrović

Ljubica: When the two of us got acquainted, you were a poet, and then a change occurred. You started writing stories. How does a poet see the world, and how does a prose writer see it? I'm asking you this because I've never written poems, I believe it's a special talent that one is born with, which exists in one as a special vocation, a special sensitivity.

1 Jelena Lengold is one of the most important contemporary Serbian writers. She writes poems, stories, novels. Her collections of poetry so far are: *The Disintegration of Botany* (1982), *The Clime of Poppy* (1986), *The Passing of an Angel* (1989), *Scenes from the Life of a Band Leader* (1991). Her stories have been published in the books *Rain-drenched Lions* (1994), *Elevator* (1999), *Fairground Magician* (2008) and *Cut Me with a Saw* (2010). Her poetry has been featured in a number of anthologies, and her poems and stories have been translated into English, Italian, Danish, Bulgarian, Ukrainian and Polish. For her collection of poetry *Scenes from the Life of a Band Leader* she received the "Đura Jakšić" award. For her collection of stories *Fairground Magician* she received the "Biljana Jovanović" and "Žensko pero [Feminine Pen]" awards. For about ten years she worked as a reporter and editor for Radio Belgrade's cultural programme. She currently works as a project coordinator for the Nansenskolen Humanist Academy in Lilehamer, Norway. In her current job, she deals with: mediation, dialogue, interethnic tolerance, discrimination, negotiations, human rights and peaceful conflict resolution. She lives in Belgrade.

Jelena: People usually think that prose outgrows poetry. To my mind, that is an insult to poetry because, as I see it, it is the crown of literature. Even before I wrote poetry, when I was twenty or so, I kept trying to write stories but didn't like them. What I probably needed was more time, to gain some experience and maturity. That is the important difference between prose and poetry, you can write poetry when you're young, when you have no experience, out of some biological, instinctive knowledge, and make it good. That is not the case with prose. It requires maturity. At least that was the case with me. My early stories seemed to me to be lacking a foundation, the characters were thin and unconvincing, but at the back of my mind I knew that sometime in the future I would write more stories. So I kept on writing poetry until I was thirty, and my poems were my entire world. However, I read a lot of stories back then, some of which influenced my poems in a way, and they got increasingly long. In fact, my collection of poems *Scenes from the Life of a Band Leader* is half-way between poetry and prose, with a precisely worked out running order, with chapters about the band leader, whose life story develops in the course of the book as if it were a novel. It was quite natural for me then to switch to prose after that.

Ljubica: Poetry, then, is the call of youth, something connected with the instinctive and the affective...

Jelena: I don't think that is so with everyone. There are people who write poetry all their lives. But later, at certain moments of elation, heightened emotional states, I tried to write a poem and came to the conclusion that I could no longer do it.

Ljubica: Does it mean that writing a poem is a spontaneous act, whereas when writing prose you apply craftsmanship skills that an experienced creator possesses?

Jelena: That depends on the person. Some people write everything all their lives, novels, stories, poems, essays, literary criticism, plays... There are those who write only one kind of thing. It's pointless to draw conclusions about the existence of some kind of rules, there are no rules for youth or for the experience one gains with maturity. In my case, there came a moment when poetry quite simply left me. As to why that happened and how, that I don't know. The only thing I know is that phases in life change.

Ljubica: Let's talk about your stories that inspire me and thrill me. I don't know whether you might find this offensive, but in those stories you come across as very feminine indeed.

Jelena: Think so?

Ljubica: I see them as suggestive writing originating from female experience, speaking of which, it is not what everyone thinks about when *ecriture feminine* is mentioned, it's not inferior and sugary. To me, it's feminine and strong. What's your view of female and male writing? It would be interesting for me to hear your thoughts about male and female writing, for I think you have managed to do what men can't do.

Jelena: You know that I have a lot of stories written in the masculine person. I wrote them so on purpose, in order to show that I can write both ways, like a woman and like a man. I think that a good writer must feel both ways. If he or she is restricted to one or the other only, then that's the same thing as what we've said about poetry and prose. Bad. As far as the so-called female writing is concerned, I've answered such questions time and time again, this whole story is used up and full of stereotypes to such an extent that I'm quite sick of it. They say, your writing is feminine but it's not sugary, as if it goes without saying that women's writing is supposed to be sugary. There are so many women whose writing is not sugary and so many men who are prone to *kitsch*.

Ljubica: All those stereotypes should be demolished, and we should talk about female and male writing as different narrative strategies that are neither better nor worse than the other, just different ways of writing.

Jelena: I demolish stereotypes by not talking about that at all. That whole story is pointless. I like to be addressed as a writer, not as a woman. I'm a woman in other spheres of life, here I'm a writer.

Ljubica: Right, but the erotic in your stories is presented from an angle which is not that of a man. Even when you write from the point of view of a male narrator, I recognise that he is seen through the eyes of a woman, the way a woman imagines what a man sees and feels.

Jelena: The book *Fairground Magician* was named after the eponymous story written in the masculine person, whose eros is male only. I don't know about other women, but I think I can write from a male angle and from a female angle as well. I'm kidding a bit, but I do think that, when I enter this creative mood, I can feel what's happening in the eros of both men and women.

Ljubica: Your stories are sophisticated but daring as well. I see that you play with taboos in them, the ones that it is shameful to talk about. What do you think about a writer's task to shake those taboos up a bit when they can't be demolished altogether?

Jelena: Personally, I don't have any taboos when it comes to writing. If I did, I wouldn't be writing about them. What are you getting at actually?

Ljubica: You've written a story about lesbians.

Jelena: Yes, there are such stories. There are stories in which incest is mentioned, or stories in which sex is openly discussed. To me, sex is no taboo, I don't see anything shameful about it. As a writer, what I find intriguing are things that are close to the edge, although a simple human story can be interesting as well. It depends, of course, on how it is told. There's that story about a married couple and a cat, where the woman's attitude towards the cat reflects her attitude towards her husband and his infidelity. There's nothing unusual in it, but it's narrated in an artistic way. And as regards taboos, to me, the greatest taboos are human suffering,

abandonment, death, partings, the disappearance of anything. They seem more terrible to me than these socially established taboos.

Ljubica: What you said is very interesting. Do you think that people don't talk about suffering and parting in the right way, that there are stereotypes and taboos concerning that as well?

Jelena: There are stereotypes in everything. Suffering is the greatest taboo. People are forbidden, especially in this modern world, to be sad, to suffer, to say that they can't go on, to be weak. That has become unacceptable and is no longer modern, it's on the verge of being indecent. People are not allowed to neglect themselves on account of their suffering. Good manners and the requirements of civilisation impose upon them to take good care of themselves. Human suffering is a much greater taboo than sex. Every sociologist, psychologist or writer should deal with it, deconstruct it down to the tiniest details, in order to see its scope and what can be done with it. Suffering is something that people shun. If taboo is something people try to evade, then it is certainly not sex.

Ljubica: How can a writer help deconstruct this taboo concerning suffering?

Jelena: I don't know if the role of a writer is to help in this at all. I don't know what the role of a writer is supposed to be at all, either. Many people have told me that they recognise themselves in my stories, and when I was young, I felt better when, having experienced some revelation or other while reading, I found out that some of my suffering had been written about in books. We feel less alone then, for we can see that whatever is inside us that is hidden and weighs down upon us actually exists in others, too, and that there's somebody else thinking about that. Even though such things make people feel better, I don't think that it is a writer's role to do that.

Ljubica: Why do we write then?

Jelena: We write for selfish reasons. No writer writes for the sake of others, out of altruism, in order to do his or her readers a favour. That's pointless. We write for ourselves, out of narcissism and our authentic need to realise ourselves. Everyone has that need, and writers realise it by writing books and meeting their readers. However, there have been writers in history who did not want their books to reach readers. A writer has a strong narcissistic and selfish need to get that madness out of him/herself. Maybe that's a kind of introspection, through which we examine ourselves and believe, like real narcissistic individuals, that all our thoughts are precious and that we should note down as many of them as possible. Put it down, commit it to paper, lest it should get lost! I'm married to a writer, so I have a double dose of that narcissism in my home.

Ljubica: Do you read to each other what you write?

Jelena: We do, he reads to me more than I to him. He writes aphorisms, and he writes every day, as opposed to me. I'm a terribly lazy writer.

Ljubica: Apart from being a narcissist, I'd like to be a bit of a voyeur as well and take a peek in your writer's workshop where you create your stories. Each writer has his or her magic concept, some secret process that he or she undergoes in order to reach those deep-hidden contents. I, for example, listen to certain kinds of music that I choose in accordance with what I wish to impart. I write down scenes and fragments of conversations in a notepad.

Jelena: I never write anything down, even though my husband, who keeps writing things down in his notepad, tells me it would be a good thing for me to write down some ideas. About once every two months, I sit down and start writing, be it on account of a deadline or because my publisher Gojko Božović keeps reminding me that it's time to hand in the manuscript. I usually only have the first sentence in my head. What will happen with that sentence or that character afterwards, I have no idea. I write a story over the course of the next two or three hours, it takes me that long to type it, as if someone were dictating it to me, and it usually stays the way it is. I don't change it afterwards, maybe a few commas here and there. My husband finds something to correct, be it the language or a typing error, and I don't spend much time working on my stories. Apart from that first sentence, I think up the story's title. Sometimes I try to think up a line of development in advance, which my characters proceed to change, as if they had a life of their own which shows them what is supposed to happen next. I let them develop the story by themselves. No, that's not a mere phrase or some artistic mumbo-jumbo of mine, I really mean it, they write the story by themselves. If I were asked, I would probably have more stories with a happy ending. However, my protagonists tend to be melancholy types prone to depression, who often come to a tragic end, sometimes even commit suicide. It's their will. What I have to do is just commit that to paper.

Ljubica: Your stories are very polished stylistically, with a musical touch. One hears music in them, the way music, in the movies, leads your emotions before the picture.

Jelena: I think I have a good sense of rhythm. It was also important to me when it came to poetry, and in my stories as well. That is why it gets on my nerves when someone wants me to change some word or other, and this change betrays my inner rhythm. There is an element of truth when they say that people who sing nicely, and I think I do, manage to compose a story in a musical manner.

Ljubica: In your stories, one feels that music of your heartbeat, a personal frequency. Do you connect your stories with some specific music, music that you listen to or music that's in your head? It would appear to me that you listen to jazz, for you improvise very skilfully.

Jelena: I like listening to Arsen Dedić, but I like modern music as well. In my home, it is often very noisy, the radio and TV turned on at the same time. I wouldn't believe it myself, but I've written a lot of stories to the blaring of the radio or the TV set. From my husband's room, you can hear loud music that he enjoys listening to. Despite all that, I am able to completely isolate myself and focus on the text only.

Ljubica: You're like Chekhov, he could write anywhere, in a restaurant or at a railway station.

Jelena: I can do that, too. I sometimes write while taking a ride in a public transport vehicle. I think I learned to concentrate like that while I was working at the Radio, when about ten of us shared a small staff room with only four typewriters.

Ljubica: In your stories there is a lot of smart and sophisticated humour. Wit is a very rare and precious thing, something that only a chosen few manage to achieve. There aren't many people who manage to make us laugh, and many, it would appear, consider laughter to be something trivial and superficial. I notice that passion seems to have moved out of literature, the passion for life, without which there is no real picture of the world.

Jelena: There are a lot of writers among us who think that they ought to philosophise in a manner that makes the rest of us develop an inferiority complex. You read a book of that sort and quite simply feel guilty because you don't understand what the writer wanted to say. They believe that a good book must be boring. If it's fun to read, then there must be something wrong with it. I suppose this stems from the erroneous assumption that it's very difficult to attain something that's worth a lot. On the contrary, I am of the opinion that only that which we find easy to do and which gives us great pleasure is worth doing. Whatever we find difficult to do may not be the right thing for us to do, which does not mean to say that we should not make an effort, but there must be some joy to be found in it. If one feels troubled and does not enjoy what one is doing, one can hardly make a success of it. We often think that we have read something of high quality if that book has made us miserable and we struggled through it for the sake of cultural requirements, for it has received some award or other and critics have described it as a must. I think that a book must be interesting in the first place. That is the most important role of a writer, to be an entertainer, which certainly does not make it trivial. Many writers will be horrified by this, but I just don't care. Entertainment first, and only then, through entertainment, will you manage to impart something else to the reader. A writer must allow the reader some breathing space once in a while. You can't pressurise the reader all the time philosophically and emotionally, and expect him or her to read, read, read, and not get anything in the way of respite after all the strain and wisdom permeating the couple of hundred pages read so far.

Ljubica: Why is laughter considered to be of marginal importance when it is such a rare gift, a special talent? Few people are capable of making mankind laugh, there are many more who make people sad or indulge in futile philosophical games. It would appear that people no longer need to play. And then again, a sense of humour is an extraordinary talent. Telling someone to be witty is the same as setting that person the task of being good-looking or smart.

Jelena: That is a major topic, which I often talk about with my husband, who is a satirist and feels very bad because everything connected with humour and sat-

ire is considered to be facile and frivolous, lacking the necessary artistic gravitas, a third-rate product. Possibly, if we went a little further, we'd come to some religious views forbidding people to rejoice and laugh. Or maybe it's just that people need to pretend to themselves that they're adults, for most people think they're adult if they're serious and don't laugh, that if they play, they negate themselves as serious and responsible beings. But play, laughter, passion, those are the basic elements of life's energy. They make us alive. If these are lacking, one can hardly communicate with other people.

Ljubica: It is important for a writer, then, to know, one way or another, how to remain a child.

Jelena: When you talk to someone through art, if you address only the adult part of that person, then you get a response from the adult part. A good writer must address the child in his or her reader, for emotions and creativity are to be found in the child. Creation does not come to us from the adult part but from the child.

Ljubica: Childhood is not just a Garden of Eden where we feel the joy of things seen and experienced for the first time. It is joyful and sad at the same time.

Jelena: I think about childhood all the time, and even today I like to read books about childhood days. Just as you said, childhoods are both magical and sad, even those most unhappy ones. In fact, childhood is a very troublesome thing and one of the great taboos. It is often idealised as a happy time, the most beautiful time of our lives, because you don't have the responsibilities that an adult has. A child is not aware of that, never having worked, and not knowing how it is to have a boss or to have to go to work. But it's much more difficult for a child than for an adult, because a child has many more fears, is worried about many things, doesn't have a clear picture of a lot of things, human relations for example, of which it has only a vague idea. A child feels guilty about many things it had no part in. I'm talking about happy children as well, not just those whose childhood was traumatic. Children have a lot of problems inside their heads, a lot of worries. When you grow up, a lot of things become clearer to you, you realise what the connections between you and the rest of the world are, which helps you assume a position. When you're a child, you fight for all that. You're very powerless. To me, childhoods are very inspirational because of the pain and trouble of growing up and searching for your place in the world.

Ljubica: Your Russian origin is very interesting, because of your grandfather Leo in your stories. It all looks exotic, quite different from my childhood, spent in the yards of Belgrade's Čubura district. Russian blood coloured your childhood and growing up in a special way. I feel it flow from Russian classics into your prose a bit.

Jelena: I've written stories which were inspired by classical Russian literature, even though it is not my favourite literature, unfortunately. I'm more inclined towards modern Western literature, but I did grow up on Russian books and with typically Russian emotions of closeness, tenderness and exaggerated outbursts of

feelings. It wasn't excessively old-timey, but it was very tender indeed. In our home there was a surplus of emotions of all kinds, just the sort that you can find in Russian literature, and that certainly exerted an influence on me. Later, I didn't know just what to do with all those emotions and vulnerability. In our home, everyone was very considerate, and that hardly fits in with this cruel world of today, which is why I mostly feel totally out of it. That's why I've reduced myself to my own microworld in which there are but a few people, who pose no threat to me.

Ljubica: It seems that there's not much empathy today, sharing the feeling of others. The world has become cruel, or is it just our impression of it?

Jelena: I don't know if it was any different in the past. In the world that I grew up in there were more emotions. I don't know if everywhere else the situation was the same as in my family, for there was a constant overflow of emotions, love, suffering... This indifferent and pragmatic world of today is quite unrecognisable for me.

Ljubica: We find a shelter and a means of escape from it in reading. Which writers have strongly affected you and pointed you towards literature?

Jelena: My repertory of books for girls was the usual one, probably the same as yours. All those books found their way to me. *The Witch of Grič*, Françoise Sagan, Katerina, Mirjam, the whole package. I read a lot, I especially liked reading poetry. But the decisive book for my poetic experience of the world was [Zvonimir] Golob's collection *Doves in the Wood*. That is the rhythm that continued to live in everything that I wrote later. I read that book and I thought: that's me, that's what I want to be. I mean that energy which entirely corresponded with me somehow. After that, when I started writing stories, I read Ian McEwan's book *The Comfort of Strangers*. I can't describe to you how that book affected me. And when I reread it last summer, after twenty years, I realised how many stories I drew out of that book. I didn't plagiarise it, of course, but I recognised retroactively in it those sentences which entered directly into my subconscious and from which some of my stories would be created much later. Another turning point was Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Even before that book, I sensed somehow the cruelty of beauty, the mortal aspect of love and passion, but with that book I really felt it for the first time, and started dealing with that in my writing. I also developed as a writer with the help of Raymond Carver and Charles Bukowski, who represented a sexual revolution of sorts to us. He showed me that things do not have to be sugary in order to be tender. The periodical *Pismo* [*Letter*], edited by Raša Livada, which featured lovely translations by [David] Albahari, opened the door of the American short story to me, and that was a precious experience.

Ljubica: Some writers are of the opinion that they shouldn't read, that reading only spoils things for them and exerts a negative influence on their style. I increasingly get to hear how young writers say, when interviewed, that reading obstructs their creative work. They seem to forget that you learn your craft through reading.

Jelena: Is that possible? I couldn't imagine my life without reading. I read constantly and I read a lot, I make an effort to read books written by new colleagues

and writers of my generation. I try to follow what's being written in the area of the former Yugoslavia. I can't manage to read everything because a lot is being published, and I'm interested in quite a lot of things. Apart from belles-lettres, I read essays, political comments, for example, of the sort written by Teofil Pančić or that used to be written by Stojan Cerović. A writer can only profit by reading, for if we find a good book that we feel a kinship to, it can elevate you on a wave of emotion to such an extent that you get inspired to start writing something personal. Sometimes a single word is enough to get me going and direct me to an emotion that is deeply hidden. In the final analysis, you should respect your colleagues and contemporaries who write alongside you. There are writers that I like reading, and there are also those whom I read in order to be informed, to know why they are said to be bad and boring.

Ljubica: Reading often becomes a substitute for life. People who read a lot rate their reading experience as highly as their life experience. What do you think about Kiš's parallel between life and literature? What is the connection between them, does literature rely on life and to what extent does it need life for inspiration, and to what extent is it capable itself of thinking something up? Personally, I like writing about some experience which has become deeply embedded inside myself as my story, one I have experienced myself or have thought a lot about. And you?

Jelena: In my books there are six suicides: just imagine what it would be like to have lived through all their experiences!

Ljubica: But you certainly thought about it.

Jelena: I've never thought about it in a suicidal manner. You don't have to live through each and every emotion that you have in your story. You should observe and carefully listen to people, think about them. I'm interested in people and I like talking to them. The Internet is a fantastic thing, I waste a lot of time chatting with unknown people and listening to their stories. It's very inspirational to me when I hear about the different ways people can think, so that I get to know them, I see what preoccupies them. I get to hear things that would never cross my mind!

Ljubica: Today, people are quite preoccupied with history. Writers, too, at least in our country, deal with historical topics a lot. There is an increasing number of historical novels being published, both those dealing with events from the recent past and those reaching much further back in time. Is that also a form of escape from reality?

Jelena: Some writers feel the need to study their collective being and to get to the personal in this way. I am more interested in a personal perspective, but I can't deny that the collective one is very interesting. History is not an escape, it is our reality. We've had so much of it over the last fifteen years that it has swamped everything and become our reality. I've taken a great interest in it and been involved in a number of events, only I didn't include them in my stories, which doesn't mean to say that history was of no interest to me. The way I see it, it has no place in my

books. There are great writers like Milan Kundera, who manage to include current history and politics in their books. But not every writer is a Kundera or an Orwell. Many are unable to distance themselves, or politics lures them into the mundane, trivial, moralistic.

Ljubica: There was a time when, in repressive societies, a writer had to "smuggle" those political views of his/hers that he or she couldn't express publicly by way of literature, thus making them less visible, but visible enough. Now, when everyone can write what he or she thinks and have it published in newspapers, there's no point in dragging pamphlets and political views into literature. Literature, it seems to me, should get rid of that political ballast and remain on its own.

Jelena: For someone to write a good book, which contains history, politics and an overview of society, he or she needs to be a really great writer. I think that we lack such a writer today, of the kind that once existed. At this moment, we don't have a Balzac who would write a novel with a thousand characters, human destinies, and who would paint this time and society they way they are, with all their diseases and perversions. The French writer Michel Houellebecq is going in that direction, but I'm referring to the Balkans. We lack such a writer. And there's plenty of stuff to write about!

Ljubica: We've done this interview for the periodical *Sarajevske sveske*. You've published some texts of yours there. What do you think about this project, already a classic now, that a periodical of this kind very studiously and abundantly presents the cultures of different peoples, but peoples close to one another?

Jelena: *Sarajevske sveske* is an excellent periodical, especially for us, writers possessed of inquiring minds, who wish to know what is being written in these parts and how people think. Whatever connects us in times of partings, all that is of enormous significance.

PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER

Stipe Nobilo

photo: Goran Vranić

Luko Paljetak

An Uninterrupted Dream of an Uninterrupted Summer

translated from Croatian by Graham McMaster

As in the novels of Françoise Sagan, in the paintings of Stipe Nobilo there is just one season – summer. Everything else is relegated to it. All other seasons are there only for that part of them that is summer, only with that fare that to the greatest extent can and must satisfy Nobilo's degree of delight with everything that the sun makes its world. In his headquarters at the top of Vela Glavica, from his observatory, he surveys and waters abundantly with colour all those simultaneous flare-ups, that uninterrupted dream of an uninterrupted summer day. In Nobilo's paintings there is no night, no shade and there are no people. We see just the traces of their work, the signs of their presences that have given way before the orgy of some archaic divinity that in its holy frenzy seeks to be given everything in return, every word, every thought, every colour in its highest tonal scale, purging everything of anything that might be able to obstruct it in the persistence of its activity.

But people, the way we look at things, know that summer does not last forever, nor fruitful autumn, and that sober winter has to come, with a solitariness of a very different kind, and that in its wake will come joyful and painful spring, which brings so much precisely because it can take away so much with the caprices of its outbursts. People on the other hand, invisible, seek their drowsy siesta, catch some shut-eye, intoxicated with the visions of their dream. It can then sound like a paradox, but the pictures of Stipe Nobilo are both very pensive, in accordance with that ancient truth that after rapture of any kind, a lasting sadness appears, and that every, even every artistic, orgasm, is in fact *une petit mort*, and that that multilayered expression *tristes tropiques* refers too to such states. And that is their aliquot speech.

Looking at these pictures, we find a space opening up in us containing the long-since hinted at knowledge that we have not actually been expelled from Heaven to Earth, but, on the contrary, have been left in it and most wonderfully forgotten, just so that nothing should be moved either forwards or backwards, neither gods nor

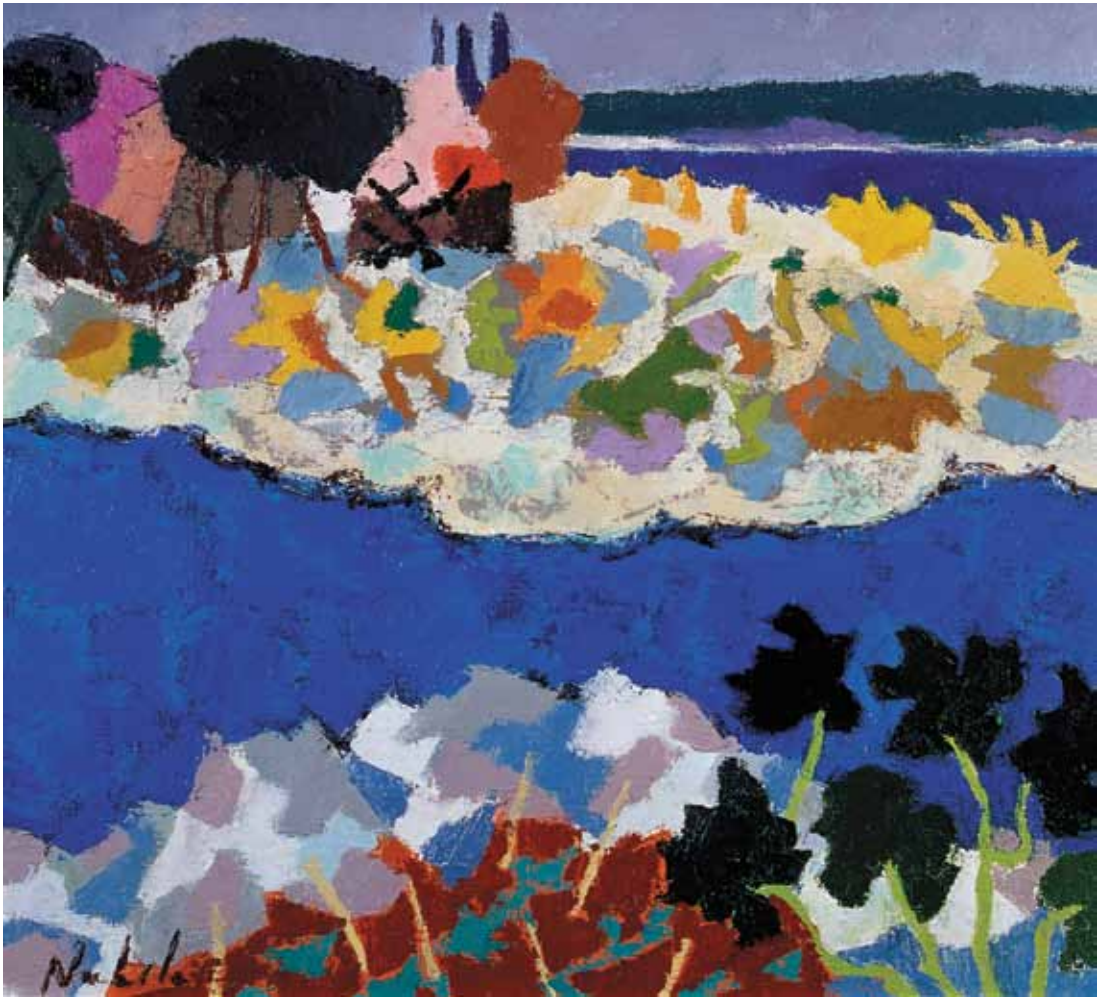
men, plants nor animals, everything to remain forever the way it is; ourselves to remain forever tempted.

The paintings of Stipe Nobilo are ruled by timelessness, that is, time as duration, or just tempo, as in coloured music written according to some de Falla-Ravel style formula penetrated by the blue notes of jazz from the sea, as well as the song of the *a cappella* group around the church. So are orchestrated those melodious visual rhapsodies. On the performance level, every one of these paintings is a kind of Lumbarda Psephism, written as *boustrophedon*, alternating from right to left, from left to right, so that it is constantly possible to read in both directions the whole surface of the slab. At the metonymic level this is a constant play of parts for the whole, wholes for the different disunited parts that rhyme with each other according to the metrical principles of the paean. At the intellectual level (and in Nobilo this is a combination of the cordiality of the mind with the intellectuality of the heart) it is an incessant recapitulation of the act of creation, the solemnisation of eternal fertility and flowering.

In all this the artist stands as an absolutist who broods over the essential unchangeability of this world, over its apparent sameness, interwoven into which is the demiurgic play of local colours that are always given. Nobilo then, from his Phaeton's angle of vision, deploys them just as he will, paying no more attention, as before, to their positioning in the existing landscape, knowing that at the end the 'real' will consent to work together with that which he has created, to be at one and equated with it, precisely because it lastingly longs to be and to remain just so.

Ultramarine, light and dark, cobalt blue, cadmium green, emerald green, green chrome oxide, Mars yellow, brown and red, light ochre, lemon yellow, cerulean blue and dove grey, burnt sienna, burnt ochre, like burnt bread, Venetian red, chestnut, madder red, natural umber, vermillion, cadmium orange, cobalt violet, turquoise, white, all the kinds of white; these are Nobilo's cards on the table of visual poker that he plays quite openly with the Maker. And the stakes are not small – they are the whole of Nobilo's world, a property that it is not easily gained or lost.


N.L.L.



Biographies of the Authors

Vojka Smiljanić-Đikić (the executive editor of *Sarajevske Sveske/Sarajevo Notebook*) is a poet and translator. She was also the editor of the *'Anthology of Contemporary Algerian Poetry'*. She translated the works of M. Yourcenar, M. Diba, J.J. Rabearivelo, S. Heaney, M. Longlay, K. Rain, E. de Luca, P. Holapp, M. Lacheraf, J. Senac, M. Haddad, R. Boudjedar, and Y. Septi. Most important books: *Tkači vetrova (Wind Weavers), Pepelnica (Ash Wednesday), Druga Zemlja (Another Country), and Prevođenje mora (Translating the sea).*

Janez Potočnik (1958) is Slovenian politician, currently serving as European Commissioner for the Environment. He was formerly Slovenia's Minister for European Affairs.

Jagna Pogačnik (1969), is a literary critic and translator from Zagreb. She earned her degree in Croatian studies and Yugoslav philology at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb. Since 1989, she has published literary reviews, essays and discussions in numerous journals and papers, and has been featured on Croatian Radio. From 2000 to 2003 she was the permanent literary critic of the show *Library* on Croatian TV. She has edited the literary journals *Rijek* and *Zor*. She has authored some twenty prefaces and afterwords for books by contemporary Croatian prose writers. Since 2000 she has been the literary critic for *Jutarnji list*, covering Croatian-produced prose. She has published a selection of Croatian prose fantasy *Prodavaonica tajni* (2001), books of collected literary criticism *Backstage* (2005) and *Proza poslije FAK-a* (2006), a selection of new Croatian prose *Seks&grad u novoj hrvatskoj prozi* (2004), selected short stories *Najbolje hrvatske priče 2005* (2006), an anthology of contemporary prose *Tko govori, tko piše* and with Milovan Tatarin authored a textbook for elementary school 5th grade called *Pssst! Knjige govore* (2003). Since 2007, together with Jadranka Pintarić, she has been the moderator of the cultural discussion panels of the Croatian Association of Writers *The Grič Dialogues*. Since 2009 she has edited the series konTEKST launched by EPH and Novi liber, which publishes recent prose titles by Croatian prose writers and writers from the region. Since 2009 she has been the leader of a workshop in the creative writing of literary criticism at the Sarasan Creative Writing Centre. She also translates from Slovene, for which in 2000 she won the international Kulturkontakt prize in Vienna.

Enver Kazaz (1962) is a poet, literary critic and historian. He teaches at the University of Sarajevo. He was the editor of the publishing company *Zoro*, the executive editor of the literary magazine *Lica,* and one of the editors of the magazine *Književna revija*. His articles are regularly featured in magazines in BiH and abroad. He edited a selection of literature from Sarajevo for the magazine *Li-*

htuncgen in Graz. He published a collection of poems *Traži se (Wanted)*, a monograph *Musa Ćazim Ćatić – literary heritage and the spirit of moderna,* a collection of essays *The Morphology of Palimpsests*, an anthology of the 20th century short story in Bosnia and Herzegovina (co-authored with Ivan Lovrenović and Nikola Kovač), a historical literary study the *Bosniak novel of the 20th century,* a collection of essays *Neprijatelj ili susjed u kući (An enemy or a Neighbour in the House),* as well as an anthology of contemporary BiH prose *Rat i priče iz cijelog svijeta,* (*The War and Stories from Around the World,* co-authored with Ivan Lovrenović*).* Two collections of essays are due to be published shortly. His work has been translated into English, German, Polish, French and Bulgarian.

Ljubica Arsić teaches literature at the music grammar school "Stevan Mokranjac" in Belgrade. She is the author of two novels, *Keepers of the Cossack Edge* and *Icon*; the short story collections *Finger Poking the Flesh*, *Powder Magazine*, *Flea-coloured Shoes*, *Twilight Zone*, *For Seductresses Only*, *More Tigerish than a Tiger*;, and two anthologies, *Quickies, An Anthology of Erotic Stories of the World* and *Purrrrr, An Anthology of Women's Erotic Stories*. She is the recipient of the *Borislav Pekić* award and the *Following in Isidora's Footsteps* award for her novel *Icon*, and won the *Pro femina* award for her collection of stories *Flea-coloured Shoes*. She also received the *Golden Pen* and *Laza Kostić* awards for *More Tigerish than a Tiger*, as well as four additional awards given by the Association of Jewish Municipalities for contributing to the affirmation of Jewish culture in works dealing with Jewish topics. Her book *Powder Magazine* has been translated into French. Her stories and excerpts from her novels have been translated into French, English, Italian, Czech and German. She writes essays and contributes to all the leading Serbian periodicals.

Olja Savičević Ivančević (Split, 1974) is the author of several collections of poems, a book of tales, *Nasmijati psa* (2006), and the novel *Adio kauboju* (2010). For the *Nasmijati psa* manuscript she won a Prozak; she won the *Večernji list* Ranko Marinković first prize for a short story and the Kiklop Prize for the best collection of poems, *Kucna pravila* (2007). Her books have been translated and published in Germany, Hungary, Macedonia and Serbia. Her poetry and prose have been translated into some twenty languages. She has been included in selections and anthologies at home and abroad. She is a freelance writer who lives and works in Split.

Faruk Šehić (Bihać, 1970) grew up in Bosanska Krupa. He was a soldier in the BiH Army (1992 – 1995). He has been publishing his literary works since 1998. He writes poetry, prose, essays, and literary and art reviews. His reportages, columns and reviews are regularly featured in the Sarajevo on-line magazine *Žurnal* (zurnal.info), and the Belgrade magazines *e-Novine.com* and *Beton*. In 2003, he won the Best unpublished newspaper text award, awarded by the Sarajevo daily *Oslobođenje.* In 2004, he was given an award for his collection of short stories *Pod pritiskom* (*Under Pressure*) by the publishing company *Naklada Zoro* (Sarajevo – Zagreb). In 2008 his book of poetry *Hit depo* won the award at the Belgrade poetry festival *Trgni se! Poezija!*. His work has been translated into English, French, Italian, German, Hungarian, Dutch, Slovenian, Macedonian and Polish. He lives in Sarajevo and works as a freelance writer and journalist.

Mihajlo Pantić (1957, Belgrade) is a prose writer, critic, university lecturer, and editor

for a number of publishing houses and periodicals. He completed his entire education in his native city, which included obtaining a PhD at the Faculty of Philology, where he now teaches. He made his literary debut in the early 1980's, and has published over forty books of studies, essays, literary criticism and anthologies, as well as nine collections of stories, some of which, such as *Wonder in Berlin, New Belgrade Stories*, *On the Seventh Day of the Košava* or *If That Is Love* (winner of the Andrić award, 2004), have been widely read. Mihajlo Pantić's stories have been translated into about twenty languages, featured in a number of anthologies and published in a number of special editions abroad. Even though they abound in literary allusions, Pantić's stories always provide direct testimony of the urban experience, and are actually connected by the attempt to find, amidst the small rituals of faceless everyday life, anonymous people obsessed with the eternal questions of fate, failures to manage, and love and death, some higher meaning that will redeem their unpromising lives. Of his more recent work, we should mention the notable *Anthology of Serbian Short Stories (1-3),* the all-encompassing collection *All the Stories by Mihajlo Pantić (1-4)*, and the collections *This Time, About Pain* and *Stories on the Road.*

Eqrem Basha (1948) is among the most respected contemporary writers from Kosovo. In the early 1970s, Eqrem Basha moved to Pristina to study language and literature at the newly created Albanian language university there. He later worked for Pristina television as editor of the drama section. Basha is the author of eight volumes of innovative verse spanning the years from 1971 to 1995, three volumes of short stories and numerous translations (in particular of French literature and drama).

Zoran Ferić (Zagreb, 1961) earned a degree in Yugoslav studies at the Faculty of Philosophy (Zagreb) and since 1994 has been a teacher of Croatian at the 18th High School, tormenting children with Homer and Marulić. He has been publishing articles and stories in papers and periodicals since 1987. His first book of stories, *Mišolovka Walta Disneya* came out relatively late, published by Naklada MD, Zagreb. For his second collection of stories, *Andjeo u ofsajdu*, published in 2000, he won the Ksaver Šandor Gjalski prize and the *Jutarnji list* prize for the best prose book of the year. His third book, the novel *Smrt djevojčice sa žigicama*, came out in 2003.

Mojca Kumerdej (1964) holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Ljubljana and is an art critic for several major daily newspapers for whom she reviews art, literature, theater, and, especially, modern dance. Her first novel, *Krst nad Triglavom* (*The Baptism Over Mount Triglav*) is a revision and parody of one of the most important literary works in Slovenian literary history, Pre...eren's epic *Krst pri Savici* (*The Baptism at the Savica*, 1835). Her book Kumerdej transfigures, with wit and irony, a mythical story, lending it fantastic features. In her second book, *Fragma*, a collection of short stories, she analyzes relations between men and women with surgical precision. Her protagonists are people living in the grip of desire, which determines and at the same time overwhelms them. These daring stories are both cameos of Lacanian psychoanalysis and literary interrogations of sexuality and violence.

Dušan Čater (1968) studied Journalism and Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana. He has worked as an editor but is otherwise known as a prominent

figure in Ljubljana's social life, which he explores in his novels (Flash Royal, Imitacija, Patosi, Ata je spet pijan).

Gabriela Stojanoska - Stanoeska (Prilep, 1978) graduated with a degree in World and Comparative Literature from the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. She is the editor of the literary magazine "Stremež". She publishes poetry, short stories and literary criticism in various magazines. She won "Studentski Zbor" magazine's first prize for the best short story. Her play *At the Parking Lot* was published in "Stremež."

Andrej Nikolaidis (Sarajevo 1974) has published several works of fiction: *Ogledi o ravnodušnosti* (*Essays on Indifference*, 1995), *Zašto Mira Furlan* (*Why Mira Furlan?,* 1997), *Katedrala u Sijetlu* (*Seattle Cathedral*, 1999), *Oni!* (*Them*, 2001), *Mimesis* (2003), *Sin* (The Son, 2006) and *Dolazak* (*The Coming*, 2009), a book on cultural theory entitled *Homo Sucker: Poetika Apokalipse* (*Homo Sucker: Poetics of the Apocalypse*, 2010), and two collections of journalistic pieces: *Balkanska rapsodija* (*Balkan Rhapsody*, 2007) and *Sunčani dan na La Plaza De La Constitucion* (*A Sunny Day on the Plaza de la Constitución*, 2009). He lives in Ulcinj, Montenegro.

Lamija Begagić (Zenica, 1980) grew up in Zenica and currently lives in Sarajevo. She studied in the Department of South-Slavic literature at the University of Sarajevo. She is one of the editors of the literary web-magazine *Omnibus* and the editor of the children's editions Palčić and 5Plus. Her two stories (*God, Jazz and a few other Bits or simply Ena* and *the Apple*) were published in the collection of short stories *Bun(t)ovna p(r)oza*. Amongst 1,209 applications, her short story *Twenty-seven* won first prize at the *Ekran priča_02* literary competition organised by *Naklada MD,* a publishing company in Zagreb, and the Internet portal *Iskon*. She regularly publishes in the Sarajevo literary magazine *Lica*.

Goran Samardžić (Sarajevo, 1961) graduated with a degree in literature from the University of Sarajevo. In addition to poetry, he also writes prose and literary reviews. He is a bookseller and a publisher. He is one of the directors of the cult bookshop "Buybook." He has published the following books of poetry: *Lutke* (*Dolls*, 1990), *Otkazano zbog kiše* (*Cancelled due to Rain*, 1995) and *Između dva pisma (Between the Two Letters*, 1996). He has also published a collection of short stories *Sikamora (*1997). In 2004 his novel *Šumski duh (The Forest Spirit, 2004)* won the best novel award from the Writers Association in BiH.

Dimitrie Duracovski (Struga, 1952) is an artist and author. His paintings have been featured in a number of one-man and group exhibitions in Macedonia and abroad. As a writer of short stories, prose and essays his works have been included in a number of selections and anthologies of Macedonian literature in his own country and abroad. His published works include a collection of short stories entitled *Tajna istorija* (*Secret History*), 1986, and *Crni proroci* (*Black Prophets*), 1996, as well as the novel *Insomnia* (*Insomnia*), 2001, for which he was awarded the prestigious *Racinovo priznanie* national award.

Aleksandar Hemon was born in Sarajevo where he grew up. He left Sarajevo in January 1992. Since 1995 he has been writing in English. His collection of short stories *The Question of Bruno* was published in 2000, followed by *Nowhere Man* in 2002. His novel *The Lazarus Project* (2008) was a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award and National

Book Critics Circle Award. In 2009 he published a short story collection *Love and Obstacles*. His work has been translated into twenty languages. A collection of his texts originally published in a column entitled *Hemonwood* in the Sarajevo weekly Dani was later published by the publishing company Zoro. He lives in Chicago.

Boro Kontić (Nikšić, 1955) is the director and founder of Mediacentar Sarajevo (1995), and is also one of the authors of Mediacentar's radio and television productions as well as a lecturer at the School of Strategic Communication, and a trainer at the school of journalism. For many years he has worked as a journalist at Radio Sarajevo. He authored numerous radio shows in the eighties. He was the executive editor of *Omladinski program (Youth Programme) Radio Sarajevo (1987)*, and later the executive editor of *Drugi program (Second Programme) Radio Sarajevo (1990 – 1992)*. He specialised in radio documentaries. In 1991, his documentary JAZZTIME won the Grand Prix at the festivals *Frix Futura – Berlin* and *Prix Italia*. He was a correspondent for the *Voice of America* from 1994 to 2003.

Mirko Kovač (Petrovići, 1938) is the author of a number of novels, collections of tales, essays, TV and radio dramas and a dozen or so screenplays. He studied dramaturgy at the Theatre Academy in Belgrade. In his very first book *Gubilište* (1962) he drew condemnation from politicians and ideologues because of "his dark picture of the world". *Moja sestra Elida* came out in 1965, while the short novel *Životopis Malvine Trifković* was published in *1971*. The novella collection *Rane Luke Meštrevića (1971*), published to a stormy reception, was at first given a literary prize, which was taken away a year later, the book being withdrawn from libraries and bookstores. Zagreb published his novels *Ruganje s dušom* 1976) and *Vrata od utrobe* (1978), after which came the novel *Uvod u drugi život* (1983) and a book of essays *Evropska trulež* (1986), of which an extended version*, Evropska trulež i drugi eseji* came out in 1994, again in Zagreb. The book of tales *Nebeski zaručnici* was published in 1987, and at the end of 1990 Sarajevo's Svjetlost published his *Selected Books* in six volumes. During the war, Sarajevo published the novel *Kristalne rešetke* in the series Savremena bosanska književnost (Contemporary Bosnian Literature). In the same year the book of journalism *Bodež u srcu* was published by the opposition Beogradski krug. In 1996 his *Rastresen život* was published in Zagreb; this was a book defined in genre-terms as a Nouveau Roman. In 1997 a book of political essays entitled *Cvjetanje mase* was published in Sarajevo. In 1998 in Split he published *Knjiga pisama 1992-1995* with Filip David. His selected works were issued in Zagreb, in twelve volumes, the first being selected dramatic texts *Isus na koži* (2003) and *Vrata od utrobe* and *Kristalne rešetke* (2004). Mirko Kovač has won a number of distinguished international prizes. In 1993 he won Sweden's Tucholsky Prize, and in 1995 he was awarded the prestigious German prize, the Herder Preise, at a ceremony in Vienna. He won the prize Bosanski stećak in 2003 in Sarajevo. He has won two *NIN* prizes, the Andrić Prizes. The novel *Grad u zrcalu* won the Vladimir Nazor Prize for the best prose work of 2007, and the Meša Selimović prize for the best novel of 2007 from the region of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, as well as the Thirteenth of July Prize, the biggest Montenegrin national award, in 2008. Since 2003, the firm Fraktura of Zagreb has been publishing his collected works; to date, fourteen volumes have been issued.

Daša Drndić (Zagreb, 1946) has had a number of very different lives in different cities, towns and with different people. She studied medicine, married a dentist, took a degree in English, divorced the dentist, took a master's in dramaturgy, then a doctorate on theme of proto-feminism and the left. She has dealt with documentary radiophony, written some thirty radio dramas, translated, tutored, swum, painted flats, varnished parquet flooring, made furniture, spent thirteen years in very close company with her child, and then started writing again. She can't crochet, but can cook. She no longer feels like doing anything. She doesn't want to write her biography. Prose books: *Put do subote* (*P*rosveta, Belgrade, 1982), *Kamen s neba* (Prosveta, Belgrade, 1984), *Umiranje u Torontu* (Adamić – Arkzin, Rijeka – Zagreb, 1997), *Canzone di guerra* (Meandar, Zagreb, 1998), *Totenwande* (Meandar, Zagreb, 2000), *Doppelgänger* (Samizdat B92, Belgrade, 2002), *Leica format* (Meandar, Zagreb, 2003, (Samizdat B92, Belgrade, 2003), *After Eight – književni ogledi* (Meandar, Zagreb – 2005), *Sonnenschien* (Fraktura, Zagreb, 2007).

Boris A. Novak is a Slovenian poet, playwright, translator and essayist, who also teaches in the department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana University. He has published fifty-two books, including volumes of poems entitled *Still-Life-in-Verses, Daughter of Memory, 1001 Verses, Coronation, Catastrophe, Master of Insomnia, Alba, Echo,* and handbooks of poetic forms entitled *Forms of the World* and *Forms of the Heart.* Besides numerous puppet and radio plays for children, he has written several theatre plays: *Soldiers of History, House of Cards, and Cassandra.* He has translated French poetry as well as American, English and Irish poetry and has translated literature written in the Southern Slav languages. His works have been translated into several languages: *Coronation* and *Vertigo (*in the U.S.A), a bilingual Slovene-English edition of *Gardener of Silence,* and a multilingual edition of *Absence*. His selected poems *(Poèmes choisis) have* appeared in French. Two books of his poems were published in Croatian, *The Sacred Light* and *Master of Insomnia*. Novak has received several awards for his literary and scientific works.

Taras Kermauner (1930 - 2008) was a Slovenian literary historian, critic, philosopher, essayist, playwright and translator. Kermauner was considered the greatest researcher and expert on Slovene drama. His life's work was a series of monographs, published under the common title *Reconstruction and/or reinterpretation of Slovene drama*, in which he analyzed every Slovenian play. He also translated several works by György Lukács, as well as Tzvetan Todorov's book *The Spirit of Enlightenment*.

Jelena Lengold (Kruševac, 1959) has published five collections of poetry, four collections of stories and a novel. For her poetry, she has received the "Đura Jakšić" award, and for her prose the "Female Pen", "Biljana Jovanović" and "The Golden Hit Liber" awards. Her prose has been translated into several world languages, and has been featured in a number of domestic and foreign anthologies. She has worked for more than ten years as coordinator for the Nansen Dialogue Centre in Serbia. She lives in Belgrade.

Luko Paljetak (1943, Dubrovnik) is a poet, translator and man of the theatre. After earning a first degree in Croatian and English language and literature in Zadar, he earned a doctorate in Philology at Zagreb University. His many collections of poems include *Prince of Darkness from a Rose* (1968,

A.B. Šimić Fund Prize), *Violet Rains* (1973), *Sonnets and Other Closed Forms* (1983), *Animals from Brehm and other poems* (1984, Vladimir Nazor Prize), *Observation about Chirping* (1986), *Iris in a Bottle* (1987), *Lowered Door* (1989, Tin Ujević Prize), *Inventory* (1993), *Dubrovnik Poems* (3rd, enlarged edition, 1997) *A Few Poems* (1998), and *13 Poems in a Calendar* (2000). He won the Goran Wreath for his poems in 1995. He is the author of the plays *Dock* (1968), *Tell Me of Augusta* (1971), *Executioner or Two Restless Days in the City on Q Lake* (1982), *Shoemaker and Devil* (1989), *After Hamlet* (1993), *Star Dust* (1997) and others. He has translated Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Byron, Poe, Wilde, Joyce, Prešern, Browning, Apollinaire, Dylan Thomas, and Lowry. For his translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in 1987, he won the annual prize of the Association of Croatian Literary Translators.

Stipe Nobilo was born in 1945 in Lumbarda on the island of Korčula. He studied visual arts at the Pedagogical Academy in Split. He graduated from the Academy of Visual Arts in Zagreb in 1971 in the class of professor Šime Perić. After receiving his diploma he collaborated for a number of years as a stone-cutter in the atelier of the sculptor Lujo Lozica working on stone figures (including "Four Seasons of the Year" for the Intercontinental Hotel in Zagreb). In 1973 he met the painter Ivo Dulčić and together they worked on a number of projects using the mosaic technique (for the elementary school Lapad in Dubrovnik, the monastery church in Kreševo and the Stations of the Cross for the parish church in Brusje on the island of Hvar). In 1976 he had an independent exhibition in Gallery Zagreb. This was followed by a succession of presentations and restoration and stone-cutting undertakings. As part of the project headed by engineer Ante Kršinić and Lujo Lozica he cut decorative plastics for renovations of significant buildings (the cathedral in Osijek, the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb, the fountain for the Ina-Naftaplin building in Zagreb and others). He overcame his existential emotional split attachment to Lumbarda, the place of his birth, and Zagreb, where he had been living for twenty years, in 1987 when he returned home for good and took up the uncertain fate of a professional painter. The sea and landscapes have always been attractive motifs which Nobilo paints in his expressionist manner between the real and the abstract, mirroring the artist's feelings and his life on the island.

REPUBLIKA SLOVENIJA
VLADA REPUBLIKE SLOVENIJE

This issue if *Sarajevo Notebooks* is financially supported by the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the government of the Kingdom of Sweden and is published by Media Center in collaboration with Beletrina – Academic Press.

Title: Best of Sarajevo Notebooks

Publisher: Mediacentar Sarajevo
Kolodvorska 3, 71000 Sarajevo, Bosna i Hercegovina
Telefon: (+387 33) 715 861
Telefax: (+387 33) 715 860
E-mail: sarajevske.sveske@media.ba
www.sveske.ba
www.infobiro.ba

Beletrina – Academic Press
Borštnikov trg 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
Telefon: +386 (0)1 200 37 00
Telefax: +386 (0)1 200 37 19
E-mail: info@zalozba.org
www.studentskazalozba.si

For publisher: Boro Kontić

Design: Adnan Mahmutović

Printing: Kovertelux, Sarajevo

Circulation: 1.500 copies

Sarajevske sveske/Sarajevo Notebook magazine is issued quarterly.

ISSN 1512-8539

Na osnovu mišljenja Federalnog ministarstva obrazovanja, nauke, kulture i sporta, broj 02-15-5451/02 od 28.08.2002. godine, časopis "Sarajevske sveske" oslobođen je plaćanja poreza na promet proizvoda.

Sarajevo – Ljubljana, 2011