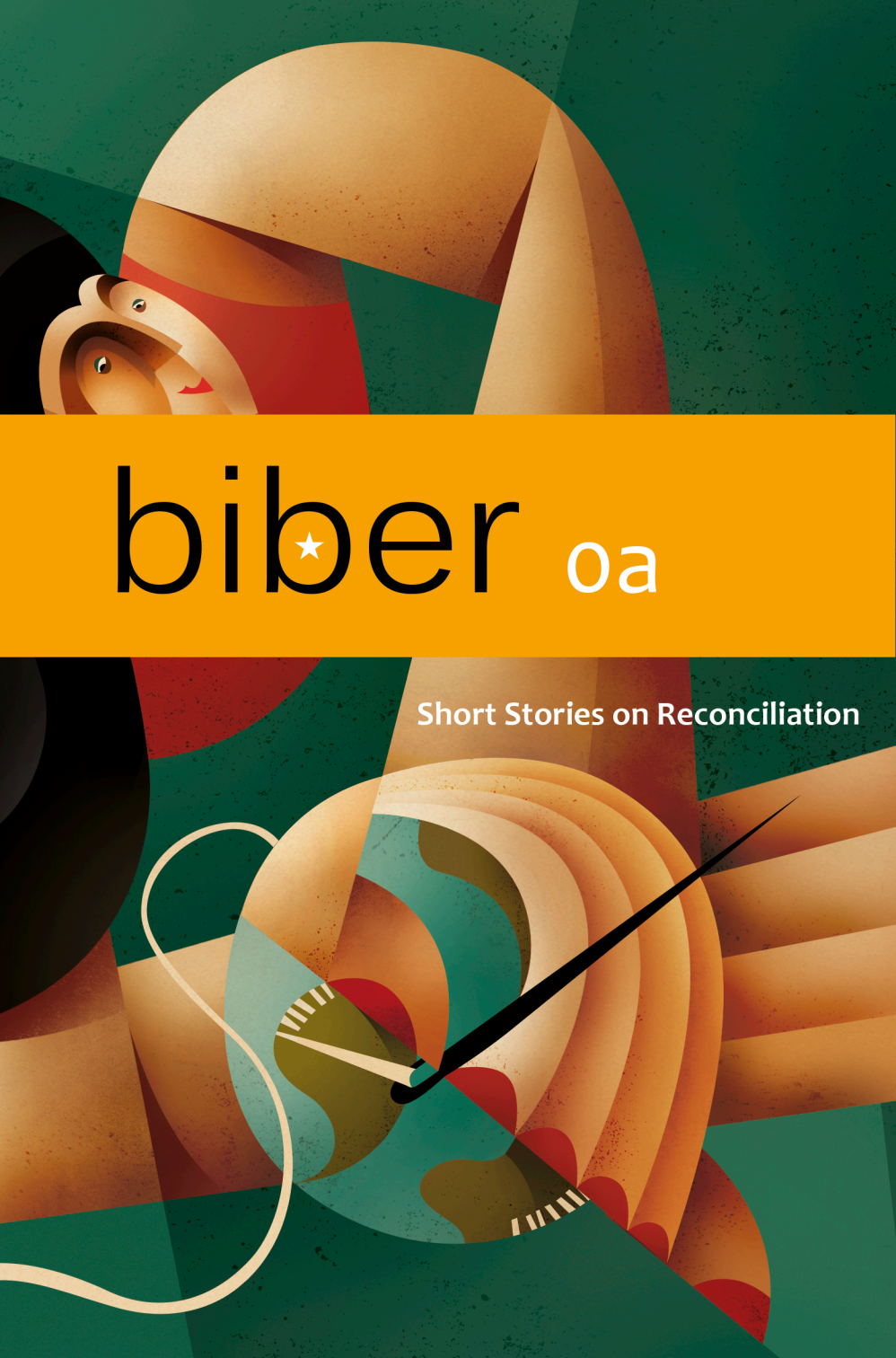
biber oa
Short Stories on Reconciliation

biber oa

Short Stories on Reconciliation

Belgrade | Sarajevo, 2020

biber oa

Edition in English

Abid Jarić · Adam Pakai · Afrim Demiri · Andrea Popov Miletić · Anela Ilijaš · Ante Storić · Anushka Minovska · Arsim Jonuzi · Blagica Gjorgievska · Bojan Todorović · Bojana Babić · Damjan Krstanović · Danilo Lučić · Dženeta Rovčanin · Edis Galushi · Gabrijel Delić · Imer Topanica · Isidora Petrović · Jovana Matevska · Korana Serdarević · Lejla Kalamujić · Luiza Bouharaoua · Maja Slavnić · Marenglen Çano · Mario Merdžan · Mehmed Đedović · Milan Vorkapić · Milica Vučković · Monika Herceg · Nada Jelinčić · Nadia Geras · Nemanja Raičević · Nora Verde (Antonela Marušić) · Sandra Cvitković · Sanja Mihajlovic-Kostadinovska · Slađana Ljubičić · Slađana Nina Perković · Stefan Slavković · Tamara Kovačević · Vladimir Tabašević · Željka Horvat Čeč

Publisher: Centre for Nonviolent Action Sarajevo | Belgrade

Editorial matters: Ivana Franović

Translation:

Alexandra Channer · Marija Jones · Marija Stojanović · Mirjana Evtov · Ulvija Tanović · Vjosa Ajdini

Proofreading: Gina Landor

Book cover illustration: Dragoslav Malinić

Printed by Standard 2, Belgrade

ISBN 978-86-89845-12-9

Publishing of this book was financially supported by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) of the Federal Republic of Germany.

biber oa

Short Stories on Reconciliation

Contents

Foreword

You have before you 41 short stories by 41 authors, stories originally written in Albanian, Macedonian and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian/Montenegrin. This is a selection of stories published in the first three *Biber* short story contest collections (2016 – 2020).

This collection is intended for short story lovers, but not only for them. This is a book for all who love the region of the Balkans, and for those who do not. Perhaps they will grow to love it, perhaps there is something here to love. Still. This book is also intended for those who would like to gain a better understanding of the people and relationships in the Western Balkans.

The topic for the first two *Biber* contests was reconciliation in the context of the legacy left behind by the wars and violence in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. For the third contest the topic was expanded, and included stories that could contribute to a better understanding among people, reducing hatred and deconstructing prejudice; anti-war stories, stories about dealing with the past, deconstructing images of the enemy, fostering empathy with others; courageous stories that dare walk in the "enemy's" shoes; stories that push boundaries and open up new ways to build a more certain, safer and freer future for all.

The juries for all three contests were made up of prominent writers from the entire region:

Biber 01: Faruk Šehić, Doruntina Basha and Bojan Krivokapić;

Biber 02: Tatjana Gromača, Kim Mehmeti and Faruk Šehić;

Biber 03: Lejla Kalamujić, Rumena Bužarovska and Shkelzen Maliqi.

The idea for this contest was the brain-child of a literary activist group from the countries of the former Yugoslavia and the Centre for Nonviolent Action Sarajevo | Belgrade. The contest arose out of our long-standing need to involve different social groups in peace work, including writers.

In the societies of the former Yugoslavia, reconciliation is not a popular concept, but this situation is not unique in the world. In our region, reconciliation has the ill fortune of being equated with forgiveness or forgetting. Insisting on forgiving and forgetting in circumstances where people experienced countless killings, suffering and injustice is akin to rubbing salt into a wound. However, if we take reconciliation to mean giving up hatred, looking for ways to achieve justice, but without causing injustice to others, and a chance to build a more confident, safer and freer future for all, then we believe this is something all our societies desperately need.

The idea of the contest was shaped by an understanding that a literature aware of its context has the potential for intervening in that context – to influence and to change, to give us all hope and a fighting chance. We started the contest not just to promote reconciliation, but also to give people a chance to look over the fence into their neighbour's yard, to look at their common past from a different perspective, to ask themselves whether we need reconciliation and how we can achieve it, to contribute to a culture of reading literature from the neighbourhood, to encourage translating from neighbouring languages, to open another communication channel and support activist authors who wrestle with topics of vital importance, swimming against the mainstream, and to receive in return inspiration, support and another foothold for further activities in peacebuilding and reconciliation. We wanted to build a small bridge. We know that short stories cannot change society overnight, but they can touch people's hearts.

In 2014, when the contest was created, the plan was to do a single round. However, the unexpected turnout and

response drove us to make the effort to continue. At the time of publication of this collection in English, the fourth contest is under way.

There are many reasons why we decided to translate a selection of the stories into English, but the main reason is that we wanted to provide additional support to activist authors. At the same time, we believe good voices should be heard far and wide.

The stories in this collection, though they are fiction, talk about our post-Yugoslav reality. They are all profoundly anti-war. They talk about crimes committed by "our side", about the war itself and life in its immediate aftermath, about childhood in war and its aftermath, the experience of being a refugee, of facing trauma and other consequences, about loves and friendships that have survived or have developed despite pressures, and about empathy with others. Two of the stories are about refugees of the 21st century.

There is a wealth of both non-fiction and fiction dealing with the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav experience. However, what makes this collection of short stories unique, to mention just two of its features, is that 1) it includes more female than male authors (which was not pre-meditated) although the societies we live in are deeply patriarchal, and 2) it brings together languages and dialects that rarely find themselves under the same roof in our post-Yugoslav reality. Unfortunately, what is lost in translation into English is precisely this wealth of languages and dialects between the covers of a single book, a sight that touched many of us who remember and who once had the feeling of belonging somewhere.

Ivana Franović
for the *Biber* team

Sneg je opet, Snežana
(It's Snowing Again, Snow White)

Lejla Kalamujić

The radio plays all day long. It's in the living room, on the dresser under the TV. The radio is a brown wooden box, the famous *Triglav Iskra* brand. It has eyes – two shiny metal buttons in front, and six white teeth – plastic keys in very dark gums. Nobody cares much which program it is. It's only important that the radio is on. As long as it is softly humming, the silence won't eat us up. The world moves slowly in the murmur of voices. The atmosphere of our everyday life is disturbed only when the song *Sneg je opet, Snežana* reaches our ears through the radio's loudspeakers. *It's snowing again, Snow White*.

They think that I don't notice. That I don't feel the discomfort in their adult bodies. That I don't perceive how they turn their heads away from me, exchanging sorrowful glances. And how their eyes fill with tears. Because that song inadvertently brings back the thought of your death. It is a reminder. It rummages through their memories. It's a lament blended with the scent of the house I grew up in.

The days multiply into months and years.

I'm growing up out of their tears, like a seed from dewdrops. Sometimes, when their eyes become misty, I can feel they're looking through me. Probing, looking for something that is no more. They stare into the void hidden at the bottom of my eyes. I'm growing up aware that an unknown Nothing resides in me.

And then comes the war. The radio is silenced. Everything

stops. And it never comes back. Everybody goes to their own side, and stays in their own cocoon of truth. The silence eats us all up. I'm left with the Nothing. But something bothers me a lot. Something that no surviving stories about you can help. Even your Communist Party membership card in the table drawer doesn't mean anything anymore. You are an open notebook. Completely blank. And that's why I'm now pulling you out of the darkness of my pupils. I open the door for you, and offer you a chair. My question is clear: If by any chance you had survived that '82, if you had witnessed our country falling apart, who would you be now, Snežana?

**

The war begins ...

We're packing. You keep rushing me. Every now and then you take something out of my suitcase. We can't take all of that, you say. It is as it is. The state has fallen apart. Borders are being drawn, and everyone is going to their own side. To their own people. We leave without saying goodbye. We climb Vraca hill. We leave the burning city.

We're on a bus. It's crowded. I'm sitting on your lap. Military tanks pass us on the way. Hands with the three finger salute stick out of them, like horns. The bus drives slowly. Every now and then there's some kind of inspection. They ask you for your ID, they don't ask me anything. It takes hours to reach the border. The Drina River appears through the window. Two men enter, followed by two more. They laugh. They shout. They thoroughly check everyone in the bus. There's a problem in the back rows. I hear a commotion back there. You won't let me turn my head. They go out. Those four men. But now there's a girl with them. She has long blonde hair. And a frightened look in her eyes. As the men take her away, they curse stupid Bosnians for letting a Muslim woman slip by them. No one speaks a word. Your lips are pursed. Your forehead frowns. Your eyes command me to keep my mouth shut.

Then we find ourselves in a small town. Among our own

people. On television, our former city is falling apart under grenades and bullets. One evening, during TV News 2, a camera zooms in on our street. Thick brown smoke rises above Alma's house. I look at you, but you're silent. There's a bowl full of fruit on the dining table, and an empty vase. Your eyes try to escape my gaze.

And then I ask you: And now what? And now what, Snežana?

Or: The war begins …

Again, we're packing our suitcases. You take everything you deem unnecessary out of mine. The borders have been drawn. The state is gone. It lives only in our hearts now, you say. We're leaving. Far from that despair. We board the last plane leaving Sarajevo. For months we drift from one refugee camp to another. In a foreign country, where we know nobody. We struggle with a new language. Little by little, we learn to spell new words. You get a job as a cleaner at the train station. You sweep, wipe and polish the grey marble floor. Often, during a break, you spread your arms and explain to passers-by how beautiful and big our country used to be. They look at you sadly with their aqueous eyes, heave a sigh, wave you away, quietly whispering to each other: *So slawische, so pathetische*.

Sometimes I get a letter from Alma. She says it's OK there, the shooting has stopped. Therefore, the war has stopped. But we're not going back, we're not going to live among graves, that's what you say. While dragging your broom. Your back is bowed every time I see you. It goes on for years like that. A scarf is tied around your waist, like a flag that warms the sweet memories of the railways you built as a young woman, as a member of the League of Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia.

The world is rushing on. I keep trying to tell you that it won't stay at the station just because some country has died. There are more and more refugees around us. New ones. They come from a long way away; their memories are fresher, and more painful. The train tracks and rail switching systems they travel on are lubricated by their host's hatred. But you don't listen,

you keep spreading your arms, like broken spears. Until the day those adolescent boys with anger in their eyes grab your broom and break it. They curse you, and spit on the floor you've just polished. You sit in a pool of water in the middle of cold marble, all confused, looking at the dirty floor.

And then I ask you: And now what? And now what, Snežana?

Or: The war begins …

We don't pack anything. Our country has fallen apart. The borders are bloody, but we're not going anywhere. This is our city. And our house, that's what you say. Adding that all things must pass, including evil. We survive the war. Your company goes under. You're unemployed for ages. Just a dinky job here and there. You have no health insurance. You have no pension either, for you haven't worked long enough to retire. We repair the house for years, but in the end it's only OK, livable. The years go by. You never stop dividing time into *before* and *after* the war. We often sit in silence. That's also how we eat. When you're in a bad mood, you moan about me alienating myself.

One night I come back late. I unlock the door. It's past midnight. You're sitting at the dining table, where my dinner is waiting, cold. I sit at the table. I try to eat in silence. But no, you want to know where I've been until the small hours of the morning. I don't answer. You're angry, you're yelling. You say you called everyone, one after the other. No one knows where I am, or what's happening with me, you say. You called Alma, too, and she was a little confused. You were shocked to learn that we weren't seeing each other anymore. She also told you about an argument I had with other friends. And that things got a little out of hand then. And … She didn't tell you the whole story.

I'm not hungry any more. I get up from the table. I'm trying to get past you. But you want an explanation. For this kind of behavior, for broken friendships. You say you don't understand what kind of person I've become. You want to hear the whole story.

So be it, I think, if that's what you want. They said I was a bastard, I say, for I was borne by a Četnikuša – a Chetnik woman! You're flabbergasted. Now it's you who doesn't feel like talking. You turn your head away. Now it's you who wants to escape. But I don't let you. I squeeze your arm tight. You moan. I softly hiss: Now you know. That's how they think of you in our city. You look at me speechless, your lips as pale as ashes.

And then I ask you: And now what? And now what, Snežana?

**

Come to think of it, I know it's totally unfair to do this to you. To so shamelessly drag you through mud you've never stepped in. And without even asking your permission. I'd better get you back to that song, Shaban's song, hand you over to those age old tears. Look, you're my mother, and no matter which path you might have chosen, no matter where you might have decided to take us, I would have surely – at some point – have screamed angrily in your face: Oh, how I hate you! And then slammed the door.

I'm in my room. The notebook remains blank. I would now like to close it, to make peace with all your unlived lives. Cold air enters through the open windows. The sun's hidden in the darkness. You knock, and open the door. You sit on a chair. You say you've stopped by, just like that; maybe we could stretch our legs a little, just you and me.

We walk in silence. One second we're in an alley, the next in a wide street. You're shivering from cold. You cling to my body, as if you were a little girl. It's dark. We go down a winding road. I can't figure out where we are, after all these years. And then you abruptly stop. Rooted to the spot. Somewhere below I see street lights. Voices are heard, and the hum of cars. But you won't go any further. You just stare at me.

And say: You know, it's better this way. Good thing I died.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

Summer

Ante Storić

"You spread a thin layer of mustard on a slice of bread, top it with a slice of gouda and two slices of salami arranged so that after you cut the toast diagonally you have one in each triangle; sprinkle mayonnaise to your heart's desire, and then cover it all with another slice of bread." This is Barba Jarko's recipe for *the best toasted sandwich in the world*. "The mustard is the key," he continues, revealing his tried and tested recipe. Buvel and I drool, both drunk, hungry as wolves, staring at the toaster, waiting for it to pop.

We were inseparable that summer, Buvel and I. Since it was our last year in high school, our summer started in mid-May. We used to wake up with high-noon coffee at Pomidora's, and then cool down with afternoon dips under the Morinj Bridge. At night we would wander aimlessly through Dolac, going round in circles. Every night before going in to sleep, we would hang out in front of Jarko's metal food stand and, shining with sweat, reflect the blue neon light of its Fast Food sign, shooting the shit while inhaling the stench of manganese coming from the nearby factory. Buvel would sometimes shamelessly scrounge money from passers-by, enough for each of us to have a toast and a can of beer. If we had no money, Jarko would often treat us. He would stretch out his hand holding the toasts, and simply say: "Here, for my boys." We'd munch on the crunchy bread, chewing each bite with gusto.

Both Buvel and I liked a neighbourhood girl called Ana, a junior in our high school. We thought we didn't stand a chance with her because she liked the action movie stars of the 1980s, ranging from Dolph Lundgren to Eric Roberts. Buvel's looks worked in his favour as he somewhat resembled Michael Dudikoff from American Ninja, but he was too klutzy to make a move. Not that I was any better. My greatest achievement: I once almost put my hand on her forearm. I think she could sense our desire, and she understood our clumsiness. It was because of her that we formed a band; we called her to Buvel's garage to be our band vocalist. And she came. Buvel made a drum kit by stretching a sheepskin over an empty Jupol paint bucket, fastening it with wire, and stretching layers of duct-tape over another bucket; pot lids served as cymbals. I brought my uncle's acoustic guitar, and Ana filled an empty Cedevita box with rice, rustling it while singing softly. We were good, though I say it myself. I taught myself to play riffs from songs by the Ramones, the Pixies, the Clash, and we practiced them to exhaustion. Buvel also brought his father's VHS camera; we made faces, and played music, and fooled around, tearing up with laughter – all into the camera lens. One evening, while all three of us were sitting in the broken armchair with our dusty bicycles leaning against it, I put my hand on Ana's thigh. She didn't protest. I walked her to the intersection of our streets. We kissed for a long time; so long that my jaw hurt.

Our band rehearsed every day until lunch. Then we would go for a swim. Ana and I would sometimes sneak into the pine forest, behind the bungalows. That's where my only pair of swimming trunks were irretrievably destroyed with resin, but that's also where I reached second base, as they say in American movies. In the evening, all three of us would hang out in front of Jarko's kiosk.

I knew where the garage key was hidden, so Ana and I would come to rehearsal early, to spend some time alone together. Once, when the rumble of the heavy garage door interrupted

us, Ana jumped up away from me, and leaned against the wall. I covered my erection with a notebook of tablatures and lyrics. Buvel sat down at his makeshift drum and, scratching the back of his head with a drumstick, suggested, "Let's play something patriotic."

"Are you crazy? We're punk rock," I said.

"So what? Let's do a punk version of *Ustani, Bane (Rise up, Ban)!*"

"But that goes against punk philosophy," Ana said. And I agreed.

"What the hell! Let's do the rock version then." He banged on the buckets and roared, "Ri-i-i-i-ise up, Ban, Croatia is calling you-u-u..." Ana and I looked at each other in astonishment. Buvel began to improvise, both the text and the melody; he mentioned the slaughter of Chetniks and hanging Serbs on willows. Ana became very serious. "I have to go ... my mother has already called me ... for lunch," she said, and left. I was watching Buvel; he was silent. He just scraped the stretched duct-tape with his drumstick.

"Ana's folks are from Pančevo," I said.

"What do I fucking care about those Serbian scum!"

"Since when did you become such a big Croat?"

"Since when did you become such a big Serb?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Fuck off, you and your Chetnik girlfriend!"

I jumped on him and pushed him against the wall. He lost his balance, tripped over his bike and fell to the floor. I left.

"Are you going to be such a dimwit when bearded Chetniks come to your house?" he shouted after me.

I didn't get to third base: Ana soon moved away from town and went to live with her relatives in Pančevo. In the fall I moved to Zagreb for my studies. For a while we managed to keep in contact by letter. She wrote about how she had to sleep in the same room with her two cousins, with one grinding her teeth all night long, and about how she was freaking out,

and how much she missed her bed at Njegoš Square, and that she wanted to enroll in the Faculty of Biology in Belgrade but her folks couldn't afford it as only her Dad had managed to get a job, and how she didn't know what to do next, and that someone had written *Ustashas* on their windshield. In Cyrillic letters.

I was writing about how I had failed an exam, and that I wasn't sure if I would continue my studies, and how I only bought yogurts and puddings in the canteen, and ate only bread and yogurt and pudding for dessert for days as I didn't feel like going to the canteen, and how my roommate didn't flush the toilet after he had used it, and that we saw on TV how Šibenik was being destroyed but were so stoned that I was convinced the war was happening elsewhere. I once wrote that I missed her. And I didn't hear from her after that. Over time, the memory of Ana faded beyond recognition. Like many a teenage love story, this one was squeezed out by new love exploits.

Come winter break, I arrived in Šibenik by a bus that had to take a roundabout route. I arrived under the cover of night, and there was a war blackout. My folks were waiting, wide awake; they couldn't stop hugging me - and mind you, my father was not in the habit of hugging. Facing the wall in the hallway, I immediately noticed a newly-hung tapestry with national symbols hanging beside the familiar items of needlepoint embroidery and wall plates painted with flowers. Later on, while tossing eggs and sausages into a pot with boiling water on a wood-burning stove, my mother said: "Marijan was looking for you. He asked when you would arrive."

After dinner, I rat-a-tat-tat on his window-shutters. Buvel opens the shutters ajar, peeps out, and waves for me to come in. I find him dressed in a camouflage uniform, incredibly talkative, with almost no pupils in his bright eyes. He tells me that the boots pinch his feet, but it's okay with two layers of socks, and how they wrote the names of the Yugoslav National

Army generals on grenades, with markers, and how he vomited beside a cow carcass...

"Let's have a beer at Jarko's," I say.

"He's closed."

"Since when?"

"You'd prefer him still poisoning us with that Chetniky goo of his?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Buva?"

"What is it, Gandhi? You went out to, like study something, and have, like, no idea about what's going on?"

"What does Jarko have to do with what's going on?"

"His people cooked this up."

Barba Jarko was in fact named Rajko. He and his wife had always lived across from us. Buvel, as a child, could not pronounce Rajko properly, and that is why Rajko was always Jarko for all the neighbourhood kids. He was always easy to talk to, and friendly – always, not just when he was working in his metal kiosk. Once, when I was in my early years of elementary school, he saw my mother and me walking, stopped his tiny Fiat 126, and took us to the bus station; another time he bought me a *Dvojni C* juice saying: "We have to give you vitamins if we want you to become a straight A student!"

Buvel brings some local wine, and we start drinking. He says he'll be here tomorrow, and then back to the front line. A Kalashnikov is leaning against the wall, below the window. He reaches for his rifle to show me how you cock the weapon, insert a cartridge, and how you shoot. I'm pretty drunk, emboldened to ask questions I've been eager to ask.

"So, have you used it?"

"Yes."

"Did you hit anyone?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill anyone?"

"Don't ask me that."

In mid-January, I returned to Zagreb and for several months lived the life of many a student: getting up late, learning too little, drinking too much alcohol ... too many visits to dark, smoky and deafening places ... and so on for almost a year.

Then, early one morning, the telephone woke me up. My mother.

"Yeah?" I was waiting for her to say something.

"Marijan ... he's been killed."

I was rooted to the spot. I couldn't stop looking at the calendar on the wall above the phone, half-consciously counting the days of that December; back and forth, back and forth. I went to the kitchen, took a bottle of disgusting brandy my roommate kept there, and drank as if there were no tomorrow. "You fucking moron," I kept saying through tears.

On the evening after the funeral, I noticed a plastic bag on the desk in my room. Inside was a VHS tape. It was labelled Summer. In Buvel's handwriting.

I close the door of my room, insert the tape into the player, and press play. Footage from our first rehearsal appears on the screen: a summer's day, we make faces at the camera, grinning, obviously in a good mood. Buvel, Ana, and I. At some point, this video of pure happiness gets replaced with a night video recorded in the same garage.

Jarko. Tied to a chair. His face covered in blood.

He mumbles, "C'mon, people, don't do this! What's got into you?" Buvel's Dad says, "C'mon, you big hero, drink this!" forcing battery fluid into Jarko's mouth.

Jarko gulps, and moans in pain. "Don't do this, guys…"

I turn off the tape recorder.

Then I turn it on again.

Buvel enters the frame. He whacks Jarko with the Kalashnikov.

Jarko tumbles to the floor along with the chair he was tied to.

Buvel shakes him with his foot, asks if he's dead, then looks at his father, and kicks Jarko in the spleen.

Jarko moans loudly.

Buvel fires a burst of gunfire into him.

"Turn that off! Turn off the cam..."

I stare at the snow on the TV screen.

My father was peeking through the door, ajar; I saw him in the reflection on the screen. I turned to face him. "Throw it in the fire," he said.

I pushed him away. I smashed the painted plates on the wall in the hallway, pulled the tapestry from the wall, threw it on the floor, and stamped on it. I pushed my mother away, and ran out of the house.

I didn't know where I was going to go.

Running through the darkness, I reached the kiosk out of breath, then sat down, and lit a cigarette.

I don't remember what I was thinking about, or whether I was aware then that from that moment on mustard would always taste like memories I'd rather forget.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

Machete You Me, Machete Me You

Tamara Kovačević

I

Grandpa, I found you in the Ovčara trial, she had been preparing for this conversation for a long time, reading transcripts of testimonies given under oath, accounts of observers and reporters from the trial before the War Crimes Chamber in Belgrade, the retrial in Belgrade, the trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

Never mind that, tomcat, come, have something to eat, Grandpa used to have a cat when he was a child that was always scratched, bitten and invariably angry. He therefore deduced it must have been a tomcat, couldn't have been female. He would later call us kids *kitten* or *tomcat*.

Fine, here, I'm eating. But I wanted to ask you...

That's all over and done with, he sat in the armchair and turned up the television.

II

Grandpa, I've read something and I want to ask your opinion. A neutral introduction, an invitation to the other side to engage.

Come now, eat your lunch, Grandpa made this pilau just for you, he nudged the pan closer to her. When Gran died last year,

he had no difficulties taking over her kitchen. Sinewy and agile, long retired, it was as if he had decided the day after her death that *needs* must and went to get the groceries. Still, he went on living exactly as she had organised their lives. Everything in the flat remained in the same place, he had breakfast and cooked lunch at the same hour, went to the same grocery shop, watered the same flowers from the same watering can. It's probably something you perfect in the army, an insistence on routine as a way of life.

Grandpa, I read the transcripts from the Ovčara trial. How come we never talk about it?

Never mind that, kitten, it was a long time ago, he continued shuffling from the table to the kitchen. *Where did you even come up with that?* Counter-questions shift the focus, allowing for additional information to come to light.

I typed in the names of all our relatives into the ICTY database and documents with your name in them came up. I later found the transcripts from the trial in Belgrade. Just the bare, ascertainable facts, otherwise he'll slip out of her grasp.

Where did you say you found this? He looked at her askance, squinting, the way people do when they want to hear you better, when they think you've made some mistake and they want to correct you.

Look, here, it's the transcript from your second testimony. She readily pulled out her phone from her bag and pointed to the text under his name.

It was my duty, my responsibility. Why do you want to know about this?

I want to talk about it. I have no one to talk to about it, besides, who else should I talk to about this other than you! Raised voice, a sign of weakness.

If you don't understand, I can't help you there. He had concluded she'd had enough lunch, so he took her plate back to the kitchen.

III

Grandpa, put on your glasses, I have something to show you, she lifted up the phone screen with text in Cyrillic. His name in large letters followed by his answer to a question put by the presiding judge. *I've read all of it, I'm not judging you, I just want to talk.*

Who are you to judge me? You little brat! I received an order and I went where I was told to go.

I'm just saying, I want to talk, not about you then, what you did, why you went, I've read all that, everything you said, multiple times, I want to talk about now. Do you think it's normal that in our family we just gossip, talk about feast days and elections, low wages, when so-and-so will get married, bring us joy, what friggin' joy when they can't see the horror! She'd been having this conversation in her head for far too long, weighing her words, arguing with herself, so she was all out of patience when it came to the real thing.

Kitten, leave it, it's got nothing to do with you, warmly, he put her in her place.

What do you mean it has nothing to do with me, have you read the papers, they want to introduce military drills for women now, she congratulated herself on this apt parallel.

Oh, leave it, the papers write all sorts of rubbish, he blinked, realising he'd slipped up. Facial expression unchanged.

Alright, Grandpa, but if I found the transcripts and the newspaper articles from ten, twenty years ago, someone else must've read them too. You yourself said you'd learnt about the atrocity from the papers. How come everyone's such a keen reader, so informed, but no one says a word?

On 20 November 1991, at the Ovčara agricultural estate near Vukovar, members of local Territorial Defence forces and Serb volunteers under the command of the Yugoslav National Army tortured and killed at least two hundred Croat civilians and prisoners of war.

Don't you understand, it's as if only I know you were there,

that it happened, only my Grandpa was in the war, and no one says a thing!

What do you want from me, what do you want me to tell you? He seemed to be relenting. Or he just wanted to gauge her ultimate goal and cut the conversation short.

Nothing, I just want to talk. For you to stop dodging my questions, to stop snapping at everything I say, it had seemed to her earlier that she had so much to ask, to deduce. Now, the point of it all seemed to be retreating before her. She sat across from Grandpa, who had practically been an old-age pensioner even back then when he got four men out of the hangar at Ovčara. Saved their lives and took them to the military prison for prisoners of war.

Yes, I testified. I said everything I had to say there. It's not up to me to go around talking about it any more. I've done my duty, both as a soldier and as a witness. It's up to you to think on it, to search and to find out, he got up from the table and went to get a glass of water.

IV

A multitude of close relatives stood in front of the graveyard. The annual commemoration of Gran's death had just ended. They stuck around to talk some more, agree on who would take Grandpa home, who would drop by the next day, so he wasn't alone.

Grandpa, see you tomorrow around five, ok?

Sure, tomcat, Grandpa will make you pilau, you haven't been to see me in ages. And you've plumped up a bit, I must tell you, you've got to watch your weight.

You were at Ovčara, for crying out loud, and you're talking to me about looks! Adrenaline surged into her brain, she leapt up like a tiger, pulling out a machete as she plummeted back down and stuck it into her Grandpa right behind his left clavicle, she had seen it in a film, at that angle the blade easily and unmistakably finds the heart.

V

None of that happened, of course. She responded with a practised blasé smile and cursed him inwardly. At least he hadn't asked when she'd get married and bring Grandpa some joy.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

The Ring

Slađana Nina Perković

I

I put on my red dress, but then changed my mind. The blue one seemed more appropriate for the occasion. I looked at myself in the mirror. My hair looked awful. Like a bird's nest. I tried to put it up in a bun, but I couldn't seem to achieve a satisfactory result. I took out the hairpins and put them back in a bunch of times. Finally, I gave up. I just let my hair down, ran my fingers through it a few times and left the house. I had been putting off the inevitable long enough.

Though there wasn't a car anywhere in sight, I dutifully waited at the traffic lights for the little green pedestrian to appear. I crossed the street, entered the red building and foregoing the lift, climbed the stairs, one at a time, to the fourth floor. I took a deep breath and rang the bell above her last name. My stomach was tied in a knot.

The woman who had been taking care of her since she was discharged from the hospital opened the door. She squeezed my hand conspiratorially. "Try to look like everything is just fine. Don't cry. Be cheerful, but not too much."

She was lying on the bed by the window. Her head was round like the moon. Bald. But that's not what frightened me. What frightened me were her eyes. Small, sunken, dead. If I didn't know if was her, I wouldn't have been able to recognise her. Everything came crashing down. I almost burst into tears.

I almost wailed at the top of my lungs. I held back the flood. I don't even know how. My mouth contorted into a smile. I bent down and kissed her cheek. That was not her cheek anymore, she did not smell of herself. The room spun around me. My legs felt weak. I had to sit down beside her on the bed.

I didn't say anything. Otherwise my own voice would have betrayed me. All I managed was to place my hand on her shoulder. Suddenly, she grabbed my hand and put her lips to my palm. It must have been 40 degrees outside, but suddenly I felt a chill. My teeth started chattering uncontrollably. I snatched my hand away and stood up. I wanted to run outside. I couldn't take it anymore. But I didn't.

I probably would have if she hadn't pointed to the chest of drawers on the far side of the room.

"Bring me my red jewellery case." She spoke in a stranger's voice.

That was just what I needed. To get away from her. To take a breath. I opened a drawer and pulled out a small dark red plush-covered jewellery case. I handed her the case, but I didn't sit back down on the side of the bed. I stood at a comfortable distance.

She fumbled as she opened the case, spilling the jewellery all over the bed. Mostly rings. Two dozen or so. Maybe more. I'd never seen her wear a single one.

"Pick one. I want you to have something to remember me by," she said.

I wanted to say something like *nonsense, you'll outlive us all*, but I didn't have it in me to play pretend. I picked up a small ring at random, just to have it over and done with. When she saw which one I had picked, she propped herself up and snatched it from my hand.

"Of all the rings, you had to pick the silver one! Here, try this one." For a moment I saw a flicker of her old self and it made me smile in earnest.

I couldn't stop staring at the gold ring with the large red stone. I kept rolling it around between my fingers. I'd never

seen such a beautiful ring. On the inside, it was engraved with "For our eternal love". I wanted to ask, whose eternal love, but then I put it on my finger and forgot everything.

The ring fit me perfectly.

II

I was running around the house in a frenzy. I had gotten all dressed up, but then it suddenly occurred to me to try the plum jam I had been cooking on the stove the whole day. Just to see if it needed more sugar, and of course I stained my clothes. I was beside myself. I rummaged around the wardrobe half-dressed, in my bra and girdle. Luckily, I had a plan B. I pulled out my boat neck black dress, but now I had to choose different shoes. My red pumps would be perfect with the black dress, but they were in a box, somewhere on top of the wardrobe. Without thinking, I grabbed a chair and clambered up. I sneezed two or three times. How long had it been since I dusted the top of the wardrobe? I couldn't think about that now. It wasn't the right time. I found the box with the red shoes and jumped down from the chair, nimble as a cat, though my joints haven't been in their best shape for a while now. I looked at the clock and froze. I grabbed an extra pair of sheer tights from the dresser and stuffed them into my bag. The only piece of jewellery I wore was the ring with the large red stone.

The cabbie grumbled about waiting so long. I didn't feel like arguing, I just wanted to get to the restaurant for my 30th high school reunion. In a conciliatory tone I said, "You're right," and "You know what us women are like." He smirked and replied he did, indeed, "only too well."

I burst into the restaurant just in time. They'd just served the sparkling wine and an old classmate whose name I couldn't remember was holding a toast. "To those of us gathered here today, and to those no longer with us, classmates and teachers. Blown far and wide by the winds of war," he said and then the music started and everyone jumped up.

I have no idea how much I had to drink. I just know that Džamonja came up to me and pinched my behind. I elbowed him in the ribs so hard he doubled over on the dance floor. Marija doubled over as well, but with laughter. The years had done nothing to us. We were still the same old fools.

Around two in the morning, I came back to the table, dreadfully red in the face and soaking wet. Not an attractive sight for a woman my age. A very pretty blonde sat down next to me and pulled a fan out of her bag.

"Remember me?" she asked as she swatted the fan around in front of my eyes.

I had no idea who she was. What the years do to people is uncanny.

"I'm Lada, we had French class together," she said, seeing my blank look.

"Lada!" I cried, genuinely surprised. "I heard you were in America, I wasn't expecting to see you here." How incredibly well she looked; not an extra kilo anywhere, not a single wrinkle. What America does to people is uncanny.

"I came especially for the reunion. I wouldn't miss this for the world," she laughed, flashing her perfect teeth.

She offered me a cigarette. I pulled one out and put it to my lips. I didn't even get a chance to light it. Lada suddenly grabbed my hand tight. Almost spraining my wrist.

"Where did you get this?" Her face darkened and fell.

At first I didn't know what she was talking about.

"Does it have *For our eternal love* engraved on the inside?" Lada almost choked on the lump in her throat.

The music was getting louder. Everyone around us was jumping and singing like lunatics. My smile was gone.

III

I haven't taken off my nightgown for seven days. Maybe more. I don't know. I've lost count. I've just been dragging myself around the house, eating home-made plum jam. Miki

kept ringing the bell and banging on the door. I didn't want to open it. I didn't want to see anyone. And I especially didn't want anyone to see me, but Miki was so persistent that I finally relented. As soon as I started opening the door, she slid in like a leech and started lecturing me about what I should and shouldn't do. I just turned around and went back to bed. I caught a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror. My face was yellow. Like a lemon. To make matters worse, my hair had gotten all tangled. Dirty and greasy, it stuck up on the back of my head. But who cared.

"Just look at you," Miki said.

She rolled up the blinds and opened the window. Fresh air filled my nostrils. I felt sick.

"Look at the state of your house," she added.

She grabbed my blanket and shook it out the window. I glanced at my limp body and spotted a rather large dark stain on my nightgown. Probably from the jam. Unless it wasn't from the jam. I had no idea.

"You have to get up. Have a bath. Tidy up your house," she kept insisting.

Without warning, she pulled the pillow from under my head and hung it over the window sill to air it out.

"It's not your fault. How could you have known? Besides, it was a gift. And you don't look a gift in the mouth." Miki sat on the edge of the bed and placed her hand on my shoulder.

The room seemed strange to me somehow. As if the walls were closing in. As if everything had contracted somehow.

"You can't blame her either. How could she have known, poor thing?" She shrugged her shoulders.

I felt a painful throbbing in my temples. How did this happen? Even the ceiling had dropped down. If I were to get up now, I wouldn't be able to stand up straight. I would have to stoop. Did Miki notice it, too? I don't think she did. She just kept on talking.

"Though, we all know who her husband was and what he did during the war. You knew as well, didn't you?" she asked.

It was dark, suddenly. Was it already night? Hadn't the days become longer? I couldn't be sure. Perhaps Miki had lowered the blinds after all?

"In any case, it's not your fault. Who could have known he'd taken that ring from a dead woman's finger," she concluded.

I turned on my side and vomited directly onto the mattress. I sunk my head into my own vomit. I wanted to drown in it. Miki swore loudly. She caught me by the shoulders and pulled me out.

"You stink, to tell you the truth," she said with disgust.

I nodded my head. It had been a long while since Miki and I had agreed about something.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Mullet

Nora Verde (Antonela Marušić)

He was sitting at a café, watching them unload cardboard boxes and black plastic bags from a van. They were stacking them in front of the entrance to the building and going back for more. The polished military boots moved swiftly and in sync, it looked as though they were performing a grim, silent dance within the several metres of space. He didn't want to look up, he didn't have to either. Their faces still hovered in his head.

**

The snapshots freshly pressed into his memory were washed away by whisky and cola later in the day, he must've poured a litre and a half of that shit into himself that evening. He came to Ziggy's with Vicious and the gang and for an hour they couldn't get him to drink anything at all. He was silent, lighting and putting out one cigarette after the other, his throat was sore but he couldn't stop. Then Vicious upped and disappeared. An hour later, he returned with a bottle of Jack Daniels and put it on the bar. The entire cafe stared in admiration at the bottle of the finest whisky, not easy to come by during the war. Then, in the style of a wild gunman, he opened a plastic bottle of cola that burped and belched all over the place. He leaned over the bar and grabbed the largest glass, the thickest kind that almost never smashed if it fell on the floor, only getting ever so slightly chipped at the top. He poured three fingers of whisky and one finger of cola and pushed the glass towards Mullet.

It took him ten minutes to finish the cocktail, and the rest he'd necked by the end of the evening. No one but him was having whisky, everyone else drank beer and herb brandy. It might have been an internal agreement, to let him have all of the whisky, as a sort of compensation for what had happened to him.

**

The news of how they broke into Mullet's apartment arrived that morning, by radio, from Vicious. By the evening, everyone in the brigade knew about it, but they couldn't decide which of them would be the one to tell him. Eventually, lots were drawn and Boris was picked, an affable and calm lad whose turn it was to stand guard with Mullet that night. Their task was to watch the access routes to Pakovo Selo, in shifts, lest a Chetnik commando group would sneak up and mess things up for them.

Boris was putting it off, from one hour to the next. Mullet talked about his old man, a retired Yugoslav National Army lieutenant, who, together with Mullet's mum, had moved from Split to a village in Bosnia and left Mullet the apartment. Ever since the war began, his father kept calling and trying to talk him into selling the apartment and going to Slovenia to stay with some relatives and start over. He was afraid that, as a Serb in Split, his son would be executed and kicked out of the apartment, but Mullet had no intention of leaving whatsoever. Tadija Petrović Mullet was a die-hard punk rocker and anarchist, the founder of the oldest punk band in town and a man who had spent the best part of his life in cellars doubling as rehearsal rooms, as well as in Matejuška, an old fishermen's harbour at the end of the waterfront promenade, where it always reeked of rubbish and sulphur, and you could see fat mullets swimming in circles in the murky sea. That's why they started calling him Mullet to begin with, even though people knew his old man was a Serb and that his name was actually Tadija. He told Boris that fleeing Split would be worse than death and that was all

there was to say about it. In the morning, towards the end of their shift, Boris mustered the courage.

"I have something to tell you, Mullet," he said and drew the smoke deep into his lungs.

"What? You and the higher-ups must've packed up some sort of horseshit for me..."

"It's not that. It's just... they entered your apartment yesterday. Three guys from the military police, apparently."

In the morning light, Boris could clearly see his fellow combatant turn pale.

"How do you mean?" asked Mullet and showered him with questions.

He told him everything he knew; how the neighbours had tried to explain that this was a National Guard man's apartment, but they wouldn't budge and kept repeating it was a military apartment and a done deal. They were armed and drunk, the neighbours got scared and gave up arguing any further, and then decided they'd let him know through the brigade.

"The Commander knows all about it, he's letting you go home today, to sort it out. You're not going by yourself, two of the guys are coming along, you can pick whoever you like," Boris explained.

Mullet's entire body went numb with shock, but he wouldn't let it show. He was glad the guys from the brigade were standing up for his apartment, but he was already tired from all the fuss and blood in the battlefield. It was wartime and shit like that happened with apartments all over the city, but why on earth would it happen to him, he wondered. Everyone knows him, he never stepped on anyone's toes, he wasn't just some random Serb speaking in Ekavian dialect and pushing everyone's buttons.

In the afternoon of that same day, they reached the city, himself, Bego and Vele. Vicious insisted on coming along too. He arrived puffing, in a leather jacket and a crinkled old black t-shirt with white stains on it. Bego and Vele stared at his hairstyle, which looked like a bird's nest with birdlings just hatching in it.

Mullet was not chatty, his left eye squinted conspicuously, a tic he developed whenever he was very nervous.

In the hood, in front of the building, they once again went over the plan previously agreed on.

"We'll try to sort everything out politely, so that they understand that Mullet is our guy and they have no business being there," said Bego, who had somehow spontaneously appointed himself the chief of the whole crew.

"Alright, but what if they flick us off?" asked Vele, adjusting his uniform. "You don't just let go of an apartment you've just got a hold of." "Then we'll exert some pressure," he replied promptly and added: "I don't mind having a fight, if that's what it takes." Mullet said nothing.

"What do you say, Mullet, huh?" asked Vele.

Mullet smiled reluctantly. "Nothing, let's just go upstairs as soon as possible," he said, fidgeting.

A sheet of cardboard posted on the apartment door greeted them when they arrived, saying, in black marker: "Croat taken." Vicious pulled it off with a single stroke and threw it to the side. Loud music and men's voices were heard from the apartment. Mullet pushed the doorbell, one long ring and two short ones.

"Who is it?" asked a voice behind the door.

"The apartment owner," said Mullet.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," they heard, and the door opened. A large man in grey camouflage uniform and a crew cut stood in front of them.

"Whaddya want?" he asked brusquely.

"We wanna talk," said Mullet.

"Go on, get in."

They followed him down the hallway and entered the living room. Another two guys were there, slouching on the couch. On the table, there were some opened beer bottles, black berets scattered about and a cassette player blasting music from the radio. Two Kalashnikovs were propped against the wall. The guy who ushered them in came up to the two men on the couch and told them something in a low voice. One of

them, the skinniest one with sunken cheeks, got up and stood in front of Mullet and the gang.

"Which one of you is Tadija?"

"I am," said Mullet.

"Came to collect your stuff, eh? The whole wardrobe is full of crap, some sort of records and cassette tapes. Some old boots too, leather jackets. Come and pick it up tomorrow, I'm hanging out with my mates now, we're having a drink."

Mullet was looking straight into his eyes.

"Sir," he said, teeming with anger, "This is my apartment. I have all the paperwork and everything that's required."

"Cut the bullshit, it's no longer your apartment, forget that, understand?" he yelled.

"We are from the 4th Guards Brigade, he is a Croatian Army volunteer," said Bego and stepped closer to the guy.

The skinny guy started to laugh, and then abruptly got serious.

"The fact that he's a Guards man doesn't change a thing, he's still a Serb, and this is a military apartment."

"He's not a Serb!" yelled Vicious and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah, right, a Split man my arse. And what's with the safety pin in his ear anyway? He can't afford a proper men's earring so he has to wear that shit. Go on, get the fuck out of here. I'm only even talking to you because you're from the Guard, don't fuck with me."

"Oi, fuck off with that shit, the lad's with us, you have no right to be here," Bego raised his voice.

"Cut the crap, you, is he a Serb or isn't he, let him speak for himself," he roared.

"I'm a Split man," said Mullet calmly.

"Like hell you are, your old man's a Serb, used to be a YNA officer. That's all I need to know, now clear off," he said, and went up to the table and opened another bottle by slamming the tip against the edge of the table, the cap rolling all the way

to Mullet's feet. He stared at the round piece of tin, and then lifted his head abruptly.

"Fuck this goddamn fucking apartment, and fuck my old man who left me it," howled Mullet, all of the veins on his neck popping out.

The skinny guy lifted the beer bottle, took a gulp and grinned.

"You can fucking have it, if that'll make you happy! Let's get the hell out of here!" Mullet shouted and turned to face his mates.

Bego came up to Mullet and pushed him a couple of steps away, towards the hallway.

"Are you out of your fucking mind, what the fuck is wrong with you?! They'll take your apartment, where the hell are you going to live?"

"Fuck cares! Let's go."

"Calm down, mate. These guys are some serious morons, but we'll fuck them up just the same," said Bego and lit up.

Mullet laid both of his hands on his friend's shoulders.

"I don't need any of this, Bego. I don't want any blood to get spilled, I'm begging you like a brother, let's just go!"

Bego let the loose ash off his cigarette tip fall to the floor. He said nothing. Back in the living room they turned the volume up again.

"Suit yourself," he said and went back to get Vele and Vicious. Mullet stepped outside. He was shaking. He let his palm slide against the worn out door of his, now already former, apartment.

**

The night after the drunken binge at Ziggy's, he woke up on the sofa at Vicious' place in Zenta. He tiptoed out of the room, put on his Doc Martens and walked out. He walked down to the small harbour, in amongst the white fishing boats and yachts. It was quiet, the only sound that of the rigging on the boats' masts gently rattling in the wind. Hung over, he was reading the

names written on the prows: Pjero, Danica, Marina, Nadalina, Laura, The Little Fairy... If only he had a boat like that, it would be his home and his sanctuary. He reached the end of the pier and sat on the ground, facing the sun that was only just starting to rise. He closed his eyes.

Mullet imagined being a fish, the very fish he was nicknamed after. Swimming around the ferries and catamarans in the city port and enjoying himself as every mullet in filthy waters does, collecting bits of food falling out of the beaks of clumsy young seagulls. And everyone just leaving him be.

Translation: Marija Stojanović

Summer Limbo

Slađana Ljubičić

The sun beat down indecently hot that summer morning, so much so that it seemed it might bleach away the "Anti-antifa" graffiti from the concrete pillar of the Novi Sad Railway Station. All the more because it had been scrawled hesitantly in small self-conscious letters. Doomed to disappear as soon as daylight caught sight of it on the sunny side of the pillar.

Like all ghosts, as she liked to say of herself, Mona was unable to feel the oppressive heat of the air that made all living beings on days like this that much closer to her – dead as she was. The weather could do her no harm, unlike the restless bodies of passengers passing through her, searing through her universe like forceful machete strokes with sweaty little universes of their own. She clung to the pillar hoping to avoid them, the letters now flush with her shoulders. She did not mind the living as such, just how pathetic they were. This graffiti was a prime example, she thought – *boring enough to make you scream*. Wandering souls spend most of their time being bored, like in a waiting room. And as you wait to pass from this world into the next, you try to find something fun to do to pass the time. The fears of the living did not even make it onto the list of diversions, let alone fun. It is not nearly as interesting as horror stories make it out to be (they're written by the living, after all).

If they weren't dead, Denis and Danilo would have definitely been late. Under the circumstances, this was practically

impossible. They couldn't have fallen asleep drunk, for they could neither drink nor sleep. Fate, they both claimed. They don't have to pack, because they have nothing but the rags they had on when they met their ends. Since they can't get sick, or hurt in a street fight, it means they couldn't have ended up in the emergency room, either.

Where are those fools, Mona wondered, hoping they hadn't decided to follow Lemmy Kilmister home, in the belief that he would soon be joining them. She thought back to last night's *Motorhead* concert and got worried that might be the case, because the old man could barely make it down from the stage. They had agreed to meet on the third day of Exit at the old spot. She had no idea why they were changing their plans and leaving town when there were still two days of the festival left. If they don't show up soon, she'll go to the nearby park, just so she can listen to people whine about the heat, trying to blame it for all their failures that day.

She kept convincing herself everything was *cool*, eager to give the appearance of someone patient. As if anyone could see her. She thought about how, if she were alive, she'd be angry both at those two and at this scorching heat of July 11th. She remembered how unbearable the heat used to be, summers in Slavonia had been the very definition of boredom. She reminisced and watched the living mannequins about her. Not knowing any better, they waited for trains to help them live out their lives even faster, oblivious to the privilege of growing old. Perhaps if she had been killed in her old age, she wouldn't envy them so much. As it was, she despised every year she had lived, forty in all, believing them all responsible for her death. There are no better spoils than the hardy woman of your wartime enemy, are there? Cleaning some of her blood from your uniform and knuckles is a small price to pay for the delights to be found between her ripened thighs and enjoyed as Roman conquerors enjoyed their sweet wine.

And just as she was sinking into despair, as she always did when she thought of her own death, Denis and Danilo

appeared. They looked somehow more bewildered and paler than is customary for the dead.

"My fellow travellers, it seems you managed to live your whole lives without learning any manners, seeing as you can be so late even when you're dead. What happened? Why are we leaving all of a sudden? Did you kidnap Lemmy? Are we in some kind of danger?" Mona joked, having realised pretending to be patient was not her strong suit.

"Kidnap Lemmy? What are you talking about? God forbid!" Danilo recoiled slightly.

Quickly, he pressed three fingers together and crossed himself. A reflex harking back to the days when he was still alive, no doubt. It's not like he was a believer. Danilo hasn't believed in God ever since that bullet tore through his insides. As he bled out, he cursed him at the top of his lungs, disappointed in his fickle nature. But then the curses, along with the body of this young forestry graduate, were swallowed up by the Bosna river.

"Lemmy's alive, he didn't die, don't you joke about that, of all people. Sorry for being late, we've been a bit disorganised since this morning." Denis tried to verbalise his anguish awkwardly.

Stuck in adolescence, he'd never learnt how to explain his feelings even to himself, let alone to others.

"Speak, Denis, what is it! Speak, so we can leave. And where are we going? Do we have a plan or are you just going to drag me around the obscure villages of your birth again? I can't take any more village inns and saint day feasts just so you two can stalk your families. Look at these young people around us! Carefree tourists. Let's follow them instead, get away from our own people for a bit. I promise we'll come back," Mona complained.

"We couldn't now even if we wanted to," Danilo muttered under his breath.

Denis hesitated, because he knew what he was about to say would sadden her. After twenty years of wandering the

gnarled Balkan gorges and ravines together, it was time to say goodbye. Still, she could be happy for them. At least in some bizarre way, as befits this whole parallel universe. As cynical when dead as she had been while alive, Mona begrudged all ghosts their unquestioning acceptance of happiness only when they were burying someone, sending them off, out of limbo forever. The lads knew what she was like, she'd long given up on the idea of seeing her own solemn funeral. Since she had no family or friends among the living, no one had been looking for her body for almost ten years. Once she had lost all hope of finding peace, she had lashed out, driving away her sense of solidarity with the other victims' lost souls.

"They're burying me today... I know we said we wouldn't go to Potočari this summer, but no one could have known they'd find my body this year. You both know I'd like you to be there, at my Janazah. We've talked about what it would look like so many times. Maybe it won't be so sad. Everyone will be there, but you know there's no one more important to me than the two of you. Look, we'll skip the speeches this time. But remember how we danced around the politicians last time, sticking our tongues out at them when they went up to the podium to speak? Now, that was fun." Something childlike slipped from Denis's lips, destined never to taste a woman's thighs.

Danilo fidgeted around the pillar, pretending not to hear anything. As if he'd just noticed the graffiti and it was taking him an eternity to read those two words. He knew the discerning and rational Mona was looking at them right now and seeing two stupid dead mediocrities. He tried to avoid her gaze as best he could. Whenever he became anxious, the hole in his guts would start spreading. The wet clothes he wore would become heavier. If he didn't get it together soon, the stench of the river lying dormant in his lungs would give him away, it was just waiting for situations like these to start churning. As of tomorrow, the three musketeers would become a duo. It took a generous heart to rejoice at another's salvation.

Mona was not surprised by this news that Denis's body had been found. Nor was she overjoyed.

They walked down the railway tracks in silence. They would soon meet the souls of the others, so this was their last chance to say goodbye. They hugged. Who knows how long they would have stayed like that had they not felt a flutter in their chests. The train from Belgrade was only in Sremski Karlovci when these three vagabonds sensed its arrival. The tracks emanated a beastly energy of cold steel, recognisable at such distance only by equally cold creatures.

"We'll be with you as they lay your casket into the ground. Don't you worry, little fellow," Mona said softly, putting her arm on Denis's left shoulder.

"We're glad at least one of us will be done with the endless wandering," Danilo added.

"I hope everything will be alright. I'm just worried about my mother. I just feel there'll be some trouble. I can't wait for the sun to go down, for all this to be over." Denis surprised them with his concern.

"There's nothing you can do about it either way. So, don't worry your pretty little head. Just relax and let yourself go into the dust to dust," Mona comforted him, though she was herself unconvinced by her own words. She'd always thought optimism was overrated.

They looked about. People clutched their bags and shuffled in place. The train would be arriving at the station at any moment.

"What do you think, how many missing, killed, secretly buried could fit into a single train? How many trains would it take to fit all of us?" Danilo wondered.

"No one knows their numbers, or ours." Mona always had a ready answer. "Honestly, though, I worry about these people. Their ignorance of sharing the train with us ghosts is what keeps them trapped. The living cannot know that they will not live in peace until all the trains you're wondering about are emptied, until every single soul gets off at its station. There are

so many of us around them, it messes with their aura. Until our souls find peace, there will be no peace among them either."

It was noon. The wire that was used to tie Denis's hands flashed bright. That was the signal that it was time to go.

Though it was slowing down as it entered the station, the train still had the force to smash the three friends into infinitesimal pieces, driving straight through them.

"Let's go lay you to rest."

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

In the Abyss of the Soul

Abid Jarić

After Livanjka died, he moved into her house.

Livanjka – the woman from Livno – was childless, although it was said that she had been married once, a long time ago.

The stranger appeared suddenly, settled in Livanjka's house in Hazna, and started roaming around the small town, reluctantly answering the questions of the curious locals who were hoping to learn something about him. He told them to call him Finch, nothing more, adding that Livanjka was his aunt. But everyone knew she had no family. They stopped doubting that he was entitled to her cottage only after a rumour spread that he had been seen entering the Municipal office holding a rolled up piece of paper tied with a black string.

The days went by.

There were very few locals who didn't believe that the stranger was, in fact, Satan. For how else could one interpret the fact that the postman's widow kept baking pies and – ignoring her brother's vehement objections – hanging them on the lintel of the stranger's door on Sundays, all wrapped up in a white scarf, embroidered with red roses to boot? Or that time when Kasap the butcher got such a fierce headache that he howled for two entire days and nights, keeping everyone in the three surrounding mahallas awake, but immediately fell asleep after the stranger passed by his house and touched a spot on its wall with his ring?! If the stranger wasn't a creature of darkness,

why would hens that no housewife could catch land on his palm and peck at whatever they found there? Not to mention that recently, when he was bitten by a rabid dog called Curly, he just shook his leg, and nothing happened to him. But of course, everyone said, what could possibly happen to someone with the devil's blood running through his veins? Hunters chased poor Curly all day long, caught up with him just before dark, and killed him on the spot. They say that the dog was crying like a human being, and it was awful watching the bloody foam rushing from his mouth. And then how come that no matter what mothers did to hide their children from the stranger, the children still rushed to him to get his tiny handmade flutes, no bigger than an index finger? He must have had the evil eye on them. And if he wasn't a creature of darkness, why would he sit so motionlessly on the bench behind his house, staring at the sky for hours, night after night, as if collecting signs only he could recognize, to use for his next black magic? Some went so far as to claim that this creature wasn't a man at all, but an apparition that came, from who knows where, just to scare the town's honest folk, and disturb their peace of mind. For no man could possibly have such an inscrutable mask on his face, only an apparition could. Then someone remembered how old Machan used to say: "*When people like this start walking the Earth, real people will have to disappear. There will be no room for both us and them.*"

Now that Machan was not among them anymore, everyone agreed that he was right.

The young man's frequent visits to the nearby forest could not go unnoticed either.

Since he was a newcomer, it's not difficult to conclude that he was constantly under the watchful eyes of the locals, who were never able to consider a stranger a friend, especially if the stranger intended to remain in their midst forever. It wasn't difficult to stalk him through the woods of beech and fir, and on the glades covered in hazel bushes. The wicker fences allowed

the locals to hide while following the stranger's every step. He would only stop next to a spruce tree and, if its branches were low enough, cut off just one, and always one facing north. He would peel it off with a sharp pen-knife, smelling the wood, staring at it for long moments and feeling it with his fingertips, and then cut it into several pieces of the same length. Eventually he would tie them all up with twine, and put them in a large woollen bag with a golden-yellow sunflower pattern which had clearly been woven by a skilful weaver.

Those keeping watch over him would later tell the others everything they saw. And they would jointly conclude, without a trace of doubt: It's not a man, but Shaitan.

To tell the truth, what most annoyed them was his indifference to all their stories about him.

What kind of a man is this, they wondered in amazement, *who, if you put a rose right under his nose, he'd still rather be sniffing a henbane flower*? Then, for no obvious reason, they started to laugh loudly whenever they met him. *How can I tell them that what they are doing is wrong?* – the man called Finch wondered to himself. *How can one laugh at the misfortunes that surround us?* This tormented him terribly. Should he tell them that they should not laugh at the fact that the son of his next door neighbour, the forest ranger, comes to his door every day, trying to sell for a mere trifle whatever he had stolen from his own house that day? Or that nothing will stop the woman from the house at the end of the alley from carrying on cheating on her husband, because he's old and feeble and cannot follow her on the intricate paths that lead her to so many doors? Pela the tobacconist will continue to brag about being the town's best singer even though he lost his hearing a long time ago, and the town will continue to laugh, just as they laugh at the deacon who they say became 'a bit wacky' due to his constant self-restraint, but still stop him in the street to ask for his advice.

In time, the stranger gave up trying to explain anything to anyone. He understood their plight, just as he was reconciled

to his own. It had been a while since the war had ended, but suspicions lingered among people, and no one trusted anyone anymore. And suspicion was especially expressed towards the stranger.

Doubting that one could make a living from selling wooden birds, they all believed he had a hidden ducat which was impossible to use up, and that this was what allowed him to live comfortably.

Nobody had ever seen how his figures came into being. But once they were finished, every person holding one of his wooden birds in their hands claimed that they had the distinct impression that the bird could easily slip through their fingers and fly away towards the sun, as birds are known to do. Some claimed that while holding a wooden bird they could feel the warmth of its tiny body on the palm of their hand, and that the heat spread like an intoxicating scent, permeating one's whole being; like being submerged in a mood of such happiness and gentleness that one wished it would last forever. Four times a year, big fairs were held in the small town, and there you could find anything and everything money can buy, but what everyone wanted to buy was his birds carved in wood. Swallows were the most expensive.

With the first sign of darkness, he would find himself on the bench behind the house.

His hand would move slowly towards his pocket, his fingers would gently touch the flute. Then his lips, moist and trembling, would come close to the mouthpiece as if wanting the first touch to be as gentle and as soft as possible. His chest would start to lift and drop, his cheeks filling and emptying at irregular intervals. His fingers flew over the holes in the flute in an incredible rhythm. As his playing progressed, his head would rise higher and higher towards the sky, and his eyes, moist and wide open, would split the darkness of the night. His face would then suddenly relax, as if it had never had that hard and stiff expression that made people avoid him. It looked as though in

a moment his body would take off from the bench and soar into the sky. If anyone could watch him at that moment, they would see his body trembling as his fingers played the last chords of the song. They would see a shiver running down his spine, his head falling to his chest, and his right hand, holding the flute, dropping heavily beside his exhausted body.

"That was for you, Birdman. Only for you, as you well know. And for your wedding which will never happen," he would utter in a hollow whisper.

A muffled sigh would then escape from his throat, just as when someone is being relieved of a burden they cannot bear.

On that night, there was no noise in his head.

It's not a good sign, he thought. He was accustomed to that feeling that had haunted him mercilessly for years, ever since the war. He had no will to go out into the garden and sit on the bench behind the house, away from curious eyes. Instead, he lay down on his bed, and turned towards the half-open window. It wasn't long before the images began to line up. As always happened. In the same order.

2.

He used to say: *He who kills a swallow commits a sin deemed unforgivable. For the swallow is the bird that deserves the Grace of God. When the Martyr hid from his persecutors under the bridge, a vivan wanted to denounce him. The vivan cried out: Here he is, here he is! The swallow tweeted: No, he's not, no, he's not! The Lord cursed the vivan because of this sin, and He blessed the swallow.*

They called him Birdman.
Birdman had a friend called Finch.

Birdman didn't like magpies.

The magpie brought the thorns with which the Martyr was crowned. The swallow kept pulling out the thorns that pierced the Martyr's forehead and eyes, and, hiding from His torturers, carried them away, one by one, in its beak. That was why Birdman didn't just kill magpies. He captured them and tormented them with that same torture, stabbing them in the head with thorns or burdocks.

On Good Friday, he paid some children to clean a few swallow's nests and put various bits of cake in them.

He believed that swallows spent the winter in water.

"They hide in rivers and lakes," he would say in a soft voice, with his eyes closed. "They use their legs, or wings, to cluster close together, and they sleep under water. But in springtime, only the young swallows emerge from the water. The old ones lose their feathers and turn into frogs."

"There used to be three Suns in the sky," he would explain to Finch, and Finch would believe him. "However, the Snake Empress sucked up two of them, but the swallow hid the third one under its wing, and carried it high into the heavens. The two pale, dry suns sometimes seen in the sky are in fact those the snake drank, and the one shedding light on us now is the one the swallow preserved."

He knew almost everything about swallows. He knew that in Islam they were called Birds of Jannah. Finch didn't tell him that the Persians believed that the chattering of swallows separated companions and destroyed friendships. It would hurt him to know that somewhere swallows were considered ominous.

While waiting for the first swallows to return that spring, he continued killing other birds. He would only shoot once, and he never missed.

**

He awaited the spring with great apprehension.

"If the first swallow appears alone, my wedding will come to nothing," he assured Finch. "If they come in a pair, you'll be my best man. And you'll play all our favourite songs on that flute of yours; just so you know."

As he said this, the scar on his left cheek seemed to lengthen a little.

That spring, for the first time since they had known each other, a swallow, shot, fell at his feet.

And later on, in the early fall of that year, he also held Finch at gunpoint.

**

The branches of a nearby thicket faintly rustled, the bitter scent of wild rose floated on the breeze. Finch thought he saw the dark blue feathers of a swallow's wing. The Earth was already creeping into the bluish veil of night, all resembling a Far Eastern garden.

With their hands tied behind their backs, the throng rippled with a loud sigh that reached the very tops of the surrounding fir trees. As they approached the edge of the rocky abyss, their bowed heads swayed to the rhythm of their tottering knees. The chasm beneath their bloodied feet looked like a spindle, and its bottom struck every eye like a prickly arrow.

"Guys, I have faith in you. Don't waste ammunition. Finish the job with one bullet," the commander's voice hissed.

**

Three men were pushed to the edge. The three shots were muffled by heavenly thunder. The thundering came from a clear sky.

Three others were already standing above the abyss.

They waited for the order.

"Fire!" the commander ordered.

One body remained on the edge of the abyss. Someone approached it, and pushed it hard with his military boot. Then he scraped the boot through the grass a few times.

"You wanted this land, there you have it!" He cursed, and returned to the firing squad.

The rifle barrels were already shoved into the backs of the next three men, lining them up at the edge of the abyss. The three men themselves assisted them in this, making an effort to accommodate the rifle barrels' aim.

The most horrific thing with convicts on death row is their solidarity with their punishment.

Six of them stepped forward at the same time. They were separated into two groups – roughly, noisily, with lots of swearing.

"Don't rush. You're a nice people, neat and orderly. And you'll all be together down there for sure," the commander snorted, with a short chuckle.

They align their feet, calmly and without panic. Their nostrils widen, their chests swell with air heavy with the rancid smell of gunpowder and burnt turf.

**

Finch is the last one, and alone. He looks at his fists, his fingers that will be shrivelled in a moment – down there, when he reaches the bottom.

"Step back!" Someone thundered behind his back. "He's mine!"

As Finch recognized the voice, something nipped him sharply just under his left breast.

And he, Birdman, bent down to tie the shoelace of his military boot. He did it slowly, as if he had all the time in the

world. When he finished, he stood up and stared through the leaves trembling in the bluish twilight.

Four strong arms, like two pairs of pliers, grabbed Finch and placed him on the edge of the abyss.

He doesn't resist.

They are together again.

Birdman and Finch.

Only this time they are not one beside the other, but one behind the other.

The firing squad stands silent and motionless, their rifles in order arms position.

**

Finch feels his breath. Birdman exhales through his nose, deeply, at regular intervals, as he always does just before hitting his target, unerringly, with his first bullet.

Streams of sweat ran down their backs.

This must be a dream. The thought boiled in Finch's brain. *This surely cannot be real.*

He heard the bullet entering the barrel.

The bluish veil began to thicken between sky and earth.

When will it be over? The question stabbed Finch's mind so hard that he wanted to shout: *C'mon, Birdman, what are you waiting for? Do it!*

The most incomprehensible thing with convicts on death row is their courage.

**

The rifle behind Finch's back spits fire.

Finch sways a little, but feels no pain.

Can you die without pain? He wonders.

And then it dawns on him. *He must not wait for another bullet.*

And he soared through the air.

All of them, purple with dusk and dumb with wonder, saw a swallow fluttering toward the sky on a red lightning bolt that suddenly illuminated the entire area.

3.

Finch was already cold when someone wishing to buy a swallow for his grandson's birthday found him in the morning.

His face seemed slightly lengthened, and softened. His half-open eyes stared at the shelf full of hand-carved birds. Among the birds, the wooden figure of a young man stood out. There was a deep scar on his left cheek.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

I Have Nothing Against Luck

Maja Slavnić

I have this abnormal dog. He's sexually frustrated, like the dog Jonathan Safran Foer harassed in Ukraine. Dogs have to be walked. Mine has to be walked at least three times a day, so he's less (just a little less) likely to hump and pant over footstools, a tumble dryer, my neighbour's six-year old boy. My dog's name is Grandpa. When he was only three months old, he looked like a Grandpa, with yellow whiskers, yellow teeth, hair as soft as a carpet brush and the eyes of someone who's lived for centuries.

The morning Grandpa and I first met him, we had gone to the park next to the city bus station. That park is my town's asylum for *different* souls. In one corner, on two neighbouring benches, sat two pairs of parents with their handicapped children. Spineless people who are ashamed to take their *different* children to the other city parks. Because "normal" people don't come to this park, only gay people looking for partners, prostitutes looking for work, drug addicts, the homeless... and, oh yes – people with dogs. Because it's the only park where you can let your dog off the leash. What do the town fathers care if a dog poops here and no one cleans it up? *Only faggots go there anyway.*

That morning when we first met him, Grandpa was not in a good mood. He'd been suffering from indigestion, and for days I'd been feeding him rice instead of chunky food. He hadn't even humped my leg once. He was in pain. As I let him

off the leash, my phone rang. While I was talking on the phone, Grandpa walked up to the nearest bench at the very entrance of the park, where a man in a grey coat was sitting with several bags, on both his left and his right. I thought Grandpa had gone to beg for food again, since he had eaten nothing but fucking rice for days. I called him back; he didn't even bother to look at me. I saw that the man in the grey coat was talking to him. I ended my phone call and went to take control of Grandpa again, who was already stretched over the right sneaker of the man in the grey coat. He wasn't trying to hump the man's leg, he was just lying still. Strange, I thought. "I'm so sorry," I said. "C'mon, Grandpa, let's go."

And then our eyes met for the first time. While Grandpa was still lying on his right foot, my eyes met the eyes of the man in the grey coat – his eyes were as blue as Greek beaches put through six Instagram filters. Eyes so dazzling that you could hardly look at them. Eyes that every ambitious singer would kill for, or at any rate give up her fat pay-checks from six *Gastarbeiter* weddings for, if she could only buy those eyes, like she'd bought her tits.

"I would, my child, if I had anywhere to go," those eyes said.

I realized that the man thought I was talking to him. "No, no... sorry. My dog is called Grandpa. I wasn't..."

"I know, I just wanted to have a bit of fun," said the man in the grey coat. The first person in the world who didn't ask why Grandpa was called Grandpa. And that's how it began, our companionship. On that bench in the park full of dog poop.

The second time we met him, he was sitting on the same bench. Grandpa ran directly to him, and sat on his sneaker. We talked about the weather. And then, as he scratched Grandpa between his ears while rummaging through his bags in search of a treat for him, he said: "It's beautiful, this Vojvodina of yours. Bountiful, green, flat. Lucky the war didn't come here, it would have been a real sin against these fields, this fertile land. There's nothing more shameful before God than pouring human blood on ploughed land. Land needs seed. If seeds of

blood were sown here, it would be blasphemous. It would be shameful."

"Yes," I said, "we were lucky."

"Listen, my dear, I have nothing against luck. But luck is not for everyone."

And that's how the man in the grey coat started his story. Grandpa and I just listened. We both kept quiet. The man was called Borislav Stojić. He was 78. He was born and he died in the village of Kravica, near Srebrenica. That's what he said – that he died the day he escaped from that village. I felt ashamed that I'd never heard of the tragedy in Kravica. Borislav didn't talk much about it either. He only said that on Christmas the bloody dogs of war entered the village and killed people. Those they could, or those they wanted to kill. Why they didn't kill him – he had no idea. He was in his house, he said, and when the shots and screams erupted, he knew what it was. He just lay in his bed. He intended, he said, to ask whoever came for him, to beg him, as a human being, to kill him in his own bed.

"That's how gentlemen die," he said. "I've always wanted to die in my bed, with my underpants on. It would be shameful to die differently."

But nobody came for him; he didn't know why.

"Why they skipped my house, only dear God knows, and He's silent. He's kept silent for twenty years now," he said.

Then he told me about how he fled from the village through the woods at night. How he walked for seven days through the woods until he got to the river, and after that, to people. He took only a knife and some bacon from his house. It was cold, very cold in that forest. "My feet froze, you see. See the foot this Grandpa of yours is lying on - four frostbitten toes had to be cut off. But the toe-eating cold is nothing compared to the coldness of the hearts of those who killed Kravica, those who slaughtered Srebrenica, those who killed Bosnia," Borislav said.

It was March 8th when we met for the third and last time. He sat there with his bags, waved to me and Grandpa, beckoning to us with his hand to come over. He handed me a box of Jaffa

biscuits. "Happy 8th of March, my dear young lady. Sorry it's so little. And sorry for burdening you with that story of mine last time. You shouldn't have listened to it. It would have been better if I had told you how Mira, who gives us medicine at the Centre, how she helped me for over a year with that internet of yours to find my best friend; I was his best man at his wedding, you know. He's dead now, but I found his children, whom I love as my own. I don't have any children of my own, and I never got married either. His children now live in Sweden. Little Milada cried with joy when I found her. She told me that her father had never stopped praying that I had stayed alive. And that he had talked a lot about me, even on the day he died. There, you see, these people are Muslims, and they still love me. They know it wasn't my fault."

Why we never met him again I don't know. I think he was embarrassed about telling me his story. Though he's the last person in the world who should be embarrassed by his story. I thought Grandpa and I might visit the Centres around town; there aren't many. But I didn't. I was embarrassed, too. I was embarrassed for not knowing what to tell him. For not knowing what to ask.

Grandpa has never lain on anyone's foot in that park again. Maybe because the people there have all their toes but don't know how to love. Or forgive. Or present a girl with a box of biscuits on the 8th of March, International Women's Day. Or stroke someone else's frustrated dog. Or lighten up someone's morning, someone's day. And every time I get drunk with my friends downtown, I remember that Twitter post where a guy said "I got so drunk, I betrayed Kosovo." Because no Kosovo, no Bosnia, no village in Baranja is worth anyone's life. They are not worth a single one of Borislav's toes, if you ask me. Only those who love are worthy. Those whose hearts are so warm that the coldness of hatred will never be able to freeze them. Sleep tight, Borislav. I know you haven't died again.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

Nobody Does It Like They Do

Bojana Babić

The raffle is over. I don't know who won, but I'm glad I don't have to listen to that voice from the loudspeaker anymore, and I'm happy to see the pensioners leaving. There's no music. There's no heating either. I'm always cold here in Edinburgh, but I've got used to it. People here have thicker skin than we do. We heat our homes and cafés until the air is so sickeningly hot that we can't breathe. I wear Paulo's long sweater that he bought to hide his belly fat. I wonder what he uses to cover it now, as it's over forty degrees in Cairo. Paulo tells me that he met a young film director from Kosovo at the Festival there. They started talking during a group tour of the pyramids. The guy's name is Jim. Or Chim. Or Chin. "I'm not exactly sure which," Paulo tells me.

This makes me think of Afrodita and how I first met her in the Zurich refugee camp, when I was volunteering there. She was seven, with long hair and a very serious face. She didn't play with the other children because she had to look after her younger brother Bruno. I tried to persuade her to join the others on the football field, but she refused. In the end, however, she agreed, after Diana, a German teacher with a soft voice, had spoken to her for a while. Bruno and I then sat together watching Afrodita's attempts to shoot at the goal; we sat on the bench until he peed himself. Then I took him to their room. The two of them lived with their mother, but she wasn't there. I spoke to Bruno in Serbian while looking for his clothes. He put his thumb in his mouth and looked at me in astonishment,

but didn't object. I couldn't find two small socks of the same colour, or any trousers to match Bruno's T-shirt. While he was running onto the football field to hug Afrodita, he looked like a fruit salad. "Who dressed you like that?" she asked, and he pointed his finger in my direction. It was the only time I saw her laugh.

"It may sound silly, but Jim and I got close very quickly," Paulo tells me over the phone. "We hate the same movies and the same books." He sends me a photo of the two of them smiling in Tahrir Square. Jim had a sparse beard and a tight T-shirt which showed off his abdominal muscles. "I have to go," Paulo says. "They announce the winners tonight. So keep your fingers crossed." For six months now, we have been sharing an apartment with a forty-eight-year-old garbage collector called George. George talks a lot, but the only thing we understand is "ay, ay, ay", so we repeat it after him. He has two ex-wives and two daughters whom he never mentions, although he drinks his coffee every morning from a mug that says *To the best dad ever*.

I often come to this pub to write. I always sit at the same table because that's where the only power socket is. An older man with fingerless gloves kindly asks if he could sit at my table. I look at him over the laptop screen as he explains that he comes here for a pint of pale ale every morning. He says he is a retired auto mechanic. "Where are you from?" he asks. When I tell him, his expression becomes very serious. He scratches his grey head, takes a sip, then says, "You did terrible things in Bosnia." "Yes, we did," I reply. "Sarajevo. Srebrenica," he says. "Yes," I admit. "Kravice," he continues. "How do you know all this?" I ask. "I watch the news," he says, "and read the newspapers." I stare at the dead screen in front of me. He wipes the beer foam from his moustache. "Do you like animals?" he asks. "Yes, I do," I say. "This is my dog Charlie. He's thirteen." He hands me a photo of a black cocker spaniel on a leather armchair. They look alike. "May he live another thirteen years in good health," I say, and he laughs. "I'm Daniel," he says. "And you? Who are you?"

"We won," Paulo shouts over the phone. "I had to go on

stage to receive the award. Do you think I look fat?" he asks sending me a photo from the ceremony. The shirt button on his belly barely holds. "No, you don't. That shirt looks great on you," I say, and he thanks me. "I'm going to get drunk with Jim, I promised," says Paulo. "Jim's become like a brother to me."

Teuta Pireva was born in Gjilan in 1964. She worked there as a journalist and editor in local television. She fled to Scotland in 1999. Today, she works at a refugee centre in Glasgow, where she lives with her husband, daughter, and son. Among the comments I read: *Shadow Behind the Sun* is a book that will open minds and change hearts. I order a copy through Amazon.

Paulo arrives early in the morning with deep purple rings under his eyes, and with back pain. The Festival didn't pay for accommodation on his return, so he spent the whole night at the Istanbul airport. He wakes up in the evening, and we go for drinks in the pub. Paulo says his throat hurts. He recounts what he heard from Jim. "They burned his house," he tells me. "And he lost his father." He's not sure whether the latter was due to the war. "Jim didn't want to go into detail." I bring us another round of beer. Paulo says he clearly remembers when he first asked me to explain it to him. We were still studying together back then. I told him it was all very complicated. "What's complicated? Tell me," Paulo insisted.

We go to bed and I cling to him. I breathe into his thick, black hair. Paulo tells me that he's too tired. "We'll do it tomorrow," he says before falling asleep. He's been telling me that a lot lately.

In the morning, Paulo coughs and beats himself in the chest. His eyes are red, his forehead hot. He shouts that he doesn't understand what's happened to him. I accompany him to the hospital, near the last stop of the No. 40 bus line. The lady doctor tells him to sit on the bed, and take off his sweater. In that position, his belly clearly hangs over his pants. She seems younger than me. She listens to his lungs and asks him if he smokes. "Sometimes," Paulo replies unconvincingly. As we enter the apartment, Paulo tells me that Jim invited him to Pristina. He explains that there will be a festival there soon. "If

you want, you can come with me. Jim would love to meet you. You've never been there?" he asks. "No," I tell him and I turn off the lights in the room.

The next day, in the afternoon, the postman inserts a package through the mail slot in our door. It falls on the floor with a thud. The cover is black, ineptly designed. Not wanting to wake Paulo up, I make coffee in George's *To the best dad ever* mug and stay in the kitchen. Teuta writes about her grandmother's stories she listened to as a child. "Remember this," her grandmother told her, "They destroy everything that is not theirs. They burn mosques, books, paintings. They crush people and obliterate history. Nobody does that like they do." Soon, George and his new girlfriend Lucy arrive. They wave at me and go to the living room. They play Elvis's hits on the bad turntable, they dance and laugh. I peek into our room. Paulo is still asleep. I put *Shadow Behind the Sun* in my bag and go out.

I drink weak beer, but it goes straight to my head. There are not many guests in the pub. I see a skinny boy come in and sit at a table opposite mine. He has fair hair and fair eyes. He's not *ours*. Nobody here is *ours*. Teuta writes about how her brother was killed. And then her father as well. She writes about how she ended up in a temporary camp in Macedonia, from where they were transported to Scotland. The pilots and crew members wore protective gloves and masks during that flight, fearing the refugees might infect them. As soon as I finish the book, I'm going to email Teuta and explain who I am. I'm going to tell her that I've read her book and that I think that people need to hear about all that. And that I'm going to translate it. No, that I'm going to write a screenplay, and one day make a film. Or I will suggest to Jim that he make a film about it. *Shadow Behind the Sun*. *Behind the Sun*. I'm sure Jim would be interested.

The fair boy approaches me and asks what I am reading. "Something interesting? "Very," I say, "but it's painful." "Why?" he asks. "The book is about Kosova," I tell him. I see he doesn't understand. "There was a war there." He sits across from me and folds his arms on the table. "I'm sorry," he says.

"If you want to talk about it ..." We're interrupted by a waiter who alerts us that they close in fifteen minutes. The fair boy orders another beer. "I'm good," I say putting my hand on his bony knee. When the waiter brings his beer, the fair boy drinks it bottoms up, like a shot of brandy. He holds my fake leather jacket for me, and we walk out of the pub. "I have my bike here. I'll take you," he says. "I'm heavy," I tell him, but he competently places me in the front basket. He puts his chin on my shoulder and rides off. I'm scared, but he tells me that he lives close by. The streets are empty. We reach a tall building, and he leaves his bike in front of its entrance. He doesn't secure it in any way. "My roommate's asleep," he says leading me to a small room with large windows overlooking the building across the street. There are no curtains. I undress him carefully, as if opening a New Year's package received from *Petrohemija* Company. He kisses my neck while I scratch his freckled back.

"My roommate is from Kenya. He's here for his PhD; he always works hard and goes to bed early. What about you? You live alone?" he asks while we share a cigarette in front of the open window. "No, I live with a Scot," I say. "He's a waste collector. And with my Brazilian boyfriend." "Cool," he says. While I pull on my boots with the close-fitting ankles, he holds the door for me. As people here don't hug, I just wave at him and start down the stairs. I'm trying to remember his name, to preserve it. Maybe I never asked his name? I save his phone number under *Jim*.

Fortunately, he lives very close to our apartment. Hoping to sneak in without waking anyone up, I squeeze my tattered bag and realize it's empty. Teuta Pireva's book is not in there. There is no shadow behind the sun. I've lost it. I reach the building and look for my keys. My index finger goes through the bottom of my bag. I press on the intercom button. A dreamy male voice asks: "Who is it? Quem é?" I say nothing. The door opens anyway.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

Cold Light

Afrim Demiri

Every time Buti opens the refridgerator door, a cold, damp light envelops his body. Swiftly everything he looks at in the room becomes indistinct. Instinctively, he quickly closes the door and things return to normal, he regains a sense of calm. Since the war, day by day, year by year, Buti has become dependent on the opening and closing of the refridgerator door. It only happens when he is alone in the room. The sense that something of his remains locked inside the refridgerator makes him anxious. As the door closes, pulled shut with a light clunk by the suction of the vacuum, his mind focuses on the darkness inside. The movement of the refrigerator door has become the boundary between the transcendental and the real for Buti, just as in a game of chance, when everyday life is no longer discernible. He has begun to see himself as much outside, as inside, the refrigerator, as if he were a being who might start to decompose if he stayed outside for too long, and thus it is necessary to take refuge inside the white box.

Buti remembers as if it were today, the day in his childhood when the Obod brand refrigerator first appeared in the hallway of his three-room house. The phrase "white goods" entered his childhood vocabulary, together with all the enigma of how ice formed inside a fridge.

His mother had covered the refrigerator with embroidered linen, thus categorising it as part of the household furniture.

Before the refrigerator arrived, a peaceful solitude pervaded Buti's house. But later, the opening and closing, the humming of the refrigerator, merged together into a chorus of industrial whining. To Buti, the refrigerator seemed like an unknown white animal that had suddenly entered the heart of the house, immersed in the scent of lilacs.

Still today, Buti cannot erase that whining hum from his head. For a long time, it seemed to him that the war had been preserved in the freezer section of the refridgerator. And whenever the door opened, it seemed to him that the war had got out, like a whiff of rotten cheese. He often gritted his teeth and uttered the word *"Frigo"*, which in Albanian sounds like the word fear. After all, was not fear always accompanied by a cold chill?

Cold fear had overwhelmed Buti during the war. In the sky above his neighbourhood, while the bright bombs from NATO planes created lightning bolts of hope, he collected leftover food from the refrigerators of abandoned houses, as if it were the last crumbs of bread in a fairytale. Every time he opened the door of one of the neighbourhood refrigerators, the cold light would blind him for a moment, and many times an empty white space destroyed his hopes of survival. With the threat of death spreading through the neighbourhood like a fetid spirit, the cold yellow light and whining hum of the refridgerator cured his murderous hunger. The neighbourhood refrigerators seemed as if there were barns storing grain, and similarly, day by day, they emptied, little by little. And when he came across a refrigerator without light or whining hum, he imagined that it foretold the end of his life and that of his family. How often as a small child had he played secretly in empty grain barns, and now, all he wanted was to get inside an empty refrigerator and never get out again.

Buti no longer needed keys to enter the houses of his neighbourhood, and he and Rushi, the only guard of the abandoned homes left, began emptying not only the refrigerators, but also the bottles of alcohol. Alcohol muffled

the sound of the bombing, making it sound instead like doors slamming in the wind. And fear emboldened him a little. Innocence had fallen on the neighbourhood houses, as it falls upon the faces of the newly dead. They began to resemble their former owners who had long gone. Buti and Rushi became the neighbourhood couple, acting out the final scene of a movie which was unfolding before their eyes. They looked like "Little and Large" in a black and white film.

At night, fear began to feed not only on the darkness. When the electricity stopped, everyone said that they had turned it off because tonight the Serbian police planned to massacre everyone, but when the electricity came back on, no one dared to celebrate because now they suspected it had returned precisely so that they could all be massacred. The local radio broadcast instructions that windows should be blacked out so that not even a candle could be seen, otherwise the houses might become a target of the NATO bombing. Buti was not mad, everyone began to see light as dangerous. The link between fear and light, like a virus, even affected the Serbian army. They broke down the door of Buti's neighbour's house, fearing that someone was turning the lights on and off on the third floor of the house opposite, ostensibly sending secret signals to soldiers on the mountains. Unsurprisingly suspicion turned to paradox, as it turned out that it was just a light bulb with an unstable connection, so sometimes it turned on and off all by itself. When Buti learned this, he was reminded of how sometimes the light of his refrigerator didn't turn on automatically, but a slam of the door was sufficient to switch it on again. This analogy equated the fear of the anxious Buti with that of the armed soldiers, and Buti had felt a small victory. Imagine, Buti had discovered that men who fought and wore a uniform were also afraid.

Even peacetime jokes and stories about the war could not release Buti from the fear of cold light. He split up the Albanian word for refrigerator, *"frigorifer"*, into three terrifying syllables *"frigo-ri-ferr"*, spelling out the words, *"fear-new-hell"*. This

morbid game became more frequent when he learned that in a lake in Serbia, corpses were escaping from a refrigerator in the water. Like a legendary monster, corpses were coming out of the refrigerator without light or sound, giving the water the opportunity to speak on their behalf. The water brought out the truth, like a wave of anger. What were dead Albanian bodies seeking on the shores of an unknown lake. Serb residents planning to sunbathe by the lake on a summer's day came across the half-decomposed bodies of Albanians. The lake was unable to swallow a second massacre of the murdered.

Upon hearing this news at home, Buti had turned off the television and opened the refrigerator door, afraid that he could hear a roaring voice from within. He thought he could hear the voices of the dead. But there was only a cold light illuminating his lonely room, and he hoped that he had put the war into the deep freeze and that it would never melt again.

Buti could not accept that the war was over so long as corpses were flooding out of the lake.

He left the bedroom, to sleep, far away from the whining hum of the refrigerator, and he wondered fleetingly whether the brand of the refridgerator in the lake might also be an Obod.

Translation: Alexandra Channer

The Crystal Vase

Nadia Geras

She spread the meat from the freezer all around the house. Being summer, it soon stank.

Who would eat this? If I live through this, I'm never eating meat again, she vowed. And so at sixty-five she became a vegetarian. When it all started, everybody picked up and ran away before the army thundering in the distance.

Where would she go? There were things to do, a full barn. The terrible heat. She poured water into all the buckets she could find to make sure the cattle didn't die of thirst. Then she let them go.

Just in case.

What could the army do to her? What could she fear?

Her son was killed in the army. In the first year of the war.

No one knew who killed him. His side or theirs. He didn't get along either with his side or with theirs.

They carried him to her so she could kiss him. His head was bandaged. When they laid him down on the bed, she started taking off his boots. They were muddy. Some boy stood beside her until she shooed him out of the small room. He didn't put up a fuss. They had sent him to help her, but she was not the kind who needed help. Crying, screaming in the throes of despair was not something she would do.

She just wanted to be alone with her son. She pulled down the green canvas blinds on the windows and secured the door

shut with a chair. She could hear movements in the hallway. The wails of her daughter-in-law who had just lost her husband. Her grandson trying to calm his mother, still not understanding.

She took off his socks. Handsome feet, not a corn in sight. As if he were a gentleman's son. She covered them all the same. She listened for his heart. It was quiet. She knew what that meant, but still she took off the bandage covering his mouth. She did it quickly, racing against the hope that was abandoning her.

He had come down with scarlet fever somewhere around his fourth birthday. They were snowed in. A high fever had held him for three days. She had wrapped him whole in brandied sheets to tease the heat out of his body. She'd abandoned her chores and shut herself in the room with him. Counting his breaths. Joyful at the deep ones, shaking him awake when they became short, shallow, dangerous.

On the fourth day he said, Mother, I'm hungry.

The brandy had pulled the fever out.

Now he was too far gone for brandy.

She stayed with him like that in peace until the beating on the door became harder and the cries so loud she couldn't hear herself think.

She stayed by his side in the room even when they took him away, and after the burial at the cemetery, and amidst all those people who had come to say something to her.

She saw him from where she was hiding in the corn. He was very young. The army uniform too big for him. He had separated from the group that was circling around the house and was walking straight to her, as if he knew where she was hiding.

They were loud, like all liberators. He must have strayed from them to take a leak in peace. He saw the crystal vase. He bent down, picked it up, looked at it and then gently put it down again. He had a red stain on his cheek, the kind you're born with

that never goes away but just gets a bit darker with time, there to torment you every morning. And remind you how lucky you are, because it could have been worse. He looked around for a moment and their eyes met. He flinched and took a step back.

"I won't hurt you!" she cried.

"Fuck!" was the only thing he said as he took his gun down from his shoulder and started spraying bullets into the corn. He did not hit her, and neither did the rest of his unit, who had also started shooting. When night fell and she was left alone in the liberated village, she crept into the hayloft and fell asleep in the scent of summer. She woke up fifteen years later with lung cancer.

How handsome he was when he graduated. She had dressed up for the occasion too. A white blouse with a pattern of tiny blue flowers. She took the kerchief off her head. She always wore it, not because she was a meek and servile woman, but to keep the dust and hay out of her hair.

They drove all the way to Zagreb.

Everyone going into war thinks it won't be them, and parents think it won't be their son. She wasn't like that. She knew: if war started, her son would get killed. The ones with character are the first to get killed, so she listened to the trumpets of war screaming on television with growing apprehension. She liked westerns, Sunday afternoon programmes, the newscaster with the deep voice and the one who had a daughter named Doe and a son named East.

She liked that the names were different. In her village it seemed there was only one male name.

She had grown to resent television just before the war. She would switch it on and then quarrel with it, without holding back, swearing and cursing.

She had tried to get him to go to Australia, Canada, anywhere. While there was still time. He could have gone anywhere, what with his diplomas, but he wouldn't budge. He didn't know, he couldn't understand, that the war would be so

horrendous. People are smart, they're not fools, he would say, trying to pacify her when she started on him.

Who still listens to his mother? You try being a mother and letting your child rush to his doom, without trying to warn him, without pleading.

Only Danica returned to the village after the Storm, she had not liked it in Serbia. So the two of them lived together in her old house for a while.

She thought she would never laugh again, but Danica could make her laugh.

She had kept the radiators from the big house safe from the first wave of looters. The stench had driven them away. By the time they came again, they didn't care about the stench. They took down the radiators, loaded them carefully onto a truck and drove away. They only had trouble with the central heating furnace because it was so heavy. One morning she gathered up the crystal she had sowed in the cornfield behind the house and sent it to her daughter-in-law in a suitcase, with some money she had kept hidden for *God forbid*. And *God forbid* had come. She had not washed the items thoroughly before she packed them up. Soil had gotten into the many crevices and the crystal had changed colour. You'd have to use a toothbrush. She never cared for them, not even when they were displayed in her cabinet.

Now they just reminded her of a time when crystal dishware made sense. That's why she sent them to her daughter-in-law and her grandson to be of use in their new life.

She wrapped them in embroidered dowry towels with tassels.

She didn't want to go to hospital.

"Is it cancer?" she had asked the doctor. She hadn't got to know the doctor on her own account, but because of her grandson. He had always been a sickly child, so they made friends with the doctor. He would come to their house for sausages and home-cooked food.

"What can I say?"

"No matter, doctor," she comforted him.

"I still have some work to do. Just don't send me to hospital. I'll make do at home."

They drove her to the hospital when she could no longer breathe and fell on the stairs. Danica called for an ambulance and she found herself in a room with five beds. She could breathe again.

Even those who jump into the sea to drown themselves still flounder to catch just one more breath. No one jumps in and simply stops breathing. Breathing has a will of its own and she thirstily took in the oxygen.

She'd known that fresh air was important, but the air from the bottle was miraculous. She could even sit up in bed. She listened to the women in the room. Observed their visitors. Their fancy handbags. Their gold jewellery. Varnished toenails peering out of sandals. Even small children wear nail polish these days. She wondered at it from her bed. She wondered also at everyone bringing chocolates, mints and juice. Every patient had a whole convenience store piled up in her small bedside cabinet. Cartons of juice arranged on the bedside tables. There was nothing on her cabinet. She had put all her things in the drawer. They would keep offering, but she was never too fond of sweets. She would thank them and decline.

She recognised him as soon as he stepped through the door. The red stain on his cheek. He had grown and filled out since.

His face had widened slightly, the stain had stretched and swelled.

"Come, granny, I'm taking you up for your x-ray."

He was gentle. He crouched down to find her slippers under the bed and rolled the wheelchair right up to the edge as he kept talking to her.

"Now, granny, you put your arm around my neck, that's the best way."

When he had her in the wheelchair, he tidied up the bed so

it wasn't left dishevelled and bare, and that seemed nice to her. You could tell he was a well brought up boy.

"Thank you, son."

He took her to the lift. Pushed her along the winding dark corridors of the hospital, even pulled her up the stairs, and then they were sitting next to each other waiting in front of the x-ray room.

"I'm going out for a smoke. You want to stay here or should I wheel you out for some fresh air?"

"I want to go with you, son."

He pushed her out onto a small platform beyond the metal delivery door and he sat down on the stoop. He took out a pack of cigarettes.

"It's not healthy, but it feels good. I'm not offering you any because you really shouldn't."

She laughed.

"Where are you from, granny?" he asked between two long drags.

"From a village you've been to. You came to my house. You found my vase.

I didn't mean to scare you."

"Was it you I shot at?"

"It was."

"My, I'm so glad I missed."

The next day they took her for another test.

They told her not to move until they said she could. She barely made it. She was disappointed he hadn't shown up to take her. And now she felt sorry for telling him it had been her.

He was the only person she knew there. And now she'd scared him away.

When they brought her back after that second test, there was a small crystal vase on her bedside table with three purple baubles of hydrangea.

He had picked them in his garden. She just knew.

She was glad for the flowers, but sorry about the vase.

He didn't buy it, she hoped.

That afternoon he came wearing a tracksuit and freshly shaven. He sat on the edge of her bed and took her hand. He had large hands, and hers had receded into themselves, just a few sinews wrapped around bones. As if they had never worked a day or borne the weight of her life.

"You shouldn't have."

"My mother sent you the vase, and I picked the flowers," he said. "She was also glad to know you were alive."

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Lazar

Adam Pakai

This isn't the same kind of darkness. The darkness in my village back then used to be thicker, it had a smell, it had a taste. I remember my mouth being full of that darkness. It was early autumn, summer hadn't yet realised it had come to an end. At the edge of the village a forest began, plummeting downwards, plunging down the slopes of that damned mountain. That forest was where darkness lived. I remember they used to scare me with that forest when I was little. Whenever I wouldn't eat, get dressed, undress, go to bed... they would also scare me when I didn't want to go and get an injection, or say hello to an aunt who'd come for a visit from Germany and who I was supposed to be happy to see even though I'd never seen her before in my life. At any rate, darkness came out of that forest, that's where it appeared first, and then slowly, house by house, overcame the entire hamlet. Laza had taken a side road to the village, the one on the other side. He didn't even know there was a forest, or a steep ravine in it. He was silly. Laza was crazy, only I didn't know it back then. I thought he was unruly because he was a puppy, and that one day he'd grow up and settle down. A mongrel, with long, knotted fur, about 30 cm tall. He was misshapen and disproportionate, as if composed of multiple different dogs. As if he were a mixture of something between a terrier and a bad feeling about the future. And yet he was happy, pointlessly and unreservedly happy. I remember

him dashing off the porch, running around with all his might, his pink tongue dangling this way and that, almost touching his ears. I remember him running between the wheels of tractors driving down the road, frantically lapping water by sinking his entire snout in it, and then walking across the porch, the water dripping off his nose and my mother cursing at the both of us. He's looking at me, recognising himself in every single one of her curses, but only ever looking at me. Checking if she's only cursing me, or him too. If she's cursing the both of us, it's not that bad. Laza could tell the difference between the two from my face. For a long time, Laza wasn't Laza either, he didn't have a name. We tried different dog names on him, but he never reacted to any one of them. Blackie, Cuddly, Tramp; he never reacted to any of those. That name of his seems to have been a bad omen too. Silly as he was, he never even needed a name to start with, and yet all of us in the household were anxious to give him one at all costs, because, come on, a dog can't go without a name. That's what they told me. At some point, Granddad was reading a newspaper on the porch and started swearing at the top of his lungs. "Enough of that Prince Lazar of theirs, and this Kosovo, and history and wars..." I can't remember what else he cursed, or for how long, but I do remember mother running out of the house to hush him up and calm him down. Those were the years when Granddad swore ever more and more frequently when reading newspapers or watching the news. At any rate, that was the first time that Laza winced, at that swearing of his. That's how Laza got his name. To make matters worse, I hadn't even known it as a child, but the road Laza took coming to our house was on the east side and led to another village, a Serb village. I hadn't recognised this traitorous difference or understood the resentment people in my village felt towards my Laza, a poor little dog, unaware of his ill-suited name. When I walked through the village calling for him, since he always wandered about, sometimes people looked askance at me. Other times not. Laza was the only one who was invariably happy to see me when I did manage to find

him, as though he had been the one looking for me, and not the other way around. Granddad never liked him, and when I asked him why, he said, "He soils the well he drinks from." As a child, I thought this sentence had a special meaning, that it contained a piece of wisdom I'd only fathom by growing up. Now I know, it never meant anything at all. It was with Laza that I first went to the forest where the darkness in our village lived. He was roaming about, I roamed about behind him, he didn't stop at the edge of the forest, he walked in through the thick bramble bushes, and I walked in after him. It was daytime, a day as clear and bright as the water from a brook, but in the forest it was cold and the daylight was dim. Only after I reached the depth of the forest with Laza did I realise where I was. And it was the first time I didn't get scared. From the outside, from the road and the village, the forest looked much more frightening than after one walked in. It was only frightening from the outside, inside it was just a slope with a thick growth of centuries-old trees, so tall I couldn't even make out the tips of their foliage. Laza walked in front of me, ten or twenty steps ahead, maybe closer. There was nothing there to disturb his canine soul and, hence, nothing to disturb me either. That's how, with Laza, I first learned that the things that frighten me most are only scary from the outside and that they only appear scary, and yet when you enter them, the fear that was piling up while you were observing them from the outside disappears. That some fears become quite ordinary once you get to their core. Still, with the first hints of the evening approaching, the forest produced a darkness thick and dark enough to engulf the entire village. That day Laza and I were home long before the darkness started creeping out of the forest. We watched it bravely, staring it straight in the eye, and we weren't afraid. What was there to be afraid of, we had seen this same darkness from the inside.

The war came soon afterwards. I remember Granddad dying with the very first news about it, with a profound uneasiness in his soul and a frightened look in his eyes. And I remember

thinking, as a boy, that Granddad was afraid of dying. Only now do I realise it wasn't a fear of dying. He was afraid of life. The war started somewhere far away, on a plain I had never seen before, it also started at the seaside, in coastal cities I had never seen either. All of that was far beyond the forest at the end of the village. Laza wasn't particularly affected. He didn't become quieter or more subdued, unlike the people in my village and their dogs and their livestock, he didn't get overly fat that autumn as our tomcat did, and he didn't stop barking proudly when walking through the village, disturbing the pensive villagers with sunken eyes. Then the war came closer, much closer. Shells were heard, their reflections could be seen clearly, piercing the darkness coming from the forest. The first flash of an explosion scared me to death, I was shaking. Laza wasn't. He barked at the flash as he barked at everything. Flashes and explosions came from all sides, as if surrounding the village, they became ordinary sounds and ordinary light, I wasn't even scared any more. Even Laza stopped barking at them. They became ordinary to such an extent that any time anything banged, flashed or exploded, Laza would only look at me. That's how we communicated, with our glances, and it was never clear to me whether he was checking where I was or if I was alright, or checking if he was alright himself. I don't know whether he wanted me to look after him or whether he was looking after me instead. It's a strange thing when evil becomes routine and ordinary. People came out of the war with horrible stories to tell, and yet I have none. Even though I was still a child, I remember the first time they drove a cart full of corpses along the road in front of our house. An arm was hanging from the cart, it looked like the arm of my neighbour Ibro, our school janitor. To this very day I can't understand how an arm can look like a person, but there, I saw that indeed it could. I wasn't afraid, it wasn't scary and I didn't dream of this scene for nights on end afterwards. Simply put, it was a human load on a cart, just as before these same carts would drive by loaded with hay, wood or potatoes. The horses dragged themselves uphill, a

man walked next to the cart and made sure that nothing fell off. I remember the passage of this cart by Laza's going to the fence, watching for a bit longer then he normally would, turning around and never barking once. And he normally did bark. That was the first time I thought Laza had grown up and become a proper dog, that he no longer was a silly, playful puppy. Like everyone else, we were hungry too, we had nothing to eat, we would cover our heads and hide in the sheds, whenever and wherever we were sent away. Sent away by armies, neighbours, our parents' forebodings, whatever. I saw them withering away, my parents, vanishing as people. They were alive and well, and yet they were melting like the snow on the slopes in the forest where darkness lived. The silences, I could tell from the silences, when a whole day would go by without them saying a single word, either to each other or to us children, when a whole day would go by without them telling Laza off for some mischief, the slippers he dragged around the yard, a cup of water he spilled or the noise he made barking at a crow perching on a laundry line in the yard. This is when all memories of them end, at that time and that place. The second wartime autumn doesn't change this truth either, when father's toothache started, when he stayed awake for nights on end, tossing and turning on his straw mattress. He haunted infirmaries and community health centres, but there were no dentists, no medication, everyone and everything was in the war. The truth is not changed by the fact that at one point he left for the forest, his eyes bloodshot with pain and lack of sleep, and never came back. Did he kill himself because of the toothache, was he killed, was it done by our people or theirs? No difference. I remember he was brought back on a cart, and that he was alone in it. We buried him hurriedly, just us, the family. Laza was there too. Years later, whenever I recounted this, here, in the big wide world, it so happened that other people started crying instead of me. I never felt anything about the fact that he had left once and never returned. I knew he had had a toothache for days on end and then he had to leave.

Soon afterwards, mother started talking more and more about how we all had to leave, us children, one by one, and find refuge somewhere. People were coming, our people, their people, in big cars, in plain clothes, in uniforms. Laza only barked at them. He had stopped barking at shells by then. They brought packages and canned food and I remember Laza cutting his tongue on the lid of a half opened can once. I think that's why he barked at them later. We didn't run, we left, one by one, the house got empty. I was the last to leave. I didn't want to leave, because of Laza, and I didn't want to stay either, also because of Laza. The idea of me, a young boy, walking down the road past that forest, until I reached a lorry waiting there in the dark was not clear to me. None of it felt any safer than our barn or the hole in the yard covered with dirt that my father had made for us children before he got his toothache. I could even hide in the stable, in the trough the cows used to be fed from. Everything made more sense than just walking past the forest, at night, by myself. I did go, though, then, when the grown-ups agreed on it, and I did so because I had to. I didn't have a particular opinion about it, about the steps I took down the road and then uphill, past the forest where darkness lived, and then across the field. Laza walked with me, it was the first time he walked right next to me. He acted dignified, well brought up and grown up, his head bowed down, no running about or barking. That was the first time Laza acted that way. Not a trace of the silly pup for whom everything was just play. Along that road, Laza grew up, and I watched him grow up. In the dead of night we reached the lorry, it was hidden in the bushes and Laza spotted it first. That's how I knew we were there, if it hadn't been for him, I would have just carried on and walked past the grove. They threw me onto the lorry like a sack, a child-sack, in silence, without a word, without a single bark from Laza. I remember watching him sitting in the road there, not even attempting to follow me, or bark, or call for me. When we'd set out, he knew he was only allowed to see me off. I had still hoped I could ask and beg for us to bring him along. He had

no misgivings about that whatsoever. Afterwards, some military check-points arrived, some lists from which our names were called. We arrived at temporary accommodation facilities, the first one, the second, the third. Bunk beds with worn out mattresses, some weird toys, used and torn, "humanitarian". Talks followed as well, for hours, with foreigners, with locals, soldiers wearing white uniforms to help us children not be afraid of them. Eventually, I ended up with that aunt in Germany after all, the one I wasn't happy to see when she had come to visit. She wasn't happy to see me either. A letter for me arrived at her address, it got there before I did. Mother wrote about everything in the village being the same, with Laza wandering about just as he had before the war and her having to go out to look for him every night. She's walking around the village, calling for him, making sure he's with her every night, so she can feel as though I was there with her. She even let him sleep inside. I stayed in Germany for a while. Then I went on to a care home of some sort, and then across the ocean, to a reception centre. I would find it all out later, in front of a committee composed of these people who always cried in my stead. I learned that my mother was killed in the war. Just that. Only later, I heard from a man from my village that they found her in our backyard, her throat slit, and that it looked as if she had been brought there from somewhere else in the village. Strange people cried over my fate as though it had been a film. And I pictured that sight, I remembered our backyard and I could clearly see my mother walking through the village at nightfall, calling out, "Lazar, Lazar..." at the top of her lungs. I pictured soldiers surrounding her. Perhaps it was "them", who killed her for giving a dog a Serbian name, after that emperor of theirs. Maybe it was our soldiers too, who killed her because they thought she was looking for a Serb in our village. That man, the last of all the people I saw who'd seen her alive, confirmed that she walked around the village every night, looking for Lazar, to take him home, and that she and the dog were closer than most children were with their parents, at that time and that

place. From this man I heard the last piece of news in my life that concerned me and that I even bothered listening to. I have no more questions, and there are no more answers. I started mouthing something, but stopped, I never said it out loud, the final question for him that night. So to this very day I don't know how Lazar ended up. It's not right to ask about a dog when someone's telling you about how your mother was killed. It's not appropriate and it's not decent.

I've become a hydrotechnics engineer in Canada, I lead a good life. I have two young daughters, a wife. The first time I made a substantial amount of money, I went to a doctor and asked him to have all my teeth removed and replaced with dentures. I was only 26 years of age and they thought I was mad. All of my teeth were good. I had to go see a psychiatrist. When they heard the story of my father and his toothache, they issued a notice saying the dentist could pull all of my good teeth out. That's how I met my wife too, she was doing her internship with the psychiatrist who issued that paper. The certificate that I was allowed to do whatever I pleased with my teeth. That's how things work around here, there's a procedure for everything and a paper for everything. I have paid back the bank loan for the house, we have two cars, two vacations each year, a winter vacation and a summer vacation. On bank holidays we go for picnics, we take pictures, we go to family functions as a family... but somehow, none of this has any real colour; the taste, the smell, the intensity is missing... it's all a bunch of nothing, my Lazar.

Translation: Marija Stojanović

Six

Imer Topanica

Screams. Gunshots. Prayers that pierce the heavens.

The poor woman. It now seemed the mistake of a lifetime to have let her husband go to war while she sought refuge alone with her two small children. What had she been thinking? How to look after them now that everyone was disappearing from sight? In whatever direction she ventured, there rushed another burning flame, another billowing cloud of smoke. Houses were collapsing in the fire, transformed into ash and charred remains.

She took shelter in the home of Merjemja's family, in a low shed, with a roof of stone slabs on top of corrugated iron. She gathered the children together and said:

"Be quiet! I don't want to hear a sound!"

Together with Merjemja, the woman who was giving her shelter, she peered through a narrow window, hoping that it was camouflaged by the copse of saplings, watching and trying not to scream as they emptied the village of people and set the houses on fire.

The bitter smell of smoke permeated the air. It was no longer possible to see where the sky began. Drunk and drugged to the eyeballs, they sang, all of them screeching, their Chetnik songs.

"Dear god, no! They'll find us next!" Merjemja was terrified.

But they had already started celebrating the cleansing of another village. The two women grew angry, trapped in the shed, jumping up and down, one after the other, to squint

through the tiny window. They could see straight towards the stables of death, where in the evening the livestock were slaughtered for fun.

At some point, as midnight approached, the men decided to retreat to their lairs, leaving the deserted village in the hands of a bloody night. After all that devastation nothing remained except the burning fires, which mounted guard almost alone in that desolate place.

They both saw with their own eyes how the cow was left shut inside the stall, while its miserable calf was tied outside. The men closed the door of the stall and left to sing about a world without Albanians as neighbours. They no longer needed meat, but there was a purpose to separating the cow and her calf. They left them to bellow out their grief for the decimated village.

Hours later, when all the fires had died out, the sad calls still ripped through the acrid air. Listening to the two poor animals crying in pain, the one frightened, the other terrified, made her get up to go to the stall, open the gate and reunite the cow and calf. But Merjemja grabbed her by the arm, saying:

"Are you mad? Do you want them to find us?"

She reminded her that in order to join the fugitives surviving in the mountains, besides needing to break through the surrounding forces, it would be necessary to find a way out for the exhausted children. She encouraged her saying that before dawn, as soon as they collected enough food for everyone, they would gather their remaining strength and courage, and set out for the mountain.

Finally, exhausted, and only after the darkness had weighed down their eyelids, they fell asleep. The children were already swimming in dreams which perhaps were not so frightening, since the gunshots had faded and become less frequent, and then had disappeared completely. She squeezed onto the old, half-eaten mattress, which could barely fit her children. She had nothing to cover herself with, just a horror that made her shiver to the bone. Only God knew what was to come the next day.

Stillness finally crept over the horror and trembling in the shed. The crying of the two animals seemed further away. Moo, Moo. At some point, she fell asleep listening to them. But their cries penetrated her dreams, and turned into words.

Moooo,
Mooo,
Moo,
Moo, oh mum, moo,
What do they want with me?

Mooo,
Let me see you,
Oh my son, moo,
I can't help you.
You grieve so,
I can't live without you.

Mooo,
Dear mum,
Tell me:
Do they like me,
Or do they want
To chop me up,
Into bits,
Skinned,
Nothing left, moo?

Mooo,
My boy,
I don't want anything else,
Let them attack me,
Cut me up.
Without you, mooo,
The life I have
This life, mooo

How to grow old?
Mooo!
Take me!
Cut me up!
Mooo!

Pray for me mum,
Pray for me
Oh, dear mum
If only you could only save me
Moo,
Moo…

Moooo...
Moo...

**

She could hear the calf charging around outside the stall. After a while, it found shelter in a corner behind her. It looked at her with blind eyes full of sadness. So she smiled at it. It lowered its head and slowly started to come closer. She wanted to move closer too, but when she tried to take a step, she noticed, with great consternation, that she could not move. Her feet were fixed to the ground. She didn't make a sound, worried that it would upset the calf. She extended her arm and two fingers, and she stroked the calf's nose. Bizarrely, it started to transform into a human nose. The calf was becoming ...

She woke up. She realized that her body was drenched in sweat and she recognised the face that she was touching. It was Merjemja.

"Wake up! You have to go and find some eggs, if you let the sun rise too high there's a risk they'll spot us."

It took a few seconds before she was properly awake. Then she asked:

"And you ... where are you going?"

"I'm going to milk the cow."

"The cow? Ah ... I'll go. I have to unite the cow with its calf. It even came to me in my dream."

"Maybe it's not necessary. Let me go for the eggs, and we'll send you to the mountains with just the eggs."

"But my children are begging me for milk."

"Come on then, let's go and get the jobs done before it gets light."

They got up and dressed. She took the milk bucket. Merjemja lent her some clothes of her own and now she too looked like an Ashkali woman. Like this, she felt stronger and braver about going outside.

**

She climbed over the fence. Just then, the poplar tree alongside the stable spewed out a chorus of cawing and black fluttering wings. She froze. Her heart pounded. The ominous birds complained in the half-darkness that lingered under the looming mountain right behind the row of sheds where they roosted.

She took a few steps and stopped to listen again. Like a deer, she carefully observed every movement, every tiny sound. She squinted her eyes and through twilight curtains could distinguish the shells of the houses. Burned windows and doors, like the eye sockets of a skull waiting for something terrible to be said, appeared from time to time through tendrils of fog. She shuddered. She remembered the dream. She wondered for a moment whether to turn back to or not. Strangely, she wanted Merjemja to help her decide. She turned her head to check whether she could see her somewhere, but beyond the fence everything was immersed in grey smoke, and it was no longer clear whether it was morning or whether the night was returning again.

She took heart. She remembered her children fast asleep. Right then, she clearly heard the cow's bellow from inside the stable. "Thank God," she whispered to herself and forced herself to walk.

The old stable door, warped by hot summers and cleansed by cold winters, appeared right in front of her. Her heart pounded. She lifted the latch and opened it. The squeak of the door invited her into the depths of the dung-smelling darkness. It took a few seconds for her eyes to grow accustomed to the dark.

Something moved. The cow? It did not look like a cow. O Lord, two huge men rushed at her and seized her. Her scream died in her throat. The bucket fell from her hands. She did not know what was happening. She was breathless with fear. They dragged her along the ground. One of them, a swarthy, bearded, sweaty man, who spat out a cigarette butt, grabbed her by the hair and shook her. He began to slap her with the palm of his hand as he violently ripped her shirt. She tried to face him, gasping for breath. He grabbed her by the throat and squeezed it. Just before he stopped her breath entirely, he let go.

"Albanian bitch!"

He slammed her head on the ground, and dissolved into hysterical laughter.

The other man was shaven, wearing a dirty uniform, with dead eyes, and he was pulling her skirt down her legs. Behind him, hanging upside down, was the slaughtered body of the calf. She saw it because the light flickered and penetrated between the cracks of the stable to shine on a butcher's knife stuck in the animal's thigh. Horrified by the sight of the man above her, the stink of brandy, the stench of his sweat, she tried again to escape his grip, but again, it was completely impossible. He was strong as an ox. She noticed he had six fingers on one hand, which seemed somehow familiar. She felt his dirty nails digging into the white flesh of her arms which he was holding tightly with one hand to stop her escaping.

"Come on, take the bitch, uncle!" he screamed, while unbuttoning his belt with his other hand.

The other man had withdrawn and was talking to him. She

did not understand what he was saying. But she did recognise his language: he was speaking Russian.

She screamed from the searing pain of penetration. She felt the damp, strange sweat on her chest like slime from a swamp. One foot pressed on her head, squashing it into the dung in the straw. Between the six fingers of this monster's hand, she looked at the terrifying face of a rapist, delirious with his own pleasure. She could clearly see his bloodshot eyes. Evil eyes. She feared her body might split in two, like the crown of a tree. Everything went dark.

After the first one had had his fill, he called the other man. But she lifted her head slightly, thinking of how to escape, and then vomited everything inside her onto her chest. The other man was disgusted. Angry, he kicked her hard in the abdomen until she lost consciousness. Everything went dark again.

**

She woke up. She the saw the two men standing not far away. The swarthy one now wore a black uniform, and the other, the Russian, was just in his trousers, but he also wore two bullet bandoliers around his body, and a large cross on a chain around his neck. They smoked cigarettes while communicating with someone via a radio. They noticed that she had regained consciousness.

"Hurry, you're late!" said a faint voice on the device.

They seemed to be asking for permission, but the voice was getting irritated. It seemed to be an urgent matter. That much she managed to understand. They got up, put on their jackets, took their weapons, and as they started to leave, one of them remembered her. He came to give her another kick in the abdomen. She didn't make a sound.

"Wait here, we're coming back immediately!" He spoke Russian, but she did not understand.

"For God's sake, there are children waiting for me!" she begged in Albanian.

"Look, you'll have more children with us. Ha-ha-ha! Get it?"

the swarthy man joked in his own language, having understood her plea.

Just then the radio came to life again, so they had no time for more torture. They left. She struggled up, gathered the remains of her clothes, and dressed as best she could. She quickly cut off some pieces of lean beef from the calf, collected herself and the fragments of her pain, and soon after she also left.

Gunfire and shelling split the sky from time to time. Smoke mingled with the clouds. Cursing with prayers. The acrid smell of ash made it difficult to breathe and the pain that came from the depths of her abdomen spread throughout her whole body which stank so badly that she was full of self-loathing. Stooped over in pain, she just made it to the fence. She climbed over it with great effort. From afar she heard a voice.

"Stop bitch!" the swarthy man was shouting.

But she did not stop. The thought of her children lit up her mind like lightning. She gathered her strength and ran to a nearby thicket.

About half an hour later, with great care, she carefully approached and returned to the garden where the evening shadows hid in fear. Before entering the shed, she took a deep breath, and resolved to leave everything that had happened to her outside and in the past. She did not want her children to see the terror in her face. Thundering booms in the village across the river shook the ground beneath her feet, but she walked on through the garden of saplings and towards the entrance of the stone shed. Inside, everyone was waiting for her.

"Did you milk the cow?"

"No ... I couldn't!"

The two small children ran like birds towards her, but she avoided hugging them because she was covered in filth.

"Wait, because Mummy ... I ... I touched the cow. I have to clean up first."

She found cold water. She cleaned herself from head to foot. She put on new clothes which covered everything but her

face, which soothed her. She put on a scarf, tied it behind her hair and returned to the room. She hugged her children. For a long time. Tightly. The girl was curious and touched her cheek to ask why she was bleeding.

"It was the thorns ... look, I'm cooking you some veal," she tried to change the topic.

"Mum, why did you have to kill the calf?"

"Oh, they had already slaughtered it, god damn them!"

Merjemja put three boiled eggs on the table. The women exchanged meaningful glances. A cut on her cheek was still bleeding. The cuts on her neck were swollen, but they had stopped bleeding. Merjemja came to her aid with a rag, which she bound around her to cover the cuts. Thousands of invisible wounds exploded in her heart. She could not hold them in, she started crying. Merjemja hugged her. The children started crying too, without knowing why.

**

She was walking beside her husband. It was raining on the bridge overlooking the north side of the city, eleven years later. As she walked among the three or four people who were crossing the bridge, she felt her body weaken.

"It makes sense, if he'd pay us, I'd sell up immediately! No need to delay! He's been enjoying it for so many years anyway, not us," so her husband was saying, when she noticed from a distance, police uniforms on the other side of the bridge.

She went white as they approached the police.

"Where are you going?" asked the policeman who came out to talk to them, after slowly exhaling tobacco smoke from the depths of his throat.

"We're visiting our house. We want to go there."

"Aha, no problem neighbour. We are looking after your house!" said the policeman with his sunburned face.

He wore a local police uniform. He turned to look at her. She kept her head down. He lifted his hand to bring his cigarette to his lips. Six fingers. This time she remembered. The heavy

stench of sweat made her nauseous. Fear, her old friend, beat in her heart. She could barely muster the courage to look up at him. Yes. It was him. He was fatter, without a beard and a little grey, but it was him.

"Go on! Take a look at your house!"

After taking a few steps, her husband asked her what was wrong, but she replied that it was probably the heat of the sun. They walked a bit further. She turned her head once more to look at the policeman. He was smoking a cigarette. He watched her. She could clearly see his blood stained eyes.

Translation: Alexandra Channer

Nermina, Dearest

Blagica Gjorgievska

Clop, clop, clop, echoed the wooden clogs. Fast, and then faster and faster. Clop, clop, along the cobbled road leading upwards to their house. Thump-thump, beat her heart, faster than the wooden clogs. There, over there, just a little bit more, I can see the tall white garden walls, the wooden gate. One more step, or a thousand, perhaps. Milana was not sure anymore how many steps she needed to make to reach the gate. Clop, clop went the clogs, thump, thump went her heart.

"Just a little bit more, I'll get there and I'll tell her everything, I'll say… what will I say? Nermina, dearest!"

Milana stopped just a step away from the gate behind which the people that had become her second family lived. Uncle Adem, Auntie Alma, Nermina and who else? Oh, and Said, of course, but he was no more. Said with the blond lock over his forehead, of whom Milana was as proud as if he had been her older brother.

Father Milosh said to Mother Ela when we were little children, yes, he said the following: "Ela, Adem is like a brother to me, let us invite him to our family celebration of our saint's feast day." Mother Ela was very glad, she and Auntie Alma were like sisters. And I, my parents' only child, I considered Said and Nermina to be my brother and sister.

But how, how can I say it: "Nermina, dearest, forgive us! Forgive us!"

Father Milosh said that Said was a good boy and that he hadn't strayed from the right path.

Thump-thump, my chest was going to explode! The wooden clogs stopped making noise. Milana sat down on the ground a step away from the house. But the thumping of her heart did not stop.

Father said that it was very bad in the city. He said, "Be careful where you go and what you do, with whom you hang out." And Uncle Adem said, "Beware, some evil people are out to destroy our nests."

Our nests? Father and Uncle Adem sat together, drank coffee together, and listened to the news on television and talked. Worried. Scared. Anxious.

Said occasionally went down to the city. He was scared too, he spoke less and less. Father and Mother whispered, yes, I heard them saying, "They should hide Said somewhere, to protect him." Why?

She had run out of breath and strength. She lay down under the tree, in front of the gate. She took off the wooden clogs, made by Uncle Adem. For the first time in her life, they felt heavy. She took them off and dropped them to her side. She lay down under the tree in front of the gate. She could not remember what kind of tree it was, even though she had swung her feet from its branches, sitting there together with Nermina and Said. Is it an apple tree? Maybe.

Father said that a man was killed. A Muslim. He did not know what had happened exactly. Then someone whispered that they had killed one of ours. Of ours? Who are these 'ours'? Nermina and Adem are not ours? Thump-thump-thump, her heart wanted to leave her chest and lie down next to her under the tree.

Said continued coming to their house just as he used to. But he stopped smiling. He was very grave and had serious conversations with Father. Only once a quiet word reached her eavesdropping ears: "I will try and protect you as much as I can." Said protecting us? From whom, from what? Father

hugged him, I wanted to hug him as well, but Father would have discovered that I was lying hidden behind the tall barrel in the yard.

Thump-thump-thump, my heart wants out of my chest, that is it, I cannot hold it in any longer, I just need to see Nermina, yes, to tell her, oh, yes, to tell her, "Forgive us, Nermina, dearest."

Father brought a rifle home. I saw him bringing it in. He wrapped it and hid it, but I saw it, hiding myself from view.

Shadows gathered around the house, they paced the yard. Father kept listening in and we were not allowed out. Uncle Adem visited us less and less. Only Said crept up to our house, entering through the back yard. He then talked to Father, and after embracing Father, Said would just slip out quietly. I wanted to give Said a hug too, but I was always hiding somewhere from Father.

Said said, yes, that is what he said, that we should be very cautious the following few days and that he would look after us. Father embraced him and Said left.

For several days some noiseless shadows circled the yard. Said stopped coming. We just kept quiet. A shot, a loud shot tore our souls apart. Father jumped, picked up the rifle and ran out. We could hear more shots. Did Father shoot too?

I closed my ears with my hands and knelt under the window. The ground tremored.

Father barged in and said that he had shot at the shadows creeping around the yard. But they were human shadows, there is no shadow without a man, so Father must have shot at a person. Everything went quiet. Completely quiet. The silence was even scarier than the shooting. The time passed very slowly. We just sat there and waited. The gate clinked and Father ran out. Uncle Adem with his arms wide open, came into the yard. Father ran towards him. He embraced him, but Uncle Adem fell down on his knees and cried hoarsely, yes, he cried, "Said, my son, Said." Father looked at him in disbelief. Father had only shot at the shadows, not at Said. Said was there to protect us, why did he have to be a shadow too?

The heartbeat slowed down somewhat, as if it had changed its mind and took pity on Milana. Gently and barely audibly it kept Milana's thin body alive and prostate under the tree, right in front of the gate in the high garden walls. Perhaps far too inaudibly to keep her alive. Her mouth was half-opened and forming the word 'Forgive'. "Forgive us, Nermina, dearest, my dearest friend, my dearest sister!"

The sun set, a gentle breeze picked up, the leaves of the tree that might have been an apple tree rustled. Everything was calm, serene and drowsy. The gate creaked open, someone pushed their head out through the crack. A loud scream, a piercing scream tore the silence that had fallen upon everything around.

"Father," screamed Nermina, "Father, Faaaather!"

With a slow step, Adem came outside through the gate. Before his legs lay the dear girl, his second daughter, Milana. He kneeled down beside the lifeless body of the beloved girl and burst out crying aloud, desolately and aloud. The wail of this man who could not let himself mourn the death of his own Said now freely shook the mountains and ripped up the trees, a dog was howling within him. Out of the corner of his eye he stole a glance at the girl lying in front of his gate. A word was written over her lips. He stooped to read it better. It said: "Forgive me."

He picked up the girl in his strong arms, pressed her against his chest and set off on foot to the house he considered his second home. Forming a kind of a solemn procession, his wife Alma and Nermina followed behind him. Alma tightened the knot on her long headscarf, as if wishing to strangle herself in its shell. Nermina just walked speechless. All emotions seemed to have deserted her, she could not cry or mourn. Just a few words played around her mouth, but she could not string them into a sentence. Something along the lines of "Milana, dearest."

A lot of people gathered in front of Milosh and Ela's gate. Where had they all come from? When did they learn? Adem could not make himself place the body in Milosh's wide open arms. He had clenched Milana next to his heart. The people

started coming closer and surrounding them. They made a circle and this circle of people kept closing up on them. The mood on the people's faces as they came closer was inscrutable. Adem and Milosh looked at each other. They intertwined their arms and made a bier for Milana. They looked around anxiously. The people kept coming closer. No one could guess what would happen next.

Adem and Milosh now came very close and held Milana's body in the middle against each other. Alma, Ela and Nermina made a circle with their outstretched arms around them. The circle of people was now very tight. People were mixed, both 'ours' and 'theirs'. They extended their own arms too. They embraced the circle that the two families formed, making a larger circle, a new and larger family. Like a great, strong heart with a healthy heartbeat, with healthy love. Milana, dearest!

Translation: Marija Jones

Fractures

Danilo Lučić

Uroš? Where's my Uroš? I don't know where he is. I don't know where you are either. Or where I am. Once upon a time, such knowing seemed as natural and effortless as breathing, looking, living. That knowing could easily have been back then, when being the last to turn in, I'd go around the house to check that all the lights and appliances were off, that Uroš was tucked in. That he was breathing. Walking into our bedroom, you wouldn't look like you were sleeping, but as if you had been busy with something, thinking, tossing in bed, and sleep had ambushed you like a bandit. Where is all that now, where is it hiding? I've strictly forbidden myself from calling it life, because that would mean this now wasn't life. And it is, fuck it. This too is life, to hell with it.

What could I have known back then, standing there with my rifle unlocked, in the middle of that meadow, completely alone, equally angry and scared? I felt behind me the chilly shade of the grove spilling down my neck, cooling my sweaty back, enticing, promising, singing... And in front of me I see Srećko Vukovljak and my fellow fighters from the unit behind his back. Their rifles unlocked too. They, too, equally angry and scared. They watch me, they are tense and teetering on the edge of madness, they wonder what's wrong with me, what am I doing, where do I think I'm going, though they all know full well. I'm doing what any of them would have done. *I'm running away*. I'm running away because of the horror that's about to rain

down on our heads, so horrendous it will have us plummeting down with the dead, to writhe among them while we still live. A few hours earlier, an order had come down from headquarters and it was very clear what it meant, and what was expected – head towards Kravica and Sandići on the double.

He walks through the hallway in his old flat. Children run past him dressed in a motley of colours. They laugh, squeal and nudge past him. They look like pirates, nurses, soldiers, singers, lawyers... He's holding a large knife, its blade smeared with whipped cream. A pale orange sunset weaves through the windows opened just a crack and carries in the first cool breeze of the evening. He's holding the knife high above his head, looking at the children, searching for his son's face. The living room door opens behind him, adults laughing in the background, tobacco smoke spreading out and the fluttering of the camera shutter. As the last child enters the room, there are gasps of excitement at the sight of these small grown-ups, while someone opens a bottle of champagne, saying it's time for the cake. Then the door closes and Milivoj is alone in the hallway.

Srećko Vukovljak steps slowly towards him. Stalks, brown and green, rustle as they bend beneath his heavy boots. Many snap. Milivoj wonders whether Srećko is grasping his automatic rifle just as firmly. I think about you and Uroš, I don't know how to protect you with my death. Deserters were often dealt with summarily in those times. Tension grows among the men from the unit as they wait for the outcome. Both they and I are wondering, what if officer Vukovljak orders them to shoot. Sound ebbs away around Milivoj, everything retreats and quietens down, light seems to withdraw from him, because you're always alone when you die, as you are when you're born. I want to wipe the sweat around my eyes with my sleeve, but I'm afraid my hand will shake. If you were here with me, or between him and me, and if you were to ask me why I'm doing this, why I'm abandoning a woman and a child on their own, I'd tell you, in the end, and not without struggling, but

already close to ruin, that it was the only hope that tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or whenever, that someone might be saved, over there on the other side, because at least he wouldn't be chased by my bullets.

Timidly, he entered the room, quietly shutting the door and leaving the noise outside. The lamps lolled around indifferently, unlit, unconcerned about the darkness creeping in. You had to tread carefully among the toys, dolls and discarded bits of costume on the floor, as if walking through a minefield. Slowly, he approached the edge of the sofa where Uroš sat, softly sobbing. He was wearing a garish skirt, an old sweater that hung unappealingly from his shoulders, a polka-dotted scarf tied around his head, and in his arms he was holding a large black doll with shiny artificial curls and thick red lips. And he was crying so bitterly and dejectedly. Milivoj had never seen a child cry like that, he thought only adults could produce such tears (as if they alone were entitled to ask desperate questions of fate). But here was his son crying like that, making no effort to conceal his face, pressing the smiling black doll-child to his chest, alone in a darkening room.

What is that on Vukovljak's face? Disgust? Contempt? What exactly does he think is standing before him? A miserable, cowardly deserter, refusing to serve his army and defend his people, liberate the land. I turn my back and abandon my fellow fighters and him. I'm abandoning everything we often talked about, Vukovljak and me, at night, sharing a rare cigarette. It's hard to say, always was, what he's hiding behind those hard eyes of his, my superior, Srećko Vukovljak. It could be: *"Why, my friend?"* but also: *"Why, my foe?"* I lower my gaze. Not from shame or fear. I lower my gaze because I have lost, I have been defeated by the war and now I'm just old and tired. War always wins, that's how it is. A soldier has stepped off to the side, watching Vukovljak and me, obviously at a loss. Perhaps he wants to see us from a different angle. I feel Vukovljak's eyes on my forehead, later I feel his hands on me. He walks up to me, coarsely grabbing my shoulders, like a soldier. He yanks at

my body, tears at my uniform, his eyes never leaving my face. Suddenly, he turns around and leaves, my rifle hanging off his shoulder, my epaulettes in his hand. The fellows get back into the vehicles, Vukovljak gives the sign and I am left alone, the loneliest man in the world, it seems. I don't know anything anymore, and I don't care, I can't bear it anymore and I don't know if there's anyone anywhere with whom I belong.

When I stepped into the woods behind me, it was already dark.

Still holding the knife, he hugged his son. The boy's face always looked so old when he cried, as if suddenly weighed down and crumpled by decades. Someone had dressed him up as a beggar woman, given him a black doll that was supposed to represent his godforsaken child and his role was to go from guest to guest and beg. Today, on his birthday. To beg friends and relatives for some money for himself and his plastic child. The other children are revelling in the attention of the guests, applauded and flattered. They lift them up in their arms, they dance with the dancers, clink glasses with the lawyers, surrender and kneel before the pirates... But Uroš doesn't understand, how come he's a beggar woman with a sooty face, a child in his arms, instead of being the child in the arms of someone who loves him. Perhaps that's why he cries so bitterly, so inconsolably, but with a resignation, an acceptance of the burden he now bears and cries under, alone. Then his father put away the doll and took the scarf off his head. Carefully and slowly, with a steady hand, he lifted the knife to the child's lips, turning the blunt side towards them, and Uroš, slightly startled, took the knife and started licking the cream from the cold, sweet blade. He was no longer crying, he was proud, because he felt that he and his father had a secret now, while in the other room children were made to eat cake with plastic spoons.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

The Carbon Paper of Rage

Jovana Matevska

There are nights when I dream of him breaking away from my arms and running away from me. Oh, how he runs, runs in those woolen socks that I knitted for him in the winter of 1983. A mother's heart disintegrates when her child's name is mentioned. Mine has been rotting away underground for years now. They did not even let me see him one last time. The coffin could be lifted by a single person. That was all that the fiends left of his Karposh-like body.

From then on I have lived without living, I have been breathing through gills, inhaling reluctance. I would have killed myself by now, with this hand that would occasionally slap his cheek whenever he was naughty. But what can I do? I raised two children in the same cradle. I have to live for my other child.

**

When my mother's wailing became the neighbourhood anthem and managed to wake up even Andon the drunkard, I abandoned my pistols and let their plastic grow old and crack. I was not a child anymore. My mother's hair went grey overnight that August night, and the following morning I woke up ten years older. I grew up without a father and he had become my awe-inducing fresco. With blue machine guns under his eyelids, his thin and straggly moustache and his commanding voice that changed tone, whose shrillness forced laughter out of me rather than submission.

I should never have let him leave. Nor should I have played counter-strike with him or made him watch westerns with me. Why could not this blind appendix see through my stomach that day before he left?

The sky flickers with light. I am terrified of the thunder. I am afraid of the festive fireworks that blaze up and rip the night in two. I am afraid because I know that before he closed his eyes for good, he watched a pyrotechnic debacle. Although he, my brother Jorde, was a hero, and will always remain a hero. In this heart of mine I built a private gravestone for him. Engraved with my memory of him.

**

I knew that after the cowardly ambush at Karpalak I must not let myself bond with rage. I could see the hate floating under the surface of Bojan's irises. He hid everything. At night I could hear him raving, talking sleepily to the family photo on his bedside table, sometimes he even screamed - my heart was numbed, but he still felt electric shocks pounding, even through his broken nail.

Yesterday in the shop, Albert greeted me. I did not greet him back. I have crossed out the phone numbers of all my Albanian friends. I refuse even to set these eyes of mine on their racial characteristics.

Oh, what am I doing? Bojan is just a reflection of all of my fascist misery. I am the carbon paper of rage.

**

I am waiting at the bus stop and staring at the obituaries. Remembering Jorde's. Remembering the three-volley salute. I blocked my ears then, just as I block them now against the words of the unclean passers-by. I borrowed Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. And I am starting my own struggle. I will winnow out all the chaff of Albanian origin. There. One of theirs, obviously one of theirs, judging by the physiognomy that I have studied so thoroughly, is coming towards me. The watchtower of my mind is giving out orders to my fists. The guards of my honour!

**

Yesterday the police brought Bojan home. They brought him back with a broken temple and a bloody shirt. The bloodied shirt needs to be laid out on the shelf, next to the rest of the books.

"Ma'am, your son was arrested because he started a fight."

I wanted to spit straight onto his badge, and to shout out "Liar, he is unable to hurt even a fly," but I kept my mouth shut. After the death of Jorde, christened after our ancestor Jordan Piperkata, Bojan transformed into a Nazi dragon. I knew that someday soon he would lose the plot and that mayhem would break loose. It was all my fault. Rage can only give birth to revenge. That is why the two words are like twins, just a few letters make the distinction.

**

I was lying in bed that night, after they cleaned my wound, bandaged my eyebrow, after the ride home in a police van, with a proud smile. Then I reminisced about the fight in the manner of an exhibitionist. I remembered my knockout punches falling on those freckled cheekbones, as if his two-headed eagle had become a dappled mare. And it must be said, I sure gave him a red background for his eagle to land on. Oh how he writhed under the kicks of my steel boot tip, like a worm on the scorching asphalt. The moaning. There was no resistance to my blows on his part. I broke my temple only when the police whacked my head against the hood of their car.

And as my heart filled with pride, a meteor rain of thoughts started beating down my brain. Moans sound the same both in Macedonian and in Albanian. Just as pain is the same.

**

My father met the criteria for the mobilization. I wept, argued, begged. It was all in vain. My attempt to help my father defect fell through when Andrej, the only son of the Lozevski family, was killed in Vejce. He was barely twenty. Something

fluttered and caught fire inside my father then. I think what triggered his decision were the tears that could fill every pitcher in the village, the wrinkles like deep canals on Lozana's ashen face, Lozana's absent gaze roaming the cerulean blue of the sky as if looking for a carrier pigeon.

He was a noble man. He joined the army and left me and my mother, even though we were the only thing that had stopped him from doing so before. But war never asks what kind of a man you are or what you have left behind far away from the front. Neither does the bullet veer away from nobility, it just travels along the trajectory generated by whoever shot it.

He died on the eighth of August at Karpalak. He was a pillar of strength; he was. But he gave up. He offered his body up as bait, and cleared the surname that had not defaced itself, following the principle of Macedonian surnames. After his death, there was no mention of his name, nor was he honoured as a defender. It was probably because it was contradictory to the principles of the ethnic politics pursued by every country that is a stew pot of nationalities. The neighbours, in the meantime, had come up with a torrent of different suggestions and guesses - my father had been a traitor, an undercover terrorist. I can only imagine the hate that had gathered in Lozana's ventricles, and the molten rage erupting from her husband's eyes. It did not take them long to unite in their pain, to hurt others even more, sheltered by the umbrella of their shared suffering as an excuse for all the suffering they caused. They rose up in rebellion. But who was there to understand? Rage blinds us and puts all other human emotions in the back seat.

We were the only Albanians in the village. We were so connected with our community that we looked forward to Easter more than to Bayram. You could barely feel any tension despite our differences. The same starry vault covered our heads, and the Macedonians are people whose hearts have been taken over by the 7/8 beat, jumping straight from the musical

notebooks into their chest. My father was a Macedonian. Not on paper, but in his soul. He died for the Macedonian cause.

My last day in my childhood home - I remember it as if it were yesterday. A mob of villagers stampeded to our house and surrounded it. "Shiptars!" they chanted. Their catcalls shook the window panes, my earlobes almost danced to the beat of fear. Severdzan, the milkman, Sara from the grocery store, even Dejan, my best friend. "A nail gets another nail out," and they started hammering nails into the windows, and they painted "death" and "killers" all over the walls with whitewash. My mother grabbed me by the shoulders amidst all this melee, and frantically tried to bring me back to my senses. I knew that these would be her last words.

"You're going to run, son. As fast as your legs can carry you. Human rage is worse even than the furious cough of nature. People will talk. That is given to us all, regardless of the genetics of our origin. But don't forget. We're all the same over there, in that yet untouched world," and she patted my shoulder, and that patting still aches and brings back memories every time the weather changes.

I ran like Dejan in Andreevski's *Tunnel*, himself locked in the tunnel of ethnic conflicts - I was stigmatized because I was Albanian, they were crippled because they were Macedonian. I knew that Auntie Desa did not actually want to throw that match that set our roof on fire, just as my father did not agree with the goals of the paramilitaries. He did not believe in a Greater Albania, as long as the Macedonian wheat fields offered him his daily bread. He cried when Andrej's ashes were blown away by the wind, at the very same spot where he had taught him how to ride a bike. The summer of 2001 was a new Ilinden - St. Elijah - 1903. Modified. And yes, everyone fought to protect their piece of land from the enemy, even when the enemy had my racial DNA.

I will suffer blows, my existence will be like a doormat for everyone else's basest impulses, like that boy's at the bus stop this Wednesday. But my voice will rise above all others, it will

soar up above the eagle and will take the lion's royal seat. And as long as someone acts like the carbon paper of rage, I will play the part of the multifunctional eraser that will wipe away the traces. I will pigment the fine line between me and them. With the goodwill that I will breathe out, I will eliminate segregation forever from the dictionary, I will eliminate the pronouns that separate us.

Me. From you.

Karpalak 2001

With the rosary in his hand, he felt that something was approaching, something evil was vigilantly lurking in the dark. His stomach cramped and the forebodings rattled like lottery balls and jumped up through his trachea. The rest of the reservists did not share his agony. To allay his concern, he thought of what he would give Bojan as a present when he got back. A film with John Wayne. He was a sworn fan to the grave.

09.27. He tapped the face of his watch. The seconds hand had stopped. Suddenly the truck stopped too. A thunder of explosion rumbled, and the soldiers jumped to their feet. They were ambushed. Their convoy had become a target of the filthy minds of the separatist halfwits that craved to prove their manliness by force.

"We are being attacked! Fight back!" ordered the colonel. Jorde observed the panic-stricken faces and the grimaces of his fellow-passengers. They were in a closed ditch, and there was no way out. It might be better if he got himself a speed bike. Frightened doe eyes roved over the interior of the truck. Shpetim registered the end that dawned in the pupils of the young boy's eyes. His fatherly instinct overwhelmed him before the rocket launcher could do the same. The only Albanian in the truck embraced the boy to protect him with his feeble body.

Translation: Marija Jones

Small Change

Nemanja Raičević

Rozi lost her job again. "Staff must not laugh so loud in the toilets," the bar owner said. Especially not when the nation is fighting for glory. He lifted his eyebrows and listed off the reasons why it was impossible for him to give her any money. "We've all got problems," Rozi told him with lots of understanding and hand gestures. The manager, who wrote a passionate journal "for future generations" offered her a sweet. "Thanks," Rozi said and made a dignified gesture that may have resembled an embrace. He scuttled away like a crab, but then charged like a mouse and made her take the whole bag. Meekness of spirit, simplicity of gift-giving, some people never lose the touch, at least not entirely, he thought proudly. A new story for his journal was taking shape.

Rozi took the complementary sweets she had seen on TV. There, dreams do come true! They'll be so refreshing after a beer, besides, she wouldn't go hungry today. Everything was going swimmingly. It was only morning. Still, she would have to procure a beer first. But didn't the sweets look just splendid in their glossy wrappers? After all, she could always try with the soldiers, she said loudly, and confidently walked out of the office that smelled like old notebooks.

"Daily help around the house needed," the ad said, hanging off the only wall that was left of a house. There was a toy car among the shards from the broken windows. She did not have

time to think everything through in detail over a drink, like in the old times. The handwriting on the ad struck Rozi as somewhat sophisticated. She quickly pocketed the toy. It was pleasant to touch, to try to see your reflection in the tiny rear-view mirror, and to hear the rustling of the sweets on top of it all. There was no doubt now that everything would turn out well. One day, she thought, one day in my life will be the day that brings me luck.

The door was opened by a woman who had made an effort to put on her make-up. She was wearing a wide trench coat. It made Rozi think of something lovely, of music, of the day before it started.

"I'm here to help," Rozi said. The woman looked at her warily, sliding her hands over some grease stains on the coat. "Lemon," Rozi cried. "It would all be alright if we could just procure a little lemon. I used to be able to work miracles with a bit of lemon. There was an art to it." "You're right," the woman said. "It would all be alright if we had some lemon." "Lemon," Rozi continued, "everything would be just perfect if we had some lemon." The woman stepped to the side and let her come in.

She wanted to finally start living in the basement and she needed help moving the furniture and carpets down there. "It's the only place where I feel beautiful these days," the woman said. "I'm not afraid of the bombs as much as dying in my own bed. Strange, I never thought I'd be one to hide away in the basement. When the war started, I threw flowers at the tanks. I talked about the heaven-sent reversal of the will of the nation. I never thought it was possible to love a basement."

"Oh, don't worry," Rozi said. She spoke cheerfully, giving herself airs. "I myself thought I had troubles this morning. But things change, things happen! Sweets, toys, basements, they're all part of life. We lack lemon, that is true. Doesn't beer also remove stains?"

When they were done, the woman coarsely said she had no money. She showed Rozi her purse where banknotes were

ineptly hidden. "I've got nothing to give anyone, right now," the woman said sleepily. "Beer," Rozi said very softly. "Just for a beer? One beer for one bit of help." The woman looked at her and Rozi could see her two wild eyebrows and faint moustache. "You remind me of my grandmother," Rozi said. "Before the war and before the beer, grandma had a house on Restive Valley Street. I think I'll go look for it one of these days," Rozi said and stared at the wall like someone who knew what needed to be done.

"Wait," the woman said. "It's true I wasn't expecting anyone to come. Who isn't lonely these days? And I certainly wasn't expecting to have to pay anyone. But everyone should tidy up their own grave. And you helped a stranger." Rozi nodded her head with heaps of approval. There are bound to be soldiers at the Majestic! "Wait here," the woman interjected and went upstairs, the trench coat trailing behind her, like a queen of drab. She returned with a dress.

"This dress," the woman pronounced proudly, "the last time I wore it was before the war, at the graduation ball of my last generation of pupils. I gave a speech to them then about authentic existence."

"It's black," Rozi said, like someone who was an expert in dresses. Pitch black. She saw ethereal shapes and fleeting, comic circles in the black. "Take it," the woman said. "It's made of mulberry silk. Take it, now. I have to go. Who isn't lonely these days and who keeps sewing all those uniforms?"

"Good night," Rozi said, and went outside. Things started looking up again. Look, weren't those just the ruins over there where she could change before the beer?

"Good evening." A voice echoed from the dark. "Is this spot taken?" Rozi asked as she quickly pulled the rest of the dress over her clothes. "I was just leaving. I have some important errands."

"No need to worry, my fair lady," the voice said. "If I wanted to harm people, I'd join the war."

"This dress was a gift," Rozi said by way of apology. An

older man in a bowler hat and with a bottle in his hand emerged from the dark.

"This was my house," he said proudly, and took a swig from the bottle. "I don't have a house at the moment," Rozi said demurely and inched closer to the man. "I never thought it would be my house that got destroyed, but no one ever thinks that," the man said, carefully examining the place where the ceiling used to be.

"At least now you can see the stars," Rozi said, looking up between the sky and the bottle. The man started laughing nervously, but happily. "When I saw you come in, I thought I could very well murder you," he said gently. "But then I thought, whoa, the presence of silk in my home again!" "I just dropped by to change," Rozi said, and winked through the dark. The man took off his bowler hat and made a bow. "Off with the old, on with the new," he said pensively, and then shouted angrily, "Never back, always forward! You strike me as a lady who doesn't mind a drink here and there, forgive me if I'm mistaken... But, help me, I beg you. Did Handel and Bach end up blind or paralysed?"

"Look for me at the edge of town," Rozi hummed with feeling and lightly ballroom-danced over to the bottle. The man put up both his hands, as if playing, as if fighting, as if he were a branching tree.

They drank and as the man in the bowler hat said, time waited for them as the hours passed. When he hurled the empty bottle at the sky, Rozi went on her way.

Wine was another good thing that day. Everything was going according to plan so far and Rozi decided to have a sweet. She felt refreshed, the joy of remembering the TV, confident of her success. There were soldiers at the Majestic and she had a dress. This time no one even tried to throw her out. Rozi felt a rush of excitement when she spotted the beer. Oozing propriety, she asked a lonely soldier what front he was on.

"If only I was at the front," said the boy-soldier in a too-big uniform. Rozi listened with rapt attention, adjusting the

plunging neckline of her dress. "If only I was at the front," the young man-boy repeated. "We need just one generation of our youth like this and we'll change the world," Rozi twittered in anticipation. The boy-soldier looked at her sleepily. "Long live the President," he replied loudly and as he saluted, his sleeve fell over his eyes. "Who sews these fucking uniforms," he wondered and ordered two beers. Rozi now saw a multitude of things: the gleam of glasses and the happy shards of childhood, the soft yellow caramel colour, the realisation that the world would go on past the last rows of trees. All doubts dispelled, life to the fullest can now begin! "Beer is good for you," Rozi said knowingly, "it's full of vitamins. Whatever the troubles and whatever our situation, we can always produce beer!" "Who are you?" the boy-soldier asked. "Oh, no one special," Rozi said. "I saw the light and dropped in. Three more beers and we can have a deal. A blowjob or whatever, anything. I'm easy to negotiate with. I'm always up for a deal. I know a safe spot. There are ruins everywhere. And victory will go to the right to freedom! For three beers, for just three large beers."

"I've got money," the boy-soldier said importantly. "Good. It's a deal. There's always money in the clothes they leave behind. That's my front. That's my job. They told us we should be proud of it. The most important and hardest work is before the final dawn, and their kind must disappear for my children to live. They said we could take the smaller bills. The small change, as we call it. We take the small change, we gamble, we buy chocolates and we take whores out for beers. We don't complain. We're doing it for all of you! They told us not to tell anyone about it. Not even mum or dad, they said. As if I'd tell my mum about the small change! But I blab it around and about. Someone will report me and I'll quieten down. Small change is a secret and it's my life. It's the only thing where I'm not obedient and would someone give me some fucking acknowledgement for being a good soldier! That's where they messed up. Man isn't what he's supposed to be."

"I used to work at the entrance to the toilets," Rozi said

with a longing for beer and a vague past. The boy-soldier looked at her and ordered four large beers. Rozi felt like singing and dancing, but she just clapped her hands. The whole world! The whole world in two large bottles and all the beneficence of the world in one boy. Rozi offered the boy-soldier a sweet. "As seen on TV," she exclaimed with devotion. "I don't need anything from you," the boy-soldier said coarsely. "You look like you're in trouble yourself. But, could you just hold my hand?" "We'll go to the ruins later," Rozi said with encouragement and took his hand. When the lights of the Majestic were turned off, like candles in a rented flat, the boy-soldier was sleeping with a bag of sweets in the pocket of his uniform and Rozi moved on.

Now everything was in its place; now, everything would start from the beginning, she thought. She even had a dress. There was also the tree she had seen: abandoned, crippled, but branching out. She didn't mind that she had fallen just before. Rozi felt a closeness with creation and destruction; a pull to return to loving and losing all things. People in toilets, the smell of paper, laughter beneath ceilings that obscure the mysteries and perils of the sky; no exceptions to the rule. She took off the dress and started fashioning a noose while humming a melody from a show she had watched as a child. Didn't even such a strong and wealthy woman like Alexis Colby wish for a bit of respite at least once in her life? Something quickly picked up the tune. A bomb fell in the next street over and everything shook. It was almost pleasant. Rozi hummed and readied herself. Then she heard something that did not come from the sky. It was harmless and demanding and persistent and loud and it was impossible not to step into the darkness. Rozi stopped, kissed the tree under which she was standing (promising to return soon) and went to follow the sound. It was coming from a rubbish heap. A plastic doll, inexplicably well preserved and smiling, was pouring forth a discontinuous and jarring melody in imitation of a child's crying.

She put the toy car into the doll's hand and tucked them in with the dress. The silk noose disappeared; Rozi moved on. She

carried them in her hands and for the first time after so many years, she was frightened when the sirens sounded and the sky became brighter than the dawn.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

War

Vladimir Tabašević

We are left to our own devices; winds and terriers run through the woods, barking. Before you know it, some have given themselves to somebody else, so that the latter can see what's gnawing at their soul. Some have fallen into someone else's hands and want to stay there, dried out and ready to die. So the days go by. There is a trap in the forest where it's possible to lay your own son like a mine. There are big swings from which it's possible to fall and remain motionless, forever. There, where rheumatism is cured with nettles, the elderly are busy enough with their crooked spines, and firmly attached to life by the determination not to allow the priest to replace the brass band at their funerals; the war is, therefore, quieter for them than for others. On Wednesdays, and only on Wednesdays, a dog attacks a chicken, but no one seems to notice that. Thousands of things exist beyond us. One often thinks it's enough to be naked in front of the other. Just that – to be naked. A girl stands close to a guy, love will stay dry there, like a fig, intact. The terriers run through the wood, barking. Someone's a woodman, and he's drunk. The sound of a saw is heard in the distance, somewhere, and then a burst of rifle fire. Next to us are former miners, who carry mine pits inside them, and a deep memory, all dried up; they also participate in the war. Somewhere out there, in the cemetery, a widow, in tears, shows her pain to the world. Somewhere out there

a monk is not sure of his decision and wonders whether it's too late for that kind of uncertainty. A greyhound stands, skinny, in front of its master, its greyhoundness confirmed by its skinniness. This skinniness also signifies the war. The world simply cannot be known, or described. Thousands of TV sets burn, seethe, and, from there, images multiply in everyone's heads, which everyone then sees in their dreams and combines with their own memories and myths. Some doubt themselves, while to some their adolescent son shows his injured ankle. It seems that everything exists for real, but in fact it exists only in order to seem that way to us. Perhaps only the war is real enough and, possibly, those bears waiting in the stream to capture a fish. On second thoughts, it must be only this damn war. Soldiers like matches, their heads scratching the ground, approach each other, hiding, sopping wet, looking for tinder to rub their heads on, looking for a little heat, even if they'll pay for it with their lives. Perhaps the only one who holds on to reality – as firmly as a new-born grabbing one's finger – is a pregnant mother waiting for her son's arrival with a fire in her body, and an ulcer which doctors see as a chilli pepper on the screen. Only she, perhaps, and the son she's waiting for. Mother and son in war.

As a child, I experienced the war from the sidelines, I saw it obliquely; the war used to put a rat in my sleep to whine and chew through my dreams. My father was growing a moustache and getting ready to give the state what the state had asked of him, that is, his life and his body dressed in uniform. His natural thinness was gone, and he seemed to have become the state itself – as strong as a rock, as heavy as hail. Father was gone, bullets were hissing, and flags were crawling down the street; a fish bone remained in a boy's throat, and he was hooked, so young, like a cherry, he was hooked, he – the sun of someone's life. The war kept beginning and ending on similar notes, putting pressure on states. Things are different in war; perhaps only paper and writing can bear them, and only after the war is over, so that we're able to remember the pigtails of the girl

who disappeared in the river, and not only that, but much more – so that all the memories can disclose themselves to us. My father was prone to drinking, and he was able to admit it to himself, because wartime is a time when men are able to admit such things to themselves. A song is heard from somewhere, a victory song; a woman waits for her husband, full of life from the waiting. My father naively utters "We will win", he says it to both himself and his family, through whom he actually begins to know himself. "No one," he says, "no one is able to change the style of shooting; I will be back, alive, healthy and strong." He used to pick cherries and watch the cherry tree defy him – it reminded him of peace and tranquillity. Once, in the middle of the night, he sat quiet as a dormouse there in the barracks, contemplating hanging himself on that very cherry tree, with no message in his pocket. He was sometimes so drunk that he would go out and shoot at the sky, looking for an answer. Abruptly, he started believing in God – just like that, overnight. He had a picture, a picture of his son – a son as small as a slice of bread, he had the picture in his pocket and a tear in his eye, to lubricate the process. No one understood why he was looking at the sky, standing there alone like a boar. They all wanted to slice him with questions; they – his fellow comrades. But none of them cared enough to actually ask the question, the big and jagged question. No. The majority of them had their own ways of being, at least for a while, who they used to be before the war. Long enough not to forget those selves they would again be some day. One of them killed a chicken with his own hand, a hand as heavy as a serious disease. Another one plucked the chicken, cut its legs and cut off its head with a knife; and then let his hunger do the rest. The red blood trickled, though briefly, as if praying. The guard is thoughtful. A man-warrior seeks a prophecy in his own palms, he seeks some happiness and history he doesn't remember, but in the name of which he must offer his head.

An aid package arrives, with food, diapers, and cans. I'm in a blanket, my mom guards me and hides me from the war.

I'll grow up one day, and I will have the shrapnel of memory in me, the memory of my mother's cold hand trembling on me, pale with helplessness. Our grandmothers are there, big, as if protecting us children with their bodies, us children who sometimes have the strength to play. Sometimes.

The army is warring, marching, stamping on the ground with their heavy boots as if wanting to wake someone up, someone who is deep down in the ground, sleeping, strangled in a fog of nightmares. The stamping and marching soldiers – the holy forces of reality. A slight redness shows through the bandages on the wounded; the redness appears like the bloody prayer of that beheaded chicken. In wartime, stories are told. After the war, decades later, everybody talks about the war, and nobody talks about these stories. The soldiers loiter about, and, exhausting the rhythm, move like a centipede, to somewhere. Stepping towards the freedom of his nation, my father has a hedgehog-like thought. If the nation were truly his, it could find a way to freedom that does not adorn other nations, other soldiers, their arms, shoulders, bellies and the napes of their necks with red prayers, and that wouldn't set its own hunger on him, to enfeeble him – he simply cannot bear that kind of hunger, the hunger to enfeeble another nation, to treat it as that unfortunate chicken. But my father keeps walking, though wishing that he, too, could lay his trembling hand on his son, if only to go into the unknown together with him. A woman's been left in a bus wreck, in smoke and hopelessness. Perplexingly, her child then swallowed a marble. Someone's uncle, a tall man, a mathematician, was killed on the other front. Someone's uncle, a professor, whose life, it seems, had its own algorithm. The house in which we hide is hidden enough for one to think that the enemy could run into it by mistake. And that fear, that is also a war. The fear that the enemy could find you by accident. An old man smokes a pipe, compressing and pressing the tobacco as if pushing his bad dreams away.

The carousels are covered, oh God, with a tarp – empty, waiting for peace to come, as if knowing that only they can wait

for peace, as if knowing that peace can only be awaited, that peace cannot be made. While the coffee is boiling, everyone feels its smell as the beginning of a new hope. The apples are red, bursting with ripeness, they are so swollen that it's painful to watch them wanting to provide some beauty in wartime. The children pick them, and eat them just to throw at each other. To throw them in the direction of another child, in the direction of another red heart. The days are calm now, as if Mondays and Tuesdays are not the main concern. Unfortunately, it is only in wartime that days become what they truly are – light and darkness. In peacetime, the days are named, divided, a function assigned to each. War is beautiful because it's only then that the days are just light and darkness – the two constantly changing into each other – and nothing more than that. The darkness in wartime, of course, is more terrible, but darkness and night, in wartime, are never any named morning – a Friday morning, for example. Unfortunately, it is only in wartime that one knows better than to name things. In peacetime one names, divides, and butchers, one cuts and subdivides, sets up, makes families, groups, and then hunts. Only in wartime can one see through the void of one's name. It is only in wartime that one realizes that one's name and one's self are not the same, that one is on one's own, and that being in war is because of one's name, and that the state rests on one's shoulders, and that the war rests on states, and that war does not give up, and that war is a war between peoples who are nothing else but fathers and sons, nothing else but people, people on whose shoulders lie names, their own names which are, actually, nobody's, names like *Petar, Ivan, Amir, Aida, Marin, Jovan, Nermin,* and that, too often, the mothers and wives waiting for their men to return from war, can only welcome back their names, empty, depleted of men, nobody's names.

I experienced the war from the sidelines, I watched it obliquely; when I was a child, the war used to put a rat in my sleep to whine and chew through my dreams. My father experienced the war directly, and after that remained just a

name, an empty name, nobody's name – just the way I was left after the war: empty and nobody's.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

War is a Small Word

Sanja Mihajlovic-Kostadinovska

My mother told me that there were big words and small words. My teacher Aralampie seemed to only know the small words, because he would only say yes, no, or fall silent. And yet, I always believed that Aralampie was a big man, because he had a big name. Aralampie. You thought he would swallow you up with that name. Gulp! And with those eyes of his. As big as saucers. At school everyone called me Ice for short. And I really hated that small name. "Ice, sit down!" "Ice, pass that!" "Ice, go and get some cigarettes!" "Ice, this. Ice, that." When the war started, I asked my mother: "Mum, is war a small word, or a big word?" My mother just stroked my head and said: "That's a scary word, son." But she never told me if it was a big one or a small one. But since everyone was always talking about it, it had to be a big one. And yet to me it seemed small: 'war'. Like 'play'. Because it is us, the kids, that play. Or like 'kite'. But I don't have a kite anymore, because it got caught in a tree and my brother refused to climb up and rescue it so I cried for three days. Or like 'plinth'. One day my father kept yelling - where is my plinth, where is my plinth, and when my mother brought him a small plank, I could not believe my eyes, I could simply not understand how someone could yell so much about such a small thing.

I said this to my mother, and she just smiled and told me that small words are not small because they are short. And

she told me to consider 'mum', 'water', 'bread', and the fact that, even though they are small, they are still very important. I think I believed her, but then one night, as I was falling asleep, it occurred to me that my mother might have mixed things up, because for example, 'ice cream' was a long word, and a big one too. Or 'bicycle'. Or 'Gevgelija'. But then I thought of the train that took us to Gevgelija to see granddad, and 'train' is a very small word, perhaps one of the smallest, but if it were not for the train we would not have been able to go and see granddad. And we would not have met the conductor who winked at me and always let me travel without a ticket. And there again, 'conductor' is a long and big word. And difficult. And scary. Maybe even scarier than 'war', and yet no one is afraid of conductors, while everyone is afraid of war. Maybe it is not a small word after all, because when the war started, teacher Aralampie said that it would last for a very long time and that we might not be able to finish the school year. But I knew that a lot of long words lasted for a long time too. Like, for example, 'fishing', 'chronicle', or 'vacation'. I also think it might be big because my mother once told me not to talk about the war, because war was stuff for grownups. It is not that I even want to talk about war, I just want to know if it is a big or a small word. But they just stubbornly tell me that I am small, though one day I will be big. And then what do I do? Who will tell me later if they refuse to tell me now? How can they be constantly telling me to brush my teeth, to tie my shoes, to eat with my right hand, not talk with my mouth full, to shake my willy after peeing. They taught me all these things, and yet they do not want to tell me about war. I think what I need to do is to wait for that war of theirs to finish, and then I will tell them a couple of things. I will tell them that 'war' is a small word because when I write it down in my notebook, it cannot reach halfway along the line.

Translation: Marija Jones

Encounter

Mario Merdžan

It was the dusk of the great war. A seven-year old girl went panting up a muddy forest road. Her hay-coloured drenched hair fell across her grief-stricken face as she walked. The whole way, she was flanked by skinny saplings in their two crooked rows along the sides of the road. She carried a large bag and wore soaking clothes that looked like third-generation hand-me-downs. A forceful wind kept making her hair flog her face, and her worn jacket kept coming undone. The overstuffed bag seemed to grow heavier, so she had to keep switching it from one hand to the other. Despite it all, she persevered through the endless forest mud.

Having arrived at a low crumbling wall overgrown with weeds, the girl stopped to rest because her arms were burning with fatigue. As she leant against the wall the hem of her jacket dipped into the mud. Miserable, she took a deep breath, fixed her jacket and picked up her bag to move on, sorrow continuing to distort her face. The shortcut through the woods was not long, but this time, because of the weather, making her way to the village took longer because every few steps the girl's feet would sink, sometimes into practically marshy soil. The mud would grip her decomposing boots, their laces undone. Though she knew she still had a long way to go, she did not lose hope, she paid no heed to the pouring rain, she just wished she could fly like the wind.

She walked on like that for a while, with heavy arduous steps, and then turned off towards the long winding country road. There, a few meters on, she found the flattened body of a dead soldier. He was of indistinct age, lying face down in the thick mud, with tank tracks running over his back. His corpse had been rotting for days in the mud, right in the middle of the road, mauled by the wild boars that roamed the villages looking for food. There were more dead soldiers around. Mutilated beyond recognition, most were at an advanced stage of decomposition, so that they no longer looked like what they were, no longer resembled human beings. Visibly exhausted by the weight of the bag, the girl stepped around the soldiers with resignation and continued on towards the village.

As she surveyed the barren landscape, the girl could just see the roofs of houses poking through the early morning mist. Having reached the top of the hillock, she carefully made her way down. At the very edge of the village, she noticed some strange noises coming from a little-known path through the woods that led to the field she had just come from. At first she thought it must be the whistling of the wind or the patter of thousands of raindrops, but it became increasingly clear that it was actually someone slowly creeping up on her. There was no time to run, so she decided to shelter in place, trying hard not to move. All the while her heart was pounding and she could hear her blood pulsing in her ears.

Petrified, her boots rooted in the mud, the girl looked with horror at the bloodthirsty canine teeth, the predatory claws and the terrifying eyes staring into nothingness. Beside herself, she realised she had come upon a hungry wolf that was blocking her path towards the village. The deathly silence that had set in was suddenly broken by the girl's desperate cries for help in the hope that someone would hear her, but, alas, it was all in vain. Her shaky voice was hopelessly drowned out by the wind and the rain. The wild howl of the wolf struck the girl like a blade and when the beast pounced on her, she retreated and fought back with all her might. She swung her bag pitifully at the wolf

and hit him right in the canines. Food started pouring out of the torn bag. While the wolf gorged on the contents of the girl's bag, incredulously she seized her chance to make a run for it.

Empty-handed and defeated, the girl dragged herself along the deserted village until she reached the muddy path that led to her home. She opened the squeaking wooden gate and stepped into the yard where firewood was strewn all around. As the rain dripped from her hair into her eyes, she looked over the destroyed seedlings being drenched by the rain. Shivering and soaking wet, she stepped up to the dilapidated front door, took a deep breath and went inside. She had to tell her father, who had lost both his eyes in the war but still supported the whole family, that the food she had managed to procure for the little money he made playing the accordion at fairs and various inns was irretrievably lost. The sooty beams in the kitchen loomed over the girl as she walked to her father's room, fearing his reaction. She held her breath, gripped the worn door handle firmly, opened the door and stepped inside the cramped room with her shame.

Her hair messy, her lip bloodied and a bruise across her face, the girl sat mutely in the shadow of the furthest corner of the kitchen. Pensively, she looked out the window adorned with old lace curtains affixed with rusty nails poking out from the wooden window frame. For a while she listened to the hysterical crying of her sisters merged with the hypnotic humming of the rain against the roof tiles. She remembered her mother, who was killed, and her father, before he was blind, leading a thoroughbred horse by the reins into their sunny yard and bringing from the cart to the table various sweet treats, gingerbread biscuits and a thousand delicacies from the fair.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Head

Monika Herceg

I often have this dream where they chop off my neighbour's brother's head on a tree stump.

In my dream, he is blond, like their son, slender and tall. Crisp September light breaks through the thick fog lapping at the trees that are slowly changing their colours as the summer dies down. The blond youth's hands are tied in front of his stomach and two men lead him down the village road. When they reach the unplastered single storey red-brick house, they enter the unfenced yard cautious as cats. There's a walnut stump a few yards from the threshold. A third man waits beside it and they go to him.

I can't see their faces, sometimes it's the sun in my eyes, sometimes the shadows are too deep. The air is heavy with silence. I know he is hollow, the young man with his hands tied, like the shell of a car with the engine taken out. They place his head on the darkened tree rings. He offers no resistance. He kneels obediently and lays his face against the course surface of the stump.

It's always the same: two of them hold him down, the third swings the axe, precisely and without hesitation, as if he were chopping wood.

*

Our neighbour Iva has a large nose, red from brandy, mother says the brandy is also what made him go insane. Just like Blaž,

who lived a few houses down the road, died because he mixed his heart medication with brandy, if the stories are true.

Mother says there's not a normal person left in the village.

Blaž had a bitch that had a litter of puppies. We took one and he took the rest to the woods. The bitch untied herself and brought them back. Blaž beat her and drowned the puppies in a bucket one by one. Though we hated him, we'd go down every Christmas to decorate his plastic Christmas tree because mother threatened to use the stick on us. She said it was neighbourly to help out. I would often untie the dog while he was sleeping, but the stupid bitch never ran away.

The city authorities want to build a road through the village, real asphalt, but our neighbour Iva will have none of it. He says they can build the road through where the Serbs live only over his dead body. Mother regularly goes to the municipality to explain to the authorities that he's not the one who has to drive his kids to school every day on a road that is no longer even fit for horses.

The problem is that you can reach our village from two directions, one passes through a Serb village and the other through a Croat village. It's a lot quicker for Mother to take us to the bus stop through the Serb village, otherwise she has to go around the entire hill.

She often fills up a wheelbarrow with dirt and shards of brick to fill up the holes that open after heavy rains. She pushes the wheelbarrow from puddle to puddle, filling them up and then pounding them down with the back of a large axe to break up the pieces of brick. Finally, she heaves a large shovel to beat out the last chinks from the backbone of the road until she is satisfied that the hole has finally lost the identity of a hole.

*

I don't go to my neighbour's yard, except when we play ball.

It's hard to play ball in the village, because there are no flat meadows. Only the ground around our neighbour Nikola's

house is somewhat more forgiving on the ball. Nikola does not live in the house they rebuilt after the war, they only come on weekends when it's warm to plant the garden and mow the grass. Mother calls such people weekenders.

Nikola's orchard has the finest pears in the village; sweet, large, with thin skin. Ours are nothing like that. We have the alcoholics' kind; small, good for making brandy.

We play ball with Nikola's son when they come, two against two.

We mark the goal with two bricks by the red wall of his one-storey house and we stick two stakes into the ground on the other end of the meadow. The ball keeps flying up unexpectedly whenever it hits a big clump of grass, but we've already got used to these unpredictable trajectories. The only thing that really gets in the way is the large tree stump in the middle of the meadow. When we play, someone always stumbles over it or the ball bounces off it and rolls off into the undergrowth by the yard. My older brother swears angrily at the stump. The undergrowth is full of thorns, burdocks, rosehip and bramble, almost up to your belly button.

Our neighbour Nikola scowls at us if he hears my brother cursing. Mother says he drinks too, you can tell by his eyes. They're dark, almost black, just like our father's were.

My brother usually goes into the tall grass for the ball because he's the tallest. The grass comes up to his hips, he wades through it slowly as if treading deep water. The bramble thorns are so sharp that they often rip our clothes, so we get smacked when Mother calls us in for supper.

*

The ball is like a head. It is calculating, despite being empty, not counting the gas molecules pumped into it. If we believe there is perfection in a sphere, we can conclude that the ball is more perfect than a head. Even the Earth is actually elliptical, flattened at the poles.

Father avoided us while he was alive.

Sometimes I think he was just a noun to describe a false function within the organism of our family. Like a phantom limb, the fact that we would sometimes get the feeling of his love for us was not really love, it was our need to be given what we never had.

*

Grandma would say, while she was still alive, that it was all because of the war. The disease that remained even after it seemed everything was over, it was worse than the war itself, because it ate at you quietly, like a tumour. That was what kept father up at night, what made him go up to the attic to hang himself, what unleashed his slaps across our faces. Steeped in the disease were all the ugly words, like whore, but no one actually ever meant them. Not grandpa, not dad. It was because of the disease that we heard Nikola ransacking his weekend house by night. The cries of his blond son that we imagined, though we never heard them.

Perhaps the army could have been anticipated by the gusty wind that baited the snouts of the village dogs, making them bark for hours before the first shot entered the wooden body of the cherry tree next to the house at the edge of the village.

A bullet of irrepressible force. The air before it went rigid, compressed into the crack of its mortal embrace.

The old cherry tree had a trunk that had stored up decades of people's lives, so its firmness absorbed the bullet.

But one lone cherry tree cannot stop a war from starting.

*

It is impossible to breathe quietly under a brandy barrel. The wood is solid, smooth to the touch.

Grandma would say how she could hear the flames lick the house, the loud death devouring everything around it.

A neighbour from the Serb village found them. Grandpa shit his pants when he saw him, but the neighbour placed the barrel back over them. For two days, they lay on the earth, the oakwood separating them from dying.

*

They chopped off Nikola's brother's head on the tree stump when the war started.

The road that passes through the Serb village to reach ours is not only shorter by half, but also less damaged than the one going through the Croat village. Nikola always comes from the Serb side. He recently started driving a new car. Mother likes to say that it's only because Iva's afraid that he doesn't curse him, but he can curse her because she's a woman and alone. She often goes to the Serb village. Has coffee, buys cheese and eggs. In the autumn, the neighbouring Serbs help her bring in firewood from the forest and break up the soil in the garden, mow the grass as well if needed. At such times, neighbour Iva shuts himself up in his house and pulls down all the blinds.

*

The head lies lifelessly for a few minutes, as if ripped off a doll. The eyes are tiny, drawn on. No blood or flesh, just soft plastic sprouting blond locks. When it finally touches my fingers, the plastic I encounter gives me momentary consolation. My Ken, it's just my Ken, bought in the vast second-hand market, my Ken, pulled out of a pile of old toys, my Ken, with bite marks on his hands. I commiserated with whoever bit his fingers, I felt while holding him that they gnawed at the plastic as fear gnawed at them, maybe in moments similar to those when I was able to tell by father's stumbling gait that he was drunk.

Sometimes I open my eyes in the dark, breathing in the stale odour of brandy that has saturated the wood. There is no grandma or grandpa. I'm sitting in a puddle of my own urine.

Outside it's just as grandma described. The noise drowns out reason.

My rapid breathing fills the barrel with sticky fear. I dare not move. Just as I did not move when father's fists drew near. The body turns blue, bones and love crackling together, like wood on a fire.

I am always a step short, a step short of returning the head to the body. A step short of fighting back.

*

I'm afraid of empty space. When I close my eyes, before going to sleep, I often find myself trying to dispel the feeling that I'm the smallest thing in the world and that a vast nothing is hitting against me so hard that I never want to close my eyes again.

I sometimes walk to the edge of the village just to touch the cherry tree. Its brittle, dry arms sapped from trying to fight transience. It too is diseased, hasn't borne fruit in years.

I touch the cherry tree as if it were my mother, I caress the body that I know has endured as much as it could bear, I whisper sweetly and imagine finally being hugged in return.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

People Can Eat Even Without Legs

Milica Vučković

Grandpa loudly chews the crescent rolls; his tooth hurts, and he's sorry the pain is not loud enough for everyone to hear it. Savka says the rolls are really great, although somewhat hard, so chewing gives her earache. Everyone bursts out laughing, except for Nada who takes the remark personally since it was she who baked the rolls from scratch, using the only available ingredients: powdered eggs, powdered milk and everything else powdered that we receive by post. Perhaps they send us everything powdered to remind us that there's nothing else out there. The yogurt is homemade, though. You first make the milk, from powder of course, then boil it, cool it and finally stir in some yogurt. The only thing bought at the store is a plastic cup of yogurt, and we're overjoyed because it has seasonal pine trees and St Nicks drawn all over it – because the New Year is approaching. We have no other holiday decorations in the house except for an appropriate oilcloth tablecloth. The table is set with homemade ajvar sent by Branka, and a sausage sent by Sava. The sausage, however, is eaten only by us youngsters. All the elders claim that they've never liked sausages, or that they just don't really feel like eating sausage today. We choose to believe them. What a holiday feast! Grandpa, fidgety because no one is paying attention to his toothache, starts to grimace and moan loudly. He never, however, stops chewing, and Grandma kicks him discreetly under the table. He immediately

jumps up yelling: What the hell, woman! Why are you kicking me? Grandma reddens like the ajvar, even a shade darker. Grandpa obviously thinks that since we live in Belgrade we have money to throw away, even though he knows perfectly well that my Dad left the Army immediately after that grenade hit my uncle, and that we now only live on Nada's salary, which is small in any case, especially now that eleven of us live in this apartment. Nevertheless, Grandpa seems to think that the money could and should be found for his visit to the dentist, although I'm convinced he's never seen a dentist in his life. Grandpa obviously thinks that now is the right time to gain that new experience. Grandma, though illiterate, knows how to read her husband, so she tries to stop him talking about it, but obviously in vain. "I can't eat," says Grandpa, "you should take me to the dentist; my tooth hurts." "Shut up, Grandpa," Grandma says, "people can eat even without legs." Nada takes the second round of rolls out of the oven, but no one is hungry anymore. Though no one is properly fed either.

Every meal, no matter how bad, had to be finished if we wanted to get that piece of a chocolate marshmallow banana. The bananas were sliced lengthwise, to make sure that everyone got an equal share. It was Nada, of course, who came up with that solution after a thousand and one quarrels over those miniature marshmallow bananas. At first, she used to cut them crosswise, always giving the fleshier parts to *them*, while *we* would get the skinny banana butts. If we protested, Nada would tell us off for not knowing the meaning of *enough*. That was until she realized how uncomfortable that had been for *them*. The two of them, Savka and Dragana, say they'd never tried these particular sweets before, but there were other equally nice sweets where they are from. Try as I might, I cannot bring myself to connect the two of them with anything nice. Their foreheads are as high, flat and white as cinema screens, on which it seems movies about tractors and forced displacements are shown every day. Be that as it may, the two of them claim they know such other sweets. And how nice they

are too. Apparently, they remember them. That's what they say at least.

I know we're cousins, some kind of sisters, but I find it strange to hang out with them. I find them odd, I'd never seen them before, and now, all of a sudden, these months of inseparability. That grenade has certainly brought us closer together. The two of them say that our Dad might become their Dad as well – and then we would be real sisters! According to them, my aunt left as soon as the war started: her father had never been in favour of her marriage. I understand nothing, except that I am sorry. When we go out, the other children notice that Savka and Dragana are not from around here. I'm sorry that that's the case because the two of them also notice that the other children notice, and so it goes round in circles. While shopping for bread and milk at the grocery store, I'm careful to use the words that Savka and Dragana use for bread and milk. I do it to make room for them to do the same, for I know that nobody will pester *me* about it. But I'm aware that sometimes it's even worse when I try to protect them. During a dodgeball game, for instance, I sometimes intentionally hit one of them on the head – in order to make them feel equal to everyone else. But then I feel sick because of it and I can't sleep. That's how I realise that the toilet is so often occupied at night; it seems that someone is always in there. And the toilet flush wakes me up whenever I manage to fall asleep. As that never happened before, I start to think that maybe that's how war sounds. Savka and Dragana are not wakened by it – they can obviously distinguish between the sound of war and the sound of the toilet flush. The nights seem eleven times longer ever since the eleven of us were forced to sleep under the same roof. Dawn never seems to come.

Nada is the first to leave the house; she goes to work. Dad makes breakfast, often sweet waffles with yogurt, or salty biscuits with plain milk and sugar. They taste odd, but he thinks it's fine – that's because he's always had a couple of drinks by the time we get up, on account of his sickly uncle who needs to

be taken care of early in the morning. We realize that there's no point in protesting. While we eat Petit-Beurre soaked in milk powder and water, I hear my grandfather say, gnashing his teeth, that he has no intention of dying here in this Serbia of ours and that he will go back as soon as he can. I wonder why he'd bothered to come here at all. And where he came from. And where he would go back to. Grandma says: Hush up. If I can just get this devil off your back, we'll manage somehow.

One morning we take them to the bus terminal in front of the A Thousand and One Roses Motel. The bus is full of grandmas and grandpas. They're all crying like first graders on their first field-trip. They will miss us, they say, and yet they leave us. Grandma waves through the window, but Grandpa won't even look at us. After they left, the packets of powdered food stopped arriving. A barter transaction. For a long time, I couldn't understand who they actually were, and who we actually were. At the risk of sounding stupid I have to say that I still don't get it, though I notice people who frown at words I learned from my grandparents. This year I'm getting a passport; that's a promise. I'm going to take roses to their graves. I've never, ever, complained of a toothache.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

Ninety-Two Today

Sandra Cvitković

On the 3rd of May, Father decided we would return. Mother's pupils widened, they looked like my pupils after the first joint I rolled in the yard behind Grandma's house. Sister was so shocked she dropped her bowl of oatmeal, and the searing crack as it hit the dirty-grey tiles pierced the still air. Ever since that time, any loud sound would remind me of shooting.

When I heard my first shot in 1991, Father was quick as lightning, he caught my arm and whisked me down to the basement where Mother and Sister were already sheltering.

I remember how Father's chin would start shaking the second he heard tanks in the distance.

"If I so much as sense something going wrong, the four of us are going down the shaft! That's the only way I can save us!"

We never had to go down the shaft, but Father's ribs suffered truncheon blows, because his fear made him forget everything but his name, even his date of birth. Mother, Sister and I watched Father stutter, unable to say anything, out of shock and out of fear of these people who until yesterday never existed.

Father got beat by a truncheon and I got pneumonia. He and Mother agreed she should be the one to take me to the doctor's, figuring women wouldn't get beaten.

I still think the moment I grew up was when I fearfully stepped onto that city bus.

We sat in the first two unoccupied seats we saw. I felt the lustful gazes of merciless soldiers fall upon my Mother, smelt the urine of the girl who wet herself out of fear, the fear in the hands of the old lady sitting next to me. From the military boots that soiled white cotton dresses, from the bloody knife someone threw into the bin, from the smashed shop windows. Fear was all around me.

At the hospital, the Nurse came up to Mother and whispered she would wave her hand when it was our turn to go in.

"There are too many wounded, ma'am. Too many mourning families. I fear what they'd do if they heard your name," the Nurse said, swallowing the same lump my parents have been sharing for dinner for years.

Back home, Father and Little Sister were already packing. I watched Sister dress up her Baby Doll.

"There. Now you won't catch cold, wherever we go."

The next morning, I was woken by a knock on the door. Mother opened it and three heads appeared along with some suitcases. No one said anything. A boy came over to Sister and me and offered us marbles.

I took the blue-red one, those were the only colours I could discern in those days, and I gave him a paper banknote I had found in the street.

We walked in silence to the playground, me with Father, Sister with Mother. There were no buses in the playground as Mother had promised, instead there were dusty lorries that were meant to load up all those grey downcast looks around us, including our own.

As we waited to board the lorry, a soldier grabbed Baby Doll out of Sister's hands and threw it to the ground.

Mother picked Sister up for fear she would start crying and anger the soldier. She whispered to her, "You'll get a new Doll soon, and don't worry about Baby Doll. There'll be other girls walking around here, one of them will be sure to pick her up."

I know she didn't console her, nothing could console her. Even if one of us had mustered the courage to pick up the doll,

it wouldn't have been the same doll she had spent so much time preparing for the trip.

The lorry trip was long and the only thing I could think about was taking off the nine pairs of knickers I'd pulled on, because it was becoming unbearably hot. I couldn't part with the new underwear our Neighbour had smuggled in from Germany. She didn't have to flee, but she cried because we did.

Father said we were to take only essentials this time, because he first wanted to talk to the people who lived there now. The whole way there I wondered how Father and Mother were feeling. Did they too get flashbacks of our porch or were they remembering how we used to have more Holidays before. As we approached our house, I felt the same way I did when Father bought me candy floss for the first time, from an old man who had no left arm, but had the broadest smile I'd ever seen.

I felt crestfallen when I saw shopping centres where once there were puddles we would splash around in and collect bottles we would later take to the factory where they'd give us juice and some sweets. Sister would always get more than the rest of us because she was the littlest, but we older kids would split up the loot equally.

When we arrived, everyone apart from me tried to hide their discomfort, whereas I tried to hide my fear of what was to come, another knock on the door, another sound.

I recognised the woman as soon as she opened the door. It was the same Woman who had stood where we were now standing those few years ago. With her Husband and the Boy.

When we came in, the only new thing I noticed were the photographs, everything else was the same.

Hanging on the wall was a photograph of the Woman, her Husband and the Boy in front of a house that wasn't our house, but some other nice house, but not nice in the way ours was.

"That was our house," said the Woman in a tone that moved my Father, but made her Husband feel awkward.

We sat next to each other, though I wanted to lie in Mother's lap like I once did, or make a shoulder stand in the armchair.

The Woman went to the other room, the one that used to belong to me and my Sister, and came back with a doll. With Sister's doll, dressed in the same clothes she had worn for the trip. That's when Mother started crying and the Woman told her she had found it the night we left. She was out walking in the playground with her Husband, they couldn't sleep that night. I saw that look in my Sister's eyes that I hadn't seen since the day they took that doll away. She hugged the Woman and thanked her, wiping her sleeve across her under-eye shadows.

When the conversation went silent, Father took the newspaper from the table and it said:

"Ninety-two Today."

And then he said, "It's the same with music. If the music is cheerful, it doesn't matter if the song is sad, you'll get up and dance. If the music is slow, melancholy, no matter how happy the words of the song, it won't make you dance."

"But, tell me, do you have a guitar?" Father asked the Boy.

With a bashful smile, the Boy said they did.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Ibrahim

Damjan Krstanović

What can a small, colourful glass ball possibly represent? A decoration? A gift? A marble? That is what was running through my head while I was roaming through the streets of Belgrade like a tourist. I stopped to watch two boys cheerfully playing marbles on the dusty ground of the park, in the shade of a stunted tree. The boys were obviously from different cultural backgrounds, but they didn't care. Their cheerful expressions and excited voices awoke my memories, and the loud click of marbles took me back to my own past.

Osijek. The year was 1993. I was nine, like the nine lives of the proverbial cat, and I felt as if I had already used up some of them. I was sitting in the shade of a maple tree bathed in the bright summer sun, playing marbles on the dusty ground. Despite the heat and sultriness of the day, there were a lot of people outside. They were enjoying the sunlight like lizards, and smiles were slowly beginning to return to their faces.

Sociability was not my strong point, so I was playing marbles on my own. School was about to start, and I felt the urge to use the last days of the summer holidays for playing and having fun. I didn't even know the rules of the game of marbles, so I played it how I wanted. I would stack the small glass balls in a pile, and try to shoot them with a bigger one, or I would arrange them in a zigzag formation and then try to shoot one through the forest of marbles without touching the others.

"Can I play with you?"

The question caught me off guard, like barking would a timid animal. I didn't know anyone was next to me, much less hope for someone who wanted to play with me. Then I saw a boy of a slightly darker complexion, almost golden, probably from spending a lot of time in the summer sun. He was wearing canvas sneakers, shorts that used to be purple a long time ago, and an equally washed-out green T-shirt. His face was lean and cheerful, and his hair looked like the hair that children always draw on stickmen.

"Okay."

"What are you playing? Cherry Pit?" he asked happily, sitting on the ground next to me.

"I don't know."

"Never mind, I'll show you."

He didn't make fun of me for not knowing the rules, but instead showed me what to do and how – a bit like when a big dog teaches a little one how to sniff. We drew a circle, dug a hole in the dirt and spent hours trying to knock marbles with a shooter. As I hardly hit any, he showed me how to hold the shooter marble properly and demonstrated his methods of shooting accurately. At the time I was terribly jealous of him for doing so well. Many years later I would realize it was envy, not jealousy.

Then, as abruptly as he appeared, the boy announced that he had to go. I gave him a present of my least favourite marble. I was sure he wouldn't like it, but his bright green eyes shone with joy. The marble that up till then I had considered my ugliest instantly became my favourite, and I wanted it back. But I didn't ask him to give it back.

"Thanks," he said, grinning from ear to ear; and then he ran home.

I did not see him again that summer.

"Dean has fled to Serbia, where he belongs," our snub-nosed teacher with the grumpy look announced with satisfaction on the very first day of school. She looked at me and my friend Josip with contempt. We were the only ones who did not take

the subject of religious education. The teacher's pleasure was complete when she started telling us how Croats had lived in this region since the seventh century. And then, a miracle happened. Or rather, life, which sometimes plays tricks on us, happened. This time, the trick was on our teacher, because the school principal entered our classroom, bringing a new pupil with him. As it turned out, I knew the new boy – it was my marble game pal! Being the only one who knew the new boy, I was the man of the hour that day at school. The boy's name was Ibrahim. He was from an area near the town of Doboj.

Ibrahim was cheerful by nature, friendly and easy-going and, before you knew it, he became almost everyone's favourite – to my surprise. I thought that because of what the teacher had said earlier he would be stigmatized as one of "theirs", given that he wasn't "ours". Only later would I realize that children act on the principle of "monkey see, monkey do". That's why they should not be judged; children try very hard in their little heads to assess what is right and what is wrong. When a figure of authority, such as our teacher who usually claims the moral high ground, assertively announces her opinion, what else can our little heads do but agree?

Ibro almost immediately became my best friend, and, as his last name was Mujanović, I sometimes called him Mujo. As he was a Muslim, he didn't go to catechism either, but he liked to tease the teacher by wailing in front of the classroom door: "I want to attend catechism too!" When the teacher opened the door, Ibro would start bowing down to him, causing bursts of laughter on both sides of the door. It was things like this that made Ibro popular at school, but rarely did anyone hang out with him outside of school. Except me. The school year flew by and in the blink of an eye the holidays began, and Ibro and I found ourselves under the same maple tree again.

"Holy shit, Mujo, you should take a bath," a boy named Ivan exclaimed rudely during our game of marbles. He was looking at a huge mark on Ibro's neck.

"You fool! That's his birth mark, and don't call him Mujo," I replied bravely.

"Oh, so you can but I can't, huh? You two-faced Serb!"

The situation quickly escalated out of control. We all started pushing each other and soon ended up rolling on the dusty ground. After the fight, we all fled in different directions. It must have been because our eyes were full of dust – I don't know why else.

"I have to go to the soup kitchen to fetch lunch," Ibro announced as we washed at a fountain in somebody's yard, where we accidentally found ourselves after the fight.

That was it for the day, I thought about heading back home, but then Ibro added: "Do you want to come with me? It's Friday, maybe there'll be cake."

"Okay," I said, not thinking twice about it.

Excited, we ran through several streets and reached the soup kitchen, breathless. Ibro went in with his food stamps while I waited outside. After a few minutes, he cheerfully came out and immediately started digging through the bag of food.

"Let's see if there's any cake."

Inside the bag were several metal pots with a single lid: a hot meal for three persons. One of the pots was full of cold murky soup, the other contained potatoes that looked already chewed, and in the third three Wiener Schnitzels with the breading decomposed by moisture. There was also some cabbage salad in a separate bag, and three apples, one of them rotten. None of it smelled tempting.

"No cake," Ibro announced sadly, after examining the contents of the bag thoroughly.

"It doesn't matter, I'm not hungry anyway," I replied with self-control. I was hoping he wouldn't notice that I, too, was disappointed that there was no cake.

As we walked home, we saw Ivan again. He was on the opposite side of the street, in the company of some boys who watched him with delight.

"Hey, queers! Go back where you came from," he shouted and threw a stone at us.

This time we knew better, so we just quickened our pace. We didn't run because it would mean that we were scared.

"And take a bath, Stinker!" somebody shouted from a distance.

We didn't say a word for a good while. Ibrahim lowered his head and stared sadly at the ground.

"What's wrong?"

"You know, this is not my birth mark," he said sadly, pointing to the stain on his neck.

I didn't know what to say because I had never seen Ibrahim so sad. I just knew that I hated that drooling idiot Ivan. Many years later I would learn that hatred only breeds hatred, and that we should not hate, even those who don't like us because we are different.

"Maybe I'm really dirty," Ibro added after a while, still crestfallen.

"Don't be silly, you're great!"

That incident brought us even closer. We spent the hot summer days playing various games, swimming, fishing, and "warring" against Ivan and his gang, using water balloons as weapons. When our companionship was at its height, when the two of us seemed inseparable, life happened. We had a quarrel in the shade of our maple tree, we had a quarrel over a glass ball. It was childish stupidity. Ibrahim just threw the marble to the ground and went home sadly. I knew right away that it was my fault, but I couldn't get myself to admit it to him.

The next day I went with my family to our holiday house. I stayed there until the new school year began. As I walked towards the school, I could only think about Ibro: I decided to apologize as soon as I saw him. But I didn't see him again. He left my life the same way he had entered it – in the shadow of the old maple tree bathed in strong summer sunlight, like a comet passing by the Earth at intervals of several centuries. People's paths in life so unexpectedly merge, and then unravel again,

like shoelaces. And no matter how much time Ibro and I spent together, it turned out that I was no better than any of those who had harassed us both. The only thing left is the memory of the time Ibro and I spent together, and a small green glass marble. The small glass ball lying in the shadow of a human form … I stood thoughtfully in the baking hot sun, wondering what a glass marble could represent. Friendship? Love?

"Please sir…!"

The voice of a small blond boy jerked me out of numbness. Another boy, dark-skinned and curly-haired, stood near me stretching out his hand. His eyes were the colour of the green glass ball.

"Would you pass us our marble, please?"

I smiled and rolled the glass marble back to them. The two ran off happily to their place in the shade of the tree.

What can a glass marble possibly represent?

Sometimes it can represent the whole world.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

Uncle Zav

Dženeta Rovčanin

Yusuf was sitting under a walnut tree, a cigarette between his yellowed fingers burning his fingertips. He didn't even blink. As the cigarette burned down to the filter, he instantly reached for the pack, but, while extracting a new cigarette, his gaze was drawn to a floral dress that flashed like a vision: curls of blonde hair tied with two bows innocently falling over a slender back that matched the colour of the ripe grain at the foot of the nearby field. Two legs, tiny as bees' legs, swiftly alternating, got lost in the field. Yusuf couldn't resist smiling to himself; just the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth, lowering his head sheepishly, furtively, as if he felt a tingle in his feet. "A warning," he thought, "laughter is the devil's work." That crazy thought justified his act; Yusuf justified his hardened sorrow as the courage required of a strong father. Selma had always felt the need to make him laugh, as only a child could. He would always tell her that she should suppress her childish jokes. She would then lift her little forefinger and put it on her nose, just the way her mother taught her while tucking her in bed after evening prayers. Selma remembered everything: all her mother's morning beauty rituals, her long dresses and the flowers that would blossom forth in her mother's hair as soon as spring appeared in the windows, spreading streaking rags of light along their slightly rotten walnut floor. She also remembered how her father used to laugh when he returned

from the fields in the evening, how he would hug her mother around the waist and whisper something in her ear, and how her mother would turn away bashfully, her face adorned with a soft smile. Her father always smelled of dewy grass. Yusuf used to squat in front of Selma, handing her five nuts from his right hand, and she would quickly break their shells with her tiny feet. But all that is now long gone. Now Selma goes to bed without prayers, though lovingly tucked in. And each night she thinks the naive thoughts of a child: her mother will dig herself out from under the cold Srebrenica soil, and prepare hot donuts and a cup of cold milk that will be waiting for Selma when she wakes up. Selma always woke up at nine in the morning; she would hop to the living room expecting to see her mother, and as she wouldn't find her there, she would run to the kitchen, and look for her behind the door. "Not here," she would say raising her arms, hearing nothing but water dripping into the white pot that stood by the window. The silence in Jusuf Abadzic's house was such that it could pinch your eyes; his house was a graveyard for two living people, quiet and gloomy, with a strange, choking smell, a faint flickering light, and the rustic scent of longing: the longing for Fatima, for her kind and gentle hands, for her scent that Yusuf could still smell as soon as he put his head on the pillow and would see her hand flashing in front of his eyes – her hand rushing to wipe away the tears incessantly dripping down his cheeks. He would lie down on his side, squeezing his eyes tightly shut so he wouldn't dream about that hideous day again. But it was all in vain. The images would come to him again and again, images so vivid that he could smell the freshly baked spinach pie and the freshly cut cucumbers... Of course it went without saying that such odours could be associated with any home, but not every home smelled of dough and cucumbers sprinkled with blood evaporating from the *sofra* set for dinner, along with fresh human blood, Fatima's blood. Every night for the past three years, Yusuf would get out of bed in the dead of the night, when only the crickets were awake. He would hold his head,

and he would softly mouth: "Why didn't they kill me instead of you."

Every time someone knocked at the door, Yusuf's heart would first drop to his toes and then jump to his throat. He would fall silent for a few moments, and then finally open the door. It was invariably his neighbour Savo who would be standing in front of the door. Savo, with a deeply compassionate look in his eyes. Savo, or, as Selma called him, Uncle Zav. When he called out Jusuf's name, his voice resounded through Srebrenica as if invoking all the local saints. Savo was a swarthy man, his eyes like shiny green marbles; he would quickly look at everything all at once, and he would miss nothing. His thick black lashes cast a shadow beneath his eyes, but under his eyes there were dark circles, so you could never tell if his gaze was darkened by some sharp pain which might make him break into tears at any moment, or by some innate grief that might make him seek solace in the outstretched arms of whoever offered comfort. There was something sad, humble, an almost childlike quiet in him. With his shoulders lowered down into his back, and his shoes two sizes too large, Savo seemed to carry the imprints of both his own and other people's terrible suffering. His gaze always caressed, and his heart always embraced all those sadder than himself. In 1995, the claws of the war were still deeply buried in the people of Srebrenica, on their hearths, in their houses, in their hearts. And in their necks. Especially in their necks. War never smells like calm; when you least expect it, it comes and finds you bare-handed and serene. It lurks and attacks you – under that same lantern where you dine on the hope and belief that War will never break windows, worlds, newly formed families. The year was 1998, but Yusuf had left 1995 behind only in body, not in spirit. He increasingly longed for death, and for the cold soil of a Srebrenica grave. Suddenly, it seemed to him that sadness was like a weed, and that no matter how much you pluck it out, it would grow even more. So he decided, and it was his final verdict. That night he took a sheet of paper and wrote on it for a long time; he left his

whole self, all his deadness and meaninglessness on that piece of paper, and then he just left. That night the silence in Yusuf Abadzic's house was broken by a wooden chair that creaked beneath his feet. The chair fell on the rotten walnut floor, and everything went out: the look and the pain and the shine in the hair and the smell of a living man.

"Uncle Zav, will my Dad wake up when I grow up?"

"He's always awake and watching over you."

"Did my Dad have a soul?"

"Of course. A huge one."

"And why do I live with you now?"

"Because I love you."

"Do you love me to those mountains and back?"

"No. I love you to the stars and back."

"Do you know how much I love you?"

"Tell me, how much do you love me?"

"To that plane in the sky and back."

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

A New Age

Željka Horvat Čeč

We called him Grandpa though he wasn't a grandfather to any of us. We had no idea if he was a grandfather at all. Whether in some town or village he had children and grandchildren. Judging by the way he treated children, though, we concluded he didn't.

Grandpa called us "blighters" and "pests". "Rats" a few times. He would sometimes pick up the kindling stacked by the house and throw it at us. They were just small sticks, no bigger than our outstretched hands. He never threw larger pieces of wood or stones at us. He threatened to, but he never did. Just the sticks and small pebbles that you put in your yard so you don't have to mow the grass. That's what we did and now it always crackles underfoot when you walk from the gate to the house.

We would laugh as we ran by Grandpa's house, it was like a game. He would shout, we would laugh and run, and later chuckle about who almost got hit. He would threaten to call our parents, too, but we didn't believe him.

He once said to me, "You're the commie's girl," but I pretended not to hear him. Grandma Štefa often shouted at Grandpa to leave us alone. She warned us to go play in front of our own houses and not to talk when we passed by their house, because Grandpa was irritated by the noise.

The boys and I have been friends since the start of this year. Last summer, they threw frogs at me. Sometimes, when they

threw them at me, I would close my eyes and be afraid they would kill me because they kept saying we were traitors.

At the end of the school year, we were given small pieces of paper to write down people we admired.

I wrote down Jesus and Tito. The teacher told me he would be calling my mum and dad because I was mucking about. Renato wrote Vile Grandpa, but the teacher did not admonish him. Sanja says he probably wanted to write Violeta, but changed his mind and wrote Vile Grandpa because it was all he could come up with. Why else would he write that. "Well, to muck about," I told her under my breath. I wanted to tell the teacher I admired people who did good deeds and felt stupid writing mum and dad. So I just said sorry. Later we laughed about "Vile Grandpa". I didn't tell them about Jesus and Tito.

Of all the girls in the village, I'm the only one who doesn't scream at the sight of frogs, which is why the boys let me be friends with them. But when they take my blood at the hospital, I always faint. Since I've been friends with the boys, I'm no longer afraid when they throw grasshoppers and frogs.

When school let out, the boys ran off to the pond, but I had to go to Sanja's end-of-year dance. We wave our arms and legs and sing English songs. I don't really understand why we're singing. But then again, I don't understand why we catch grasshoppers and frogs, either. I flashed back to Jože and the axe and the frog's hind leg he chopped off last summer. I was convinced that was how people killers started out.

But then why did that man put a machete to dad's throat?

I keep making mistakes when we dance. They say it's because I have no sense of rhythm. Grandma Štefa often comes over to have coffee with Sanja's grandmother. She says I'm not made for dancing because I spend too much time with the boys and because I keep playing football. I should be forbidden from playing football because I'll have ugly legs. "Girls should have nice legs," Grandma Štefa says.

I think my legs are normal. They stand up straight, they have knees, and a bruise here and there. The bruises are from the

woods and football, sometimes from the hard little berries we use in our slingshots. We play with the slingshots by the last lamp post, because there are no houses there and our pond and the trees are close by.

Our gypsies must have come around again and torn down our tree house. They are afraid of the frogs and bugs, so we throw them to chase them away. We say our gypsies when we mean the gypsies from our school. The gypsies in our school are the nice kind, they have the best windbreakers, Nike shoes and the most pocket money, their parents own companies and say they are Muslims from Bosnia and not gypsies. No one calls them traitors or commies, only sometimes someone mutters gypsies, but even that bothers them. No one knows why they came to our village. Lazar and Sanja came because they were from some place where there was war and they lost their house, so now they're refugees. They might be moving on soon, according to Sanja. Refugees fill up the empty houses in our village. I wonder if they pay rent or if people have let them live there for free.

Sanja's dad rang our doorbell one evening. He smelled of beer and mumbled unintelligibly. Mum made me go to my room. He came back the next day with a cannon shell by way of apology. My brother kept his girlfriend's photo and some letters in that shell.

No one wanted to be friends with Sanja at first. No one wanted to be friends with me either, but then the boys from the street accepted me. There are more and more strange kids at our school. Some only came for a bit and have already left for Austria or Germany. The house across the street is empty again. The upstairs window is broken. Maybe the next refugees will fix it.

We made guns from slats and hooks and rubber bands. We use beer bottle caps for ammo. Dad says that's dangerous, so he gave me a slingshot to use with yellow plastic Kinder eggs. All the boys have Cro Army t-shirts. They got them because

they completed an album of stickers we used to exchange in front of the school.

Jože called me a heathen. They sometimes tell me I will go to hell because I wasn't baptised. They don't say that to our gypsies because they're Muslim. I pretend I don't care when they say things like that. At night in bed, I practice being a ninja, I grit my teeth and look fierce.

Now I feel ashamed for crying when the man put the blade to dad's throat and said we should all be slaughtered because we were against Croatia. But that was five years ago and I was little then. The policeman said it was all because of politics. Mum says we have to keep quiet about that and that we're not against Croatia, though we don't go to church. We all survived, but we double-bolt the door now. Every night I dream the Man will come back to kills us. If I cry in my sleep, I smack my face to make myself stronger. I don't cry.

There are no more people like that. Mum says that Grandpa was in the war too and that's why he doesn't like noise. Renato says he's too old to have been in the war. Jeeps don't drive down our street anymore and we don't shout H V and show the victory sign with our fingers. Now that school's out, we play border patrol in front of Grandpa's house.

No one calls our gypsies gypsies anymore. We call them by their names. They'll stay here forever.

Now I'm the only heathen. They say I won't go to heaven because I don't go to church. But we still all play together this summer. Playing tag around Grandpa's house is the most fun.

Sanja told me that Renato said he liked me. Probably because of the football and because I gave him my Cro Army t-shirt last year. Sanja says it's not that and that he's in love with me.

This autumn we're starting 5th grade and some people already have girlfriends or boyfriends. Mum says it's a new age for kids. We're bigger now. We won't be throwing frogs and grasshoppers anymore.

Who knows if Grandpa will still run after us this school year or if it will be a new age for him too.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Each Day I Grow More Restless

Andrea Popov Miletić

As the author of *Yugoslavia, My Country* says quite aptly, if you weren't there during the war, keep your trap shut. Fine, I will. I was an endangered bear. Or I'll only write what I know, what I remember.

They came for Uncle in the early evening. He turned green. Mum blew up at Gran for opening the door at all. Gran kissed him three times (the first time I saw her do that) and cried (another first, as far as I know). On his way out of the house, he'd always say, "I'm off to live it up." I thought, this time it's different. When they transferred him from Orolik to Šid, I wrote him a letter.

Drawing: Uncle and his mate on a tank, hearts, flowers, flags and a big sign saying Šidland.

**

Everything was already over and everything was normal. We'd cross over, everything was the same. A Vojvodina village on the other side of the mirror. Houses with long porches, the tiles, facades and large yards, behind them the silos and poultry. You have to pass through all the rooms to get to the bathroom, the smell of mothballs and large pillows in the bedrooms. The cold quilt weighing down on you like a corpse. Everything was normal, but something was hiding behind the smiles. I have a clear memory of Gran with the left lens of her

glasses fogged up. A man missing an arm drinking beer in front of the corner shop. The girl who collected scented wrapping papers and sang Dragana Mirković songs in leggings. As we skipped rope, she said, "Rape is when they tie you down and give you wine and brandy to drink." Mum listening to the song *Man with the Moon in His Eye* and furtively crying. Everything was normal, the houses displayed flowers and embroidered cushions. Empty like eyes behind smudged glasses. Displaying smiles for others to see, like flower pots. They were empty like the riddled houses. They've let the endangered bear out of the cage. Each day I grow more restless.

**

As Mother pinned the flower to his collar, she looked in his eyes as if he were the prodigal son returned and forgave him his youthful folly.

Within an instant, he became aware of the horror, or so his *body language* trainer told him, but he dropped his gaze, his mouth contracted tight so it wouldn't shake.

Her pain was abstract, beyond our grasp. His shame materialised and began to stink, as if he had become aware of where he had ended up. In the same place.

At one point, she became a sublime being, while people averted their eyes from him.

I turned off the TV. I'm sorry we didn't manage to send you anyone better.

She looked him straight in the eye, as only a Mother can.

Each day I grow more restless.

**

From my great-grandfather, I inherited a belief in fairies and a tendency to lose track of time. He told stories of the wind that starts blowing in the field, flattening the grass, and how he himself was caught up in a circle dance with barefoot girls with long hair, because he dawdled too long in their enchanted spot. He woke up beneath a tree and never again would be

caught out by night near the Fairy Spring. They took them out of Jasenovac one day in a column and loaded them into the train. After all, he thought, they're not taking us anywhere good. Relying on his good sense of timing, he jumped from the train somewhere in Srem and hid in his cousin's attic, sleeping in the hay. A lovely dream, the kind that great-grandpa's choking nightmares would not allow even into his subconscious, went like this: the Croats of Sremski Karlovci signed a petition that saved their fellow townsfolk from the Jasenovac death camp and they were all freed and sent home. That was a waking reality. When the train arrived in Sremski Karlovci, great-grandma cried because all the neighbours had returned, but he was nowhere to be seen. He only arrived a few weeks later, so malnourished the children feared peeking into the room where he lay. Great-grandma sold the house to tend to him, they became tenants, she cooked him soups and various delicacies, the children got leftovers.

Each day I grow more restless.

**

Ivana Brlić Mažuranić (this was a hundred years ago) told me her stories in the voice of my mother in that small flat (that was a hundred lives ago), which was a single room divided by a chest of drawers. I was an endangered bear back then. I loved that language, I laid claim to it as my own. I miss that language like a lost part of myself, the language of cartoons, quizzes, picture books. Back then, I lived in the world of "Vjeverica" children's books, the room lit up by "Svjetlost" Sarajevo. We were only happy at the seaside. We lost the sea, too. I remember mum's face as she waded into the cold water. I still remember the happiness on her face, why, you're swimming.

**

YouTube comments under a Croatian language Peppa Pig cartoon

Even though it's in Croatian, I love Peppa

Kill the Croats, Serbs have no brothers
I'm 9 years old and I love Peppa

**

I watch a boy play and I think, that's life, as he ruthlessly topples everything he had painstakingly built. Through the car window, a row of churches, pins in the grass. From above, the church is a needle in a haystack. For us down here, the church is the needle. The church is a needle in the eye. Laser Defends Sarajevo from Myopia, an eye clinic advertises. You could have been the woman gazing nostalgically after a bus and then going back to chopping wood, and she could have been you going away. Children sleep with a red whistle under their pillow. The bull is colour-blind, the red is there for us.

**

Juhuhu Children's Programme
Croatian Radio Television
Prisavlje 3
10000 Zagreb, Republic of Croatia

Dear Juhuhu,

My name is Danica and I'm six years old. My mum helped me write this letter. I watch your show every morning before pre-school. And on Saturdays and Sundays, too. I have to tell you that the show is great and the cartoons are the best. Pre-school TV is also great, especially Krtac and the girl with the orange hair and the stories about the girl called Danica just like me. I live in Novi Sad and we don't have such nice shows on TV, but I watch your TV and I understand everything. I like how you say biscuits instead of cookies and trousers instead of pants and I love the Thomas the Tank Engine song and when you say carousel for merry-go-round. I've been to Croatia at the seaside twice and the lady who rented us the room let us play in the garden where she had an orange tree and a kiwi tree. Every day

we went to a shop that's just like our *Idea* shop here, but it's called *Konzum* there.

Drawing: Danica and her brother at the Petrovaradinska Fortress. LOVE YOU (L turned the wrong way around), a small fairy in the corner.

**

I have a daughter Danica and a son Zoran, I believe in fairies and long for the seaside. My ex-husband has gone to Slovakia for work. He says he's the oldest one there. The rest are all children from good homes. They time him on the conveyor belt. I didn't lose anyone in the war. I've been spared the shrapnel, mass graves, rape, madness, humanitarian aid and being called a half-caste/chetnik/ustasha/balija. My mother died right after the war as one of the silent, invisible victims of everything that happened. My uncle came back from the front and never spoke a word about it. *We* no longer means the same thing for us, him and me.

Today, battlegrounds are like the desks of famous writers in museums, we cannot imagine that anyone fought there, or wrote. Like the tip of your tongue persistently seeking out the gap where a tooth once was, thoughts keep coming back to the space left barren by death. The sea is no longer the same, or blue enough, run it through a filter, amp up the colours. Do you know what it is to be a man until you've killed someone bad, saved someone good? We don't have a microscope powerful enough to tell us what we become after death, I explained to the child. But we can see them sowing death with the naked eye and do nothing, I thought to myself. There are days when we're living in concentration camp Earth. And then there are days when "reflections of normality" push through and life goes on with summer hits and bare feet in prams passing by, friends comforting each other on the benches along the quay and we have clouds on sticks in our hands. Wise trees silently drop their seeds and we carry them along in the cuffs of our trousers to travel with us and be reborn. It's morning and

children pee vigorously, creating the illusion of a stream and the flow of nature. A pigeon repeats in its guttural voice all the boredom of the world. In a city not at the seaside, you can rub sunscreen into your skin, smell your own shoulder and kiss it like a newborn.

With a royal blue curtain on my head, Jergović and I lean into the bend, I hold him tight. As the bus swerves this way and that, I read about a carsick boy whose insides lurch forward. In front of the reception centre that used to be a slaughterhouse, on the way from the trains to the Šid bus station, migrant children fly kites. The people of Šid complain about migrants stealing in the shops and scaring the children. The dump is on fire, it's the rubbish of those who get to live in their own homes that's burning. Šidland.

"We know what foreigners are like (...) What will they do with all that free time without being controlled? Our six-year-olds even come home from pre-school on their own, their mothers will be worried about them," says the woman who started the petition against Serb labourers in Slovakia.

Last night, I dreamt we were walking by the sea at night and people were jumping out from the ruins and chasing us with brooms. Fears in the dark, not of animals, but of people, of their ill will. People have more ill will than animals, whose only bad intention may be to eat you. Here, doctor, I'm wrapping it up, this is the end. Dark are all those streets where we'll get robbed, raped, killed. Too long? You told me to write down everything that occupies my mind. You're just projecting, you see, the cause of your dissatisfaction, says the therapist in my dream, because a real one would be too expensive, and everyone knows it's best to go to a private practice.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Room of Reconciliation

Edis Galushi

"The Roma see rulers up close,
and that's why they never envy them."
Anon

Today, like any other, he puts on the shoes that he never cleans, even though he shines shoes for a living. His shoe box hides all the tales that have healed wounds, but have left eternal traces. Dellthani is deeply familiar with every inch of the town, and the whole town knows him too. He has earned this fame thanks to his linguistic diversity, yet he curses his talent every day because it is not valued, and so he is treated neither as intelligent nor wise. But then, wisdom has never been adequately defined. Some say that wisdom is being brave and saying the right thing at the wrong time. Some treat it as divine and thus dare not define it. A little wise and a little stupid, sometimes brave, sometimes cowardly, Dellthani has survived despite the hardship and mistreatment he has experienced under different rulers, and he remains the man he is today, both an instrument and a refuge for those rulers, who always patronise him. Today, as he approaches his wooden chest, he curses the stories that fill it, because although all that can be seen on top of it is a display of some brushes and shoe polish, for Dellthani, this wooden chest is both his sacrifice and his life. This chest is his wisdom, as only he knows how to define it.

He has never enjoyed reading. He has books scattered all over and he looks at them with a little pleasure and a little loathing. With pleasure because hidden inside they contain

that unreachable and enviable "wisdom". But in these books, Dellthani's name is "wisely" distorted and he is portrayed as an untrustworthy and worthless man. And so he often looks at these books with hatred because he has never been asked about the content of these books, each of which has as its main protagonists the victimized Roma. Such books create history, and in them, Dellthani's name is twisted and explained according to the wisdom of others. These books mention various heroes whom Dellthani never envied because he knew exactly who those people truly were. He had either shined their shoes, played music for them, or forged their armour. Emperors and other powerful men all passed through his hands yet they never mention him in their stories. Even if they do, it is as a statistic, never by name and surname. So that is why Dellthani does not enjoy reading much, even though he has books scattered around his room.

The armchair in which he sits is very old.

Nights of escape, surprise, accusations and betrayal. It is in that armchair that he sits every night and remembers the nights when he returned home from noisy places. The "tick-tock" of the clock hanging on the wall calms him, though for many it is an irritation. The sound of the rhythm takes him into deep meditation, where memories and fear meet.

Dellthani played music wherever he was invited. That is, wherever the "wise people" wanted to spend an unforgettable evening. He played music in their homes, noticing how they forgot who they were and how they called each other by strange names. He often played music indoors, in places where people wore their coats and did not know each other. Those were the places, full of smoke and drinks that Dellthani had never heard of before, where he often slept. Every song that he composed on the spot contained yearning and despair. Through chords, he sang of a merciless life. Sometimes he remembered the children. He imagined them in an open space, bursting with joy and smiles. That angelic gaze…

The nights were long in the places where he played the

guitar, or the violin, or the accordion, or whatever instrument the "wise people" requested. He did not dare admit when he did not know how to play an instrument because to them, he was a man with "music in his veins", and according to them, he existed only to entertain others, nothing more. Depending on the location, he had to speak and sing in different languages. He had to know all the songs because he had "music in his veins".

Looking at his old violin, now without strings, he remembers the nights when he was abused with different names, the nights when he dared not say, "I'm tired," and still he remained stupid.

The room which contains the armchair where he sits and mulls over the past is full of various tools. Some old and some new. On the left hand side of the room there are some iron tools which he keeps in memory of his father. As a child, he had to master the craft of the blacksmith because, as his father used to say, "That's how we make a living." He remembers the days when he worked with his father all night until dawn because no one knew when "the others" might come to take the tools that his father had produced with so much love and craftsmanship. His father's skill was never deemed worthy of respect.

The concentration camps fill with people by the day. People's names are forgotten, while Dellthani listens to the silence. He is losing faith in himself because he has never been valued as a person. Overwhelmed by loneliness, he wipes the dust from the window which is seldom decorated with curtains. The room where he spends his nights full of memories is dimly lit. He never learnt how to speak convincingly, he trips over his words whenever he is asked about the guilt of others. Confused between breath and speech, he lost faith even in his sight and hearing because he has always had to live as if he neither saw nor heard anything, and he has never managed to restore his lost faith.

Dellthani grew up as if he were motherless, even though she did exist. He keeps her clothes hanging on the wall. His mother had to wake up every morning (very early) to prepare

what little they had to eat and, wrapped up in those clothes, she went here, there and everywhere to clean other people's houses. He still remembers how she used to say:

"Nakhava pi buti. Tu bistar te phane o vudar!" ("I'm going to work. Don't forget to lock the door!")

His mother's voice accompanies him at every step, even though for others she remains just a forgotten number, somewhere in an archive. She is probably still unregistered. As a child, he did not understand his mother's stories. He often saw her weeping and did not understand why. Mostly she wept on days when she was thrown out of the houses that she was cleaning. Often she was blamed for something she had not done. His mother was called by different names, but never by her real name, Lulugjiana.

Dellthani never had a family because he was afraid of repeating history. He was frightened that they too would have to line up in front of a wall, where the men, women, children and elderly would be separated from one another. Sometimes, with the help of the step-ladder that he had used before for "painting and decorating", he takes down from the wall a photograph that he has lovingly preserved. There are no people in the picture, only tools and some things of importance to Dellthani. It is possible to see some iron tools, and musical instruments, and on the right, his mother's clothes, tattered books, the shoe box, some colourful handmade ropes near it, and the old step-ladder that he used when he worked as a painter. This is a photograph of Dellthani's room, showing this space where he has tenderly kept every good thing that he and all his relatives gave to society. But such a photograph never exists or is exhibited. It is always behind a black curtain, hidden from view, and it does not see the light of day.

This morning he went out a bit later to his usual spot as there was not much work on Sundays. He used Sunday mornings to clean the shoe box and he never expected much profit from the day.

"I find how you live intriguing," a man said to Dellthani,

placing his feet on the wooden chest, with a light, but ironic smile.

"Oh, how do you think we live?" Dellthani responded, starting to polish his shoes.

"In the present, today-for-today, you don't think much about tomorrow," the man replied.

"When you can't do anything about tomorrow, then you try to just live for the day ahead. We are not allowed by others to be far-sighted because they need something else from us. For the strong to lead and demonstrate their power to the fearful, the weak must fall behind; and meanwhile the wise always stick close to the strong," Dellthani replied, taking the black shoe polish, and continuing to shine the shoes.

"Everyone's fate is in his own hands. The work you do today shapes what will happen to you tomorrow," the man replied.

Dellthani paused and looked him in the eye saying, "My hands are always covered in black polish. I didn't necessarily want it like this, but others needed it so. Fate is written in your hand, and for that reason I often keep my hand closed tight, because I want to hide my fate from others so that they do not experience the same fate as my family. My fate and their names are written together in my hand."

Upon hearing these words, the man left, and Dellthani took the wooden shoe box and set off home.

Once again, he did not clean his shoes, even though he shined shoes for a living. The shoes lie abandoned at the entrance of the house, where Dellthani last took them off. His wooden shoe box has gained another bitter story. Dellthani is no longer mentioned by anyone, but every inch of the town knows him, just as he knew his town well. Dellthani's story is forgotten and neglected by every ruler of the times, just like the photograph of his room that remains hanging on the wall, and which no one ever interpreted as Dellthani did himself.

Translation: Alexandra Channer

Pioneer

Nada Jelinčić

Mother takes the bottle of milk from the threshold, pours it into a pot and puts it on the stove to cook. She turns to me as I'm washing my face over the stone basin.

"Hurry up, son, they'll be out of bread soon. And get two hundred grams of marmalade from Kaža," she says, dropping my short trousers and shirt onto the table. I dress, take the money and my bag and rush out into the yard.

I love the smell of fresh bread spreading through the street early in the morning. The bakery is full of people already. Toma passes the steaming loaves from the crate into outstretched hands. I burrow into the crowd, slowly advancing towards the counter. I run up against Gliša's Ana and she greets me with a bashful smile. The morning's off to a good start, I take another heel of bread with my loaves to make up the two kilos. I get out before Ana and linger in front of the entrance, waiting for her. I get self-conscious, so I leave.

The street is already crowded. It's market day before the holiday. The peasants have come into town early this morning with their cattle, wheat, vegetables, wool, whatever they can trade. A horse-drawn cart has blocked the street. The horse lifts its tail and unloads a smelly heap onto the concrete. The moustachioed man in the driver's seat hurries the horse forward, yelling at the top of his lungs. A whip whistles through the air making it pick up its pace. In front of it, shuffling feet rush to the side.

A pleasant coolness awaits me at the NON-STOP. Sugar spilled on the black and white linoleum crackles underfoot. Straining to see over the counter, I ask for mixed fruit marmalade. Fat Olga lifts the five kilo can and scoops out the marmalade with a big wooden spoon. She plops the red jelly onto some wax paper laid across the scales. My eyes are glued to the jar with the sweets. I hone in on the caramels, practically feeling their taste on my tongue. I don't have enough dinars to treat myself. I go to Litra's pen.

I walk into Mr Vlado's yard. The old man rarely comes out, so I'm safest there. I sit beneath the stairs. From my netted bag, I produce the heel of the loaf and bite into it greedily. I unwrap the marmalade and dip the bread in, careful not to leave a trace. I have my private feast whenever the loaf is lighter than a kilo.

I walk along the edge of the street over the stone slabs placed on top of the gutters. In front of Gliša's door the slab beneath my feet wobbles. I quickly leap to the side, remembering how his Mara lifted it one evening. She disappeared into the house for a while, returning with a chamber pot. She emptied it out into the gutter and put the stone back in place. Everyone knew Gliša didn't have a toilet, but not how they made do. They had moved here from Bosnia a few years back. They were not looking to make friends with the neighbours, they lived quietly. The older folks said Gliša sang some Ustasha songs after the war and spent some time in jail. A burly man with a deep hoarse voice that scared us when he shouted. His daughter Ana spies on us when we play in the yard, but does not approach. I've taken a fancy to her as of recently, since she stopped wearing her hair in pigtails and let it loose over her shoulders. I'm embarrassed to confide in my friends because they make fun of Gliša. Just yesterday, we mocked him, hiding in the canal behind the hedge:

MARKO GLIŠA HIT THE SPOT
PISSES IN A CHAMBER POT

We threw pebbles at the window looking out onto the yard. When the glass cracked, we scampered like mice.

Coming home, I smell *Divka* chicory coffee that mother brews with milk. My younger brothers are around the table, waiting for breakfast. Father takes out a rolling paper from his cigarette case and a bit of tobacco between his fingers. He rolls it up carefully and licks the edge of the paper to make it stick. He tears off the excess tobacco and sticks one end into his wooden cigarette holder. The smell of petrol as he flicks the lighter.

"I'm out of papers. You'll buy me a pack at Milo's. And a lighter cartridge," he says, blowing a ring of smoke at the ceiling.

"Gliša told me last night you were throwing stones at his window again and broke it. Are you insane? Shame on you! Don't you dare do anything like that again, or there'll be hell to pay. Why don't you play with his Ana? He says the girl keeps crying because of it," father said as his cigarette holder angrily clinked against the ashtray.

"It wasn't me, dad, I didn't throw the stones. I told them they would break the glass. And Ana has never asked to play with us. She just spies on us," I hang my head, ashamed. All the same, my heart skips a beat at the thought of Ana.

I run off to Milo's shop at the edge of the town square. Turko stops me on the way back in front of his pastry shop.

"Srećko, take your mother some of this cake colouring. She asked me for some." He hands me a pill bottle half filled with red liquid. I thank him and as I turn around, I collide with someone's belly. I lift my head and spot Gliša's eyes above his bushy moustache. He catches me by the shoulder.

"Hold on, kid. You broke my window yesterday. I told your father. Now, promise me you won't do anything like that again." I'm shaking with fear even without his deep-barrelled voice. I'd promise him anything right now.

"Give the kid one of those little canes." He turns to the display where Turko keeps the pastries and red-and-white

candy canes. As soon as my fingers grip the sticky cane, I set off at a run, followed by Gliša's laughter.

Reaching the gate, as usual I carefully extract two rolling papers from the pack. Father has never suspected my pilfering. Now I just need to get a bit of tobacco from the top of the wardrobe and I'm off to the pigeon coop. Mr Pavle's attic has been overrun by the town's pigeons. There's just one window, so it's pretty dark in there. The piled-up furniture is covered with a thick layer of dust and bird droppings. It's always an adventure to make it from the door to the dried-up skeleton of a bed where we sit and smoke. No one lives in the flat below, so we aren't afraid of being found out. We share the attic with the birds and we've already become accustomed to one another.

**

Today is the First of May. After lunch, mother covers the old cast iron table in the garden beneath the cherry tree with a tarpaulin. Neighbours bring cakes and wine, sit around the table and relax. Suddenly, Gliša appears at the garden gate. The conversation dies down. His ears stick out from just beneath a Pioneer's cap and he has tied the red bandana in a firm knot around his neck. This year, Ana and I became pioneers. He's carrying a jug of wine in his left hand and a wooden mug in his right. Us children freeze up in expectation of being blamed for the broken window. Trailing behind Gliša with uncertain steps are Mara and Ana.

"Should we drink to our health?" His hoarse voice cuts through the silence. Father jumps up from his chair, takes it by the back and turns it towards Gliša.

"Of course. Come, sit," he says and Gliša's smile reveals two rows of large teeth.

There's no mention of the window, so we sigh with relief. He talks about his unfortunate excursion into drunken company whose Ustasha song got out of hand. He did a short stint in jail, which is why he left Bosnia. He's not an Ustasha, never was. He's just looking for a peaceful life for his family. Ana keeps

holding on to the back of her father's chair, turning her head to peer after us kids.

"Go on, my pet, go play with the children. See, they're waiting for you," he says and lightly pats her on the bottom.

I welcome her with a smile, though the others are still looking at her suspiciously. The distrust dissipates as we play. I'm happy she's among us.

The next day, I ask mother for two dinars. That's how much a candy cane costs. I buy it and wrap it in some paper. I wait for Ana, hiding behind the wall of the yard. As soon as she comes out of the house, I walk up to her and hand her the wrapped-up candy cane from my pocket without saying anything. My words would have been drowned out by my thumping heart, anyway. She unwraps it and looks at me askance. She breaks the candy cane in half and hands me one piece.

"Will you come smoke with us today?" I ask, barely containing my joy when she nods her head.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Call Me, Chase Away the Blues

Gabrijel Delić

"But it was here."

"Yeah, right there."

"There... right there." Josip Rupčić was looking at the vegetable garden where the house he was born in once stood. "What happened?"

"Oh, you know. A grenade hit it and that was it," Milan Radovčić explained. "Not a year after you left. They were shelling Osijek and someone must've misread the coordinates and fuck it. It was the only grenade that month, too. But fuck it."

"And it had to hit my house? Tsk," Josip Rupčić clicked his tongue. "What will I do now?"

"No worries, my friend, you'll stay with me till you work something out. It's not an easy situation."

"No. Not at all," Josip looked at the tomatoes, cucumbers and squash growing where he used to live. "I can't stay with you. I'll get in the way. There's five of you, it's crowded as it is."

"Six. I've got a son now, he's five," Milan boasted.

"Well, congratulations!" Josip squeezed his neighbour's hand.

"And don't be ridiculous. You'll stay with us until you get back up on your feet," Milan smiled warmly at his neighbour.

"Thank you, friend. But tell me, are the tomatoes any good?"

"Oh, you can bet on that. You'll try them. Ivanka's making

supper. There's cucumbers, too, this big," Milan spread his hands.

"And the squash?"

"Those aren't squash."

"What are they then?"

"Aubergines."

"Aubergines?"

"Aubergines."

"Man, they look just like squash."

"Oh, never mind that now. Let's go down to the Axe and Shovel for a brandy."

"Where's that?"

"It's the Hammer and Sickle, but it wouldn't do to call it that anymore. Rajko renamed it back in '91 already, soon as the shooting started."

"Right, it wouldn't do." They got into Milan's Golf 3. The motor grumbled and they slowly drove off, avoiding the potholes in the asphalt. Milan pushed in a tape of folk music. Šemsa Suljaković and South Wind, Josip noticed. They passed a horse-drawn wagon dragging its feet along the edge of the road.

"People still listen to this music?" Josip asked.

"My friend, people will be listening to this music when we're all living up on Mars. You should see what goes down at the Axe and Shovel when they put on *Call me, Chase the Blues Away*. Glasses fly, ashtrays, bottles. People yell, cry, it's chaos."

"And they don't mind the music?"

"No, why would they?"

"I'm asking because there was this one guy up in Germany with me, Stipe from Imotski, he was, you know, a proper Croat. He kept up with the news of the war and all that. He never let anyone play Serb songs. So, I thought..."

"They're all like that here. Big Croats and all, but when they've had a bit to drink, there's only one kind of music that will do." They spent the rest of the trip in silence. Milan had aged, Josip noticed. His hair had thinned, his face withered, his

forehead creased, and his once black beard was now salt and pepper coloured. Germany had changed him too. It had been ten years. And he hadn't spent them lolling about. He'd left his backbone on a German construction site. It was difficult getting out of bed in the mornings, his arms had gone rigid, his sight had deteriorated. They passed by houses riddled with bullet holes, by the church tower bedecked with scaffolding and orange netting. They went by the house where old lady Stana lived with her daughter-in-law, the two of them sitting out on the porch shelling peas, their heads covered with black kerchiefs. In front of the village shop, some men Josip didn't know sat on upturned crates, nuzzling bottles of beer. A Croatian flag proudly flew in front of the municipal building.

They parked in front of the Axe and Shovel. The inn hadn't changed in those ten years. Except for the new sign with the name. The wooden windows varnished a hundred times were still there, as well as the door bleached by the onslaughts of a thousand rains. The green awning was still there, but it was now held together with sticky tape. As Josip and Milan went inside, they were met with the smell of cigarette smoke and times past. The patrons turned their heads to glance at the newcomers and somewhat reluctantly got up to shake Josip's hand. They murmured words of welcome and their condolences.

"Welcome back!"

"Man, Jopa, you haven't aged a day."

"Germany's not all it's trumped up to be, eh?"

"My condolences, man, she was a good woman."

"Rajko, give Josip a drink."

Milan and Josip sat at a table away from their old friends. Milan lit a cigarette and offered one to Josip who declined. Rajko brought them each a brandy.

"Good to see you, Jozo. Sorry about Marija. Pity. She was young."

"Thank you, Rajko," Josip gruffly accepted condolences for the umpteenth time.

"I hear the company went under. Didn't know German companies could do that."

"Well, they can," Josip explained.

"Who would've thought," Rajko said.

"Rajko, give us two beers," one of the patrons called over. And Rajko left.

"What's up with Pero?" Josip asked.

"You haven't heard?"

"No. What?"

"Well, Mr Pero amassed a pretty fortune during the war."

"Pero? You must be joking."

"I'm serious."

"How on earth?"

"Listen to this. There he was walking along one day, no reason, just because it was a nice day, and he comes upon an abandoned artillery battery."

"What did he do, sell the cannons?"

"Nah. The shells."

"You don't say."

"Yup. Couldn't see the ground from how many there were. And fifteen kilos of brass in each, so you do the math. So, he sells off those shells and the idiot buys a meadow somewhere in bumblefuck. Said he took a fancy to it. Buys it for pennies, it was the war. He gets the papers sorted and he buys the land and, listen to this, that lucky bastard, after the war, they find oil on his land. So, what now? There was talk around the village that some Americans had gotten word of Pero and the oil. So, they come over, hello, hello, we'd like to buy the land, how much? And Pero's thinking what to say. He can't name a price too low and fuck up now. So, he says to himself, I'm just gonna blurt out a number and then we'll haggle. So, Pero says, five million. The Americans look at each other and say, fine. Now, listen to this. The Americans write up the contract and bring it to Pero to sign, and Pero's like reading it over, and listen to this, now, he reads the number. Five million USD. He said if that didn't give him a heart attack, nothing would. He was

thinking five million kunas, but they gave him dollars. When he got the money, the celebrations went on for three days. Then he went travelling a bit, met a Swedish girl, nice, he sent us pictures, married her and now he's just fucking around. Sent us a postcard from Thailand not two weeks ago."

"You don't say. A Swedish girl," Josip said as they downed the brandies. He looked around a bit at the people sitting in the inn and they were all old acquaintances. They had changed too. Their eyes had become dull, their faces expressionless, their words bitter. They did not laugh, they just uttered banalities, just so they didn't rot away in silence. They would only perk up after a dozen beers and a couple of brandies, when the music was turned up. Whether it was because of the war, the poverty, the general apathy or some other factor, Josip could not tell.

"Why do they sit like that?" Josip asked. Milan looked around the room confused.

"Like what?"

"Well, look, Mile and old Đorđević over there, Ante, Marko and Stjepan at the other end, and Ibro at the bar. They used to be a bunch of guys that would drink together, eat together. Has it really come to this?"

"Oh, fuck it, Jozo, what can you do? It's not easy to just forget everything and be done with it. It's not easy to get over everything. Because, look, Mile killed Ante's kid, and Stjepan killed old Đorđević's brother. It's a good thing they can sit in the same inn without killing each other. If there was another inn nearby, none of them would set foot in this one if they saw the other guy inside."

"Oh, man, Milan..." Josip shook his head. They had a few more brandies, the estranged men even more than that. It got dark and started raining. The rain beat down on the tin roof of the inn. The volume of the music went up with every beer and brandy. Soon, the lads were well drunk and Josip thought they might even get into a fight. But when *This is Our Story* by Angel Dimov came on, Ibro's voice cracked up as he put his arm around the sobbing Ante. Mile joined in, wiping tears off

his face. The beer kept on flowing, more brandies were drunk, and Josip and Milan kept sitting at the same table, watching the situation unfold. Hits by Mitar Mirić, Hanka Paldum, Nada Obrić, Halid Muslimović and Halid Bešlić were put on. Elated, for the moment, the reunited men embraced each other, kissed one another on the cheek, saying, "My brother, what has come between us?" and such like. Glasses were smashed, the men tumbled onto the floor with peals of laughter, Rajko kept turning up the music and writing down what each guest had on his tab. It was hard to keep up with all the orders, but Rajko wanted to make sure he wrote everything down to the last brandy. Ibro and Mile got drunk enough to fall asleep in each other's arms. Still holding bottles of beer in their hands.

"That's how they are, my Jozo, almost every night. They won't greet each other in the street, then they come to the inn, get sloshed and end up singing together and celebrating God knows what. The next morning, it's the same story all over again, won't greet each other in the street. You can't tell up from down or friend from foe anymore. And that's how it's gonna be for a while yet. You know what people here are like. Nothing has changed since you left, my friend, except that flag in front of the municipal building."

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

O!

Anela Ilijaš

Drinking her coffee and walking briskly at the same time, Fahima reached the newsstand, the only newsstand in this big city that still carried newspapers in her mother tongue. Having bought the paper, she walked to the nearest cafe and went in. Her gaze meeting the waiter's, she smiled a slightly silly smile, and the waiter asked coolly, "The usual?" - to which she nodded readily. She picked a table by the window, sat down and opened the newspaper. The waiter brought a large cup of black coffee. She made a gesture to thank him. She took a big sip of coffee, and, her elbows resting on the table, immersed herself in the newspaper. However, while staring at the newspaper, she could feel her eyelids closing, and however hard she tried to force herself to read even a single article, she couldn't focus. She would most certainly have fallen asleep staring at the meaningless groupings of letters in the newspaper, if she hadn't suddenly heard a gentle voice, right above her head, reciting the lines:

"Oppressively overcast, onset obscured,
Off of this oceanfront, onwards!"

Fahima raised her head. A young woman was sitting opposite her. She had smooth, shoulder length ginger hair, a pretty, still quite childlike face, and - Fahima pinched herself to reassure herself she wasn't asleep - eyes of different colours: one eye was blue, and the other green. Fahima took another sip of her coffee.

"Forgive me for taking a seat at your table without asking you. I just noticed you were reading a newspaper, a newspaper in my... your... our lang... You are from former Yugoslavia, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Fahima and drank some more coffee.

"I am Asja. A-sja. I am a poet," the ginger haired girl with one blue and one green eye introduced herself cheerfully.

"Fahima. You said you wrote poems?" responded Fahima and, opening her purse, produced a packet of pills. The box read: "Caffeine: dosage should not exceed two pills a day."

"Poems, yes. My mum always said people only waged wars because they didn't read enough poetry."

Fahima took two pills with her coffee.

"What city are you from, Fahima?"

"From Sarajevo," said Fahima and took two more pills, washing them down with her coffee.

"From Sarajevo? I've never been to Sarajevo. And me, I'm half Croat, half Serb. And a poet to boot. A-sja."

Fahima motioned to the waiter, and the waiter brought Fahima another cup of black coffee.

"Half Croat, half Serb. Is the green eye Serbian or Croatian?"

Asja just giggled and whispered another couple of lines:

"Orphaned, others overstay,

Owning oaths of origins."

Fahima drank some more coffee and took another couple of pills. She looked at Asja and said:

"I read about an old man from Vietnam who hasn't slept for forty years now! I wish I knew his secret!"

Asja looked at her with her green and her blue eye.

"Why don't you ever want to sleep? Why do you take so much caffeine?"

"Please, recite some more of your poetry."

"Over-thirsty ocean

Obsesses over oases.

Why do you take so much caffeine?"

"When the war started, I had just finished nursing school. I

trained to be a nurse, you know? And I decided to volunteer. Be a nurse at a military hospital. We treated all soldiers, regardless of their nationality. I saw everything there, every day: burnt bodies, bodies with their limbs missing, decapitated bodies, the stench, the rot, the puss... and the bitter smell of blood... it was so frightening... so frightening, so frightening. I thought I wouldn't survive. I thought I'd die at some point, of fever. But I did survive. And then I moved to the other end of the world, as far away as possible, as far away as possible... But those horrors of war haunt me here as well. Every time I fall asleep, I dream of the burnt bodies, bodies with their limbs missing, decapitated bodies, the stench, the rot, the puss... and the bitter smell of blood."

Fahima drank some more coffee and added:

"I'm afraid to fall asleep. Do you see? If I fall asleep, I'll see all that again... I'm afraid to fall asleep!"

Asja listened, distractedly staring at the newspaper and tracing circles on it with her finger.

"I'm afraid to fall asleep," said Fahima again and took another pill.

Still absentmindedly tracing circles on the newspaper, Asja said softly, more to herself than to Fahima:

"When the war started, I was still little. I lived with my parents in Croatia, in a small Croat village. Everyone there was Croatian, only my mum was a Serb. When the war started, all the Croats in our village started hating Serbs. They went collectively mad. They came to our house and killed my mum. They tied me and my dad to some chairs, tightly, and made us watch them kill mum. They tortured her for a long time. A bit later, Serbian Chetniks killed my dad on the battlefield. One - all."

"So frightening... "

"Ocean ossified,

Obsequiously, ominously, odiously.... while they were killing my mum, she was screaming. She was screaming 'O-O-O-O!', but that's not how people normally scream. People scream

'A-A-A-A!', and yet she screamed 'O-O-O-O!' I'll never understand why she was screaming O... Picture that, her screaming O!"

Suddenly, Asja burst out laughing. And in her childlike, breezy laughter, Fahima could hear an undertone of a sick laughter. And it dawned on Fahima: the girl had lost her mind after the tragedy she had experienced. Terrified, she whispered:

"Poor child!"

Asja stopped laughing and turned very serious.

"I am not poor. I am A-sja. I am a poet. My mum always said people only waged wars because they didn't read enough poetry."

She stood up.

"I have to go."

Fahima made a vague gesture in order to keep her.

"Wait! It was so nice, not speaking English to you in this city! Let me have your phone number, so we can meet up again."

From her purse, she produced a pen and held it out to Asja, together with a paper napkin. Asja hastily wrote something on it and returned it to Fahima. Fahima took the napkin. It read:

"Oppressively overcast, onset obscured,
Off of this oceanfront, onwards!
Orphaned, others overstay,
Owning oaths of origins.
Over-thirsty ocean
Obsesses over oases.
Ocean ossified,
Obsequiously, ominously, odiously."

When she raised her head, Asja had already gone.

That night, after a long time, Fahima finally fell asleep, and dreamt of people of all nationalities: Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks, French, Japanese, Italians, Americans, people of every single nationality, sitting on the floor, in a circle, in the shape of the letter O, and right in the centre of the letter O, Asja, the ginger haired poet with eyes of different colours, reading her poetry.

Translation: Marija Stojanović

Therapy

Isidora Petrović

It watched me with its single glowing eye, the No. 9 tram. I don't remember anything after that, they said it was attempted suicide, they said the driver reacted in time and that the passengers were in shock. I don't believe them. As far as I can remember, that day I was just more confused than usual, I stopped and slipped on the wet tracks when I heard the tram's bell. I remember that a few moments before, the cabbie had kicked me out of the car because I'd changed my destination four times, I couldn't remember where I was supposed to go first. Maybe I should have simply made a decision, even if it was wrong, but I just couldn't manage it. Making decisions had already started giving me anxiety two hours earlier because the woman in the line at the bakery was impatient and I couldn't decide between a chocolate glazed doughnut and the jelly rolls that had just come fresh out of the oven. If only the jelly rolls hadn't turned up, but as it was, I just couldn't decide on the spot, and the woman standing in line behind me was in a hurry. I left with the doughnut, unhappy. Yes, I got the chocolate glazed doughnut, even though I had been told to change my eating habits three months ago. Actually, exactly twenty weeks ago I made that decision when the results showed increased blood pressure and triglycerides. Later, the nutritionist explained how many kilos are tolerated at my height and my 38 years of age. Anything more than that I'd have to lose. He gave me a nutrition regime and I am completely not sticking to

it. Because I have no motivation. While Sigmund was still alive, it was easier to satisfy the exercise requirement at least. Three walks a day, two short and one long. But now there's only his mat in the dining room and that isn't enough motivation. It's the opposite, in fact, walking without Sigmund makes no sense. Next month it'll be one year since my friend hasn't been around. It's like half of me is missing. The first half has been missing from before. More precisely, for three years, and maybe a few months more, I try not to count every hour. Today is three years and 48 days. I still sometimes catch a glimpse of blond hair tied at the nape, next to the kitchen window. It's gone in the blink of an eye, but for eight years I never thought that I would just stare at the window frame. That morning when she was leaving, she sat at the kitchen table by the window holding a cup of cold coffee and crying. She was crying like I was the one leaving her, like I was to blame for not being good enough. She had a good cry, picked up her bags and left. She left my life so completely that she never even called again. I'm still sticking parts of myself back together, still trying. I'm not good enough for myself either. Yes, I've had that feeling before. Graduating at 30 is late, but getting something done is still good, I guess. And I had already been working for five years by then. "You know, if you had a degree, we'd be having a different conversation about this position, but as things stand, this is our offer," actually meant that I should be grateful for the money I was getting, they didn't give a toss about talent. At the end, I gave them copies of my diploma. All my employers, all the teachers in all the schools I had gone to, I even gave one to the swimming coach who did not have much faith in a lad who came from some backwater where they'd never seen a pool. "What are you going to do with swimming, lad? Go to football, there's meadows everywhere to kick the ball around, because once you're back home... there's no pool there." He was very insistent, that man with so little space between his eyebrows and his hairline. "I won't be going back, you know, there's a war," my voice was too soft, but I wanted to ask, "And you are

a seal, I presume?" The pool water was blue, very blue, almost as blue as the sky that morning when we set off in a column, a bit lighter than the blue fingers of those who didn't make it. My hair was shaggy the day we set off, mother was particularly bothered by that. I mean, that wasn't the reason, she just made it into a thing all the way to Belgrade. We had to talk about something. Coming to a new world shaggy-haired, no, the first thing we're going to do is get you to a hairdresser. We won't take a shower, we won't eat, we won't let our bodies lie down to rest, first we're going to do something about that fringe of yours. All of that was perfectly fine, just to keep our minds off the fact that father couldn't come with us. And she wanted him by her side all the time; it ruined our lives. That possessive love of my mother couldn't let go of him, even ten years before that, couldn't let him go off to Germany and make a new life for us. He won't be off shagging Polish girls in Bavaria while she raises a child on her own. Later, the war tore him apart. I know, it's not her fault, she couldn't have known. It's just that I'm weak now. She didn't know, because I kept quiet, she didn't know that the kids at school didn't like me very much, because of father, said he came from the wrong side of the river. That wasn't so terrible. What was terrible was that my mature baritone was above average for my age, as were my diction and bearing, but that wasn't good enough for me to be part of the drama club. In other words, because I wasn't one of them. And I wanted to be one of them so badly, especially because my best friend had this noble desire for us to become blood brothers. Until his father explained to him that I could never be his brother, that I could not even be his friend anymore, that it would be best if from now on we were strangers. My best friend. A kindred spirit. I think that was the first time I thought I didn't want to be alive anymore. Among strangers. But I'm always among strangers. It was a suicide attempt, they say. I don't believe them. I've been dead since long ago.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Theirs

Korana Serdarević

When she finally came out, no one said anything, there was just one hand that stealthily reached for her fingers. She quickly pulled them away and stuffed them into her pocket. A few minutes before, she had washed all gentleness from her hands. She removed it from her palms and fingers, rubbing her skin with disinfectant, thoroughly and briskly. As if it were dirt or even disease, as if to make sure no one would ever be infected by it again. Her son was the last to feel it as she wrapped the bandages around his chest where the wound glowed crimson like the evening sun. Soon, it would envelop him whole.

When she was done, she kissed his cheeks and thought how it was good he was unconscious. This young man, this child, her life, sleeping as he had slept the first time she had carried him into that house in the middle of the street. The house is gone. Life is something else. In the streets out front, dozens of unknown wounded men waited: she saw them lying on stretchers and bleeding out. Red, everything was red. Beneath her feet was an endlessly filling lake of warm red blood and she could feel the sweet liquid reaching up to her mouth, her nose, forehead, the top of her head. She was gasping for air. The hot sticky blood was everywhere. She had to go and that's why she had washed her hands. Washed them well. Her son remained behind, dying.

It never occurred to her to quit her job, especially not in times when it seemed it was the one thing the world needed.

Place the gauze, patch it up, stop the bleeding, prevent choking, lift the head, wash, rinse, clean, bandage. She was quick, deft and always ready to move. So dedicated to her work that her real name paled over the years under the shadow of her calling, her essence. They called her Nurse.

"Drunk again," she said to her neighbour while hanging out the laundry to dry. The woman in the yard encircled with a rusty fence made a sad grimace and sighed.

"Well, as long as he's singing, it'll be alright."

"It'll be alright," Nurse repeated and glanced at a girl standing alone in the street. She was holding a lizard's tail in her hand. It squirmed and wriggled as if it was still part of the real world and not just a discarded stump, an imitation of life. Nurse shuddered at the thought that cut through the image of the girl in the colourful flower-patterned dress. Just then, the first swallow of the year landed on the power cable above their heads and stretched its wings. It was spring. The girl clenched her fist and whispered something into her tiny fingers.

The morning wore on. Nurse's laundry swayed in the spring breeze, clean and scented. She spread out the last shirt and caught its collar with the pegs. The loud music from the yard across the way beat down on her eardrums and she couldn't wait to go back inside, close the door, slip her old apron over her head and stir the orange vegetable stew. Though she lives alone, she cooks every day. She takes care of herself, she is diligent and clean. No one comes to see her and she does not meddle in anyone else's life. If that tall loud man hadn't moved in next door one year, she would have had no reason to step out of the peace she had long sought, a peace she had won by persistently repelling other people's advances and some of her own heavy thoughts. All the disarray she had felt over the past few years was set in motion by that man who came to marry the plump girl next door, the neighbour's only child. He moved in, trampled the street with his long paces, inspected every neighbour with his watery blue eyes, homed in on

every yard. On the ground floor of the unplastered house, the newly-weds arranged some cheap furniture and settled into a seemingly ordinary life that soon brought them a yellow-haired little girl. As she was growing up, her father kept going around the neighbourhood every day, going into people's houses for a glass of wine, waving from the street, always shouting, always pointing out that he was there, that he should be seen and heard. That he exists and that he's important.

The instant she first laid eyes on him Nurse had been dislodged from her rhythm for a moment. Her breath caught, she blacked out and her knees visibly buckled. Two neighbours held her under her arms so she wouldn't fall. That man, that stranger who came from who knows where, looked just like her dead son, her wounded only child that she had left behind that morning to go and quell the bleeding of other people's sons.

She kept her distance. He lived as if on assignment. He collected stories about people, feeding on their fates like a leech. He commented and judged, drew closer and advanced. He came to see her one afternoon, knocking on her window and calling her by name. Nurse got up from the couch and looked at the photograph of her son on the bookshelf. She was ready.

"People tell me you were in it as well," he stared, having had a few sips of coffee that stood steaming on the table, hot and black. She said nothing. "For how long?"

"Long enough."

"And? You sorry?"

He watched her with half-closed eyes. Long fingers caressed the ear of the ceramic coffee cup. Nurse understood the look of that man and she knew: he was something else. The spasm in the face of this man had never relaxed, he waits and preys, tense and hot, with that wound that's spreading, that's infectious and whose pain is felt in the chest of anyone who dares approach him. She had seen the unhealed many times before, she avoided them, but found it hard to forget them.

Some illnesses take a long time to heal and their bitterness is passed on to all those who are weak, helpless and alone. She knew what she had to do.

"Now, if you don't mind, I have to catch a bus into town."

"Of course, of course. Another day, Nurse." That last word seared, and she felt it branding her.

He never came into her yard again. Nurse never forgot her diagnosis of him, but she kept it to herself. She was more distressed by the sad likeness exhibited in the body of this stranger. She turned her back the way people do on things they cannot understand and are unable to influence. Still, she would often watch the girl as she played in the street. Her hair, her freckles and restless hands stirred in Nurse something of that gentleness she had scrubbed out long ago. Whenever she would pass by the child, her hand would inadvertently go to caress her locks, press a sweet into her palm, straighten out the dress the girl had put on herself.

The spring day was ripening into evening, but the man kept playing his loud music, singing at the top of his voice and shouting in sharp bursts. The wind picked up and dark curtains spread across the sky. Nurse shut all the windows. There was a storm coming in.

Heavy rain beat against the doorposts and flowed down the gutters. It rolled pebbles, dispersed the soil from the gardens, bent the frail stalks to the ground and splashed the young leaves on the branches.

"Nurse! Nurse, quick!" A man's wet fists beat against the front door. As she was putting on her shoes, she didn't think of anything. Just to make it in time.

The wind pushed them off the road, chased them, spun them around, unrelenting.

"The ambulance is on its way," one of the neighbours said as they rushed across the road, the rain plastering their hair against their foreheads. The front door was open. The young woman was lying on the couch, her face covered in blood. One

eye blackened and closed. On the carpet, broken glass, blood and teeth. Nurse sat down beside her. The bleeding from the mouth must be stopped. The woman must not be moved.

"If she touches her, she won't be coming back to my bed," the man said and got up from the table where they had made him sit, to calm down, to forget. He was still sweaty and soiled by his rage. People had retreated into corners. No one said anything. Just to make sure they weren't left alone.

"You're theirs, Nurse, you fucking cunt. You were saving theirs while we were dying, you fucking whore! You touch her and you're dead, both you and her."

Nurse said nothing. Hands came down onto the man's shoulders. People tried to calm him down and talk some sense into him. Nurse wants to help, let her do her job, she's good at it, it's the only thing to be done to make things better. We can't let the woman bleed out. Now is not the time for explanations. Take it easy. Calm down. Everything will be alright. Everything will fall into place one day.

Fear, unease and blood congealed in the house. Outside, there was rain, wind and clouds.

The ambulance came, they took the woman away and called the police. Nurse wiped her hands and started towards the door. As she reached for the handle, a hand caught her fingers. "Only death is incurable," she heard someone say. The door to a room opened a crack and a child's face emerged from the darkness.

The storm had passed and Nurse could finally run across the street with the girl.

One by one, people started opening their windows. They watched the sky. Clouds were still congregating above the rooftops, but in the distance, low above the sea, a long crevice had opened to let rays of white light come through.

It is a holiday and Nurse is walking towards the small graveyard at the edge of town. As she approaches she can feel the sun on her back, so she quickens her pace to make it back

before noon. Summer has warmed the marble and dried out the flowers. The centre area of the graveyard is like a bare lawn. Here, the graves are without stones, level with the earth. They are all the same colour and size, the names written out in small letters. Way in the corner by the wall, one grave is completely covered by a red carpet. Nurse stops in front of it and the girl tears away from her and starts gorging on the wild strawberries that had ripened there. There were hundreds of them.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

The Disarmament of Statues

Marenglen Çano

They brought her handcuffed and put her in the cage in the courtroom. Then they released her hands from the cuffs and left her alone by closing the iron gate, which released a scratchy sound, due to a lack of maintenance on the part of the technical staff.

The relatives of the defendant, the lawyer, and other interested parties such as law school students and journalists from the print media, online media and digital media, were present in the courtroom.

The case was rather special.

This woman had demolished the statue of The Warrior on Horseback; she had cut off the Warrior's arm, which held a sword to cut off the heads of his enemies.

A journalist with a laptop was informing his online readers that the woman had used the period of time when the team that was dealing with the restoration of the sculpture was having a break. She had used their ladder, climbed to the top of it, and cut off the statue's arm, which was holding a metallic sword.

If one considers the height of the statue, this was a dangerous deed; even a risk to her life.

If the symbolism of the statue, the law and public opinion are put into the equation, the consequences of the danger become even greater.

The sound of the gong signified the beginning of the process.

Everyone stood up, and then sat down again to listen.

Then everything was routine procedure, like in any judicial process. The judge asked the defendant to explain herself.

"I cut off that plaster arm - which is holding tightly onto the sword."

The defendant pointed towards the large table where the plaster arm, holding the metal sword in its hand, was placed.

"I would've liked to demolish the whole statue, but that was all I could do. At least I disarmed him, The Warrior on Horseback.

You know this; perhaps it is even written in the files in front of you.

I am a widow, whose husband and son were killed in wars waged on behalf of our countries, our nations.

The soldiers that attacked them came from the square of The Warrior on Horseback.

The oaths and parades, the ceremonies that inspire soldiers, they have all used the sword symbolically – and this has served to cut off their heads.

Whose?

Can a whole city be called free, when almost half of the inhabitants are grieving, and the sword stands tall over their heads?

During these past days, a podium is being prepared in this square.

Carpenters, painters and stage workers are preparing everything necessary for the artists in our city, under the raised sword, to perform the music and choreography of our dances, to recite the lines of our poets and interpret the dramas of our writers.

And everything will happen underneath the sword.

This scares us, the widows!

This scares the orphans, and the parents who lost their children!

This is a painful euphoria, an irony and sarcasm that must come to an end!"

"Enough! Enough!"

In the middle of the courtroom, an elderly man was standing up and heading for the jury.

"I am…" he pronounced his name and surname.

"I am the sculptor of The Warrior on Horseback, and I want to address the lady."

He was referring to the defendant.

Seeing that the jury neither approved nor opposed his request, the sculptor headed toward the cage, and when he stood face to face with the woman, he leant against the bars of the cage and dropped to his knees.

"Madam! I apologize for the suffering that my sculpture has caused you. My talent has been misused, and I have suffered for that, but I did not have the courage and strength to stand up for myself!"

He continued to stutter words that did not reach those present in the courtroom; it was a confession for the sacrifices that had been made for the realization of the work, and it was an internal revolt, erupting out of the abuses of his talent, which was being used as a setting for ugly crimes.

Towards the end he raised his voice:

"Thank you for your help.

You made a choice, not only for our city, but as something necessary for all our Balkan territories, where sculptures and monuments have aimed swords, spears, arrows and automatic weapons at each other!

Stories and legends, literature and books of art are still filled with negative characterisations of our neighbours. The wars have not ended yet.

The artistic and cultural images of their harshness, like comets that have been burning for years, continue to shine here and there."

And addressing the jury, he concluded:

"The statues do need to be disarmed - but not just them!"

The court withdrew for consultation. The relatives and acquaintances of the woman had approached the cage, creating a semicircle.

A student was trying to send a message via his cellphone, while the journalist with the laptop was communicating the situation inside the courtroom to his online readers:

"No matter what the jury decides, this trial does not end here.

This hall will encompass the entire Balkan map, where regret and forgiveness will be a pair of ghosts that will permeate people's hearts and minds, until a new generation, with a unified 'social gene' repopulates the peninsula.

But our broadcast does not end here. This is an opportunity for the online press to turn our readers into protagonists and co-authors.

After you leave the last page of this online transmission - which is more like a short story, connect on our Facebook page and on our web page, where you can become participants, or observers, of our Balkan repentance."

Translation: Vjosa Ajdini

My Father's Name: a Dash

Milan Vorkapić

Yesterday I returned from Serbia, the land of darkness, Chetniks, hatred and suckling pigs. I haven't unpacked yet. My soul is packed as well. I'm still all messed up. I have to get it together, somehow. First of all, I have to take my camera to a photo-lab and have the photos printed... having them in the computer is not enough. If the system crashes, I'll be left without a father again. And a dash instead of my father's name again, each time I have to fill in a form.

**

It was hell finding Borča. I didn't dare take a taxi as I had been warned that those Belgrade gits would rob me blind. They are notorious – their fame has even reached our part of the world. So I took the bus, but nobody knew which bus stop I should get off at. After some shilly-shallying, an elderly gentleman offered his conjecture.

"It might be this one. Street names don't mean much around here, I'm afraid. It would be more helpful if you could name a café or a warehouse."

I walked to the first kiosk and discovered that I should have got off a stop earlier. But I was pleased nonetheless. I had been extremely uneasy ever since I'd got off the train and the whole time while I was looking for a bus and travelling to this Borča. I was even constantly looking back to see if anyone was following me. Surprisingly, no one tried to cut my throat,

and no one even tried to insult me, even though my accent clearly showed my origins. On my way from Zagreb I had been practicing how to pronounce words the way Belgrade people do, but it was all in vain. My accent betrayed me as soon as I asked for directions at the train station.

But, interestingly, I didn't meet a single Chetnik. Or perhaps they were hiding, careful to stay off my radar. They must have somehow felt I was coming, or had even heard about my arrival. Why else would that woman come out of the kiosk and kindly show me a shortcut so that I didn't have to go back to the previous bus stop? I took the suggested route, approaching my prey on foot, like a persistent hunter. When I finally saw a plank nailed to a pole with a hand-written sign "Ninth Street", I was surprised to see it wasn't in Cyrillic but in the Latin alphabet. My throat tightened: This was it. My long curiosity was suddenly suppressed by fear and uneasiness. I forced myself to carry on and not give up on this adventure. I passed variegated houses: some large, with elegant façades and iron fences, some unfinished. And lots of parked cars – some expensive, some obviously cheap, and even a tractor ... Then piles of sand and planks, laundry hanging on lines, concrete mixers, macadam ... I followed the house numbers. As I reached 39, my knees started to tremble slightly, and my heart betrayed me too – it was beating abnormally fast. How about I give all this up? Maybe I should have sent him a letter first? Maybe I should have first checked if he wanted to meet me? Maybe I should have first told him I existed? There was No. 37 ... surely followed by No. 39. I'm not sure it could be called a proper house; rather, it was a one-floor dwelling built of grey concrete blocks. Instead of a roof it was covered with a large nylon tarpaulin pressed with planks and, again, those cheap grey concrete blocks. A TV-antenna was attached to a wooden pole tucked into the hole of yet another cement block. A concrete mixer standing in front of the house was also covered with nylon, as well as a wrecked Yugo parked near it. I started wondering whether the inhabitants of the house would be dressed in nylon suits. There

was no one in the yard. The path led towards a half-open door. I headed along it feeling like I was walking in someone else's feet. There was no doorbell, so I knocked on the frosted glass.

**

"I totally understand you, my dear young lady, but you have to understand me too. It's totally normal that you want to find your father. That's normal, and I can say that, but it's not normal for you to just rush here to me saying that you are my daughter. That's … that is totally unfounded speculation. Now, it is true that in my youth I fell in love with Ankica - your mother. And I'm so sorry to hear that she died. I'm really so sorry, I had no idea. But that … what she told you, it can't be true. It simply cannot be true – you get that? And to tell you the truth, I did love Ankica. I loved her deeply and sincerely. I even escaped from the Yugoslav National Army coz of her, I risked facing a military court coz of her. But, with all due respect, I have to tell you, I know she was your mother and all, but I have to tell you ... she wasn't faithful to me. She cheated on me, she had someone else. There – I've said it. And that, young lady, is why I don't believe you. Her cheating was really nasty, believe you me. I can't go into detail, it wouldn't be appropriate given your age … you could be my daughter ..."

"But I *am* your daughter!"

"Uh! Cut me same slack with this daughter thing! This is not a Turkish soap opera where fathers, brothers and sisters suddenly jump out of nowhere. I'm telling you nicely, I'm not admitting to anything to do with that, I have enough pain and trouble of my own ... plus, I'm poor as a church mouse. You'd be better off choosing a rich father. As for me, I don't want to so much as hear about your mother! May her soul rest in peace, but she didn't deserve any better, I swear by my Faith. So, if you've finished your juice ..."

"Okay. I will leave, but please tell me why you think my mother wasn't faithful to you. Just tell me that, and I'll be on my way, and you won't see me again."

"Listen young lady! I'll tell you this one thing more, and that's it. So, here's what happened. I was doing my military service in Slovenia. On the 27th of June, 1991 the Slovenians attacked us at Cerklje airport. They fired a dozen grenades at us. We couldn't believe our own people were shooting at us, but we defended ourselves, yes. Your Croats started to disappear almost at once, deserting in massive numbers. They asked if I wanted to come with them, thinking I was one of them, and they told me how to escape. And I did, partly coz of fear of the war, partly coz of Ankica. We were attacked on Thursday, I deserted on Friday night. It was only ten kilometres to the Croatian border, but still ... I was hiding, crawling along on all fours, all day Saturday to get there. When I finally reached my town on Sunday, I knew I mustn't go home coz it was possible the militia was waiting for me there. There was a lot of shooting – in Croatia, I mean; it had started there as well. So, I decided to go to Ankica's village, that seemed the safest bet, plus my heart was drawing me there. I was in my Yugoslav Army uniform, which means it wasn't easy to get to her village, but I did. And early on Monday morning, I only went to Goran Kuja's, and then went straight to her house. And do you know what I found there young lady? The door was ajar, no one was inside, but there was a table set for two. What can I say – it was obviously festive: white tablecloth, flowers and candles, two crystal glasses, two trays, ćevapi, music quietly playing ... whoever was there must have been very important to her if she was greeting him so regally while I was fighting at the airport. She'd never greeted *me* like that, you know. Maybe that one's your father? Anyways, I went away as quietly as I had come. Tears and rage suffocated me, I'll confess to that. What can you do ... maybe it was for the best, coz if I had found the two of them there, who knows. I'm not sure what I might have done. Bloodshed, maybe, coz I really loved her. There ... that's the story." Mile sighed deeply.

The girl burst out laughing but her laugh sounded bitter, and finally turned into sobs. The man watched her grimly, not

knowing what to do. He was silent for a while, then said, in a hollow voice:

"My wife and son will be back in half an hour... I wouldn't want them to ... to ... to find you here."

She opened her bag and took out a handkerchief and a small notebook.

"Oh, Dad, Dad," she sighed looking at him reproachfully with tearful eyes, opening a small notebook. "This is my mother's diary. I want to read part of it to you, and then you decide. This won't take long. Here, I think it's best to start from ... yes ... from here:

Sunday, 16.06.91. – I wrote a letter to Deutschland. A nice sunny day. My aunt dropped by. Those idiots are still waging war. Kind of. Then making peace. Kind of. I'll calm down only if those idiots calm down. With my lousy luck, my Mile will be the first to get killed.

Monday, 17.06.91. – I worked the afternoon shift today. In the morning I went down to the store. I don't even need to ask anymore, Goran Kuja tells me immediately that I don't have any mail. An old guy from Donji Strnovci bought a trailer's worth of flour, salt, rice, salami, biscuits, macaroni, sugar, batteries, toilet paper, beer, wine, bacon and a mountain of cans. He asked Kuja to order him 50 litres of lamp oil. Miki asked him what he needed it for, whether he intended to open a store in Strnovci. The old man said: "The bloody war has begun, my children." Miki continued to joke, "So why do you need beer and wine then? Will you be shooting at Chetniks with bottles?" And the old man retorted: "My dear boy, having survived one war, I know that every army leaves you alone if you offer them a drink." Everyone laughed, only I didn't feel like laughing. The war had to break out right now of all times, while Mile was doing his military service. Does he have any beers or cans there? Everyone curses the Yugoslav Army, but I still trust it and I'm convinced that Mile will come back to me.

Tuesday, 18.06.91 – I watched the news tonight. Everyone's gone crazy out there. I can't understand why these small problems have to be solved by a war. Why do Croats shoot at the Yugoslav Army when there are Croats in it? They say on the news that a party called *The Party of Justice* is asking for the revival of the Independent State of Croatia. Not a single customer came to the salon today.

Wednesday, 19.06.91 – My Fićo supermini barely started this morning, I was almost late for work. If it weren't for the downhill road from the house to the village, I don't know how I would have made it. I left it with the mechanic, and he repaired it by the end of the day. Now it starts like a missile. Bloody hell, now I sound like a fighter too. I mean it starts like a dream. I cooked beans; that'll be lunch for three days.

Thursday, 20.06.91 – Cloudy with a chance of rain. Goran Kuja's brother joined what everyone calls *Zenghe*. That's ZNG or the Croatian National Guard. Tuđman apparently promised them a salary of 2,000 German Marks. Kuja said he was going to resign from his job and join the *Zenghas* as well, as there was no chance he could earn that much money in a year working in the shop. My only customer today was the owner's godmother who came to the salon to have her hair washed.

Friday, 21.06.91 – I've just seen the news. This is a disaster, everyone's gone completely nuts. Who needs this? Will we be better off with war? The only thing that gives me hope is that some Baker, some US bigwig, said that America wanted Yugoslavia to remain whole. The beans were burnt, but who cares. I couldn't be bothered to cook anything else. Still no mail.

Saturday, 22.06.91 – The siren alarm was set today: apparently Serbo-Chetniks were attacking us. My own personal alarm: I'm late four days. Panic. Sheer panic.

Sunday, 23.06.91 – I ate beans again, but I'm far from being full of beans. I went to my aunt's and then to the gas station. I filled the tank to the top, plus I took a jerrycan of petrol.

Shortages have indeed begun. The old guy from Donji Strnovci was right. No petrol, no letter from him, no menses: a general shortage. My aunt tried to make me go to church, scolding me for not going there since Corpus Christi. Aunty dear, I seem to have a tiny *corpus* inside my own body. I have to see a gynaecologist tomorrow.

Monday, 24.06.91 – I don't have to see the gynaecologist. I puked my guts out this morning. I feel a little silly, but at least I know I'm pregnant; I don't need a doctor to tell me that. A disaster. But, to quote Scarlett: "Tomorrow I'll think of some way … tomorrow is another day." The salon owner mentioned the possibility of sacking me as there's no business whatsoever in the salon.

Tuesday, 25.06.91 – A letter came from Deutschland. My folks wished me happy birthday, notifying me that 200 German Marks are travelling my way to mark the occasion. They send the dough for my Geburstag every year. Except that this year the money will not be spent on going out, but on a cleaning out. Croatia and Slovenia have declared independence. There's general merriment in the town, shooting and high spirits all around.

Wednesday, 26.06.91 – My birthday. I'm 20. Summa summarum: what a catch I am! I have a job as a hairdresser, a Fićo supermini in good condition, I'm alone in the house, my folks regularly send money from Deutschland. But the most valuable thing, the only thing I have is my Mile, for whom I pray to the Virgin every night. And I also have vomiting – a memory from his leave of absence from the army. On my way home from work, I stopped by the store for bread and milk. I also bought some macaroni and cooked goulash for two days – but I don't feel like eating, and just throw up everything I eat anyway. Goran Kuja said he was with some guys who had fled the Yugoslav National Army. I asked if they were deserters, but he said they were patriots. What a madhouse! They said in the news that the Croatian Police forces have penetrated

into Glina. The Serbs attacked the police station. Complete and utter chaos.

Thursday 27.06.91 – They said in the news that the Slovenians had attacked the Cerklje airport with mortars. Damn them; I cried all day and prayed to God to save my Mile. I don't care about the wedding, I don't care about anything anymore – except for him to survive, to came back from the army. That's all I want, nothing more, just for Mile to come back alive, even if wounded. If only Mile would come back to me, if only I wasn't so alone in this madhouse.

Friday, 28.06.91 – I've been crying all day. The hair salon owner fired Aunty Mira. The poor woman cried her eyes out, she knows she can't find another job. She's not young anymore. Besides, she is "one of them". Her husband Stanko was fired as soon as the HDZ came to power in the town. The owner tried to convince Aunty Mira that her sacking had nothing to do with her ethnicity, and that she would have her job back as soon as the salon's clients started coming back. As if! I cracked completely, and said: "If that's true, let her stay then – I will quit." The owner looked at me in shock, taken aback, but she had nothing to say and agreed for Mira to stay. So I went home. Why did I do it? Well, firstly because Mira has children. Secondly, she's a true friend. Thirdly, I don't give a hoot about anything anymore.

The Slovenes attacked the Yugoslav National Army barracks, the army sustained casualties. People on television are frantically encouraging the Slovenes to kill all Serbo-Chetniks and Yugo-Communists. For God's sake! I hope he's alive. I hope he's alive!

Saturday, 29.06.91 – I couldn't fall asleep for a long time, and then woke up around nine. But I didn't get up. I was thinking about lots of things, but mainly about my mom's suggestion to join them in Deutschland. If only Mile would come back, I wouldn't wait a sec to go there ... Swabia, here we come. My aunt dropped by to ask if I could take her to the tailor's shop

tomorrow. Of course I can; anything is better than solitude in this secluded house on the edge of the village. I have to surround myself with people – it helps me think less. He must be alive, he must! Help him, Virgin Mary, please help him! Is his Orthodox Virgin Mary the same as ours? I have no idea. If there's two of you, please help him together.

Sunday, 30.06.91 – My aunt didn't come until 8 a.m. I decided I don't have to decide anything but will just wait for Mile. He will decide then, about the abortion and about moving to Deutschland. I will do whatever he says. I think I can breathe easier now. I took my aunt to the tailor's but he hadn't finished the sewing for her. He promised it for tomorrow. My aunt was niceness itself to the tailor's face but called him every name in the book as soon as she got into the car. She was cursing him all the way home, and not only the tailor but every one of his extended family. She offered me gas money, but didn't insist when I refused it. But I didn't refuse to take her there again, tomorrow.

Monday, 01.07.91 – I vomit less and less. But eat pickled foods more and more. My aunt came early this morning and continued to swear at the tailor all the way into town. I left her at the tailor's. Her stuff wasn't ready yet and the tailor promised to do it by noon. My aunt decided to wait in the shop to make sure that he did. I went to my usual coffee shop and ordered a bread roll and a white coffee. Just as I sat down, Goran Kuja rushed in. He stared at me goggle-eyed, as if he had seen a ghost. Then he grabbed my arm, pulled me out into the hallway, and hissed, "That guy of yours has fled from Slovenia. I met him half an hour ago. He's looking for shelter and asked me how things were in our village. He was heading to your place; said he'd be safest there, with you."

I thought I could feel my wings growing, but I struggled to fill my lungs with air. Then I jumped and rushed to the car. He must be tired and hungry. Knowing how much he likes ćevapi, I bought a whole kilo of those ground meat kebabs, and 10

flatbread buns. I was driving like a madwoman; didn't give two hoots about my aunt – to hell with her and her tailor. I kept looking, hoping to see him along the way, but I realised the poor man was most probably hiding from both the Serbs and the Croats, both from the police and the military, both from the smart and the stupid. My darling Mile, hurrying to his girlfriend. I quickly set the table, white tablecloth and all, two plates, ćevapi, flowers ... I even lit a candle. I put on some nice music. While setting the glasses on the table, I realized I hadn't bought any beer. My Mile needs his beer with his ćevapi! I rushed to Goran Kuja's store, but it was closed, damn him, he hadn't returned from town. I went to the pub and bought a crate of beer, and hurried back. I waited. And waited. Mile didn't show up. I'm a jerk. Once a jerk, always a jerk. Either Kuja had played a trick on me, or Mile had forgotten about me. Or maybe they had arrested him. I waited all night."

**

Yesterday I returned from Serbia. I had been told that it was a land of darkness, Chetniks, hatred, and backwardness. I didn't meet any Chetniks anywhere though, and no one tried to attack or rape me. I didn't see the darkness either, and now I have a much clearer image of my family. I met my father Mile and my brother Djordje. It wasn't like in the movies. We didn't fall into each other's arms. We looked at each other quizzically. We didn't even talk much because we didn't have anything to talk about. We were all confused, we talked about things I can't remember now. The three of us just babbled. And we took selfies with each other. I promised to go there again, since my Dad isn't allowed to come to Croatia. And I will go again, for sure. I will no longer put a *dash* in the "Father's name" box when filling in official documents. My Dad's not much to look at, but my brother's really good looking. He's five years younger than me, and a really handsome guy. Tall, dark-haired ... what do I care if his name is so recognisably Serbian and his favourite team is Crvena Zvezda ... I'm going to show everyone

the pictures of my newly found family. I'm going to frame this treasure of a family that I knew nothing about before. Since my Dad can't come here, I'm going to light candles for his family. I bought those yellow candles of "theirs" since you can't find them here anymore. Even the yellow candles have been expelled. But from now on, when I go to visit my mother's grave, I will also go to light candles for my grandpa Jovo and my grandma Milica. My Dad told me how to find their grave plots: on entering the cemetery, turn right immediately at the entrance. Their names are written on the gravestones, that is – if someone hasn't destroyed them.

Oh, mother, my dear mother, would you ever have believed that a few beers could change your destiny? I went to find a father, and instead I found my Dad.

Translation: Mirjana Evtov

The Heart of a Pheasant

Mehmed Đedović

Redžep Kusić - Kuso was sometimes so naive that he appeared ridiculous. He believed in fairness when it was nowhere to be seen. He hoped good would win over evil, but after living half his life, he concluded his hope was in vain. The way water polishes stone, Redžep was polished by experience, but something deep inside him remained unchanged, despite the misfortunes that never seemed to spare him. It's not that he stopped hoping completely, but his faith in human kindness and fairness had paled considerably. He was turning into a cynic who questions everything and takes nothing for granted until he weighs it on his own scales, chipped from use, but still reliable.

The less he trusted people, the more he turned to the mountain, for Kuso was a man of the woods. He would get up early, before sunrise, and rush off to embrace the wilderness. Heaving a heavy chainsaw, a backpack into which his wife had packed his breakfast and lunch so he wouldn't go hungry while he worked, he would advance steadily towards the high hills overgrown by a dense forest.

His lumbering gait would often see him disturb a wild boar from its shelter, or a pheasant or a doe, and he would watch them recede deeper into the woods.

Redžep Kusić had spent his whole life working with trees and wood, pruning, cutting down what the forest ranger had

marked, toppling giants to hew them into pieces and stack them up.

Then he would come with his son Jago and a doddering tractor that he had inherited from his own father, and pull closer to the road what he had prepared in his mountain neverland.

He toppled old and diseased trees to let the healthy ones grow, racing to see which one would be first to touch the sky.

Whenever Redžep had any dealings with people, they would invariably swindle him, so he preferred to keep to the mountain, and mixed with people only when he had to sell the logs he had prepared.

He lived from his hard labour in the woods, but he didn't complain. Kuso never bemoaned his hard life, or at least no one ever heard a complaint slip past his lips. He accepted things as they were, knowing he couldn't change them.

He was a large man, his broad shoulders sculpted by logs, his hands large and calloused, his head round and towering, rimmed with grey hair.

Redžep Kuso would have spent his whole life dealing with logs and firewood if the war hadn't come. And it came like a brisk, long-legged hiker, or at least that's how it seemed to him.

There was shooting, burning, killing...

His forest sobbed with fear. It was full of strange people, who took no notice of the mountain breeze or the roe startled from sleep.

They tormented the wild game, shooting at it for fun, as if they owned the whole place. They cut down the trees with such hostility, severed even the saplings, and no one cared which was healthy and which diseased.

No one saw the mountain for what it was, a carefully tended garden where everything was nurtured and fed.

The war years shook Redžep's world, but he swallowed their evil as a large bite that cannot be avoided, silently but without hiding his discomfort. Luckily, he was as big as a bear, so people mostly avoided him. That suited Redžep just fine.

Even when it was dangerous, he would still go to the

mountain to breathe in the rustling of the leaves and fill his lungs with the sound of the wind, because he felt he would otherwise die of the pungent smell of gunpowder.

And then there was the battle.

In the final years of the war, in the heart of the forest, people were fighting. Shooting at each other, killing, crippling, breaking, no one having the slightest intention of stopping. The mountain watched the ants in its bosom and kept silent. It wasn't the first time, it had seen all manner of evil and managed not to scream, not to dry up from sorrow. It cried its cold brooks, but made no sound, whatever men did to it, or to each other.

Redžep looked at the tall trees and sighed. Snow had covered the forest, the cold was splitting the trees lengthwise, incautious birds had frozen on branches, the brook was covered by a sheet of ice, but the people still kept shooting, wailing, dying, crying, but not giving up.

From a hill in whose soil a trench was dug for the soldiers to shelter, finally a white flag went up. The trench had been surrounded and attacked, but it wouldn't surrender, it was fibrous, obdurate, hungry and wounded. It had hoped the ring around it would be broken and that the soldiers would be freed by those wearing the same uniform and praying to the same god as them. They had tried, but failed; obstinacy had yielded to common sense. Someone decided it would be better to surrender than for all of them to get killed. They had to survive, and they did survive, until they surrendered.

After a long and hard battle, their hands raised in surrender, sixty-seven soldiers emerged from that trench. They surrendered, gave up, they had to. Forced by the cold, the hunger, fear of death. If they surrendered, perhaps they'd get to see another day, but if they remained in their dugout, underground, they would not see the sun rise again.

They put their hands up, reconciling themselves to everything that awaited them, and prisoners of war rarely had anything to look forward to.

After that battle, the rest of the winter was far more peaceful. Not even armies like shooting in the cold.

The prisoners of war were taken somewhere, to some hangar, to await their exchange. We give you yours, you give us ours, then come springtime, we'll go back to shooting at each other again, that's how it seemed to Redžep Kusić, but he kept his mouth shut. The mountain had taught him to bite his tongue, and he respected the mountain above all else.

He'd heard that the prisoners were in a hangar somewhere behind the lines, so he decided to go see them. He didn't know what made him want to do that. Once, he had a dream that he was taken away by strange people and kept in a dark cellar, hungry, thirsty, beaten, and he woke up thinking about how he'd never want to be taken prisoner.

He walked a dozen kilometres or so, with his trusty backpack always on his back, and went straight to the hangar. The guard watched the bear approach and smirked. Woe to anyone caught by Redžo's massive hands and put through his fingers. He could break every bone in a man's body as if they were twigs. Redžep Kusić - Kuso looked grim and said nothing, but the guard kept prattling on.

- A slap here and there, but nothing more. Sometimes someone comes over angry because their son or father was killed and takes it out on the prisoners, it's understandable.

- Aren't you guarding them?

- I'm guarding them, but...

- Then why do you let them get beaten...

The guard was dumbstruck, he looked at his feet, not knowing what to say.

- There's a war on, you know...

- Like I don't know. Whoever wants a fight can go down to the inn and find someone his own size. Redžo hasn't come to beat anyone. These poor beggars have it bad enough being prisoners, there's no fate worse than that. Only cowards would take it out on the defenceless.

So he let Redžo into the hangar among the prisoners.

They all squeezed together. Their eyes full of fear, they'd dig themselves into the ground if they could, they'd rather be ants than people, skinny, miserable, petrified.

Their fear was palpable. They were thinking, this big hulk will beat us now.

Kuso, still looking grim, asked: Where are you from? They told him, quietly, muttering, barely audible. Anyone mistreating you? They shrugged their shoulders, no. Yeah, right. Redžep knew full well that some diseases were incurable and that there were people who jumped at the chance given them by war to let their insanity loose.

Are you hungry, he asked again. They're not hungry, they eat what everyone else eats. You smoke? You got cigarettes? They shrugged their shoulders. Cigarettes cost an arm and a leg.

Redžep left the hangar and bought a carton of Drinas from a smuggler, paying handsomely for it.

He came back to the same door and the same guard, who just stepped aside this time without saying a word. He handed the cigarettes out to the prisoners. They smoked, inhaling down to their toes and keeping it all in, they smoked, but they couldn't meet his eyes, fear won out.

Later, all sorts of things happened, months flew by like a flock of pheasants over the mountain, chased by hunters' shots. You didn't know when one day ended and the next began.

The war ended and peace began. You survive one evil and another comes to weigh down on your shoulders.

Kuso went back to the woods and felling trees.

He'd start off early, before the sun, and would stay up in the mountain to see the moon. He'd sit on a tree stump, light a cigarette and listen to the woods breathing.

His son Jago grew up, got married, has children now; he sweats together with his father, pulling wood out of the forest. A doctor's child has his path in life cut out for him, it's much the same with woodcutters.

It's hard work, dangerous too, but honest. Redžep never knew any other and distrusted money earned without sweat or calloused hands.

One humid day Redžo's old Ferguson breathed its last throttling breath. A tractor has a life span, much like a man. It works while it works, pulls while it pulls, but then the engine dies and isn't worth repairing.

He couldn't find fault with the machine, it had pulled enough wood from the mountain to last three human lifetimes, but losing the tractor worried him. You can't work in the woods without a machine, a man is powerless against the large logs and deep gorges. The problem had to be solved urgently because heating season was just around the corner and there would be demand for firewood.

Woodcutters know each other and help out when needed. That's how a friend advised Redžo to find a TAM 5000, a military truck that's strong and sturdy and just the kind you need in the woods.

So, Redžep starts asking around for that kind of truck.

One morning, he stuffed the little money he had into his pocket and set off for Ugljevik. He had heard you could get a good TAM from a fellow called Zoran in Ugljevik. He knew where he was meant to go, the inn called so-and-so where he would find the man who would sell him the truck.

His old Golf heaved and sighed up the winding mountain road, the wheels screeching at the sharp bends. Soon, however, he was down by the cross-roads, then past the petrol station and a bit further on to the inn.

He went in, sat at a table, ordered a coffee and a beer. He asked the fat waiter whether he knew so-and-so, the waiter said he did and that he would be along soon.

Redžep didn't wait long, he had just enough time to light a cigarette, drink his coffee and get started on the beer.

The man arrived. Tall, thin, moustached, he kept looking at Redžep so intently as to make him uncomfortable.

- Do we know each other from somewhere?

- I don't think so...

- The trucks are over there behind that house, go see if there's one you like.

Redžo hurried out to take a look. He felt uncomfortable in this place, he just wanted to get the job done and go home. He saw a large parking area with more trucks than he had seen in his life, all in one place.

He looked around, checked under the bonnet, started some of them, listened to the sound of their engines, and found the TAM that suited him best. It seemed to be made for him, because it was perfect for the forest and hauling logs.

He just wished he had more money in his pocket. He liked the truck, but if the man set the price too high, he wouldn't be able to afford it.

He went back to the inn to find the moustachioed man still sitting at the table, but this time with rakia and meze.

And again, the man looked at him from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

- Do we know each other? As if he hadn't already asked him that.

- No. Redžo said again, impatient to finish his business and be on his way.

- Did you pick a truck?

- Yes. I think I found one that'll be good for what I need.

Kuso's pheasant heart relies on instinct honed by the wilderness, and it is quiet, not a quiver, no warning of danger. This man may have had a bit to drink, but he's not dangerous.

- So, you found a good one?

- I did. Now I just need to know how much it costs so I can pay you and get going.

The moustachioed man kept sizing him up.

- Where did you say you were from?

- I didn't... Redžo was impatient. He was now apprehensive that the fellow had had a bit to drink and that there could be trouble. By now it was clear to him that Redžo wasn't one of theirs.

- Ok, sit. You want a drink?

- We'll drink later, now just tell me how much you want for the truck...

One is silent, the other doesn't utter a word. They stare at each other. There is something between them, but neither of them knows what.

He was not much bothered by what the man was saying. It was something else that made him feel uneasy. He looked him in the eye expecting the coldness he had become accustomed to, but this time it wasn't there. There are people, his father used to say, you will see eye to eye with them and you won't have to exchange a single word, and then there are those that you don't need to exchange a word with to know that you'll never see eye to eye.

Just yesterday, this man was on the other side of the cross hairs, so he didn't expect anything more than contempt from him.

Redžo's quick temper was getting the better of him.

He turned around intending to leave. No business would get done here.

He made a few steps as if to leave the inn. Then he stopped and took a deep breath. He was struggling with himself. He was not afraid of a brawl, instead, what confused him was the friendliness and welcome, especially where he least expected it.

This man seemed to be prepared to drink and sing with him into the night. Reason told him this was wrong.

- Come, sit, what's the hurry...

He shouted after him.

His large hand had already reached for the door. But he turned back and saw the man's broad smile.

- Fuck it... He mumbled to himself and went back.

The inner struggle between two wolves was best understood by the man he'd wanted to get away from.

The man at the table was now holding his head in his hands, his whole body swaying. He wasn't drunk, he had remembered.

Then he raised his hands towards Redžo and smiled broadly.

- You asked me something, Redžep said.

- Sit, let's have a drink.

- I'm sitting.

- Good.

- You remembered.

- I did.

- Better now?

- You know what, it is. And you know something else, I'm glad to see you.

- Me too... I'm glad...

- Here's to your health, said the man and lifted a glass from the table. Redžo accepted the toast.

- What now?

- Nothing.

- Will you sell me the truck?

- I will.

- How much...

The man was silent and kept shaking his head. As if he still couldn't believe who was in front of him. Then he cleared his throat and downed another rakia. He smoothed his moustache and sighed. He kept looking at Redžep and shaking his head.

- That truck, Redžep Kusić, he finally uttered while Redžep hunched his shoulders, for you, it's free. It's worth as much as that pack of cigarettes you gave me while I was imprisoned and you came to see us in that hangar. We all thought you'd come to beat us, but you bought us smokes... So, you see, that's why I'm giving you that truck, though I can never repay you for what you did. It took me a while to remember you, but that face of yours, I'll never forget it as long as I live.

That is how Redžo returned that same day, though it was already dusk, with a TAM 5000, which he still uses to get logs out of the mountain.

He had remained the same, honest and naive, goodhearted and big-bodied, and he was never going to change.

He became close friends with Zoran. They had so much in common, it was hard to believe. They were brought together by war, but became close over a TAM 5000.

And so it remains, to this day.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Faggots

Luiza Bouharaoua

I.

First lesson of falling: Arms won't save you.

The metallic sound of the school bell shudders and smashes the silence. The air reverberates with the squeals of children bursting out of the school, their cries rising up to the sky and merging with the shattering of glass directly above me. A giant man-like bird plummets into the large fig tree in the yard next door and falls through the branches. The spread-out wings cannot stop its fall, how could they when they're not wings but arms. Arms breaking branches, branches breaking arms, unripe fruit flying around, milky sap dripping from the top of the concrete wall that separates us. The ground absorbs the final impact in silence.

"Get out of the street," mother is running towards me, pulling me into the house, into the bedroom, closing all the doors.

I press up against the window. First, I hear her asking *who and why* and then some unintelligible muttering, but it soon transforms into whole sentences. I cannot recognise the voices, but what they say whistles through the air, flies into the room, bounds off the walls. Every word eventually sticks right into me. My arms cannot protect me.

"Someone threw him off the fifth floor."
"Serves him right!"
"The faggot."
The last spoken by my dad hit me right in the gut.

That afternoon, Joke and I are sitting on the low wall across from the main entrance to the building. Two large policemen drive up, one is fanning himself with a folder, they both stop in front of the first entrance. Joke is nibbling a green cherry plum as if it were a miniature apple, his mouth contracting from the sourness.

"Joke, what's a faggot?" I ask when he gets to the stone.

"No idea. A Serb, probably."

Dejan's mum emerges from the darkness of the passage, her left hand holding on to a straw bag, her right pulling Dejan along. Her white cotton dress is completely soaked across her chest, with large red flowers from her swimsuit peeking through. She greets the policemen and starts rummaging around in her bag, but she can't find what she's looking for. She squats, puts the bag on the ground and takes out a snorkelling mask from the top, two colourful beach towels and a paperback with damp curled covers. She pushes all these things into Dejan's hands, but he takes them clumsily, as if the hands weren't his. When his mum finally digs out the keys, she can't seem to get them into the lock. After four tries, she drops the keys, but the younger policeman picks them up and says,

"Here, ma'am, let me help."

Dejan's mum stuffs everything back into her bag and follows the policemen into the building, leaving Dejan out front.

Joke spits out the stone, it falls soundlessly behind Dejan's back. He's still staring at the door after his mother. Joke sticks a whole cherry plum into his mouth, takes aim and spits it out with all his might. When it hits him on the shoulder, Dejan turns around. His eyes are two deep black holes.

"Hey, faggot!" Joke laughs shrilly.

Dejan's mum and the policemen climb to the top of the building, they don't stop until they reach their flat on the fifth floor. Dejo stares at us. I can't even look at him.

II.

Second lesson of falling: As opposed to bodies, things fall with a loud crash, and they let you watch that.

When you throw it off the fifth floor, an object will fall almost exactly like a man, the only difference being is that a body can land silently. Objects are loud, but not all equally: a table, for instance, is louder than a chair, but much quieter than a whole bookshelf being shimmied out the window by someone's invisible hands. The window and the ground are neutral. Everything that's pushed out of a window falls, everything that hits the ground crashes. At least that's how I understood it.

Neighbours gather on both sides of the wall that separates the yard around Dejan's building from the street. On the one side is a row of heads mounted on the concrete wall, on the other a group of whole bodies moving back step by step while shards of glass and splinters of wood decorate the fig tree. Instead of sweet fruit, this year it will only bear death.

"Catch!" yells a headless voice from the window, but no one stretches out their arms.

The air is petrified with heat and expectation. Something round flies out the window, rebounds high in front of us once, a bit lower the second time, and then leaps straight at Joke for a low volley. He dribbles the ball for a bit and then passes it to me. I turn around and go home.

That evening Goran and Damir come to our house and place a large black television right in the centre of the living room. Its black eye watches me threateningly.

"Mare, give us a glass of water, for God's sake! I'm boiling in this uniform," Goran says and sits at the table. As he takes off his fatigues jacket, Damir helps my dad lift the television onto the shelf.

Once they've quenched their thirst, they say goodbye and both pat dad on the shoulder as they leave.

"You were a great help today," Goran says to him.

Dad mumbles something, he never speaks so softly.

"The story's out. Who'll bother about a faggot in the middle of a war? No one, that's who," Goran says.

The two of them leave and I keep staring at the switched off television, afraid the darkness will swallow me. This morning, everything flew out the window of Dejan's apartment, except for the television.

When mum and dad are asleep, I sneak out of my room, turn it on and turn the volume down completely. I sit on the floor and let the screen paint rainbows over my face until I fall asleep sometime before dawn, I fall into the black whole the television opened inside me, into Dejan's two moist eyes black as the soil in the garden that had absorbed the crash of his father's bones. Tired and messy-haired, I run to school in the morning. I'd spent half the night awake, but I still don't know if Dejan would fly if they were to throw him out that window.

III.

Third lesson of falling: Sometimes, children can fly.

Light as he is, Dejan still managed to fly over only ten steps at the entrance before his face hit the asphalt in front of the school.

"Faggot son of a faggot dad!" Joke shouts.

Dejan props himself up on his elbows, messy-haired and snot-faced, half his right cheek scraped off.

"Leave me alone, I'm late for the bus," he says.

Yesterday, Joke's mum told mine that Dejan and his mum now live in just one room and that he has to take two buses to school and that already next week he would be moving to a new town and a new school. They have nothing left here, Goran now lives in their flat, that's what she said.

With one swift kick in the ribs, Joke throws Dejan back to the ground.

"My dad's not a faggot," he squeals and looks up towards me standing stock-still at the top of the stairs.

Dejo is lying on the ground, crying, and I see him on his birthday placing the remote control of his new television in my hand and saying, press the red button and then use the numbers to switch channels. What should we watch, Dejo, I ask, and he smiles and says, you choose. His mum, without dropping anything, places two small plates with chocolate cake in front of us. His father opens the large double-sided window in the living room and throws out the afternoon humidity and nothing, nothing more.

"Why are you beating him?!" I yell as I fly over the steps, it seems to me I'm still in the air as I pick Dejan up off the ground.

"Because he's a liar!" Joke snaps, the other boys from class closing ranks around him.

"My dad's not a faggot," Dejan mutters as I sit him on the low wall.

Joke and the boys squeeze their fists, excited by the smell of dust and blood.

"Here," I say and hand Dejan a packet of tissues. His eyes are two switched off televisions.

Joke and the rest point their fingers at us, not caring that teachers are rushing down the stairs. Something in them has come undone and they're shouting at the top of their voices:

"Faggots! Faggots!"

I take a tissue out of the packet and wipe dirt, blood and tears from Dejan's cheek.

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Uncle Aki's Family

Anushka Minoska

I miss those warm summer mornings when I was woken, not by the persistent rays of sunlight creeping under my lashes, but by the mellifluous voice of Uncle Aki, which was nonetheless penetrating and resonant. "Get up, it's market day, market day, I'm leaving for the market! Does anyone need anything?"

I couldn't help but smile at that geniality, warmth and honesty, of a kind I never again found in my life. Dressed in a floor-length 'sara', looking like the Sheik of Qatar, this carpenter and self-taught actor, in his own as well as in our lives, and in the Minorities Theatre, this dreamer of the most beautiful dreams, gave meaning to our lives and made them easier right from the early hours of the day. He was extraordinarily decorous and brave, with a closely-shaven and greying beard that was so out-there that even much younger men would not dare sport such a style. Though in his fifties or sixties, he was still younger than them all. In spirit, of course. And as much as he was decorous, he was also simple, modest and accommodating - and he really did bring back full bags from the market. He was a manly man. The sleepy housewives, some covered, some not, Aunt Lenche, Marika the ballerina, Muradija and Ramize, would just throw him some money fastened with a peg together with the list of things they needed to start the day. And so the morning could begin.

I loved him the most in the world because he called me

'Italian doll', which to me felt like being given the title 'the Queen of Egypt'. It was as if he had been waiting his whole life for me to come into this world. I always remained special to him, something unique, and the way he made me feel has survived up to this very day. But he was the one who was special.

In our United Nations block of flats, as my mother used to call it, he was our Ban Ki-Moon. Dauntless and authoritative, and yet meek and mild at the same time, conciliatory and understanding. He did not divide; he did not judge. He united.

Uncle Aki's summer nights ended as nicely as the days had started. We waited with eager hearts for his return from the tearoom or, occasionally, from the theatre, so that he could tell us all about his adventures, his conversations, and about the hot topics discussed in the Old Town and throughout the entire city.

Does anyone on the other side of the Vardar know that Čair had its own microclimate and was a world in its own right?

Whenever Uncle Aki showed up, everything around the building came to life. He was the initiator. Uncle Sveto, the only Serbian resident of the building, also held some kind of special position in the hierarchy. Bislim and Rade built a wooden table and two benches for the men to get together in the evenings and talk until the small hours. It was an established custom that Ljutvi from the ground floor delivered the cold rakija and shopska salad, while my aunt, the ballerina, always prepared the tzatziki and sent my father to take it down together with the pretty rakija glasses from Russia; but Uncle Aki was master of the specialties. I don't think that even the formula for Coca-Cola has been such a well-kept secret as his boneless roast chicken recipe, which Uncle Aki passed on to his middle son Tamer - a much more acclaimed and successful actor than himself. You could hear just about anything during those late night talks. Of course, the most common subject was politics, mostly local, but also international. Here the solutions for the most difficult economic problems were found, and strategies and political

systems were forged for the poor, the disenfranchised and the under-developed. All kinds of projects, the World Bank would envy them. It was just like you were at a United Nations General Assembly.

And the repertoire was well-known and well-worn: Palestinians were always right, oil was the only reason for all wars, Americans were forging the new world order, Russians were stupid to keep quiet, but one day the people would awaken to the truth and justice would win. And of course, all of them believed in communism, because it was the only system that could bring forth 'the ideal society'. It was not unheard of for an occasional spark to fly or for an angry word to be said, but nothing that could not be smoothed over. Such disagreements usually occurred at one o'clock after midnight, when the political talk was already well-oiled by a good amount of drink. Both the culprit and the offended would refrain from turning up at the 'debate club' for a couple of nights, but once again Uncle Aki would apply his 'catering tactics' and all harsh moments were soon forgotten. Or perhaps it all wasn't so magical after all. Perhaps quite a lot of forgiveness, understanding and tolerance was employed. Somehow, we were better people then than we are now. It was not such a big deal if someone had occupied your parking space or blocked your garage door with their badly parked motorbike, having raised hell riding it till very late the night before. "For goodness' sake mate, you were really out of line last night!" "Don't mention it, I got terribly pissed, but now I can't find my car anywhere, God knows where it's parked it or how I even got home…"

So, that is how our summer months went by, up until the even more delightful month of September, when the real mobilization began. That was the season of ajvar-making and of carpet-cleaning, the great 'autumn preparations'. Uncle Aki was in charge of the stove schedule. One day was Ramize's day, the next was Marika's, the day after that was Barie's, then

Miriam's, then Anam-Inge's, then Sveto's, until everyone had taken their turn. Everyone took part in the making of everyone else's ajvar and in the cleaning of everyone else's carpets; the only problem was the lack of small stools for everyone to have a seat, everything else was in perfect order. Sometimes I ask myself if we were not in fact just one big family. At least three of Lyutvi's daughters were married off from our house, all the extra guests at the weddings were sent to the neighbours' flats, and we celebrated the Orthodox and the Muslim holidays with equal joy and happiness. Very early every Easter morning little Albanian and Turkish boys and girls would all line up to get a red Easter egg each so that we could all try our luck at cracking each other's eggs, while the rest of us drooled in expectation of Bayram baklavas and sekerpare. We could barely wait for the day to break to rush over to our neighbours'.

That's pretty much how the summer days proceeded, so did the years, up until the day we learnt that Uncle Aki was in hospital, because of some problems with his stomach. Luckily, he was soon back in the neighbourhood, but he had to leave again shortly after that. He departed quietly, mysteriously, as they do in the movies. And he loved films. But he never died, not really. He is still very much alive in my heart, in my memories.

Then came the new millennium; those were unsettling times, you could hear the newcomers chanting about a Republic of Kosovo, and the Macedonian nationalists started to fire up too. We all started to look at each other with distrust, with suspicion and caution. And yet, the war caught us unprepared, confused and afraid. Many 'refugees' came from the neighbouring villages, we didn't sit on the bench outside at night anymore, we ran straight home the moment it got dark. Only one time, when Mejrem was coming home from her father's house in Bojane and saw me standing on the balcony, she asked me sincerely, fearfully, "What are we going to do if the armies come?" And then, right away, she suggested, "You know, if ours come, you'll hide with us, and if yours come, we'll

hide with you. Is it a deal?" "Deal," I said, blankly. I didn't know who theirs were, or ours. But one thing I knew, Čair was never the same again.

It needs Uncle Aki.

Translation: Marija Jones

Looking Forward Means Being a Great Person

Arsim Jonuzi

"...and so, my son, you must be a great man," said grandfather Sabri.

"But I am still young, grandpa. I am only 14 years old," responded Shpresim.

"No, Shpresim," his grandfather quickly corrected him. "Greatness cannot be measured with age. Greatness has to do with the heart, not with the calendar. I believe that you have a big heart, like your mother. She told me that you talked about your father last night."

"Yes grandpa. She told me the story, she told me the whole story for the first time." Shpresim got himself ready, and turned to his grandpa, thinking about where he should start.

Grandpa Sabri started to sweat and tremble. He was going to hear a story that he had lived through. He had done this to see where his grandson stood in relation to the fallen hero, his father.

"Yesterday was my birthday," Shpresim began, "and grandpa, you know I was born on April 10. I think that you forgot, as always."

"Oh, my son," exclaimed the old man, "you know that I am an old man, and I promise you, my boy, I don't even remember my own birthday. Ha, ha, ha," laughed the old man.

How could I forget your birthday, my dear grandchild, said the old man to himself, when April 10 is the day that your father died?

It was on that date that the news came that Shpat Sabri Ramadani had fallen in the village of Kala, in the Karadak region. When Shpat's wife, Fatime, who was pregnant at the time, heard the news, her waters broke and she gave birth to the now fourteen year old boy. When they brought the baby to his mother's arms for the first time, they said to her, "God took away the hope that your husband would come back, but gave you this light, this other hope." And because of this, she decided to name the baby *Shpresim*, meaning *Hope*.

"My mother told me that was the very same day my father died," continued Shpresim.

"Mmm," reacted the old man, pretending he had forgotten.

"She told me that my father was in armed conflict with the Macedonians. And that was the same day I was born. What a coincidence, right grandpa?" asked Shpresim.

"A coincidence, my son, really, what a coincidence," whispered the grandpa.

"But the Macedonians, why did they kill my father, grandpa? What did he do to them?" asked Shpresim, curiously.

This is where Sabri understood that Shpresim's mother had not, though, told him everything related to the death of his father… as if she was scared that then Shpresim might not hang out with Zoran, their next door neighbour and Shpresim's friend, whom he had hung out with ever since they moved to the city, Nova.

"It was a time of war, dear Shpresim!" said grandpa in order to calm down his grandson and explain the circumstances to him, once and for all. "In times of war our blood gets heated, and when that happens, the values of compromise, reason, understanding and tolerance diminish."

"Ahem, ahem!" Sabri cleared his throat, and with the utmost care continued with the advice he was giving his grandson. He was taking him on a path, where he would not underestimate him, but would also not allow him to repeat history.

"Anyone – any person or group of people, nations or countries – have their ideals, Shpresim. Everyone thinks that

their ideals are the most divine, the most perfect, the purest, the truest, the most righteous, and so on. Wars, if they happen, should not be repeated. There must always be love after hate, whereas, after love, there cannot be anything else! Remember this, eh!" said grandpa, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, yes, grandpa. I am listening to you," Shpresim said seriously.

"Civilizations are built in decades and centuries, but to be destroyed… they only need two or three days to be destroyed. That is the definition of war, dear Cim," said the old man, as if he wanted to end the conversation.

"Oh grandpa, I love it when you call me Cim," said Shpresim, and jumped into his grandfather's arms.

"Ha, ha," laughed the old man. "I've gotten old and every day I am becoming weaker. One day I am going to die, and I want you to promise me that you will always be a good boy. You should take care of yourself, and your mother; and behave well with your neighbours and your friends. In the future, when you get a job, you must be good to your colleagues, and so on, and so with everyone."

"I promise, grandpa," said Shpresim, elated. He hugged his grandfather one more time and they both kissed each other's foreheads.

"Cimo, a dëshiron të vish të luajmë me top?" ("Cim, do you want to come play with the ball?") Zoran unexpectedly called to him from the door.

"Да, Зоки, одма доаѓам," ("Yes, Zoki, I'm coming,") responded Shpresim to Zoran.

"Wow, your friend Zoki speaks Albanian?" asked the old man, surprised.

"Yes, grandpa," said Shpresim. "Didn't I tell you that we go to a school of civic education?"

"No. What's the name of the school, and what are they teaching you?" asked grandpa.

"The school is called *Panbalkanika*, grandpa, and it has to do with learning the Balkan languages, the cultures of the Balkan

nations and the common elements between them," stated Shpresim, reading the school's promotional material. "And it has the principle that each speak the other's language, so we can learn the language better," concluded Shpresim.

"Wonderful, Shpresim, wonderful!" responded grandpa. "Educate! Educate correctly! Educate in a civilized way! Educate to be greater, as I told you before. Educate to look forward. To not forget who you have been, but neither to forget who you should be or become!"

"Yes, grandpa," said Shpresim, and wished him a good day.

"Have a good day!" said grandpa.

"Ајде, Зоки!" ("Come on, Zoki!") yelled Shpresim.

"Tani jam duke ardhur!" ("I am coming!") responded Zoran.

Translation: Vjosa Ajdini

Caricaturist

Bojan Todorović

That Saturday night, the alarm went off at the time when I usually go to bed. After my morning routine, I got in the car and set off. Every fifteenth of the month, there's a fair in Šid, a small town in Srem on the border between Serbia and Croatia. I know my way there off by heart, every bump in the road, every pothole, every unusually shaped tree and ridiculous house. The sun started coming up and the sky looked as if it had been drawn in pastels, much prettier than any sunset. Limp sunflower petals started perking up. They made my thoughts wander across the Pannonian August-scape. Though I enjoyed the drive, going to the fair always felt like a punishment. I was meant to have the longest school holiday of my life, take the entrance exam for university like my peers, but my father's illness kept us off track longer than expected. When I graduated from secondary school at the end of May, I took over with the market because dad was ill. As the summer ran its course, bringing us closer to his recovery, I decided I would leave Serbia when he was all better. Day had fully broken as I waited outside the booth to pay for my two meters of stall space at the market. Though the sun had seared through the windshield, the Košava wind came in such strong gales that I needed a vest. Grains of sand and soil got into all the pores of my body, even my mouth, so my teeth produced sounds as if they were cracking each other. I parked the car and crossed

the road to the tent for some coffee to help me wake up. Only a few of the tables were occupied. There were already ten lambs and five piglets roasting by the tent. Dad's friends Marko and Pinki sat at a table by the bar, so I waved and went over to join them. The two of them, guys in their early fifties, sat back in their chairs, caressing their belly buttons on their protruding hairy stomachs, their bare feet resting on top of their flip-flops. Gusts of wind would knock over a parasol from time to time and disperse the orange-grey embers beneath the piglets and lambs into the air, making them stick to people's hands, so they would blow on them to get rid of them. A moustachioed man selling sunflower seeds, peanuts and chocolates came down the road, crying out his wares in some strange rhythm. The noise went up a few decibels as people started arriving at the fair. When I went to unload my goods, Marko and Pinki told me I was crazy to do it myself, better to give a hundred dinars to one of the "darkies" milling about quietly. Marko was soon lecturing me on the hordes of people who had set their sights on Europe, to steal jobs and change the demographics. Pinki added that since we were giving them shelter, the least they could do was to contribute in some way. Statements like these reverberate all around, from the tent, through the cafes, to the sellers at the market and secondary school teachers, people are spreading this contagion like rats, it emanates from their mouths like bad breath. I left the tent and went to my car boot to start unloading. I first took out the metal components of the stall made up of dozens of metal rods with hooks on both ends. When I had set it up, I placed the wooden boards on it and covered them with two large white tablecloths embroidered with flowers in red and green thread. Slowly, I started arranging my goods, equipment for agricultural machines, starting with the larger components such as the universal joints, the water pumps, the oil pumps, headlights and the rest. At one point, two guys showed up by Marko's and Pinki's stalls and started unloading their wares, while Marko and Pinki remained sitting in the tent drinking beer. The men arranged the goods on the

stalls intuitively, one working with different types of socks, the other with powders and cosmetics. A thousand more like them milled about the fairgrounds on Sundays, because just two kilometres down the road was a refugee camp, one of many along Serbia's border with neighbouring countries. They were put in a camp encircled with wire, reminiscent of a concentration camp. One of them, having finished unloading the various consumer goods, went to the tent to get those hundred dinars from Pinki. The other one was still busy with the socks, so I nodded and mumbled something like "hey" and he blinked in confusion. He asked me in English whether I needed anything, I said I didn't and asked him what he was doing here and what his name was. Just then, an older man came up to my stall to ask about the price of the AC pump for the IMT tractor. Glancing at the guy next to me, he warned me to watch out in case the lad decided to blow himself up and take all of us with him. The thing is, my dad has this superstition where the first customer gets whatever they wanted to buy for free as this is a way to ensure good business for the rest of the day. Me, on the other hand, I charged this old man 25 euros for a pump that actually cost 20. I generally set the prices as I see fit, I don't stick to exactly what dad dictates. I watch the people moving along the street and if they glance avidly at a product on my stall, I know it's something they've been searching for and will be prepared to pay more than it's actually worth. Marko came back and started shouting at the guy arranging the socks, but I stepped in and told him to leave him alone and that he had given him an impossible task to arrange everything just as he wanted. Marko swore at both of us, so I told him to get lost and then I led the man away in some random direction. He thanked me and said his name was Abed, that he'd been at the camp for a month now, that volunteers give him food because he had already spent all his money bribing the police in Greece. He got beat up when he tried to cross into Hungary, but then he heard they were more lenient in Šid and he was determined to

find some way into the European Union so that he could finally reach Germany. We stopped for a moment.

"Who do you have in Germany?" I asked.

"No relatives, but a friend from the internet promised he would let me stay with him for as long as I needed until I got myself sorted."

"Oh, and what do you do?"

"I'm a reporter. I worked for a satirical magazine, writing columns and I've been drawing caricatures for years as a hobby. I don't publish them because I'm not that good. And you? The market?"

"Oh, don't ask. My old man is sick, so I'm filling in, but I'll be going off to Germany to my aunt's soon, too. I've worked in construction and I've got some haggling experience from the market, so I guess I'll find some job, ha-ha."

"Ha-ha. Well, I've never done anything else but write, never wanted to, plus I'm tied to my language, which I love, its music that I've been exploring for years and its words that I string together like pearls. I can't imagine writing in any other language, there's not a day goes by that I don't ask myself why I ever set off in the first place. In Germany you'll be a worker at least, I'll just be a big Nothing."

"Ah, don't sell yourself short, you can always be a caricaturist."

He laughed. I thought maybe the joke would offend him, but he managed to rise above his suffering and laugh in its face. He was very thin, his cheeks sunken, his nose slightly curved. I imagined him doing some physical labour and sorrow crept into my body like damp into walls. I didn't know anything about the war he had come from and at that moment nothing mattered to me except my own feeling of awkwardness for not being able to help him in some way.

I told him, "Look, I'll be in Germany in three months at most, if you need anything, here, write down my number, I'll definitely be using it for a while once I get there."

"Ok, sure, if I ever manage to make it over there," he said.

I stood still and watched him leave. He walked among the stalls with his head down, kicking a rock in the gravelly path here and there, oblivious to all around him, while everyone stared at his ragged appearance and slow gait. For a moment, oh the irony, I thought, how great it must be to be a refugee. No one knows you, you can piss or spit in the street, the locals will say you do anyway. The hubbub of people mixed with the music from various loudspeakers created a cacophony I could barely stand. Suddenly, I got worried about my stall and my wares, so I quickly ran back. The day went on as usual, people came and went, mostly to ask stupid questions rather than buy anything. The sun had reached its zenith and the wind blew in waves of heat. Dust flew around everywhere as I sat on the edge of my open car boot, greeting customers. I watched a man across from me tending to a barbecue grill. He wiped his sweat with his forearm, picked his nose and then put his hands into the raw meat to make burgers. The air between us was a haze of heat and it was like watching the heat mirages above the asphalt during Formula 1 races. Around noon, I called dad to tell him how much I'd made that day and that I would probably be heading home soon. Weeks and months passed, my departure for Germany came closer. Dad had somehow managed to get his kidneys up and running again, so he didn't need me to fill in for him at the market anymore. My aunt did good by me, I've had a few different jobs here already, I've got a girlfriend and lots of friends. Last night, I went out into town and as I was searching for a parking space, I got a text message that I initially ignored, but when I sat down in the cafe and took out my phone, I saw a notification from an unknown number and a message in English: "They published my first caricature, ha-ha. Abed."

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Tovarnik

Stefan Slavković

when she wakes up. Voices floating behind electric torches disturb her sleep the way rockets riddle Aleppo in her dreams. Unannounced, underground and targeted, until they touch her, as if in secret. Her body shakes with the ground, the marble beneath her whispering: rain is falling, little Ajša, cover your feet, they'll get cold. May in Tovarnik is nothing like May in Aleppo. Over there, spring is dryer than gunpowder. And gunpowder must be dry, otherwise it's not gunpowder, otherwise it doesn't explode, otherwise it wouldn't come into her dreams. But then again, Tovarnik is nothing like the Aleppo she left with her family almost a year ago. She vowed she would come back. The vow a matter of principle, not addressed to anyone. Mother mostly keeps going on about the books she used to discuss with her students, and father keeps shakily repeating: don't get separated, all this is normal. Ajša is eleven years old and smart enough to know that grown-ups change the outlines of normality to survive, to preserve their sanity. She also knows that she's supposed to stick close by because the road they are travelling is long and unforgiving. She also knows that sleeping in a graveyard inexorably changes the questions she can ask herself, though she still isn't sure how. There are too many drops, too many, to worry about that now. How many days have they been here already? Several probably, certainly more than one. Like this, from her impermeable dreams, she can

only pull her feet under the tarpaulin, like a cat ready to leap or a mouse on reconnaissance, and look at the stone beneath which she had slept. Simo Bursać, 1945-1993.

She sits up, yawns and moves her hair off her forehead. The sky has been purple for several nights. It nibbles at the horizon again, except for the forest, the perpetually stubborn forest from whose outline she can see electric torches approaching, carried by foreign languages. Reporters again. She gets up and looks off into the distance. The cops are still darting their batons, whispering amongst themselves, smoking and talking on their phones. When they arrived, father had said: these are on the one side, those are on the other; these won't let us through, those push us back; these had recently defended themselves, those had recently defended themselves, and this graveyard, here in no man's land between Serbia and Croatia was left defenceless, so it doesn't belong to either side; to top it all off, in their languages, which they claim are different, the word "tovar" means the same thing. Luggage, goods, baggage. Burden. The name Tovarnik intrigues him more than mother. Time passes quickly when you know a lot of things, he says. But mother also knows a lot of things. Just yesterday, she thrice repeated a story from a book where a guard wouldn't let some curious peasant through the door, insisting that there was an even more frightful guard behind him. The peasant eventually dies and the guard was probably right. Father interrupted mother only on her third retelling and winked at Ajša: this is a process, all of this is normal.

Simo watches her steadily, unwaveringly, with a crooked smile. Ajša wipes the picture with her bare hand and now someone different appears in it. Angled, tired, it seems, as much as she is herself. Thank you, she says and pinches his cheek. Look for your parents, Simo says and dissolves again under the drops. She's gotten used to them not being around, but she doesn't know what she'd do if she knew she was seeing them for the last time. Or, even worse, the second-to-last time.

One of the voices approaches her and points its electric

torch at her face. Ajša shields her face with her hand and sits next to Simo. Cooperate, he says. For her, the person is still just a jumble of stuttered words, English, sharp, and a pair of muddy boots. Sorry, she hears, sorry, kid, look up, and so on. Ajša pretends she doesn't understand because conversations tire her. Who would have thought that "Hello, Ajša, fourteen, from Aleppo, about a year, with mum and dad, there's a brother too, only three, we don't know," could get old. Words become stale, or even worse, hardened, and then they're like uneaten bread. For a while she was Latifa, eighteen, model, Kabul. Then she was Mai, twelve, almost thirteen, Tripoli. Libya, not Lebanon. Then she became Almasa, fifteen, Damascus, all alone. Now she is a girl tirelessly shaking both her head and her hands, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. Fine, shake your head and cooperate, Simo says, you know how it is. The reporter in them prefers it when you say something, while the human in them is no better than the other humans, they prefer you to be mute.

The voice grows silent and with a single motion spikes the torch into the ground. Behind the flickering light squats a man of thirty odd years. A camera sways around his neck. He extends a pale hand and Ajša shakes it. He leans towards her. The light from below illuminates his youthfulness, a sharp chin in stark contrast, and grooved above it two large eyes, clear and blue like the spring sky over Aleppo. He smiles and nods his head. A handsome fellow, says Simo, no doubt about it. Handsome, replies Ajša.

The man points at himself and says his name. Ajša does the same. The Sava laughs from its depths. If the name is anything to go by, you should like him, he's a dear one, it says. Ajša giggles. How are you, the man asks. Ajša shrugs her shoulders and shakes her head. You're very beautiful, he says. Ajša shrugs again and feels her palms growing hot. The man takes a chocolate bar from his backpack, put it to his lips and says: quiet now, this is for you. Ajša's pocket swallows the chocolate bar and her mouth fills with water. The man catches hold of

the long lens and asks: Can I take your photo? Yes, comes the answer from Ajša, like a detonation. Her voice escaped and startled her suddenly. Steam rises off her palms.

Ajša moves her hair to the side, rubs her eyes and smiles as the man turns off the torch and fiddles with the camera. He takes a few snapshots of her while looking at the glowing display. He's checking the settings, Simo says, it'll be soon now. The flash makes figures dance before her eyes; she rubs them again and feels the chocolate wrapper rustle beneath her elbow. She takes it out, unwraps it and offers it to the man. He puts it aside. He points to her pocket and winks. Ajša says: no, no, no and takes it out again. The man takes the chocolate and puts it on the ground. He looks more serious. He's pressing the space between them with his whole hand, downwards, like an open box, and saying: take it easy. He fiddles with the camera again. He's really not hungry, Simo says, or maybe he just doesn't want a shot of you eating. You better put it back in your pocket.

The camera hides his face for a moment and his mouth gapes carelessly. It's alright, he says. Ajša smiles and imperceptibly puckers her lips. Up until a year ago, she would do that in front of a mirror. A finger waves in front of her. The man lets out a long sigh and gestures to her: be natural. After a long while, Ajša is surprised by someone's behaviour. She wants to say: I am natural, but the flashing camera stills her tongue. Instead, she smiles again, this time her lips flat, and tilts her head slightly to the side. The man drops the camera and grabs her hand, quickly, while pointing to his serious face with his other hand. I'm not doing something right, Ajša thinks, even though I'm acting naturally. And he's squeezing me too hard, this dear fellow, with both his words and his fingers. It's in Serbian, Simo interjects, I don't understand a word, but I understand fingers, kid, he's mad about something.

The man stops talking and moves his fingers from Ajša's hand to the tip of her chin. He lifts it towards the camera and uses a finger to push her lips down, like plasticine. Ajša

moves his hand away, he puts it back, and then one more time. Externally, this may look strange, Ajša thinks, like kung fu for beginners. She giggles. Roughly, with his whole hand, the man grabs her jaw, points the camera at her and, at just the right moment, moves his hand away. A burst of shots from the knuckle of his index finger. The flashing lights blind Ajša and the only thing she hears is: click, click, little Ajša, stay still, you'll go blind. Her peripheral vision returns, colourful arabesques break off, piece by piece, colliding and spinning. She shuts her eyes tight and kneads them with her fingers, gently, as if they were grapes. The darkness she's not looking at melts into the external darkness she cannot see. There's no one in front of her. The man has moved off a few paces and keeps walking through the mud, smiling and satisfied, in love with what he sees on his display. He gets lost among the black outlines of people. Look for your parents, says Simo, let me sleep.

Ajša gets up and for the first few steps, the only thing she's sure of is that the feet she sees beneath her on the ground are really hers. She takes out the chocolate bar. It too is real. She bites off a quarter and puts the rest back into the wrapper. A bite for mum, a bite for dad and one more for brother's little teeth. If he's gone, he'll be back. If he's lost, he'll find them. She is more certain of that than the feet beneath her.

She can hear cries and blows from the direction where the man went, like stifled clapping. There's cursing, Ajša thinks, but in the dark she cannot tell who is shouting or who is being clapped. The flashes of the gathered reporters, arranged around the fray in a crescent, randomly illuminate the agitation of muddy bodies, and their grimaces, deathly and alive. Another fight. She returns to Simo and lies down on her side. She yawns righteously and knowingly staves off sleep. She already knows what's on the other side. The plain next to the house, of the kind that are ubiquitous in Aleppo, all bulging and dry, will turn into excited clods of earth of its own accord. The passage leading to the playground will thunder then. Nothing will be left of the kitchen and dining room, save for

the intangible, unfathomable proof that they can be smashed to smithereens. She will then see, through heavy lids and hazy mornings, at the edge of wakefulness, she will see the rim of her bed, right next to pampered feet, she will see it shake. It's a terrible world where you can't see the rockets, she thinks. This time, however, through the dust and spasms, her father emerges, she's sure it's her father, with two bare feet hanging from his embrace and a small sleepy head resting against his chest. He's here, Ajša, look, this is all normal, he says. She hears her mother too: bismilah ir raham, ir rahim. But Aleppo calls to her, to die, tirelessly, every time

Translation: Ulvija Tanović

Biographical Notes

Abid Jarić was born in Duvno, BiH in 1950. He graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar. He has lived in Zenica since 1997, where he works as a secondary school teacher and headmaster. He has authored prominent articles on language, literature and pedagogical practice. His stories have been included in a number of collections and he has published four books: *Podgradinske priče*, *Velika propunta* (novels), *Bijelo na crno* (editorials, articles and commentary) and *Čovjek u vidokrugu* (short stories). He is also the recipient of multiple awards (Naša riječ, Ulaznica, Susreti Zija Dizdarević, Simha Kabiljo, Milutin Alempijević and others).

Contact: jaric.abid@yahoo.com

Adam Pakai was born in Belgrade, Serbia, in 1975. Concise in providing bibliographic data, without ambition or great expectations. Author of the published novels *Grobnica za Danila Kiša*, *Zavera otpisanih* and *Istina u laži* ili *Uloga za život*, and a collection of short stories, *Srbi*, included in the *Jugosloveni* edition. Luckier as a father than his daughter is to have him. A few friends, a smattering of vices, one Vespa scooter and a dog. Lives at the very edge of the Pannonian Sea confused by the land he sees all around.

Afrim Demiri was born in 1960 in the village of Sazli, in Ferizaj, Kosovo. He became interested in literature in the 1980s, writing poetry, short stories and news articles. His work has been recognised in several competitions. In 1994, the De Rada Literary Club published his collection of poems *Fjongo e zezë (Black Ribbon)*. Between 1997 and 2015, he worked as a correspondent for the newspaper *Koha Ditore*. In 2003 he received the Correspondent

of the Year Award from the Association of Journalists of Kosovo. He is the co-founder of the local newspaper *Ferpress* and the information editor at TV Tema.

Contact: af_demiri@hotmail.com

Andrea Popov Miletić, Novi Sad, Serbia, 1985. Author of the novel *Pioniri maleni, mi smo morska trava* (Treći trg, 2019) – long-listed for the NIN award and short-listed for the Vital award, Zlatni Suncokret. Winner of the short story competition at the 14th WH Fest (Široki brijeg, 2016). Won the 12th Prvenac Prize awarded by SKC Kragujevac in 2013 (authors under 35) for her book *Bezazlene crtice*. Short-listed for the Vladimir Devidé Haiku Award - IAFOR, Osaka, Japan 2012. Finalist at the 14th FEKP (Zagreb, Rijeka, 2015). Writes prose, essays and criticism for regional cultural magazines.

Contact: andrea.popov.miletic@gmail.com,
http://andreapopovmiletic.blogspot.rs

Anela Ilijaš is a young author and Japanologist of Croatian-Russian origin. She is a scholar of modern East Asian literature and a writer herself in her free time. Her works have won numerous Croatian and Russian literary awards, and she has also been awarded as a translator of novellas and poetry collections by Croatian authors into Russian.

Contact: anelchyili@gmail.com

Ante Storić was born in Šibenik, Croatia, where he lives and works. He graduated from the Dramatic Arts Academy in Zagreb. He is the author of a dozen music videos and short films, and one documentary. One of his short stories was published in the collection *Priča se (p)o gradu*.

Contact: ante.storic@gmail.com.

Anushka Minovska was born in 1986 in Skopje, North Macedonia. She has an MA in managing human resources in social work. Belle lettres, clean air, flower gardens and books, love and love returned – these things make up her fair wind. She finds inspiration in nature and in people in their simplest circumstances and she translates this into art. Of all art forms, the written word

and ballet represent the true Anushka. Every recognition and award she receives, she dedicates to Mirna, her greatest inspiration.

Contact: anuska.cvet@gmail.com

Arsim Jonuzi was born on 20 July 1989 in Kumanovo, North Macedonia. He completed his primary and secondary education in his hometown, and his university studies in philology in Skopje. He writes prose, poetry, and aphorisms, and he works on a variety of projects, including translation and teaching. So far he has published two of his own works as well as dozens of other translations.

Blagica Gjorgievska was born on 14 February 1960 in Prilep, North Macedonia. She has a degree in economics and is currently employed as an accountant in an accountancy bureau in Prilep. She is also a wife, mother and grandmother of a wonderful granddaughter. She has published poetry in the magazine *Stremez* from Prilep. She is a regular participant in the Poetic Markukule festival in Prilep and her poems have been published in the anthology published by this festival. She has twice won first place in competitions organized by Macedonian Radio Television.

Contact: bgjorgievska@yahoo.com

Bojan Todorović was born on 19 November 1992 in Šabac, Serbia. His works have been published in the literary collections *Na ulici gaze bose ljude* and *Sanjatorijum* as part of the CK13 Creative Writing Workshop in Novi Sad, as well as on various online literature portals such as *Strane*, *Eckermann*, *Rez*, and others. His poetry manuscript *Čarli ili (dobri dečaci loših država)* won the Milutin Bojić and Prvenac awards. The collection was published in late 2016. Bojan lives and works in Novi Sad.

Contact: bojantodorovic.tumblr.com, instagram.com/bojancharlie

Bojana Babić was born in Pančevo, Serbia, in 1990. She completed her BA studies in dramaturgy in Belgrade and her MA studies in film at universities in Portugal, Scotland and Estonia. She writes prose, film scenarios and plays. Her short stories have been published in the collections *Rukopisi* and *Odakle zovem*, and she

has claimed prizes in the competitions Ulaznica in 2013 and Stevan Sremac in 2015. She lives and works in Tallinn.

Contact: pedraparamo@gmail.com

Damjan Krstanović was born in 1984 in Osijek, Croatia, where he completed his BA studies at the Faculty of Economics. Unimpressed by economics, when he turned 30, he started actively writing. He has published the following short stories: *More* (Rijeka art and culture magazine RE), *Prikaze* (Vranac Prize for best short story in 2015), *2184* (finalist at the Sea of Words competition in Barcelona in 2015), and was a finalist of Lapis Histriae in 2017 with the story *Ispod površine*. He currently works as a Pannonian sailor and is still working on his first novel.

Danilo Lučić was born in Belgrade, Serbia (1984). He completed his BA and MA studies at Belgrade's Philology Faculty, Department of Serbian Literature. He has published the poetry collections *Beleške o mekom tkivu* (2013, the Branko Award) and *Šrapneli* (2017). He is the editor of the online literature and culture portal glif.rs and was previously an editor for the *Kontrast Izdavaštvo* publishing house. He was also the editor and moderator of ARGH! poetry readings. He is currently the co-editor of *Bosanska vila*, the oldest Bosnian-Herzegovinian magazine and the executive editor of *Zajednička čitaonica*, put out by KROKODIL. He is also a member of the editorial board of the Poezija Narodu project that works on promoting poetry. He lives and works in Belgrade.

Dženeta Rovčanin was born in Sarajevo, BiH in 1994. After secondary school, she started her studies in language and literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo. Her first published poem was included in the international poetry collection *More na dlanu – tijelo od soli*, followed by a poetry collection of ten young authors, *Poezijom mijenjam svijet*, published by the Zagreb based association Kultura Snova. Her works have also been published on the web portal *Čovjek-časopis – Literature Magazine*.

Contact: dzeneta.rovcanin@outlook.com

Edis Galushi was born on 6 March 1989 in Prizren, Kosovo. He completed his bachelor's degree in English language and literature

in Kosovo and Lithuania, and received his master's degree in the same subject from the University of Zagreb. His poetry and drama make a significant contribution to Roma culture and literature as he is one of the few Roma authors from Kosovo. Between 2007 and 2014 he worked as a journalist at Radio Television of Kosovo. He currently works as an English teacher at the Loyola Gymnasium (High School) in Prizren and from time to time as a translator of Albanian, Serbian, English and Roma.

Contact: edisgalushi@gmail.com, https://www.facebook.com/eddy.galjusi

Gabrijel Delić was born on 14 May 1998 in Zagreb, Croatia. The short story in this collection is also his first, but certainly not his last, published short story. He is confident that he will meet with Biber again in 2021 when the competition is re-launched.

Imer Topanica is known as a poet and prose writer from Kosovo. He is the author of three books published so far: a novel, *Udhëtaret (Travellers)*, Prince, Tirana 2013; the poetry collection, *Tufë Drite (Burst of Light)*, Rrokullia, Prishtina 2014; and another poetry collection, *Shënime të Pamjaftueshme (Insufficient Notes)*, Armageddon, Prishtina 2019. He has also worked as a journalist. His poems and stories have been published in literary magazines in Kosovo and Albania, including *Jeta e Re*, *Verbi*, *Ilz*, *Akademia* and *Oaza*. His works have been translated into English, Turkish and Serbo-Croatian.

Contact: i.topanica@gmail.com, https://www.facebook.com/imer.topanica

Isidora Petrović was born in Belgrade, Serbia, in 1976. After secondary school, she enrolled in the Faculty of Biology where she later earned a doctoral degree in molecular biology. Researching life is both a professional and a personal pursuit for her. Her stories and poetry have been published in the collections *Izgleda da će jugo*, *Reci ko te je ubio Gea* (Ars Antibari, Bar), *Moć reči* (Kreativno pisanje, Beograd). It must be that she is usually in the right place at the right time, otherwise none of it would make sense.

Contact: silibgd@gmail.com

Jovana Matevska was born in Bitola, North Macedonia, in 1991. She works as a psychologist. In October 2015 she published her debut novel, *Tambovski Snow*. The same year she was one of the awarded participants in the short story competition published by the newspaper *Nova Makedonija*. The title of the short story was *The Two Hands*. In August 2016 she digitally published her second novel, *The Letters in the Library*, and won the award of a project dedicated to introducing young authors. In October 2016 she was again one of the awarded authors in the *Nova Makedonija* short story competition, this time for her short story entitled *Somethingness*.

Contact: jovanaaa.bt@gmail.com,
https://memoaritenazelenookata.Wordpress.com/

Korana Serdarević is a writer from Croatia, born in 1982 (Zadar). She graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb with a degree in Croatian Studies and Comparative Literature. She translates from English for the dubbing of animated films and series. She works as a mentor and teacher of Croatian language and literature at the XII Gymnasium (High School) in Zagreb and is the author of new secondary school textbooks for Croatian language and literature. She has won a number of awards for her short stories and has published a short story collection, *Nema se što učiniti*, as well as a novel, *Eksperiment Irene Tot*.

Contact: korana.serdarevic@gmail.com, www.facebook.com/korana.neverin.

Lejla Kalamujić is a writer from Sarajevo, BiH. She has a degree in philosophy and sociology. She has published two collections of short stories, *Anatomija osmijeha* and *Zovite me Esteban*. She has also written two plays, *Ljudožderka ili kako sam ubila svoju porodicu* and *Ugasimo svjetlo*. Her short stories and plays have been translated into several foreign languages.

Contact: lejlakalamujic@gmail.com

Luiza Bouharaoua was born in Split, Croatia, and lives in Zagreb. She works as a writer, translator and cultural worker. She founded the Skribonauti Association. Her book of short stories, *Jesmo li to bili mi*, which was published in 2019, has had two print runs in

Croatia and was also published in Serbia in early 2020. For her first book, she received the Prozak Award for best unpublished prose manuscript, the Slavić Award for best debut work of literature in 2019, and the regional Edo Budiša Award for the best short story collection. She publishes photoprose at instagram.com/luizabou/

Maja Slavnić, from Serbia, has spent a third of her life in Vrdnik, a third in Belgrade and a third in Novi Sad. A former reporter. For the past ten years, she has been researching the secrets of PR. She reads a lot, writes a little.

Contact: maya.slavnic@gmail.com.

Marenglen Çano was born on 31 August 1948 in the district of Saranda in Albania. He served in the Albanian Airforce for almost thirty years in the maintenance of combat equipment. He is currently retired and living abroad.

Contact: marenglen@hotmail.it

Mario Merdžan was born in Zagreb, Croatia, in 1993. After graduating from a classical high school, he enrolled at the Law Faculty in Zagreb and earned a degree in administrative law. He is the author of short films that have been presented at a number of festivals and shows in Croatia and abroad. His first film was *Udaljeni glasovi* (2016), followed by *Kratki izlet* (2017). *Buđenje u strahu* (2018) is his third film and first medium-length film. In addition to directing, he also writes short stories, scripts and poetry.

Contact: mario.merdzan@gmail.com

Mehmed Đedović (1971), BiH, Tuzla. Writes prose, poetry, children's books, literary criticism, essays and articles for newspapers. He has published several books of short stories: *Tragovi*, *Osluškivanje*, *Čaj od nane*, *Kad se Bulbul vratio* and *Malo čudo*; novels: *Sjena kurjaka*, *Vodi je da teče*, *Onaj kojeg nema*, *Ćopak vodoravno*, *Legionar* and *Put znaš*; poetry: *Svjetlo lampe*, *Nešto se čudno događa*, *Obična voda*; as well as children's books: *Ime mi je Pahulja*, *Priče iz velike šume*, *Trava puna mrava*. He has received many awards and his works have been translated into several languages. He is a member of the Writers' Association of BiH.

Milan Vorkapić was born in 1953 in the village of Trojvrh, Ogulin Municipality, Croatia. He graduated from the Faculty of Pedagogy in Rijeka. In 1991 he emigrated to Serbia, for obvious reasons. He is a retired teacher. He lives in Vrnjačka Banja. He has received eight literary awards and is a member of the Playwrights' Association of Serbia.

Milica Vučković was born in 1989 in Belgrade, Serbia. She completed her BA and MA studies at the Applied Arts Painting Department in Belgrade where she is working towards a doctorate. During her studies, she attended a one-year programme in Bali, Indonesia as part of Darmasiswa, where she took part in various painting, drawing and sculpting workshops. She has exhibited her works in multiple collective exhibitions and has had nine solo shows to date. She has published her short story collection *Roj* (2014) and her novel *Boldvin* (2019). In 2017, she won first prize in the Biber short story competition.

Contact: milicavuckovic1@gmail.com

Monika Herceg was born in 1990 in Sisak, Croatia. She received the Goran Award for young poets for her manuscript *Početne koordinate* in 2017. The book was published in 2018 and received the Kvirin Award for young poets, the Fran Galović Award for best literary work about homeland and/or identity, the Slavić Award for best debut work in 2018 and the international Mostovi Struge Award. In 2018, she received the Na Vrh Jezika Award for best unpublished manuscript, and her book titled *Lovostaj* was published in 2019. In 2020, her third poetry collection, *Vrijeme prije jezika*, was published. Her poetry has been translated into a dozen languages and published in various magazines.

Contact: moherceg@gmail.com

Nada Jelinčić (Sinj, Croatia, 1958) works as a lawyer at the Sinj County Office. In 2016, she was the winner of the short story competition organised by *Kvaka* magazine and won second place in the 2016 Samobor City Library short story competition. She was short-listed in the short story competitions of the Karlovac Literary Circle in 2015, 2016 and 2017, the WHF competition in 2016, the 2017 Samobor City Library competition, and the Biber competition in

2016. Her stories have been published on web portals, in magazines and in short story collections.

Contact: nada.jelincic@gmail.com

Nadia Geras was born in France in 1963. She completed acting studies at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, Serbia, and film and TV direction studies at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Zagreb, Croatia. She is a two-time mother. She has lost her mother tongue four times. Despite this, she continues to write.

Contact: nadiageras@gmail.com.

Nemanja Raičević was born in 1976 in Novi Sad, Serbia, and has lived in Lisbon, Portugal. He has published three short story collections: *Priče* (2002), *Nije kasno smejati se* (2009) and *Na proputovanju* (2014). His stories have been translated into English, Hungarian and Romanian. They have been published in literary magazines and included in the following anthologies: *Antidepresiv*, ed. Mirjana Bobić-Mojsilović; *Plejlista sa početka veka*, eds. Ivan Antić and Slavoljub Marković; *Prostor za mokrog psa*, KC Grad; *Pucanja – izbor iz mlade srpske proze*, Službeni Glasnik; *Najkraće priče srpskih pisaca*, Gramatik.

Contact: nraicevic76@yahoo.com

Nora Verde (Antonela Marušić) was born in 1974 in Dubrovnik, Croatia. She has a degree in Croatian language and literature. She published her first book of poetry, *Sezona bjegova*, as a student. She is the author of the book *Posudi mi smajl*, the novel *Do isteka zaliha* and the book of stories *O ljubavi, batinama i revoluciji*. She is one of the initiators of the Vox Feminae feminist movement (www.voxfeminae.net) where she has been a writer and editor since 2011. She is also a contributor to a host of Croatian and regional media and portals dedicated to independent culture, media, literature, music and human rights.

Sandra Cvitković was born in Doboj, BiH in 1992. She completed her MA studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Mostar. Her poetry has been published in the collections *Rukopis 39*, *REZ* and *Garavi sokak*, and on the portals Strane and Astronaut. Her first poetry collection, *Lucidni Zapisi*, won the Zdravko Pucak Award. She

spends her working days in Munich and her weekends wherever they may take her.

Sanja Mihajlovic-Kostadinovska (1982, Skopje, North Macedonia) is an assistant professor in Spanish literature at the Blaze Koneski Faculty of Philology in Skopje. She has published the novel 517, the winner of the New Blood literary competition in 2015, a collection of very short stories, *(Un)Limited Models of the Short Story* (2018), and a story for children entitled *Little Dreamer* (2019). Her short stories have been published in Macedonian, Serbian and Spanish in several magazines and anthologies, and she has also participated in several short prose festivals. She is an active member of the Macedonian Association of Translators and Interpreters (MATA).

Slađana Ljubičić (1979) lives in Novi Sad, Serbia. She studied psychology at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Novi Sad. She has worked as a reporter and as a psychologist counsellor for war veterans and their families. She is an activist and adventurer, and the mother of one wide-eyed little boy.

Contact: sladjana021@gmail.com,
www.pismasinu.wordpress.com

Slađana Nina Perković was born in 1981 in Banja Luka, BiH. She completed journalism studies at the University of Banja Luka and political communication studies at the Sorbonne. She is the author of the short story collection *Kuhanje* and the novel *U jarku*. She lives, works and writes dividing her time between Banja Luka and Paris.

www.sladjanaperkovic.com

Stefan Slavković was born in 1986 in Belgrade, Serbia. Father and husband. Recipient of the Danilo Kiš Award for best MA thesis in General Literature and Literary Theory. Reporter for the Belgrade weekly *NIN* and the *Liceulice* magazine. He has published several stories on literary portals and in magazines. He plays the drums, but is not a drummer.

Tamara Kovačević was born in Belgrade, Serbia. She started writing short stories and a few poems at literary workshops led by Lidija Dimkovska. Her stories have been published in the dual language collection of short prose and poetry *BIĆE BOLJE – BO ŽE* of the Danilo Kiš Serb Cultural Centre in Ljubljana, as well as in other independent regional publications.

Vladimir Tabašević (1986) was born in Mostar, BiH, under the full name of Vladimir Bošnjak-Tabašević, of a Croat father and a Serb mother. On the eve of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, he moved with his mother to Belgrade. His work includes the poetry collections, *Koagulum* (2010), *Tragus* (2011), *Kundak* (2012) and *Hrvatski kundak* (2014), and the novels *Tiho teče Misisipi* (2015), *Pa kao* (2016) and *Zabluda Svetog Sebastijana* (which received the NIN Award in 2018). He is the founder and one of the editors of the internet magazine *Prezupč* (prezupc.com) concerned with class relations in society.

Željka Horvat Čeč was born in Čakovec, Croatia in 1986. She has a master's degree in Croatian language and literature. She has published a book of prose titled *4 brave* and a poetry collection titled *Moramo postati konkretni*. She is a member of the international poetry project, Versopolis. She received the 2013 Ulaznica Award for poetry and her poems have been translated into English, German, French and Swedish. She lives in Rijeka where she organises literary debates called 'Pisac i građanin'. Woman, mother, footballer, antifascist. She is a loud supporter of Arsenal, Rijeka and the Packers.

biber.nenasilje.org

CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

821(497)-32(082.2)
821.163.41-32
821(497):929

BIBER 0a : short stories on reconciliation / [editorial matters Ivana Franović] ; [translation Alexandra Channer ... [et al.]]. - Ed. in English. - Belgrade ; Sarajevo : Centre for Nonviolent Action, 2020 (Belgrade : Standard 2). - 251 str. ; 20 cm

Тираж 400. - Str. 6-8: Foreword / Ivana Franović. - Biographical notes: str. 241-251.

ISBN 978-86-89845-12-9

1. Franović, Ivana, 1974- [уредник] [аутор додатног текста]

COBISS.SR-ID 27698185