Basements And Other Museums of Stillness

Stories

by

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ABSTRACT

Set in the former Yugoslavia, contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Midwest America, the collection of short stories follows the complicated trajectory of war-survivor to refugee and, then, immigrant. These stories---about religious prisoners who are not at all religious, about young, philosophizing boys tempting the bullets of snipers, about men retracing their fathers' steps over bridges that no longer exist---grapple with memory, imagination, and the nature of art, and explore the notion of writer as witness.

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[1] I hear, the axe has bloomed,
I hear, the place is not nameable,
I hear, they call life
our only refuge.

Paul Celan, "I Hear, the axe has bloomed"

Deathwinked

We called sniper alley the alley of wolves. We were young and boys and had nicknames for everything, first of all the girls. There was the Nanny, the Epilogue, and the Soulcrusher. We thought these nicknames very clever, breathless with truth. We were thirteen and easily excited. To be killed by a sniper meant to be deathwinked, a verb. I came up with that. I had a minimum understanding of poetry, a maximum amount of fear.

We ran across the alley of wolves to test our recent manhood, among other things. We ran because there was nothing better to do. We ran because it was more bearable than standing still. We were young and anxious to be brave. We were practicing martyrs. Our fathers were gone; mine gone forever, heaven-swallowed one winter night at the front. Miralem's father was still at the front, firing his gun at the threatening distance. All three of us dreamed of soldierhood and feared that the war would soon run out. Edin's father had come back from the front and was gone in yet another way, halfway between the gone of Miralem's father and the never coming back of my father. He was crazy, according to the completely not insane. He spoke the names of the dead, but not in his sleep, like normal people. He confused the living for the dead, which worried the living. We all smiled at him and pitied him the best we could. We smiled at him and measured our sanity against his truth. Edin took it all in stride, in run, explaining it away through philosophy, intellectualizing the problem until the problem grew wings. His father's rants

did not bother him, but it bothered his family, who wanted to institutionalize the father. But there were no institutions left. Edin argued that to call somebody insane was ridiculous in time of war. Nobody in his family listened to him; he was thirteen, which is its own form of insanity.

Our fathers were gone, and our mothers had no authority over us. We loved them, our unreluctant Slavic mothers, but we loved our courage more. “War is our true mother,” Edin once said, inspired and dumbfounded. “Unable to give birth, men make war,” he said another time. Edin was the oldest by a month, a small lifetime, had slow blue eyes, and spoke deliberately, like a drunk wanting to be understood. He liked Kierkegaard; he liked the idea of Kierkegaard. He argued about religion, for and against it. His father had taught philosophy and was now insane, or within untiring reach of insanity. His family had been wealthy, but now money did not matter, had lost meaning. It was wartime and everything was free, and everybody on the eastern side of Mostar was equal as the dead are equal. The dream of Communism bloomed among casual shell bursts and articulate sniper fire, on the eastern side of a town without bridges. Eastsiders have nothing to lose but their lives, and an afterworld to gain. Alley-runners of all countries unite!

The family library lay in rubble, but some of the books had been saved, and being the only books left, they were many times read and meticulously understood by Edin. Edin came up with the name ‘alley of wolves’ and it had been his idea to run across it. To impress the Epilogue more than anything else. Larger reasons became apparent only later, and by virtue of their late arrival sounded like excuses. Ideas were Edin’s guardian angels; he had a whole tear- bright choir of them. Beyond the grave there will be singing.

He had bulletproof testosterone. A missionary's courage. There were doubters to convert to something less than doubt. There were detractors to prove wrong. And death proved everybody wrong, eventually, always. We congregated near a spilling set of trashcans, behind buildings bruised by mortar fire. Houses in every state of uninhabitable lined the alley on one side, walls left to stand as monuments to futility, while on the other side stood nothing, open space and a gravel path leading down to the river. And up ahead, the nothing-goal, more desolated houses and the mute storefronts of empty shops, and the stone remains of a mosque, with its third of a minaret, the promise of intermission and the burden, almost motherly, of the run back. A small and narrow street, strewn with garbage and garbage-scented, our ground of play. These adjectives come easy, self-compounded at birth.

Mostar, my city, you are far from me now, but I peek through the spyglass and you appear so near. In my third floor apartment, in the neverdesperate America of my childhood dreams, at my desk, armed with pencil and paper, sensitive as a landmine, fumbling similes like live grenades, I, the young, triple-tongued poet, write down the name of my birthcity like the name of a former lover. Mostar. Mostar, my city, stunned quiet. They took the Most, threw it into the river and made you unnamable. My city, one night you went dark all around me. You trembled and could not be embraced. The bombs fell on you, near-constant and heartbeatloud. I recommend war-tourism to any artist, poet especially, a month or so of up-close-death, a month, or twenty-three, of dark-houred explosions in a world maddened by sirens. You'll never lack material, or have to account for sudden mood swings, and you'll never lose at those drunken games between friends, intimate games, those poetic games of whosufferedmost.

Three floors are enough to kill a man. The truthhearing poet gives the truthsharpened tip of his pencil a lick, he writes: Three floors are enough to kill a man/There can be no hate without memory/To love is to imagine/In the white noise of other feelings. That with his pencil the poet writes the truth is implied, was implied, is implied no longer. He gives the pencil another swift lick, he writes: All children pretend/Their games are serious/All games have rules/Even the games of animals/Have rules. Our game had but a few rules. If you ran last yesterday, you must run first today. That was one rule. If you ran across the alley to the other side, you must run back. That was rule number two, for there was another way back, sniper-less but long. And there were rules of which we were ignorant, the secret rules of the sniper. But whether the sniper followed any rules was left to debate. Sundays we did not run. Yesterday, Miralem had run last; he would run first today. Who would run second was decided by a coin toss. Edin would run second. I, last. Tomorrow I would run first. Tomorrow I would not run.

The time leading up to the first run was the happiest time of the day, our concentration lax, our muscles fearful and limber, the words between us intimate, unexpected, binding. Sometimes we sang. It was morning, during the week of lentil soup. Miralem stretched his arms and legs, while Edin and I sat on opposing stubs of stone arguing in war-hushed tones. The blue sky promised no rain, and the sun looked a blotchy and vague yellow. Miralem threw one arm behind his back and pressed the bent elbow with his other hand, his legs wide apart, his torso stout and armless. The amber-sheen of autumn leaves, the gazelle-like wind, the abashed leaf- rustle, they all spoke in different languages about the same things. Beauty. Nature. Truth. Poetry. We spoke of philosophy, Edin and I, while Miralem quietly and thoughtfully stretched, and in the new

dawn's unraveling silence, under a sky morningpureblue, the sniper fired the first shot of a long day. Bullet, trashcan, a metal ping almost adorable, almost loud. We turned our heads toward the sound, then toward each other, then back. We resumed our conversation and Miralem joined us. He was arguably pretty, one of those who narrowed their eyes when they grinned, one of those who gestured with their fists. His eyes were green, a little blue, and he had a full Slavic forehead, broad and thought-pale. He was short but athletic; he was short and had a temper. He did not like tall girls. He did not like the Soulcrusher, with whom I played games in death-proof basements. There we spoiled each other for our future selves. He brought daily lilies for the Nanny and kissed her deeply, with a more meaningful tongue, with more daring and saliva than I ever did Selma. I write her name like the name of something lost. She knew how to swing the hips she did not have. She knew how to haggle good enough and long enough to make you give up everything. With her smile she fooled you into laughing at yourself. With her laughing eyes she crushed your soul. She dreamed of a husband with money. She dreamed of big hips. A skirtful of memories, everything I have, for a handful of her skirt.

Miralem had played soccer before the war, before the cemetery turn of every idle field, before the dead packed stadiums; he was fast, his run was urgent and blind, it was a sprint, and he ran with his head down. And yesterday he'd tripped and fallen a yard or so from safety. The sniper had fired and missed. He did not fire again. A little dust rose, it settled. Miralem was on the other side by then, bent over, with his hands on his knees, breathing greedily. He did not fire again as if to let us take in the full magnitude of his miss, or to impress us with his patience. The confidence of those with death on their side, how could we ever understand it? Miralem said nothing when we got to him, his tender

calm edging on some kind of bewilderment, and after the run back, we walked home in silence, and parted from each other in silence, the silence of raised stakes. Now Miralem ridiculed the sniper, saying that he missed because he was a bad shot, and not on purpose, saying he was some fat, pimply boy playing at war, and not a man of many battles, not a man at all, just a novice at death and not worth the fantasy of our revenge. But Edin wouldn't have it. No, to him he was a man and a master, a Machiavellian sniper-prince, with a nihilist's love of beauty; his aim is steady and true, he shoots you with a shot made of lead, his slit eye is Catholic blue. Edin had read his Celan, saved from the rubble. Death is a master from the Balkans. But it is more intimate than that. He is a close relation, the mysterious uncle bearing strange gifts at each prophetic visit, the one who winks at you behind your parent's back. We were brought up on his knee, on the black milk of his wisdom. Our blood is his blood. The one who waltzes you across the alley of wolves, the one who lets you stand on his feet as you move against each other in this gently wicked dance. Our songs are his songs. He sings into your hair as you dance. He whispers in your ear, forbids you to stop.

Miralem ran across the alley, with his head down, with his head only slightly lifted toward the end. Alive on the other side, he grinned at us, his eyes almost closed. Then it was gone, the grin, memory-wiped, collapsed into a thinking pout. The sniper had not fired. Sometimes he didn't. And when he didn't he blessed our run with innocence, like running before the war. Sometimes that was what we wanted. We had run for a month now, had been in this war for years, and weren't getting any wiser. So why not go back? To a time of sparrow-enswirled minarets and non-firewood lindens, to a time of packed café terraces and their murmur like rushing water, when death and its mirror image, life

in war, were as distant as nightmares after waking. In front of our buildings, punched blue and black by rockets, was a large courtyard, and this courtyard had been the setting of our first game, a game of collection. Under the spell of sunlight and tall grass, we'd search for bullet shells and find also glinting syringes, uncapped bottles of pills, an occasional limb abstracted from the body. One day, we found a rocket shell the size of a baby seal, unexploded. We dared each other to touch it. Edin moved toward it, extending an unsteady finger. "BOOM," Miralem yelled at the point of contact, and Edin jumped back. Miralem laughed and Edin fumed. They fought it out, and afterwards both fumed. And as they sat on opposite sides of the projectile, not looking at each other, I got up from my seat and placed my palm against its belly. The metal was scorched by the sun and felt smooth and naked to the touch. I let my fingers linger haughtily, waiting for them to notice. I felt an upward rush of courage, like a declaration. Miralem and Edin joined me, our three hands pressed against the hot metal in a silent oath. That was when we knew we wanted to be soldiers and never die.

Beyond the broken-down stores and houses, beyond the kneeling minaret, on the side which we first ran to reach, was their headquarters, in the sandbagged gymnasium of a shell- bitten and nearly roofless elementary school. We peeked on three soldiers, all three young; we watched them gather by a corner table, watched two of them sit on upturned milk crates and the other stand; watched them eat lentil soup from a can that was warmed by old-fashioned fire; watched them listen to a portable radio as they ate with no hope of satiation; watched their hands busily scratch and their lips seldom move; watched all three turn toward the radio when the human voice got lost behind an unrelenting tearing of sandpaper. The soldiers went back to patrol the rubble and we

watched them walk away, toward danger, unafraid and amused. There was something solemn about their amusement, something sensual and elusive about the way they carried themselves, in their warstained boots and burden-heavy uniforms, something eerily casual about the guns slung over their shoulders, lustful and sentimental about their lack of helmets. What bleak respect we had for them, all God-like and dusty-loined. They were not so much defenders of our city as defenders of our dream of the city. The odds were against them, but the crowd on their side, the cheer of the wind in the trees.

We wandered about for a while, wasting time before our run back. It was getting to be noon, the shadows growing long and ragged. Women appeared on the street, braving their way to market, located makeshift in one of the rear classrooms, smuggled goods. Once, we had looked for ingredients to make a cake for my birthday and found nothing but a nestful of eggs. We had the party in a basement, with no cake, but with many candles, more than was my age. In another yard, a new breed of child explorers rummaged for shells in the overgrown grass, their pockets full of singing. Further east, toward Stolac, a blue-grey tower of smoke had risen, straying from its origin, swallowing houses whole along its path. We saw the absence of the bridge and a gentle curve of river below. The Old Bridge was gone, but the Neretva River was still here, flowing bright and prewar green. The river doesn't care. The river has seen worse. The river is not concerned with what we throw in it: debris, bodies, blood and stone, the water stitches it all to a mend, never stopping to wonder what we send downriverflowing. We climbed a garage and flopped down on our bellies. With our voices love-timid, our stares remote, we looked over our half of the city. Behind us, the boughs of a large tree whose name we had not yet learned shielded us from danger. Green mountains enclosed us on all sides,

separating us from our enemies but not from ourselves. The piled smoke rose still higher, spread out greater than a cathedral, more clouded than the idea of God. Sparrows chirped, crests chirped, gunfire chirped. The waxwing had flown south, summer was over. The dandelions had been beheaded; the lilies had hanged themselves. It was autumn now and nothing bloomed, except the yearlong ax.

Miralem was on the starting side again, alive and well and one day braver, while Edin stood on the edge of safety, waiting to run. He stood just behind a little shop, its interior grey and plundered. Before the war, I'd run there to get emergency Vegeta for my mother, and sometimes its owner, old and Hellenic Mr. Salemovic, would call me into the back and ask me to stack some items for him, rewarding my impromptu work with free candy. I remember red jars of Ajvar, tall glass bottles of Laro Juice, and those compact silver cans of Eva Sardines, with a waving walrus dressed as a sailor on the blue cover. I remember Dorina Chocolates and Bananko Bars, Bajadera Pralines and Napolitanke Wafers, and Jaffa Cookies with their chocolate skins and orange jelly hearts. I remember a balance scale on the counter, with numerous dust-colored weights in increasing sizes of mass; I remember the slow sway of its thin shoulders, the delicate movements of its plates, their eventual, hard-earned symmetry. One surging whiff of Vegeta and I'm back in a light-filled kitchen, beside my mother who smells of red vegetables and spices, standing innocently in the way and marveling at her instinctual measurements. Just one whiff and I remember my mother, half-orphaned by one war, wholly divorced by another, tasting the sauce and smiling down at me her expert opinion. Music comes from the living room, where my father is taking his afternoon nap. This tells me that we already ate, that the food being prepared is for tomorrow, that despite the

Sunday texture of this memory, this is more likely a work day, a day my mother will end at the hospital, where she will begin the new day, working at her typewriter, giving injections, changing sheets. The number of coffee cups on the table tells me there will be guests, our next-door neighbors, a Muslim man who always guessed the card in my hand and his Catholic wife who could read the future in the muddy remnants of the coffee.

Edin stood on the brink of danger, waiting to prove his bravery. But in war everybody is brave, even the coward. Even the sniper at his post, beguiling the fates. The three soldiers patrolling the rubble, they were braving another day of boredom, their courage doomed. Huddled around the radio, they waited for the news to tell them what they already knew. The war will not end today. The children in the tall grass, in the bloom of their inexperience, they were brave without knowing. The women in search of food, carrying their grief inside them like a long pregnancy, their bravery no conciliation for their loss. Everybody is brave in wartime. Everybody wise, even the fool with his warning. We were just braver, the answered prayers of our patient tormenters. Victims of our own death-mined wisdom. Strange prideful lambs, we made our courage our God. Like every rose is a flower, every Slav boy is an Icarus.

Edin was on the verge of his run, waiting for a favorable sign that only he knew how to tell. Then, suddenly, he was off, his footsteps echoing bluntly in the empty street, his thin vicious elbows stabbing the air behind him. The sniper fired and Edin crashed to the soundless asphalt. Deathwinked.

I thought I screamed, I thought I tore my mouth with my voice, but my cry, its angular fury, was only imagined. I took a couple of steps toward Edin, to soothe the distance between us, but Miralem raised his palm and I obeyed. We looked on from the

disbelief of safety, looked at his unflinching body, waiting for loyalty to move us, for fear to release us, for courage to break us free. I wiped my tears on my sleeve; I looked at Miralem and knew. He lowered his hand and we ran. A new game had began, a game of retrieval. I grabbed him under his armpits and Miralem grabbed him by his ankles. We carried Edin home, running. The sun was in my eyes; I thought I would trip. I felt the weight of his body like never before. The sniper did not fire.

And now? What now? Why stop one's war story in mid-exhalation? Why bring in the present to take revenge on the past? The past, which is our only refuge. Now my sleep is fragmented by nightmares. Now I'm ghost-weary, my tongue a cripple. Now I lean out of my window and think about ending this chance-riddled life, but can never keep my eyes closed long enough. Now I walk barefoot in my apartment trying to catch in a mason jar every flicker of my insanity. Now I sit at my desk and write.

The sniper did not fire.

Now that the war is over we laugh that it ever began. But even now we hunger for the right man to lead us down the wrong path again. For even now, in some small, divided village, a Milosevic is waiting to be stubbornly born.

Now the exhumed graves are again silenced with our soil.

Now the past is burned like sheets of infidelity.

Now, in comfortable prisons, under supervision kind and condescending, sworn enemies bond over a game of cards.

Translated from the Bosnian

7 June 1993

Dear Arabela,

They came for me like for any other, in the morning, knocking innocently. That freckled boy, the baker's son, frowning like a servant, and Goran, looking away and smiling the smile of the eternally blameless. I took what I could, what was left in the apartment, a suitcase of clothing and essentials, and walked in between them down the stairs. The courtyard was full of men with suitcases or rifles and the indistinguishable cries of women. They were rounding up the whole neighborhood, herding them onto buses, young and old. What a scene, Arabela, what a terrible and familiar scene, with that terrible and familiar disorder with which we do everything.

That was three days ago, I'm sorry I could not write to you sooner. But there is not much to write, not really. The bus drove us to Heliodrom, and after two nights in the sports hall I was put into a room on the second floor of the military college. They have boarded up the only window here, but sunlight peers in through the cracks in the wood. There are too many of us in the room, but that is to be expected, along with the smell, the heat, the restlessness and boredom. Mira's son is with me, as I'm sure she has told you. He is doing fine, though I can feel my age against his impatience. He paces like a teacher. Today they brought in three more, including Mirsa, who stood in the center and asked what corner we use to piss in. We laughed, and so should you. There are toilets in the hall, there is food and water enough, and Goran is careless with his cigarettes. Life goes on. But to write about life here in more detail seems pointless, as absurd as describing the

weather to you. Do not misunderstand my silence as a stoic withholding. And do not believe the gossip of Mira and other women. They exaggerate, it is their right.

So far I have been spared any labor at the front because of Jadranko. He says it is the least he can do and I'm beginning to believe him. My back only occasionally flares up, from sleeping on concrete. I have not heard about Haris since they took me. I have written no poems.

Arabela, I miss you in the morning and I miss you at night. I miss the shudders of your body when you sleep. The murmur of your breath and its comfort. The animal sounds your stomach makes in the dark. I miss waking up to you still asleep, on your side, with both hands between your knees, in the silent radiance of our bedroom. I miss those mornings when you roused yourself with a sigh and came into the living room where I read, naked the whole flawless length of you, carrying in your hand your numb arm, fish-heavy and tingling with pain. I miss how you would let me straighten it out and rub it back to life, then kiss you from elbow to palm. Arabela, I miss you in the morning and I miss you at night, I miss and I miss.

Keep writing to me often. Take good care of the baby by taking good care of yourself. And after every breakdown, gather yourself and stand firm, Arabela.

I love you and always will,

Alen

12 June 1993

Dear Arabela,

I remember. Of course, I remember. Behind my father's house, where the river narrowed with the willow trees on the banks, their boughs so close to the water that at the edges one could jump out and grab onto them, swing from them like the children did. And farther down the river, the old fishermen, catching trout and telling jokes as ancient as their bait, down where the river curved and broadened like a woman's hips. And you, your hips flickering in the green water, the brevity of your sunburned shoulders, the white flash of your armpits as you swam.

I remember the summer Jadranko and his family went to Istria and left the house to us. Our weeklong imitation of marriage, you called it. You disparaged marriage, the begetting of children, the whole tired idea of love, but forbade me to do the same. You said I could ruin your mood by just listing all the things I did not believe in. Do you remember that? We lay in bed until noon everyday, in a chaos of sheets, listening to American music and eating from your brother's garden. You whispered, You are a good man, as we listened to Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, as I tapped the beat of Tupelo against your blunt, musical ribs, as sunlight glared at the window's edge. Remember when we called "American music" all music that was not ours? Or French. You tipped the strawberries with cloudlets of whipped cream. I watched you eat.

Once that week, after a day of fighting, and a night of forgiveness, I watched you sleep because I could not. The window was open and the room full of the smell of pomegranates. The moon was pale and yellow. Your hair was tinged with the day's

nicotine and your stomach vied with the nightbirds. You turned haphazardly in your sleep and I turned with you, feeling your heartbeat in unexpected places.

Nothing has changed here, our lives go on. I worry only about Nermin, the powerful restlessness within him. The guards have begun to goad him. He talks about breaking out. Where will you go, I tell him. This cannot go on forever. We must come to our senses, while we can still look into each other's eyes. Mirsa says that the circus has come to town and we were its performers. The trapeze artists and fire breathers, tamable beasts. A nice metaphor, but I cannot make any use of it now. I'm as unthinking and unfeeling as a stone. I have only enough for these letters. Breaking up parts of what I have written here into stanzas might yield a poem. Not a good one, but a familiar one, and maybe of some comfort to you.

Keep writing, Arabela. Do not struggle alone, write your pain down and I will feel it. But do not linger in pain. Remember to let your hands wander over your belly for me.

I love you and always will,

Alen

16 June 1993

Dear Father,

Are your dreams still blameless? Is right still distinct from wrong? Like milk from blood, you said. Is the law still heavier than the cross, still the soil greater than the veil? You were always a man of logic and common sense, a Sisyphean passion, an earthly saint. You gave to your country until nothing was left.

In your heart you knew each man's vice, but you held them all equal before the eyes of the law. You said intuition is intuition but a law is a law. You were well regarded and treated each man fairly. You said charity is charity but a law is a law. Do not let them trample your conviction or poison your faith, you said. Do not let them turn you against your brother, for there will always be a wolf among the devoted hounds. And when misery comes to your door in the shape of a neighbor in uniform, do not let revenge turn your heart into a fist, because revenge is only revenge but a law is a law.

Father, you dreamed of a paradise on earth and believed it was home. I remember our walks together when I was a boy, the beauty you tried to impart to me, the pride. The rattle and crunch of our country roads, the soft tapping of the cobblestones in Old Town, how they amplified our footsteps, like we were a small procession of fathers and sons. Sounds of our land, you said. You lived for the smell of lilies, so overwhelming in the morning, for the sight of butterflies flitting over daisies and dandelions, a snail on a leaf. Sometimes, on our walks, your eyes would moisten, becoming a fainter green, almost

transparent, and once I even saw a tear form on your cheek before the wind took it. You said no stone is just a stone in the country of your birth. You knew the names of trees.

Nothing binds a nation like victimhood and pride, but ours was bound by victimhood alone, shared wounds, a long history of the knife and the wire. For you Yugoslavia was too logical of an idea to fail, inevitable and correct, an invention of nature. But you were wrong, father, our state was not a mountain, its law not a stream. You were wrong, not every pond within our borders was a watering place. Your laws have failed me. Your faith has deserted me. Your wrongs have wrecked my life. The nation you built has fallen into the nothing you built it from. Yugoslavia is dead. Communism is dead. Both died in their sleep, like you.

Sometimes I wonder about your ideals, father, if without them the wind would have blown you away. Communism, that hollow faith, that blackout among stars, what would you have been without it? Without the law you practiced all your life, the land you cultivated only in your dreams. Father, you logician and saint, you sensible and fatal man, with a soul full of ideals and landscapes, I hope you have now reached the paradise you thought your country to be, felt the love of a God whose indifference you were all your life indifferent to, and I hope you are at rest somewhere where rest brings happiness.

I love you, father, and can do nothing but love you,

Alen

23 June 1993

Dear Arabela,

I apologize for not responding to you sooner, but they have not let me see the doctor until now. It is easy to judge the progress of the war by the guards' moods. There is nothing new to report. I'm doing well. My back is only a little sore. I have a beard now. I have also gotten some new clothes from Jadranko, but they barely fit me. And the cigarettes he brought me are not my brand, though I can exchange them with Goran. There is nothing to write, Arabela, and I'm tired of writing nothing. I only live to read your letters. I cannot make my loneliness eloquent or my pain wise. I'm tired of trying. I'm tired of writing to an addressable but unreachable you, in only the language of loneliness and pain. I'm tired of memory and its clumsy echo. You tell me not to become desperate, to stay hopeful, yet all hope is desperate. But you can tell from my handwriting that I'm calm. Should I tell you about the hunger that wakes me before the guards, the thirst which is much crueler, the humiliation of running in a circle while singing their songs? Should I tell you how I miss my brother? My feet are bruised, my skin hangs from my bones, and my asshole itches. My hands are dry and cannot make a fist. I lay in a small room full of shipwrecked men. I smell like an animal smells. But I will not cry out of guilt over you or pity for myself. I will not shed any tears for the living or the dead. Prison is a dry place. Three days ago I saw Nermin get beaten for a reason that was no reason at all, get beaten until they could not beat him no more, his teeth scattered on the ground, his mouth red and shapeless. I only chose one hell over another, mine over yours.

24 June 1993

Dear Son,

I close my eyes and I see you as you might look someday when you read this letter, tall like your uncle, as handsome as your mother, with her beautiful eyes, her beautiful heart, her soul. I see you in the yard of the building that was to be your home, standing in front of it as if for a picture. I close my eyes and there you are, in your room, my former office, at the roll-top desk, my desk, reading this letter. The dark is intimate, but it is not home. I open my eyes and you are gone.

My son, I do not write to you out of guilt or shame. I do not write to explain my reasons for anything, to confess or repent. I write to give you a history of myself, so that you are not without knowledge. I write to keep you company, so you do not feel abandoned. I write to you to have a reason to write, my son, my son, my son.

You know where I was born, and when. You know that I was the older of two boys. And you might have heard that my father, your grandfather, was nothing if not a good man. He had good looks and a good education. He had good taste, sonnets and sonatas. He was strict in his realism and his realism was practical and good. He was fussy and self-assured. Doubt and terror never assailed his mind. He was loyal to family, country and the law. What else can I write? I did not know him as well as I should.

As a child, he took me on walks through the city and countryside. He spoke of the history of our land and pointed out its beauty. He never talked more than on these walks. From our house on the banks of the Neretva we would go uphill into the city. On Fejic, people would stop and talk to him, their gestures playful and exaggerated, their voices

like the voices of actors. The cafes were full of men under tilted parasols calling out his name. We walked past mosques with their heavy grey domes and silent minarets, and father spoke of their beauty and their history and cursed their existence. Everyday we crossed one of the three main bridges, Lucki, Titov or the Old Bridge, depending on my father's whim, and went west toward Partizan Park, where he read while I played. Before going home, we would usually end up in some pastry shop on Avenija to have baklava with lemon juice.

On weekends, the family visited your grandmother's parents in Privorac. We walked through the copper and gold of fig trees and pear trees, past tall black pine and down sunlit grass to the bottom of Hum Hill, climbing a gravel road only used by sheep and their herders. My father's voice mixed with the sounds of animals and it seemed to come from as deep within him as the humming of bees or cry of the crows and sparrows that trailed us for the breadcrumbs. On those walks I learned about the Romans, the Turks, the Germans. I learned the names of our hills, our birds and trees. I learned more on streets and bridges, in orchards and on riverbanks, than in school.

Do the street names remind you of home, my son, or are they unpronounceable?

Your grandmother was a storyteller and jokester. She told stories of ghost children that swing from clotheslines and of an oddly shaped boy that lives trapped in spoons. She told these stories in a voice eager and warm, larger than her body, gesturing like a magician. I remember my mother in long skirts and light-colored blouses, swaying in the kitchen, her bare feet moving to a song on the radio. She would roll her hips and throw a free arm in the air. And when some favorite of hers came on, she would grab me

and dance me from living room to kitchen and back, our naked feet turning in the amber and blond light coming through the beech leaves.

What I miss the most is never seeing you run crying into your mother's lulling arms, never hearing her voice grow husky with endearments for you.

The rain is wrinkling the windowpane, my mother would say. She called butterflies drunks of the air, said their frantic wings were as silent as ghosts. She compared the yolk frying in the pan to the sun simmering in the sky. The blue of the sky blazes, she would say. She would make up stories about the lovers who carved initials in the pale-mottled bark of the beeches outside of our house, myths of eternity and longing. Both my parents wanted to describe their world to me, to show me the lurking wonders in familiar things. I tried to do the same and started writing poetry.

Now I want to share some of that beauty with you. So you, my son, can see all that inspired my poetry and my life, the house in which I grew up, the wooden porch in the backyard, my mother hanging out the wash on the clothesline, my father sitting with a book under a willow by the water. The red-painted backdoor of our neighbor's house while my brother steals a fig as tender as his heart. To see your mother carry a basket of vegetables and crouch down by a slow river, see her run through a pear grove, disappearing behind branches and waiting to be found.

Your Father

25 June 1993

Dear Arabela,

Do not give me terrible news I already know. I saw it with my own eyes and the memory of it torments me. There could not have been much life left in him when they dragged him away. I understand you want to be with her now, to bring with you a miracle for her, but Mira does not need you and your wanting to be of use would only make you stand more in the way. Nermin is gone from this world but he will never be lost to her.

Do not add to my troubles by writing about a return. You are safe where you are and I will join you soon. Just write to me for now. Tell me more about your life and ask me less about mine. I only live to read your letters. Tell me if you have gone swimming. Is the saltwater stinging your lips? Are the mosquitoes pitiless? I know how you would rub your ankles against the rough edge of our bed at night. I remember the spider bites on your thigh, small and round, pale as scars. Keep writing about the life that is inside you, make me feel the shudders of his body. I imagine how big you will be when we meet, like there is a globe under your shirt, the whole world, Arabela.

Write, keep writing, write longer. Be true to us by never straying from yourself. I kiss your roughest knuckle, your belly and our child.

I love you and always will,

Alen

25 June 1993

Dear Son,

I began writing poetry at fifteen, when it became impossible not to. My early poems were terrible and quickly abandoned, barely worth the cheek of the girls they were dedicated to. There were many. As a student at the University of Mostar, I started writing political poems and imagined stopping tanks with my pen, sparking peaceful revolutions, imagined my poetry being recited in crowded city squares by zealous youths, hungry and betrayed. But there was no spark and no fire, no knock on the door by the authorities, no condemnation or medal. My country did not need my poetry or my silence.

As a child, I had been a chronic daydreamer, and I became more detached and pensive as I grew, disappearing further and further into my silence. Poetry, if it did anything, was an explanation for my detachment at the time. It made my strange nature bearable, my selfishness necessary. Your mother once told me in anger that I was not a giver. I am a poet, I said.

I feel that these letters, like my life, have been leading up to this, to her. I met your mother in Makarska, though neither of us was staying there. My brother and I had rented a room north of Makarska, in a smaller and cheaper resort; your mother and her friends farther south along the coast. I cannot describe to you, my son, the first time I saw her for when I looked at her for what I thought was the first time, in a café, dipping a sugar cube into her coffee, I realized that I had seen her before, that I had passed her on the promenade, had noticed her on the beach. In the café she was sitting off to the side, by herself, yet somehow the center of everyone's attention. This I noticed repeatedly, her

proud and unapproachable solitude. She was lonely but unconcerned. She was quiet, which was intimidating because it was rare. She was tall and held her body straight. There was something of the aristocratic Russian about her, the long dark hair, her pale face, my imagination. The Russian Princess, I called her in my head, and once to my brother, the tone of my voice giving me away. From him, your cavalier of an uncle, I learned that she was involved with a tourist, an American. He learned this by flirting with one of her friends. I imagined a rich older American with a summerhouse in the Adriatic, but it was only a young backpacker, rugged of build, blond of hair, from Montana. She called him Montana, never telling me his real name when she spoke of him. I never asked. She said she liked foreign men because she could change the meaning of her name with each new man, because foreign phrases of affection were easier not to mean.

Each morning I took the first bus down to Makarska and walked on an empty beach until I felt ready to call her. Together, we would walk up and down the promenade, then get coffee in the Old Town square before meeting up with her friends and my brother at the beach. She had a car and was more flexible than me, but her vacation was almost over while mine was indefinite. She could make me wait and leave me with nothing, I realized. It was only on our very last day together that she told me that in a month she would begin studying at the University of Mostar. We had gone up some hill to see an old church there, and from the church took a path through the forest to the statue of St. Peter, which overlooked the town, the red roofs of houses, the glint of traffic. It was morning, the sun low above the Adriatic, violet and orange spread out over the horizon. She touched the key St. Peter held in his hand and I took a picture with her camera. On the walk back she told me about her plans, as though she did not know or had forgotten that I went to school there too. I could not make her aware of it again, for fear that she would not care. I tried not to show my hurt or anger and so became indifferent. Your mother had eaten an orange

on the way to see the statue, and now I saw the orange peel she had left behind, mixing with pine needles and cigarette buds on the ground, stirring in the breeze. Birds sang overhead, sharp rapid notes, and small yellow butterflies darted above lavender shrubs. But she talked about her studies and her talk ruined everything.

The sundress she wore that morning was white and there was a yellow sweater tied round her waist. I remembered because I thought it would be the last time I would ever see her. Mostar was a big enough city not to run into each other, and the History building was miles away from Language. We stood on the cracked stairs on the top of the hill, ready to descend, when I told her that I would stay up here, lean against one of those graying church walls and read, patting my pocket as proof of the book that was not there. She gave me a look, angry, annoyed, but obliquely affectionate, coy. I resisted it, said that I would rather stay and read. She rolled her eyes, large and brown, who are you fooling, they said. She offered me her hand, but I ignored it like a shadow. Her features slackened. She told me then, in a voice tender and unforeseeable, that I would never understand her feelings for me. That is when I knew, almost too late. My son, I was a fool with your mother and lucky to get her, lucky the way only the foolish are lucky.

I will not describe to you our relationship in all its meanderings, but there are some things I want you to know. Your mother will tell you the rest, if you let her. We dated for a year and it was summer again. I worked the fields with your mother's father like a character out of a Russian novel, my neck burning. We picked Marasca cherries in the morning, the sun slowly rising behind the high boughs of maple trees, blurring their leaves. Her family accepted me as one of their own. And when her brother's family went on a trip to Istria, he left the house to us as a responsibility and gift. We borrowed from

his garden and stole from his cellar, selecting the wine by the thickness of dust on the bottle. The house was near the Buna River and we bathed there under a moon perched on a hill. On the terrace, which was overhung with grapevines, we danced drunk on another's wine and our own happiness. Your mother knew a little French, enough to sing along to Charles Aznavour while in my arms, the smell of golden lilies and pomegranates rising from the garden below.

We were married in September of 1990, the ninth, and moved into an apartment on Rude Hroznicekar that the Yugoslav Army had given to my grandfather for his service in the second World War. After I graduated, my brother got me a job in the food division of Velmus, a wholesale distributor on the outskirts of Mostar, where I eventually became manager of the warehouse. Your mother and I bought oil paintings from local artists and hung them on our walls, instruments and nudes, soft curves and olive tones. Copper plates of the Old Bridge and watercolors of pomegranates we put in the small room adjoining the bedroom, your nursery. We filled colorful bowls with colorful fruits, oranges everywhere, a habit of your mother's that had turned into a pleasure. She had begun eating them when she was young only because their smell covered up the cigarette smoke in her room, on her skin, her fingertips, between which sugar cubes melted. We drank coffee three times a day, together in the morning and evening. Your mother started teaching at my old high school as part of her praxis and I began working ambitious hours to justify my promotion. I wrote a lot of bad poems and a few good ones to validate them all. Then, one dawn in April, the war started, a slow dawn whose colors were not gentle. The year was 1992. Hopeful people, we blamed the violence on circumstance and history, ancient grievances and long memories, a bad economy, the fall of communism.

We went from basement to basement, ending with a relative of your mother in Bijeli Brjeg, not far from the stadium. It was a large house with a large basement, a view of mountains from the balcony. I drove to work each morning until the Serbs overran the warehouse. Your mother never denied me the normalcy of my former life. I tried to keep in touch with your uncle, who was in the Croatian army fighting the Serbs, though really he was in-between armies. His allegiances were complicated, as were ours. But survival is not complicated, my thoughts or your mother's thoughts as we crouched under stairwells or hid ourselves in pantry closets with the sugar and potatoes. And when the Serbs left, there was nothing simpler than to return home and pick up the pieces. Our apartment had been plundered, each cabinet door in the kitchen flung open as if out of breath, but we had not lost anything that could not be replaced.

If it had not been for you, your mother would not have left when the war began again. You saved her life. Remember that. I cannot explain to you what happened next, because I do not understand it myself. They came for me one morning and I went. But you will ask why I had stayed. My reason is a long and disorienting hallway, narrow and forever turning, endless and endlessly indistinct. Sometimes, I ask myself why.

I do not know you, my son, but I know that I love you, and is that not the height of love?

Your Father

28 June 1993

Dear Arabela,

You will never be lost to me. You are not near when I awake, but I embrace you in my dreams. You are far from my touch, but my arms stretch out patiently toward you. We are apart now, but I have never felt closer to a place where we will meet. I will wait and listen for you there. I will move in the direction of your voice, always. As long as you have memory and language, speak my name. Do not let it become a ghost between your lips. My heart beats within yours, Arabela.

I love you and always will,

Alen

29 June 1993

Dear Son,

Your uncle stood before me in the living room of our childhood home, asking me to go east with him and fight when the time comes. The time would come, we both knew, though I kept it a secret even from myself. The Serbs had left and the Bosnian Catholics and Muslims who had fought them together as part of the Croatian Defense Council were now slowly turning against each other. The threat of another war was near but quiet. The threat was quiet but it echoed. Your uncle said that there was a deal, for the Serbs to leave Mostar and the Croats to take over. He called them Croats and I called them Bosnians. He pointed at the uniform he was wearing. It is not called the Bosnian Defense Council, he said. I said, There is always a rumor of war in our country. He said, The Serbs retreated because they wanted to retreat.

Your uncle did not hope to change his mind, because he did not hope to change, because he did not hope. As a boy he stole figs from our neighbor's garden because he liked the man's daughter, a slender girl who spent most of her free time practicing the piano with her mother. We could hear the music from our backyard, Chopin and Liszt, teasing my brother's nerves. He was lanky and athletic, tall for his age, funny and daring and effortlessly normal in the company of others. He smuggled blue jeans from Italy when he was supposed to be doing something else. He was in Zagreb, studying Economy at the same university where our father had studied Law. He learned English, read the Romantic poets when he was supposed to read Adam Smith. He adored the poetry of

Keats and wrote nothing. Instead of preparing for his exams, he spent summers with pretty German girls and beautiful Czechs wandering Croatian beaches. He quit school after two years, coming home an inspired failure.

She had grown tall and beautiful and he told her she was the reason he had come home. Her long, thin fingers played across his shoulders and over his back like a piano. They loved each other with an angry and devouring love. She feared that she loved him more than he loved her, and he feared that he would lose her if he did not prove her wrong. But he feared proving her wrong more. They learned one another's insecurities and hurt each other with the truth. They fell into fits of competitive silence. They fought with intensity and a misguided devotion. And one night, after a week of not talking, she knocked on our parents' door asking where he was and my mother told her that he had already left for his yearlong stint in the army. He never wrote her back. When he returned, he was changed, out of love. His humor had become bitter, his daring nihilistic. Your uncle deserted the army to see the only woman he had ever loved get married to another man. Barely able to stand as we lined up before the groom and bride, he held a rose in his hand which he had run outside to get and which she took from you with an awkwardness and longing only her husband could miss. And as the band sat down for a pause, he yelled at them to keep playing, songs of joy and forgetting, yelled at the guests to clink their glasses together until their glasses broke, to overturn all the tables and set fire to anything white.

We stood in a house empty of the people who had built it, with snow settling on its roof, your uncle asking me to follow him east and I telling him no. He did not provoke me or call me a coward, but I thought that I sounded like one by refusing to go without

telling him why. I had a reason but I could not articulate it. So I said that your mother was pregnant, and this in your uncle's eyes was worthy enough of a reason to stay, to risk my honor and not my life. Nothing was guaranteed, but he knew that my chances were higher if I stayed. He knew I had connections in and outside of Heliodrom. He had them, too, but did not care. Life is hard, my son, but it is easy if you do not care. Your uncle packed one duffel bag full of clothing and food. His plan was to cross over Lucki to the other side and burn his uniform as soon as he got there. When night came, he went. He walked through the snow that had been falling all day, was falling still, through the snow and toward the something for which it was worth giving up everything.

For me that something was home. That is why I had stayed. For me there was no hope of life beyond my land, beyond that small patch of Mostar that was mine. Anywhere but here, the longing for what I had left would have exhausted me, the instinct to return disturb my dreams. My heart is anchored here and here it will be buried. There is nothing to fight for because to fight for a city is to destroy it. And to flee your home is to admit that you cannot find your life there, and if you cannot find your life at home, my son, then you will not find it anywhere in the world.

That is all, and yet it is not enough. I feel that I have failed to make myself understood. It was your fate, you will say. You must forgive me for leaving you with nothing but this letter, small glimpses of my past, cracks of light. You must forgive me for leaving you with nothing. I think of words my father said to me, words I can pass on to you. Never turn your back on your country, your grandfather said. But you will only appreciate the unintended irony of that. Be good and you will be happy, he said. But he

also said that I should be good even if it makes me unhappy. He said, Do not resent what you know is necessary. My son, do not hate those whom you should pity.

Forgive me for having the last word and leaving you the silence,

Your Father

September 24 2011

Dear Father,

A response to your letters is not needed, but it feels natural to write one, more natural to have it in the form of another letter. Maybe response is the wrong word. We write to the dead what we did not remember or dare to say when they were alive. We write to the dead because there is always something more we want to say. My need to write to you is not much different. You died two weeks before I was born.

Sometimes I'm angry with you, and sometimes I pity you, but most often words are useless to describe what I feel for you. Mom has kept you alive in my mind; there are pictures of you around the house, there's one I particularly like. You two are standing on grass under the raw branches of a bare tree, a Bosnian maple, and there's a river in the background, green and inert. The Neretva River, mom said, and complained that nature always appears startled in photographs. You're wearing a brown jacket and dark pants, your expression is stern and remote, your mouth doleful. The slight flutter of mom's skirt is evidence of a ghostly breeze.

The letter you wrote but didn't send, the one where you describe prison as a dry place, was found in a shoebox along with letters from mom to you and a letter from you to your father. There was also a black and white picture of mom in that shoebox, a leather case for glasses, a wristwatch whose battery had given out at a quarter to nine, your passport, driver's license and other documents proving your identity and existence. They were saved by Uncle Jadranko and given to mom when she returned to Mostar, nine months pregnant, to bury you. She came back to Split only a week after your death

because she could not stay in the place you had died for longer than that. My life is ruined there, she keeps saying. Whenever she talks of you she starts crying with an intensity that embarrasses me and makes me proud.

She added the letters she had received from you into the shoebox and stored it in her closet. The shoebox lay there for years, not exactly hidden and not exactly put there to be found. She'd show me the letters when the time came, and it came a few days before our trip to Mostar. I was twelve. I remember that first trip back as a series of cemeteries, destroyed buildings and unknown family members fawning over me with a delicate cheerfulness. Nothing is rebuilt, mom said, pointing at what used to be a shopping mall. There was trash everywhere, and graffiti on the walls of ruins. There were buildings with only their façades standing, hollowed out with trees growing inside and branches shooting out of empty windows. It looked like an abandoned city, left to nature, but at night people came out into the cobbled streets of Old Town and cafes filled with music and laughter. But it is a city divided in two, on one side the church, on the other the mosque. Even the dead are divided, though you, father, are buried in the city cemetery, which is common ground and, ironically, just outside Mostar. Your headstone is black and made out of marble, and we put a lighted candle on the ledge, a bouquet of flowers on the grave. In the improvised cemetery on Tito Street, where Uncle Haris is buried, the white headstones are all shaped like lilies and the lettering is in gold. Mom and I walked the narrow walkways of that cemetery, reading golden numbers against slabs of white. Almost all the dates end in 1993.

We stayed on the eastern side, the Muslim side, with Mira and Izudin, even though this angered mom's family. She didn't care. She rented a car and showed me the

sights she wanted me to see, our old apartment, the houses of both of my grandparents, and the Old Bridge, so crowded in the summer, with divers walking the ledge and teasing to jump. On the last day of our trip, we returned to the cemetery, walked the cement path with its many blossoming cracks to your headstone, lit the candle again and placed fresh flowers on the grave. Mom kneeled in the dirt, put her palms together and improvised a prayer. As we walked back to the car, she spoke of the immense human silence of a place like this that made it possible to hear the wind rustling in the trees, the birds chirping on the branches. Like the silence of a silent crowd, she said.

After we returned from Mostar, I reread your letters. I imagined that some phrases in your letters were taken from your poems, though I had no evidence, since the few poems saved from the war do not correspond with anything in the letters. After we returned, I began listening more closely to our songs, began learning the history of our country, from books, from my mother's mouth. But still I felt no closer to home. After a year in Split, we had gotten a visa to the United States and came to Phoenix, where there weren't many Bosnians, then to Tempe, where there were even fewer. The immigration agency said Phoenix is your new home and mom didn't complain, because she didn't care. We moved to Tempe because of her job. I grew up an American and mom didn't care about that either. And Mostar we visited only because she wanted to see your grave again. She will visit often, but she will never come back for good. Whenever I read about war in books or see documentaries about it on television, there's always the feeling that those who had lost their homes or a loved one, even those who were wounded or raped, were somehow lucky. Maybe it's an instinctual reaction by the onlooker, but it strikes me as the wrong one. He was wounded but at least he survived, they'd say, like survival will

cure all pains. She was raped but lucky to be alive, they'd say, as though only the dead are unlucky.

I can't explain to you how I could miss a place I never knew and that never was my home, but I began missing Mostar with an unexpected urgency and regret, the way I have always missed you. I told mom I would go back after graduation, and she agreed. I took your letters with me and went for a month this year. I stayed with Mira and Izudin, in their downstairs apartment in Old Town, where mom and I had stayed before. Every morning I went for a walk and each walk would take me farther and farther away. It is hard to describe the adrenaline I felt, how swift and tireless my legs felt, how the beating of my heart propelled me forward. The cobbles gleamed like they were wet and amplified my footsteps. I heard the clutter of tables being set up outside the many cafes, the scrape of chairs and the *whoomp* of blossoming parasols. I heard the voices of young shopkeepers bargaining in English and German where Fejic becomes just an alley with souvenir stalls on either side. I heard the beating of wings as pigeons fought for breadcrumbs thrown by an old man on a bench. On Fejic, I smelled spinach pita and burek from the bakeries and the milky batter street vendors swirled into crepes on their hot plates.

After lunch, Izudin would speak to me about local and international events, beating the newspaper with his forefingers, the toothpick in his mouth forcing a smirk on his large, good-natured face. He told me stories about being a soldier on the wrong side of the Neretva, hunting farm animals for food and stealing supplies from UNPROFOR, told me how some of the people responsible for his son's death are still out on the street. The Hague is but a poor man's Nuremberg, he said. He spoke like a comedian, but there

was pain in his eyes. We are a funny, careless and bitter people, he said. Everyday he asked me to translate a peculiar and impossible Bosnian phrase into English and everyday he laughed at my literal and nonsensical translation. At night, on the weekends, I hung out with Izudin's nephew, Edo, who showed me the nightlife of Mostar, which spanned ethnic divides. Before each night out at the club we'd go to a small and isolated clearing in a beechwood forest, where young men and women would come to drink bargain wines from gas stations, sitting on logs and rocks while music from their car stereos and the lilies of the forest overwhelmed the night. It was something mom said she did when she was a teenager, something you probably did, too, and something now I have also done.

One day, I met Uncle Jadranko in a large café on the western side of town, not far from the rondo. The streets on the west side have all different names now and mom's directions were nearly useless. The architecture is modern and lifeless, but the cafes and shops are crowded. Jadranko looked much older than he did when I last saw him, his face wrinkled and nut-brown. He spoke passionately about his house on the Buna River and his dream of retiring there soon, smoking cigarette after cigarette as he spoke and flexing his brows with every exhalation. He still works for the city council. I asked him about the Heliodrom camp. This is what I learned: he worked nonstop to obtain your release and had you just given him more time, you would have been freed; he got you out of working at the front, digging trenches and building fortifications for the army that imprisoned you; it was through him that you were granted access to the doctor, who was another prisoner, and to the small but comfortable room within Heliodrom. There you lay on an army cot, writing letters and waiting for your back pain to subside, and there you hung yourself from a drainage pipe on the last day of June with a length of rope you used as a belt. I'd

known all of this before. I also know that human shield is a beautiful combination of words, that freedom is the horrible feeling before you make a decision, and that there can't be any redemption in keeping a man alive if he wants to die and no redemption in letting him die.

Jadranko and I argued about the check until he leaned back in his chair, giving up, playing with the cellophane wrapper of his Camel pack the way his sister does with her Marlboros. When I returned to Mira's it was that bad time of the day in Mostar when temperatures hit triple-digits and it's unbearable to be outside. I usually spent those hours listening to music or reading in the cool of the downstairs apartment, but that day I took out your first letter to mom and started translating it, because that day it became impossible not to try.

Each day during those dead hours between noon and dusk, I worked on the translations, trying to make the letters as beautiful and affecting in a new language as they are to me in the original. Each day I tried to dig through to you. I failed because failure is the translator's fate, because every note on translation is a somber one. I failed because there was too much earth and language between us. The more of myself I transferred into the letters, the more of you I lost. What's left is only a ruin in translation.

On my first visit to Mostar, with mom, they had just released the Srebrenica tapes, and footage of the massacre was shown frequently on television. It showed Serbs drinking and joking while the prisoners they had rounded up squatted in the background, waiting to be shot. It showed Serbs firing into the mountaintop forest through which some of the men tried to flee to safety. It showed the terrible ambiguity of safe areas. It showed a man shouting his son's name to the mountain, forced to tell his son to give

himself up, that nothing would happen if he did. The son's name was also Nermin, and hearing that name groaned by the father, like from the bottom of a ghostly well, made Mira hysterical for days.

The footage also showed the actual killings, the men being dragged from the back of trucks and made to kneel on the grass, their hands tied and heads down. It showed the events of Srebrenica with the most detail and clarity possible. It brought them closest to reality for the viewer. But what I wanted to know as I watched the footage was more than the camera could show, more than any anthropologists can tell. What I wanted to know was the men's thoughts as their knees hit the ground, what each one was thinking the moment before death. That the camera cannot capture. The bones do not reveal.

I love you, father, and can do nothing but love you,

Alen

Image, distortion, conflation – the knight move of metaphor.
Ivan Boric

Writing is prayer.
Franz Kafka

We are alone and in love, suddenly and too late.[1]
Ivan Boric

Witness to a Prayer

This biography of sorts is the result of three meetings I had with Vesna Boric, the widow of Ivan Boric, perhaps the greatest prose stylist in Serbo-Croatian. A fellowship to Prague gave me the opportunity of arranging the interview with Mrs. Boric, who has been living in Prague since she and her husband emigrated there from the former Yugoslavia in August of 1992, one month after the death of their only child, Mila. Mrs. Boric answered my questions to the fullest possible extent, even those that caused a new recognition of an old loss in her very large, very green eyes (so often borrowed by the late author and rented out to his female leads). For this I am most thankful. I have tried my best here to translate into a flowing narrative the information Mrs. Boric provided me about her husband; I have tried my best to give a detailed and accurate, albeit short, account of his life. If I failed to illuminate this incredible writer, make him exist in the reader's mind, the fault lies solely with me. At one point during our last meeting, in fact, I was tempted to throw out the note cards in my square pocket and turn to Mrs. Boric and

[1] These two quotes are from the last notebook Ivan Boric kept for his planned collection of stories, tentatively called, *Basements and Other Museums*, and they perfectly emphasize his sense of aesthetics as well as his sense of pathos, the balance all great writers seem to possess between the cerebral and heartfelt. Sandwiched between them is the famous quote by Franz Kafka that inspired the title of this piece.

simply ask her to tell me everything about him, everything she knows and everything that's unknowable too.

One last note on the interviews that produced this small biography: I got lost trying to find our meeting place, a little café on Kaprova, as soon as I got out of the tram, and it felt as though it was my fate, that sly, grasping deity so often impersonated by the author, to follow in the footsteps of his protagonists, those wing-heeled travelers who find themselves blissfully lost in foreign surroundings, never pausing to wonder how they will return home, only to notice a copper inscription on an Synagogue or the white lily scent in the city garden, or the dancing iridescence of raindrops against the pavement of some nameless seaside town.[2]

[2] The last example is taken verbatim from page 16 of "Apropos Madeleine," my favorite short story from *Life Under Embankment Lights* (Prosveta, Belgrade, 1986). The first two examples are paraphrases, approximation of Boric's prose style. I have set out in this piece to deliberately copy Boric's style, his imagery and diction, his syntax and rhythm, his imagination and legerdemain, in an effort to provide a more vivid picture of his experience of the world (though compared to his singing prose, mine is only a hoarse whimper, a card trick to the parting of the sea). I believe, as Boric did himself, that a writer's consciousness is reflected in his style, and in trying to capture the way he wrote, I am trying to capture the way he thought, remembered and dreamed.

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Ivan Boric was born on April 21st, 1955, in the Old Town of Mostar,[3] the birthplace of many former poets. As a mature artist, he would recall many parts of his happy childhood and scatter them throughout his art: the L-shaped balcony of the family house on Fejic, with its square of cramped shade and the cellophane effect of reflected light in the lone window; the dusky basement in which he once found a dead mouse, a foretaste of his mortality; the blurred view of the toilet and sink through the ribbed glass of the shower door, a foretaste of his style; his mother, Enisa, blowing on a spoonful of sauce in the tomato and mint haze of the kitchen; the thud and flutter of books and typewriter paper, and sometimes just Chopin, coming from behind the closed door of the study, where his father, Miroslav, sat in a leather and oak armchair,[4] at a desk as broad as a sarcophagus, revising his lecture on Hegel. It was the study that fascinated Ivan as a youth (he was an only child). The dense shadows at either side of the bookcase,[5] the blue

[3] When, as a seventeen-year-old budding writer, I asked my father what Yugoslav authors I should read, Ivan Boric was his first and only answer. Great writer *and* from Mostar, my father said with pride. The obvious choices such as Ivo Andric and Mesa Selimovic did not attract me at the time with their robust historical dramas and soulful neurotics. I wanted something different, more exhilarating and dreamlike, and I found it in Ivan Boric's work.

[4] In *Oroz* (Prosveta, Belgrade, 1990), the novel's supposed hero, Vedran Videvic, imagines his father, another professor, also sitting in such an armchair, calling it "the emaciated throne of philosophy" (pg. 82). As in the epigraph, all the translations in the footnotes are mine.

[5] Videvic is taken by the mysterious quality of his master's bookcase, writing that "the real gem of the study was a bookcase that took up the entire far wall, and he could until his dying breath recite like a remembered prayer its bottom row: Hamlet, Eugene Onegin, The Encyclopedia of the Dead, Ulysses, Being and Time, Despair, The Possessed, From Threshold to Threshold, The Sickness unto Death…The books, twelve gleaming rows of them, seemed randomly ordered – Tragedy mixed with Comedy, Philosophy grouped with Poetry, Hamlet nowhere near Macbeth – yet the particular order in which he first realized them was the order in which they remained, this consistency of the obscure arrangement, and the teasing possibility of an pattern behind it, always a strange comfort to him" (pg. 24). All these titles are easily identifiable except perhaps for *From Threshold to Threshold*, by Paul Celan, a Romanian poet and translator, a Jew who wrote in German and drowned himself in the Seine. Note that two of the books, including Celan's, were written and published after the year in which the novel takes place, 1940, suggesting its unreality, the intentionally clumsy hand of the narrator/author. Note also the incidental, or not so incidental, poetry of these book titles.

glimmer of the ceiling fan's rotating blades and, most intriguing of all, the blazing rungs of light reflected from the wooden window shutters, an abrupt ladder on the parquet floor.

Like many great writers of prose, Ivan started out as a poet. Yet from his first poem, written on *24 January, 1970* (he put a date in the bottom right-hand corner of each emergent poem, to give it a romantic authenticity), to his last, written on *10 May, 1973*, he never wrote anything with which he was completely satisfied, and looking back over this short period of verse he only appreciated it as a necessary step in his artistic progression, cherishing here and there a small pocket of brilliance and beauty: here, the slick thump of a leather soccer ball, there, a small girl's elegant tug at a limp sock.[6]

They would meet in Partizan Park, on leaf-dappled benches near statuesque pines, a bunch of student poets, Ivan's friends from the gymnasium, reading their lyrics to each other and the crickets. So many distant mountains! She was among them sometimes, a freshman, Dario Novak's sister, the silent participant in a loud circle, biting her thumbnail or peeling a translucent piece of skin from her upper lip. Ivan barely noticed her, only that she was tall, displaying in her movements that touching discomfort of young women not yet accustomed to their stature, and that there was an long albino scar on her left ankle, perhaps from a slip on beach rocks.

Ivan had known Dario only for a while and they quickly lost touch when he moved to Sarajevo[7] to attend university, and he didn't think of Vesna at all, except that sometimes at night,

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[6] These snippets of his poetry, like any other facts of his life, exist only insofar as Mrs. Boric can recall them. Her feat of recollection in general, and her recitation of long lost poems in particular, remind me of Dragan in "Apropos Madeleine" hearing his future wife, Diana, from the balcony below his, "humming to a melody from the radio, then to the memory of it" (pg. 3). It also reminds me somewhat dejectedly of Dragan's assertion toward the end of the story that "memory is the most unreliable of narrators" (pg.17). The story is partly set in Makarska, Croatia, where Ivan and Vesna Boric often vacationed.

[7] The reader can see Sarajevo brimming in the background of Boric's stories from *Life Under Embankment Lights*. These shimmering scraps are from the title story alone: "the dull glint of copper in the shops" on the Bascarsija, "the striped awnings and their fringed shade;" the large chessboard near the outdoor market on which the players could walk, "old men, mostly, stroking their chins with large, pink-freckled hands;" "the broken sunlight through the columned trees" in the Avlija, "the bird-stained indigo benches," the smell of "leaves and grass and horse manure;" and everywhere around Sarajevo in winter "the pockmarked and obliquely iridescent snow" (121-139). In the Czech Republic, when news came on about the bombing of

during intense fits of insomnia, he saw her suddenly reflected against his inner lids, dressed in the thigh-length shorts and sleeveless shirt of her volleyball uniform, vivid, knee-high socks covering her scar. The image reoccurred throughout his years in Sarajevo and one especially terrible night he finally tracked down its source, remembering how Dario had once come to pick him up with her in the backseat, how she sat in the middle of the seat quietly until they dropped her off at practice, slouching as much as her tall body would allow in the tight space and looking out of the left-hand window, her profile somber – how, as the car took a steep slow curve, she turned slowly away from the window and met his gaze in the mirror, her big green eyes infused at the moment with the infinite tenderness of human abstraction.

At the University of Sarajevo, Ivan studied his father's trade,[8] though he spent more time writing short stories than actually exploring his major. In the middle of his second year, he totally dedicated himself to the double enchantment of reading and writing. Indeed, late at night, his eyes closed to the motionless shadows on the wall but unable to sleep, the snoring of one roommate and the heavy breathing of the other an accompaniment to his fantasies, he imagined that this period of his life would be a significant chapter in his future biography under the heading of either something half-clever like *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Pretender* or fully banal like *The Making of a Writer*.[9] His short stories, so short on story, were often in the form of mock confessions and oblique autobiographies, interpretations on the theme of memoir, and like the

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Sarajevo, Ivan Boric would switch the channel or leave the room, finding it unbearable to watch the destruction of a city he loved.

[8] In *A Eulogy for Viktor H.* (Prosveta, Belgrade, 1985), Viktor H. gives up on philosophy as well after not finding what he was so obsessively looking for, "a philosophy that made sense of the nonsense poetry of existence, majestic and lucid, majestic in its lucidity" (pg. 64). He decides that only style matters, only the aesthetics of a philosophy, and that he had "enough struggling in the drowning torrent of thought, enough of owlish ontology, metaphysical intrigue, arguing with eloquent ghosts – by sophomore year my temporal heart wasn't in it anymore (pg. 65). Viktor H., like his creator did, works for the philosophy department of the University of Sarajevo, describing himself on page 64 as a "Dostoevskian clerk in a Gogolian office."

[9] Viktor H. also spends nights awake thinking about his future biography and the man he has chosen to write it, "Ivan Boric," mocking in parenthesis "those poor, unenviable fellows, future biographers, always the last to know" (pg. 68). Like Dragan before him and Videvic after, Victor H. suffers from "the ghostly vigil of insomnia," (pg. 121), a reoccurring motif, a ridge in the thumbprint of authorial presence. The character "Ivan Boric" will henceforth be written with quotation marks.

lives they portrayed, almost profound and always on the edge of parody (one story was narrated by Gavrilo Princip). In them the reader can already find themes that would reoccur in his work such as the dual nature of men, the shared sphere of reality and dream, life's subtle beauty and its elegant lack of meaning.[10] Through his prose style he gestured toward the dazzling slits in the mask of everyday life, those sublime hints at the harmony of existence, which a true artist feels like a running shiver down the spine, a leaping flame in the heart that illuminates the hollowness.[11] Ivan's reason for writing had always been an avid desire to describe the world; to impel and aid the reader to imagine a smile, a smell, the play of light at dawn, the voices in the street – all the small, overlooked miracles of life. Indulge in swarming, enthusiastic, narcissistic, veracious description. Embrace the caress and warmth of details. Imprison beauty in a padded sentence. This for him was the supreme pleasure of art. Let the scientist explain and the philosopher interpret – the artist must bear witness and describe.

Yet what a demeaning struggle it was, and what an intolerable bore, trying to answer the question of why he wrote,[12] especially when he knew or sensed that the interlocutor thought writing a trifle, an adolescent hobby, and that there was something ridiculous about a grown man playing quiet games with his noisy imagination. What further complicated his explanation was that in conversation he invariably left the second part unsaid – embarrassed by its seeming sentimentality, its daunting simplicity – which was a desire not only to reconstruct a torn down

[10] *A Eulogy for Viktor H.* commences with one of the most well known openings in Yugoslav literature: "I am not a loner, I am just alone. I am a passionate man, a serious man, cynical and innocent. I am a liar and a thief, but I am an artist, first and foremost. My art is the written word as exhibited in this recondite memoir. Yet, a memoir, no matter how extraordinarily recondite, cannot but deal with life, and one cannot write properly about life without also writing about its elegant lack of meaning. This, then, is a narrative of utter meaninglessness – friend and foe alike, consider it my masterpiece" (pg. 3).

[11] The faint literary criticism in this brief paragraph are my humble opinions of the thematic focus of Ivan Boric's fiction and the metaphysical implications of his style. Mrs. Boric's opinions are quite similar to mine, yet neither her nor my *interpretation* constitute a "truth" (a princely word that, like reality, must always be attended by its royal guard of quotes) of Ivan Boric's art, or Ivan Boric as an artist.

[12] "When I imagined myself in ripe old age," says Viktor H., "a proven master of the form, being asked this weedy question by some awed interviewer, I saw myself disdainfully respond, with one blazing brow raised, that my only purpose was to make love to the alphabet" (pg. 39).

building, or resurrect a severed tree, but to relieve the human dead of death and grant them immortality. The dear dead, to the immortality of art. But how hopeless it was to relay this exquisite joy, with its ripple of transcendence and blasphemy – to say to an inquiring stranger that he, Ivan Boric, wrote to capture beauty and to raise the dead.

At the University of Zagreb, where he obtained his doctorate, majoring in English Language and Literature, Ivan continued to write and publish short stories. But already by the end of the first year, despite his work appearing in prominent journals like *Gusla* and *Rijec*, he was hungering for the wide grazing range and thick concealing undergrowth of the novel. That summer, while at home in Mostar, he begun to do the necessary research, filled notebooks[13] with promising scraps of imagery (the purest expression of the abstract bliss of observation), reread his favorite novels, studying in particular their sturdy, weatherproof structure, and nightly tempted insomnia with hazy, half-blind fumbles for pen and paper to obsessively scribble something that in the sober morning became either completely unremarkable or else impossible to read. Such was the urgency of his muse, losing a shoe as she ran to embrace him. He'd long had the idea of an intelligent, ambitious man, Viktor H., a writer without talent, who plans an act of terrorism in the streets of Sarajevo. Yet he's no revolutionary, nationalist or religious zealot, follows no ideologies, has no political beliefs whatsoever, does not bargain with God; a dangerously superfluous man, he tries to achieve greatness and immortality through destruction and death. He is caught easily, writes a "confession" from prison to prove his sanity and repent, and then takes

[13] Here are some of my favorites from his notebook, which Mrs. Boric allowed me to borrow while in Prague: "the dream of childhood from which the war woke her;" "all whispers are urgent, it is the whisper's way of being loud;" "Brodsky's cabin in Archangel, Russia;" "the shivering brightness of the horizon at sunrise," "equine beauty of Mostar's hills:" "her bruise the color of crushed figs;" "the flame fluttered like a bullfighter's cape;" "pelicans are only swans with venetian masks;" "Rilke, Lermontov, Paul Celan – what is inspiration but the whisper of ghosts?;" "the window frame reflected in his coffee;" "…by sleight of fate;" "golden lilies eavesdropped in the wind;" "in memory the rain always falls sideways;" "nothing is more ~~patient~~ impatient than the grave;" "a blood-soaked tissue is not a rose."

his denial of life to its stoic conclusion by committing suicide[14] days before his trial. But there must be a doppelganger, a shade, Ivan thought, coming through the tall doors of the humanities building, the protagonist's childhood friend, perhaps, a true artist – though the reality of the artist is as much in the limbo of quotation marks as the reality of the terrorist – who is initially brought along in the hope that he will write a posthumous book on Viktor, a biography of the anti-hero. Ivan went up the broad stairs, which an army could climb, turned left instead of right, and picked up his pace like a man who feels the first ghostly drop of rain on his forearm (he was late for his first class as Anton Kovacevic's assistant). What if the childhood friend provides extensive annotations to Viktor's pseudo-confession, an eccentric endnote commentary, as well as an intro and index, thus becoming an editor of a parody? Ivan liked that idea a lot. Furthermore – passing the inky blur of the bulletin board and turning a corner – the childhood friend should be called Ivan Boric, bringing the caricature of reality full circle. And what if[15] – he turned another corner and bumped heavily into a girl coming the opposite way. The collision was severe; the poor girl sprawled on the ground like a starfish. He helped her up, went to fetch the book that had slid down the hall, clumsily kicked it even farther when he tried to pick it up, dropped it as he ran back, and then nearly dropped it again as he handed it to her. The hope of sneaking into class unnoticed had vanished; the only conciliation was the empty hall. The girl, mousy and black-spectacled, pressed the book to her chest, red-faced, her glasses knocked crooked, accepted his apology like she would a toad and scurried away. Ivan just stood there, and it took him a while to

[14] Victor H. dies of a barbiturate overdose from drugs smuggled to him by a compassionate guard (or perhaps "Ivan Boric" himself as hinted in the commentary). "Ivan Boric" explains in the introduction that the barbiturates were taken together with an antiemetic, that the act was carefully planned, that, "like Romeo, Viktor went looking for something gentle and quick." Ivan Boric's work is replete with allusions to Shakespeare: Dragan, for example, spends 12 nights in Dalmatia and the village idiot of *Oroz* is named Osric, with the Slavic accent on the c.

[15] I know that in this passage the facts I've been given begin to grow wings, but I feel it is important to evoke his innermost thoughts in order to make him more vivid on the page, to create the intimacy and immediacy usually missing from a secondhand account. See footnote #2 and #6.

distinguish the laughter behind his back from that in his head. He turned, the way one turns in a dream, and there she was, gently and wickedly smiling.

With impromptu grace, Ivan bowed to his audience of one. From the debris of a shared past they tried to build a conversation until she bent her elbow to check her watch. He told her he'd walk her to her class, but she said they were standing right in front of it, causing him to make the long, wide-eyed face one makes when walking in on fate.[16] Later on, when they were already dating, he overheard her relate the story of their meeting and put herself in the place of the gawky duckling he had accidentally trampled. He never called her on it, for he knew she'd plainly and shamelessly state that her version of events made for a better story. Indeed, her telling had a more daring touch of fate that gave the story a certain perfection. And perfection, of a kind, is the aspiration of all artifice.[17]

Neither of them had been punished for their tardiness that day because Anton Kovacevic arrived even later, a habit of his along with the absentminded brush of pudgy fingers through thinning hair and the distracted tone of voice as he read his notes to *Mansfield Park* and *Bleak House* against the quick, cricketlike noise of scribbling pens. Ivan sat in the corner of the auditorium, facing the ascending rows of seats, trying not to be caught staring; Vesna sat in the second row, eight seats from the left, twelfth from the

[16] Dragan, after running again into Diana in a similar fashion, ponders the shock of catching fate unawares, "rising sleek-limbed from the bathtub" (pg. 8). References to an anthropomorphic fate are numerous in Boric's work.

[17] "Ivan Boric," after catching Viktor H. in a white lie, comments on the relationship between life and art, that "all writers merge memoir with fiction and fiction with memoir, creating fusion works, artful hybrids, swarthy centaurs and smiling mermaids. Truth is elusive and not adequate. Even life's most ingenious designs must be more perfectly shaped, even its best-patterned themes further enhanced by the pen. As an artist, I, too, bent the truth to fit my fiction. I invented a better truth, I told the poetic truth, I imagined, I lied. I lied about life and stole from it like from a favorite author. Like Victor H., I plundered my life for all its silks, and out of these real silks I have spun my web of make-believe" (pg. 142).

right. They began dating and went to the movies, got coffee and ice cream in those attractive side streets in the city – narrow rows of tables and chairs, bright parasols in full bloom – or sometimes just sat talking for hours on a bench in Republic Square, feeding the fat, high-breasted pigeons. They frequently stopped by the botanical garden, walking the pebbled paths, touching bark against their palms, and trying to read the scientific names of the flowers: Helleborus atrorubens, Adonis vernalis, Campanula poscharskyana, which was her favorite, a simple, star-shaped beauty, with arched lavender petals, vaguely tongue-like. Once, while circumventing a pond within the garden, he paused to write down in a small notebook she carried in her purse for him a description of water lilies.[18] Then, with a sweep of his writing arm, a gesture that included the water lilies, the leaf-lined branches replicated in the pond and the partition of conifers in the sun-shot distance, he told her this was what he meant when he talked about research.

Ivan was renting out a room by Maksimir Park during his time in Zagreb, and Vesna would often stay the night rather than take the long tram ride back toward her dormitory near Jarun Lake. She thought he was too cramped in this room, the back of the chair bumping into the footboard of the bed, but he enjoyed the solitude it afforded him, being far away from the bustle, clamor and kitsch of the dorms. His insomnia was less powerful when she shared his bed, backing into him, his heart beating against her spine as they slept. He drank her in, her breathing, moving, olive-bright skin, the faint chestnut smell of her hollows, the languorous bends of her long body. The transparent blue vein that ran the inner length of her left thigh was like a cousin of the white scar across her ankle. Volleyball injury, she told him, surprised he kissed her there. The tip of her nose was always a little cold and damp, no matter how well he covered her in the middle of night

[18] Ivan, the butler of the Heinrich household in *Oroz*, describes the water lilies he finds in the pond behind his master's house as "queenly flowers, with their reticellas of white and coronets of yellow" (pg. 28). Considering the erudition of this sentence, this is more likely the keen eye of the intrusive narrator/author.

when she slipped out of the blanket. He was absolutely entranced by the sleek upward curve of her big toes. But there was nothing as poignant about her body as some random reminder of its absence – the scratch mark of her eyeliner against the white of the pillow, the smell of her on the sheets, a long mirror-reflected strand of her black hair sticking to his chest.

In May of 1981, Ivan and Vesna married. After a summer spent back in Mostar, including a brief honeymoon on the Black Sea coast,[19] they returned to Zagreb for Vesna to continue her studies and Ivan to start writing his dissertation, *God, the Novel, and the Problem of Omniscience*. They bought a one-bedroom apartment close to the school of humanities, and Ivan began teaching at a nearby gymnasium. The baby was born at the end of October, a healthy girl, weighing five kilograms, named Mila. Ivan defended his dissertation the upcoming September; a year later Vesna passed her final exams. They went back to Mostar, where Ivan got a job teaching at the same gymnasium he himself had attended. They moved into his parents' house, living in the large guestroom across from the study that Ivan now shared with his father.

A Eulogy for Viktor H. was released by Prosveta on July 26, 1985. Ivan did not care to read reviews of his work, so Vesna read them for him. Milan Petrovic, a well-regarded critic, complained in the Sarajevo journal *Petla* of the aloof, cynical, bullying tone of Boric's narrator, while a reviewer for a trendy Belgrade newspaper lamented the dearth of dialogue.[20] A critic from

[19] Ivan and Vesna Boric shared a love of travel, among other things. The second time we met, Mrs. Boric surprised me with photographs of their trips. She sitting in a gondola with Mila in her lap, behind her shoulder the gondolier's dark glossy waistband, Ivan Boric reflected in miniature in her sunglasses, a flash at his heart; Mila bowing to smell a red rose in the former Royal Garden in Athens, the shadow of the photographer's bent elbow visible on the white gravel; Ivan Boric leaning over the stone parapet of the Charles Bridge the first time they had visited Prague, lost in thought, or pretending to be for the camera; the entire family in front of the blurred columns of a wealthy Armenian merchant's house in Plovdiv, taken by a stranger with trembling hands. None of the photos were from the war or after. There are a few photographs, Mrs. Boric said, but Ivan always has his eyes closed in them like a sleepwalker.

[20] Victor H., apprentice writer and terrorist, objects to the "artificial limb of dialogue" (pg. 36) in some unnamed classics he read as a student. On the same page he also criticizes novels with heavy symbolism, "scattered like gaudy Easter eggs," and stream of consciousness writing, which he likens to bats out of a cave.

Zagreb thought that Mr. Boric's novel sacrificed emotional depth in favor of satire.[21] N. K. Vukovic, who was an editor at *Gusla* and early supporter of Ivan's short stories, now accused him of being deliberately obscure and esoteric. More worrisome than mere aesthetic misunderstandings were the misinterpretations of the novel's political intent[22] in daily tools of state propaganda like *Brotherhood and Unity* or *Borba*. Both papers construed the novel as a veiled celebration of communism and a satire of the bourgeois culture that produced such doomed men like Viktor H., confusing the parodic tone of the novel for misanthropy. The reviewer at *Borba* went so far as to write that the novel warned against local nationalism, which could only be avoided in our great country if individuals turned their hearts toward socialist ideals of equality and justice as Viktor H. does at the end. The novel had also its more accurate and sane champions and was nominated by discerning editors for the two most important national literary prizes, though it won neither (Ivan did not belong to the communist party and was thus automatically out of contention for any government sponsored prize). And in *Rijec*, Danilo Kis, the only Yugoslav writer Ivan considered a contemporary, praised the novel in a short review, calling its author 'a verbal acrobat in clown's garb.'

A year after the publication of *A Eulogy for Viktor H.*, Ivan's first collection of short stories, *Life Under Embankment Lights*, was released to more favorable reviews. Immediately, he started work on his second novel.[23] He was writing in the study one morning when she twinkled

[21] Ivan Boric does not need my belated defense, but it is ridiculous that any critic should confuse Boric's use of parody for satire, or claim that his novels lack heart when they are built on the intersection of parody and pathos.

[22] Ivan Boric was an extremely private person who did not have many writer friends. He liked to quip: Why would I want to talk to a writer at a party when I can take his book to bed? He gave few interviews and thought them along with petitions and demonstrations awkward, pointless and incredibly dull whether conducted in a democracy or under a dictatorship. In his public life, it seems, Ivan Boric was never more than a writer, or less.

[23] *A Eulogy for Viktor H.* explored the blurred line between artist and terrorist, between the desire to create and the desire to destroy. Boric's second novel continued this exploration on a grander scale, and whereas his debut only hinted at the unreality of the novel's world, in *Oroz* it is taken for granted: the narrator of the novel is the author himself. Even before he fully reveals his identity, a reader feels the author's presence through the many literary allusions that are beyond the characters' ability to make or notice, the historical

in through the open door in a tank top and dark jeans rolled up to reveal her bony ankles. Ivan laid down his pen. As usual, she swung from the arm of his chair, leaning away on her heels, arms outstretched, and then leaning back in and pushing up on the balls of her bare feet, a question in her upturned green eyes. Yes, he said, and moved to the sofa by the door, opposite the bookcase. With a long-legged, foal-like bounce, she ran out of the room to get her notebook. This was all in keeping with the reassuring rhythm[24] of their lives: she coming in on the tips of her long toes to ask a question and the aching pleasure of his new novel fading instantly before the slit shadows of her dimples. Mila came back and sat next to him. He opened the notebook on his lap and marveled at the drawings of dresses, skirts, blouses, hats and swimsuits. She nudged into him, a corner of her tongue peeking out sideways as though she was redrawing the designs in her head. Ivan loved her for selfish reasons, yet he loved her more than he loved himself. Mila explained the sketches over the blue-edged drone of the ceiling fan, pointing an ink-stained little

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novel Vedran Videvic tries to write and that serves as a work within the work, and the slew of coincidences that bespeak the hand of a lowercase god. *Oroz* follows my namesake's move into the house of Franz Heinrich, a Yugoslav-born German, a Nazi sympathizer and aesthete, who owns a cemetery in the mythical town of Oroz (the novel is set on the eve of World War II, when the newfound republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated from internal and external pressures). Franz has a daughter, Mila, and Videvic is her new tutor. There's also Franz's bed-ridden, off-stage wife, his gypsy mistress, a maid turned governess, Ivan, the fervent communist and butler, and nationalistic undertakers Boro and Bata, a Serb and a Croat who are as interchangeable as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But the novel's true focus, its heart and soul, is its author, nameless and body-less but tingling with nervous energy throughout the telling, a vibrant spirit that colors the book. The poignancy of the novel comes from the author trying desperately to understand the characters he is writing about, to connect with them and reach them through his imagination, for their actions, or rather the actions of their similar-minded real-life counterparts, will have an impact on the author's life later on (the novel was released in October of 1990, less than a year before the second and final break up of Yugoslavia). The author fails and his failure becomes part of the novel he is writing. The realization of his failure corresponds with Nazi Germany's invasion of Yugoslavia; the two worlds of the novel merge in their destruction. The reader's sympathy in the ensuing chaos is not with the characters, but with their creator, not his water-into-wine posturing, but his impossible longing for connection with the other. Rather than reading *Oroz* as a parody of transcendence, as some critics have done, I think it should be read as a transcendent parody.

[24] A scene between Heinrich and Videvic in the former's garden is interrupted by Mila riding by on a bike, then further interrupted by the narrator/author asking rhetorically if anyone has, "in a poem maybe, captured that enduring father and daughter scene, the daughter paddling swiftly, jittery on the bike, the patient father trotting alongside, holding the edge of the handlebar and rear of the seat, the daughter relaxing a little, softening the tight grip on the bars as she achieves a certain reassuring rhythm, confident, delighted, she turns her head bravely to share with her father this triumph, but there is no father, he is a long way down the street, a gesturing blur, yelling just go on, you are doing good, but all is lost, the daughter fumbles and the bike teeters and they both crash, she scrapes her precious knee, suspends bike-riding for a month" (pg. 124).

finger at what to pay attention to. Her reddish-brown hair gleamed like an apple in a sunbeam. The shutters were up. The pages rustled and lisped. A square of light quivered on the hardwood, seeming about to lift itself into the third-dimension at any moment.

2

It was seven in the morning and Ivan was awake. If he were lucky, he'd get three hours of sleep, watching a game of chess between the light and shadow in his room until dawn erased the chessboard. His temporary room. Everything was temporary now, everything borrowed but the clothes on his back. He'd lie in bed, pretending to be asleep for Vesna's benefit, knowing that she did the same. At one point in the night he saw her winding silhouette against the window, sitting on the sill, her knee raised, one foot resting on the edge of a dark bulky thing. She was asleep now, truly asleep. He slid out of bed quietly and got ready for his walk. While he washed and shaved, Prague was being staged outside, the buildings and church towers propped up, the Czech sky molded like papier-mâché, the air brushed with the sharp, elusive shimmer of reality.

Back in the bedroom, Ivan disentangled the blanket twisted around Vesna's legs and covered her up to her throat. There was still the undercurrent of chestnuts, but now her skin, her curves and hollows, smelled predominantly of bread. The soft white part, not the orange crust. The bed was a twin, the furniture in the room brightly pink and purple, and on the walls there were watercolors of animals with unnatural hues and impossible limbs. Ivan stood before the mirror, buttoning his long coat, a little stunned, a little baffled to be here in an apartment on 22 Benediktska Street. The mirror only proved the existence of his reflection. He locked the front door, went down the stairs and out into the deceptive sunlight of a September morning, the collar of his coat turned up. He had held the building door open for an old lady with bags. After you, Beatrice, he'd said. There was a light wind in the cobbled alleys, sparrows and pigeons called

from telegraph line to telegraph line. The air was damp from last night's rain, ripe-smelling. The sun in the shop windows made them opaque. He took Dlouha all the way to the Old Town Square, his fists like two stones in his pockets, his steps heavy and imprecise, his body drunk with cold. He remembered the stack of logs in the backyard, how they had turned dark blue in the rain. He remembered Mila walking a few steps ahead of him toward the beach, the white hairs on her narrow brown back. He hoarded this image against some unimaginable winter. Of the five benches that encircled a large tree on an intersection island, only one was occupied. Remembered her walking barefoot over pebbles and pine needles to the beach. An old man in a flat cap was folding a newspaper while his dog smelled the leaves on the ground, his hanging tongue as pink as the inside of a watermelon. Ivan passed them, remembering the iridescent silver of wet cobblestones, the dark-blue logs in the backyard, the sunburned, leaf-dappled shoulders of his daughter. Behind him, the old man sneezed, or the dog barked, and in front of him she walked with a foal-like bounce to her step, long-legged in bathing shorts, crossing the square, past the fountain in the center, past men in overalls setting up a stage, past the wedge of peach light between two buildings, past the carriages with their black and white horses, past the St. Nicholas Church and back into the dream-lit maze of narrow and never-ending streets.

Ivan had written in his notebook, during the train ride from Zagreb to Prague, that for a man on the brink of a cliff, everything is peripheral but the abyss. This is how he felt on his walks through Prague; everything melted together, the baroque facades and the bottle green puddles in which they were reflected, the beggars and the sidewalk they bowed against. He knew he was on Kaprova because he had passed their café, and he knew that Kaprova would lead him to the Vltava River. The notebook, where was it now? The logs gleamed in the sun, after the rain had turned them dark blue. He had no energy to write, no desire. His muse had deserted him, dragging a suitcase behind her like a sled. At night he did not think about writing anymore. In a square stack, dark-blue-gleaming in the sun, untouched. What was he doing in the study when he heard

the explosion? Where was he in relation to the sound? Not that it mattered; the sound had been everywhere and he nowhere where he could have made a difference. But he still needed to chart his location at the moment of impact. Her skin was tight from the sun, her pale lashes even paler. He followed her to the beach, leaf-shaped shadows sliding across her shoulders and rushing down her back. The small garden across from the Rudolfinum was empty. He shielded his eyes to look up at Dvorak and then began to round the base of the statue for a better angle of his face. She did not fully understand that each calm in the bombing did not mean an end to the war and so seemed always as unprepared for the next round as she was for the one that had come before it. Thunder, he said to make her stop crying, even though it was much larger than thunder. It would end soon, he said, even though it would never end, because endings were the very thing she misunderstood. He felt a sudden spasm in his chest and throat and sat down on a nearby bench. Regret had a way of startling him. He breathed in and out, slowly, conscious of the effort. A woman bent over him and Ivan gave her a hand gesture of reassurance, vague with exhaustion. He was fine, he told her, in his own language. He watched her disappear behind a building and his eyes closed almost without his knowing. He watched her sleep in the candlelight. He watched her chest fall and rise among the wavering shadows.

Ivan sat trembling on the bench; the harder he tried to control it the more he trembled. The edges of his world began to blur, but he shook it off. Sparrows looked for food in the shadow of a dead man's statue. Flecks of sunlight caught in the shrub leaves. The buttons of Ivan's coat heaved. No description could capture or even suggest the unreality of the moment: the bright hard burst of sound that was everywhere as he was nowhere, the humid rubber smell of the silver-wet alley, the drying logs in the backyard, gleaming in the sun. She held a purple pinecone in her hands like a baby bird, raising her elbows to show him. Each night he lay awake measuring his own complicity. He could not find himself at that moment, even in the study he was not there. Each night he lay awake, watching her sleep. There was pain in his legs as he got up from the

bench, pain and a lightness – the dreaming limbs of hanged men. Each night the smell of burnt rubber. Sunlight flickered in the shrubs, while crickets chirped in the periphery, nature's EKG. Everything buzzed with the insatiable amber of fall. Everything rustled and breathed. She would be eleven soon. She would never be eleven.

The river was his compass. He walked alongside it to the Charles Bridge, feeling better. Halfway across the bridge, he stopped to look down at the water. He fed the logs into the fireplace when the electricity went out and the flames climbed but never reached. The smell of rubber, warm as a mouth, and apricot-colored clouds through a moon-thin smoke. He flowed seamlessly into the moment from one unremembered. It was colder on the bridge and he could hear more clearly the scarf-muffled voices of the wind. A black-headed gull slanted toward the water. A girl rubbed the bronze plaque on a haloed statue, rising on her tiptoes. Some saint who was drowned in the river. He heard the wind without listening to it. His arms folded on the stone parapet, Ivan yawned at the water, weathering the first dull sting of tiredness. The water was yellowish-green where the sun hit it, Ophelia's colors, violet and obliquely silver where the shadow of the bridge reached. He heard her voice like a bell whose vibration was still felt even when the sound had ceased. The spires of the east tower rippled in the water, the current slow and secretive. There were only a few vendors on the bridge, but no musicians, and no artists painting portraits that made one's face look like it would reflected in a spoon. He imagined her heart compressing and expanding like shadows in the basement did when they passed the candle around from one to another. Her elbows rose to show him a purple pinecone, a flat pebble, a grasshopper in its green armor. Her soft white down. A large red-orange fire, a black column of smoke, thinning out into silver as it rose, clouds pierced by the sun, colors mixing, blurring, rushing. He did not understand endings either, not after her end, knew them only from books, where nothing ever really ended. Death and then what? A long, dark, cricketless silence? Ivan did not believe in an afterworld. He did not believe in a God he could not imagine and refused to

believe in a God he could imagine. He did not believe in anything that could give him hope except his writing. But he could not write. Last night he had opened the window of their temporary room on the third floor and stuck his head out into the cold, moist-smelling dark. There were no mountains in the distance, no foliage on the windowsill to conceal the plunge. He leaned his head out more, felt sprinkles of rain on his scalp, forehead, cheeks. He could not sleep and he could not write. He saw no dazzling slits in the night sky except for a slice of moon through clouds. He felt nothing down his spine but fear and regret, and in his heart he was only aware of the night's powerful refusal to yield anything to him.

Mila was killed by a fragment from a mortar shell that hit their neighbors' garage as she played with the neighbors' son. Never go outside without my permission, Ivan told her. From the L-shaped balcony he could see the army move on the hill. He focused on the brassy glare of the sun in the river. Never go outside. Fragment in the chest. Without my permission. Never go. The window of the room in which he forgot himself was sheathed in plastic. This he remembered, the popping sound the plastic made in the wind. Then the quick blind thack-thack-thack of rifle fire. Then a deep bursting hardness. He did not understand it, the sudden violence of circumstance. Or fate, which he pretended to know the way the neighbors' boy, a sheet around his neck tied in rabbit-ear knot, pretended. A cobblestone alley separated the garage from their backyard, where the logs gleamed blue in the sun after the rain. The fire in the alley where the children had played climbed into silver but never reached the gold of the sky. He held her in his arms bloodied and limp, and the memory of holding her was as feverish and vivid and stubbornly unreal as a dream. The white hairs on her hard brown back, the blue over her shoulder when they reached the beach. She walked into the water slowly, back crooked, hands gliding over invisible furniture, looking back and exaggerating her shiver. He thought about it every night, how easy it would be. She hugged herself, turned her head toward him, made her green eyes big with a little girl's longing and grief. He thought about letting himself fall down with the rain; Vesna would be the widow of

a great love, if not a great man. Something so touching about tall girls. The water up to her waist, Mila began to turn her body, painful and slow, then threw her narrow back against an oncoming wave, her hard narrow back turning into the wave. All he needed to do was raise his body over the parapet. On the tips of her toes, a bobbing head, with glints of brown shoulder in the blue, she grinned shivering at him, calling out for him to come in. It would be that easy. The waves were as sad and inarticulate as the wind. He felt a dark calm beneath the leaden river, the downward tug of a strong inner current. In the water, he picked her up shivering in his arms.

Ivan braced himself against the stone, and then let go. Her alert shoulder blades, her small yellow-knuckled fist holding onto something dear, her dimples when she smiled, it was all gone with her and she would not return. Ivan felt like a child at the realization that she would not. A man on the embankment was feeding swans, his reflection floating in one place, the ghost of a drowned man. The edges of Ivan's world blurred again. He looked at the tower in the water, the wrinkled spires, then back at the drowned man trampled by swans. She was no longer in the range of his vision, but he could still hear the echo of her voice. She was no longer but he could still. The swans swelled and dissolved. The river burned through his tears.

Instead of taking the stairway off the Charles Bridge into Kampa Island, as had become his habit, Ivan went back east on the bridge and then walked farther along the river. Feeling tired again, his legs aching, all he wanted was to lie down on damp familiar grass, but he knew his sleep would be brittle, full of the emblematic dreams he did not believe in as a young man. He unbuttoned the top buttons of his coat, took Narodni toward home. There was a beggar in front of the stairs to the National Theater, genuflecting severely, his hands cupped above his bowed head. Ivan dumped change into his mute palms without looking at him and crossed the street. From the chair he was reading to her his latest chapter, Vesna sitting in bed with the sheets tousled around her waist, a swan in repose or a swan in mourning. The sidewalk filled with the smells of the fast food places he was passing, fleeting voices, the oblique coos of pigeons. The sky was pale and

blue, like wet paper. She was staring out of the window at a large evergreen bloated by the falling rain, a tinge of melancholy to the loose shape of her open mouth. He stopped reading abruptly and it took her a while to notice. He sat down on her side of the bed, looked where she was looking. Taking his hands into hers, she said what she had to say – and he never forgot the hesitating gait of that sentence, each word's pensive, childlike step. Ivan stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to listen to a live piano from the inside of a café. His eyes closed almost without him noticing and his world shrunk down to sound. Tonight he would go to sleep and never awake again, but now he stood in front of a café, listening to the calm tremor of a live piano. She stared at a tree swollen with rain through large green daydreaming eyes.

Here is where I will leave him, walking toward Republic Square, making his way home. I imagine him nostalgic, thinking about the shy soaring quality of Chopin and the thick piercing smell of mint. I imagine him going back again to that day in Zagreb. She is asleep now. He is happy and fearful. Her breath is shallow. The rain is dark and it gleams. I imagine him walking the cobbled streets through crowds of tourists, past the fleet-footed clatter of plates and the broken arias of maitre d's, trying in his mind to pin down the perfect image of her. This is the last gift I make to him. Mila rising from the basement floor, her shadow rising with her and spilling over the ceiling like ink; Mila on a swing, Mila on a bike; little Mila asleep on the sofa in the study, wind through the open window blowing on her long curling toes; Mila bowing her head to smell a red rose, the pale, whispery hairs on her curved, slender, almost touchable nape.

I have written only for seven years, but I know that if I write for another seventy, my reasons for doing so would not change – like Ivan Boric I would still be trying to capture beauty and to raise the dead.

Admir and Benjamin

I.

Everybody always said that Admir was crazy, but to me he was just impulsive, rash, a child with grown-up tastes. If somebody asked me if he were intelligent, I'd pause, then say he wasn't stupid. But if somebody asked if he was passionate, I'd respond without the slightest hesitation – yes, Admir was always hiding behind his passion.

He was broad-shouldered but fragile looking, rolling his shoulders as he walked, head held high, short dark hair flattened to his scalp like he had just come out of the rain. From afar, his face seemed to consist solely of a forehead, though a closer look revealed a small nose, a brown mole under the left nostril, a sensitive mouth and strong jaw. And if you looked closer still, you would notice within the pale blue of his eyes, around the pupils, a burst of green. But only few ever dared to come that close to Admir.

Almost a year has passed since Admir's murder, and some Bosnians avoid talk of his death while others have genuinely forgotten it. Igor, in jail and awaiting trial, still maintains that he had not meant to kill Admir when he stabbed him outside the pool hall, and I believe him, not that it matters. A few days after the murder, in the garage of one of Igor's friends, Admir's blue Mitsubishi Eclipse was found, and then sold.

Almost a year has gone by but Admir is still on my mind. He's in my dreams and nightmares, and I remember our past together with a poignancy both pleasurable and sad. The poignancy that arises when moments shared by two people can be invoked in memory by only one.

II.

Admir and I met at a bus stop, on the first day of 7th grade. We were introduced by my cousin, Amela, at whose apartment my parents and I stayed for a month after our arrival from Sarajevo to St. Louis. She was eager to hand me over to somebody else and Admir turned out to be a great guide, navigating me through the halls of Buckley Middle School, the crowded cafeteria, translating my teachers' slowly spoken instructions and my fellow students' slang-filled talk. Outside of school, he continued educating me on the codes and customs of American adolescence. What clothes to wear and how to wear them: long, loose shirts and baggy jeans worn low to reveal your boxers. What kind of rap music to listen to. How much gel to put into your hair. I remember the time he showed me how to play baseball, first explaining the complicated rules with the aid of a video game, then taking me out on the tennis court and teaching me how to properly grip the bat and swing it. "Hold on to it this time, Benjamin," he'd say, then duck after throwing the pitch. I recall how he smiled and shook his head when on the third day of our lessons I arrived with a newly bought, right-handed glove and was unable to throw a single ball on target with my left arm, scattering yellow tennis balls, our substitute for baseballs, all over the red court.

My parents and I moved out of our relatives' crammed quarters into the building across the street from them, into an apartment one floor below Admir. The fact that we were the only Bosnian boys in our apartment complex made our friendship almost inevitable. With who else could he play catch, throw a football, kick a soccer ball; with who else could he exchange confessions of shoplifting and masturbation, confessions that only showed our lack of anything to confess; to who else but me could Admir describe,

with a fortuneteller's vagueness, his deepest dreams and desires? That we never talked about the war seems significant in retrospect, but our silence meant that he never heard about the bullet that lodged in the refrigerator door as I was rummaging for something sweet inside. And it was only by accident – overhearing my parents' conversation in their bedroom – that I learned about the Serb who held a knife to Admir's throat, only a bribe restraining him from murdering my best friend.

Knowing what I knew scarcely altered my perception of Admir then. It did soften his faults and made it much easier to forgive him when, after having had a fit of temper, he promptly came by to apologize. He was particularly upset about defeats in gym class. He had to win every game, and when he didn't, he would blame my poor play for the loss, though he kept picking me to be on his team. But what did it matter, the anger he sometimes showed toward me, it could not change our need for each other. We accompanied the girls to the nearby theater on South Lindbergh – which played movies already available on video – and played in the pool with them all summer long. But their lives were lived apart from ours. They gave one another meaningful glances that we could not decode, laughed at jokes we did not find funny, and we could only guess how many times they had gone to the movies without inviting us. Admir liked Amela, and I liked Esma, though I can't tell now what separated them from the other two, all four blond-legged and flat-bellied, with dimples appearing when they twisted their lips into smiles. Even their personalities were similar, an infantile cheerfulness that could and would change with nightmarish abruptness into a pubescent girl's gloom. We adored them in a subdued, languid way, and in that same way they ignored us.

Our isolation and longing were never more apparent than on the December night of Amela's thirteenth birthday, celebrated in the form of a slumber party – girls only! To kill the irresistible curiosity we felt, Admir and I had a sleepover of our own at his house, one that must have rivaled theirs in excitement and fun, though it merely consisted of us kneeling by the window and peeping through Admir's binoculars – he hunted with his father – at what was happening across the street, at that fantastic and mysterious twilight gathering of girls. It had snowed all day, but in the evening the snow ceased, granting us a clear view into my cousin's room – before the curtains were drawn. But we held our positions, sustained by the nervous pleasure of expectancy, passing back and forth the binoculars, drinking coke and eating chips and hoping for a stir in the curtains, which would give life to the larger hope that they were secretly peeking at us too. By the yellow rectangle of light that bordered the greenish curtains, we knew that they were awake, which meant that they were talking, about us maybe, though we doubted it. How cruel it was to talk about them all the time and to think that they talked about us never.

An hour passed and nothing happened. The snow gleamed blue in the moonlight, and the sky was the color of plums. Snow-crusted branches gave the grim shade trees a beautiful frosted glitter. The curtains did not stir. The light in the room below the one we were watching winked on and off twice in quick succession. Icicles hung blue-gray from the roof and snow, windblown off the building, swirled out into nothing. Another hour passed and the green curtains did not stir.

It was not out of boredom but from excitement brimming over that we decided, wordlessly, through a series of glances and smiles, to get dressed – thick pants over our plaid pajamas, hooded jackets and knit hats – and go over there. The wind singed our

faces and gushed into our mouths as we slowly crossed the street, Admir walking behind me so to step on the indentations I created in the snow with a crunch and make it appear as though only one person was taking the journey. Once inside the building, we stomped our feet on the potato-colored carpet longer than was necessary to get rid of the snow, then went up the stairs, laughing out of anxiety and joy, and shoving each other against the gray metal banister and tawny-spotted wall. By the door we fell silent. We knew, by the light, that they were awake. We also knew they were alone, at least for a while, because Amela's parents were over at my house to give the girls the illusion of privacy, which we now wanted to destroy. A knock would probably do it, but that seemed mischievously simple, like an easy question asked by the teacher that nobody in class dared to answer, fearing it was a trick. So we just stood there, putting our ears to the door, hearing nothing but our own heavy breathing.

Suddenly, Admir pounded twice against the door with his gloved hand. He stared at his arm with open-mouthed astonishment, as though it had moved on its own, then he looked at the door, then at me. Thin, angry voices rang out; rapid footsteps approached the door. He took a step back, panic etched on his face, darkening it, turned and ran off, the stairs booming woodenly, the downstairs door opening with a screech and closing with a slam. I stood alone in front of the nightgown-clad girls, their faces identical in their bleak expressions, all four barefoot. It was at their feet, small, soft looking and white, that I stared as I tried to explain, the door shutting before I could finish.

Starting home I was angered not just by Admir's eventual cowardice but also by his initial bravery. I never saw it coming, the knock, having thought that we had wordlessly agreed not do anything but linger for a few more exhilarating moments and

then quietly leave. His knocking and running were equally terrible, and I was angry because both actions excluded me.

Entering my building, our building, I found him sitting on the stairs, his head bowed. He looked up only after a while, his cheeks burning. I gave him what I hoped to be my most hostile stare, and in return he smiled. Looking at that smile, the blazing red cheeks, his upturned eyes, I could not restrain myself any longer and burst into laughter. Soon we were laughing together and could not stop. Then we went back upstairs, and in the warmth of his room, with our cokes and our chips, I started to tell him all about the four dreary faces and eight ivory feet.

III.

In Middle School I could have counted on my fingers the number of Bosnians, while in high school I did not get to know them all even after an entire year. Milton High School was a series of connected brick buildings, low and rectangular, with all the cheerless, formidable demeanor of a prison. Two long, blue metal benches flanked the main entrance, and it was on those benches that the Bosnians would congregate every morning. I never contributed much to the conversations that would sprout and tangle like weeds. The predominately banal chatter – gossip discussed in an inarticulate hybrid of English and Bosnian – perfectly captured the dull personalities of most of the people there. Certain mornings I was absolutely ready to believe that they, the blank-faced boys and gaudy-painted girls, did not really exist but were only part of my lousy imagination. Or, more accurately, that they were part of my first fumbling attempts at character construction, vivid on the outside but on the inside empty, the kind of characters one finds in the drawer-bound works of young writers.

The only reason I sat on those benches and remained sitting there till the bell rang, as opposed to stealing away to class or disappearing in the library, which had acquired a sudden grace after I had read my first book, was Admir. I was naturally inclined to be wherever he was. We spent less time together during high school, and when we were together it was usually in a group, before somebody's house, for example, assembled around the raised hood of somebody's car, bent over the shiny engine, examining it, as the owner sat behind the wheel and blissfully pressed the accelerator. Or it was on the basketball court where I would slide and slip and bump into everybody, the ball slyly slipping out of my hands when it mattered most. Each Friday night he dragged me to some terrible bar in South City or to the pool hall on Gravois where music drowned out any attempt at conversation. When we did spend some time alone, I found that our friendship had not changed at all since the early days, and though he had changed, just as I had, I still felt exactly the same way toward him – I was still charmed, hurt, and occasionally bored by Admir.

I was charmed by his passion – for music and sports, cars and women – a passion that might embarrass a stranger, but which was utterly charming to those that knew him; by the childish fondness he had for food, even taking pleasure in watching other people eat; and, especially, by the pain and pity he showed at the sight of some unhappy animal (sophomore year he adopted a large, burly, brown-furred dog that constantly knocked into the corner of things, tipping over chairs and small tables, but raising his paw with such an intelligent inclination of his head and endearing wiggle of his ears that one just had to love him deeply and unconditionally). Yet Admir was intolerant of human shortcomings, especially on the basketball court, and though he was sympathetic to the pain of others, sometimes he did not detect its existence, or his own contribution to it.

He often spoke to me about what he proudly called his girl-related problems. One day, as he went on and on about his most recent girl, an American, I realized that his problems were all

entirely similar in theme. What he essentially complained about was his girlfriend's inability to get over his cheating on her.

"I don't understand why she's making such a big deal." He was sprawled on the red sofa in the corner of the room, Rambo, the dog, by his feet. "Why can't she realize that just because I hooked up with that girl doesn't mean that I don't love her anymore."

"You know lust isn't love." I sat in an armchair, across from him, by the window.

"I know that. I really do love her. But why can't we just fuck whoever we want, even if we're in a relationship." The dog glossed his black nose with his long mobile tongue. "She shouldn't be so uptight about it. Why does she even care?"

"She cares because she's a human being," I almost yelled, and he just shrugged without taking the slightest offense.

What bored me about Admir was a trait common in the self-absorbed Bosnian male – a morbid lack of curiosity. The pleasures he had discovered at twelve became the pleasures he enjoyed at eighteen and beyond, not adding anything new, not even trying a more complex version of the same pleasure. I persuaded him to read some books I had specially chosen for him, but it was useless, though there was a funny moment when, after he was confidently given *Slaughterhouse Five*, he earnestly asked me if it wouldn't be better to read one through four first. He wasn't enthusiastic about the music I tried to get him to listen to either, and though we would never relish together Metallica or The Smiths, it was still a pleasure whenever we rapped along to an old shared favorite.

Admir loved rap, wrote down lyrics, had dreams of becoming a rapper. And it was partly in tribute to 2Pac, his favorite, that Admir had tattooed "Soldier" across his chest on the night of his seventeenth birthday. "Soldier" because, as he explained later, this is what we Bosnians are and will always be. I smirked at that idea and also at Admir wearing a star and crescent on a chain – this was probably another effort at copying rappers, only with a star and crescent in the place of

an electric chair or tank. That Admir was sincerely religious never entered my mind. I simply did not believe that he believed. But then came visits to the mosque and hard fasting on Ramadan, and I decided to put myself at ease and to ask causally if he really believed in God.

We were in his room again, Rambo and I on the sofa, Admir on the armchair, sitting in profile toward me and looking out of the window. He was unaccustomed to fasting, and one could tell how miserable he felt at being deprived of breakfast and lunch. *All Eyes on Me* played softly, and in the velvet hush between the end of one song and the beginning of another, I asked.

"Of course I do," he said, not breaking his bleak admiration of whatever he was looking at outside.

"So you believe in heaven and hell, too?" I asked. He nodded, and kept nodding as I explained, through the horrible paradox of human freedom, the impossibility of heaven or hell. I stopped talking after he had stopped nodding. He didn't appear to be listening, staring, it seemed, at the glass and not at what was beyond it.

"Admir."

He turned toward me, blinked. "I see your point," he said, "but I still believe that there's a heaven, and a hell."

I felt as though I was the one fasting. Could he really believe in something so strange, something in which I couldn't? "And do you think you will go to heaven?" I asked, sarcastically.

"I do," he said.

Then I asked, not sarcastically, but in a tone unintentionally gentle, if I would.

"Of course you will," he said, smiling indulgently, the way one smiles at the questions of a child.

IV.

In senior year of high school, we both began to do the things for which we would be, at least in our circle of friends, forever known: I began to write stories and Admir began to get into fights. That year I enrolled into Honors English, taught by Mr. Humphrey, who wore horn-rimmed glasses and Hawaiian shirts, and part of the requirement for passing the class were two original compositions of either fiction or poetry. So it was mostly out of necessity that I wrote my earliest story, an immigrated teenager's first-person account of a war-tarnished Bosnian childhood, in particular his near death by an accidental bullet.

As for Admir, he had always been aggressive, and there were here and there a few fistless scuffles that resembled wrestling and were never endowed with blood. They arose out of trivial arguments, mere misunderstandings between friends, and Admir would never, no matter how angry he got, strike a friend over a trifle. But Eric Bynes was not a friend of his. An obnoxious moron, Eric had on the first day of senior year shouted "Speak English!" as he passed through the no man's land between the Bosnian benches. Unsure about whether he was being serious or just unfunny, we reacted only by shouting back at him to shut up. And so it went the next time he did it, and the time after that. But the fourth time, which would also be his last, was different.

As soon as he got out of his car and started walking toward the entrance, there was a lull of expectancy on the benches, and our collective stare must have seemed to Eric like a dare to shout out his stale two-word slogan again. He stopped just short of the entrance, in whose dark glass doors we were all perfectly duplicated, turned toward one bench – the one I was sitting on – and like a doll whose chord had been pulled repeated the only words he knew. Then he laughed

through lusterless teeth, reached for the door handle but could not open the door – Admir, who had leapt off the opposite bench, had pressed his hand against the glass.

They stood silently face-to-face, Admir blocking the door and neither backing down. A half-circle formed around them, while some, like me, got up on the benches to watch, the crowd's excitement increasing as the silence endured. Eric finally said something, curt, indistinct, and with a smooth sudden forward motion Admir head-butted him. I heard a crack and a tear almost simultaneously, then saw blood dripping out between Eric's fingers as he tried to cover, first with one trembling hand, then also with the other, his smashed crimson nose. He was bent over with his face in his hands and Admir knocked him down to the ground with a punch to the side of the head.

Moments later Admir was escorted by security to the principals' office, where he spent the morning. And when I entered *German III*, a noontime class we had together, he was nowhere to be found. The rumor at lunch was that he was suspended, and this rumor, spread by some not without a certain sense of pride, turned out to be true. I saw him in the evening; he was calm and said without going into much detail that he had been suspended for two weeks, that what Eric had said to him just before being head butted was 'queer' – which rhymed with an American's incorrect pronunciation of Admir's name – and that even if Eric hadn't said 'queer,' he would have still fought Eric because he did not like it when somebody told him to speak English.

I told Admir that he had overreacted.

"It's just that when somebody tells you to speak English," he said, "they are not only criticizing you for being Bosnian, they are also criticizing you for not being American enough, you know?"

I did know. I knew more than I let on.

In the aftermath of the fight, meetings were set up between school officials and Bosnian students, all of them male, to discuss urgent matters, including how to reduce the violence already

characterized as rampant by our principal. These discussions took place in a small room around a large oak table, and two days into it my name was mentioned and I was requested to come in. What I found interesting were the four or five different motives dreamed up in that room for why Admir fought with Eric – out of jealousy, out of pride, even for profit (that Admir was paid to do it) – each motive tinted by the presenter's unique interpretation of Admir's personality. It was extraordinary to me that there should be evoked so many versions of one seemingly uncomplicated person, and even more extraordinary how for a majestic instant these different versions merged into what was, perhaps, a passing imitation of the real Admir.

On the day of the last meeting, a week after the Admir-Eric bout, another brawl occurred, this one in the cafeteria. It was between Cameron, a big black kid, and Igor, a skinny Bosnian. I did not like Igor, a.k.a. Rogue, amateur rapper and petty thief, who made terrible mixtapes and burgled the houses of other Bosnians. We all wondered how he really got the money for the Escalade he drove. He was auburn-haired, with a claw of hair falling over his forehead, tall, lanky, with deep-set brown eyes, prominent ears and a crooked, broken-looking nose. Descriptions, even of murderers, are so very innocent.

On our ritual night out the following Friday it took a real team effort to tell Admir about all the incidents that had occurred in his absence – the fight itself, the nervous intercom message of amity immediately after the fight, the school-wide assembly in the gym a day later, and all the ridiculous overreactions in between. We were at the pool hall and Admir seemed more interested in finding a free table than the information.

There would be another fight, in the spring, on school grounds again, this one between Admir and Cameron, ending with a broken jaw for Cameron and leading to a expulsion for both (Admir would eventually graduate from one of those schools with metal-detectors at the entrance, where fights were as common as French fries in the cafeteria). I did not see the fight and Admir only said it was about a girl. The rumors were more complicated and dark, and many thought that

Igor was somehow involved. That it was some kind of revenge. It was after this fight that everybody began to say, shouting, whispering, with proud smiles, with respect, even with fear, that Admir was crazy.

Around the same time I wrote my second story, following the Maric family, dark father, blond mother and three sandy daughters, as they attempt to cross from Bosnia into Croatia, their journey including an encounter with a Serb soldier who almost slits the throat of the youngest daughter. People in the workshop liked it, Mr. Humphrey liked it, but neither their comments nor the story's real merits could match the intense private pleasure I felt at having gracefully buried my friend's secret into one of my stories.

V.

After high school, Admir and I began to occupy different worlds. We had different friends because his stayed the same; our interests were different because mine changed. I worked at the library and Admir worked in a car repair shop; I was a junior in college and he wasn't. Sometimes I even wondered if the little contact we still did have was not a naïve, unconscious effort by us both to keep alive the spirit of a shared past through occasional interactions in the present, as though ending our friendship would amount to treason against our younger selves.

We became close again in a way following the theft of his Eclipse right outside of our apartment building. I drove him to work and back for a week, while he fumed and plotted in the passenger seat. The police had come, taken all the information, and left promising nothing. Nobody had seen anything, of course, but Admir had a list of suspects, most of whom were his friends. I was the only one he could trust now, he told me. He'd be making some house calls, he also said, unambiguously.

One day, as we were driving home, Admir was uncharacteristically quiet, kneading his chin and staring intently out of his window at the gas stations and fast food restaurants that lined

Lindbergh Boulevard. He was probably sliding his tongue over his teeth, as he always did when in deep thought. I asked if anything was wrong and he shrugged. A vein, red at the base, swelled diagonally on his forehead.

"Can you drive me to Igor's house?" he said suddenly.

"Now?" I asked.

"Yeah, right now."

"For what?"

He sat up in his seat and spread out his arms, waiting for an answer. "Are you going to drive me or not?"

"Admir, what are you going to do?"

"I'll know when I get there."

"Figure it out now."

"Are you going to drive me or not?"

We arrived at Igor's house in ten minutes – he lived on Forder and Lemay Ferry, not far from where we lived. It was an ordinary ranch-style house, with a one-car garage, the up and over garage door painted green, and three bushes under the windows trimmed to resemble a row of teeth. There were no cars in the driveway as we entered it, no gleaming black Escalade, and I thought with relief that nothing would come out of this. The silver knocker was a thin ring in the clutching jaw of a lion. The screen door opened with an elastic twang and Admir held it open with his foot.

"Wait," I said, as he grasped the ring. "What if his parents are home?"

"His parents are in Bosnia, have been for a week. Okay? Will you relax?" He knocked on the door. There was no sound, inside or out, except the incessant ticking of the crickets. Kitchen fumes – a mixture of sausage and bacon – seeped out of the open window of the neighboring house. Admir knocked again. Nothing. "Go check the back real quick," he said. I checked the

back: six patio chairs, a table with a parasol, and a pool filled with floating leaves. No clothes on the clothesline.

"Nobody's there," I said, coming back. "He isn't home, we should go."

Admir knocked a third time. A bee flew by my head, its shadow on the door, the window-ledge, on a leaf, gone. A dog began to bark somewhere nearby.

"We should go."

Admir gave me a sidelong glance, smiled, and knocked again. I heard light footsteps, and Admir heard them too, cocking his head and bringing it closer to the door. They ceased, then resumed, but swerved to the left, away from the door, then ceased again. The curtain rippled. Admir, fingering his chain, hastily tucked it under his shirt when the knob began to turn. The door opened and a slim girl poked out her blond head.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she said, blinking in the sunlight. She spoke slowly, her voice throaty, hoarse. Judging by the lack of an accent, she was American.

"Is Igor home?" Admir asked.

She stepped out a little farther and glanced suspiciously at us both, scratching her elbow. Her face was unfamiliar, pretty, with pale cheeks and drooping blue eyelids. She was dressed in pajama bottoms and a white T-shirt. "Nah," she said.

"Well, can we come inside and wait for him," Admir asked, gently pushing the door open as he spoke and stepping inside. "We're friends of his."

"I don't know when home he is going to come," she said, and then started laughing like she had the hiccups. "I don't know when home he is going to be," she said, throwing herself on the couch, laughing harder. Then, as suddenly as she had started, she stopped laughing. Admir and I exchanged looks; he formed a circle with his index finger and thumb and pantomimed smoking a joint. The smell in the house corresponded with his guess. I sat down in a recliner opposite the couch on which the girl lay spread-eagled, pouting at the ceiling, then at me, pink

nail polish on her fingers and toes. In between us stood a wooden table, ash stained, with a sugar bowl in the center. The left-hand side of the room was taken up by a big screen TV, above it an oil painting showing the Old Bridge in Mostar, where Igor was born. Admir stared at the painting, rocking on his heels. He was born there, too.

The girl turned onto her stomach, propping her chin on her palm, and started talking about a movie she had recently seen. So we talked, she and I, about our favorite movies, past and present, while Admir walked through the house, rolling his broad, broad shoulders (broader than ever), and from time to time lifted a corner of the curtain to glance outside, making a triangular glare appear on the large screen.

Eventually, cross-legged on the carpet, he joined our conversation, turning his head toward the window whenever a car drove by the house until, after a whole hour of waiting, the right car finally came, announced by rap song and interrupting the girl's charming and incoherent description of some plot.

Admir stood up. The fear that hibernated through our conversation now awoke inside me with a roar. He was by the door.

"You don't know if he did it," I said, speaking in Bosnian, "so, don't be stupid."

"It'll be easy enough to find out," he responded in English.

"What did you say?" the girl asked.

Igor entered, eyes wandering, smile forced. "What are you guys doing here?" he said, offering Admir his hand.

"My car got stolen," Admir said, not shaking it. "You know anything about it?"

"No, how should I?" Igor brushed back the claw of hair from his temple. Our eyes met and I looked away.

"Someone saw you in the neighborhood around the time it was stolen."

"Who saw me?"

"My mother," Admir said, bluffing well. "On her walk. What were you doing?"

"Just seeing a friend." Igor tried to navigate past Admir but was blocked. "Will you let me go? You can't just come in here and accuse me of shit." He shuffled his feet, his upturned palms pleading at hip level.

"Where's my fucking car?"

"I don't know."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know." Igor took one step back and grabbed the doorknob. "I had nothing to do with your car."

Admir struck him in the face and the girl screamed. He struck him again and the back of Igor's head banged against the door. Then Admir hit him in the stomach.

"Stop it, Admir," I shouted.

Igor was doubled over, hugging his stomach, coughing. Admir relaxed his arms and just stood there looking at him. Suddenly, Igor lurched forward and fell to his knees, then slowly face down on the carpet, still holding on to his stomach. Admir stepped over him and exited the house.

I told him that we were not leaving yet, so he waited outside while I helped the girl take care of Igor. His mouth was swollen and bloody, and his right eye, also swollen, was a blue-rimmed slit. I told him that he did not look all that bad. We sat him on the recliner, and with McDonalds napkins found in the kitchen we cleaned his face while he groaned. The girl then put an ice pack to his face, bending over him and, every now and then, removing with her free hand a bit of hair that kept getting into her eyes.

Outside, Admir was leaning against my car. "Did you exonerate yourself," he asked, rolling his eyes at the word. I said nothing. What could I say? Wasn't that exactly what I was doing?

Later that same day, a phone call disrupted my writing; home alone and writing, I let the machine pick it up. The vague message, given in a moist hysterical girl's voice, was clear enough. I did not try to call Amela back but drove straight to St. Anthony's. I remember the yellow-painted waiting room, and certain conversations I had but not with whom I had them (there were a lot of people there). I remember pouring paper cup after paper cup of bland, lukewarm coffee, and then I remember a short chubby man, an uncle, announcing to the room that Admir was dead.

VI.

The funeral was held in November on a sunny afternoon in a small and treeless cemetery in St. Louis. I was sitting in the second of five rows, at the edge, not far from the coffin, dressed in the required black and austere in my expression of sorrow, though my hands trembled, slightly but visibly. Admir, his skin a dusty blue, his hair slicked down as in life, his features softened as if by sleep, seemed to me the only flesh and blood being among all these spectral figures.

The same short chubby uncle that had announced Admir's death delivered the swift eulogy. He was also round-headed and bald, this uncle, with prominent cheekbones and small eyes, resembling a turtle. The eulogy started off with some details of Admir's childhood in pre-war Mostar – including an anecdote of how Admir once ran away with a pig and hid with it in the nearby forest to rescue it from the butcher's knife – but then degenerated into general statements that could have been made about anybody.

Admir was described as good-hearted, hard working, independent, truthful and loyal, though he was, at times, the very opposite of those things. And sometimes he was also impulsive, impatient, and primitive, but one was forbidden from blemishing the dead with faulty human traits. Therefore the Admir being eulogized was almost alien to me, a half Admir, an Admir painted exclusively in bright colors and so unlike anything found in nature. All light and no shadow. It was then and there, among the mourners, listening to the eulogy, that I decided that I

would write about Admir. And now, as I'm writing the epilogue to my own version of his eulogy, I find myself overcome with doubt about everything I have written, certain that I have failed to describe Admir as he really was.

I see him on the basketball court, shirtless and sweaty, passing the ball flawlessly through his legs, pivoting with a squeak of his sneakers and flashing past an opponent, his strong, outstretched arm laying the ball in the basket with a sharp pump of the palm. I see him in the yard behind our building, being chased by Rambo and laughing. I see him behind the wheel of his car, face red from drink, strangling the gear stick and screaming as we race down an empty highway, doing triple digits at four in the morning. I see him in my room, fidgeting to a song, his hands swaying like a conductor's. I see him standing by a dark door – eyes bulging, mouth forming an O – that winter night he ran away, that winter night when I, not for the last time, was left behind trying to explain.

Hand in Glove

The job is simple. It's the setting that's complicated. I go from business to business in South City, St. Louis, and ask owners to sign partnership agreements with the Census, which they do without reading them. I ask them to distribute pamphlets to their customers. To advertise the Census by keeping engraved pens and buttons on their bars and counters. I ask them to put up posters of smiling families on the walls of their restaurants and cafes, Bosnian stores that sell Bosnian brands reminding the Bosnians here of what they have lost without truly replacing it.

When my parents returned to Bosnia a month after I graduated from college, I was supposed to fly out with them, to help with the renovation of our old apartment. But then a half-expected call from the Census Bureau changed our plans. I drove them to the airport on Friday – my father satisfied, my mother hopeful, neither of them happy – and on Monday started work. What I had in mind was going door to door in some quiet South County neighborhood helping people fill out their Census, asking them questions by which strangers define one another, listening to the answers that told nothing. Instead they made me the Bosnian Representative and sent me to South City.

***

My family and I came to the U.S. in the summer of '95, after three years in Germany. We came to St. Louis, where my uncle had lived since the start of the war. He was our sponsor, a key word in the refugee vocabulary. He picked us up at the airport and I remember the drive to his apartment with remarkable clarity. My uncle's Dodge smelling of hot leather, the lunar-cratered roads, a bumpy ride, sunlight, low buildings,

lots of sky. I was eight. I remember my mother and I sitting in the backseat, looking out of the same window, and her crying at what she saw.

After half-a-year at my uncle's, my parents bought a house on Evergreen Lane in South County. We lived there for almost fifteen years, until they moved back to Bosnia and I got an apartment of my own. Most of our neighbors on Evergreen Lane were old. There were two widowers, both dead now, who played chess on their porches everyday but Sunday. They'd greet me with gray lingering smiles when I came out to check the mail or mow the lawn, and I'd think that the only thing the old know with any conviction and insight is that it's better to be young.

I know now things I did not know then. Like how both of the widowers sometimes resembled Dr. Gachet in Van Gogh's famous portrait. How painful the decision to buy a house and how drawn out and stressful the process was for my parents, how hard they tried to hide the anger and regret that came with every refused loan, every realization that they would not return to Bosnia anytime soon. How, in the faces and hearts of young and old, patience is always melancholy.

***

Throughout high school I didn't tell anybody I was gay. I walked the halls separated from my true desires, sitting in the front of classrooms, meticulous and aloof. There wasn't anybody I felt comfortable enough to tell, certainly not any of my Bosnian friends. Only Nina, but I had no faith she'd keep it to herself. I knew she'd be the first one I'd tell once I was ready, and I imagined her looking at me afterwards with the same expression of recognition and disbelief with which she stared at the wall in class.

I had met Nina in elementary school. We were in Ms. Armstrong's class, the only Bosnians. She was a little tomboyish then, but our relationship was uncomplicated. We were children. In the snow, we slid down swift hills, secure and warm, invulnerable, in our thick clothing. We went to the pool in her apartment complex and played baseball in a nearby park, Nina and I in the sunny outfield, excited, nervous, a little dreamy – a dream from which the hollow thud of the aluminum bat woke us. Yellow grass looks red in the sunlight, she said once, with that random precision of hers.

By high school even I had noticed the changes she'd undergone and could no longer ignore the vulgar appreciation of the boys around me. Her sexuality seemed most apparent when she was dancing, in the flicker and weave of her hips. She wore knee-high leather boots with everything, spoke of *candy* photography and *handsome* cabs, and at parties passed out with a cigarette in her mouth, knowing she had me to take off her boots and put her to bed. A mediocre student, she depended on me in class, when she wasn't faking illness to get to the nurse's office. I enjoyed the warmth of her when she leaned over in Mythology class to ask in a loud whisper: What are the names of those sea monsters? Syphilis and Chlamydia? I thought we wouldn't have traded in what we had for anything, even for the possibility of something better, even if we could.

***

I spent the summer before senior year in my room, dreaming of college. Nina came over from time to time to keep me updated on what was happening in my absence, the hook-ups, break-ups, the parties and fights. There wasn't much I was missing. She was excited about the upcoming school year, about being a senior, about a big party one of the Bosnian girls was going to throw in August, to initiate us into that glorious year.

But I was indifferent to its promise, didn't care. There was no convincing Nina, however, who leaned back in the armchair with the look she wore when dancing or dreaming and imagined a year of unmatched excitement. I smiled without condescension as I listened from the bed, thinking that we all need to fool ourselves a little.

The night of the party she sat in my room begging me to go. She'd had her long boots propped up on the table but was now pitched forward in the chair, worried that my no's were serious. She was sitting under the fan, its wooden blades cutting through the smoke from her cigarette. On the bed, I lay with my arms behind my neck, looking at the pockmarks on the ceiling. *The Queen is Dead* played low on my computer, over the murmur of the air-conditioning, the insect whir of the fan.

"It won't be the same without you."

I laughed. "It'll be exactly the same."

She put out her cigarette in the ashtray in her lap and tipped out another by tapping the bottom of the Marlboro box. "You sure your mom or dad won't suddenly barge in," she mumbled, cigarette in mouth, lighting it.

"No, they'll be gone for a while." Smoking was not allowed in my house, or coming into it with your shoes on, but Nina was special. The ashtray was a secret between us, hidden in a locked drawer with some lyrics I had written to nonexistent songs and the scrap of a story I never had the heart to throw away.

"I have to, you know, keeps my fingers busy."

I smiled.

"Come on, please."

"I really can't, Nina. I just don't want to."

She got up from the seat and lay down on the bed, putting her legs over mine. The ashtray wobbled on the mattress with every shift of our bodies. She wore blue jeans and a dark shirt that had "HORSES" across the front of it in glitter. The shirt bared her midriff and reminded me of all those times she tried to wear something similar to school and was caught by the authorities and given a jacket with our school logo to wear over it, which she did proudly. It reminded me of the tight skirts that slid up her legs when she crossed them a little more dramatically than she should, semi-drunk at a party.

***

My father is whom I thought of when I thought of a Bosnian man. Not my friends from high school who seemed too young still, flippant and impractical, and not their fathers, who had eagerness in their eyes where there should've been regret. I didn't think of myself, because man and Bosnian were only an approximation of my reality.

He came to all my elementary school recitals, to all the baseball games when I played for the middle school team, even though he didn't like sports, much less baseball; he taught me to swim, to ride a bike, to multiply; he taught me that only male seahorses give birth and only female mosquitoes bite, that you measure the size of a country not by its area, but its population. He was quick and capable, with a manly ingenuity about him. He could take things apart and put them back together, and I envied him and didn't care.

My father counted down the days until his return to Bosnia. He moved furniture, drove a truck for a time, painted houses with his brother and packed medicine at the pharmaceutical company, making it to the front office eventually – and all the while he counted down the days. Weekends, he went to Mostar, one of the Bosnian cafes on Gravois, and he sat there drinking his cappuccino and counting down the days. I can

picture him so well, a corner table man, rocking gently in the chair to the music, a raised knee in his interlocked hands, a man lonely and distracted in his joy of the moment. His future was in his past, and patience and regret were the heart and soul of his disposition.

He'd come into my room to drop off the mail and he'd ask, How was the party last night, or, Were there any girls at the pool? He asked with a sated little half-grin he couldn't pull off, the meaning behind the smile as unreachable for him as it was for me.

***

Nina and I let the blue smoke fill our silence, until that too was gone. She was looking at me, on her back now, our sides touching. Something slow and mocking about that look, or maybe it was in the lines of kohl with the little flick above the outer edge of her lashes. Maybe in the subtle arch of her brows. Gone with the smoke was the curious stare she was giving me before, hard-eyed, her mouth halfway smirking, looking at me like I was an interesting challenge. That was something I never wanted her to see in me.

"Please. I need you there."

"Trust me, Nina, you don't."

She turned on her stomach, letting her chin rest on my chest, her face collapsed into a pout. I put a pillow under my head to better see what she was doing. We became silent again because there was nothing more to say, though it felt more deliberate than that. She moved up toward me, slowly and without words, her body sliding over mine. Then she pressed her mouth against my lower lip, kissing me. My mouth slackened under hers, relented to it, played along like a wall plays along. She was kissing me with a hard, heedless plunge of her tongue, her hips grinding against my motionless bulk. My arms

were too limp to push against her dipping shoulders, my mouth slack and defenseless. I felt a double beat inside my chest, a ropey tightness.

Suddenly, she was standing by the bed, taking off her clothes with an unthinking swiftness, undressing down to her bra and panties. Before I could speak, she was on top of me again, tugging at my shorts. The ash spilled onto the sheets like a horrible parody and the mattress groaned under our innocent weight. Telling her the truth now seemed further from possible than it had ever been, and anything else I could've said to stop it would've been a lie she'd recognize and interpret in ways that'd hurt her more than this would hurt her – or so I thought, closing my eyes and letting her pull at my clothes.

***

It was my mother I worried about. My mother who grilled me about the lack of girls in my life. Who dreamed out loud about a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. Who made me nervous when she looked at me tight-eyed and frowning, leaning forward on the sofa we shared, her arms crossed over her knees. I knew she thought I was strange and I feared that the question of why I was that way would eventually find homosexuality as the answer. I could see the question formulating in her mind whenever her eyes narrowed and her mouth became a compact, opaque little frown.

She'd been a civil engineer in Bosnia, but in Germany took care of an old wealthy couple and an even older and wealthier widow. The state provided money for groceries and rent and so my mother really worked for life after Germany, for the right to decide where that life would take place. Not Bosnia, because there was no future there for her only child. I came to America for you, she'd say when she needed to prove her love or have me prove mine – and I'd only think about the disappointment that awaited her.

Now my betrayal was double-edged; by dating Nina I was lying to my mother, too, making her hopeful and impatient. Nina and I had dinners at each other's house, with each other's family, and the talk was always ambitious and sweet, especially when my mother was at the head of the table, with wedding dates and children's names spoken over bell peppers and roasted potatoes. Nina helped my mother cook while listening to her stories and relieving her momentarily of the pain and loneliness of a daughter-less existence, the strange nature of her only son.

***

Rumors spread quickly in high school; by the first day of senior year all the Bosnians knew about Nina and me, the eyes of the boys narrowed and mouths grinning in congratulation. They said they'd suspected something was going on. It was excruciating, their happy suspicions. The girls weren't surprised either – they'd seen it coming.

I walked Nina to her classes, hand in hand down busy hallways, and we sat close together at lunch in the Bosnian corner, her thigh rubbing against mine under the table. Part of me became content with this arrangement, this fantasy of us. I started to take a lulling comfort in our public tenderness, our ceremony of heterosexual love. For the first time in my life I wasn't scared of being found out because for the first time I was fooling everybody. But guilt brought me back to reality each time, the thought of my silent partner in this deception, the friend I was betraying for an illusion of freedom.

We went to nightclubs because she wanted to. We danced under the boozy lights to blurred music. We went to parties and she mingled while I kept to the edges of rooms, sober and bored. We fought lightly, got jealous for no good reason, said bitter things we did not mean, played all the sly and dismal games boys and girls play when they think

they are men and women. We had the backseat tit for tat in random parking lots for the sake of excitement and risk. We went down on each other with our clever hands and mouths and our pleasure was fleeting and incomplete.

Nina cooked for me sometimes, tender and fussy in her mother's apron, sprinkling salt through the bunched tips of her fingers. I looked in now and then, standing under the archway to the kitchen, shy, anxious and incredibly moved.

Whenever Nina said she loved me, I felt a complicated pity for us both, and then I said it back.

***

The Dollhouse was a small, ramshackle record store on Tesson Ferry I visited regularly looking for used CD's. "Only Shallow" slithered out of the wall-mounted speakers as I made my way to the ambiguously titled Rock section, nodding at Dave behind the counter. I was looking for The Smiths' first album, which Nina had borrowed and subsequently lost. As I browsed without luck, I noticed a boy with a familiar face doing the same across the aisle of shelves. It was a good face, with a muscular curve to the cheekbones and gently slanted eyes. A face wasted on a boy, my mother would say. I was sure I knew him from high school, but his name wouldn't come to me. I moved around to his side, wanted to brush his shoulder against mine. Instead I picked out some random CD and pretended to look at it. He wore a buttoned long-sleeve shirt, heavy for spring, khakis and tan sneakers. He held two Miles Davis CD's in each hand like he was weighing them on a scale. With a sudden grace his name came to me.

We talked a long time, Ryan and I. It was effortless. I don't remember any subject in detail because we didn't stay on one for long. He was majoring in English at Webster,

where I'd just gotten accepted. We talked about that. We talked about high school, the film class we had had together. We talked about the songs in The Dollhouse, how each song changed the room's feel. He had a way of staring off to the side, looking at my shoulder rather than my face.

"What're you looking for?"

"Miles Davis, if I can make a decision."

"You're into jazz?"

"Actually, my ex-girlfriend, she listened to him a lot when we were together, so I had to listen to him. A lot. You know how it is." I nodded, smiling, and wondered if I did know. "It grew on me. Only problem is I don't know which one to buy." He looked sadly at both. "What do you think?"

I wished I had an answer for him, but everything I know about jazz, I learned afterwards, in preparation for next time, our second chance encounter.

I was walking toward my car when I suddenly turned around and went back to The Dollhouse. I stood by the store window inclined and motionless, peeking in through a narrow gap between two posters. Ryan had only one CD in his hand now. He took it out of its case, then looked around indifferently. Dave was on the phone again, or on the phone still, his elbow propped on the counter, his head in his palm, eyes on the floor; there was only one other customer, a hip-swinging girl with headphones on and her back to everybody. Ryan moved toward an empty corner and farther away. I pressed my face against the glass. He looked around some more while his hand moved to his breast pocket. He slipped the CD in – and it was gone. I'd seen it coming, the minute gesture of

it, yet it astonished me. I thought how charming, what a beautiful and charming thing it was, caught by my eyes alone, I'd hold it forever in my heart.

***

The more times Nina and I had sex, the more receptive I became, the more I learned to tune my mind out and let my body follow the rhythm of hers. I never kept my eyes open too long, though, never said a word. I trembled without being eager. And sometimes I lost my erection, which happened as naturally as a moan during orgasm, though there was as little embarrassment for me in the one as there was passion in the other. Afterwards, elbow cupped in palm, smoking a cigarette, she'd tell me that it happens. It's all right, she'd say. We're getting there. All I wanted then was to drop at her feet and beg for all the forgiveness in her soul.

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Before we parted at The Dollhouse, Ryan casually mentioned he'd be at a small club off Lindbergh on Friday. It felt like an invitation to a chance meeting. I brought Nina along in case he didn't show. But he was there, in a corner booth with some blonde, a friend of his. Nina and the girl made fast friends and had long, shouting conversations over the music. Ryan charmed the waitresses with his ambiguous smile. I watched people in the club, making comments to the table when it became too irresistible. There was a revolving door of local bands, with girls and boys wriggling on the dance floor below the stage or stoically wasted at the bar, staring into the distance like castaways. Ryan got a kick out of my fake ID, turned it over in his hand, compared it to his, said mine felt more like the real thing.

We kept meeting, sometimes alone, sometimes not. And I kept noticing how his eyes never met mine in conversation, how his slow and indirect way of looking at me allowed for varied interpretations, for tenderness and detachment. I felt a hesitant, guarded attraction toward him, giving him the corner-of-the-eye leer I had perfected by necessity and accident in high school. There was an old buzzing in my limbs again whenever he was near, a sharp murmur in my bones that turned my body into a coded message. I thought of him during sex with Nina and in the stillness that came after, when the rare screech of some faraway tires was the only sound in the night and my dreams.

I graduated high school and enrolled at Webster, impulsively choosing Art History as my major. I read large books with glossy pictures and began to see analogies in real life, flesh and blood metaphors wherever I looked. I saw Ryan in Bronzino's Portrait of a Young Man, in the long slope of the nose and small hard mouth, the noble cheek. Saw my mother rigid, marble-poised, an Assyrian statue. And Nina, when she was lost in thought, her legs folded under her on the sofa, looking out of the window at the rain, past the rain, silver and sudden – she had that doomed and ethereal glare in her eyes, something of the Madonna in Byzantine mosaics in her tranced gaze.

And where was I in all this? Buried in grays and greens, misshapen and gaping, Saturn devouring his children.

***

Nina didn't go to community college like she'd promised her parents, even when the spring semester came around. Instead she started working full time at a job she had throughout high school, selling tickets at the Ronnie's multiplex on Lindbergh. She worked weekends, too, and I took every opportunity to see Ryan on those busy Fridays or

Saturdays. We went to a tavern not far from campus. Students from both of our departments hung out there, sitting around oak tables under Cardinals pennants and signed pictures of ballplayers, the smell of fried potatoes coming from the noisy kitchen. Despite the large group, I talked without censoring my words or concealing my gestures. I felt lighthearted and invulnerable, at a point of safe arrival. I felt I was finally with people for whom my sexuality would be at the very edge of their perception of me.

Ryan and I usually stayed until closing time, and afterwards, not yet tired but with nowhere to go, we just drove around South County in his red Camaro, music seeping in and out of the open windows. Traffic would be sparse, the traffic lights blinking yellow, raw asphalt and dark sky filling up the windshield. We drove into downtown sometimes, its streets geometric and empty, then back south on Highway 55, along the Mississippi. Sometimes we drove into the Bosnian area in South City, that stretch of Gravois before and after it intersects with Morganford. Benevolent Ryan never asked any questions. And sometimes we drove over the bridge into Illinois instead, with visions of Chicago under a starlit night. Once, after we'd just seen the skeleton frames of another Camaro in front of some rundown house in South County, Ryan said that these nowhere drives inspired him like nothing else. He was tipsy, one careless hand on the steering wheel, the other gesturing toward the dark, pointing out a dingo pack of young boys huddled on the street corner, trying to map out, he said, the shortest route toward their desires.

I had done these nowhere drives before, with the Bosnians, but now was different, a purer mixture of adrenaline and the dark, with more poetry to the night, an element of fate that didn't depend on the outcome for its meaning. Ryan challenged other cars at stoplights, pressing down on the gas pedal while in park only to feel the promise of

acceleration, the tremble of the frame. When the light flashed green, we watched the other car roar forward, marking the pavement black, the hot screech of its tires deafening out against the night sky. The music we played now was no longer just an taunting announcement of our presence and power, like the defiant rap from high school, but an evocation of deeper wants, an attempt to communicate secrets, a more sincere and subtle expression of our wonder and unapologetic joy. We played *Meat is Murder* and *Louder Than Bombs*. The music never rose above our voices; we never had to turn it down to be understood.

Our nights usually ended around Grant's Farm, the car parked on the grass at the side of the road, serving only as a radio now, and Ryan and I sitting on a wooden fence that gave out on a field, beyond it a small forest, the trees turned to silhouettes in the moonlight. There was a deep-breathing calm to late nights in winter, even without snow, even in a city like St. Louis. We sat on the fence in silence, listening to music and the phantom gallop of the horses that ran there during the day. I could tell Ryan was sober again when he stopped looking me in the eyes.

***

She was peeling a grapefruit, wearing a summer dress, the lilac faded from too many washes, and didn't have any make-up on. She sat in the armchair in my room, legs crossed, one of the worn-out slippers my mother had given her tilting on the brink of her suspended foot. The white slippers had turned a buttery yellow around the edges. My mother had given them to her so her feet wouldn't get cold. It was May.

I sat on the bed with a book spread out in front of me, studying for my last exam of the school year. The fan was working. We were silent. The sun shone behind drawn

curtains, and the air was charged with a secret resolution that I wouldn't have the courage to follow through for yet another day. For her it probably just smelled of citrus. I was looking at paintings trying to memorize their names, the names of their makers, dates and certain techniques, but thought instead about how coming out to Nina was to signal a new beginning, a new life, how it still would, but not for the better. I thought about my mother when I heard her laughing, watching sitcoms in the living room. I thought about my father's silence, then my own. In that respect, it was like any other day.

She shifted her weight in the armchair and I looked up. With one flick of her foot, the slipper came flying at my head. I caught it by the heel, pretended to rip off the puff, then threw it aside. She pierced a slice of grapefruit between her teeth, took it up on her tongue to crush the juices out against the roof of her mouth. I smiled, she smiled – and that was as far as it went.

***

Nina complained of a headache and left. I thought about calling Ryan as I gathered up the grapefruit peel she had scattered on the table, the skin still pungent, evocative of what was lost. I thought better of it and drove out to his apartment.

Ryan lived by himself in a rugged but trendy neighborhood off Manchester, in an apartment on the 5th floor. He opened the door in a sweat-drenched t-shirt, said he just got back from a run. Clothing was strewn on the carpet and over furniture, paintings on the wall, one by a former girlfriend, an abstract thing, naïve cubes and mauve flames. The room smelled of soul food from the restaurant below. While he showered I looked over his books, though I knew them all, had figured out which ones were by gay authors. I took out a collection by Hart Crane, leafed through it leaning against the bookshelf. My

favorite vision of Ryan was in the white-fenced garden behind the Pearson House at the University, slouching on a hard bench under a speckled shade with a book in his lap and a pencil behind his ear. The water turned off and I pictured him now in front of the damp mirror, towel around his waist, his face slurred by the steam on the glass. I put the book back.

The window was open, the sky orange with sunset. On the roof of the building across the street were two plastic recliners like the kind you'd see at a pool, one beige and the other white. Ryan joined me by the window, barefoot in dark jeans, wearing a grey shirt with the name of our college arched over his chest. I could tell he'd just shaved by the tentative blue sheen on his cheek, the bit of crimson on the base of his jaw.

"There's this couple and they suntan up there," he said, gesturing toward the rooftop with his chin.

We sat down on the sectional trying to figure out what to do with the night. He sat a cushion away, slouching slightly, one foot against the edge of the table. He was talking about the movies.

"It's too early for the movies," I said. "Plus she's not working tonight."

"I don't mind paying."

I felt reckless and brave. "Except for CD's, right?"

He turned toward me with an almost mocking slowness, the tight smile already on his lips. I shifted my body to face him and we were silent.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing, I guess. I just want you to know that I know."

His stare became vague again, gentle with obliqueness. He stopped smiling. I touched his face and he closed his eyes. We kissed.

On the way to the bedroom, I gripped him by his pale biceps and pressed him against the doorjamb. We kissed harder. He tasted of cherries and soft wax. He tipped his chin; his throat was humid and rough. I was taller than him; it gave me confidence. He palmed my crotch and I clenched his hair. He bit my lip and I bit back. His bed was a couple of mattresses stacked on top of one another. I pulled him down on it by his hips.

We jerked each other off with a certain clumsiness that put us both at ease, I think. Ryan began to talk about our plans again like nothing had happened, or like whatever had happened was now over. It angered and relieved me. A violet-blue dusk filled the window, half-open to the rumble of trucks, the jagged siren of an ambulance. Ryan lay with his head in the crock of my arm, naked above the waist, pale and delicately muscled. His nipples were dark small towers. He talked and clawed at his arm, bumpy with mosquito bites, scarlet-tipped little mounds I brushed my stubbled cheek against when he wasn't expecting it.

***

Part of my job with the Census was to help set up block-parties in neighborhoods with low participation rates, where people did not fill out the form that came in the mail. These were in predominantly minority neighborhoods. Our supervisor said it was fear more than laziness, a deep suspicion and fear. The block-parties I set up to promote the Census in the Bevo Mill area were a failure in the sense that no Bosnians ever showed up to them, forcing me to go to the nearest bars and try to persuade the bemused patrons there to come, worried always that beneath their disinterest there lurked a hint of ridicule

and hate. *Peder* is the word for gay in the Bosnian language and it's almost impossible to say without sounding like an insult, because it means both homosexual and fag, because for us there's no difference. I listened for this word in the white noise of the crowd, against the foreign blare of the music, but when I heard it, or thought I did, I never had the guts to turn my head, to stare back with the pride of the unwounded.

***

I told my parents as soon as I came home from Ryan's. My mother cried in a hushed way, her head bowing into the tissues she held, and my father only looked at me with that heavy patience in his eyes, abstractly holding his reading glasses, the newspaper folded beside him. I knew that for the rest of my life I'd have to explain myself to them and thought it was the least I could do. Later, my mother came to my bedside, and I remember how she tried to shape the words with her lips but made no sound louder than a whisper, each word bulky with meaning. I remember how, as she sat straight-backed on the edge of my bed, with her ruddy hands clasped in her lap, her sad, softly inquisitive eyes, she looked like a woman in a painting I'd never seen but was sure existed.

Emil, she said, you understand that there is more than love? She could make you very happy. Nina, she said, is a good girl. From the lighted hallway, only a voice, my father called her name, told her to leave the boy alone. She got up and simply closed the door, came back and sat down again. I turned on the bedside lamp without moving my head off the pillow. Her shadow appeared against the far wall, a woman older than her, bundled in black. She began repeating herself, love and happiness, how they are not the same, and I said, I know, sadly, tenderly, I know, like hushing a child. I remember the grey where her hair parted when she bent down to muffle her sobs against my breast.

***

I told Nina the first chance we were alone, coming to pick her up for a party we'd never get to. I held her by the elbows and looked into her eyes as I said it. I tried to make her understand but she seemed to stop listening as soon as she realized what I was saying. She yelled and cried and beat against me with her small fists. She called me a pervert and a freak. Ryan, she said, as though she knew, and I felt the dizzy heat of a blush. Ryan, she said bitterly. Then she calmed, sitting with her knees together and ankles apart, still wearing the indigo bathrobe I'd found her in. It hung open down the middle, revealing the smooth apricot of her chest and belly. I wanted to go over to the sofa and comfort her, but didn't think I had the right. She was staring out into nothing, with that almost serene and utterly fragile look on her face, the make-up around her eyes runny from tears.

I tried to reason with Nina in the following days, to apologize, to tell her that I loved her and always would; I called her on the phone repeatedly, but she either wouldn't answer or she'd curse at me in a small but savage voice before hanging up. I drove to her home, but it was her mother who kept coming to the door, turning me away each time with lessening affection. Finally, I went to Nina's work and asked for her forgiveness through the little hole at the ticket counter, but she only said she'd call security if I didn't leave. I reached my arm inside and she jerked back like it was a snake, her mouth ragged with disgust behind the streaked glass.

One day my mother told me that one of her friends who'd come by for a midday coffee on weekends asked her about me, my disease, as the woman had called it, *bolest*. I'd have laughed at this if I didn't think my mother secretly felt the same way. I'd have laughed if I didn't know that Nina had told.

It felt like the longest summer of my life. By the end of it, Ryan and I had fizzled out. I cannot think of a more careless yet fitting expression than that. I'd been pretending to my parents that I was taking a summer class in Chemistry just to see him, staying at his apartment every weekday from eleven to two, then every other day, and then I just walked the South County mall trying to fill the time. I told everybody in our group that I was gay, but I never told them that Ryan was my lover. I sensed he wanted our relationship to be kept a secret. We always had an instinct for each other's needs, understood the subtext of each other's body language. I knew what he wanted and gave it to him because it was what I had wanted too, at first, because it had been easy to give. Then I wanted to give more and knew he would never give as much in return. The last time we made love was hasty and intense. It felt like the last time.

***

If the Census Bureau were to relocate me tomorrow, there wouldn't be any heartbreak on my part. The sweet molasses smell of baklava never reminded me of coppersmith huts lining cobbled streets or old Ottoman bridges like the one in the painting that hung in Café Mostar. My earliest childhood recollections are not of the Bosnian city I was born in, but of a small town in the south of Germany, its blue-roofed tower, its old men with El Greco expressions sitting outside of ice cream parlors. After those memories comes only the whitewash of St. Louis.

I was in Café Mostar today asking the owner if I could leave some Census pamphlets off with him when I saw Nina through a crowd of broad shoulders and unshaven faces. She was sitting with a group of young men near the billiards table in the back, the sticks lying in an X on the synthetic green behind her. She held on to the arm of a dark-haired handsome boy, talking over his shoulder and gesturing with a cigarette in her free hand. I couldn't even imagine going over to her through the maze of tables, saying hello, how've you been. I just watched her out of

the corner of my eye, another familiar-looking stranger from where she sat, in room full of familiar-looking strangers. She seemed happy, forgetful, and I'd like to think it was out of love, not fear, that I didn't approach her. She wore knee-high boots and light green shorts barely visible beneath an oversized jersey. It was the all-white home uniform of the Bosnian national soccer team, the number ten shirt, too big for her and probably his. She did seem happy.

Like Coming Home

When Daniel thought of his father – while watching from his bleak little cubicle the chair the gum-chewing and unsmiling secretary had just deserted, or at night, vaguely asleep, with the after-rain drip and gurgle outside of his window, the wet gleam of sidewalk and moon – he remembered his father's peculiar means of making money as a young man, smuggling blue jeans from Italy to Yugoslavia. Daniel's father did his buying in Trieste, a hotspot for the blue jeans trade and close to the Yugoslavian border (ah, the bright, ephemeral, counterfeit nature of borders and border crossers).

The particular market his father had gone to was a five-minute walk from where Daniel sat now, the Miramare Café, and it still sold jeans among its glossy fruits and vegetables. If Daniel had bought a pair as he walked by the overflowing wooden stalls earlier, he would have fulfilled the main purpose of his visit to Trieste. But then he would have had to tour the rest of the city with a bag in his hand. His father carried up to five bags at one time, but his excursions were limited. He came, did his business, and left. Daniel was aware of early events in his father's life by the stories his mother told him in a poignantly longwinded way. The rest he imagined.

The Miramare, named after the whitewashed castle on the Gulf of Trieste – where a phony empress had gone genuinely mad from wild mourning for her shipwrecked husband, or so I've read – was a seaside café with polished windows, a creaking door, a creamy terrace with only three tables, and a horizon-inducing view of the dusky blue Adriatic (had he been more artistically inclined, he would have thought the water a nostalgic blue, the horizon a scarlet slit athwart the violet and orange wound of sunset). A

couple of large gulls glided across the sea, making gull sounds and casting gull-shaped, dimly glimmering shadows over the water. Daniel could also see a good stretch of the pale stone esplanade before it curved and disappeared behind red-roofed houses, farther down, the moored boats in the blue marina, farther still, the boats at sea, sails flapping like flags of surrender.

Oh, the poetry of port towns.

Daniel, brown-haired, broad-shouldered, and almost twenty-four, sat at the center table, leaning gently to one side in his chair. The table behind him was empty. At the table facing him sat a long-limbed blonde in a clinging lilac dress. She was reading *Ulysses* by James Joyce, whose bronze double Daniel had encountered on his walk (Trieste was swarming with ghosts, his travel guide pointed out). Pretending to read the dessert section of the menu – cakes sonorously named after Renaissance sculptures and painters – Daniel stared at the girl, shamelessly eavesdropping on the conversation she was having with the waiter, a lithe, acne-scarred, handsome boy, wearing his dark hair slicked back in the preferred style of Italian waiters. Daniel felt no shame because he could not understand what they were saying, though it all sounded dimly poetic to him (the girl was asking in careful, school-learned Italian, with Slavic tints and overtones, when the last train for Venice was leaving, and the boy put down his empty tray – a dark, circular, raised-rim tray, streaked with moisture – and stroked his red-stippled chin, before saying he wasn't sure).

The door creaked and they were alone. The girl took a small sip of her latté – a tickle between porcelain and lip – and went back to her book, slouching forward, her raw pink elbows on the table, the book held awkwardly in one hand, licking the index of the

other to turn the page. Daniel's Italian consisted of a few touristy phrases provided by his guide book, not nearly enough to attempt a coherent conversation with this girl, whose thick lulling lips sometimes tenderly mouthed the words on the page, brows lowered and swift eyes narrowed as she read (intense, wintry blue eyes). Daniel wanted to talk to her, or at least offer a clever, echoing aside that would hint at the ghost of a romance. His father had met his mother in Trieste.

As the story goes, his father, bags in hand, heading for the train station, saw Daniel's mother, who was vacationing in Italy, sitting in a café. He sat down across from her for the sole purpose of gazing at her foreign beauty. After exchanging glances, he went over to her table, but because each thought that the other was actually Italian, and since their combined knowledge of the language amounted to a half-dozen words, neither attempted a conversation, and their communication by gestures soon floundered. So they sat in silence until his father muttered something in Serbo-Croatian – he had banged his knee against a chair and cursed – and the whole misunderstanding was cleared up.

Then the smoldering romance began, and they ended up spending the entire day together promising to meet again as they parted on the train platform. Here his mother liked to go into great detail, positioning herself on the edge of the platform, misty-eyed, clutching a tissue, while his father, one foot aboard the train, shouted something inspired and unforgettable – which she did not hear – as it took him into the convenient sunset. Daniel would object, accusing his mother of confusing her life with a romantic novel. But she stood by her story, though he believed what she had described was a fantastic scene that never was and could never be reenacted in reality, no matter how ardently his mother desired to play the part.

Daniel took out of his pocket a silver wristwatch with a square face and black leather band that used to belong to his father. Despite its handcuff feel, he cherished it as a simple reminder of what he had lost. He put the watch on the table next to his half-eaten Verrocchio. "*Il conto, grazie*," he called out to the young waiter – tone self-conscious, words muffled – after calculating he would have only twenty minutes or so to buy the jeans and get to Trieste Centrale, where *his* train was waiting. The smile on the boy's face when he saw Daniel's tip seemed genuine and he showed his appreciation with a hearty, accented "Thank you." Daniel looked at the girl one last time as she leaned back in her chair, the novel sprawled on her lap, and made up his mind to casually praise the book as he passed by her table (he did not notice the legs of the chair she so languorously sat in reflected against the pale yellow cement, or how the colors of sunset shone and swam in the palm trees that lined one side of the esplanade, nor did he hear the exuberant buzzing of a bee that circled a plotted plant in the corner of the terrace – or else he confused it with the noise in his heart). Daniel rose suddenly, approached slowly, cleared his throat loudly – and she looked up. He opened his mouth, caught the blue dazzle of her eyes, and was struck dumb. Out on the street, he cursed his cowardliness in all the languages he spoke, with all the blunt fluency of regret.

The word digression has for me a physical quality: a young man, walking toward the main square of an European city, is abruptly seduced by the optical siren song of some scrawny vivid alley snaking its ancient way uphill; he can see the great church tower with its rust-colored, aesthetically cracked bell – and what's more the heat is becoming oppressive, the sunlight glinting off the pawn-shaped, black-domed automobile barriers in town – but he turns, he digresses, he sins into the alley anyway, drawn by

curiosity and a vague longing for beauty, by the luminous knick-knacks in a teeming shop, the bargaining tongues of shopkeepers, the chance sight, atop some fancy ironwork balcony, of a Madonna in a sundress or accidental Juliet hanging her linens, graceful legs shimmering through the gaps in the flowering balustrade.

Daniel was not such a young man, not yet. He only grew digressive with age.

No, he was not such a young man and made it to the Piazza dell'Unita d'Italia in no time. He began looking for stores that sold jeans. It was a bit nauseating in the dense hot crowd of the wide square, under the stone-eyed Hapsburg Emperors and their horses (rigid and rearing, respectively), surrounded by architecture nostalgic for the foundation of an empire (pretty Trieste suffers under the charming spell of an identity crisis, with its imposing German architecture and voluptuous Italian people, its out-of-the-way graffiti, on bridges and in tunnels, proclaiming the city as Slovenian). Daniel got onto a street that branched out of the square, passing up several inviting storefronts. Two old men sat on the curved steps of a residential building, playing chess with gloomy concentration. Young boys grunted and screamed as they passed a ball back and forth in a narrow side street, while girls, watching from the sidewalk, seemed unable to take the their passion seriously. But they looked intrigued, hands shielding their lips as they gossiped and burst into laughter. In their pink and orange skirts, taken for granted by the young boys and old men, they lived only for the leer of a foreigner, or so Daniel liked to imagine. He knew better. They were not interested in him despite the white-toothed smiles and the sly look in their eyes. They were not interested, but they appeared to be. That was their charm.

"*Signor*," a voice cried out behind him – light-filled and achingly soft – and Daniel, though he did not think he was being called, turned around to marry the senses. He turned too suddenly, and she bumped into him with her delicate bones. Her smile was slight and lovely. Opening her fist, she revealed a familiar-looking wristwatch coiled in her golden palm. Instinctively, Daniel reached into his pocket and found nothing.

"*Grazie*," he said. He wanted to say more. She seemed to know it, too, inclining her blond head to one side and looking up at him with those eyes. But he only repeated his thanks and stared back at her, hoping that his eyes would express what his lack of Italian kept him from saying. It would be an awkward parting.

* * *

The window on the train from Trieste to Zagreb was aflame with sundown. Daniel dozed off with his head resting against the thick glass. There was a constant promise of color – an oblique burst of aquamarine, a streak of azure flashing at the shoulder – that diffused into sudden gray at every turn of the dreaming eye. He saw legs crossing and uncrossing beneath a table in continuous motion, while his father gestured from an incidental angle, moving his lips in vain. White-shirted and wearing black pants, not himself at all in appearance, but his father under the authority of dream logic, he was later checking Daniel's boarding pass in a train cabin that resembled the inside of a small, unpleasant bar Daniel had visited on his twenty-first birthday. Then, his father a mere bystander again, a younger version of Daniel made his way through a crowd at a beach toward a raised, swanlike arm in the gray distance. And from this labyrinth of meaning, this offhand riddle, Daniel awoke with only splinters of lucid recollection.

Across the Zagreb Kolodvor, a columned, neoclassical building, a Hungarian's dream, is a finely manicured park with a fountain in the center and an equestrian statue on its southern edge, facing the elongated station – but Daniel was already in a taxi, looking out of the glare-smudged window, distracted in a sullen way by inner landmarks. On the bus to Split, a smooth highway run, he fell asleep again, awoke, changed buses in the city Diocletian had built, and was on his way to Mostar. It had been humid and grimy

in Split, the bus station shoddy and loud, the sun a blind menace, the sea a blue mirage. Daniel was glad to board the bus. But soon the titillating coast was gone: the hoary, green-veined, precipitous rocks, the blue-pebbled beaches, the sea's lacy, tattered foam hem; and the air-conditioning died with a abrupt thorny rustle; and the dry inland wind brought only the briefest relief; and the bus was ponderous; and it stopped at every sea-forsaken little village to pick up a ghostly swirl of silver dust on the ground, or a musing white goat in the adjacent pasture; and it was all so maddening and hot and slow; and the border was jammed, and border was close, and the border was far away.

He fell asleep once more, a hot wet dreamless wink of time. When he awoke, he looked out of the window and instantly realized where he was (it was not really knowledge, but a deep feeling, let's call it an articulate chill along the spine or the loud moan of intuition). He asked the driver if another bus was coming and exited at the nearest stop, slightly hunching under his backpack and swinging his bag with the fire engine red of the Levi's logo on it. The gate was thin and black, one harp-shaped door ajar, as if held open for Daniel by some ghostly porter.

The cemetery in Mostar was sprawling and endless. So it seemed to Daniel as he searched for his father's grave among the tooth-shaped stones, the marble gleaming blue in the mounting dusk. Walking through it, Daniel was pleasantly surprised to feel the same rush of fear he had known from his childhood wanderings through cemeteries, when dared by a friend to walk from one end to the other with only the trembling moon as accompaniment, he instead ran down the nimble pavement, his heart beating in his ear, as soon as he was sure the winding path had taken him out of view (I was never really sure, but eventually, at a small sound that blossomed into a roar even my booming

heartbeat could not drown out – an long-echoing twig snap, or the wind-magnified crackle of autumn leaves – the terror of ridicule and hazing would be instantly overcome by the more pressing, merciless terror of darkness and the unknown). The fear and excitement faded quickly, though, and Daniel became impatient, walking toward the cemetery's vague southwest corner, where his mother had told him his father was buried.

When he finally reached his white headstone, his name written in curling bronze, all Daniel could do was stare at it. He stared at the name and the stone, the even pile of dirt, suddenly feeling like he had come to this cemetery by mistake, by a wrongly given direction, and was now standing over the grave of some random stranger (how could *my* father be *here*?). Yet he kept staring. He had come here to learn something about his father that his mother's stories could not teach him. To resolve in one elegant stroke the whole mystery of his father's life. Now Daniel realized he could never complete such a task, but nor could he ever abandon it.

When she had heard of his father's death, his mother returned to Bosnia to bury him, while Daniel stayed in Croatia, waiting for her, and somehow his, return. A few days after coming back, his mother told Daniel with tears in her eyes, and without him asking, that his father had died by stepping on a landmine. What side planted the landmine mattered as little to his mother then as it did to Daniel now, and to know would only further complicate his already complicated sense of resentment. His father was a patriot even at the worst of times, an optimist despite being Bosnian. He had taught him to respect Muslims and Christians before Daniel became aware of their differences, and Daniel remembered once overhearing his father say that taking sides in a war meant defending the bad against the worse. He remembered those words not because they were right – they weren't, not in this war – but because he had taken them seriously when he first heard them. Now they were the only words of his father he remembered.

Daniel stood over the grave for a while longer, then sat down on the concrete, spreading his legs out over the grass. The sun was setting behind blurred hills, orange and purple, silky and rough-edged, its motley iridescence trembling on an anonymous leaf. The fragrant golden lilies shook their heads in the wind. Daniel thought in the simplest of terms: What if his father were here right now, free of all temporal and spatial restraints, standing right there, looking over him, and looking into him, his past and future, his memories and desires, as sullen and restless as his son. There appeared a faint new moon in the moist violet of the night sky. The wind still sang in the bushes, delicate, discreet, able to shiver a rose petal, make a skirt on the clothesline bloom, shut a door in an empty room, the draft of otherworldliness that runs through our everyday lives.

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Daniel thought of Jelena in imagistic spurts, mostly as she was the summer he left for America, with a pebble beach in the foreground, the Adriatic in the back, and at the subliminal periphery, a translucent yellow lighter they had hidden beneath rocks and twigs near a marked tree. There's Jelena looking out at the sea, her hands at her side, one leg slightly bent, the strap of her orange dress sliding off her shoulder. There's Jelena dipping her hips to bath her hands in the blue water, the waves washing over her feet. There's Jelena, arms stretched heavenward, revealing the peach hollow of her smooth armpit, fingers outspread, mouth agape, a mighty yawn, but the corresponding audio is missing and thus a mute roar. Memory is deaf, or clogged with seawater, and he can never hear her yawns, her laughter, her sighs of exasperation.

But he wasn't thinking about her now as he walked across the bustling, tree-lined and pigeon overrun square on which he had driven miniature cars as a child. He thought he was being perceived as a tourist and it made him feel vulnerable. He had felt it before, this vulnerability, in Trieste, even in Zagreb, but that he should feel it now, here in Mostar, was painful and strange.

What imperfection, he wondered, revealed him as an outsider? It couldn't be his wobbly Serbo-Croatian, the clash of accents, because he hadn't said a word. It wasn't what he wore either; his clothes and their clothes were identical. He possessed no foreign odor or aura and must have inherited whatever distinct Bosnian physical characteristics there were. What then?

Daniel himself was uncertain about whether he was a tourist or not, and perhaps this uncertainty was the imperfection. He did not *feel* Bosnian, whatever that meant. Did not *feel* American either. Somewhere in time he had simply ceased being Bosnian without becoming anything else. And why should he not be considered a tourist? Mostar was not really his home, only the place where his father had died.

Crossing the street named after a homegrown poet, Daniel was on Tito's Bridge, going east toward the rugged emerald of some mountain. Velez. Velez. Velez. Once he returned to the States, Daniel began to regret not having paid more attention to his surroundings, not having at his mnemonic disposal readymade images of vivid poignancy when he needed to describe the place of his birth. He regretted not lingering a bit longer on that resurrected bridge, looking down at the southward river, the sinuous, deeply shimmering almost-turquoise of the cold, clear water, the gray-carved, languid protrusions of stone from which the young, effortless boys leaped. The icy burst of the pearly-green water, the subtly quick current of that beautiful river. Neretva.

He went down Fejic, the main pedestrian road on the eastern bank, then turned into a small alley that gave out onto a large courtyard called the May 5th square, according to the daintily written address, his mother's tender hand, on a wrinkled piece of white paper. The half-dilapidated building in which Jelena lived was smaller than Daniel remembered, like everything here, and it didn't have balconies though he distinctly recalled Jelena, afraid of heights and extremely pretty when afraid, clutching the thin black railing as he tried to pry her fingers open. He sat down on a wooden bench in the courtyard, from where he had a view of the building's entrance, not really wanting to see Jelena again, who he had last seen through a train window,

waving and seeming both bored and devastated by his departure. It all came back to him then, sitting there on that brown, wooden, bird-marked bench.

It came to him nearly the way he would later write it down: He and Jelena kneeling on the backseat of the Fiat, turning their backs on the border and looking instead at their fathers through the sun-stained window, watching them gesture, wave, become smaller and smaller, then vanish; the plunging feeling, as he knelt looking out of the rear window, of a remote threat finally revealing its dark significance; Jelena asking him, while both of their parents were outside, arguing with the shaved heads of the border guards, offering passports and papers for their disinterested inspection – she asking him to explain what was going on and he not knowing how to explain and feeling fear at not knowing and shame at being afraid (all I could tell her was that the houses were prettier here, the colors of the flag different from the ones my father had taught him were the colors of my flag); Jelena running, thin-limbed and blushing, past his mother and up the stairs of the basement, back when the border was but a crouching nightmare in the corner of a bright dream, back when he and Jelena played adult games in a suddenly adult world, when Daniel still thought that his mother only existed to deny his every satisfaction; a shadowy figure in a lighted doorway taking the shape of his father as he descended the stairs Jelena had just ran up, a smile on his face that Daniel knew was meant for him only, because when his mother turned at the creak of a stair, it disappeared.

The sun, hard and voluptuous, flanked by orange-blue clouds, was setting, and I decided to leave, come back later, at night, if at all. Checking the watch, now on my wrist, I set out toward the Old Bridge.

The street became narrower and narrower, full of people, their faces sinister and mask-like, until they smiled. Small shops, selling worthless knick-knacks, stood on either side. Candles blazed in archaic lanterns. Brassy music played out of cafés, laughter and the tinkle of glasses on the terraces. Further along, more laughter, robust, Slavic-toned laughter, and more music, songs

that reminded me of nothing, though I felt they should. Then, the Old Bridge, its white stone as bright as the emerald of the nameless mountain in the background, the amber streaks of the sky above.

As I looked at the bridge, arching over a river whose name I could not recall, I felt what I always felt when I looked upon anything here – a radiant pleasure with a dark tint of pain. The actual Old Bridge, Ottoman built and standing for three centuries, had been destroyed during the war. This was a reproduction, an exact duplicate, built from the old stones, now literally as well as symbolically bridging the two sides of the conflict. Despite the recent reconstruction it was still called the Old Bridge, and, perhaps, for all intents and purposes, this really was the Old Bridge. But I knew it was not, nor would it ever be, the bridge over which my father had walked.

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