



The
third

Milorad Pejić *life*



SAMI
ZDAT
KAMI
ZDAT

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Translated by
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*On Monday my book is going to press, The Third Life.
The compositor sent word that he'd accept changes
by eight in the morning at the latest. I have nothing
to change any more, I've changed everything
and feel as if on Monday I am going to the burial
of a body that has been in a coma for a long time.
At eight I'll unplug the cables and cut off the life-
-support apparatus with relief. To end my misery.*

NYX'S* SON

Last night I raked my lawn and this morning
new leaves have already fallen on yesterday's
earth. Spring I almost don't remember any
more, summer has collapsed into itself..
Still, faith in a third life has not left me yet.

When Nyx's son, like Grandfather Frost, knocks
on the frozen window with his torch, I muster
my old strength so as to appear young and busy.
So that he let me be for a little while. I dredge up
my dead friends as my endorsers.

* Nyx, the goddess of night in Greek mythology and mother of Thanatos,
the god of death

MEMORIES

When they return empty-handed from
the Gobi Desert, bare-necked vultures peck
at and drag away the bones of long-spent
carrion until they cheat their hunger at last.

On everyday days we come home tired.
As in a deaf-mute movie, we've nothing to tell.
Like the hulky cursed birds of the Gobi Desert,
we descend in pairs on the carcasses of the years.
We pluck and poke through our memories until
the words return at last.



THE SECRET

Ever since I was entrusted with keeping
the secret, I don't recognize myself. I don't
trust myself anymore. I chew every word
a long time before uttering it. Nights I sleep
awake lest I reveal it in a dream even to you
who are lying next to me. In the morning,
over coffee, I inspect you with a Kafkaian eye.
It is only with the dog and cats that I speak
like a man.

THE SHEEPDOG

You found your man's best friend in a sheepdog with both a male and female name of Kim. Kim is, in the nature of things, more devoted to you than I, and has more understanding for your profession, too. When the phone rings at night, she doesn't know that someone, somewhere, is gravely ill but she realizes you must go and doesn't grumble.

I sleep and usually don't hear when you return, but the dog keeps standing in the hallway all night, on the same spot like a statue, conjuring up your steps until they turn into real ones. When she hears the key in the lock, she jumps wildly and greets you squealing and licking her best friend in you.

Sometimes it happens that someone dies and then the phone calls you to come write it all up and put that blue band around an already stiff wrist. Kim doesn't know, but as usual she stares watchfully at the door handle. When you turn up at last, she sniffs your clothes and suddenly starts snarling and barking terribly with both her dog names. For a long time she doesn't let you in.

LOVE

Once upon a time, in our strongest youth, I suddenly felt a hot hole in my back, as if from a burning cigarette, and my body unstoppably leaking out through it. You agreed, and I carried you piggyback out of town, far from the material. I knew the way through the mine field to the deserted shack sunk waist-high into the waves of nettles.

Later, we abandoned in the same way our foreign cities also. Fleeing from the material, even today we overnight in a Bedouin tent, but from the look in young children's eyes it is clear that we are old people who are spending their borrowed time on earth. The love I carried piggyback from my rebellious youth is losing in courage but it still keeps me moving. Today as a burden I dare not set down.

IN THE PARK

Babies listen and look curiously, but from their strollers they still can't hear or fully see what's around them. The world going past their world is without sharp outlines, like a watercolor, and that is tiring. That's why a child prefers to amuse itself with its own body. Through the pacifier ring it aims, turning on and off its thought that moves the little fingers.

We, old men on a walk, are the same as babies in strollers. We no longer hear clearly or see the world going past ours. We are reluctant to bend over the watercolors of the little fingers; sweet-talking is tiring. Our own bodies are more interesting, the spotty stones. We lower them down in the tub and with a magnifying glass take stock of the moles.

WAKING UP

1.
I'm horrified by the thought that one day I'll wake up by your cold body and that that day is ever more certain. The morning when the sun's accordion will go through the blinds like through a comb and lie down on us in bed is getting ever closer. I'm horrified by your cry when you wake up some day next to my body turned cold like iron.

2.
In the dead of night I'm woken by raving: voices from your dream. I calm down and listen to what you are dreaming. I feel ashamed a little as if I were opening and reading other people's letters.

ARCHIPELAGO

The difference between what we choose ourselves and what we agree to is small and insignificant until our youth begins to fade. When youth stops working, we talk less and calculate more. We suddenly realize that we are not on a continent but on an archipelago, where every soul is an island to itself surrounded by a boiling sea.

Weep, by all means! You, man, who did not have the strength to say “No”! You, woman, who against your will said “Yes”! On the archipelago both of you will bear your irreplaceable gain.

LITTLE GAMES

1.

Death! From time to time, she strays our way, too, Blind Woman’s Buff. With a blindfold over her eyeholes, she roams the extinguished rooms, sniffing furniture.

When it was up to us, we kids would stay a day longer with our aunt, the Italian. If you still remember, she’d go out before daybreak and put her hand into the dark of the henhouse. She would feel around long before pulling out a rooster for the sumptuous meal.

Cowering in the wardrobe, we bate our breath, paralyzed as in a dream. Blind Woman’s Buff listens to the keyholes and grabs unjustly the first one she touches. She does not distinguish between flesh and flesh.

2.

If I could choose, I would take one of the deaths from August 24, 1983. The same one to which Pentti Saarikoski agreed to also, when under that autumn day, like under a bell jar, he hid from his two temptations: his wife and his mistress.

I’d feel a gentle draft through the ajar door of the library and hear noiseless steps approaching behind my back, woollen socks. Cold hands would close like shutters over my eyes, and a chilly breath would whisper in my ear: “Guess who it is!”

THE NATIONAL ANTHEM

We moved a lot. In the waters of countries
and cities, our fingerprints have washed away;
in alcohol, our blood group has evaporated.

We no longer belong to anyone. Any national
anthem I hear, I stand stiff like at a closed
railroad-crossing gate, till the train passes.

COMPATRIOTS

On various continents, at airports,
at stadiums, everywhere I meet people
who more than twenty years ago, escaping
war like I, settled far and wide around
the world.

I feel they are there around me, who they
are and where from, but I don't notice them
right away since they are indistinguishable
in the crowd. They are as ordinary as I
until we look one another in the eye and
recognize each other by the madness that
still endures.

NURSING HOME

The war veterans in the *Regeneration* section have stopped hating. I can see them as they stroll behind the yard wall holding hands with their victims. The latter don't hate anymore either. The disease of forgetting has united them again. Both carry only the memory of childhood like dried-up scabs that are the last to fall off from the body. New wounds don't take. Only on Sundays, when they are led out like first-graders into town, does someone stop short, bewildered, outside the gaping church doors. He listens and asks, horrified, what dogs are those barking from the dark?



THE BALKANS

I've never anywhere seen a quince, but lindens bloom in Scandinavia also. Rinsed by the tea of rains, though, their scent is faint. Like a strong perfume, the scent of the Balkan linden tree in summer gets into both blankets and sweaters. Quinces rust on the wardrobes in cold bedrooms in the fall.

In the Balkans both good and evil are enlarged and so they are never boring. In their trap I fell a long time ago when as a child I was loved and transferred by all, smokers and alcoholics, from arms to arms, from lap to lap. I would scream and I would struggle, just for show, never with all my strength lest they drop me accidentally, lest I accidentally break free of them.

BOSNIA

1.

For years I have not lived in the country
I was born in. But I visit it, in the same
way we as children used to go see our
next of kin. Although among your own,
you feel like a guest.

2.

Here and there I don't recognize a word.
And many faces. In villages, empty homes
and full graves. If you push a door open,
the only living things you'll see are a bright
ibrik for coffee and white cups behind it.
As if a hen with her chicks were crossing
a low dining table.

3.

Disappointment gets old and dry with
the years. But it doesn't lose its heaviness.

TUZLA

I can hardly keep in mind anything from
yesterday's day, but the past I remember
clearly. The early years are the first to sink
into the dregs of a lifespan, just as the grime
of the sun and red soil settles in olive oil.
The rest has no taste.

In October we were regularly late returning
from school, stealing on our way the forgotten
grapes of the already gnawed-out summer.
A sudden gust of wind enraged the hornets...
I left long ago and long have I wandered
the world, but Tuzla still turns the scale,
sinking to the bottom like mercury. In it
I have spent eight out of my nine cat lives.



ČARDA STARA KOLIBA*

1.

We've been long in foreign countries,
we, likeable old men. Now, having got
together again, coming from all sides,
we sat down at a table as if we were
sitting down at our mother tongue.

We let the words out like birds out of
a cage, but, from being so long confined,
they'd forgotten to fly. They were hopping
among the glasses and forks, pecking
at the Cyrillic letters on the wine list.

2.

When I talk about myself, I hear no one,
like a crowing rooster. That was once;
today I prefer to listen. I was devouring
all the words, rearing up out of my body
like a dolphin reaching for anchovies
in the air. When the turn came for my life
story, I went through it quickly, just as
a sated man rushes through a menu.

3.

Don't approach us, sir, with curiosity and
exaggerated kindness! We have nothing
to tell you. In our newspapers, too,
pedophiles give communion to children
in churches on Sundays, and television
turns prematurely released life – sentence
murderers into victims. You can't tell us
anything, we can see all for ourselves.
Empty beer cans are floating by us on
the murky water toward *Kalemegdan*.
The ramparts are lit up like a dragon's
skeleton. That beast has guarded us for
centuries from all oppressors except from
our own selves.

* The name of a river restaurant in Belgrade

A LOVERS' TRIP

We had not chosen the old pecked-out road up the island's rib because of the beer in the restored *Humac* tavern.

We were going there to disown our memories! On top of the stone roofs collapsed into the bowels of their houses and the wine presses eaten away by the rust of blight, archaeologists were crawling like vacuum cleaners. Digging up the fossils of the untenable, they'd run into this scorching day more than thirty years ago when I, aroused by gaping armpits, made a sudden turn and plunged the Trabant's snout into the red soil and you laid down a blanket between the grapevines.

We said we didn't have memory of time and continued on foot, in love again but somehow asexual, like two Teletubbies: „Big hug!“ Down the western slope waves of lavender flowed uphill and a blob of concrete on the town's rampart in the distance came clearly into view like an amalgam filling in a tooth when the sea's mouth gapes wide.

You reminded me that we didn't remember places, but at the counter by the bus station sat the immortal Nonna Donata welcoming other people's guests. With one hand she supported her heart just like thirty years before when she nodded toward your sister's rented-apartment window that was coughing the smoke of burnt flapjacks. We stopped as if mesmerized but did not buy the cheese I'd sniffed. We didn't like the sunglasses you'd tried on. Masked by a foreign language we moved on pretending we did not understand her mocking words behind us: “Big hug! Run away!”

MANNAMINNE

When into my dream, like into an egg, a day for which I have no energy pecks through, I turn my back to it and try to fall asleep again. You slit the window curtains apart and muttered with comfort that wisdom is in taking away, not in adding up. Although they are on the same road sign, you'll choose not to visit the fishing village of *Bönhamn*, so we'll drive only to the *Mannaminne* museum colony. We'll churn our stale blood in the antiques pavilions like big-ass amphoras do their sour wine in a sinking ship's steerage. I will, when we come out, show your Englishwoman friend and the Polish doctor one such ship by the name of *Lugnvik*.

We strolled successfully through the *Mannaminne* displays, and when from the sunken ship *Lugnvik*'s deck we noticed the turban of a black cloud rolling along the open sea's pasture, we hurried to find salvation in a chapel with the Ten Commandments carved into ten pine benches.

It's smarter to wait than to dare the Sheytan. Our friend suggested that we play the game of atonement until the storm passed and that each sit on the bench of their own burden. She herself chose “You shall not commit adultery,” and my lot was that I “shall have no other gods...”! I was the first to give in. Going out, I passed through a burst of rain as if through a streak of slaps. The thunderbolts brandished their sabers and roared from the depths in a warning but somehow paternal tone that exists only in the Arabic language.

MOVES

Never after, in our countless moves, did we feel sick to our stomach as that first time when we were leaving our native town for ever. Only then did we fear removing ourselves too much from what we were escaping. Later, we moved painlessly. We hopped from continent to continent with ease, like green frogs from one lotus leaf to another, neither grieving for what we were leaving nor hoping we would ever, anywhere, have a home again.

Still, I get entangled in my night thoughts like a weakened spider in its own web. Everywhere I turn, of all places, only tiny Pello on the Finnish border truly loved us. We stopped there by accident, just to take a breather by the water but, caught by a cloudburst, we decided to spend the night in a crooked watermill. We believed that, thus secluded, amid the whisper of leaves and raindrops, no one could notice us, but come morning, housewarming gifts had turned up outside the door: a bag of children's toys, a basketful of apples...

Of all the places we had left for ever, I long only for the little village on the Finnish border. For those dwarf birches that, bent over the Torne River, are taking root.

CHRISTCHURCH

Few are the cities in which I can fall asleep calmly, but in Christchurch I could. I move it from defter to defter as at the start of the year one copies old phone numbers to the new address book.

I do that even now when it's been flattened to the ground and when I can recognize almost nothing in it except the trees. The satellite images on the rainy TV screen are no longer any different from the glamour of the concrete in my window. Ruins of cities are as like as two peas.

COPENHAGEN

It's nice in Lund also, why make a trip to Copenhagen?
The woodpeckers in the Botanical Garden are calling to
each other by machine-gun bursts; why should we waste
on Denmark one of our three precious days in Lund?

On the train I kept silent as if an empty coffin awaited
me in Copenhagen. The faces in the compartments from
the opposite direction passed our faces with the speed
of portraits of Queens and Jacks being shuffled in a new
deck of cards.

I forget what I remember from Denmark. Nothing
but that one lost day in Lund.

FLORIDA

1.
Gregory didn't wait for me as he'd promised,
but he left the key under the flowerpot. Quite
enough on his part!

2.
The first night on Anna Maria Island I could
not fall asleep without you. I went out into
the sand like into cornflour and sunned myself
in the moonlight. Dreaming awake.

Your hours were older than mine, and I saw
you blowing on your tea and your glasses
fogging up before, pushing away your morning
paper, you got ready to tackle your day.

3.
Key West! That which is true before noon
is usually a lie in the afternoon. That's how it is
with people. With pelicans, it's the other way
round. During the day they ruminate the fish
of the night before perched on luxury yachts,
and in the evening they fly away and vanish
in the open sea, returning to their real life.
No one knows where they sleep the night.
Behind the horizon line, Cuba floats on
the ocean: a stranded, ghostly ship.

MANHATTAN

The driver of the yellow cab politely urges me to admit that I didn't know as much about the city as I do now. I say I didn't. I say I have to admit: today I know less, but I still believe that once upon a time New York was truly a city. Just in case, I purposely lose a detail or two here and there, just as Hansel and Gretel dropped bread crumbs in the woods so they could find a way home in the evening.

Behind the facades of red-brick buildings where gigantic linden trees used to grow in the courtyards, glass skyscrapers are growing now. In the streets deep as wells, the pilgrimage of the dollar, and from above, behind a thousand darkened windows, thousands of pairs of invisible eyes are watching over the tyranny. But New York, too, was once a city, and the toothless smiles of vendors of tourist attractions do not approach me as a customer but rather, it seems to me, as someone who brings them news from home.

BENARES

I've nothing to talk about with the pack of white gloves poring over stock-market obits. I neither want to say anything nor do I want to listen anymore. Fed up with constant griping about lukewarm coffee, I skip breakfast at the *Palace on the Steps* hotel and separate myself from the group. Most of all I like to take a walk upstream to have a smoke with a walking skeleton, fisherman Mesh. He had a bad day yesterday and he had no supper.

The Ganges is an industrial canal for dumping ashes. It feeds no one, but human sins are blacker still and in that turbid water they easily soak away and wash clean. In that thinner, he says, Mesh's dust also will soon unite with the dust of billions. The pyre is already lit; all that remains is that they shove me in a sheet, just as you, Sir, put your glasses in a case.

On the way back, I see, they are already getting onto the bus. Today is a day of rest from the temples, shopping is on the agenda. All day we will burrow through clothes hangers at department-store sales like wild ducks delving and grazing underwater. Let them wait! I go down to the sacred river to wash off the dirt of my sins. So I don't loathe myself for at least a moment.

THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY

The overdosed beauty of the living forest in the claws of the living water kept pouring forth from all directions and bursting into the sultriness of the compartment. That's why I'd turn my eyes away from time to time and rest them on the gypsum relief of the Petrograd priest glued to the window's edge. Transferred to the extremely remote backwoods village of Hilok, he as a man irrevocably lost faith in people, but as a clergyman he was not yet letting go of his faith in God. He kept it in a thick leather-bound book, which he clutched in his sweaty hands when he wasn't reading.

When he was reading, he'd tear out rebelliously every page he had read and throw it out into the wind through a narrow opening at the top of the window pane. From the outside, it surely must have looked as if dandruff were falling off the top of the engine's head. When he'd yanked the last letter and put it in the mailbox of the universe, the train was just coming to a soft stop, colliding with the flesh of wild boars. He got off and sank into the silences of Siberia leaving his empty book to go on traveling with us, sitting on the shelf, just like hollow volumes sit in the cabinets of furniture stores. Like belief in God, I dare to say. Luxuriously printed, with a golden title, but with no interior.

THE STALOLUOKTA CHURCH

Wherever there are men and women, a church is appropriate. Come in, come in, please, gentlemen, you're all welcome, no matter which God you worship, Jesus has just been crucified!

Where a church has been placed, there's usually a market stall. Buy the fish, ma'am, fresh *röding*, you won't be sorry! As you can see for yourself, just caught, freshly dead...



SAINT COLUMBA

I've been dead for fourteen centuries, but in the stained-glass window above the altar my image still smoulders like an unreleased soul. When from that window I gaze into the gloom below, the carpet of the past unfurls before me all the way to the night when, a white ghost on black ink, I unloaded my faith, coming here to the island of Iona to prevail singlehanded against false gods.

From a dove's perspective, creatures on the ground are tiny and I don't feel anyone's burden. I feel doubt! Along the corridors bald scalps are moving like the flat pieces in a game of checkers—silent moves elevating villains to the righteous. I would have left long ago were I not fettered by my own emptiness. Like a released toy balloon, my spirit is stuck between the roof beams. I've been dead long on the island of Iona, and this death is wearing me out.

GANDHI

I don't feel pity for whales! What I feel about them is admiration and disappointment, both at the same time and for the same reason: because they don't strike back.

Just as when kids chase with forks the last pickle on the bottom of the jar, cruel fishermen, on wretched boats, plunge their rusty harpoons into a whale.

The others swim around feeling that they are one with the whale which, tied with a wire rope, can no longer sink. Unaware of their strength they circle around the slaughterhouse witlessly until its body leaks out and blood becomes water.

THE SIMUL

My hero of our time, Uncle Lukas, tied a detonator fuse to the security bars of a shop in Bukinje after his older mining buddies had run out of cognac one midnight. Toward the end of his harsh ten-year term, they began letting him go home on weekends, but for Lukas it had already been too late. Marking his time, alone against all, he had estranged himself from his children.

Going down on Fridays to the shade of wild grapes, he'd bend over the first game like over an open well and for no reason sacrifice his youngest pawn. The grandmasters from three villages sat frowning behind their strength. When a *Black Maria* would pull over at Lukas's gate on Sunday evening, he was already waiting, all set, exactly where they'd dropped him off: in the dark of wild grapes. Alone among beer bottles, the winner at the table.

STROKE

My mother's father breathed for two days and three nights. We took turns by his neither dead nor alive body until, like a wick, it burned itself out.

He'd smile gently from time to time, but we didn't know whether he was dreaming or remembering. I think he was remembering how, long ago, at age seven, he'd stolen bald Rudolf's trade. He'd climb up the man's apple tree even before dawn and, hunkered down in the crown, followed all day long the strictly kept secret of making casks and oak barrels.

A twitch of pain would dabble on the lip of my mother's father from time to time. I doubt that even that was remembering. It must have been, rather, that a precise blow of Rudolf's adze had fallen into his dream, like onto a stump. A gobbler with cut-off head and jerking legs lurched over the chips and sawdust and ran into the apple tree. He jumped up three times hoping he'd buy back his life by denouncing the intruder.

THE TWINS

Now that they are gone, Ruža and Mara spring to our mind when we were still children. They were always the same, wearing the same clothes, too, with the same kerchief on each head. As they grew, their navy-blue macks and their knee highs were lengthened on a Singer.

Neither one even knew then who was who, but we from October Street would get the idea. Ruža would always go a step farther, skipping with her heavy right boot ahead of Mara's left. Whatever the one said the other would parrot: "Watch out for the manhole, RoseMary!"

So their shared youth passed and only when they began to shrink did they begin to recognize each other, too. They never again borrowed from each other and never shared anything. When they followed the tree line along October, each carried in her same bag her same things.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

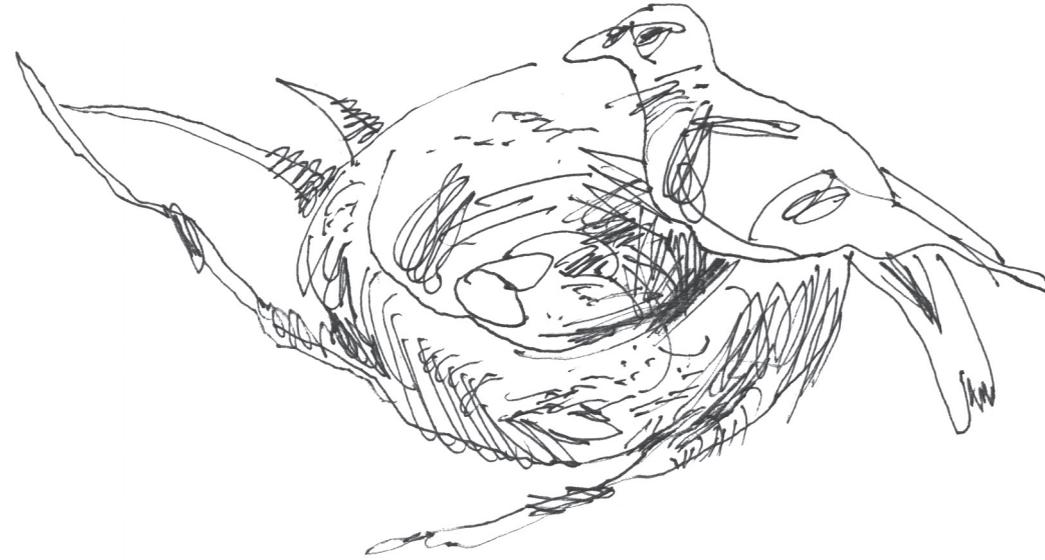
We'd barely moved into 85 Stengatan when two elderly ladies came knocking to let us know about Judgment Day. One had an anthill-shaped bun and the other a mustache of purple lipstick. They said they'd already embalmed their bodies for the said day and, indeed, in the entire house, in all rooms, one could feel the stench of a living corpse.

Later, they kept stopping by for months, but we never invited them in. Every time I'd tell them at the door that we were still not interested and that we had many more pressing things than Judgment Day. At last they stopped coming. From time to time I seem to hear someone knocking, but when I open the door, only a gust of vacuous autumn is there to meet me. I must admit I miss them a little.

THE ROWAN

The *Rönn* and I stood facing each other as if no decision was yet made who would take whose life. In summer the *Rönn* decks itself with glorious clusters the color of blood. That's why I waited till deep into the fall for it to be as naked as any other tree.

I hoed around it and cut its thick roots; it fell down with great difficulty at the end of the day. I covered up the spot where it no longer was. Every spring, when the snow melts, a bloody stain breaks through in the grass where the *Rönn* used to grow. I go out and we measure each other up, the stain and I. As if no decision was yet made who would take whose life.



THE CUCKOO

Cute is that little birdie that from a cuckoo's egg pecks through into an alien world. In an alien house they accept him as a late – arriving brother, letting him eat first... He will later push them out from the nest by his mass, one by one. He will listen to the thud of the lumps of their bodies like rotten pears on the lea. In the end, he will outgrow even those who feed him.

Nothing in the world is as blind and naive as parental instinct. So it is unjust to blame those happy losers who, by feeding the cuckoo bird, have no idea of what they are raising. For not even the bird himself knows who he is until he starts to fly and sing with that beak full of his own name.

BURG ELTZ

Burg Eltz can be found only by those who've lost their way. We drove through a labyrinth of roads among green fields of wheat and yellow ones of rapeseed spread out in the sun like newly washed rugs. When it seemed there was no way out, we saw a cloud of forest in the distance.

We climbed up the round steps, like in a well, from room to room. A room for weapons, a room for love, a room for masks, a room for decisions... In the decisions room, the *rose of silence* hung above the exit door. Not a single uttered word could be taken out.

SOGNEFJORD

Our daughter didn't dare to fall asleep for months. We tried everything, but her unbearable nightmares were waiting, persistent like moths, in each of our beds. I said: "We must go to Norway!"

When we sneaked up and climbed the hump of the Feige Waterfall, the earth opened up before us, and the roads of the sea entered among the cliffs like among dominoes. We took out and laid down on the stone everything we had: cucumbers and onions from our garden, sour cherries and currants, as if we were offering sacrifices to the Queen of the Fjords.

You said: "We'll sleep in the camps, in nobody's beds, we'll dream other people's dreams!" Glaciers hung in the sky shone in the evening sun like lanterns. I nodded: "We have nothing to lose!"

THE KALIX

Not even the pursuit of the Holy Grail matches the adventure of searching for the Kalix River's beating artery. Wading waist-high through a field of oats, we pushed our way to a man on a tractor. We lied slyly about forests and mushrooms in forests while sitting with him drinking beer on the fender. We kept tapping our toes nervously as if we were in a line for a restroom, but the old guy had no words to sell. Only when he sniffed at our suspenders and realized what path we were lost on did he reveal to us our own secret by dropping a trembling red X on the tattered map before us: Saarikurkkio!

The last kilometers we unraveled like a belt along the dike of pebbles and pine needles. When, passing through the underbrush, we came out to the water dust, we threw our knapsacks down as on command, as biathlon competitors take the rifles off their shoulders as soon as they get to the flat ground with lined-up targets. We waded up to our waists and, hastily tying up our hooks, we started to whip the furious water of the newly awakened flood.

Today, when I'm no longer up to adventure, I remember this journey of long ago, but not for fishing. Fishing I do miss, but I think more of our flagging friendship in other places, yet still possible on the Kalix River at Midsummer, just as the sun—which keeps hopping from hill to hill, swinging on the polar circle's invisible trapeze above the Saarikurkkio rapids—is possible.

SJISJKA

Deafened by the hissing of alerts and alarms, choked by the fuming of asphalt, blinded by the blinking of a host of lights, I hop on the train from time to time and leave the cage-city to recover in the groves and marshes. Just as children in school repeat their lesson, I practise from the beginning the alphabet of the senses.

I'm usually the only eccentric who at the Sjisjka station gets off into a swarm of charging mosquitoes and, to fend them off, waves his straw hat as if in greeting them back. If there's a summer shower, the straw gets heavier and softer on my head, like pie crust, but by then I'm already by the lake itself, in the sunlit field of bog cloudberries.

While, bent over, I pick the berries and put them in the tote bag hanging from my waist, two long menacing periscopes of swan necks keep me in their sight. But no matter what they do, a flush of joyful ugly ducklings always rushes my way. I enjoy in their onslaught yet brandish my sombrero furiously to introduce them into the alphabet of fear. And I flee schlepping my full feed bag ripped open like my own gut.

SKIERFE

For twelve kilometers I walked on the paths
of reindeer through the fields of plowed-up stone
to the hill of Skierfe, and it took me another seven
up its spine, like up a braid, to climb to its ears.
From the cliff's edge I peered into the abyss from
which inscrutable shadows were rising at dusk.
They reminded me of the tiny text clouds in comic
strips, but there were no letters flickering in them,
only the extinguished faces I remembered from life.

Under the white night's cresset I climbed seven
down the monster's spine and then, accompanied
by the music of whispers, walked another three
to the murky water where the rafts land. I was going
like Orpheus, carrying the heavy curse of not looking
back. The ferryman had not noticed the stowaways,
just as I didn't when I embarked, but he gave me
a suspicious look as soon as he felt the burden
of the other world on his oars. He always incurs loss,
he says, when he ferries the dead across Lake Laitaure.

SLOTTESSKOGEN

Trees look with their leaves. Prehistoric oaks
in Slottesskogen see and take in the world with
their leaves. When they fall into hibernation,
the wind rolls their fallen eyes down the icy slope.
Only their magpie nests are left behind, tied
around the bare branches like wrist watches.

When in spring they start looking with their new
buds, the ancient oaks in the Royal Forest will
have to get used again and anew to a long life.
From their old address, of all their property,
they drag only empty bags, those bird nests
which, for the time being, are waiting like locked
vacation homes.

DU LEVANDE*

The psychiatrist in the film *Du Levande* does not have energy anymore. For twenty – seven years he has slaved making vile men happy, but he can't do it anymore, seeing no point to it.

I pick up his white coat and put it on. In the little pocket on the heart I stick my pen and put my glasses on. For thirty years I've struggled not to understand the failed psychiatrist in the film *You, the Living*, but there's no reason anymore, no sense...

THE SCREW

I don't know why, but wherever I see a screw I get the desire to unscrew it, especially the one with a nut. The larger the nut, the stronger in me is the urge to undo it. Were it not punishable, with a box wrench I'd sever the giant arms of power pylons and break the necks of floodlights. So darkness can take over, the power of the little man.



* A 2007 film by the Swedish director Roy Andersson

SPACE TOURISM

Despite their wealth of inhuman proportions, they're flesh and blood and they don't have it easy either, the billionaires. They too have worries. In a hurry not to miss anything, they don't get to live. The séances of their suffering look like the tastings of first-class wines: they take a little sip of each and then spit it out.

The antidepressant industry has a cure for that also. They will soon be able to buy tickets for space trips and taste nirvana. When their bodies get into a state of weightlessness, it is reckoned that their other earthly burdens will fall away, too. From above, through the little portholes, they'll look down absently on us.

I can already see the rockets on launching ramps and the crowds like those around the mosques in Istanbul. I can hear a muezzin counting down. The calls for the evening prayer are lighting up the fuses of the minarets pointed at the sky.

THE FIRE

The splendid *Villa Harriet* burned down to its foundations last night. It had been at least two hundred years older than its owner, our neighbor Count von Holstein, but that didn't show on him. When we'd pass by and greet him, he—haughty and glum—would crack his whip on his boot.

Armed with a handful of comforting words, we set off under a winter sun to see the catastrophe. Firemen were just winding up their hoses on reels and were going away, leaving an island of ash fringed by deep snow like a threshing floor in the middle of an unharvested wheat field. In the living room, the count was going through the cinders of his memories as we crossed over them with our shadows. He didn't look up, as if nothing had happened and as if the walls were still standing around him.

Like in the story of the emperor's new clothes, we did not contradict. We continued on quietly, taking away the unspent words of comfort despite the sizzling of pans and skillets on the still hot stove by the site of the fire, and only a bare chimney stood upright like a stone marker on a fresh grave.

SACRIFICE

The refugee from the Gambia, Amadou Jatta, was passing by the fire and didn't notice – because all he had in life had burned to a cinder several times before – either the burning house or the crowd gathered outside the gate. Only when he heard a child screaming behind the door of hell did he jump from his bicycle as if from sleep and push aside *the white mass* that could not make up its mind on anything. He went in without thinking and started up toward those who were nothing to him. He never came out, Kunta Kinte.

But someone's children did. Led by the inexplicable instinct of sleepwalkers, they both crawled as if after a soap bubble ever slowly down the stairs into the darkness of the basement, all the way to the lifesaving little window used for coal-delivery. Pictures came out in the papers, and it became known that the asylum seeker from the Gambia had unnecessarily put life in danger, making everything harder for the firefighters, who were about to arrive any minute, about to arrive any minute, any minute...

God Almighty, help us to see, if you can! Help us to heal, for we, too, *the white material*, are struggling and sacrificing every day, but almost never for those who are nothing to us, so we don't understand. So we are blind to the sacrifice of Amadou Jatta, which is greater than ours even when it is in vain.

THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA

We used to run out, precocious boys, bringing oranges and our toothless smiles before the strangers whenever they appeared with their ships, like a camel train, on the belly of the sea. They preferred to take precious stones in their colonies, turning our olive groves and grasslands into mining strips. Today, when as refugees we knock at their doors, the curtain in the window moves but no one opens the door, as if they were not at home.

I cannot lie: I look forward to the end of the world! Or, rather, to those memorable minutes that precede it. Before we felt the scent of pine from the land and crashed on the underwater reef, the weather had been favorable for navigation and our tiny titanic by the name of Medusa was gliding straight, ripping the open sea's surface like a zipper. I crawled long on the shadow of the moon in the black water following and colliding with sea turtles that kept coming out that night to bury their future children in the sand.

Everywhere, including the island of Lampedusa, there are many who rejoice more in the dead than in the living but, truth be told: a toothless little girl handed me an apple that morning as I was, wet and freezing, waiting for the fishing boats to unload my company. They were carrying out on their shoulders the long and thin bodies wrapped in linen bedsheets just like in a bazaar rugs are carried outside a store.

GAZA CITY

Admirable is the precision of airplane projectiles.
 One went right through the keyhole of Al–Mathaf
 Museum’s thick doors and killed all the antique statues.
 From their dismembered limbs white dust is bleeding.
 Another flew into the laundry across the street rattling
 like a key thrown into a copper can before destroying
 three floors of bedrooms and living–rooms above it.

Killing has many faces, but common to each is that
 it humiliates. It sometimes appears that scoundrels
 who rule the world are right and that only in genocide
 civilizations can reconcile. For the weak also like
 to destroy. Their rockets’ failing to reach their targets,
 falling instead in the desert or in olive groves, lessens
 the number of casualties but not the purpose of killing.

In the shade of Al–Mathaf’s ruins, a blind *effendi* sat
 on the rump of Zeus. A guardian angel, a little girl with
 a *tocado* cap, like one of those empathic Japanese robots
 given out to old people abandoned by their own children,
 had by some natural miracle found herself next to him.
 From a bag of humanitarian aid she took out an orange
 tattooed with a *Jaffa* seal and cut it up into slices, thin
 crescent sickles. They sat without words, with distant eyes
 but inseparably joined in the same kind of humiliation.
 He was fingering his sweaty *tasbih*, she was tapping
 on her iPhone. Let him who claims that it’s impossible
 to reconcile civilizations step forward! Let him step
 forward and explain that to these people!

VIGANELLA

The Alpine village of Viganella sits as if in a funnel,
 so deep in the ravine that the sun doesn’t come out
 for it in months. The houses, viewed from the top,
 steam with the wetness of newborn kittens left on
 a snowy path. You clamber down to them through
 snow walls, like into a limekiln.

Seen from below, like from an open manhole,
 the sky above the little town is round and taut,
 like a circus tent. People under it, in winter months,
 have for years whined and sniffed the air above
 like blind kitties dumped in a ditch.

For that reason the town fathers had a giant
 mirror screwed into the highest hill so in winter
 it could throw the sun’s face onto the square in
 the crater. From then on, whenever there is
 a sunny day in the world on the other side of
 the grave, Viganella joyfully unsheathes its
 church tower. Just like a wind–up mechanical
 ballerina jumping out of the dark of the music box
 as soon as someone lifts the lid with the mirror.

BUSHMEN

Dwellers of the bush are far ahead of our time. Women of unbearable beauty with pepper-hair emerge from clay huts as if from Dutch ovens to say goodbye to men without age. They do it without tears, hugs, excess of feeling... They sputter consonants after them until they drop out of sight beyond the horizon of the Kalahari Desert.

Men with perfect muscles of antique statues sniff the wind and read the sand. They don't do it as a pastime but to feed hungry mouths. That's why their hunting is without special effects and exciting twists. They don't even have sniper scopes but kill their prey on foot, following the animal night and day until, exhausted, it kneels down into its own shadow like into a pool of blood. Let's bow to the people of the bush, we who are far behind their time.



THE TUAREGS

We've heard of your cities but don't envy you.
Why the glitter, which mars the cressets of the stars?
Alone beneath the skies we make a fire with dry dung
and bones. We blow on our tea with words.

We know of your houses but they don't attract us.
Abandoned by God we spread the silence like a rug
on desert sand and sleep like logs. Houses are living
men's tombs.

TONGARIRO

Hung on a cloud, the cloak of the Tongariro volcano is clasped at the neck with a single round button: Blue Lake. At the bottom of the lake, at the height of the heart, a time bomb is ticking. We try not to think, we try not to know, but its veins like prickly goose bumps are crawling up our spines and are sweating.

In the blue lake at the top of the Tongariro volcano there is nothing to eat, nothing but stone. This is known to the strange long-necked birds, but they still, on their way across the ocean, alight on it. Flying high, they have outlived their enemies and are now resting on the waves like on a seesaw.

We, too, you and I, are strange long-necked birds who have outlived all their enemies. Coming from afar, we set down our backpacks and wade into the dead water of the Tongariro volcano. We are resting from our courage.

OCEAN BEACH

For David

We had nothing either for buying or for selling when we turned onto the narrow road to Ocean Beach. There's nothing about Ocean Beach in brochures; on the map it's a tiny speck, but we gave word to each other that we would find something to remember it by.

Low tide is the shallowest part of the day. It seems that we ourselves are being emptied of our own thoughts. With high tide the villages on the hills again come closer to the coast, invading the pastures. The houses are wrestling for a view of the sea. We jumped in, unwary bathers, and the current pulled us to the open sea. It took long for the boats to arrive. Too long for me, and too late. Since then I've not slept nights. The thoughts of water taking away our bodies will never empty.

TARANAKI

The Taranaki Volcano has the shape
of a witch's hat. On its brim lie human
habitations. It's a long day to the summit.
On the summit of the day we lean over
the stone soup boiling in the gigantic
cauldron. Meat's arrived!



APOCALYPSE

In one and the same apocalypse the world ends twice.

First the future is annulled by the hell of fire and ice.
They scare us with it forever and keep us in obedience
hissing from oaken pulpits like over upright coffins.
We curse and spit, but when the time comes we'll go
out peaceably as we go out to stand in line for bread
or in line for water.

The other calamity is more brutal but just, for it will
erase us from the past leaving not a grain of hope to
anybody. Into it we fall like into a shredding machine,
a dense, whimpering comb of knives sifting the letters.
It brings us back into nothing, just like in a fast-rewind
video depraved old men are rejuvenated into unborn
children.

THE RATTLE

Seen from the angle of sterile space, the Earth is a perfect planet. Wonderful to such a degree that I seriously doubt the theory that such a thing exists.

It must be, rather, that the Earth is a dream of a child – a newly born cyclops. A slimy trunk reaching from the galaxy’s darkness is rocking the baby. Above the cradle a globe–rattle is swaying, the infant is dreaming of the rattle, and in that dream we are kissing and hugging on the Earth and slaughtering and killing one another as if we were our own selves on our own ground.

When the beast down there sighs or belches from time to time, volcanoes up here start to move and hurricanes pounce to remind us that the child can wake up any moment. Then we walk again on tiptoes for a time.

THE “IN THE BALKANS” COLONY

Dedicated to Adin Ljuca

The anthill of city neighborhoods lacks the geometry of the soul and so has no feeling for tiny losses. That’s why no crater is visible on the spot where Adin stood before, brooding over himself and worrying as if over an incurable disease when he noticed that he’d been filling up more space than his body required. He locked the library, put up the sign *I’ll Be Back Soon*, and left for good for Žižkov, for the colony “In the Balkans.” He drew into himself like a folded umbrella.

The rains have multiplied in the nooks and crannies of Prague and with them the cruel slug that browses everything in its way, swallowing up its own offspring. Watching over the leaves of young cabbages in his plot of garden, Adin clearly saw, like under a magnifying glass, the similarity between people and invertebrates, which have no natural enemy and which devour their own children when they step out of their own bodies. Since then he has not gone down into the city, except for chemotherapy appointments. And even that quickly, as if running out for a coffee.

BIRDS

Dedicated to Saša Skenderija

Birds are abandoning us, my Salko!
 For years we had swallows under the eaves.
 Every spring titmice used to move into
 the birdhouse nailed to the birch tree just
 below those two white branches spreading
 from it to left and right like two spread arms.
 As if, entering the box, they were entering
 an embrace.

We have not, my Salko, shouted either clearly
 or forcefully the “*No pasarán!*” so today flies
 are sunning themselves on the gable. As if
 feeling hypocrisy in the house of man,
 the swallows had stopped coming. When
 the squealing of the shutters at night wakes
 me up, I start hoping it is the titmouse chirping
 and get up and peer into the yard. On the birch
 in the dark, crucified, man’s Jesus with two
 white arms and a hole in the stomach.

THE FUNERAL

Dedicated to Milomir Jovanović

You hadn’t arrived, and I sat alone among
 the masks. Not a single one did I wish to
 recognize and I kept silent at the very same
 table at which a long time ago, in splendid
 poverty, your tiny mother used to deal out
 buttermilk to us in spoons like cough syrup.
 You didn’t ask, but I carried her out from your
 unbearable dream forever when she, leaning
 over the continents, whispered in your ear
 that her soul was weighty like a millstone.

I stole her from the hospital as carefully as
 if I were removing a lit candle from in front
 of a reader. Like the son in *The Ballad of
 Narayama**, I carried her on my back, slowly
 down the floors of diseases. We’d pause
 by the incubators with premature babies
 and peer into them as into shop windows.
 And when we had pecked through the concrete
 and stepped into the cornfields, I sensed
 I could no longer feel the hot breath at my ear.
 And light was she, your tiny mother, like a picnic
 backpack.

* A film by the Japanese director Kinoshita Keisuke from 1958.



BOOKS OF POEMS

I moved often during the war, each time overlooking a handful of books or leaving behind some I couldn't carry farther. Finally I smuggled my empty hands across the border, but I believe the books are still alive.

I'll never know whose dust they are breathing in the cabinets, yet it's a certainty nobody ever opens them. As if they were lying, irradiated, on the shelves of the abandoned houses surrounding Chernobyl. Woods have grown up wildly around the houses and beasts have multiplied... Deer with fallen antlers is poking his head through the window and sniffing poetry.

AWARD

In the courtyard of the National Library they are loading a truck container filled to the brim with unimportant books, sentenced to death by incineration in the city's heating plant in order to free shelf space for popular releases. When the truck moved, a few lighter volumes fell out. A thin one with a maroon cover flew out like a leaf in the wind and fanned open before her on the sidewalk. The girl crouched down and scanned a couple of verses. "Let's save the poor thing," she said and shoved the poetry into his knapsack.

I saw this pair of lovers in the evening under the stone bridge. They were getting ready for bed, these homeless ones. After they got into the sleeping bag and pressed against each other, she pulled out the book, and he his lighter. He burned his thumb while she was reading to him, but he kept the flame going until the gas ran out. I don't know that any book of poetry ever got a bigger award.

BIRD MAGICIAN

Dedicated to Fikret Libovac

It wasn't I who caused you pain, master! It was you who opened the book I'd left behind in your atelier, those hard-to-read poems. I went out so as not to be in your way, so you could finally complete that strange installation with taut telegraph wires.

I returned in the evening for you so you could take me out in Sarajevo. We sat until dawn at the *Praonica Inn*, and when we stepped out, autumn had been falling on its deathbed: the first snow.

No, master, it was not you who caused me regret! It was I who forgot to close the window in your atelier and those wondrous birds flew of their own accord into man's cage and, alighting on the wondrous installation, turned into annealed wire as if into stone.

SÉRAPHINE

Midnight woke me up so I went down to see why you were not coming to bed. You'd been staring at Séraphine. Your eyes were closing with fatigue, but the movie was only half done and Séraphine, in close-up, was just hugging a huge oak tree as if she were taking the measure of the tree of life. With the filbert brush of her fingers she was crumbling the world into flowers of flowers, leaves of leaves, berries of berries...

In her eyes turned up to the sky you could already discern symptoms of a magnificent madness, and you were struggling not to fall asleep, but your head kept sinking into the sofa's gravitation. I took off your glasses, sitting down to relieve you. So that you'd not miss the end in which the naive minutes like leeches suck the strength and in which not only Séraphine de Senlis but all together, Wilhelm Uhde and I and you are slowly being reduced to still lifes.

TRANSLATION

Dedicated to Aida Bešliagić

Two nights in Aachen were not enough, but with plenty of wine we managed to complete the translations. Your friend, and now also mine, we lovingly call our “Kraut of Endearment,” knew all the words except for *šišarke*. I got up and pointed out your window at a pine tree and the cones on it.

So we also pinned down *nostalgia*. I pointed with my finger at his fingernails stained with psoriasis. I said that it was a similar disease. Both are incurable and in both cases the only help is a little sunning.

FR. OMER

Dedicated to Omer Hadžiselimović

Just as we are soft when it comes to the faults of our own children, I could not step back from my poems and view them with objective eyes. I was not capable of reading them as someone else’s until the time when, at a resting–place for diligences, my path crossed with Fr. Omer’s.

Fr. Omer sat in a darkened room going through freshly arrived mail. Now and then, coughing or putting down his monocle, he’d startle the flame on the candle. He’d bring my letters to his ear and listen to them for a long time before copying them to the reserve language and arranging them in a shoebox. Today I got the package and am sorting the mail that has just arrived. I’m bringing my poems to my ear and listening to them for the first time as someone else.

WAITING FOR THE BOGUMILS

For Mak Dizdar

Just as Tibetan nomads choose their headman by a throw of dice in which the one who loses the gamble wins, it's fallen to me to continue to wait for the Bogumils after you. So that there is always someone who will go out to meet them in the language they understand.

Every day I open the house of our forefathers, bring out figs, and pour the wine, reading the stone while I wait for the Bogumils. I enjoy this work but I can see that my children are already growing old and that my time on earth is running out, too. Soon I will go lie down, like you, in the coldness of space and cover myself with a *stećak** like with a comforter. I therefore seek someone to relieve me, someone who will wait for centuries to come out to meet me in the language I understand.



* Stećak, pl. stećci: medieval tombstones in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its neighboring countries.



MILORAD PEJIĆ

was born in Tuzla, Yugoslavia, in 1960. Since 1992 he has lived in Sweden.

He entered the literary scene of Bosnia with his poetry book *The Vase for the Lily Plant* (Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 1985). His second book of poems, *The Eyes of Keyholes*, was published bilingually, in Bosnian and German (Bosanska riječ, Tuzla–Wuppertal, 2001).

The book's second, revised edition was published by the same publisher in November of 2012. *The Eyes of Keyholes* was published in English (translated by Omer Hadžiselimović) by Červená Barva Press (Sommerville, Massachusetts) in 2015.

The poetry collection *Hyperborea* was first published in 2011 by the Czech publisher Aula, Prague. The book was republished in 2013, by the Mak Dizdar Foundation, Sarajevo, having been awarded the *Slovo Makovo–Mak Dizdar Prize* in 2012 for the best poetry collection published in Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian the year before. The English translation of *Hyperborea* (by O. Hadžiselimović) was published by SAMIZDAT in 2016.

Pejić's latest book of poems, *The Third Life*, came out in Tuzla (Bosanska Medijska Grupa) in 2015.

OMER HADŽISELIMOVIĆ

was born in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia in 1946.

From 1972 to 1994, he was a professor of English at the University of Sarajevo. From 1994 until his death in 2016, he lived in the United States, where he taught English at Loyola University Chicago and North Park University. He wrote and published in the fields of English literature, American literature, American Studies, linguistics, Bosniaca, and travel literature.

FIKRET LIBOVAC

born in Prijedor, Yugoslavia in 1957, is one of the best living artists in Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

His fascinating sculptures made of simple materials like paper and wire have earned him a status of an authentic artist in the Balkans and beyond. More about the life and work of Fikret Libovac may be found on page 70 of this book.

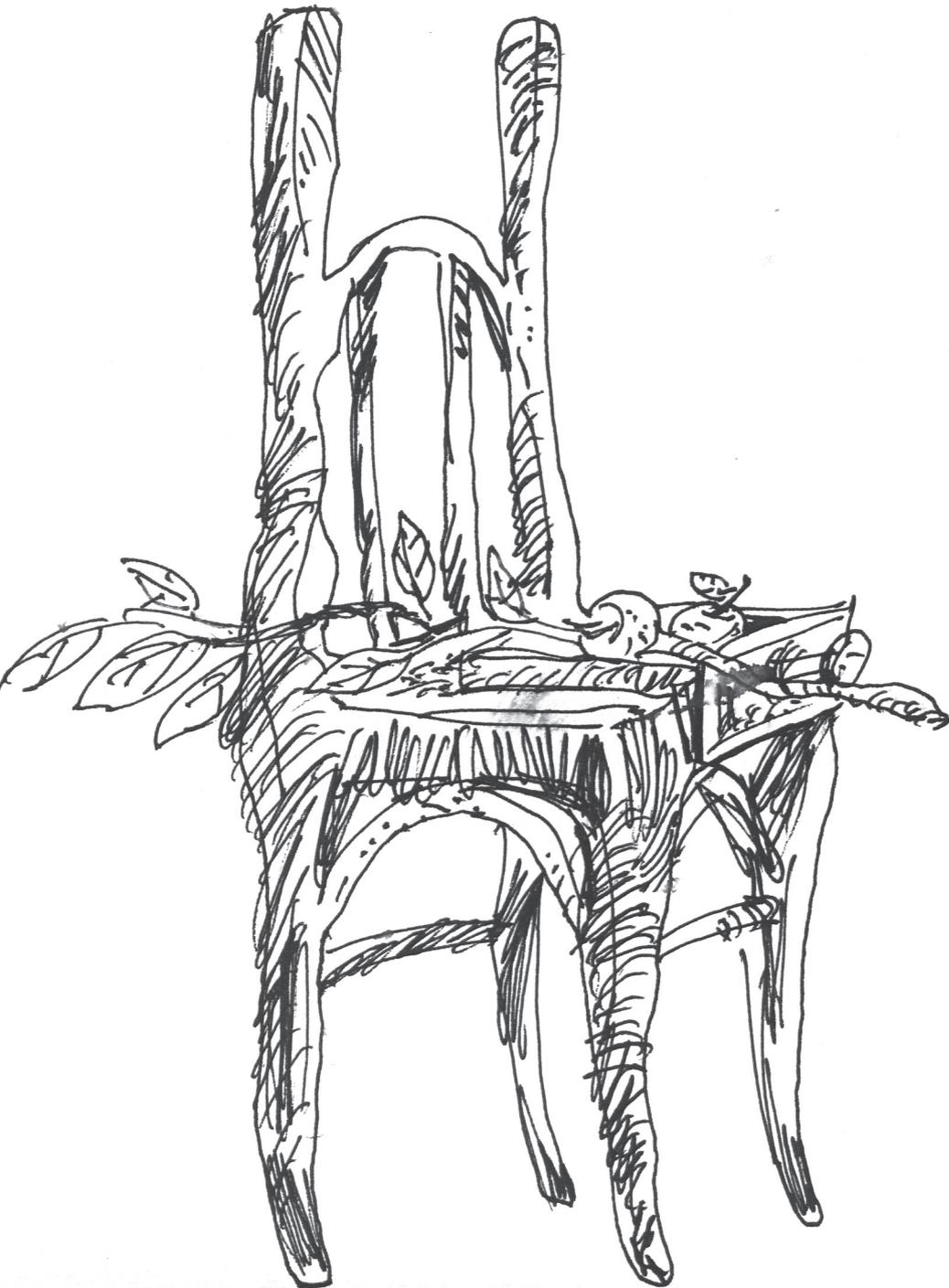


TABLE OF CONTENTS

NYX'S SON	9	BURG ELTZ	44
MEMORIES	10	SOGNEFJORD	45
THE SECRET	11	THE KALIX	46
THE SHEEPDOG	12	SJISJKA	47
LOVE	13	SKIERFE	48
IN THE PARK	14	SLOTTESSKOGEN	49
WAKING UP	15	DU LEVANDE	50
ARCHIPELAGO	16	THE SCREW	51
LITTLE GAMES	17	SPACE TOURISM	52
THE NATIONAL ANTHEM	18	THE FIRE	53
COMPATRIOTS	19	SACRIFICE	54
NURSING HOME	20	THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA	55
THE BALKANS	21	GAZA CITY	56
BOSNIA	22	VIGANELLA	57
TUZLA	23	BUSHMEN	58
ČARDA STARA KOLIBA	24	THE TUAREGS	59
A LOVERS' TRIP	26	TONGARIRO	60
MANNAMINNE	27	OCEAN BEACH	61
MOVES	28	TARANAKI	62
CHRISTCHURCH	29	APOCALYPSE	63
COPENHAGEN	30	THE RATTLE	64
FLORIDA	31	THE "IN THE BALKANS" COLONY	65
MANHATTAN	32	BIRDS	66
BENARES	33	THE FUNERAL	67
THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY	34	BOOKS OF POEMS	68
THE STALOLUOKTA CHURCH	35	AWARD	69
SAINT COLUMBA	36	BIRD MAGICIAN	70
GANDHI	37	SÉRAPHINE	71
THE SIMUL	38	TRANSLATION	72
STROKE	39	FR. OMER	73
THE TWINS	40	WAITING FOR THE BOGUMILS	74
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES	41	ABOUT THE AUTHOR	77
THE ROWAN	42	ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR	79
THE CUCKOO	43	ABOUT THE DRAWINGS	79



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