





ΣΑΜΙ
ΖΔΑΤ
ΚΑΜΙ
ΞΔΑΤ

STAL
ACT
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ADIN LJUCA
STAL
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Translated by *Omer Hadžiselimović*

Prague, Samizdat, 2020

THAT
WHICH
ISN'T

The Archaeology of Hope

Looking for who knows what, I stumbled
upon a set of silverware sunk to the bottom
of the last box with things no longer needed.
It does not fit in with anything in my kitchen
or in my life except an old fancy of my
mother regarding my future.

Margita

She'd pull a blanket over her head. She'd say:

Although I see buds on branches, spring will not come again. Sometimes she didn't have enough strength even to answer the phone. I'd wait outside the door, she wouldn't open. We'd sit in silence – she on one side, I on the other – waiting for something to happen. And it did happen: spring, in spite of everything, was coming again. She gathered the remaining strength, slowly picked up the paintbrush, and began looking for me on the canvas.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

To Dana and Anna

Redford and Newman, in the famous movie from '69.

The idols of generations.
And why wouldn't they be when they look good,
shoot with precision and,
in the most dramatic of moments,
conduct dialogue with composure?

Even when wounded and surrounded they know what to do:

from Bolivia
they would find refuge in Australia.

There we won't be foreigners, there they speak English, says Butch.

It bothers them that they're *foreigners* and not murderers and robbers.

Smoke has joined the earth and the sky,
but nobody understands smoke signals with an accent. Lack of understanding kills.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid are heroes. Ausländer raus!

Whenever I'm in a hopeless situation, I, too,
want to find refuge in a distant country in which they speak my language. At such a time I usually go for coffee at the Counseling Center for Refugees.

Picture Postcard

12

It was sent at the end of the nineteenth century,
and you – from the same town – a century after it.
Still, your paths will cross in a used bookstore
a thousand kilometers away:

*Dear friend, in the center of this town is the most
beautiful waterfall of the Empire – the Czech tourist
wrote on the back – Instead of to London, I'd go to
Bosnia, such is nature there.*

Over the Emperor's head, a properly stamped seal:
K. und K. Militär Post. Date illegible.

More beautiful than on the picture postcard, the waterfall
appears only in the writing of long-dead tourists.

Mirage

13

I'm approaching you at the speed of 990 km/h,
at the altitude of 9000 m, at -36C. With the lowered
window shade, headphones on my ears, I fight off fear
with the rhythms of the Lufthansa party, a fear of heights
that has moved me so far away from my abysses. I fly so
that from your arms I can look at my very self.

The pilot's voice came over the loudspeaker: *A sight
this beautiful even I don't see often!* I push up the shade
and see New York. I can't see the Statue of Liberty, it's
probably not on our side. I close my eyes and think of you,
think of us. Us who are down there. Us who can survive
only as long as we are able to see what does not exist.

Those Days

14 it was such a winter that swans' webbings were getting stuck to the frozen Vltava. And they could never fly away from my memory.

Just like you. In such cold – it no longer hurt nor could it heal.

One needed to wait.

Librarian's Work

15 It was not the first time that I'd gone through the estate of those who didn't have anyone to leave even a book to. Familiar covers and favorite titles – just like from my burned library. As if I were waking up ghosts: Mircea Eliade in the *Zora* edition – wasn't it torched? But what can I know about the occult...? I open the book and follow the sentences underlined in pencil. Were we attracted by the same thoughts in the chapter *The Mythologies of Death*? Like from a police mug shot, one can make up a description of the donor: journalist from Belgrade, fifteen years in exile, suicide by hanging. No family. He who does not agree to write lies – goes away.

Far, Far in the North*

To Milorad Pejić

16 You who they say tracked the moose's scent, I couldn't
follow. Not because where you live images are sharp as
razors, nor because entering a warm place clouds my sight,
fogging up my glasses.

Not for lack of strength: no one knows where it's from
nor what it is that makes him move. Vain would be
the strongest of wingstrokes without the lightness of
bird's bones and the skull's porousness.

For me there was no other path but this. I was rising
hesitantly, seemingly lazy and wavered, like a cobra
woken by the fakir's flute. But, you must admit, even this
is a miracle: when a mere reptile is unglued from the earth
by music. Even for these few moments I am grateful.
But enough about me. And about music.

Let's return to you: if you have no twin, why then the double
shadow upon all you describe? I'd like the answer to this
before the white avalanche that lurks in ambush where even
silence cracks from the freeze of insanity crashes down on us.
Over there, where the front and reverse sides meet like a wound
and a cold compress.

* This poem was first translated into English by Wayles Browne, Stephanie Krueger, and Sasha Skenderija (see *Spirit of Bosnia*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2012).

Getting Unaccustomed

17 Going to work, you make your way through the masses of
tourists who, for a couple of days, have taken refuge from theirs
in your quotidian: twisting their necks like hungry nestlings – while
Praha, the mother of cities, feeds and chokes them with the beauty
to which you are already so accustomed that you don't notice it.

The flash of the tourist's camera, like that of the war correspondent,
lights up the same indifference on your face.

But a masseur's fingers
can unfailingly feel the pain suppressed for years:
an image petrified
in the spasm of a muscle.

To make it easier to wander in our quandaries,
we transfer the suppressed sights to new contexts,
we lower our worn bodies
into the curative waters of a spa.

To survive, the body rejects excess:
but how to recognize moderation
when even a few mouthfuls could kill the starving camp detainees?
At what moment do you stop noticing beauty? At what, horror?
There are questions that even the best of answers fit
as a prosthesis
fits the stump. But even as such,
it is better than the emptiness which
paralyzes: that's probably why we agree to lies so easily.

The Miller

I can no longer
recall from memory the voice of Jusuf the miller.
I can't separate it from the murmur of water
and the creaking of millstones.

18

I remember only the images:
the pack saddle set down in the grass,
the peasant untying the sack, the horse
drinking from the river.

The wooden mill quivers, but the image
is clear: through the tiny holes beams of light
break in and insert themselves into the roaring
semi-darkness where soft wheat dust dribbles
onto the miller's cap and apron.

Grains ground to dust.
The days, too.
Dust to dust,
I hear father's voice.

The Whisper of Shalwars

I should defend my trade, but how
when this what I do, except for a higher one,
has no sense at all?

In the house I grew up in such questions were
not asked. You could hear the rain pattering
on the roof and pouring down from the gutters,
into the darkness... and my grandfather, who'd

get up painfully, coughing and tottering until
he became fully awake. On workdays he delivered
mail from door to door, never doubting the purpose
of what he was bringing to people.

On weekends he worked in the bakery: *He who has
ten children, he'd say, must work ten days in a week.*
He lit the bread stove in the bakery, kneaded the dough,

and turned over the loaves with the long baking shovel –
just as I turn over nonsense – so they wouldn't burn.
Grandma you could not hear. Only the whisper of her
shalwars.

19

The Rooster

I was four, or five,
from my grandma's lap
I peer from the corner of my eye:
Uncle Salih is slaughtering a rooster.

20 He holds it in his left hand
and with his right, in one blow,
he buries the axe into the stump:
the head on one, the body
on the other side.

I thought – this is the end,
but I hid my face in vain
in the shalwars: the rooster's body
keeps flying as if only now, after
death, it got wings.
Headless it tries to break free of
it in the swirl of bloody feathers,
its little legs twitching,
wings wildly flapping
around the yard.

As if frantic,
like I,
like the entire town,
which started to move
only after it fell.

THE SMELL OF THIRSTY EARTH AFTER RAIN

Last Minute

In the middle of a long and hard winter, an unplanned trip to the south. We descended into Istanbul like into a picture book: Bosphorus, Byzantine temples, carpet galleries, Taksim, and then tea and narghile under the Galata Bridge. Egyptian Bazaar, in which half the foodstuffs and spices we were unable even to recognize. Then the harmonized greyness of cobblestones and mosques in Eyüp, all overlaid by the flapping of pigeons and shouts of salep vendors. We quietly passed by the cafés so as not to disturb the old men bent for centuries over a game of *tavla*. At every step we met carefree cats, like sacred cows,

even at the *turbeh* of Suleiman the Lawgiver himself. And not to forget, the old barbershops that refuse to be swept away by time.

The white towels drying in front of them won't surrender to modern hair salons. Luring passers-by, shopkeepers and waiters peek out of their stores and *aşçinicas*: *Bujrum! Bujrum!*

In one side street you'll hear *bujrum* a hundred times, as the wind carries every which way the smell of fish, the hooting of ship sirens, the cries of gulls.

Your eyes absorb the displayed carpets, on the obverse side woven through with vivid and cheerful colors, on the reverse tied with invisible knots.

You know the pattern, you've carried it in you since childhood, but you had to fly away so far, where you'd never been, to sense again the sweetness of that forgotten taste:

Istanbul's sorrow is as juicy as a tomato from the south.

New Year's Eve

Ten minutes or so after midnight, I'm crossing
the Galata Bridge: fishermen packed like sardines
have been standing in the same spot for hours.
Since last year, since birth, they've been tossing their
hooks in the water as if casting something away
from themselves.

Thirty-second Birthday

I never dreamed that at my age
something like this could happen. I went carefree,
as one goes to the dentist. After the mammogram,
I went out, sat down on the nearest bench and cried.
Birthday text messages kept coming one after another.

At Zdena's

To the hairdresser I would go with trepidation;
I'd bring with me little pictures cut out from magazines.
Surrounded by mirrors, I'd watch closely every move:
styling, teasing, hair spray...and I'd still be unhappy.

At Zdena's you don't have to fear, she knows everything.
Behind her are years of surgery and chemotherapies.
She says: *So as not to count your fallen hairs at night, you'd
better cut your hair off.* Instead of the snapping of scissors
– just the monotonous hum of the balding clipper. Zdena just
dusts you off and you can leave, you don't even have to look
in the mirror.

Waking

We'd tidied up the apartment. We lay down, read
a little, and went to sleep. We slept well all night,
unaware of anything. We got up early, before dawn:
outside the window, nothing but frozen darkness.

We washed our faces and knelt down on the floor, facing
each other, like teacher and student. For ten years already
we've been learning from each other. After a breathing
exercise, we set off into a new day, another chemotherapy.

Viki

Dear Viki, you've not heard from me for a while; I didn't know what to write. Into reality I landed while still on the plane, as soon as we sailed into clouds, a white nothing.

Where you are ailing we used to go to recuperate.

You said that after metastasis you hid in the apartment we'd been put up in – and screamed. I sat all night long under the crown of the mandarin tree watching the even blinking of the distant lighthouse eat away at the darkness, patiently – as salt eats away at stone. Like a tumor. Until daybreak.

28 From my trip I carry, as souvenirs, a handful of images you've related to me. What also remains is a trace of that smell of thirsty earth after rain that saw us off.

Euro-weekend (Nuremberg, 2011)

Although sages teach us that the past cannot be visited, we pulled up our trouser legs and entered the old town, raised from the ashes in '45, prepared: the discoveries were decided for us by the guide we'd already figured out. Culture balanced by Michelin stars: in one hand a sausage, in the other gingerbread.

From the labyrinth of the National Museum we extricated ourselves jumping centuries: we didn't even stop by the displays of old compasses and maps, although their inaccuracy is instructive.

Albrecht Dürer's grave, in a sea of tombs, we also found easily: Plot 1A, No. 649, but we didn't get to say a prayer for his soul. We dashed off, as if out of breath.

29

No Need

to balance one's accounts, friend, for every grain in
the hourglass falls in its place anyhow. What used to hurt
is now foreign: it had gone by like a movie on the screen while
we, munching on pumpkin seeds, sat comfortably reclined in our
dreams. But when the lights came back on after the show, a heavy
feeling would remain: days empty like hulls, and jumbled together.
We never needed anything beyond what we'd frittered away while
holding on to higher principles and our own. Today there exists only
what we've rejected; everything else we don't have.

Before Going to Barcelona

I know, the hum of the market in Barcelona is the same
as in Egyptian Bazaar
in Istanbul, in the *pescheria* in Trogir or, Wednesdays,
in the *pijaca* in Maglaj.
Looking for the soul of the town hidden behind the market counters,
I always
submerge myself into the hum so I can catch my breath again.

No matter where I go, or stay, my perplexities go and stay with me.
I love
repose, but also movement. Deserts, but also cities.
Imagine, say, a Catalan
place: you're sitting on a dock with a friend,
and you're keeping quiet – while
the cries of gulls keep piercing into your souls like penicillin.

The cries of gulls I can hear from the picture postcard
you sent me from
the Cape of Good Hope back then.
It can be the flapping of pigeon wings in
Bašćaršija, or a whistle of wind under the Statue of Liberty.
It can be anywhere.
That silence can be filled by anything – if you have
someone to be quiet with.

What Will the Doctor Say

For Raymond Carver

On first reading, I overlooked that poem,
Raymond. It takes, however, just one cell
to change its mood and make alive that which
we'd failed to notice till then.

What the Doctor Said I have no energy to read
now that I, too, am going to hear it. The noose
of words tightens after the first lines and I can't go
on. With the unsteadiness of a blind person,
the streetcar is pushing on through the fog of cold
streets as if it didn't have the tracks in front of it.
Your 26-years-old words from the closed book warm
my palm while images are fast multiplying.

The Sky

There's no limit to the devastation: the veins are bursting,
the eyebrows and the eyelashes are falling off. The boys
are playing hockey to the death. The fans are cheering.
The curtain separating you from the other patient is drawn up
across the entire sky.

Stalactite

To attain that beauty – you must be patient, like a stalactite. To drip and wait. And fulfill no one's expectations. Sparingly drip to completion the words that have poured over from a world that no longer exists into a body that is no longer the one consigned to you once. If they discover you, or if you open up to them, your end awaits you. Until then – only quiet underground work and patience. Only darkness, and the silence of dripping.

Music Notation of Silence

I haven't given up an inch, but poetry is no longer a question of life or death. I've spent my life.

And a spent life looks like a picture without sound, although from the inside I can still clearly hear the players thumping the pieces on the board playing blindfold chess.

Midnight Mass

Silent night, holy night,
midnight... Everyone's asleep.
Only the Christmas tree
decorations are gleaming from
the end of the hallway of the
oncology department.

Side-effects

Everything is difficult and slow going.
Only the days are passing quickly.
The years, too.

I'm a step away from a poem
but can't write it down:
all my energy I spend
on resting.

White Field

New Year's Day:
snow has covered a field
of mines.

If You Look Back

you don't know what you'll step on in a dark alley,
behind the school, where someone was leaving someone,
where a small betrayal announced big defeats.

If you take a wrong step, you'll be blinded by a flash of memory,
your ulcer bursts, your brain hemorrhages. You wonder innocently,
new illnesses keep you from seeing old wounds.

FROM

**A GARDENER'S
NOTEBOOK**

I Find it Harder and Harder

to give a final shape to something. Not a single cup
I scoop up water in, not a single jug I carry it in attains
the balance between full and empty.

Today I dare not do anything more than
to weed the garden, rake up the words, throw
them on the compost, and wait for spring
to turn them over.

After the Snow Had Melted

it was raining for days. While houses were sinking under water,
and people into despair, the earth could not absorb a single tear:
it refused to receive what it could not bear. Our garden and
summer house on Dry Hill were ravaged by torrential rain.

This morning I was finally awoken by a hushed sky and a frenzied
chirping of birds. Today we must dig a path for the water, so that
when it visits us again it is free to go. Misfortune also should be left
an open door.

Letter to Flaubert

July 28, 2013

I'm reading your letters, friend, but the dates confuse me: as if they arrived with the speed of electronic mail, for the words are still hot, like the bread from Mimo's bakery that I, as a child, would eat half of before I reached home.

You write that these days you've read in *The General Encyclopedia* about chef Carmen, the creator of famous sauces: because of his profession, the great gourmand gave up the pleasure of eating. So many books, so many libraries, and you believe only in *irreplaceable* verses and sentences.

Looking for them, my eyesight has weakened. But, the less time there is, the more patiently I look. And listen. And quite clearly, from the crowd, I hear your voice: *That for which there is no word, a look is enough.*

Anew

For I. E. Babel

When I'd read all your letters – as if to one whose love has died – nothing else was left to me but to start anew.

While your soul yearns for *cosmic* Russian proportions, your story is concise, but not scant, just as an Eskimo igloo isn't. Precise, like the misfortune of small homelands.

The shine of the same, long extinguished stars we followed, and the same darkness of this world of ours swallowed us both, although we lived in different ages.

The Sky is Dark

and the wind is driving a flock of tiny clouds, like sheep.
Still, I'm not sure it will rain. You can't rely on the sky, so
I'm watering the tomatoes with extreme effort. They are
starting to ripen, and I know I won't be here to see them. I'm
leaving, but I can almost feel the sweetness in the mouth that
will be eating them. No envy, and that fills me with satisfaction.

There Have Been Prosperous Ones, Too,

but this year not a single fruit
did the apricot tree bear:
its leaf was eaten by invisible
bugs, but its crown still casts
a shadow into which I crawl
like into old age. I don't need
more room, an entire life can
nestle in a haiku:
*a magnolia tree in bloom –
its flowers have not fallen off
only in my mind.*

Spa Poem

A succession of European nobles filed through this place.

The warriors of long-fallen empires recuperated from their great victories, the poetry greats from their poems, the Bolsheviks from the Revolution. Soldiers and the sick, workers and pensioners for two hundred years have been rinsing out their pain in these same springs.

Heavy and mean-spirited – I'm wallowing in the curative mud.

A Russian cosmonaut is also here. He's recently returned to Earth. They're teaching him to walk. He's recuperating from the cosmic emptiness that he brought from there and that could pass on to me as well, like a childhood disease I never had.

Reading *The Third Life Through and Through*

Countless words, and still more stars and heavenly bodies are circling around us, and yet in my head emptiness gapes from the word *cosmos*, like from a black hole.

To search for elusive verses is the same as to follow the light of a star gone dark long ago: broken twigs, trampled grass, a hoof print in the interplanetary dust...

Towards the end of *The Third Life*, it becomes clear what will be, but not what was. Words emerge as if from ambush, palpable like letters from a book for the blind. I can smell them like the scent of a freshly snuffed candle.

Musa Ćazim Ćatić Reading Amir Brka's *Dot*

It's a long way to a pure image, as long as to the Moon.
But all you need is to raise your eyes above this *turbeh*
to see the setting torrid dot, the red sun in the middle of
the white flag of Japan.

Tešanj is your Mecca: stick to your garden, and leave it
to the stars to till the celestial fields. Words pour down together in
an eruption of simplicity, and on the face's *pergamena*
a human footprint remains: a tear.

Beware, only, of professors' praises and of critics'
glorifications.
They release concert fog, imitate the whistling of ship sirens.
By making you a classic, they're killing life in you.

I'm telling you this, friend, with pure intentions,
without any other consideration, as a free man,
as a true slave of beauty.

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Home Again

Although it's still summer

the surrounding peaks

are white with clouds of snow.

The creek by the road is springing like a goat.

You think, here it's more beautiful than in heaven

but that overpowering thought is diluted

by a sudden shower: you seek shelter

in a bower gone wild by a ruined house.

In the living room, kitchen, hallway,

a plum tree, rose hip, nettles, thistles.

Behind the house an orchard,

a field

of mines.

Drops

of rain

dripping

from leaves,

from bunches

– grapes.

Adin Ljuca

was born in Zenica, Yugoslavia in 1966.
He has been living in Prague since 1992.



He has published the following books:

- **Hidžra** (poetry), Prague, 1996.
- **Maglaj: Na tragovima prošlosti** [*Maglaj: In the Footprints of the Past* (a cultural-historical study)], Maglaj, 1999.
- **Vytetované obrazy** [*Tattooed Images* (fiction)], Prague, 2005.
- **Stalaktit** [*Stalactite* (poetry)], Tešanj, 2015.
- **Jedan bílý den** [*One White Day* (fiction)], Ostrava, 2017.

In addition to writing and translating Czech poetry and fiction (Ivan Wernisch, Petr Hruška, Jan Balabán, etc.), he has also written and translated dozens of scholarly works in the cultural history of Czech-South Slavic relations.

In 2016, together with Milorad Pejić and Omer Hadžiselimović he founded a publishing house Samizdat.

www.samizdat.nu

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.

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