

Saša Stanišić

# How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone

translated from the German  
by Anthea Bell



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How long a heart attack takes over three hundred  
feet, how much a spider's life weighs,  
why a sad man writes to the cruel river,  
and what magic the Comrade in Chief  
of the unfinished can work

Grandpa Slavko measured my head with Granny's washing  
line, I got a magic hat, a pointy magic hat made of cardboard,  
and Grandpa Slavko said: I'm really still too young for this sort  
of thing, and you're already too old.

So I got a magic hat with yellow and blue shooting stars on  
it, trailing yellow and blue tails, and I cut out a little crescent  
moon to go with them and two triangular rockets. Gagarin was  
flying one, Grandpa Slavko was flying the other.

Grandpa, I can't go out in this hat!

I should hope not!

On the morning of the day when he was to die in the evening,  
Grandpa Slavko made me a magic wand from a stick and said:  
there's magic in that hat and wand. If you wear the hat and wave  
the wand you'll be the most powerful magician in the non-  
aligned states. You'll be able to revolutionize all sorts of things,  
just as long as they're in line with Tito's ideas and the Statutes  
of the Communist League of Yugoslavia.

I doubted the magic, but I never doubted my grandpa. The  
most valuable gift of all is invention, imagination is your great-  
est wealth. Remember that, Aleksandar, said Grandpa very  
gravely as he put the hat on my head, you remember that and

imagine the world better than it is. He handed me the magic wand, and I doubted nothing anymore.

It's usual for people to think sadly of the dead now and then. In our family that happens when Sunday, rain, coffee and Granny Katarina all come together at the same time. Granny sips from her favorite cup, the white one with the cracked handle, she cries and remembers all the dead and the good things they did before dying got in the way. Our family and friends are at Granny's today because we're remembering Grandpa Slavko who's been dead for two days, dead for now anyway, just until I can find my magic wand and my hat again.

Still not dead in my family are Mother, Father, and Father's brothers—Uncle Bora and Uncle Miki. Nena Fatima, my mother's mother, is well in herself, it's only her ears and her tongue that have died—she's deaf as a post and silent as snowfall, as they say. Auntie Gordana isn't dead yet either, she's Uncle Bora's wife and pregnant. Auntie Gordana, a blonde island in the dark sea of our family's hair, is always called Typhoon because she's four times livelier than normal people; she runs eight times faster and talks at fourteen times the usual speed. She even sprints from the loo to the wash basin, and at the cash register in shops she's worked out the price of everything even before the cashier can tap it in.

They've all come to Granny's because of Grandpa Slavko's death, but they're talking about the life in Auntie Typhoon's belly. Everyone is sure she'll have her baby on Sunday at the latest, or at the very, very latest on Monday, months early but already as perfect as if it were in the ninth month. I suggest calling the baby Speedy Gonzales. Auntie Typhoon shakes her

blonde curls, says all in a rush: are-we-Mexicans-or-what? It'll-be-a-girl-not-a-mouse! She's-going-to-be-called-Ema.

Or Slavko, adds Uncle Bora quietly, Slavko if it's a boy.

There's a lot of love around for Grandpa Slavko today among all the people in black drinking coffee with Granny Katarina and taking surreptitious looks at the sofa where Grandpa was sitting when Carl Lewis set the new world record in Tokyo. Grandpa died in 9.86 seconds flat; his heart was racing right up there with Carl Lewis, they were neck and neck. Then his heart stopped and Carl ran on like crazy. Grandpa gasped, and Carl flung his arms up in the air and threw an American flag over his shoulders.

The mourners bring chocolates and sugar cubes, cognac and schnapps. They want to console Granny with sweet things, they want to comfort themselves with drink. Male mourning smells of aftershave. It stands in small groups in the kitchen, getting drunk. Female mourning sits around the living room table with Granny, suggesting names for the new life in Auntie Typhoon's belly and discussing the right way to put a baby down to sleep in its first few months. When anyone mentions Grandpa's name the women cut up cake and hand slices around. They add sugar to their coffee and stir it with spoons that look like toys.

Women always praise the virtues of cake.

Great-Granny Mileva and Great-Grandpa Nikola aren't here because their son is going home to them in Veletovo, to be buried in the village where he was born. What the two have to do with each other I don't know. You should be allowed to be dead where you really liked being when you were alive. My father down in our cellar, for instance, which he calls his studio and he hardly ever leaves, among his canvases and brushes.

Granny anywhere just as long as her women neighbors are there too and there's coffee and chocolates. Great-Granny and Grandpa under the plum trees in their orchard in Veletovo. Where has my mother really liked being?

Grandpa Slavko in his best stories, or underneath the Party office.

I may be able to manage without him for another two days. My magic things are sure to turn up by then.

I'm looking forward to seeing Great-Grandpa and Great-Granny again. Ever since I can remember they haven't smelled very sweet, and their average age is about a hundred and fifty. All the same, they're the least dead and the most alive of the whole family if you leave out Auntie Typhoon, who doesn't count—she's more of a natural catastrophe than a human being and she has a propeller in her backside. So Uncle Bora sometimes says, kissing his natural catastrophe's back.

Uncle Bora weighs twice as many pounds as my great-grandparents are old.

Someone else in my family who's not dead yet is Granny Katarina, although on the evening when Grandpa's great heart died of the fastest illness in the world she wished she was and wailed: all alone, what's to become of me without you, I don't want to be all alone, Slavko, oh, my Slavko, I'm so sad!

I was less afraid of Grandpa's death than of Granny's great grief crawling about on its knees like that: all alone, how am I going to live all alone? Granny beat her breast at Grandpa's dead feet and begged to be dead herself. I was breathing fast, but not easily. Granny was so weak that I imagined her body going all soft on the floor, soft and round. On TV a large woman jumped

into the sand and looked happy about it. At Grandpa's feet, Granny shouted to the neighbors to come around. They unbuttoned his shirt, Grandpa's glasses slipped, his mouth was twisted to one side . . . I cut things out in my mind, the way I always do when I'm at a loss, more stars for my magic hat. In spite of being afraid, and though it was so soon after a death, I noticed that Granny's china dog on the TV set had fallen over and the plate with fish bones left from supper was still standing on the crocheted tablecloth. I could hear every word the neighbors said as they bustled about, I heard it all in spite of Granny's whimpering and howling. She tugged at Grandpa's legs and Grandpa slid forward off the sofa. I hid in the corner behind the TV. But a thousand TVs couldn't have hidden Granny's distorted face from me, or Grandpa falling off the sofa all twisted sideways, or the thought that I'd never seen my grandparents look uglier.

I'd have liked to put my hand on Granny's shaking back—her blouse would have been wet with sweat—and I'd have liked to say: Granny, don't! It will be all right. After all, Grandpa's a Party member, and the Party agrees with the Statutes of the Communist League, it's just that I can't find my magic wand at the moment. It's going to be all right again, Granny.

But her grief-stricken madness silenced me. The louder she cried: leave me alone! flailing around, the less courageous I felt in my hiding place. The more the neighbors turned away from Grandpa and went to Granny instead, trying to console someone obviously inconsolable, as if they were selling her something she didn't need, the more frantically she defended herself. As more and more tears covered her cheeks, her mouth, her lamentation, her chin, like oil coating a pan, I cut out more and more little details of the living room: the bookcase with works



by Marx, Lenin and Kardelj, *Das Kapital* at the left on the bottom shelf, the smell of fish, the branches of the pattern on the wallpaper, four tapestry pictures on the wall—children playing in a village street, brightly colored flowers in a brightly colored vase, a ship on a rough sea, a little cottage in the forest—a photograph of Tito and Gandhi shaking hands, right above and between the ship and the cottage. Someone saying: how do we get her off him?

More and more people came along, one taking another's place as if to catch up with something, or at least not miss out on anything else, anxious to be as lively as possible in the presence of death. Grandpa's death had been too quick. It upset the neighbors, it made them look guiltily at the floor. No one had been able to keep up with Grandpa's heart running its race, not even Granny: oh no, why, why, why, Slavko? Teta Amela from the second floor collapsed. Someone cried: oh, sacred heart of Jesus! Someone else immediately cursed the mother of Jesus and several other members of his family. Granny tugged at Grandpa's trouser legs, hit out at the two paramedics who appeared in the living room with their little bags. Keep your hands off him, she cried. Under their white coats the paramedics wore lumberjack shirts, and they hauled Granny off Grandpa's legs as if prizing a seashell off a rock. As Granny saw it, Grandpa wouldn't be dead until she let go of him, so she wasn't letting go. The men in white coats listened to Grandpa's chest. One of them held a mirror to his face and said: no, nothing.

I shouted that Grandpa was still there, his death didn't conform to the aims and ideals of the Communist League. You just get out of the way, give me my magic wand and I'll prove it!

No one took any notice of me. The lumberjack-paramedics put their hands inside Grandpa's shirt and shone a flashlight in his eyes. I pulled out the electric cable, and the TV turned itself off. There were loose cobwebs hanging in the corner next to the power socket. How much less does a spider's death weigh than the death of a human being? Which of her husband's dead legs does the spider's wife cling to? I decided that I would never again put a spider in a bottle and run water slowly into it.

Where was my magic wand?

I don't know how long I stood in the corner before my father grabbed my arm as if taking me prisoner. He handed me over to my mother, who hauled me down the stairs and out into the yard. The air smelled of mirabelles mashed to make schnapps and there were fires on the meġdan. You can see the whole town from the meġdan, perhaps you can even see into the yard in front of the big five-story block, practically a high-rise building for Višegrad, where a young woman with long black hair and brown eyes was bending down to a boy with hair the same color and with the same almond-shaped eyes. She blew some strands of hair off his forehead, her eyes filled with tears. No one on the meġdan could hear what she was whispering to the boy. And perhaps no one could see that after the woman had taken the boy in her arms and hugged him for a long, long time, he nodded. The way you nod when you're promising something.

On the evening of the third day after Grandpa Slavko's death I'm sitting in the kitchen, looking through photograph albums. I take all the photos of Grandpa Slavko out of the album. Out in the yard our cherry tree is arguing with the wind, it's stormy.

When I've fixed it so that Grandpa Slavko can come alive again, for my next trick I'll make us all able to keep hold of noises. Then we can put the wind in the cherry-tree leaves into an album of sounds, along with the rumble of thunder and dogs barking at night in summer. And this is me chopping wood for the stove—that's how we'll be able to present our life proudly in sounds, the way we show holiday snaps of the Adriatic. We'll be carrying small sounds around with us. I'd cover up the anxiety on my mother's face with the laughter she laughs on her good days.

The brownish photos with broad white rims smell of plastic tablecloths, and show people with funny trousers that get wider at the bottom. There's a short man in a railwayman's uniform standing in front of a train, looking straight ahead, upright as a soldier: Grandpa Rafk.

Grandpa Rafk, my mother's father, died for good a long time ago—he drowned in the river Drina. I hardly knew him, but I can remember one game we played, a simple game. Grandpa Rafk would point to something and I'd say its name, its color, and the first thing that occurred to me about it. He'd point to his penknife, and I'd say: knife, gray, and railway engine. He'd point to a sparrow, and I'd say: bird, gray, and railway engine. Grandpa Rafk pointed through the window at the night, and I said: dreams, gray, and railway engine, and Grandpa tucked me up and said: sleep an iron sleep.

The time of my gray period was the time of my visits to the eye specialist, who diagnosed nothing except that I could see things too fast, for instance the sequence of little letters and big letters on his wall chart. You'll have to cure him of that some-

how, Mrs. Krsmanović, said the eye specialist, and he prescribed drops for her own eyes, which were always red.

I was very scared of trains and railway engines at that time. Grandpa Rafk had taken me to the disused railway tracks, he scratched flaking paint off the old engine; you've broken my heart, he whispered, rubbing the black paint between the palms of his hands. On the way home—paving stone, gray, railway engine, my hand in his large one, black with sharp scraps of peeling paint—I decided to be nice to railway trains, because now he had me worried about my own heart. But it had been a long time since any trains had passed through our town. A few years later the first girl I loved, Danijela with her very long hair who didn't return my love, showed me how silly I'd been to protect my heart from being broken by trains.

Peeling scraps of paint and the gray game are all I remember of Grandpa Rafk, unless old photos count as memories. And Grandpa Rafk is absent from our home in general. However often and however readily my family like to talk about themselves and other families and the dead over coffee, Grandpa Rafk is very seldom mentioned. No one ever looks at the coffee grounds in a cup and sighs: oh, Rafk, my Rafk, if only you were here! No one ever wonders what Grandpa Rafk would say about something, his name isn't spoken with either gratitude or disapproval.

No dead person could be less alive than Grandpa Rafk.

The dead are lonely enough in the earth where they lie, so why do we leave even the memory of Grandpa Rafk to be so lonely?

Mother comes into the kitchen and opens the fridge. She's going to make sandwiches to take to work, she puts butter and

cheese on the table. I look at her face, searching it for Grandpa Rafik's face in the photos.

Mama, do you look like Grandpa Rafik? I ask when she sits down at the table and unwraps the bread. She cuts up tomatoes. I wait and ask the question again, and only now does Mother stop, knife blade on a tomato. What kind of grandpa was Grandpa Rafik? I ask again, why does no one talk about him? How am I ever going to know what kind of a grandpa I had?

Mother puts the knife aside and lays her hands in her lap. Mother raises her eyes. Mother looks at me.

You didn't have a real grandpa, Aleksandar, only a sad man. He mourned for his river and his earth. He would kneel down, scratch about in that earth of his until his fingernails broke and the blood came. He stroked the grass and smelled it and wept into its tufts like a tiny child—my dear earth, you're trodden underfoot, at the mercy of all kinds of weight. You didn't have a real grandpa, only a stupid man. He drank and drank. He ate earth, he brought earth up, then he crawled to the bank on all fours and washed his mouth out with water from the river. How that sad man loved his river! And his cognac—a stupid man who could love only what he saw as humbled and subjugated. Who could love only if he drank and drank.

The Drina, what a neglected river, what forgotten beauty, he would lament when he came staggering out of a bar, once with the frame of his glasses bent, another time after wetting himself, oh, the stink of it! What a messy business old age is, he wept when he stumbled and fell, trying to hold tight to the river in case he took off. Oh, how often we found him at night under the first arch of the bridge, lying on his belly with his fingers

clutching the surface of the water. Swollen, blue hands, half-clenched into fists. He'd be holding flowers in the river, stones, sometimes a cognac bottle. It went on like that for years. Ever since they took the railway out of service, so that there were no more trains running through the town with that sad man switching the points for them, setting the signals, raising the barriers. He lost his job and never said a word about it, he had nothing to do now and nothing at all to say. He was sent into retirement and he drank day after day, first in secret up at the railway station that wasn't a station anymore, though the old engine still stood there, and later by the river and in the middle of town, overcome by sudden, stupid love for the water and its banks.

You didn't have a real grandpa, only an embittered man. He drank and drank and drank until he was tired of life. If only he'd loved chess or the Party or us as much as he loved his trains and then his river, and most of all his brandy! If only he'd listened to us and not the deep, unfathomable Drina!

One evening he scratched a farewell letter into the river bank. He had drunk three liters of wine, and he used the broken neck of a bottle as his pen. We pulled him out of the mud by his feet, and he whimpered and cried out to the river: how am I to save you, how am I to save something so large all by myself?

To think that something so sad can stink like that! We were called when his shouting and his songs got to be more than anyone could bear. Papa carried him home in his arms and put him in the bathtub, clothes and all, and in the bathtub your drunken grandfather threw up twice, in a fury, cursing all angles: may your weapons turn against your own mouths, he said, prodding the river's belly like that with your hooks,



tearing the fish's lips—ah, what silent pain! May your skin be flayed with blunt knives, you criminals, may the depths take you along with your boats, your filthy gasoline, all your weirs, all your turbines, all your mechanical diggers! A river: a river is water and life and power and nothing else.

Around midnight I washed his hair and his tortoise neck, I washed behind his ears and under his armpits. He kissed my hands and said he knew exactly who I was. In spite of his tears he knew whose knuckles he was patting, he remembered everything: what a jewel Love was, and Fate such a bastard!

I'm your daughter, I told him three times, not your wife, and on that night, his last, he made me three promises: from now on, he'd wear clean clothes, he'd drink no alcohol, and he'd stay alive. He kept only one of them. His railwayman's cap was found under the first arch of the bridge, his cognac bottle was also found, but he himself was never found. We probed the water near the banks of the Drina for him with pitchforks. Why had he gone out again? What was there left to love on that May night? The bars had all been shut for ages when I tucked him up after his bath, after he'd made his promises. An angler, of all people, found his body in the reeds downstream. His face was under the water, his feet were on the bank—his beloved Drina was kissing him in death, marrying that sad man who kept only one of his promises. He had smartened himself up for the wedding and was wearing his uniform with the railwayman's badge. He had spent so many nights looking for death, but until then he didn't have the courage to find it; he didn't keep his head under water long enough for the Drina to be the last and only tear he wept.

And when he was to be laid out for the funeral, twelve hours after I'd washed him into making his three promises, I was the one who took the loofah again, the hardest I could find, I was the one who scrubbed his thin torso the way you scrub a carpet, rubbed soap into his yellow, wrinkled belly and brushed his flabby calves. I didn't touch his fingers or his face. Your sad grandfather had dug his hands into the bank, and what kind of daughter would I have been to scrape the earth out from under his fingernails? After he had said: when I die I don't want any coffin? How that sad man loved his cruel river, how he loved the willows and the fish and the mud! You didn't have a grandpa, Aleksandar, only a naive man. But you were too little to remember his naivete. You liked the way he said gray, gray, gray to everything, for some reason you thought it was funny. It was only for his river that he thought up the brightest of colors, he saw the detail of nothing but the Drina, that sad man who could laugh only when he saw his reflection in the water. You didn't have a grandpa, Aleksandar, just a sad man.

I look at my mother with a thousand questions in my eyes. She has sung me the song of the sad man as if she'd been rehearsing it since the day he drowned. She has sung as if he hadn't belonged to her, as if someone else had written the lines, yet with such loving anger that I was afraid a mere nod of my head might disrupt the song. Now she shakes her head over something I can't see and lays slices of bread out in a row on the table.

I ask only two of my thousands of questions. What did Grandpa write on the bank? And why didn't any of you help him?

My mother is a small woman. She runs her fingers through her long hair, combing it. She puffs in my face as if we were playing. She unwraps the butter. Unwraps the cheese. Spreads butter on the bread. Puts a slice of cheese on the butter. Puts tomatoes on the cheese. Sprinkles salt on the tomatoes with her thumb and forefinger. Takes the bread on the palm of her hand. Puts another slice of bread on top of it. Presses them firmly together.

The cherry tree withstands the storm, whipping its branches about. At first the tapping on our front roof comes like a few coins dropping into a cash register, then it goes faster and faster; it's a hailstorm. After my mother has silently left the kitchen I open the window and put a photo of Grandpa Slavko and me on the sill. The cold wind reaches out for my face, I close the window. In the other brownish photos people are standing about in bathing suits with vertical stripes, ankle-deep in the Drina. There are no such bathing suits anymore; the dog and her four puppies probably aren't around either. My young Grandpa Slavko, with his hat on, is patting the puppies, enjoying himself. Which is the last photo of him? How long do dogs live, and do I know any of the puppies? A time comes when there are no new photos of dogs or people because their lives are over. And how do you photograph a life that's over? When I die, I'll tell everyone, photograph me in the ground. That'll be in seventy years' time. Photograph my nails growing, photograph me getting thinner and thinner and losing my skin.

Everything that's finished and over, all deaths seem to me uncalled-for, unhappy, undeserved. Summers turn to winter,

houses are demolished, people in photos turn to photos on gravestones. So many things ought to be left unfinished—Sundays, so that Mondays don't come; dams so that rivers aren't held up. Tables ought not to be varnished because the smell gives me a headache; holidays shouldn't turn into going back to school; cartoons ought not to turn into the news. And my love for Danijela with her very long hair shouldn't have turned into unrequited love. And I should never finish making magic hats with Grandpa, but go on talking endlessly to him about the advantages of life as a magician in the service of the Communist League, and what might happen if you season bread with dust from the tail of a shooting star.

I'm against endings, I'm against things being over. Being finished should be stopped! I am Comrade in Chief of going on and on, I support furthermore and et cetera!

I find a picture of the bridge over the Drina in the last photo album. The bridge looks the same as usual except that there's scaffolding around its eleven arches. People are standing on the scaffolding, waving as if the bridge were a ship about to sail away down the river. Despite the scaffolding the bridge looks finished. It's complete; the scaffolding can't spoil its beauty and usefulness. I don't mind the gigantic completeness of our bridge. The Drina is fast in that photo and rushes along, the broad, the dangerous Drina—a young river!

Flowing fast is like shouting out loud.

Today it rolls lazily by, more of a lake than a river; the dam has discouraged the water so much—the slow Drina, with driftwood and dirt near the banks as if it's fraying at the edges. I carefully take the bridge out of the photo album. The surface is



cool and smooth, like the once wild, untamed river is today. I put the photo in my trouser pocket, where it will get crumpled and dog-eared.

I want to make unfinished things. I'm not a builder, and I'm rather bad at math except for mental arithmetic. I don't know how you make bricks. But I can paint. I get that from my artist father, along with my big ears and his constant cry of: not now, can't you see I'm busy! I'm going to be the artist of the lovely unfinished! I'll paint plums without stones, rivers without dams, Comrade Tito in a T-shirt! Artists have to create pictures in a logical series; that, says my father the spare-time artist, is the recipe for success, he told me about it in his studio. As well as his canvases and paints there are tubs of sauerkraut stored there, boxes of old clothes, and the child's bed I've grown out of. My father spends entire weekends in his studio. A painter must never be satisfied with what he sees—painting reality means surrendering to it, he cries when I knock at the door to say the air's leaking out of my soccer ball again, or the inner tube of my bike tire. Artists have to reshuffle and rebuild reality, says my father in his beret as he pumps up the soccer ball. He isn't really talking to me, he doesn't expect any answer. There are French songs playing in the studio, Pink Floyd late in the evening, and the door is locked.

Logical series are the answer. Other people can fly planes and delouse the pelicans in the zoo, but I'm going to be a soccer-playing, fishing, serial artist of the Unfinished! None of my pictures will ever be painted to the end; there'll be something important missing from every one of them.

I get my painting things, my paint box; I borrow paper from my father. I put water in a jam jar and soften my brushes in it.

The empty sheet of paper lies in front of me. The first picture of something unfinished must be the Drina, the mischievous river before it had a dam. I put blue and yellow on the plate where I mix them; I make the first green brushstroke on the paper, the green is too pale, I darken it carefully and paint a curve, I lighten it, too cold, I add ochre, green, green, but I'll never get a green like the green of the river Drina, not in a hundred years.

The dead are lonelier than the living ever can be. They can't hear each other through coffins and the earth. And the living go and plant flowers on the graves. The roots grow down into the earth and break through the coffins. After a while the coffins are full of roots and the dead people's hair. Then they can't even talk to themselves. When I die I'd like to be buried in a mass grave. In a mass grave I wouldn't be afraid of the dark, and I'd be lonely only because my grandson will be missing me, the way I miss Grandpa Slavko now.

I don't have any grandpa now, and the tears are building up behind my forehead. Everything important in the world can be found in the morning paper, the Communist Manifesto, or the stories that make us laugh or cry, best of all both at the same time. That was one of Grandpa Slavko's clever sayings. When I get to be as old as he was I'll have his clever sayings, I'll have big veins like the veins on my father's forearms, I'll have my granny's recipes and my mother's rare look of happiness.

On the morning of the fourth day after Grandpa's death Father wakes me, and I know at once: it's Grandpa's funeral. I dreamed everyone in my family was dead except me, which felt like being suddenly very far away and unable to find my way back.

Pack your things, we're leaving.

My father wakes me up only when there's some kind of disaster; otherwise Mother comes to kiss my hair. Father doesn't kiss me on principle. It's awkward between men. He sits down on the edge of the bed as if to say something else. I sit up. So there we are now, sitting. Papa, I look at you the way you look at someone when you're listening, look, I'm not getting up, it's a good thing for you to tell me everything I already know, explaining what I already understand, because the thing isn't complete until a father has told his son and explained it all. But I don't say that, and Father doesn't say anything either. That's the way we talk to each other. We often talk like that. He goes to work, then after work he goes into his studio and spends the whole night there. He sleeps in late on weekends. If he's watching the news there's a ban on talking. I'm not complaining, he talks to other people even less than he talks to me. I'm content and my mother is happy that she can bring me up on her own, without interference from Father.

Sitting there saying nothing today, my father looks as if he doesn't have any muscles. He's been staying with Granny since Grandpa died. Granny phoned late yesterday and asked how the boy was doing. She thought it was my mother who'd picked up the phone, so I said nothing. We're going to wash Slavko now, she added, and said good-bye. I imagined Grandpa being washed and dressed for his own funeral. I didn't see any faces, just hands pulling Grandpa about. The hands threw all the bed linens out of the bedroom and boiled the sheets, you do that when there's a dead person in the place. Little veins in your eyes burst from washing your dead father; your hands get smaller and you have to keep looking at them. My silent father sits on the edge of my bed with

his red-rimmed eyes, hands on his knees, palms turned up. When I'm as old as Father I'll have the lines on his face. Lines show how well you've lived. I don't know if lots of lines mean you've lived better. Mother says no, but I've heard the opposite too.

I get up. Father straightens the sheet and plumps up the pillow. Do you have anything black to wear?

Not: Grandpa.

Not: Grandpa's dead.

Not: Aleksandar, your grandpa won't be coming back.

Not: Life can never be as quick as a sudden heart attack.

Not: Grandpa's only asleep—I'd resent that even more than the way he opens the window now and hangs the blanket out to air.

I take a black shirt off its hanger. Suddenly I realize that my father is counting on me. He understands that magic is our last chance. We can start right away. I say, I just have to fetch something from Grandpa's apartment first. Something important.

On the way in the car he says: Granny and your uncles have gone ahead. Hurry up, everybody else is already there. "There" he calls it.

Not a word from him about the funeral, and I don't say that I'm the most powerful magician-grandson in the nonaligned states. Don't worry, step on the accelerator and I'll get my grandpa back for me and your father back for you. I don't say anything because suddenly being a child seems so difficult.

Grandpa's apartment. I take a deep breath. The kitchen. Fried onions, nothing left of Grandpa. Bedroom. I press my face against the shirts. Living room. I sit down on the sofa. That's where Grandpa was sitting. Nothing. I go into the corner behind the TV set. Nothing. The cobwebs are still there. I look

out of the window into the yard. Nothing. Our Yugo with its engine running. Father has got out. My magic hat on the glass case. I climb on a chair, carefully fold up the hat and put it in my rucksack. The rucksack! I search it for the magic wand, and voila! I was going to show the wand to my best friend Edin, I remember, and for demonstration purposes I was going to break some unimportant bone in our history teacher. He skips almost every lesson with Partisans in it, even though there've never been better battles than the fighting of the People's Liberation Army and Red Star Belgrade's matches. Red Star Belgrade is my favorite soccer team. We almost always win and when we lose it's a tragedy. Grandpa's death has saved the history teacher for now.

Like all the others I wear black, but wearing black can't be all you have to do at a funeral, so I imitate Uncle Bora and my father in turn. When Uncle Bora bows his head, I bow mine. When Father exchanges a few words with someone, I listen to what he says and repeat the words to someone else. I scratch my stomach because Uncle Bora is scratching his own big belly. It's hot; I unbutton my shirt because Father is unbuttoning his. That's the grandson, people whisper.

Auntie Typhoon has caught up with the pallbearers and has to be called back. She asks if she can help. Oh-this-slow-creeping-about, she says, it'll-be-the-death-of-me.

Great-Grandpa and Great-Granny walk behind the coffin. Great-Grandpa isn't wearing a hat on his long white hair. When I get to be as old as he is, mine will be even longer. I'd like to tell him about my magic plan because he's a magician himself,

but I can't find a good opportunity. Grandpa Slavko once told me that long ago Great-Grandpa mucked out the biggest stable in Yugoslavia in a single night because in return its owner promised him his daughter's hand in marriage—today she's my Great-Granny. Grandpa wasn't sure just when it all happened. Two hundred years ago? I suggested, and Uncle Miki tapped his forehead: there wasn't any Yugoslavia back then, midget; those were the royal stables after the First World War. I liked Uncle Miki's version because it made Great-Granny into a princess. Grandpa said Great-Grandpa didn't just muck out the gigantic stable; on the very same night he helped two cows to calve, he won an immense sum of money against the best rummy players in town, and he repaired an electric lightbulb in his father-in-law's house—which I thought was the most difficult task of all, when you remember that nothing in the world is deadier than a dead lightbulb. None of it could have been done without magic. Princess Great-Granny said nothing about it, but smiled a smile full of meaning. You should have seen his arms, she said; no one ever had eyes of a color that suited his arms as well as my blue-eyed Nikola.

I stand beside the grave and I know it can be done. After all, I magically made it possible for Carl Lewis to break the world record. So not all Americans are capitalists; at least Comrade Lewis isn't because my wand and pointy hat work magic exclusively along Party lines. I stand beside the grave where Grandpa, formerly chairman of the Višegrad Local Committee, is going to be buried, and I know it can work.

Great-Grandpa climbs down into the grave and tears roots and stones out of the earth walls with both hands. Oh, what a sight! he says. My son, my son!



It's hard to imagine Grandpa Slavko as anyone's son. Sons are sixty at the most. In fact, almost all the people saying goodbye to Grandpa today are around sixty. The women have black scarves over their hair and wear perfume because they want to drown out the smell of death. Death smells like freshly mown grass here. The men murmur, they have colored badges on the breast pockets of their black jackets, they clasp their hands behind their backs and I clasp mine too.

Father helps Great-Grandpa out of the grave and strands behind me. His hands press down firmly on my shoulders. The speeches begin, the speeches go on and on, the speeches are never going to end, and I don't want to interrupt anyone making a speech with my magic spells, that would be rude. I'm sweating. The sun is blazing down; cicadas are chirping. Uncle Bora mops the sweat off his face with a pale blue handkerchief. I mop my forehead with my sleeve. Once I secretly watched a funeral where there weren't any long, boring speeches, just a short incomprehensible one. A bearded man wearing a woman's dress sang and waved a golden ball about on the end of a chain. Smoke was coming out of the ball, and death smelled of green tea. Later I found out that the man was a priest. We don't have priests—the people who make speeches at our funerals are sixty years old with badges on their breast pockets. No one tells any jokes. They all praise Grandpa, often saying exactly the same thing, as if they'd been copying from each other. They sound like women praising the virtues of cake. As the dead can't hear anymore when they're in the ground, the last thing they hear up here ought to make them feel good. But correct as my grandpa was, he would always put anyone who tried sweet-talking him

right. No, Comrade Poljo, he would say, I have not been busy reforming our country every single day, last Friday I did nothing at all to lower the rate of inflation, I slept in late on Saturday instead of going ahead to implement the plan in our regional collectives, and on Sundays I go walking with my grandson the magician. We always go a different way and think up stories, that's the great thing about Višegrad, you never run out of new ways to walk and stories to tell—little stories, great ones, comical and tragical, they're all our stories! And where else would you find a place where a grandson knows more stories than his grandpa? When he was this big, Grandpa would say, raising his thumb, forefinger and middle finger, he thought up stories about the later life of Mary Poppins. Comrade Poppins gets tired of her silly queen, changes her name to Marica, moves into our high-rise building in Yugoslavia and marries Petar Popović the music teacher. He's already married, and allergic to umbrellas, but he plays the piano so well that Marica can't resist him. She enchants him with her singing and her tightly laced boots. Marica flies over the town with her umbrella, she doesn't want to be a children's nanny anymore, she gets a job on the assembly line of the Partisan machine-tools factory, whereupon it exceeds the planned production quota twice over, month after month.

But I'm straying from the subject, Grandpa would say, snapping his fingers, I really had something else to say. I don't always have good advice for everyone. For instance, for young people—I really don't know what to tell them to do, except perhaps to trust us less and listen to Johann Sebastian more. It's also not true that I carry coals down to some old widow's cellar

for her, Grandpa would say, dismissing the notion, I'm not particularly fond of old widows! In one thing, however, you are right, Grandpa would have said, taking Granny's hand and running his thumb over the back of it. I help my Katarina do the dishes, I vacuum the apartment, and I love to cook. Katarina has never had to spend all day on her feet, not as long as I could stand on mine! And why shouldn't men cook? Best of all, I like cooking catfish for my grandson and my proud wife Comrade Katarina. With lemon, garlic, and potatoes with chopped parsley. And there's one thing I treasure above all others, Comrade Poljo: Aleksandar is the best angler from here to the Danube, his grandpa's sunshine, that's what he is.

I don't know how long I stood, deep in thought, beside Grandpa's coffin. I don't know when I freed myself from my father's heavy hands and ran around the grave with the smell of summer rain rising from it. Or when I put on my hat with its blue and yellow stars turning around the crescent moon, although on the day of the evening when he died a death that proved stronger than any magic, Grandpa had told me that stars didn't turn around moons, moons turned around stars. How long did I point my wand at the five-pointed star at the head end of the coffin? How often did I hit out when people tried to carry me away? What curses did I utter? How much did I cry? And will I ever forgive Carl Lewis for using up all of my magic power on his world record, leaving none for Grandpa? All of it went during those 9.86 seconds on 25 August 1991, the day before the day before the evening when someone on the *megdan* might not have heard a mother whispering to her son: you had a loving grandpa, and

he will never come back. But his love for us is never-ending, his love will never be gone. Aleksandar, you have a never-ending grandpa now.

We made a promise about stories, Mama, the son said, nodding, and closed his eyes as if he were working magic without his hat and magic wand, a very simple promise: never to stop telling them.



How sweet dark red is, how many oxen  
you need to pull down a wall,  
why Kraljević Marko's horse is related  
to Superman, and how war can come to a party

And a cigarette now and then, right? finished my father,  
without looking up from his newspaper.

Father slept through my birth.

I'm like my mother in my fondness for plums and minced  
meat, and I've painted a plum without a stone surrounded by  
minced meat for both of us. Mother has sweet dark redness all  
over her face like a beard too. You'll have to eat some lunch, all  
the same, she warns me from up on the ladder, don't eat so fast!  
Don't eat so many would have been better advice, because  
I've just broken the world record for plum eating: and now I  
hold two world records for indigestion. I lie there and let the  
flies buzz around me.

Plums are dusty fruit.

That's the first thing you've laughed at, Aleksandar, said my  
mother when we were talking about the harvest. She didn't add:  
since Grandpa died.

These roads are made for an arse, not a car! cursed my father  
yesterday morning on the way to Veletovo, looking under the  
hood of our yellow Yugo and shaking his head.

Yugos are made for four, not six, replied Mother, lighting a  
cigarette.

That's not the trouble; its contrary nature is the trouble! This  
is not a car, it's a donkey on wheels! Father kicked the wheel  
rim.

A donkey . . . Mother began to answer back, but then luck-  
ily she went away to smoke her cigarette in the company of the  
flowers by the roadside.

Even on its very first drive our Yugo, which was brand-new  
at the time, had stopped on the winding road to Veletovo with

I can't eat any more, I let myself drop and lie there among the  
buzzing sweetness of the crushed fruit. Little flies buzz around  
my head; the dark red sweetness of the plums is sticky in my  
mouth, around my lips and on my hands; I'm feeding the flies  
as if they were birds. We're billing and cooing.

Plum-picking time in Veletovo: Great-Granny Mileva and  
Great-Grandpa Nikola have invited us to the village harvest  
festival. The whole family are here, some of them still wearing  
black in mourning for Grandpa Slavko. Black is the opposite of  
summer and so that grudging bastard the sun feels insulted, says  
Great-Granny, feels insulted and burns down on their backs. She  
wipes the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand.

Grandpa's death is the very opposite of summer, the most  
opposite of all.

I get my love of plums from my mother. Recently, when she  
saw how I was looking forward to the plum harvest, she told  
me that in the last months of her pregnancy she did nothing but  
watch figure skating and eat large quantities of plums: plums  
all through the day, she said, minced meat and chocolate in the  
evenings, now and then carrots, and coffee by the liter when I  
was thirsty.

its engine still running, as if it just wanted to take a quick look at the view: the brambles covered with ripe blackberries, the stream under the fir trees, ferns the color of my mother's bright red perm. Father had taken his hands off the steering wheel and shrugged: stepping on the accelerator didn't work. Ever since then we've always had to walk part of the way to my grandparents' house. On the way home the Yugo will start the first time. The only one of us who can never get used to it is my father.

Yesterday, while he was busy repairing the engine until his fingers were black, I tried to tell my uncles and Nena Fatima that they didn't have to let me win at rummy. The days of giving me a toddler's privileges are over, I cried, I'm only pretending! I can't cope with fourteen cards at once to lull you into a false sense of security!

I threw my hand of cards down hard on the middle of the rock around which we were sitting, so as to make a loud sound without raising my voice. My mother was expert at such gestures, she was Comrade in Chief of them. She could leave the table with just a shake of her head, she could put her hands on her hips and frown, and the sound was so loud I felt like stopping my ears.

And, Uncle? I said, tapping Bora's shoulder with my forefinger, if you're going to look at my cards then please hang on to the jack you yourself need, and don't discard it on my behalf, I'm not incompetent!

I know the word "incompetent" from my father. He uses it when there's something political on TV, or when he and Uncle Miki are quarreling about something political they've seen on TV. Incompetence means doing something even though you

haven't the faintest idea how to—like governing Yugoslavia, for instance. "Fellow traveler" is another important term, and several times already it's led to me being sent to my room, or the brothers not speaking to each other for days on end. If I had a brother, we'd be the exact opposite of my father and Uncle Miki. We'd talk seriously to each other, and no one would have to be afraid we'd raise our voices.

Uncle Bora said okay, picked up the cards, shuffled them, and we let Nena Fatima win the next game. Behind us, Father slammed the hood of the car down and Bora offered him his pack of cigarettes. We started to walk the rest of the way.

My father was a Veletovo smoker. He smoked the only cigarettes of his life on the way from our stalled Yugo to my grandparents' house. He did it again yesterday—two packs in two hours. When we had to take a rest for Uncle Bora's sake, because he was so badly out of breath he couldn't go on, I imagined our Yugo minus its exhaust on the road to Veletovo. Early morning, dew gleaming on the grass, birds twittering, and the rest of our family, whose Yugos never break down, hooting as they overtook us.

I'm doubled up with stomach cramps under a sky full of ripe fruit on bending boughs, and I badly need to go to the bathroom. Quick, up the hill, across the veranda where Uncle Bora is nailing plastic tablecloths to the tables. This morning, when we were deciding who'd stay here to pick plums and who'd go and put the furniture up on the veranda ready for the party, he was the only man who ponderously turned to go. A little-tree-climbing-would-do-you-good, Auntie Typhoon called after

him, all in a rush. How fast her tongue went! Her words first overtook what she was saying herself, then anyone listening.

It might do *me* good but think of the poor trees, said her husband, dismissing this idea, and he dragged his three hundred and thirty pounds up the hill. As if to express his opinion of plums in general he polished an apple on his sleeve and bit into it so hard that the apple broke right apart, and juice ran down both his double chins. Underterred, the big man made a face and closed his eyes with relish.

This-is-the-end! This-is-the-end! Auntie Typhoon was tearing her hair. Fascinated, we stared at Steamroller and his pregnant natural catastrophe, ah, how delightful love must be, sighed Great-Granny, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

My aunt speaks at the speed of a German autobahn. For years Uncle Bora has been pounding tar with a steamroller in Germany to make the fastest autobahns in the world, while Auntie Typhoon is a waitress at a service station. If anyone asks me what my uncle does for a living, I don't mention the roller. I say he's a guest worker. Although it puzzles me that there are places where guests have to work, in our family we don't even let a guest do the dishes, but our neighbor Čika Veselin once called Bora a steamroller, that fat skinflint wouldn't need to use any machine, he'd only have to lie down and roll the roads himself. I asked my mother to get Uncle Bora to go on a diet so that he wouldn't grow any fatter and people would stop saying nasty things about him. She thought she was too fat herself at the time, so she was on a diet of plums and minced meat. People say nasty things, she said, not because Bora is fat himself but because they think he has a fat wallet full of deutschemarks.

Guest workers aren't welcome anywhere except in their own families.

Now Uncle Bora is nailing the tablecloths to the tables in slow motion, while down at the foot of the hill Auntie Typhoon is racing around among the trees shaking their branches: we-don't-need-any-rest-go-on-go-on-go-on! Bora is wheezing with a sound like Father's circular saw when it's about to run down.

The cutlery clatters in the plastic bucket that Great-Granny bangs down on the table beside the stack of plates. She plants herself four-square in my way, looking just like her hero the Comrade in Chief of all cowboys, Marshal Rooster, although with forks at her hips instead of Colts: where are you going, jailbird? She's even wearing her eye patch. Every time we visit Veletovo I have to sit with Great-Granny and watch that grumpy drunk Rooster and Mattie Ross quarreling.

That was how I used to look, just like that, only my skin was pinker, sighs Great-Granny, pointing to Miss Ross. Great-Granny's tears as the final credits roll are followed by High Noon on the veranda. In winter when the grasshoppers don't chirp, Great-Granny takes over from them. She presses her lips together, chirping fit to terrify you. She keeps her finger pistols low, she's always quicker on the draw than any tenderfoot around. Great-Granny is faster than the wind, and with her eye patch she can look even more cynical than John Wayne. Very old people live two lives. In one life they cough, they walk with a stoop, they sigh: oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! In the other life, their eye-patch life, they talk to stinging nettles about the neighbors, they believe they're sheriffs, or they fall in love with deck chairs or bees.



Where are you going, jailbird? Great-Granny's hand moves down to her hip; her thumb takes the safety catch off the fork. I feint to the right, then storm past her on the left and into the house. Oh wow, Great-Granny! High Noon in my guts! Only seconds to go before I break the world record for an accident in my trousers, out of the way!

The new bathroom. The inside bathroom. Great-Grandpa and four oxen demolished half the wall for it, four oxen can do that kind of thing well but two would have been better, then no one would have had to think what to do later about too much hole in the wall and the ripped-out banisters. Great-Grandpa soon found the answer; he fitted the new bathroom next to the balcony—which is smaller now, but the bathroom is bigger, and you can get into it from the balcony through a curtain, fresh air thrown in for free, says Great-Granny. At the same time the four-hundred-year-old outside toilet was jettisoned, and no one ever had to go standing up again. They had the first TV set in the village, years ago, black and white, two channels, the second channel showing busy little scurrying dots for Great-Granny to watch before going to sleep, now the first inside bathroom—my great-grandparents were always twenty-five miles ahead of the times in Veletovo.

There was a party to inaugurate the new bathroom. Abroad they think we have parties here the whole time, says my uncle the guest worker. Which is not entirely right, because we have to spend time clearing up after the parties too. And a party costs a lot, so parents have to go to work in the day. However, it's a fact that my great-grandparents see anything as an excuse for a party. Once they partied through two whole nights because Great-Granny had found a meteorite the size of a man's fist

among the carrots. That was an hour after they'd been showing *Superman* on the new TV set. Great-Granny made soup out of the meteorite, six pounds of carrots and seven secret seasonings of her own. The whole village, she cried around midnight when her eyes were glazed and she was trying to uproot an oak tree with a judo hold, the whole village smells of kryptonite! She failed, because Yugoslavian oak trees are stronger than super powers.

All the neighbors came to the party for the bathroom. Even Radovan Bunda from the high mountains, who knew about electricity only by hearsay and who talked to his chickens. By neighbors they don't mean the same in Veletovo as they do in Višegrad. In Veletovo even the Pešićs count as neighbors, though it's half a day's walk for them to visit my great-grandparents. Not because they're too poor to own a car—they *are* poor, yes, but there isn't any road to drive a car on where they live. The grown-up Pešićs are all over six and a half feet tall, including the women and the old folk. Once, long ago, I visited their place. I remember the sourish goat's milk, and the wooden toys, and wondering why they didn't build higher ceilings, with all of them being so gigantic. When a baby is born or someone gets married in the Pešić family or in ours, we exchange visits. The families are godparents to each other's children and witnesses at weddings. My mother says I didn't have a Pešić godparent, though, it has something to do with her and the religion on her side of the family. Nothing bad, says my mother, and she asks: would you have liked to be baptized?

What's that? I ask.

Well, there you are, she says.

Limning up for the new bathroom, the neighbors were shifting restlessly about with bladder pressure and anticipation. Great-Grandpa had first go. He was wearing his black frock coat, he tapped his stomach and he crowed at the top of his voice: haven't gone for four days now! Bong bong, tom tom, bong bong, he beat out a rousing rhythm with the toilet lid.

Some people, including me, clapped along. Everyone was in good humor waiting for the inside bathroom, sixteen spectators, a five-man band to play music, perfect bathroom weather, I said, presenting the show. Great-Granny gave Great-Grandpa a bottle of spirits as solemnly as if she were handing him the Baron of Youth. He put the shot glass on top of the bottle like a hat and stayed sitting on the toilet for forty-five minutes. Outside, the neighbors and relatives began talking in loud voices so as not to hear all the noises inside the new bathroom. When he wasn't groaning and crying out and clattering like a moped, Great-Grandpa sang. I put my ear close to the door so that I could hear his deep voice. How the door vibrated! My Great-Grandpa sounded like the lowest string of a double bass! In his songs, someone called Kraljević Marko jumped across the river Drina astride a wine-drinking horse and butchered some Turks. So many that I couldn't keep up with the head count. But more exciting than the poor wretched Turks, I thought, was the question of whether all horses who drank wine could fly. When Great-Grandpa came out after forty-five minutes, triumphantly raising his clenched fist, the bottle of spirits was half empty and the shot glass was gone for ever.

Flush it, you idiot! Great-Granny said, loud and earnestly, then she looked down into the bowl and crossed herself for the first time in sixty years. They drank the rest of the good pear

schnapps and the five-man band played a waltz. After that the band opened the dancing with gypsy music that no one liked because the fast bit came too soon. We can still lie down without holding on to anything, you amateurs! cried Great-Grandpa, and he couldn't stop dancing.

Now the neighbors had a go on the new toilet too, starting with the men. Oh, how my heart is pounding, someone said before closing the door behind him. Radovan Bunda was last in line. He kept on grumbling more and more crossly, holding on to himself in front and behind. When it was nearly his turn he roared out: what an idea, tormenting a man who's come all this way, you tramps, with your newfangled notions! He was rapidly unbuttoning his trousers as he raced off in the direction of the outside toilet.

What outside toilet, Radovan must have asked himself when he got there, because two oxen had uprooted the little cubicle from the ground like a weed. I don't need any bowl, any flushing mechanism, any tiles! I don't even need a hole in the ground, Radovan would say later, drinking to liberty.

All this comes back to my mind now in the inside bathroom during the thirty minutes I spend there, almost as long as Great-Grandpa, suffering horribly from my plum world record. I'm out again at last, and here comes Marshal Rooster's finger-Colt producing me in the back—scrub those tablecloths, Great-Granny orders, scrub them, Redskin! She'd been lying in wait for me behind the door.

Unenthusiastically, I pass the dishcloth over the stains and wonder why everyone is celebrating the fact that Uncle Milki is going away. I'd rather celebrate when he comes back from the army.



Great-Granny's teeth are yellow, and brown at the tips; she laughs and nods: yes, yes. That, she says, pointing to a greenish lump of something, that's *kryptovitz*—kryptonite with *slivovitz*. You won't get your hands on that. It made a pile of money but a fearful stink too. Great-Granny winks at me and takes her finger away from the back of my neck to adjust her eye patch.

Great-Granny doesn't talk to me about Grandpa Slavko. You're all my children, oh, you don't give me an easy time, she told Father when we arrived in Veletovo. No one wants to bury the child she bore. I'm burying my own joy.

Father did not reply.

Great-Grandpa replied by searching around for words.

I miss him too, I say then, quietly, putting the cloth down. Great-Granny takes her eye patch off. Her big brown eyes. She has a thin hair growing from the mole on her cheek. Her flowered smock above her black dress. I sink away from her bad mood. The sun's shining. I climb a plum tree. Lost to the world, Father is singing a song. Mother is smiling. Nena Fatima takes off her boots. Auntie Typhoon fills bucket after bucket and pats her big belly. Uncle Milki has seized a chicken by its legs and is taking it out into the yard.

There's cured sausage with red pepper and garlic, there's smoked ham, there's smoked bacon, there's goat's milk cheese, sheep's milk cheese, cow's milk cheese, there are fried potatoes with leeks, there are hard-boiled eggs, there are toothpicks sticking in the sausage, the ham, the cheese, the slices of egg; there's white bread and golden corn bread, the bread is always broken, never cut; there's garlic butter, liver pâté, and creamy *kajmak*, there's cabbage soup, potato soup and thumb-sized dollops of fat swimming

on top of the chicken soup, you can dunk the bread in all those soups; there's bean broth (it's horrible!), there are baked beans and bean salad; there's white cabbage leaves stuffed with rice and minced meat, there are peppers stuffed with minced meat, minced meat stuffed with minced meat, minced meat and plums—Mother and I look at each other, she asks if there's any chocolate—yes, there's chocolate, there's chicken, there's cucumber salad (I've never seen any dish go ignored the way that cucumber salad is ignored); there's warm baklava with syrup made from sugar, cinnamon, honey, and cloves, it drips from your fingers onto your trousers, onto the minced meat; so sweet, someone cries, oh, so sweet, it's Uncle Bora, he's enjoying the sweet baklava so much that he gets to his feet, so sweet! It's almost more than I can stand, stop it, oh, more! There are plums piled on top of plums, there's plum strudel with vanilla sugar and plum jam, there are baked plums with icing-sugar topping; there are melons, the five-man amateur band takes a break from playing specially for the melons; it's a mystery to me why they've been invited to play again after the failure of their performance at the bathroom inauguration party, but there they are, falling on the melon slices, slurping, slobbering, smacking their lips, all of them slurping-slobbering-smacking; and the first tune the band plays after their break is "In Višegrad, That Fine Old Town." But Great-Grandpa cries angrily, pleausurably: aah! and spits a barrage of melon seeds in the direction of the trumpet, aah! that won't do, you don't play something so tender with melon, you amateurs! Grandpa himself reached the lamb stage long ago—he has a melon boat on his left, a shank of lamb on his right, and is munching them in turn, aah! Yes, there's lamb too, its gray meat piled up on the flowered plates, and any moment now there'll be suckling pig: Auntie Typhoon

is turning the spit, pouring beer over the pig's back and wine over the pig's belly, red-cheeked with the heat and the effort, no-no-I-don't-need-a-chair, her blonde hair flying around her head. Auntie Typhoon turns the spit with both hands so energetically that ashes fly up under the suckling pig, turn-it-too-slowly-and-it-won't-roast-evenly. There's rendered, salted, pressed pork dripping with bits of crackling in it, there's fried pig's innards, there are pig's trotters and pig's ears coated with jelly, nothing whatsoever is missing.

I take the bucket of melon rinds off to the pigsty and throw the rinds over the pigs; the pigs don't mind, they have thick skins, they eat the rinds and burrow their soft snouts in the mud. I hit the fattest sow on the belly. She grunts, but she isn't bothered about anything but the rind, my tooth marks on what she's eating, that's a pig's life for you. Great-Grandpa promised me today, next time we kill a pig I can chase it too, help to get it down on the ground, put it on the spit—you run the spit in at the back, along under the backbone and out through the mouth. And I can scrape and wash the stomach out too, but I wouldn't want to put my hands in where there might be melon rind. I'd rather leave the bit with the knife to my father or my uncles. Cutting a pig's throat is the best way, says my father, but Uncle Bora shakes his head: in the heart is the best place. Uncle Miki doesn't mind which, as long as the pig ends up good and dead.

If it was up to Great-Grandpa I could do a lot more things anyway, not just pig killing. I could eat whatever I liked and I wouldn't have to go to school. Great-Grandpa says: boys don't get to be men in town, schools don't teach stupid lads to be fine men. You lose your sense of smell in town and you see six feet less ahead of you.

Great-Grandpa got no further than the letter *t* when he was at school, because there's nothing important after that. He left his village only three times, twice to go to war, once to win a wife. He won three victories. Proud, robust, always singing, always close to tears or laughter. The family like to tell every guest how last Easter—it is always last Easter—Great-Grandpa seized one of his oxen by the horns, forced it to kneel with one hand, while he picked the first lily of the valley of the year for Great-Granny with the other, and then plowed his fields in just four days. The ox that a human being can humiliate like that, he's said to have announced, patting the ox's nostrils, doesn't deserve to set hoof on my land. If he's asked his age Great-Grandpa says: oh, I'm still young, I've never yet seen a ship and I've never yet taught a liar to be an honest man.

Someday, when I'm as old as my great-grandpa Nikola, I will have set sail in a ship, I'll have met a liar and left him an honest man, I'll have persuaded a donkey to go the way I want, and I'll have sung like Great-Grandpa, with a voice as powerful as a mountain range, a ship, the habit of honesty and a donkey all rolled in together.

Back to the table, because there's coffee, and Great-Granny reads everyone's future in the grounds. She promises me an unfulfilled yearning and three great loves in the next three months. Mother laughs and interrupts: but he's much too young. Great-Granny tells me off for drinking coffee while I'm still so young, and she changes the details to two great loves and one affair—but the affair will be with an uncomplicated woman artist, you never saw such green eyes!

She doesn't need more than two minutes for anyone's future except Uncle Miki's, and she takes thirty minutes over

his, rocking back and forth and never ending a sentence; then suddenly there's stuffed pastry *börk*, there's pita filled with potatoes, pita filled with young nettles, pita filled with pumpkin, there's walnut cake and a sip of red wine for me; the courses aren't served one by one in any special order, there's always someone saying he can't eat any more, he couldn't possibly force another morsel down, hands gesticulate, fending off any more, and no one takes the gesticulations seriously; there's no stopping now, there are hurt expressions if someone seriously threatens to expire after the next half-chicken; the wine will fortify your blood, says Great-Granny, pouring more for me when no one's looking. There's white bread with everything, Uncle Bora puts warm white bread on top of cold white bread: I'm in white bread heaven, he says, and then I'll move on to cider paradise—although that will lead to problems on plum-picking day, as Uncle Bora knows, and he laughs when Great-Grandpa holds a glass of *slivovitz* in front of his face: how are you going to drink it, then, of your own free will or through the nose? There's beer, there's brandy, there's cognac; ice clinks in glasses. There are never any empty plates. And there's Nataša, that girl Nataša in her flowered dress, with bare feet and red cheeks as if she has a fever. Nataša's been around all evening, chasing me and chasing me and chasing me, come and be kissed! she keeps calling, come and be kissed! She finds all my hiding places. I escape under the table, determined to stay there for a hundred thousand years until she gives up, Nataša with the gap in her teeth and her pouting lips, come and be kissed, come and be kissed! Marshal Rooster, of all people, is mean enough to speak out and give me away: he's under the table, catch him, why don't you? That's town boys for you, they're afraid of us, they crawl away

under the table legs! So Nataša dives down and crawls toward me, and the way she crawls makes me think of Petak, Great-Grandpa's sheepdog, falling on the squealing, bleeding piglet today. Come and be kissed, come and be kissed, and the loud trumpet and the family singing and no one there to give Nataša a kick. I retreat, my back's up against my mother's legs when I hear the roaring. A man's voice is roaring, and the music suddenly stops. The singing stops. There's silence.

Nataša freezes beside me. Heads close together, we peer out from under the tablecloth: we can see Uncle Milki's best friend Kamenko putting his pistol in the mouth of the trumpet and shouting until his cheeks are redder than the cheeks of two furious red faces put together and his head swells two sizes bigger: what's all this? Music like that in my village? Are we in Veletovo or are we in Istanbul? Are we decent folk or are we gypsies? You ought to be singing the praises of our kings and heroes, our battles, the great Serbian state. Milki's off to join the army tomorrow, and on his last evening you stuff his ears with this Turkish gypsy filth!

Catching a pig for the spit isn't easy. Because pigs are fast, they swerve well, and follow your train of thought, said my father at the beginning of the party, surprising us with a speech, the longest speech any of us had ever heard him make. The pig sees the sharpened knife and puts two and two together. It says to itself: right, let's get out of here double quick! Does the pig have some kind of vision? asked my father, looking around at us. It hasn't found the way out of its sty for years, why should anything change over the next twenty seconds? It can smell the pig killers already. Panic and instinct exist side by side in the pig's



head. Independent thoughts bloom sparsely in the communal garden: bright flowers for bright moments. The pig picks one of those flowers, it squeals and runs! The last pig killer hasn't closed the gate behind him yet. The last pig killer is Bora. He looks down at the tunnel made by his legs and says: that was never the pig, was it? Yes, brother Bora, it was, and the pig is already out of the farmyard and into the meadows. With us in hot pursuit, the runaway animal is galloping across the meadows to freedom! And guess what? Such a sophisticated pig, such a speedy and elegant pig, a pig with such vision deserves its freedom! Away from collective stupidity and the musty smell of the pigsty, off to individuality! cried my father to his audience, spreading his arms. Ahead of the pig is the forest, so are its wild colleagues, and so is the mountain range above—and here are our meadows; nothing except the river Drina is a healthier green, you feel like kneeling down to eat the grass. The pig squeals, and I can tell you it's a city of sheer joy! The pig squeals to celebrate its revolution! Bora is the first to stop, or was he ever running after it at all? I soon give up too; only Milki runs on. My little brother Milki, said Father, looking at the place where Milki was sitting. Anyone can see he's going to be a soldier, the pig has a start of one hundred and fifty, maybe two hundred feet on him, but Milki isn't having any of it. I'm not having this! he shouts, so loud you can hear him right across the meadows, into the forest, high up in the mountains. Still invincible in its cunning and speed, the pig suddenly stops. It turns its head to my uncle Milki. Now what? The pig stands there looking at the mountains, at Milki, at the mountains, at Milki. And only when Milki has almost caught up with it does it rush away again, not toward freedom in the forest this time, but back to the farmyard. It crashes in between

the stable and the barn and gets stuck where the gap narrows at the back. You saw the rest for yourselves; we had to get a roll of cable and the tractor to uncork it.

My father raised his glass. My father the pig killer, eyes glazed, cried: to my brother! Everyone drank to Milki. Killing a pig for the spit is no joke! cried Father. Because pigs follow a train of thought, unlike my brother Bora here. Because Bora didn't want to go for the throat, he insisted it ought to be the heart. And because he forgot to tie Petak up. Yet there are only two mistakes you can make when killing a pig: forgetting to tie your dog up when it's going frantic with the smell of all that blood, or missing the spot when you use the knife, so that the pig goes frantic too and takes forever to die.

Until the pain's so great that life is past bearing, I thought to myself.

Uncle Bora had made both mistakes.

Oh, fuck those divine pig's trotters, Bora, you may have hit the kidneys but you never hit the heart! is what Uncle Milki had shouted at his brother, putting his knee on the pig and pushing it down to the ground with all his weight. The blood was spurting in every direction. The barking was coming closer. Petak shot across the yard faster than the sound of his own bark. Bora, watch out! shouted Milki, and then Petak was leaping around the men and the bleeding pig. He wasn't barking now, he was screaming, slobber oozing through his bared teeth and dripping down his muzzle. Milki couldn't let go of the pig because Bora was raising the knife again. Stop it, Petak! Stop! he shouted, my father kicked out at the dog, who howled, and Bora brought the knife down for the second time.

\* \* \*

Stop it! Stop the music! That's what Kamenko is roaring now, although the bandmen aren't playing anymore, they're retreating before Kamenko's pistol. Only the trumpeter doesn't move, with the trumpet still where it was at his lips when he played the last merry note, and the last merry note still hangs in the air, only not so merry anymore. The barrel of the pistol is resting in the trumpet. Kamenko's arm is trembling, the trumpeter is trembling, a cold wind rises. Kamenko with his roaring and Petak with his barking are sharpening the wind, the way Uncle Bora sharpened the longest knife ready for the pig's heart.

Bark away, bark away, mutters Kamenko, staring fixedly as he slowly takes his pistol out of the trumpet.

Stay down there, whispers my mother, pushing my head under the table. I can see everything all the same, I see Kamenko's arm twitch, there's the shot, there are screams, there's the clatter of the trumpet as it lands on the ground. Nataša falls on my neck, falls into my arms, doesn't bite, doesn't kiss, just whispers: what was that?

Something so loud that even Petak is silenced. Something so horrifying that my mother's legs twitch. Something of such significance that the mountains repeat it, and the echo sounds like distant thunder. His face distorted by pain, the trumpeter holds both hands to his right ear, but he's writhing as if he has been hit in the stomach. The pistol was too close, I want to shout, why so close? Nataša leans her head against my back and hugs me. She doesn't have to do that, I'd like to fight her off, or perhaps she does have to do that just now.

Stop! Stop the music! You'll play what I say now! orders Kamenko, kicking the trumpet. Has our nation won battles so gypsies can shit on our songs?

Only Great-Grandpa's snoring breaks the silence after Kamenko's question. No shot, no barking, no orders in the world can disturb so melodious a sleep. Before Kamenko rose to interrupt the song of Fair Emma, Great-Grandpa was singing along with the first verse. He went to sleep in mid-song, with his head on the table.

Kamenko pushes the trumpeter up against the wall and puts his arm under the man's chin. The leather of his boots is worn right down to the metal. The trumpeter's breath rattles in his throat, and Great-Granny dabs the corners of her mouth with a lettuce leaf, adjusts her eye patch, and plants herself right behind Kamenko.

High Noon, cowboy! she calls out to him. She is armed with two forks. I'm going to count to three! One: Kamenko, my sound and healthy Kamenko, did you know I suckled your grandfather Kosta because his mother's milk was too thin? It was my milk that made you Kosta tall and healthy. He played with my Slavko and danced at our parties. And when your Kosta wanted a song, he strapped on his own accordion and hit the keys manfully, the musicians just couldn't keep up with him! And two: Kamenko, my handsome Kamenko, you've let your hair and beard grow, you wave that pistol about and you've sewn a badge on your cap—admittedly it's sewn on crooked, but these things can be learned. But did you know your grandfather Kosta went to war against caps like that and the double-headed eagle on them, did you know he was wounded twice in the same shoulder and twice in the same calf? So three: Kamenko, my trigger-happy bandit, why are you firing guns in our house? We raised it from the ground and up to the sky with these hands, and now you go shooting it right in the throat where its soul lives!



Kamenko pushes the trumpeter away and turns to Great-Granny. Ah yes, the house . . . And at once the fathers behind him get to their feet. I'll pay for the mortar in your wall, but who, Kamenko asks, is going to compensate me for the injury done to my ears by these bastards? Kamenko with his pistol pushes in between Great-Granny and the musicians huddled in the corner. Great-Granny's fingers are playing impatiently with the forks in her skirt pocket. Kamenko doesn't stand a chance against Marshal Rooster, the fastest gun in Veletovo. Miki is my blood brother, his family is my family—all honor and respect to this blood! says Kamenko, turning out his forearm, because when you're talking about blood and brothers you are bound to think of a wrist. Miki stares straight ahead, pulping bread in his closed fist. He has turned his sleeves up; he bites the bread so hard that the muscles in his lower jaw tense. The fathers hurry toward Kamenko, my own father moves fastest—but Kamenko raises his pistol even faster, turns, and mimics a shot at each father as they stand in a semicircle. Bang, bang, bang, he says.

I put my hands over my ears; the fathers stand there. My father has stopped in midstride, arms bent, leaning forward the way he did when chasing the runaway pig.

But, but, but! Kamenko turns in a second, slower semicircle, waves his pistol as if shaking his head. Each "but" is for one of the fathers, and the fourth is for Great-Granny: but didn't my grandfather sacrifice his shoulder and calf for his country and his people? While we sit here the Ustasas are plundering our country, driving our people away, murdering them! Didn't my grandfather fight the Ustasas too? He did, Mrs. Krsmanović, he did! I'm not having gypsies give me Ustasha songs and Turkish howling anymore! I want our own music for our own Miki!

Songs from the glorious days that once we knew and that will come again! Kamenko strikes his chest with his free hand. Let's start now! I'm not here to talk or dance. Get on with it!

However, it is not the fat singer who starts performing. Instead, Great-Grandpa wakes up. All of a sudden he raises his head from the table and continues the song of Fair Emina at the very place where Kamenko shot it dead. Loud and sorrowful, as if the vain girl Emina were standing in front of Great-Grandpa's balcony and won't return his greeting:

... ja joj nazvah selam, al' moga mi đina,  
ne šće ni da čuje lijepa Emina . . .

Great-Grandpa's voice rings out, and Petak joins in, howling. Bemused, Kamenko looks at the white-haired singer. Emina's hair, worn in braids, smells of hyacinths, she has a silver dish under her arm, in the song she is standing under a jasmine bush but in Veletovo it's under a plum tree:

... no u stbren ibrik zahitila vode  
pa po bašti dule zalivati ode . . .

Great-Grandpa spreads his arms wide and throws back his head. Kamenko and I both let the song distract our attention, and when I look at him again the fathers have got him down on the ground and my father is kneeling on Kamenko's pistol arm until he lets go:

S grana vjetar duhnu pa niz pletči puste  
rasplete joj one pletenice guste . . .

The wind plays in Emmina's thick hair. Only one person is heard above Great-Grandpa's singing, Petak's howling, and Kamenko's scream of pain when the fathers turn him over on his stomach, face to the ground, and that person is Uncle Milki. Not because he raises his voice, but because this is the first time he's said anything at all since the pistol first went into the trumpet—

*zamirisa kosa ko zumbuli plavi,  
a meni se krenu bururet u glavi . . .*

Emmina's hyacinthine hair has my enamored Great-Grandpa totally confused, and Milki says: let him go at once!

Good heavens, Milki, the man's sick! Naraša's father, an unshaven farmer with bushy eyebrows, twists Kamenko's arm behind his back. My father picks up the pistol between his thumb and forefinger—

*. . . malo ne posrnul, mojega mi dina,  
no meni ne dode lijepa Emmina.*

Emmina smells so sweet that you can hardly keep on your feet when she comes close.

I said: let him go! shouts Milki, bending over his friend. Kamenko, you wouldn't really have shot anyone, would you?

But there's no time for questions and answers. The fathers look at each other, pick Kamenko up, hold him against the wall, there's saliva and blood on his chin. Cheek pressed to the wall of the house he gasps: it's okay . . . let go . . . it's okay!

Great-Grandpa needs no music, the amateurs wouldn't be able to sing for him anyway now, they're looking at their trumpeter's

ear with concern. Great-Grandpa has risen to his feet, he's singing the last couplet:

*samo me je jednom pogledala mrko,  
niti hajje, alčak, što za njome crko'!*

And he's dancing. Emmina has nothing but dark looks for Great-Grandpa; she doesn't want his love. Great-Grandpa dances around the table and snatches Kamenko's pistol from my father. He dances to the stables and shoots at the big muck-heap until the shots are mere clicks. Then he pushes the pistol into the muck with his boot until it's out of sight, straightens his back and says: that's it!

There's no explanation for a lot of things, there's the *that's* it; there's a furious Kamenko on a tiny veranda in a tiny village in the mountains above the little town of Višegrad; there's long-haired Kamenko holding his painful arm, as they lead him away from the veranda and throw his camouflage jacket on the floor; there's Kamenko breathing heavily as he rummages around in the cow dung for his pistol; there's Kamenko bellowing: I'm rummaging in the shit now, but when our time comes it's the traitors who'll be eating shit! There's a sudden shower of rain, a two-minute summer shower, there's the fat amateur singer wanting double pay from Great-Grandpa Nikola, and he'll get it too if, says Great-Grandpa, with a hand to the fat man's cheek, if you wake my hyacinth tomorrow morning with—and he whispers something in his ear. Great-Grandpa drops a kiss on his hyacinth's face below the eye patch. Ahead there's the army for Uncle Milki. There was a quarrel in spring between father and son, Grandpa and my uncle, and an order: Milki, these

are not times to become a soldier. We'll have no discussion about it. I was in the next room, and now Grandpa Slavko is gone. I didn't tell anyone about the quarrel, you don't tell tales on your own family. There's been a party, there were threats, there was a brawl, there was a shot, maybe that's how it has to be when someone joins the army; before you even really get there the war comes after you. There's the fear of Milki being sent somewhere they don't just shoot into muck-heaps, there's a sad good-bye to Milki, there are tears for Milki and a slap in the face for Milki: you shameless brat! The slap is because tomorrow's soldier says: Kamenko is right, we don't have to take this kind of thing; it's high time we faced up to the Ustasas and the mujahdeen; that's the reason for the slap, and there are surreptitious glances at my mother and my Nena Fatima, deaf mute Nena Fatima who looks around, ashamed and sad, as if she's understood every word, every gesture and every shot. Sides are taken, you belong or you don't belong, suddenly the veranda is like the school yard where Vukoje nicknamed Worm asked me: what are you, really? The question sounded like trouble, and I didn't know the right answer.

There's no Kamenko on the veranda now; only his threats are left, he went off without finding his pistol, which Grandpa takes out of his boot, all nice and clean now, as he says to Milki, but what you are doing is not right. There's such a thing as shame. I'm ashamed of myself, and not because Uncle Milki says a man who doesn't have all his marbles is right. I'm ashamed of myself on my own account, because I thought it was brave of my uncle to stand up for his friend. But I'm also ashamed because Mother is ashamed, and is stroking Nena Fatima's back as if she were a cat. Across the table Mother says, so quietly that I don't

think Milki can hear her: oh, Milki, what's all this . . . ? There's my father, saying nothing as usual, there's the color of his face—if I looked like that they'd give me a penicillin injection. There are the Ustasas, there's the history book that says the Partisans defeated those Ustasas the way they defeated the Nazis and the Četniks and the Mussolinis and everyone who opposed Yugoslavia and freedom. And there are the mujahdeen, they ride through the desert wearing sheets. There was that question from Vukoje Worm in the school yard, I thought it was a threat and I thought my mother's explanation was a joke. I'm a mixture. I'm half and half. There was everyone in the school yard wondering how I could be something so vague, there were discussions about whose blood is stronger in your body, male or female, and me wishing I could be something not so vague, or a made-up thing that Vukoje Worm didn't know about, or maybe something he couldn't laugh at, a German autobahn, a flying horse that drinks wine, a shot in the throat of a house.

There's me, and later I'll paint a party without any pistols. There's Nataša close to me, there's Nataja's flowered dress, there are Nataša's feet with their dirty soles, there are her braids, twined together like Emin's in Great-Grandpa's song; there's Nataša on the trail of a kiss, my hero, she says to me, oh, my hero, my hero, and she closes her eyes, come and be kissed, come and be kissed; there's me sitting in the middle of the buzzing, world-record sweetness of Nataja's kisses, they're humming around my head like little flies, their dark red sweetness on my forehead, my cheek, my cheek, my forehead.



Who wins when Walrus blows the whistle,  
 what an orchestra smells of, when you can't cut fog,  
 and how a story leads to an agreement

After the end of his own career Milenko Pavlovic, once a three-point shooter and feared for his scoring prowess, who was nicknamed Walrus because of his bristly mustache and drooping cheeks, went off every Saturday to blow the whistle at basketball games in the top Yugoslavian league, getting home the next day in time for lunch. Of the sixty matches he refereed, fifty-five were won by the home side.

That particular Saturday in late April 1991 his son, Zoran, went to a match with him in Split, and Zoran suggested coming home straight after the bingo. Bingo and beans with pork ribs in the most expensive hotel in town. A hearty helping for Walrus, who had whistled valiantly. After the offensive foul for the away team four seconds before the final whistle the crowd had chanted: Walrus! Walrus! rather than the names of their players. The home team, Jugoplastika, nearly missed out on victory, but Walrus didn't miss out on good winnings at bingo.

I can't be doing with a sleeping passenger, said Walrus, if you drop off to sleep in the car I'll put you out on the Romanija. He licked the fingers that had been holding the pork ribs. Walrus, that diligent referee, had equally diligently gnawed the meat right off the bone. The bill was on the house. The pear cake was

on the house. The pear schnapps was on the house. Walrus had tipped his third down the hatch, and over his fourth he and the hotel proprietor drank to Jugoplastika's victory. Walrus! Walrus! Walrus! cried the waiters and the guests of honor.

Walrus! Let's have a song for Walrus! babbled the hotelier, a sturdy Hungarian by the name of Agoston Szabolcs, loosening his tie. A lively accordion tune wound its way out of the kitchen and into the restaurant. The chef kicked the door open and swayed across the room. I'm the orchestra around here! He squeezed the red accordion back and forth over his magnificent paunch; a greasy meat fork dangled from his hip, sweat dripped into his smile. His stubby fingers slipped across the keys, the prelude smelled of beef, of garlic, of metal. Twenty well-fed men took up the song, twenty victorious voices, more seriously smashed, more rapturous, more enamored with every verse and every shot of spirits. The chef grinned as if under torture. The chef whistled. The chef dripped. The chef put his foot down on a chair to support the accordion. Yoo-hoo! cried the suffering chef, grabbing the schnapps bottle. He tipped spirits down his throat straight from the bottle, and there was no break in the singing when he took his hand off the keys. I'm the orchestra around here, he gurgled, that's me, the orchestra!

The waiters took orders, always ordering a double for themselves. They twirled trays on their fingertips, hugged one another and swayed in time to the songs, sailors dressed in black.

The eighth, cried Walrus, throwing the seventh glass over his shoulder, the eighth is for my little lad here, only he can't legally drink yet, so I'll just have to manage it for him.

Little means a lot smaller than me, Zoran protested, and he drank the dregs from every glass without making a face. Agoston



Szabolcs did the same, only with full glasses, and he went to sleep after the tenth with his elbow in a brimming ashtray. All of you shut up! startled the chef, and the accordion whispered an emotional *csárdás* in the hotelier's ear. The men rose to their feet, looked at each other, closed the circle, moving arm in arm. Glasses hit the wall and didn't break, whereupon Agoston Szabolcs stood up as well, joining the dance even before he'd woken up. Milenko joined in, tilting his head back, more wolf than walrus.

Zoran stayed awake for the first hundred and twenty-five miles—the way his father was singing, there was no chance of going to sleep. Two hours later he drank the first thermos of coffee, and just before Sarajevo and after his third packet of glucose he felt a little unwell. When his father woke him up in the Romanija region—look at that, Zoran, fog like cement!—he rubbed his eyes and instantly cried: I wasn't asleep!

No, no, you just closed your eyes for a minute, same as me. We'll both have to replace those eyes of ours, next time the meadows may not save us. The car had stopped a good way into a field, with a steep slope downhill on the right, you couldn't see where it went. Five in the morning, fog like cement, Zoran!

It was night, morning, and cold all in one in the Romanija. Father and son got out of the car, the big man stretched and scratched his mustache. Zoran yawned, picked up a stone and threw it into the fog. Dew lay on the grass and their shoes. They peed to the right and left of a fir tree, aiming downhill through the foggy cement, both of them whistling, both of them happy. Walrus leaned against the warm hood, one hand

in his trouser pocket, a cigarette in the other. Zoran picked dandelions and daisies and something pale blue the name of which he didn't know and put them together in a bunch. He unwrapped the remains of the pork ribs and folded the foil around the stems. He didn't think much of flowers, and the bunch showed it; crap was his father's highest praise, but flowers are flowers, your mother will be pleased.

She wasn't pleased. The front door was unlocked; her hair was mussed. She wasn't pleased, she was naked, and why, Zoran asked himself, why fog like cement anyway? Nothing was ever as soft as the fog in the Romanija on the Sunday morning when Zoran and his father, Milenko, nicknamed Walrus, arrived home six hours earlier than planned. The door was open, and so was the zipper of Bogoljub Balvan the tobacconist's fly.

Zoran is sitting on the steps outside Maestro Stankovski's barbershop staring at a photo in his hands. Zoran likes the kinds of girls who are princesses—they have to have long hair, they have to be pale and slender and proud. Like the woman in the photo. And like Ankica, Zoran's Ankica with her black curls.

I sit down beside him and hand him the bag of sunflower seeds. Zoran is three years older than I am, and I get to do things for him now and then. Today I had to go and speak to his Ankica. I had to apologize to her on Zoran's behalf.

Although the shop is closed, Zoran still has to be there today. He has to help Maestro Stankovski pack because he's going on vacation in a few days' time. Holiday—ho, yes, said Zoran when we first met this morning, pulling the skin under his eye down with his forefinger.

Sure, I said, doing the same.

Usually Zoran sweeps up the hair, polishes the mirrors, and cleans the two Panesamig shavers with their tiny brushes. Maestro Stankovski claims they're better than Panasonic—sharper and cheaper, and let's be honest, how would the Japanese know what's best for beards?

Doesn't my little Austrian girl look like Ankica? asks Zoran as I hand him the sunflower seeds, and he wipes invisible dust motes off the crumpled black-and-white picture.

Her eyes seem familiar to me, I say, nodding, and I look more closely at the young woman with the long curly hair and the white dress with a bell-shaped skirt. I've seen the photo before, Zoran always shows it when he waxes enthusiastic about Austria or about girls.

They all look like that, says Zoran, and the princess gazes sternly at us, just think of it—a country where all the girls look like that! Wow!

Tell you what, Zoran, I say, she looks like Bruce Lee . . .

That's right, he replies dreamily, not surprised at all, Austrian women all look like Bruce Lee. But with prettier hair, and that neck . . .

We both sit in silence, just looking at the photo. That neck! Zoran smells the sunflower seeds. It's not difficult to sit in silence with Zoran because it isn't easy to talk to him. He's not interested in anything but books, princesses (first and foremost Ankica), Austria and his father Walrus. There's always a book in the back pocket of his jeans, the jeans are washed out, there's a white star on his sneakers.

*Grüss Gott*, he whispers to the photo, kissing the corner where you can see Hissi or Sissi or something written with a flourish. *Grüss Gott*, kiss your hand, lovely lady! Zoran's lips

are slightly pursed when he tries talking like an Austrian, pursed for a little kiss. Kiss your hand, pretty lady, kiss your hand! Kung fu!

Zoran leans back on the steps and narrows his eyes. The sun is low, there's hardly anyone out and about in the street. Another reason why it's easy to sit in silence with Zoran is because I never know how to ask him a question.

What kept you so long? he asks me, spitting the shell of a sunflower seed out in a high trajectory.

I looked in at home. My old folks were quarreling. I listened at the door.

Whose fault was it?

It wasn't about them. It was about everyone going away, like Maestro Stankovski. And the situation. The situation, the situation, the situation . . . well, what's in the offing, what we ought to do and all that.

Hm. Zoran cracks a seed in his teeth, puts the photo down on the steps and runs a hand through his hair. What is in the offing, then?

No idea. My old lady opened the door at that point.

Hm.

When I'm talking to Zoran I call my parents "the old folks." We sit in silence again; there's nothing to hear but the cracking and spitting. A sparrow comes down beside the shells.

I went and told Ankica, I say after the silence has turned a little too silent. Zoran blinks at the sun. We were alone, like you said, and I just told her, this is how it is, that's it.

This is how it is, that's it, repeats Zoran.

Well, yes, I said you're sorry. You apologize. It won't happen again . . .

What did she look like?

What?

What was my Ankica looking like?

Hm, well, same as usual, curls and eyes and all that. She said you promised it wouldn't happen again the first two times as well. She said she hates you and she never wants to see you again. She said kindly don't send any midgets around when you want to speak to her, it's almost worse than your temper. I didn't think that was very nice of her.

She didn't really say temper. Zoran shakes his head and flicks a shell away.

She said "the slap," that's what she said. She's had enough, she said, you don't make her feel good anymore.

Zoran has slapped his Ankica three times. His Ankica, because everyone knows that she is his Ankica, and Zoran is Ankica's Zoran. The first time he told her: this is for taking something away from me that I'll never get back again.

You really ought to apologize to her yourself, Zoran, I tell him, and I feel embarrassed having to say a thing like that. I heard it in a film, but it sounded a thousand times better there. The film was about a detective who spent ages hunting for the wrong woman.

Zoran stands up and leans on the handrail, relaxed. He looks at the photo again.

Why do you hit her, anyway? I ask. I dare not remind him of his part in the agreement.

After I'm through with school, Zoran tells the photograph, I'm going there, to Austria. And there'll be roses for my Ankica tomorrow. You just remember this, Aleksandar, roses aren't just flowers. My Ankica will come with me, then I won't need any

Austrian girls, they can make Bruce Lee eyes at me all they want. *Griiss Gott* and so long, pretty lady, so long and good-bye . . . He stuffs the photo in his shirt pocket, says: that's how you want to treat your girl from the very start, and then what happened to my father can never happen to you . . .



When flowers are just flowers, how  
Mr. Hemingway and Comrade Marx feel  
about each other, who's the real Tetris  
champion, and the indignity suffered  
by Bogoljub Balvan's scarf

... That Sunday morning Father and I came home six hours earlier than planned. The door was open and so was the zipper of Bogoljub Balvan the tobacconist's fly. My mother was kneeling in front of Bogoljub with her hair all messy as if she'd just woken up, but then at least she'd have had her nightie on. She was stroking the tobacconist's thighs and bobbing her head up and down like a chicken.

The bunch of flowers was jammed between Father's hand and his sports bag; the stems squashed flat, but flowers are flow-ers. I looked at him, I wanted him to explain all this to me, the chicken movements and the tobacconist. He dropped the bunch of flowers, then dropped his bag on top of them. Mother and Bogoljub hadn't noticed us yet. Father put his ref's whistle to his mouth and blew it. The two of them jumped in alarm, Mother clenched her teeth and Bogoljub shrieked with pain. She moved away from the tobacconist's lap, wiped her mouth and staggered toward Father. God help me, Milenko! she pleaded, with her hair falling over her forehead, and she snatched Granny's crochet tablecloth off the table to cover herself. The vase of flowers on it tipped over and water flowed over the tabletop, but flow-

ers are flowers—these were roses from Bogoljub's tobacconist shop.

Just a moment, murmured Father, striding toward her. He put out a powerful arm: offensive foul. Thus far and not a step farther, his fist showed her. There were two books lying on the floor at Bogoljub's feet. Just a moment, is that Marx and Hemingway lying side by side?

Bogoljub Balvan widened his eyes. Mary, mother of God, he whimpered, tiptoeing his way between *Das Kapital* and *The Old Man and the Sea* and tugging at his zipper. Holy Mother of God, he squealed, blowing on his crotch where it was still painful, Mary, my soul's salvation, don't let it stick!

But the zipper did stick, so Bogoljub cursed the name of God's mother, the holy mother of all zippers, and gave Father no option but to bellow at him loud enough for the whole neighborhood and half the town to hear and never forget it: go fuck the sun, Dragica! Did I build this house with my own hands for you to whore around in it? Did I make those bookshelves and choose the books just for some asshole of a tobacconist to bring himself off on Comrade Marx and Mr. Hemingway? Take that tablecloth off this minute, do you hear? Soiling the work of your own mother's hands! As for you, Bogoljub, have we known each other since we were in the Pioneers for you to break the Pioneer oath of friendship right here in my house, to shame me and madden me by stuffing yourself in my Dragica's mouth, making an adulteress of her? Did I lend you money back then for the tobacconist's shop and never ask for a dinar of interest, just for you to turn all reactionary and religious in my house and land your prick in debts you can never repay? Go fuck the holy

mother of all tobacconists! Get out of here! Both of you! And if you value your lives, put those books back on the shelf!

Trembling, Mother picked up the literary classics and collected her clothes. Bogoljub still had his hands too full to help her. He hunched his shoulders and sobbed, barely audibly: I didn't mean to . . . we were only . . .

Just a moment! Father took his shirt off and looked at the flickering TV screen. Our C64 console was lying on the floor, a jumble of cables, along with two joysticks, salted nibbles, and toothpicks stuck into pieces of cheese on Father's favorite plate, the one with the little basketballs. That just-a-moment had hardly died away before Father turned and Hemingwayed Bogoljub so forcefully that the tobacconist was sent flying against the bookshelves. Tito's *The Party*, Volume 2, and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* fell out; that pair weren't such a tragedy. Mother picked them up too, whimpering, and Father perpetrated a technical foul on the TV set: just a moment . . . were you two playing Tetris?

The list of high scores was visible on screen: Bogoljub had taken over the first three. He had written BOG [God] under his results. Father reached behind the shelves and loaded his shotgun. Have you gone and broken my record in my own home? He closed his left eye and took careful aim. Mother and the tobacconist ran out of the house in panic. Father put the safety catch on the shotgun and leaned it against the bookshelf. He raised his hands in front of his face, turned them around and examined them, as if surprised to find he had such things as thumbs or fingernails or lines of destiny. Then he sat down in front of the TV and played Tetris late into the night, in his undershirt, without saying a word or washing his hands, which he

usually did when he came home from a basketball game, even before hugging Mother and me.

I ate what was left of the pork ribs, which tasted of earth. I picked the petals off the flowers: Anika loves me, she loves me not, she loves me and she loves me. Father didn't answer any of my questions. I set to work on the savory nibbles and the cheese. Father didn't eat anything, didn't say anything, stacked blocks and now and then polished up his shotgun until the metal gleamed. Around midnight he topped out with a score of 74,360 points—MIL MIL MIL, it said on squares one to three.

God, said Father, is dead.

Bring all the drink here, Zoran, I won't be needing a glass. He stripped to his underpants, and I brought him schnapps, brandy, wine. I watched him for a while—drinking, putting the bottle down, drinking, putting the bottle down. But serious drinking without any singing or company is the most boring thing in the world, so finally I went to sleep on the sofa.

Father drank until the sparrows started twittering. Then he shouldered his shotgun, walked through the street, shot at sparrows in the light of dawn and failed to hit a single one of them. He rang Bogoljub's doorbell, shouting: come out and let's kiss like brothers! But as nothing moved inside the house he shot out all the windows, forced the door open, knocked the bookshelf over and slammed his gun against the TV set, but didn't break the glass. So he plugged in Bogoljub's C64, laid the gun across his lap, and did better than BOG's highest Tetris score at the first attempt. Then he set fire to Bogoljub's edition of the collected works of Marx, and as the flames rose higher he crapped on the carpet.

The first shots had woken me and I followed Father through town, first alone, later with some of the old men of Višegrad

who went out angling at this time of day. They were eating salted sunflower seeds and laying bets. Not many were betting on the TV set. I bet ten thousand dinars on my father's talent for Tetris—in her haste Mother had forgotten her purse—and I won forty-five thousand. Just as Father was taking his trousers down and straining over Bogoljub Balvan's carpet, the two policemen—Pokor and Kodro—arrived, sleepy, pale and unshaven. Their uniforms smelled of fried liver and they were smoking. Papa hadn't thought to bring any toilet paper, but Bogoljub's scarf proved useful. He wrapped the soiled scarf around the TV and the policemen asked him to wash his hands now, please. This kind of thing won't do. Private property. Willful damage. Fire. A fine. Come with us.

Father listened to what Pokor and Kodro had to say, leaned on his shotgun, and agreed with them in every particular. But then he told them, sadly and truthfully, what that bastard had been doing in his house, how broken trust hurts worse than broken ribs, how many sparrows he'd left alive because sparrows are tormented so much anyway, and how very badly ashamed he felt, how ashamed he would feel all his life, that his only son had been forced to see these shameful things with his own fair eyes.

The policemen took off their caps, scratched the backs of their necks with the peaks of the caps, nodded, and shook their uncombed heads. Finally Father shrugged his shoulders and showed them the palms of his hands: go on, tell me again this won't do, it's private property! I'll pay any fine you like, but I'm not going with you until I've settled accounts. I'll never get back what was taken from me, not the way it was before. Everything I'm going to take from him can be replaced, so I'm taking plenty.

Pokor and Kodro retreated to Bogoljub's kitchen, had breakfast and consulted together. The anglers unpacked their stools and offered me apple juice out of unlabeled cans. When Pokor and Kodro put their caps on again and went off without a word to drink coffee, the old men nodded approvingly. The policemen had lost their bet—they didn't take Father away.

Bogoljub had guessed what was coming to him. He was a tobacconist through and through, he always wore the same dark red smock, and he could get hold of anything for his customers—instantly, or by the day after tomorrow at the latest. He had salvaged what he could carry and driven away with it from the tobacconist's shop. My father cleared out what was left. He knocked the window panes in, threw all of Bogoljub's wares off the bridge into the Drina one by one, down to the very last pen. Drawers, the shelves from the walls, newspaper stands—everything that hadn't been screwed down landed in the river, and later on so did everything that *had* been screwed down. No one stopped him; over twenty men were watching when he finished by tearing the door off its hinges and chucking that into the river too.

Word had gone around town of what had happened to us in our own home. People gave Father schnapps and leeks, Amela brought him warm bread and salt. Amela baked the best bread in the world. Old men patted me on the head and looked as if they were going to curse and cry at the same time. Drunk as he was, my father took me aside and said: Zoran, I'm going away now. You can stay with Aunt Desa. I'll be coming back, but first I have to get everything new for us: *Das Kapital* for me and a new mother for you. He put two hundred deutschmarks in my shirt pocket and rubbed the back of my neck by way of saying



good-bye. He rammed the car into the tobacconist's shop twice and then drove out of town, hooting his horn.

So now what? I ask Zoran, although I know the answer: Zoran's mother ran off to Sarajevo with Bogoljub the same day as his father went out of town. She left some money for him with his Aunt Desa, but Desa managed the money on his behalf the same way as Zoran's father had managed the pear schnapps meant for Zoran in Split. Zoran was sleeping in his aunt's attic, and beating up his two cousins every day, once after getting up and once before going to bed. Zoran only beats up people who really deserve it: his two cousins because they kept shooting their mouths off, and Edin because he learns ballet dancing, but he apologized for that when he discovered that Edin doesn't have a father. Desa let his parents' house to seasonal laborers working on the dam. She was divorced, and spent a lot of time with those tired men. They always spoke highly of her. Uncle Milki says: Desa is our Marilyn Monroe.

Now, says Zoran, standing up and interrupting my thoughts about his aunt, who always smells of honey, now I can't stand daisies and dandelions—crappy flowers are crappy flowers. My mother preferred those filthy roses. Flowers are not just flowers.

That's true, I can confirm it, Danijela with the very long hair had an alarming fit of laughter when I gave her my daisies.

Zoran takes the broom and sweeps up the sunflower-seed shells in front of the steps. He's lanky like his father, long arms, long legs, sturdy torso. His hair is thick and uncombed above his ears. However hot it is, he never takes off his father's worn

old denim jacket. The twigs of the broom scratch over the asphalt, the only sound in the afternoon silence.

Mother and I talked on the phone, says Zoran, sweeping away with the broom. She says she can't come back. Because of people, and what the town would say. She says none of it is true, and she wants me to move in with her in Sarajevo.

What did you say to that?

Zoran gathers the mucus in his throat with a hard, grating sound, and spits on the ground. I said: right, Mother, okay, but what I'd have to say to you is worse than anything the people here are saying. That's why I'll never move in with you and you'll never move in with me—because I'd be telling you those things every day till the end of my life, and I'd have to see you bobbing your head about like a chicken every day when you answered me.

The bell inside the shop door rings, and Maestro Stankovski's bald patch appears around the door: Zoran, I said take a break, not a holiday!

Comin', says Zoran, leaning the broom against the handrail. We can hear the clip-clop of hooves. Musa Hasanagic is leading his mare Cauliflower across the square by her reins. Zoran and he shake hands. Musa takes off his top hat, and Zoran pats the white blaze on the mare's forehead.

Zoran doesn't know many stories. It's because so many incredible things happen in his own life that he doesn't have to invent anything. He can always tell the tale of his cuckolded father's revenge on Bogoljub Balvan again and again. Sometimes the story takes less than two minutes—there's no Tetris playing and nothing gets thrown into the river, Zoran's father spends all day polishing his shotgun and weeping over it and

then polishing his tears away and weeping and polishing again. That version ends with Zoran on his knees, begging his father to take the barrel of the gun out of his mouth.

Zoran and Musa gravely say good-bye. Zoran shakes hands with me too, nods, and disappears into the shop. I set off for home. A long-distance bus turns the corner behind me, its driver wears a cap. His mustache, his long arms, his long fingers on the steering wheel, the dark hair coming out from under his cap above his ears—just like his son's.

Anywhere there are stories, I'll be right there.

How did Milenko Pavlović, known as Walrus, the three-point shooter once feared for the number of points he scored but not quite such a good shot with a gun, come to be behind that steering wheel? And shouldn't I run straight back to the barbershop and tell Zoran that his father was back again, not too early this time, more like a year too late?

When something is an event, when it's  
an experience, how many deaths  
Comrade Tito died, and how the once-famous  
three-point shooter gets behind  
the wheel of a Centrotans bus

It's an event when Mr. Fazlagić storms into our classroom. Punctual Mr. Fazlagić races up to the board with a dripping wet sponge as if he weren't a teacher at all, as if he were a firefighter in a hurry to extinguish the board because it's gone up in flames. We have Serbo-Croat lessons every day and Mr. Fazlagić is right in there every day to put out the burning board and rescue our spelling with thousands of model sentences. As a teacher Mr. Fazlagić may be a good firefighter, it's hard to tell for certain because his rescue attempts have no effect on most of us. In spite of all the Mr. Fazlagićs of this world, we'll never be able to tell ć and ċ apart, and the board has never burned down either.

Edin and I have tried to burn it down several times. First with math books, then with half a Coca-Cola bottle of gasoline that Edin pinched from his mother's garage. I was skeptical: these school boards aren't made of wood, and how much gasoline do you need to set a brass board alight? You could pour the contents of a whole fuel station on brass and the brass still wouldn't burn, I said, and I repeated the word "brass" until Edin held the Coke bottle of gasoline up to the light, examined it through narrowed eyes, and nodded: yes, I see your point. You can cut glass with brass, and glass doesn't burn either, so why would

brass burn? Let's sell the stuff to Ćika Spok or set fire to a frog with it.

Gasoline is alcohol, and Ćika Spok is a drunk. Every town has to have one. Ćika Spok phones the stars far into the night, with his thumb to his ear and his little finger on his lips. He sweet-talks the Great Bear: one of these days, he promises, I'll have a great, proud weapon, I'll lay you low with it and make myself a Great Bearskin cap.

Well, perhaps those aren't his exact words, but whenever his shouts wake me up I wish he'd explain the Bear's fate to him more soberly, and not keep shouting abuse and accusing him: those are my stars you're carrying off, you thieving animal! Or throwing bottles around the place night and day, and letting fly with curses about the Bear's mother and how he's going to skin him. And I wish he wouldn't puke on the park benches where he sleeps and then go to sleep in his puke.

Edin and I decided on the frog and not Ćika Spok because Ćika Spok was sleeping so peacefully, sitting up straight with his back to the mosque wall. It was two hours before we could catch a frog. I lit a match, and then a second match. As I did so the frog must have been reflecting on its present life and the whole stupid situation it had got itself into. Instead of puffing out its cheeks on the riverbank and darting its tongue into the air to catch flies, here it was, sitting in a cardboard box and being doused with gasoline, while two dark-haired heads above it threw burning sticks at its back, waiting for a spectacular explosion. The fourth and fifth matches went out too. The gasoline smelled of fermented apple juice.

If you keep throwing lighted matches at a frog sitting motionless and thinking about its fate, you soon begin to feel sorry

for its captive frogginess, but still you try one more match. Only then do you let the frog have its pond back, throw the empty Coca-Cola bottle in after it, and set fire to the cardboard box.

It was also an event when our Serbo-Croat teacher climbed a ladder on the first day of the new school year and took Comrade Tito's picture down from the wall. He clutched it to himself and announced in a solemn voice to Tito's big face, Tito's epaulettes, and Tito's officer's stripes: from now on you children will stop calling me Comrade Teacher and call me Mr. Fazlagić instead. Is that clear?

After the silence observed by grown-ups when they've just made a solemn announcement, I snapped my fingers and stood up, like we'd been told to do when we have anything to say. Mr. Fazlagić, not-Comrade-Teacher-now, how filthy is not-Comrade-Tito-now, then?

I thoughtfully placed my thumb under my chin and laid my forefinger on my pursed lips, observing the silence that suggests that the next thing you say will begin with the words: suppose . . .

Suppose Tito isn't totally filthy dirty, then you wouldn't have to take him down? We, I said, his Comrade Pioneers, and here I spread my arms out like a folk singer, we can scrub our former president clean in the toilets in no time at all!

I could positively hear the eyes of those Pioneers rolling in an unconradely way, so I scored more points on the eccentricity scale, where I was well ahead of the class anyway. Edin swallowed a raw egg during break every day, collected insect legs and did ballet dancing, but all the same he was way behind me. Even Edin's physical appearance scored him points: slight, bony,



pale, with little blue veins showing at his temples and eyes that bulged like a horse's. None of his movements was ever fluid, I had no idea what he learned in ballet classes—he darted jerkily along like someone made entirely of secrets, looking to the left, to the right, up at the sky, all because he wanted to be a special agent. Aleksandar, women always fall for 007, and I can imitate any sound except the sound of a heartbeat. Sure enough, sounds of some kind were emerging from Edin's mouth all the time—even when he was standing still he wasn't silent; he was whispering, breathing heavily, yapping and twittering, but always so softly that you wouldn't notice unless you put your ear quite close to his mouth. When the two of us were on our own he stopped all that stealthy darning about, he looked healthier, spoke more slowly, and knew a lot about biology and the female body. For instance, he knew it had a wound that bled every thirty days, which could be really dangerous if, for some reason, the earth took it into its head to turn thirty times faster than usual.

Mr. Fazlagić was still looking at me. And the class was still looking at me, so they wanted me to go on. The Party Committee would certainly approve of scrubbing Tito clean too, that is if the Party Committee still existed, I said, encouraged by all the attention. And I'll ask my granny to lend us one of her tapestry pictures while Mr. Broz, not-Comrade-Tito-now, is absent from school. There's a really nice one with a ship in a storm. It would look better than the mark on the wall.

Vukoje Worm, who was proud of having broken his nose three times, threw a crumpled-up death threat that hit me on the back of the head. It listed the various tortures waiting for me after school and called me a "smahrt aleck" and a "Commie" *swein*.

My crumpled-up reply just missed him.

Strictly speaking, Tito hadn't left any mark behind on that first day of the school year. Marks are dirty, but the wall behind Tito's back was clean—a white rectangle surrounded by the rest of the wall, which was beige. Tito had been protecting the paler bit, that's how it had stayed clean.

And Tito protected us too, his Pioneers.

Well, that's what they say, although Tito never actually stood in front of us dealing out Bruce Lee kicks to any dissidents with a grudge against us or the Red Star. He thought young people were progressive in the cause of progress and the well-being of Yugoslavia, he even moved his official birthday to the Day of Youth. He was often seen with Pioneers in photos, he was laughing and the Pioneers were laughing, and the caption under the picture told you that Tito and the Pioneers were laughing.

I once met Tito, but it hardly counts because I was still a baby at the time, and a meeting you can't remember isn't much of a meeting. Tito was visiting Višegrad, and when his white open-top Mercedes drove by he waved to me, or so Grandpa Slavko claimed. He also claimed to have spent an hour arguing with Tito about the closure of the railway line, but even he was powerless against Tito. Soon no more trains came through our town and Grandpa Rafk lost his job.

When I'm as old as Tito I'll have a white limousine too, the kind where you can stand up in the back. Edin will be my driver, my loyal Party Secretary and best friend and special agent, responsible for bird imitations and also for the Ministry of Biology because he knows so much about the female body.

Our framed Comrade wasn't cleaned up at all. Everyone understood that, even people whose mothers were not former

political advisers to the local committee of the Communist League of Yugoslavia and whose grandpas couldn't explain everything. Something else happened to our Comrade Tito. Our Comrade Tito died. Again. Josip Broz Tito died for the third time when his pictures were taken down from classrooms.

Edin tapped me on the shoulder. Psst . . . Aleks, what did you write to Vukojic Worm?

Nothing. I was only correcting his spelling.

Tito died his first death at five past three in the afternoon of 4 May 1980. But it was only his body that died, and year after year everyone in the world and in space would stand still to remember Tito at five past three on the afternoon of 4 May, except in America and the Soviet Union and on Jupiter, because no life is possible on Jupiter. Sirens would howl, cars would stop, and I would search my memory for a suitably sad quotation from Marx with which to conclude the minute of silence and impress someone, anyone. I never managed to find my quotation.

Karl Marx never wrote a single sad thing in his life.

After his first death, Tito moved into our hearts with a little briefcase full of speeches and articles and built himself a magnificent villa there out of ideas. Grandpa Slavko described the villa like this: the walls are made of economic projects, the house is roofed with messages of peace, and you look out through the red windows at a garden full of poppies, flowering slogans about the future, and a well from which endless credit can be drawn. As the years went on, more and more people did as they liked and took less and less interest in Tito's ideas, and when no one is interested in an idea anymore, that idea is dead.

So Tito died for the second time.

But he lived on in poems and newspaper articles and books. Soon, however, it was correct not to own those books and not to have read the poems. Then it was even more correct to put books on your shelves that used to be banned, and the time came when the most correct thing of all was to write newspaper articles and books yourself of the kind that would once have been banned. After Grandpa died it was my mother who told me all these things. She was a political scientist and knew what she was talking about. Grandpa called her a Marxist, and was pleased about it. She wasn't too pleased herself. In the old days when people asked what my mother did for a living, I didn't hesitate for a moment. I used to say, at Auntie-Typhoon-speed: political adviser to the local committee of the Communist League of Yugoslavia! She writes speeches for those dimwits the secretaries and president of the local committee. I didn't say "those dimwits" out loud, but I knew that's what they were, because my mother had moaned and groaned over and over again about their many kinds of dimness. Their empty heads, their poor memories, the gulf between what they promised and what they did, the holes in their purses, and moreover, she would say: they can drink like a fish, all of them, but they can't get a reasonable sentence down on paper.

If people ask me now what my mother does for a living I usually say: she's tired. You get to be especially tired if you're always working too hard and always talking about how you're always working too hard. Working makes you old. My parents come home from work and talk about work. Father takes off his shirt and washes his feet in the bathroom. He works in a factory that makes wooden furniture, but he's not a woodworker;

he sits in a room with pocket calculators and a desk diary and he wears a shirt. At home he never wears shirts and he works in his studio, but he doesn't call that work. He says he can't abide figures any more than he can abide our government. Father cleans his glasses and makes a face when he's looking closely for marks on the lenses. When I'm his age, I'll have hair that's going gray at the temples myself. When I'm my mother's age, I'll be able to talk about troubles for an hour on end, all by myself without stopping, but the troubles won't be my own. Mother would really have liked to be a figure skater. Now she races around our local law court all day until she's tired. She says: this legislation is so clumsy you almost grow fond of it. In the evening she makes sandwiches for work. I'll make the sandwiches for work—she always says this in just the same words, it's like Father washing his feet. I wonder why she doesn't make the sandwiches for herself and Father—work doesn't have to eat, I once pointed out, and my mother replied: oh yes, it does, my work is eating me up day after day.

I always preferred talking to Grandpa about putting Marxist ideology into practice, Socialist self-government, Tito's foreign policy, or the best way to gut a fish. Conversations like that are very difficult with my father. He is inclined—if he feels like talking to me at all—to think up all kinds of ways of not revealing his incompetence on such subjects. He will talk not about Yugoslavia but some unnamed kingdom where there are words for things that don't exist, and things for which there can't be any words. You inherit the ability to tell good stories, but it sometimes skips a generation.

Tito lived on longest in our school textbooks. History, Serbo-Croat, even math couldn't get along without him. The distance

from Jajce to Bihac is one hundred miles. A Yugo drives from Jajce to Bihac at a speed of fifty miles per hour. At the same time Josip Broz Tito is walking from Bihac to Jajce at a steady speed of six miles per hour. At how many miles from Jajce will they meet?

To conceal my total ignorance of the calculation, I protested that obviously you couldn't have a Yugo and a Tito on the same road at all, because if our president had wanted to go for a walk, the road would have been closed to everyone else. As a safety precaution, I added, and I for one would have welcomed it.

But math teachers are unrelenting about such things.

A new teacher once got so angry about Tito's life as told in the history textbook that he could be heard from the corridor, shouting away in the headmaster's office. I'm a historian, he shouted, not the presenter of a children's story hour on TV!

I told Grandpa Slavko about the historian, and the next day Grandpa came to pick me up from school with his glasses on, in his overcoat, carrying the walking stick he didn't need, and wearing a hat and all his Party decorations. Out in the corridor, we'd been able to hear my grandpa's voice, but not the historian's.

Tito lived his third life on TV too. Partisan films were shown so often that I could act along with the dialogue of some of them. My favorite film is called *The Battle of Neretva*. The Neretva isn't quite as green as the Drina, and the finest bridge over it, in Mostar, has ten arches fewer than ours. I went to Mostar with my class last year. Men were jumping off the fairly high bridge into the Neretva, and everyone clapped. In the film a whole army of people sick with typhoid jump into the river. Their leader cries: follow me, all of you typhoid sufferers, over the



river to freedom! Then he drowns. Another saying from *Battle* is: our people sing even when they're killed. If Marx had seen that film, maybe he would have thought of something sad to say.

I wash my hands before meals so as not to get typhoid.

In my second-favorite film, miners blow up an incredible number of Nazis with an incredible number of dynamite sticks. Colliers are left lying in the mine like sailors on the seabed, says one of the miners. A German soldier gazes into the distance and says: we are to blame for being naive and weak. The weak have no place in history. I'm only sorry that I shall die a soldier and not a miner, he says.

Tito also lived on at commemoration ceremonies, rallies, and holiday celebrations. At dismal meetings of elderly men with unironed shirts and women with dyed perms in smoky back rooms, where I spent endless hours in my mother's company. They ate ham and grumbled: in the old days, ah, the old days, well, those were the old days. Even Grandpa Slavko turned quarrelsome there, complaining of this and that, and his bad-tempered carping made him seem ten years grayer than usual. I coughed and had red eyes the next morning.

Last summer, two weeks after Grandpa's death, was the first time I refused to go with my mother to a meeting of former something or others in the basement of the municipal library. Grandpa doesn't have to go anymore either! I said. I struck to my guns, and Mother didn't look disappointed, she looked frightened. She changed her clothes, painted her fingernails red in front of the bedroom mirror, and then closed the bedroom door. When she kissed me good-bye her breath smelled of wine.

I painted our flag with the five-pointed star and kept thinking of Mother's red nails the whole time. After a while I couldn't hold out any longer. I knocked on the studio door until my father admitted to being at home and agreed to go and fetch Mother with me.

The Yugoslavian flag was hanging from a central heating pipe in the library cellar, and a man with glasses perched on the end of his nose was reading aloud from a gigantic tome. But no one turned the gramophone off. There were toothpicks bearing small homemade flags with Tito's portrait on them stuck into cubes of cheese on plates. My mother was tapping her red fingers in time with the music. She was the only woman in the room and the only person there under sixty. On the way from home she'd had her hair done differently. Father stopped in the doorway, playing with the car key. When Mama saw us she slowly stood up and reached for her bag. She didn't say good-bye to anyone. No one said good-bye to her. One man coughed; another stood up and turned the record over. That was the last meeting Mother went to. I couldn't tell if she was particularly happy about it or particularly sad, she just stopped going, the way I suppose I'll stop growing some day. And her hair hadn't really been done differently. My mother just looked unbelievably tired in the smoky light.

Pictures upon pictures of Tito were still around too—in offices, in shop windows, in living rooms next to family portraits, in schools. Tito on a yacht, Tito standing on a speaker's podium, Tito with a girl handing him flowers. You could get a jigsaw puzzle of Tito and E. T. holding hands. So when those pictures were removed from the classrooms, Tito died for the third time.

Comrade Jelenić, known to us as Fizo, still wanted to be called Comrade. He was the only teacher to leave Tito's portrait hanging on the wall that first day of the school year—Tito in his admiral's uniform with a German shepherd dog. Fizo placed himself behind his desk without a word of greeting, put on his glasses, and entered something in the register. You'd better all invest in a workbook and a formula book, said the strictest teacher in our school without looking up; you have a hard year's work ahead of you.

That day Mr. Fazlagić, not-Comrade-Teacher-now, didn't just take away Tito's steely brow in its gilded frame; he also took the red flag carried at the head of the procession in every school parade out of its glass case. When I'd asked whether we Pioneers couldn't clean Tito up he embarked very seriously on a long and serious speech: this is a serious matter, Aleksandar Krsmanović, and your irony is wholly misplaced! Serious changes to the system are in progress. The new forms of address and the abolition of all remnants of any personality cult are constituent parts of the process of democratization and should be taken seriously! The teacher's lips went on moving; the teacher's mouth produced one long sentence after another. Mr. Fazlagić put the picture down several times and shook his arms about. But instead of leaving the picture on the floor, he kept picking it up again, and went on talking to us until break.

To show that I'd understood how serious the whole business was—the system, new forms of address, the personality cult—I came to school the next day in my dark blue Pioneer uniform, which was much too small for me, but I thought it still looked smart. I sat down in the front row of Mr. Fazlagić's

class, my back straight and Socialist as Grandpa always demanded. I'd even scrubbed my fingernails clean. I spread my fingers out on the table in front of me as we used to do in the old days when a hygiene supervisor came to inspect the class. At the first question Mr. Fazlagić asked us, I sprang to my feet and said: now let's consider what's left of labor products. There's nothing left except the same old eerie realism, just a jellified mass of indistinguishable human labor, that's to say the expense of the labor force without any thought for what it's expended on.

Three hours' detention. Three teachers invigilated, their grim expressions speaking volumes about the social and political shift in ideology, otherwise known as radical change. If you don't see sense, they threatened me, you'll be here after school every day.

Students are left lying in school like sailors on the bottom of the sea, I said, drawing two diagonal lines in red felt pen on my cheeks; I'm only sorry that I shall die a student and not a miner.

After that there was another voluble and angry exchange, but then I was allowed to go home, because even teachers have a private life. I decided to take a closer look at the meaning of the expressions "provocation," "family brainwashing," and "political shifts in ideology otherwise known as radical change." I knew the meaning of "irony" by now. Irony is when you ask a question and you don't get an answer, you just get trouble instead.

Edin turns to me and says: Jasna's shirt. Edin, Comrade in Chief of human biology, explains what's making Jasna's shirt swell out like bodywork that has to be flattened when a car's been in an accident. Friday, third period, Mr. Fazlagić wipes the board clean

with such vigor that water drips off the sponge and runs up his sleeve. Edin and I quickly agree that Edin's explanation is not quite the right way to describe those swellings, because what's suddenly appeared under Jasna's shirt has nothing to do with car repair workshops. Nor is Jasna's red shirt in any way connected with bent axles. It is rather clearer to Edin than to me why, when he and I come anywhere near her, we act as if she were both the most important and the most unimportant thing in the world. Kneading bread, stroking a dog, trying to find a radio station, that's the best way to work on those nontechnological swellings under Jasna's shirt, Edin explains. You have to be gentle and precise. You have to master the art of touching and do it perfectly or girls will run away from you, whispers the Comrade in Chief of biology, and he looks dreamily at Jasna. If I could touch her just once, he sighs, then I would die happy.

I've never heard the word "precise" in Edin's mouth before, and when his voice rises a little on the word "perfectly," Mr. Fazlagić flings his bunch of keys down on the teacher's desk with full force. Silence. All of a sudden. Precisely.

The bunch of keys is an experience. For Edin, for me, for Jasna too. Because Edin, Jasna and I are personally responsible for Mr. Fazlagić's irritation. The former Comrade Teacher is unbeatable in the irritation line anyway. At least once a week he predicts in a shaking voice: you lot will have me in Sokolac yet! By "you lot" he means us when, for instance, he catches us trying to set fire to the board, or when we've all ganged up to write the first school essay of the year in the Cyrillic alphabet, although express orders went out after Tito's third death: no more writing in Cyrillic characters. And there's a lunatic asy-

lum at Sokolac. It's where Adolf Hitlers and people who think they're chairs go. Mr. Fazlagić might make it to the asylum too. And when his nerves are reaching Sokolac-point, he likes to bang things down on his desk. The flat of his hand, the register, the map of Turkey—a country that Mr. Fazlagić has recently taken to holding up as an example for this, that and the other. Today it's his bunch of keys, which must weigh thirty pounds. All Yugoslavia and half of Turkey could probably be opened up with those keys. The echo of the bang hasn't quite died away when he shouts: perfectly? Do what perfectly, Edin? And just what do you want to touch? Your marks are far from perfect, so you might touch your books for a change!

The noise and the shouting alarm Edin; he jumps up from his chair, performs a pirouette, thrusts his chest out, spreads his arms wide and cries: I don't want to touch anything! And when I said "perfectly," I was talking about our move, my mother and I are moving away, Aleksandar said he'd help and I said with him we'll do it all perfectly.

Edin isn't moving away at all, but the move is a good excuse, because Mr. Fazlagić asks no more questions, he just says: you can leave discussion of that question until break.

These first warm weeks of the year are going-away time. There's a general mood of departure, as infectious as a cold in spring. Whole families get itchy feet, you can hardly see the cars under so much baggage. People are leaving town in such a hurry, they're so intent on getting away, they can't even find time to say good-bye to the people staying behind. They're setting off in frantic haste, as if to save their carpets and their sofas from a flood. I like the idea of loading cars up with sofas. When I go to see Granny I always sit on Grandpa Slavko's sofa.



When I'm watching TV, when I'm eating, when I'm sleeping, when I want to listen to my heart to find out if it's stopped. The Ladas and Yugos are so heavily laden that their floors scrape the bulging asphalt of the gas station. This road will take them to Titovo Užice, perhaps even Belgrade or Bulgaria, or if they turn off the main road a little sooner, they'll reach Veletovo. But something tells me no one wants to go there. Edin and Zoran don't know where all these people are going; my parents don't know either, and yesterday after school when I asked Kostina the caretaker where people were off to on holiday, he laughed nervously as if he was scared of me.

Yesterday Edin and I spent all afternoon at the gas station. Everyone in Višegrad knows that road and its bumps: if you take your foot off the accelerator your exhaust will stay put. But yesterday it seemed as if the drivers had forgotten what their own roads were like; they raced over the bumps and the floors of their cars protested so loudly that an old lady in the house opposite the gas station put a cushion on her windowsill and leaned out of the window so as not to miss a thing. By early evening, cars with suitcases on the roof had stopped driving past. A woodpecker flew by, and I thought of the various different kinds of birds. Some birds spend the winter here in spite of the cold; others fly to warmer places. Do birds of the first kind sit on the overhead wires to watch the other birds leave, the way we watched the cars? Do they get an uncomfortable feeling when the other birds sing about places in the south? Quick, off we fly to the sun to build nests in coconut palms and eat mandarin oranges all day! Do they roll their eyes and twitter: oh, you conceited formation flyers! It doesn't bother the birds who fly

away that the other lot are staying; they couldn't care less what the other birds think: you could come too instead of freezing your beaks off.

Can birds actually roll their eyes? I asked Edin.

Danilo Gorki's Golf approached the gas station so fast that Edin and I jumped up from the side of the road and took a few steps back. Danilo is our neighbor, old Mirela's son, and a waiter at the Estuary Restaurant. He's a young man known to half the town because his last girlfriend wrote him a letter after she dumped him. Her letter consisted of a single sentence, and she wrote it in spray paint on the road under Danilo's window.

The floor of Danilo's Golf crashed over the biggest bump. He stopped and kicked the exhaust pipe, which wasn't attached to his Golf anymore. Edin and I congratulated each other as if we and the road had just succeeded in some great mission. The furious Danilo was cursing the road, mentioning cunt, pig's guts, grape must and mothers in the course of his tirade. We greeted him with extravagant enthusiasm as he walked into the gas station, dragging the exhaust pipe behind him. Old Mirela got out of the car, stood at the roadside and looked back at the town as if waiting for someone. An hour later, she and her son were able to drive on again.

Edin spat through his teeth, watched Danilo's Golf chugging away and said, looking in the direction of Titovo Užice, in the direction of Belgrade, in the direction of Bulgaria: Hey, Aleks, I think they're all clearing out of here.

I didn't argue with him. The twittering of weary birds surrounded us in the dusk. They're running away, said Edin more quietly, picking pebbles off the palm of his hands. He'd been

leaning his hands on the ground, and the little stones had stuck to them.

But why? I asked.

Danilo, everything about you, from your brain to your prick, is tiny!

Mr. Fazlagić turns away; he's satisfied with Edin's answer. Get your exercise books out, he says, I hope you were listening properly yesterday when I explained the difference between an event and an experience, because today you are going to write an essay on the subject of "A Wonderful Trip."

Well, it makes a change from "My Native Land" and "Why the View of My Town from My Window Makes Me Proud and Happy," or "Why the Day of the Republic Is My Day Too."

A wonderful trip, and it has to be an experience—not just an event! Mr. Fazlagić looks at us. Vukoje, I shall stop reading after the twentieth spelling mistake. Faruk, anything illegible will lose you marks. And Aleksandar, I don't want to know anything about your great-grandma uprooting oaks, or inauguration parties for the family bathroom, or your Auntie Whirlwind running a race with Carl Lewis over the bridge and ending up in Tokyo. You've wandered off the subject in every essay you've written this year, so kindly restrain your imagination! Mr. Fazlagić comes up to my desk and bends down toward me. And we use quotation marks for direct speech, he says, leaning his fists on the desk top, you know that, I don't have to explain it to you every time. Now, you all have an hour!

Mr. Fazlagić sounds cross. When he was still Comrade Teacher he once gave me a punishment because I did restrain

my imagination, and my essay on "My Native Land" was seven pages of geographical and economic statistics about Yugoslavia that I'd learned by heart. We were given "My Native Land" for an essay at least twice a year. So I wrote a footnote referring to my previous essays on the subject, and added that, despite inflation, I hadn't changed my mind and wasn't likely to change it in a hurry. In a second footnote, I suggested to Mr. Fazlagić that he might like to look at my poetry collection, particularly the poems "8 March 1989, or I Send My Political Adviser Whole Spruce Woods Full of Motherly Love," "1 May 1989, or The Chick in the Pioneer's Hand" and "Comrade Tito, in My Heart You Will Never Die."

Grandpa Slavko had liked my inappropriate choice of subjects, Mother wasn't quite so keen on my bad marks, and Father didn't think school mattered much. Just don't get into fights, he said.

I open my exercise book at the first blank page. "A Wonderful Trip." I go to the Adriatic every summer, always to Igalo. It's organized by the workers' syndicate at Varda, the firm where my father wears a shirt and tie. Hundreds of the people of Višegrad who work for Varda pack their suitcases, gather their families together and tell them: we're being put up in this hotel, though we'd rather have the one where we stayed in '86. All Varda goes to Igalo, its people are moved from a little town without any seaside to a little town by the sea for one month. I know my way around Igalo as well as I know my way around Višegrad, and not just because of the annual trip there, it's also because the hotel beds and shelves, in fact all the furniture, even the wooden floorboards and the wooden paneling, are made by Varda, exactly the same as we have in our bedrooms and on our

walls at home. So if you want to write about a wonderful trip you don't write about Igalo.

Thinking about Igalo, I've drawn a head in one corner of the sheet of paper. The corners of its mouth are turned down, I give it a mustache. Now the head gets two long arms instead of ears. Walrus. A wonderful trip for Zoran's father, Milenko Pavlović, the three-point shooter once feared for the number he shot, but not quite such a good shot with a gun! Walrus's wonderful trip to a new wife and new happiness!

Secure in the knowledge that a good story is never an inappropriate subject, I write the title:

What Milenko Pavlović, known as Walrus, brings back from his wonderful trip, how the stationmaster's leg loses control of itself, what the French are good for, and why we don't need quotation marks

... the reason being that anyone can say anything, or think it and not say it, and what would be the point of quotation marks around thoughts you don't say, or something you do say that's a lie, or thoughts that aren't important enough to be said out loud, or something said out loud that is important but no one hears it?

Drunk and deceived as he was, Milenko Pavlović, known as Walrus, had taken his son aside and said: Zoran, I'm going away now, I have to get everything new for us: *Das Kapital* for me and a new mother for you. He had got into his car and driven out of town, hooting the horn. No one knew where he was going.

Yesterday, one year later, Walrus came back. He drove into town still hooting, just as he had left, but this time at the wheel of a Centrotrens bus. These days everyone was leaving town, no one knew where they were going, only Walrus came proudly back, no one knew where from, and the first thing he said when his shoes touched the ground of Višegrad was: anyone want to buy a bus?

You won't sell a bus like that in a hurry, I told Walrus, breathlessly. I'd run after the bus as it drove down the street at a slow



<sup>41</sup> James W. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishing, 1993), 93–96, esp. 95; see also Harry, *Masculinities*, 117–18.

<sup>42</sup> In an interview with *Spiegel Online*, Meyer points out, “There are similarities regarding solidarity. But in relation to the perverted image of masculinity as it is particularly cultivated in Turkish environments, there are enormous differences”: “Unterschicht — was soll denn das sein?” Interview with Florian Gathmann and Jenny Hoch, *Spiegel Online*, 26 February 2008, [www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/0,1518,536352,00.html](http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/0,1518,536352,00.html) (accessed 21 August 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Susan Sonag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 103.

<sup>44</sup> Hensel, *Zonenkinder*, 7. In *Honecker's Children*, Anna Saunders explores the “we-identity” that “has emerged only since confrontation with life in West Germany, and perceptions of Western arrogance and political colonisation, as well as the persistence of economic inequalities between east and west” (5).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Stirn, “Absurz Ost.”

<sup>46</sup> Clemens Meyer, *Gewalten: Ein Tagebuch* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> I am referring to the writer's portrait on the dust jacket of his first book and the portrait accompanying the interview “Ich hab' es richtig krachen lassen,” interview with Jan Brandt, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 March 2008, <http://www.faz.net/-00myv8> (accessed 10 May 2011).

## 7: Saša Stanišić, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*: Reinscribing Bosnia, or: Sad Things, Positively

Brigid Haines

THE BALKAN REGION IS SUBJECT TO its own kind of Orientalism in the Western imagination. The birthplace of European civilization, it has nevertheless frequently been mythologized as Europe's less civilized other.<sup>1</sup> The eruption of violence in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s did nothing to dispel this trend. Indeed, it has been argued that even such engaged recent commentators as Peter Handke, W. G. Sebald, Norbert Gstrein, and Juli Zeh struggle to move beyond the stereotypes of exotic yet tragic Balkan otherness.<sup>2</sup> In *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* (2006; *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, 2008), however, the other writes back, representing, in the author's own words, “sad things, positively.” This novel, loosely based on the author's own experience, concerns the Bosnian conflict of 1992 and its aftermath. Despite evoking a tragic set of events, it is hugely energetic, often humorous, and ultimately life-affirming. It does not shirk the horror of the war, even though it does not represent it directly. Rather, it approaches it obliquely in a number of ways, building into its aesthetic the knowledge that time, like life, moves on. That Stanišić's “sad things, positively” self-description appeared on Twitter, the microblogging social networking site, and in English, are symptomatic of the positive outcome of his own personal story as well; namely, his transformation from child refugee into global bestselling author and multilingual citizen of the world.

*Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* met with rave reviews both at home in Germany and abroad, particularly in the English-speaking world when Anthea Bell's translation appeared in 2008; it has been translated into some twenty-eight languages. Critics found it an exhilarating read, fast-paced and vivid. Its labyrinthine, patchwork, or symphonic structure, its mixing of genres — part family novel, part migration story, part war memoir, with shades of magic realism — and its bold incorporation of elements of the tragic, the picaresque, the absurd, the surreal, the comic, the melancholic, the lyrical, and the naïve drew widespread praise. Stanišić was hailed as a major new voice, “an exceptionally talented, impish and caring

writer who has walked to the edge of the abyss," his "crazy-quilt novel" celebrated as "a bold, queering work of art deeply rooted in the complex history of a blood-soaked, bone-planted land."<sup>3</sup> The *Guardian* reviewer called it "a wonderfully inventive and impressive novel."<sup>4</sup> With *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, Stanišić won the Publikumspreis of the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis in Klagenfurt, was a finalist for the Deutscher Buchpreis in 2006 and, in 2008, was the youngest ever winner of the Chamisso Preis for German writing by authors whose mother tongue is not German.

Stanišić is one of a number of writers who have moved from the former Eastern Bloc to the German-speaking countries since the fall of communism and are contributing collectively to the *Osterweiterung* (Eastern expansion) of, or "Eastern turn"<sup>5</sup> in, contemporary German literature. Together, such writers as Ilija Trojanow (featured in this volume) and Dimitre Dinev from Bulgaria, Artur Becker and Radek Knapp from Poland, Zsuzsa Bánk and Terézia Mora (featured in this volume) from Hungary, and Vladimir Vertlib (featured in this volume) and Wladimir Kaminer from Russia constitute a new wave of German writing, distinct from — though sometimes thematically similar to — Turkish-German literature and other *Migrantenliteratur* (migrant literature). In writing of their homelands, they are capitalizing on the interest of Western readers in the countries "lost" for forty years behind the Iron Curtain, but are also staking a claim in the project of redefining Europe, insisting on broadening out both historically and geographically the Cold-War definitions of Europe based on the Franco-German heart of the European Union. Europe, they insist, is ancient, dynamic, and complex; its peoples are shaped by empires, whether the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, or global capitalism.

Yet like many of these writers, Stanišić's pedigree is also distinctly German in that, like many of the best contemporary writers, he attended the Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig. He rejects the label "immigrant literature" as "simply wrong, because it is wrongly simple," objecting also to the patronizing assumption that authors who do not write in their mother tongue enrich the host literature, and adding that a language is "the only country without borders."<sup>6</sup> After coming to Germany as a fourteen-year-old in 1992 with his family to escape the fighting in his home town, Višegrad, he attended both high school — where he was encouraged to write by a teacher who spotted his promise — and university in Heidelberg. He has worked as a teaching assistant at Bucknell University in the United States, and as writer-in-residence for the city of Graz. The author of many short stories, as well as a work of fantasy (with Stephanie von Ribbeck), *Aus den Quellen des Harvornud*, and a play, *Go West*, which was staged in Graz in 2008, he currently lives in Berlin and is

a keen blogger, tweeter, and soccer fan, a theme that emerges in the novel.

This chapter will show how, through its innovative narrative form, through employing sport as theme and metaphor, and through intertextuality, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* registers the violent collapse of Yugoslavia, and brings the story of Bosnia, "perhaps the only true representation of Yugoslavia,"<sup>7</sup> up to date. Engaging the reader in a debate about how to represent the shock of war and displacement without succumbing to despair, it shows how identities are continuously renegotiated in postcommunist Europe. Neither sentimentalizing nor exoticizing Bosnia or former Yugoslavia, it nevertheless creates a space to mourn what has been lost while still insisting on the dynamic potential of historical forces.

## The Limitations of Fiction: Representing Bosnia

At the silent heart of the novel lie the genocidal events that occurred in the Bosnian town of Višegrad in 1992 when Serbian soldiers went on the rampage against the Muslim population. While other atrocities during the Bosnian war, such as the Srebrenica massacre, have become iconic, what happened in Višegrad, though shocking in the extreme, is less well known. Višegrad, a town on the river Drina near the Serbian border, was strategically important because of the hydroelectric dam on the river and because it was on the main route connecting Belgrade in Serbia and Sarajevo in Bosnia. Ed Vulliamy of the *Guardian* describes the events:

Night after night, truckloads of Bosnian Muslim civilians were taken down to the bridge and riverbank by Bosnian Serb paramilitaries, unloaded, sometimes slashed with knives, sometimes shot, and thrown into the river, dead or in various states of half-death, turning the turquoise of the Drina red with blood. As well as the slaughter on the bridge, hundreds of Muslims were packed into houses across Višegrad and incinerated alive, including women and children. Višegrad was, too, the location for the one of the most infamous rape camps, at a spa called Vilina Vlas, where Muslim women and girls were violated all night, every night, to the point of madness and sometimes suicide.<sup>8</sup>

The ethnic cleansing was horribly effective: while Višegrad's population before the war was nearly two-thirds Bosniak and less than one-third Serb, by the end of the war, it was virtually a Serb-only town and remains so today. What happened there was symptomatic of the Bosnian war in general — a genocidal conflict orchestrated from the outside that turned com-

munities against themselves and ended with a re-mapping of the area that seemed to some to hand victory to the aggressors.<sup>9</sup>

These events are not portrayed directly, however, but via the first-person testimony of a child narrator, Aleksandar Krsnanović,<sup>10</sup> who is close to the fighting without witnessing it directly or, at the time, understanding its causes. Escaping with his family to Germany, he catalogues his memories into lists, researches the war, and returns years later, hoping to fill in the gaps in his knowledge. By using a child narrator who matures, Stanišić brings the reader close to the intimate, rather than the macro-political, causes of the hostilities, and invites the reader to reflect on the dislocations of exile and the painful processes of coming to terms with the loss of a homeland.<sup>11</sup>

The very few negative reviews of *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* accuse Stanišić of kitsch and whimsy but are, I believe, based on a misreading of his narrative technique.<sup>12</sup> It is true that in the opening chapters, the author plays with bucolic Balkan stereotypes and risks the sentimentality that can attend a child narrator, especially one as naïve as Aleksandar, despite all his precociousness. The scenes, however, are crafted to show that the hatred of the other that emerged with frightening speed at this period came from tensions that had always been present. One of the earliest scenes, for example, is set at a village party thrown by Aleksandar's grandparents to inaugurate a new outdoor toilet. The food at the feast is lavishly described; there is much jocular and merry-making; the scene, like much of the novel, has the ring of magic realism. But the incipient nationalism surfaces when one of the guests objects to the gypsy songs being sung, insisting that they should be singing patriotic Serbian songs instead. The child narrator does not understand that the future of his country is at stake; rather, at this stage, he is still inspired by and devoted to the memory of his beloved grandfather, Slavko. Slavko is associated throughout both with Josip Tito's vision of a multiethnic, federal, communist Yugoslavia, and with the transformative gift of storytelling, which Slavko bequeathed to Aleksandar shortly before he died. The narrative undermines Slavko's dual legacy by a pattern of references to, for example, the hostility between Aleksandar's father and his uncle Miki, and to the sadness of his mother that the boy's gift with invention can do nothing to alleviate. The ethnic tensions that were latent but contained in Bosnia until Yugoslavia started to break apart are shown to exist in the most private of spaces: the family. Aleksandar's mother is Bosniak, his father and radicalized nationalist uncle are Serbian. When the family flees to neighboring Serbia and the car is searched at the border, the mother says "I'm the weapon they're looking for" (113).<sup>13</sup> Aleksandar discovers that he himself effectively embodies Yugoslavia, and that while this used to be an unproblematic identity, it is now in crisis. In one of the key statements from the novel, he realizes that he is "a mixture. I'm half and half. I am a Yugoslav

— which means, I'm disintegrating" (41).<sup>14</sup> While Aleksandar does not disintegrate, however, the family never recovers. In exile, his father, always a gloomy critic of Yugoslavia's leaders, criticizes the Dayton Accord that effectively partitioned Bosnia along ethnic lines, and the now-adult Aleksandar has to grapple with the knowledge that his uncle Miki, who in the toilet scene is just about to join the Serbian army, became one of the perpetrators. From the start, then, the apparent idyll of ethnic harmony is undermined.

This is reflected in the narrative form that progressively challenges Slavko's utopian manifesto on the holistic power of storytelling. After the family's flight to Germany, the linear narrative fractures and becomes a kaleidoscope of pieces and fragments that refract rather than represent the fighting directly. The novel apparently consists of twenty-eight chapters, most of which have long titles reminiscent of Gimmelshausen or Cervantes that refer, somewhat elliptically, to the events contained in them. For example, the chapter describing the family's terrifying stay in the Višegrad cellar while the fighting rages overhead, where Aleksandar meets the Muslim girl Asija, is called "What we play in the cellar, what the peas taste like, why silence bares its fangs, who has the right sort of name, what a bridge will bear, why Asija cries, how Asija smiles" (86). But when this norm is broken, unpredictability sets in: several chapter headings after the move to Germany consist merely of a date, the content being a letter written by an increasingly desperate Aleksandar to Asija, the lost girl who becomes the focus of his longing. Another chapter contains the transcripts of Aleksandar's calls to various numbers in Sarajevo in his search for Asija. A novel within the novel, with its own contents list, further disrupts the reading experience. Entitled "When Everything Was All Right, by Aleksandar Krsnanović, with a foreword by Granny Katarina and an essay for Mr. Fazlagić" and dedicated to Grandpa Slavko, it represents Aleksandar's attempt to capture his memories, both idyllic ones of fishing in the Drina, and compromising and shaming ones — as, for example, when the young Aleksandar joined in rejecting the friendship of the visiting Italian dam engineer, Francesco, in a collective act of homophobia. The final chapters return to the narrative present, recounting Aleksandar's visit back to his homeland and resuming the chronology of events.

Aleksandar's is far from being the only voice represented. The polyphony serves to incorporate some of the testimony that Aleksandar himself, with his limited perspective, cannot give. The text incorporates monologues from, for example, Aleksandar's mother, still enraged by her dead father's drunkenness; the rabbi cruelly taunted by the soldiers (this chapter heading incidentally consisting simply of three dots); Asija bewailing the destruction of her village; and the soldier lamenting his lost beloved. Aleksandar's formerly silent grandmother speaks of her newfound sense of liberation in the United States, while his friend Zoran bears witness to the



throwing of bodies into the river and the suicide of İka Hasan, an unwilling perpetrator of this act until he can take no more of it (247). In Aleksandar's imaginative essay, the river herself, whom Aleksandar envies because she can see so much, laments that she has had to carry away so many corpses, cannot hide, close her eyes to crimes, or save anyone at all (184).

The increasingly polyphonous and fractured novel is styled as a *Künstlerroman* (artist's novel), reflecting Aleksandar's development from a naïve storyteller confident of his own powers into a postmodern writer who accepts the limitations of fiction, the incompleteness and instability of memory, the possibilities of fluid identities, and the strategic necessity of silence. The novel's chaotic structure and inventiveness reflect "the splintering of the glass of Aleksandar's perception and life course"<sup>15</sup> and his attempt to find an adequate means of expressing his loss and bewilderment as he works through his politically induced crisis of identity, distancing himself from the utopian aspect of his grandfather's aesthetic while simultaneously preserving memories and a belief in the power of invention. Slavko's credo was that "the most valuable gift of all is invention, imagination is your greatest wealth" (1), but Aleksandar is soon silenced by his grandmother's grief at Slavko's funeral, and he expresses his impotence in a rant against death and closure, taking his cue from his artist father's belief that "a painter must never be satisfied with what he sees" but rather must "reshuffle and rebuild reality" (13). Stanišić shows that mimesis is not adequate, and neither is pure narrative, which tends to closure. Aleksandar resolves to be "a soccer-playing, fishing, serial artist of the Unfinished" (13). Just as he then paints pictures that are unfinished, so too the kaleidoscopic structure of the remainder of novel after the catastrophic intrusion of war represents aspects of reality without attempting completeness or closure. Years later, the closet he returns to the scene of his greatest fear, the cellar, the more his memory lists compiled in exile — of smells, of buildings in the town, of girls, of silences, of his unfinished paintings, and of questions he did not dare to ask in the cellar — are intercut into the narrative. His desire upon returning is to fill in the gaps, but despite the fact that he has become a good listener, some people in the aftermath of conflict do not want to talk and even think it is better not to — for example, the wife of the teacher, glad that her now-demented husband can hide from both memory and the terrible present. Zoran's endless repetitions of the trauma scene and his angry rejection of Aleksandar as a stranger who should be glad of it (244) are painful, as is Aleksandar's shame when he cannot defend his mother's name to the old policeman, still in office, who had been involved in the massacres. Stanišić provides no closure, except tentatively in terms of Aleksandar's own personal healing process: the novel's last words, "yes, I'm here" (277) affirm his acceptance of the present moment and the realization that there is no way back.

## Ideals and Identities: Sport

Sport is employed as a thematic thread providing connections across the fragments; in one key stand-alone episode, it also serves as a metaphor for the fighting. Soccer has recently played a positive role in the construction of a West German, and then a German, identity, as for example in F. C. Delius's *Der Sonntag, an dem ich Weltmeister wurde* (The Sunday I became a world champion) and the film *Das Wunder von Bern* (The miracle of Bern), not to mention the 2006 World Cup fever that provided the mass spectacle of Germans waving their flags without embarrassment or irony for the first time in fifty years. In contrast, Stanišić's sporting references chart the breakup and disappearance of Yugoslavia, and the transformation of Bosnia, and catalogue the effects this has on the identities that are constructed out of that state and that republic.

Some of Stanišić sporting references are trivial and humorous, and some deathly serious, a mix that reflects the comic-tragic border crossings of the novel itself. Early in the novel, sport functions as a sign of harmony, leisure, and healthy competition, though there is always an edge. Aleksandar's passions are playing soccer with his friend Edin, fishing in the river Drina, storytelling, and painting. But as he registers the disappearance of normality in the buildup to war, the sporting references become more sinister. An excellent fisherman with a love of tall fishing yarns, he wins a local championship but cannot attend the final contest because it is too near the fighting. When the soldiers arrive, their idea of sport is to fish with a hand grenade, kill a horse by tipping it off the bridge into the river, and shoot a dog, showing off to local children; the purity of sport becomes abused. In the cellar, as the radio now names his town up above as the scene of fighting, Aleksandar destroys his own marbles, perhaps signifying his child's understanding that the possibility of play is suspended. When his family hurriedly load the car and leave, he is not allowed to take his soccer ball, so he gives it to his friend Edin. His last view through the rear view mirror is of Edin chalking goalposts on a wall and taking some shots, clinging to normality. Later, his friend Zoran, who remains behind, reports that no one plays anything any more and the sports hall is full of people, prisoners or refugees, he is not sure which. When Aleksandar returns years later to a shattered country where the Muslim population has gone and the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing, including his own uncle, walk the streets unchallenged, the goalposts have been removed from the school playing field.

The key sporting scene in the novel is set up to function as a microcosm of the Bosnian war, in line with Stanišić's aesthetic of showing rather than telling. Placed late in the novel and narrated in the third person, it has no framing authorial comments to guide the reader. During a ceasefire in the fighting between the Serbian and the Territorial Defense forces over a

strategically important route to Sarajevo, a soccer match is held. It is the third such match; the Serbs have won the previous two. Before it starts, two players from opposite sides who are old school friends, Kiko and Mikinaus, embrace over the body of a dead comrade. During play, with the Serbs two-nil up, the Territorial Defense player Meho accidentally kicks the ball into the woods, which are mined. Ordered to fetch it, he shifts himself but succeeds, after some tense moments, in retrieving the ball. Afterwards, he cries as he borrows clean trousers from the dead comrade. On returning to the match, he discovers that the ceasefire has finished and the Serbs, under their brutish commander, General Mikado, have turned their guns on their opponents. When one of the Territorial Defense players dithers, he is shot dead by the Serb goalie. The desperate Territorial Defense captain, Dino Zoff, fearing for the lives of the rest of his men, challenges Mikado to let them continue the game, promising that if his side wins, no one will die. The challenge is accepted, and the match continues. One death and several goals later, Mikinaus, the normally silent, giant farm boy — who only realized that he was a Serb when the war was looming and who is only in the war in order to escape the drudgery of farm work — leads a mutiny of the Serbs against their own captain in the name of fairness, insisting that a wrongly disallowed goal stand and the match be continued. The result is a draw, but a victory for sporting values.

With its obvious echoes of those famous fraternizations between German and British troops who discovered a common humanity on the Western front on Christmas Day 1914, Stanišić has also constructed the scene to bring out the peculiarities and absurdities of the Bosnian conflict: both sides speak the same language, they often know each other, their personal motivations have nothing to do with the strategic aims of those directing the fighting from afar. The scene shows the bewildering speed of events and the — even for a war situation — grotesquely deadly stakes and carelessness with human life. One could also comment on the particular brutality of the Serbs, though it is shown to be chance that they grab their weapons first when the ceasefire ends. Mikinaus's mutiny restores fair play in, and proper closure to, the game, which serves to highlight the messiness, open-endedness, and stalemate of the actual fighting.

It is worth considering why, when much of the novel is autobiographically inspired, Stanišić invented this match.<sup>16</sup> Four characteristics of soccer are its relative simplicity (the only requirements are a ball and two improvised goals), its near universality (it is played all over the world), the fierce loyalty local teams engender, and the fact that it is the national sport for a majority of the world's countries.<sup>17</sup> Its simplicity and universality make it suitable for metaphorical use, but Stanišić also uses soccer to chart the disappearance of Yugoslavia and the transformation of Bosnia, and to trace the changing identity of his protagonist as he migrates West. Vic Duke and

Liz Crolley argue that soccer “captures the notion of an imagined community perfectly,”<sup>18</sup> and that the politics of soccer in relation to the state is most straightforward where the state “overlaps to a large degree with the nation.”<sup>19</sup> Yugoslavia, however, was never that simple. On the one hand, its leaders aspired to creating a national identity, and the success of its national soccer team no doubt helped.<sup>20</sup> Bosnians, incidentally, because of the multiethnic nature of their republic, had the largest stake in this collective project. Yet the country was actually composed of a variety of nations held together in a federation under a communist system, and the nationalism of the various ethnicities was often expressed through club loyalties. These tensions are explored in what follows.

Aleksandar is a Red Star Belgrade fan who, though brought up in a secular household, has been known to pray for his team's success in the mosque. Red Star, one of the most successful teams in former Yugoslavia, were a Serbian team strongly associated with Serbian nationalism, whose supporters, led at one stage by the warlord Arkan, were involved in a famous riot with Dynamo Zagreb fans in 1990 just before Croatian independence. Praying for this team in a mosque is therefore a gesture heavy with ironies that Stanišić characteristically does not draw attention to. For Aleksandar, there is no contradiction, however, because of his mixed parentage that only becomes troublesome as the state is threatened. He is not the only Red Star fan for whom his team allegiance does not map seamlessly onto his ethnic identity. Before venturing into the forest on his potentially deadly mission during the soccer match, Meho, who is playing for the Territorial Defense, the Bosniak (Muslim) side, takes off his precious Red Star Belgrade shirt, and entrusts it to Marko on the other side. When asked by Marko how he, a Bosniak, can support a Serbian team, Meho reacts with an expression of unswerving loyalty that Nick Hornby himself would recognize: “I don't care where the team I support comes from, the lads are only playing soccer” (214). When Meho is shot, his precious Red Star shirt, with all that it symbolizes of potential unity across and beyond the newly imposed ethnic boundaries, and of the ability of sport to rise above nationalism, is also destroyed.

But Aleksandar is not like the old men he meets in Sarajevo years later, who mourn the good times when the Yugoslav team was great — 1962 in Chile — and bemoan the loss of a national side: “if we were still all one country . . . we'd be unbeatable today” (203). Even though, as his friend Kiko puts it in one of the most telling sporting metaphors, the whole country was relegated when war threatened (225), Aleksandar, with the adaptability of youth, moves on. He develops a new team loyalty in Germany, to Schalke 04. He continues to fish, and spends his time playing Sensible Soccer on his friend's PC. Meanwhile, his mother in the United States takes up ice-skating and looks forward to attending an American football game. While the old men remembering 1962 see only the negative



—“Sixty-two in Chile . . . the country was doing all right, and when a country is doing all right sport doesn’t do badly either. Now it’s like this: shit here, shit there” (203) — Aleksandar is not struck in the past. But interestingly, his national affiliation, it seems, does not transfer to Germany. Rejecting the glib discourse of German multiculturalism that suggests that he is well-integrated, he notes that he backs five national teams. He doesn’t name them — he leaves this comment hanging — but presumably they are Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia. Yugoslavia may have disappeared as a state, but that is not the end of its story.

### Endless Reinvention: Intertexts

Sporting references thus contribute continuity and resonance to the fractured narrative and to Aleksandar’s continuously renegotiated identity; so too does the use of intertextuality. Stanišić draws on at least three intertexts in order to deepen and enhance his search for the meaning of the events in Višegrad. While Aleksandar does not witness the killing, the burning of houses, the carting off of women to rape camps, and the throwing of bodies into the river from the town’s famous bridge, his friend Zoran, who stays behind, does. In a ranting but lyrical phone call to Aleksandar, he expresses his despair at the breakdown of society and his hatred of the soldiers responsible for the atrocities and of Aleksandar for leaving. His reference to Paul Celan’s famous Holocaust poem “Todesfuge” (Death Fugue), “I like to read. Death is a German champion and a Bosnian outright world champion” (124),<sup>21</sup> serves as a stark reminder that genocide, which post-Holocaust Europeans tend complacently to believe occurs only in such far off places as Rwanda, can still occur here. How that can be is the central question that the adult Aleksandar investigates in the second half of the novel. His quest is indicated in the poem he cites by the Bosnian poet Mak Dizdar:

Who is that, what is that? Forgive me!  
is it,  
Where does it come from,  
Where is it going,  
This country  
Of Bosnia?  
Tell me! (198)

The question posed here of the history and future of Bosnia is answered progressively through references to a third, and the primary intertext, Ivo Andrić’s Nobel-Prize-winning novel, *The Bridge over the Drina* (1945). Andrić (1892–1975), a Croatian Catholic by birth, who was imprisoned

by the Austrians during the First World War and later worked as a civil servant and ambassador for Yugoslavia, is revered by Bosnians of all ethnic groups. His novel chronicles the history of Višegrad through its famous bridge, from its building in the sixteenth century by an Ottoman vizier to the First World War. It is a story of empires and of the peoples subject to them: the bridge was built as a statement of Ottoman power but becomes a symbol of timeless endurance when the Ottoman empire declines and retreats, to be replaced by the Austrian empire. The different peoples of the town enjoy varying fortunes depending on the macro-political situation over the centuries.

Stanišić’s novel functions as a homage to and conclusion of Andrić’s, though it is quite different in tone and scope. Andrić’s tone is wise and knowing, his perspective sovereign and detached. The events he depicts all occur in Višegrad, where the bridge and the townspeople continue to endure even when the wider world is engaged in the “war to end all wars.” Stanišić’s fractured aesthetic and chaotic structure reflect the bewilderingment of the victim of historical violence rather than the detachment of the bystander; his protagonist builds a new life in a global arena, returning to find the town and Bosnia itself radically transformed.

The intertextual references work on a number of levels. First, certain incidents and images, often connected to the bridge, act as literary echoes to any reader familiar with the iconic Bosnian novel, suggesting continuity across the ages. These include the sight of women washing blood from the bridge after acts of violence, the trepidation about whether the bridge will survive the fighting (it always does), accidental drowning in the river, suicide by drowning, and the grisly and bestial tops of murder by skewering (246).<sup>22</sup> Secondly, Andrić is metonymically present in the novel in the fact that his statue in the town is destroyed by the Serbian forces. The novel’s reproduction of this violent historical event unequivocally signifies rupture, the impossibility of the vision of an enduring, ethnically diverse Bosnia and a federal Yugoslavia that Andrić espoused and promoted in his life and works. The references to the eponymous gramophone bear this out, too: for Andrić, the gramophone signifies modernity, cosmopolitanism, and the power of art in the last uneasy years before the outbreak of the First World War: “Everywhere the gramophone ground and churned out Turkish marches, Serbian patriotic songs or arias from Viennese operettas, according to the tastes of the guests for whom it played. For men would no longer go where there was neither noise, glitter nor movement” (226). For Stanišić, it signifies violence and violation: in the cellar, a Serb soldier repairs an old-fashioned gramophone he has found by kicking it. But in the third and most powerful use of intertextuality, Stanišić’s postmodern aesthetic incorporates some of Andrić’s modernist insights into the catastrophic effect of macro-political events on the relations between — and on the psyches of — those subject to them. Thus, when the mood



turns sour in Stanišić's toilet party, the reader is reminded of the sudden intrusion of communal violence in *The Bridge over the Drina* where, retreating before the advancing Austrians, the Muslim population takes revenge on one of their number who has been outspoken in pointing out the futility of resistance by nailing his ear to the ground: "So in a few moments there took place what in any one of those moments would have seemed impossible and incredible" (120). And when Aleksandar's father rails against the Dayton Accord for carving up Bosnia, he is like Andrić's townspeople in 1913, looking at a map showing the future partition of the Balkan Peninsula, "They looked at the paper and saw nothing in those curving lines, but they knew and understood everything, for their geography was in their blood and they felt biologically their picture of the world" (229).

Stanišić's novel echoes many of the themes of this volume: like Bronsky, he writes of assertive young identities within an increasingly global culture; like Berg, he questions what it means to be German; like Vertib, he writes of migration with a surprising lightness of touch. Like many of the authors represented here, he employs a self-conscious playfulness and postmodern polyphony, unashamedly offering publishers the "new readability" they seek after decades of introspective and aesthetically challenging German fiction. Most interesting is the comparison with Mora's *Alle Tage*. Both novels express the sense of displacement and loss arising from the breakup of Yugoslavia, and stretch the novel form in order to adequately represent the effects of the shock of war. Biendarra's argument that Mora refuses to celebrate the possible liberatory effects of diaspora that are glibly championed by some critics partially holds true for Stanišić as well. For what is remarkable in Stanišić's text is the immutability of the sense of loss and of the brute fact of nationalism at the heart of Bosnia past and present. Nevertheless, the differences are striking, for while Mora's text is deliberately generalized, and her protagonist remains traumatized, set apart from his new surroundings, able to speak but not to communicate, Aleksandar proactively seeks ways to convey the specificity of his experience and of those around him, with the result that he does not remain isolated between cultures but evolves along with them.

According to his Nobel citation, Andrić asked "what forces . . . act to fashion a people and a nation";<sup>23</sup> so, too, in *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, does Stanišić. But while Andrić's epic novel is built around the solidity of the bridge and highlights the impotence of individuals to influence their fate in the age of nation-states, Stanišić's postmodern novel, even as it charts the death of Yugoslavia, takes its cue from the fluidity of the river itself that allows for endless reinvention. Resisting Andrić's fatalism and Mora's pessimism, Stanišić finds a way to write about sad things, positively.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: OUP, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Boris Previšić, "Poetik der Marginalität: Balkan Turn gefällig?", in *Von der nationalen zur internationalen Literatur: Transkulturelle deutschsprachige Literatur und Kultur im Zeitalter globaler Migration*, ed. Helmut Schmitz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 189–203.

<sup>3</sup> Donna Scaman, "War and Bigotry from a Child's Eye View," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 2008, articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/15/books/bk-scaman15 (accessed 31 March 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Josh Lacey, "Rage among the Ruins," *The Guardian*, 5 May 2008. Links to further reviews can be found on Stanišić's personal website, [www.kuenstlich.de/rezensionen.html](http://www.kuenstlich.de/rezensionen.html) (accessed 31 March 2010).

<sup>5</sup> See Michaela Bürger-Kofits, ed., *Eine Sprache — viele Horizonte: Die Osterweiterung der deutschsprachigen Literatur: Porträts einer neuen europäischen Generation* (Vienna: Praesens 2009), and Brigid Haines, "The Eastern Turn in Contemporary German, Swiss and Austrian Literature," *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 16, no. 2 (2008): 135–49.

<sup>6</sup> Saša Stanišić, "Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany," [wordswithoutborders.org/article/three-myths-of-immigrant-writing-a-view-from-germany/](http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/three-myths-of-immigrant-writing-a-view-from-germany/) (accessed 31 March 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Misha Glenn, *The Fall of Yugoslavia. The Third Balkan War* (London: Penguin, 1992), 162.

<sup>8</sup> Ed Vulliamy and Nerna Jelacic, "The Warlord of Visegrad," *The Guardian*, 11 August 2005, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/aug/11/warcrimes.features](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/aug/11/warcrimes.features), 11 (accessed 31 March 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia. A Short History* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 252.

<sup>10</sup> Saša is a diminutive form for Aleksandar, showing the closeness of author and protagonist.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Morer, "Ohne Kunstblatt," [www.falter.at/web/shop/detail.php?id=6598](http://www.falter.at/web/shop/detail.php?id=6598) (accessed 31 March 2010).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Iris Radisch, "Der Krieg trägt Kirtelschürze," *Die Zeit*, 5 October 2006, [www.zeit.de/2006/41/L-Stanisic](http://www.zeit.de/2006/41/L-Stanisic), and Sam Munson, "The Naive Fiction of Saša Stanišić," *The New York Sun*, 23 April 2008, [www.nysun.com/arts/naive-fiction-of-saa-stanii-263/75158/](http://www.nysun.com/arts/naive-fiction-of-saa-stanii-263/75158/) (both accessed 31 March 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Saša Stanišić, *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, translated by Anthea Bell (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008). Quotations are taken from the English translation unless otherwise indicated. (Editor's note: The term "football" has been replaced throughout with "soccer," as is the case also with the American version of Bell's translation published by Grove Press.)

<sup>14</sup> The last key sentence, which is unaccountably missing from Bell's translation, is my translation.