

Dario Harjaček

Sanjica Lacković (a novel in fourteen stories)

Translated from Croatian by Andrea Rožić

*They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.*

*But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sappy-stern
And half at one another's throats.*

*Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.*

Philip Larkin, "This Be the Verse"

PART ONE

Story number one

(In which Petar-Krešimir Vitez (P.) narrates his personal sexual revolution in the town of Baroque, flowers and music, during the historical period of the creation of the independent state of Croatia (1990 – 1993))

1990

They've formed a circle. They have us pressed together like two dogs in a fight. One dog is bearing its teeth. The other one is me.

- Deck the priest! C'mon!

- Hey, priest, will you hear his confession? (laughter)

- Sprinkle him! With sperm! (laughter)

They also call me Pastor.

- P.'s gonna be a priest. He said so himself! Blessed be Jesus and Mary!

Blessed be Jesus and Mary!

In the commotion, my fist hits the head of the boy lunging at me. A few moments later, a droplet of blood is starts trickling down his chin. He's changed his mind. Wants to run away. Even starts crying. But rage makes me lunge at him now. The Pastor's lost it! I knock him to the ground and kick him in the stomach. I bang his head against the asphalt. I pound. And pound. The boy is in tears. He's screaming. The others are laughing.

The grown-ups arrive. They're yelling, trying to pull me off him.

- He started it! He started it! - I say over and over. A panic washes over me.
I'm the centre of attention.

Some older boys arrive on bicycles and ask what happened. They spend their days racing down the streets and tearing down the posters of the League of Communists, The Party of Democratic Change from the advertising columns, poster boards and walls.

The word HONEST is written across the posters.

I take down the posters, too. They say the boy whose last name is Šmic tore down thirty of them in one day. There are loads of them. We can't tear down as many as they can put up.

* * *

The real pastor hands out blows quite often as well. He dishes out slaps, pulls you by the ears. Once, drawing back the curtains of the stage at the far end of the catechism classroom, Šmic did a silly role-play while we were waiting for the class to begin. He was making us laugh. He didn't see the pastor come in. The pastor is listening:

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With a tuft of hair, (you know where),
And three pretty holes in a row.

Šmic erects an umbrella like a big, hard penis. Seeing the pastor, he suddenly clams up. He is embarrassed and blushing. The pastor walks over to him. He smacks him. Not out of his mind like me. His fist strikes with moderation, more meaningfully, educationally. He dictates the Catechism of the Catholic Church for the duration of the class. He always reads very fast. Now, probably on purpose, too, to get back at all of us. Our carefree susceptibility to

sin irritates him. I think they're all evil, too, so I enjoy his power. I am on his side. At the end of the class my arm hurts. I look at my notebook and can't make out what I've written. Luckily, I have a printed copy of the *Catechism* at home. I take notes because I don't want to show off about us having the book at home. "The Pastor must know all of this by heart," is what they'd say if they saw I wasn't writing while they're toiling away. In a few months we're receiving the sacrament of the Holy Confirmation. The confirmands always sit in the first rows at church during mass so the pastor can count them. Otherwise, many of them would lie they'd been. And they hadn't. The girls on the left side, the boys on the right. When I pray, I reverently look at the ceiling. To the skies.

At school, the class mistress tells me to go see comrade school counsellor.

- Why are you fighting? Is that nice?

I cry. I defend myself.

- I never fight! Ever! Others get into fights! Somebody always wants to hit me.

The poor sod I beat up is at least ten inches shorter than me. He's in fifth form. I'm in the seventh. He's tiny, scrawny and feisty. A scrappy little gamecock. Today he owns an auto exhaust repair shop he took over from his father. I ran into him once. I reminded him of the incident from childhood. I told him I often thought about what had happened and that, if they hadn't pulled me off from him, maybe I would've killed him. Or, at least I wouldn't have stopped hitting him until I thought he was dead. I don't know what had come over me. I'd completely lost it. I told him that at that moment I thought I had every right to kill him. That he deserved to die. He just lets out a hollow laugh. Maybe he doesn't even remember any more. It was just before the war. After I beat him up, the satisfaction was short-lived. A big emptiness came over me.

When I came home from school, my father beat me on the bum with a slipper. The boy's mother was at our house. She said his entire body was covered in bruises. His head was all scratched up. To create a stronger impression, she mentioned the heart arrhythmia the child suffered from.

- They were running after me! They were the ones who didn't want to let me go until I fought him! They grabbed me when I tried to get away! He was charging at me!

Father says: "If you're being picked on, why didn't you tell me? Or Višeslav?" That's my brother. The eldest one.

I was afraid. That's what I told him. But I thought: *I was ashamed*. I was ashamed of my family. I was ashamed of how they dress. I had a feeling that was the reason they make fun of us.

Držislav, my other brother, used stickers to cover up the red stars on the licence plates on our van, which has been sitting motionless in our yard for two years.

The whole town is eagerly awaiting a great renaissance. You can feel it. There'll be no more communism! We're Croats now! Just as we've always been! They say my father is a "great Croat".

* * *

I didn't mention the fight in my next Holy Confession. I was afraid to confess it. Besides, I'm convinced of my innocence. They forced me. Into sin. But at the same time, I feel that I've betrayed Jesus. Remorse doesn't let up for days. That's what life in sin is like.

* * *

At school, the brave ones, or those with slightly more nerve, feel up the girls' breasts and bums; during recess and before class, they shove their hands between the girls' thighs and squeeze them, while the girls wriggle like fish out

of water. This is called copping a feel. By refusing to do it, I show respect for the girls. I see this as my only chance. They all call me a nerd.

We often ride our bikes to the river.

- Is it true that your family pray before eating? – the girls ask.

- Only my older sister. The others just cross themselves.

They look at me like I'm part of some secret cult. Nobody ever prays before a meal at their house. Only one girl mentions that her father puts his right palm over the heart when the anthem is playing. I'm in love with her. At night, I imagine I'm kissing her breasts on the river bank. After swimming, I take off her wet one-piece bathing suit. It feels like being reborn. I rub my hard penis against the mattress. I want to keep the image in front of my eyes forever. I once saw my sister's naked breasts as I was passing through her room. Small, conical, proportional to her lean body. She screamed and put a wrinkled t-shirt over her chest with one hand. Since then I haven't had any peace. The thought of touching them, squeezing them, the thought of seeing them again kept me awake at night. I get a strong urge to peep through the keyhole when she goes to the bathroom.

1991

Father reminds us that Laci has invited all of us to the Bishop's Ordinariate for his first lecture which is part of the programme for promoting premarital purity. Father just called it "that lecture Laci's asked us to come to." I ask him what it's going to be about. "It's some sort of gathering for young people," he replies.

Laci is a final year violin student. His right hand is dedicated only to his bow, some people joke. Laci's father is one of the initiators of conservative political thought in our town, which they call the town of baroque, flowers and

music. Laci's father has six children. He is a renowned surgeon, politician, benefactor, and conductor of the cathedral choir. His eldest son continues to strengthen the foundations of traditional life. As in our family, most of their children are musicians.

We must celebrate God and respect our body! Laci is standing with a piece of chalk in his hand, presenting the programme that has been yielding excellent results in America for many years. He has completed an extensive seminar taught in German. The programme is called *Teen star*. It is currently spreading through Italy as well. Laci is talking about respect, faith, persistence. He seems at ease. His appearance and language signal he belongs to the younger population. He speaks about the seductiveness of the world, about the media, he speaks about the pressures of society, about pornography. The girl's chastity is her sanctity. The greatest bliss is marriage.

Father is sitting in the last row. My two sisters and I are sitting together with our catechism group "The Burning Bush." After each of Laci's statements, I glance over to my father. His face reveals nothing. Laci announces he is going to organize workshops. He invites us to come and bring our friends.

I look at this self-confident persona. There are white lines of dry saliva in the corners of his mouth. I find it funny that he made a calculated call to unbutton the top button of his shirt.

Afterwards I ask my father what he thought of the lecture. "Well, you see that in Italy and in America this is...," my father replies.

Who I am among all of them? I who am rotten. I who am sinful. I. I. I. To me, even the burning bush is a fervid female vagina. I masturbate in bed. The sheets are filled with dried up stains. My mother just flatly whispers, who's going to wash all this out!

I've given up on my ambition to become a priest. I've even given up on the idea that I believe in the existence of God. I lived without God for a long, long time. Because they convinced me that if God existed, it could only be their God - the God of the washed out, the God of those who judge, the God of wooden

saints, God whose word is shaped through Laci's mouth with dried saliva on the edges. A pathetic kind of God.

Not belonging comes as a relief. Pleasure. Discovery.

1992

On the upper floor of the big baroque corner house (confiscated at the end of World War II and whose restitution we were expecting in vain, as if it was a matter of days, with the arrival of the new government) there was a bookcase in our flat which my father used to call the library. This bookcase, this library, was right next to my bed. In each book, he put a stamp on the page of the year of his birth which said: Library of Trpimir Vitez. I became a passionate reader. The mysterious pleasure of reading. I read anything I get my hands on. I read and read. And wank off. I read and wank off.

I shared the room with my brother Tomislav. But he was in the war back then. He was barely eighteen when he left.

My father starts taking out some books from our library and burning them in the furnace. The books burn, together with everything written inside, while I pull out some selected plays by Beckett and Brecht from the heap. Bertold Brecht, it said on the cover in big letters. Semjuel Beket.

- Burning books. Way to go, dad!

- What do we need this for? Who's gonna read this?

- I am! I'm going to read it, you Führer!

I grab a pile of books, carry them out of the room indignantly and throw them on my bed.

- What are you going to do now? Send me to a concentration camp?

He's saying I should be ashamed, so I ask him how come these same books never bothered him before.

- Shame on you if you don't know who you are and if you don't know who beat your grandfather to death like a dog!

- Maybe this grandfather had it coming if he was such an idiot to think burning books was the way to go.

At that moment, my father comes into my room and furiously pounds me on the head for some time with an open fist. I didn't say a single word to him for a full year. He just ignored it. I agonized over the fact that, despite our differences of opinion, he couldn't devote some time to me, acknowledge my point of view, understand my life. I wanted him to hate me. But to him, that was too immature.

By that time, he had already started actively visiting the pits. He was the secretary of the Society for the marking of burial grounds of the victims of communism. He organised bus rides for group visits to execution sites and collected voluntary contributions to put up memorial plaques.

"How is it possible that a grown man doesn't even have the dignity to address his son after he beats him senseless?" I'm talking to my mom who is peeling an apple while she is waiting for her TV show to start.

- Ah, you and those books of yours! Don't you have enough books over there? Mum never made eye contact when she was speaking to you.

Father brought home flour, cooking oil, rice and hygiene products from the Caritas office. That was the year we got our social welfare card. My younger sister started crying hysterically when she saw this testament to our misery on the table. For two days, no one could make her come to her senses.

1993

Our teacher, Sanjica Lacković used to say she believed in ghosts. She said the dead were among us, to be more exact. She had recently returned to our town.

She taught Croatian language. There were rumours going round that she was a lesbian, which were crowned by the scandal for which she was expelled from the school three years later for having a dalliance with one of the female students. We gathered on Friday nights, at the so-called Book Club, in the basement of our grammar school. "The purpose of books is to help you realise that language can set you free, that the limitations you see around you don't exist in it. That is the path to becoming the people of the spirit. And the people of the spirit are happy people." That's what she used to say. As lovely sequences of well-formulated sentences came out floating on her breath, the cigarette between her fingers was like a stick in the hands of a skilful conductor. I'm seventeen. Sanjica Lacković has changed my life. In her presence I feel exalted, important, elated. I started writing right around that time. I wrote a love poem for a girl who showed an obvious interest in me. I wanted Sanjica to read it first. She said she'd known I could write brilliantly. She commended me. She praised my "maturity." Then I gave the poem to my future girlfriend, who's now my wife, my one and only...

Sanjica Lacković often mentioned ghosts. We spent weeks combing through Hamlet. The ghost of Hamlet's father. That was her favourite topic.

- Do you believe in the possibility of the dead speaking to us?

- That's nonsense! - I jumped right on it. I found anything otherworldly revolting because it reminded me of the church.

- And what does the ghost of Hamlet's father want?

- He wants revenge.

- So what kind of ghost is he, then? Is he an angel or a demon? Can an angel order a revenge killing?

The question is, does he seek divine or human justice. Under divine justice we assume forgiveness, absolution, love... - speaks the failed seminarian in me. - The one who asks you to kill cannot be on the side of truth. For example, my father is in the same situation. His father disappeared during the war. He was fleeing towards Austria. In the end, he was killed. Probably at Bleiberg. Lately, my father has dedicated his life to exposing to the world the brutal murder of his father. He does this on a daily basis, in such a way it's now become his lifestyle.

His hobby. He's become a hate-mongering machine. He's after some grand, fateful justice. He's after revenge. On the other hand, my father is Catholic, a believer. Only for him, there is no real solace in faith. On the contrary, this church is encouraging him to persecute the persecutors, to spread his hatred. That's why I think the church is deeply hypocritical. That my father is a hypocrite. Except he doesn't see any contradiction in what he's doing. Which is why we fight a lot.

- Does that mean that usurpers should be allowed to rule? Does that mean killers can get off scot-free?

- No, I just think that the ghost of Hamlet's father, who introduces the idea of the crime, might not even exist. Maybe he is just the personification of the prejudice which wants to keep the world in an old, petrified state by force. I know all about the charisma of a father spirit. That's why I think conclusions about justice and condemnation should be made confident that we are not being guided by the spirit of a vengeful father.

- I wish you all the luck in finding such determination in life - says Sanjica Lacković laughing. - This ghost appears where we least expect it - she added.

* * *

My father is the only man in his office. It's actually a barrack in the middle of a big yard with dirty lorries parked all around. Filling in dispatch notes, bonds and orders, that's what my father does. He is a bit stiff, but pleasant. The women respect him, he makes them feel as though they've secured a respectable job in life after all. They freeze up when he arrives at the office. They start to correct their speech to a moderate version of the standard language.

- He's from a noble family. They say he even has a portrait of his great-grandfather up on the wall at home. The entire family tree. He studies it.

The ladies think that, because he lives in a mansion, my father is a person of standing in the community, and that, because of this, he knows all the other people of similar standing. When they go to see a doctor, they mention the doctor's surname in front of my father, as if it is implied my father knows him well – not only him but the doctor's entire family tree. When they receive an official letter in the post they can't understand, they take it to my father to explain it to them. When they see something written in a foreign language, they bring it to my father to translate it for them, because, of course, it's understood he speaks all the foreign languages. Singers, though ... he doesn't know much about singers. He listens to that, what would you call it... what do you call it... serious music.

My father is also a college dropout. He spent his youth in frivolous pursuits. He was thirty by the time he met my mom. She was a shy provincial girl of nineteen, the daughter of a butcher shop owner. She was fascinated by my father's politeness. Two months later, they were married.

During the day, my father wears two ties: one for the office, that is, for the barrack in which he fills out dispatch notes, bonds and orders. His mode of transportation is the bicycle. He also carries a leather briefcase. In it, there is always some sort of collection of scientific papers on the persecution of the Croatian people: *The Croatian Herald*, *The Bleiberg Almanac*... his pastime for the long hours spent not working at work. This impresses his female colleagues. He likes history. For his retirement, they collected the money to buy him a beautifully framed drawing depicting the amorphous body of Christ, nailed, in the manner of a piece of cloth, to the Croatian coat of arms. In the background, there is a relief of Croatia before the war. My father put the picture in the dining room, right next to the portrait of Ban Jelačić on a box of candies.

When he comes home, my father puts on his other tie, which he wears at home – a croquet, brown, thin, sporty one. Mom withdraws to the bedroom at exactly 8 o'clock every night, right after the weather forecast. She puts on a white cardigan over her nightgown, also croquet and made specially for reading in bed. She likes romance novels. Once she is nestled in the old-fashioned, black bed, under

which she and father still keep their chamber pots, she takes a book and enters the secular worlds of animated passion and romance. A resurrected Christ, cloaked in a red cape watches her mildly, one hand pointing to his heart, which, entwined with barbed wire, burns in eternal flame. The crucifix hanging over the door is three feet tall. It depicts Jesus in the moment of his greatest suffering. The blood is pouring profusely from his wounds. My mother doesn't even notice the crucifix, but I do. When I see her in bed, rubbing cream onto her skinny face and arthritic hands, it seems as though she's embalming herself. The seven of us were conceived in that room.

My older sister complains about the gazunders under the bed every day. But who'd walk to the toilet down that long, cold corridor at night!

There is a trundle bed under their feet where my youngest brother sleeps. His music stand is next to the bed. This is where he practices his trombone.

Father says that the instruments are guaranteed bread and butter for us. I was given the clarinet. When I practice, I imagine the clarinet is a bread.

Downstairs from us is a bakery shop. Every morning father buys four loaves of bread there. *Jesus is the bread of life. Whoever comes to him will never go hungry. To live, one needs Jesus and music.*

Story number two

(In which we gradually move from Petar-Krešimir Vitez to the outskirts of the town of baroque, music and flowers, where, in her diary, Sanjica Lacković introduces us to the importance of family pig farming during the thirty years of the existence of the settlement behind the textile factory.)

(From the diary of Petar-Krešimir Vitez)

21st March 1994 squeezing

In keeping with the fashion of the times, our town took a breath of fresh air around the middle of the nineteenth century. By pulling down the ramparts around its overflowing centre, the city was given space for new growth. However, everything that lived inside the walls, remained huddled together unprotected in its place, not appreciating the idea of “comingling” with the outside world. The idea of prestige if one lived within the town’s core existed even then. I think that, for people like us, it was precisely in that moment that time stopped. So, even today, it is approximately the year 1850. That is the year my great-grandfather Gjuro bought the palace on Trg slobode from the Zagreb ecclesiastical chapter, after achieving great success at the Imperial fair in Vienna, where even the Emperor Franz Joseph himself expressed praise for the quality of his leather products. The news of this event is permanently recorded in the magazine *Vienac*. The framed newspaper clipping hangs in the foyer of our flat, right next to the photograph of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother. He is standing, his hair slicked back, wearing a black suit, while our corpulent great-grandmother is sitting down dressed in a fur coat. In the bottom right-hand corner there is a stamp from a Viennese photographic studio.

Retro-fetishism, that’s what Sanjica Lacković called our current mind-set in one of our book club meetings. While discussing Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* we talk about the seeds of fascism in the womb of small-town everyday life. I mentioned my father’s book burning which took place two years before. Everybody was deeply appalled, and I was proud to have created such a strong impression.

Going to book club means I don’t go to “The Burning Bush” meetings any more. Father mentions he ran into sister Cecilija, who is worried about my absence. I tell him that this is something school-related and that I’m getting extra credit for enrolment in university. This is a lie. But the lie proves effective. We

drop the subject. Father doesn't even know that I've stopped going to mass on Sundays. I don't have the strength to brag about it to him. This would deeply shock all of them and would put me in the doghouse. I still think a lot about sin. The Catholic religion pushes me away, partly because of a constant sense of guilt. "God's eye sees everything, you can't hide a thing from him," that's a poem my mom taught me as a kid when I asked her why there was a triangle with a big eye in the middle, chiselled above our front door. "That is the eye of God and the triangle is a keyhole through which God watches us from the sky." As a child, I was afraid of the idea of our house being a surveillance point of God's omnipresence. Even today, when I look out the window, I get the feeling that I'm seeing things from God's perspective.

Front row seats to God. The church is across the street from our house is. There is a wide bicycle stand in front of the church.

Sanjica Lacković parks her bicycle there on her way to class. Sanjica Lacković lives behind the big textile factory. Everything about Sanjica Lacković makes me curious. Sanjica Lacković rides an old, green Pony. It's the so-called mini Pony. The bicycle is creaky, its seat is falling apart, the colour worn out. Is that why she leaves her bicycle half a mile from the school? Could it be that vanity prevents her from showing up in front of the students on this wreck? Or is it that invisible membrane, torn down a hundred and fifty years ago, which stood exactly where the bike stand is today, which makes her mark her entrance into Town, when she arrives from the outskirts surrounded by fields and meadows. Indeed, seeing her tie a chain around her shabby bicycle, I have a feeling this chain splits her person in half: the one belonging to the fringe, and the one belonging to the centre. The one which belongs to the edge possesses a certain mysterious untouchability for me. I am slightly wary of knowing that part of her life. I have a feeling this would spoil the picture of perfection this, for me vitally important, mysterious character embodies. I could never sit on her bicycle. Even if she didn't tie it with a chain across from my house. Through the window, I like to check if the bicycle is there. As long as it's there, I feel the town is not completely abandoned to the despotism of the book burners.

A friend from class lives right next door to her, behind the textile factory. They are real weirdos, he says with the air of a privileged insider. They keep to themselves. You can often hear terrible rows coming from their house. As soon as they built it, somebody committed suicide there. And there was another horrible story connected to them, too. Her cousin and aunt lived there for a while. The aunt had married some long-haul driver, only to have her daughter run off with her step-dad – the driver. A few years after the scandal, when the cousin wanted to leave him, he killed her and then himself in the woods somewhere. Sanjica's old man is a drunkard and mostly lives in the country. In the old house where he was born. Sanjica lives with her mom and her brother's family. The brother's got weak nerves since he got back from the war. He runs away from home and he's gone for several days. He often sleeps in a tent by the river. Goes fishing. It calms him down. And she's all weird, too. She's forty but acts like she's twenty. Everyone says she's a lesbian. Her sister-in-law tells horrible stories about her to the neighbours. She mostly criticizes her for being lazy. She says that all she does is read, all day long.

All she does is read.

* * *

(Sanjica Lacković: "The Inner Circle", a volume of diary entries)

21st March 1994

I'm going to repurpose the pigsty. My imagination burns brighter as I ride into town. I usually leave the bicycle at a fair distance from school. I feel myself differently as I take in

the beauty of the town with each step. It is a strange beauty. Provincial, but lovely. It produces a lightness, it soothes me. Every one of those steps is important to me.

I've already planned out the whole thing, I say to the Old lady when we're lying in bed at night. It won't take much work. A part of the wall will have to be torn down for the window and it just needs some plastering and painting. The old man can fix up the installations. It won't cost them a penny. I'll take out a loan and pay for everything myself. I already know how I'd fix it up, too. Simple, minimalist. A bookcase on one side, and a bed on the other. And then an armchair and a lamp. For reading. We can't live crammed like this any longer.

My brother's wife says I should leave the pigsty be. Things as they are, we might have to go back to feeding pigs. If we're going to eat. She is from the country. Domestic animals offer her sentimental comfort, I suppose. Make her feel more at home. In the country. Ana is a tall, strong woman, petty, of little words. People scare her. Which is why she makes up something nasty for everyone.

I feel the same anger, the same helplessness, I felt when I was fifteen. I don't want pigs in my yard! This is a town! Don't you people understand that? No-one keeps pigs and chickens anymore! No-one! Back then, when I was fifteen, my late grandmother Marica wouldn't hear of it. "Yes, we'll buy meat and still throw away the food that's left over!" She was the one who poured the swill from a plastic bucket into a concrete trough for the pigs every day. "Eh, if I'd got a job back then, when we moved here, at least as a cleaning lady... somewhere... I'd have my own pension now, this way – diddly-squat! They've all gone off to work. And who'd look after you lot if I'd had to work, too? That's what I get! Not a penny to my name!"

23rd March 1994

Grandma Marica. She wore button-down floral dresses. Strange men often came to see her. She pours them brandy into a small glass. There is a portrait of Marshal Tito in uniform in the hallway above the kitchen door. A sticker on the door depicts baby Jesus lying in the crèche. Underneath it, the letters M+G+B, written in chalk. A calendar with the photograph of the latest-model coach hangs on the kitchen wall. The Coach-transport Cooperative wishes

you a happy and successful 1961. Grandma Marica is fascinated by coach drivers. They are real gentlemen! That's what grandma Marica thinks, fascinated by their white shirts, ties and blue knitted waistcoats. They smell of cologne and they're freshly shaved. She often takes me to the coach station. We ride around in circles on the front seat. Grandma Marica talks to the driver who gave us the calendar. After the ride, I drink a peach juice at the station café. Grandma Marica goes for a short walk with the driver. I sit in the corner frightened, waiting for her. On our way home, she strictly forbids me to tell anyone where we've been.

If grandma Marica could give me her blessing, she'd want me to have my own job and a driver for a husband.

24th March 1994

When grandad brought home his wages, grandma Marica would put the bundle of bills under the ironed, neatly folded sheets on the upper shelf of the wardrobe right away. She would secretly give each of us one bill.

Grandad is black. His skin was brightly red-brown in colour. In the summer, it would peel off in layers, revealing patches of fresh red-violet skin. Mostly on the bald patch on the top of his head. He was a road mender. He would get up at dawn and spend the entire day scattering hot asphalt on the road until late at night. Every night he would come home cycling down a dirt path across the meadow. When he carries the bicycle down to the cellar, grandad often falls down the stairs because he's drunk. He carries a bullrush bag full of plastic bags of milk. The road menders have to drink it. It neutralises the asphalt fumes. My grandad doesn't drink the milk. Grandma Marica says: "You'd even drink white spirit if you could. But grandad keeps the milk for us. The milk is sour when grandad brings it home because it's been in the sun all day. That's why we mostly can't drink it, so grandma Marica makes cheese out of it. There are cheeses dripping from gauzes in the pantry.

The neighbour who reads the future from coffee dregs with grandma Marica (every day except on Tuesdays – the future cannot be read on a Tuesday) brags how her husband has

never forgotten foreplay. To that grandma Marica says: "Ha, if this one would!" She has other nice words for him too: old and mouldy. The neighbour's husband works in an office. He rarely drinks. When he does have a few drinks with his friends, he likes to sing songs, which, for our taste, pretty refined, parlour songs. Grandma Marica envies her neighbour on her husband.

25th March 1994

Ana says I shouldn't touch the pigsty. Since she lost her job at the shoe factory, she makes paper bags at home. Twenty pence per bag. The house is full of multi-coloured paper. And stinks of glue. The Old lady helps her. The Old lady doesn't take any money for it, so she doesn't particularly count her bags. It's for the kids. Buy them something nice. For school. The Old lady lost her job, too; technological redundancy at the textile factory. They're both fast and skilful – years of working on the machines.

After I come home from class, I don't glue the bags and Ana hates me for it. "You could make nice money, too, you know!" Ana says condescendingly. When I'm not there she calls me madam. Even milady sometimes. When I'm at home she doesn't call me anything. She seldom speaks to me. Not because she's upset, but because we don't have anything to say to each other. At least not like this, insincerely, the only way we know how to talk.

What pig? What pig? Don't we also get a say in this?

Every time the pigsty renovation is mentioned in front of Ana, she rolls her eyes and paces nervously up and down.

The fear of the unknown. What fear!

28th March 1994

At the house, the TV is always on. Ever since the war, we're convinced that they're going to announce something important. Back then, we were anxious to see if they would mention "the

Pakrac front." Dražen spent almost two years there. We would sit at the kitchen table keeping warm, looking at the small black and white TV. There is a wooden stove in the kitchen.

Dražen is now retired with the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. Being deprived of work – what a terrible situation for a man of forty-seven! "Cows, you fucking cows, fuck the hell off!" he yells, not at the animals outside, but at us, the women. He is the only man in the house. When he came home from the war, he was so disgusted by our tiptoeing that he would yell at us for no reason at all. Sometimes for things that happened years – even decades – before. Late at night, when everyone was already in bed, he liked to turn the TV up full volume and watch patriotic music videos recorded on a videocassette. Ana, who wasn't impressed by his manifestations of madness, would come over to him and start shaking him saying: "Stop it! You want to go back to hospital?" She was taller and stronger than him. He would then rush out of the house furious, head to the pigsty to get his fishing rods and buckets and get in the car. From the house, we'd hear loud screeching as he pressed the gas pedal, wheels swerving on the dirt road.

"That's genes for you," the Old lady would murmur anxiously, thinking about my old man who rushed out of the house in anger the same way all his life, until he returned to his mom in the country permanently. Only my old man didn't go to war. He was simply angry. At everything. And with everybody.

30th March 1994

When I was fourteen, the pigsty haunted me. The pig's invisible grunting, magnified by its echoing in the quiet summer nights, filled me with an eerie feeling. It made me constantly restless. Nobody understood. Nobody wanted to understand it. One night, I decide to free the pig. But the pig doesn't want to go. It's just staring at me from the darkness with those beady, shiny eyes. Ever since then, pigs disgust me. I'd start trembling at the mere thought of a pig. Their moist snout disgusted me, their dirty, stocky body, the stench coming from that tiny brick shed in the yard made me sick. I decided I wouldn't eat pork anymore. The Old lady puts a bean stew with pork rinds on the table. I'm sick to my stomach. I say I don't want to eat. The old man, already visibly drunk when came home from work, first makes a sarcastic grimace and says: "You don't want to? You don't want to? From now on we'll order bird

tongue from Paris especially for you." He puts a few spoonfuls in his mouth, and then, shaking with rage, pulls me by the hair. He shoves my head into the plate. "Aristocrats! To hell with all of you!" he adds, as he puts on his black worker boots. Then, the same way his son would do it a quarter of a century later, he storms out of the yard in his car.

But I have my books. And that's enough for my life to be something else. That's enough for the pigsty and everyone around it to be just an insignificant periphery of my true reality.

1st April 1994

I lie in bed with the Old lady. I'm fantasizing about my pigsty. It's going to be my little oasis. What irony! The symbol of the world I fought against my entire childhood now becomes the space of my freedom. Yes, maybe I shouldn't have returned. But right now, I've got nothing other than nostalgia. My soul is drained. The only thing I have to offer is to be here. For someone like me. For some child who's had a pigsty built in the middle of their soul. I love my job! That's the reason I stay! That's the reason I live!

Is all of this just another attempt at releasing the pig from the pigsty?

I lie in bed with the Old lady and daydream about the pigsty.

5th April 1994

The dead have been restless lately. I hear them at night. But they seem to have fallen into a routine. Grandma Marica doesn't yell at grandpa all that much. They're lying in bed listening to the radio. I can't see them through the wall, but I still feel them across from Ana – her feet are right next to their heads, and the other way around. The lovers don't sigh so loudly and passionately any more. I can hear them, but only in between occasional giggles. They're hiding their shameless secret. There's only the cheerful sound of the accordion coming from the attic. Dragan almost never stops playing. I've got used to sleeping while he's

playing. You could even say he's made some progress. His technique has improved. His repertoire is soothing. And occasionally makes me laugh.

Dragan was my first dead man. I was seven when I first heard his voice. I can barely remember him while he was still alive. I was four years old when he killed himself. All I remember is some women walking frantically, there was panic and screams, someone pulling me away. Dragan was my aunt's husband. When we moved to town, my aunt, together with my cousin Slađana, very soon followed. Slađana is two years older than me. The two of them ran away from the village after Dragan kicked them out of the house, waving an axe and smashing all the doors in the process. He was a young man, but alcohol had already damaged him so much that he looked like a sick, battered old man. He worked at an abattoir. Before work, in the bar across the street, the men gulp down brandy and beer. That is how he would start the day. He came to us following my aunt and Slađana. He stayed at our house for a while. Grandma adored him because he played the accordion. And he was handsome too. After about a month Dragan realised my aunt didn't want to go back to the country. She had decided to separate from him. It was clear from the start that he would never stop drinking.

Dragan is kneeling in front of my aunt, crying. My old man and grandpa pull him up from the floor.

That same day, he tied a rope to a beam in the attic and hung himself.

** * **

The village doesn't have a mortuary at the cemetery. The dead usually stay lying in the house for a couple of days.

A small cottage with no façade.

An open coffin in a room filled with pillows. I'm holding grandma Marica's hand. At that moment, some women remove the cloth from the dead man's head. With his grey face and bloated and his purple neck, he looks like a wax doll of Dragan. Grandma quickly pulls me out of the room. The Old lady yells at her.

On the way to the cemetery, I sit on my old man's shoulders. He is unusually tender.

The fire department brass band marches in front of the coffin.

The drum is as deep as the abyss.

Behind the coffin, the mother screams in tears.

* * *

I hear woeful moans from the attic. I don't dare open the door. When I asked Slađana if she heard them, she would say she didn't hear anything.

The sounds become clearer. It's a man's voice and he's pleading: "Give me something to drink! Give me some booze! Give me some booze!" His pleas gradually turn into violent orders. I can't take the shouting anymore. "Give me something to drink!" I take a full demijohn of wine from the pantry, unlock the attic door, leave the wine on the first step and run.

As soon as I close the door, the voice falls silent. Shortly after, I hear the accordion. When the accordion stopped playing, there would be silence. Dragan, I assumed, must have fallen asleep.

"Who keeps carrying the demijohn up to the attic?" my old man asks. Nobody answers. But one time he caught me taking the big, wicker-wrapped bottle out from the pantry. He just ripped it out of my hands and said: "Do that one more time and I'll rip your head off, you little fuck!" he shakes me by the shoulders and adds: "You got that?" – then lightly slaps me across the face.

Since then, I pour the wine into a glass and put it in the attic closet. I always take at least a sip. It seems that Dragan is content. There are too many of us in the house. All of us. All of them. It's becoming unbearable. That's why, lying in bed with the Old lady, I daydream about the pigsty.

10th April 1994

Apart from schoolbooks, there were two other books in the house: a thick, red monograph filled with pictures of comrade Tito and one more – the so-called "dream book." The cover of the dream book said: "The Hundred-Year Calendar." It was a collection of different occult teachings. Grandma Marica called it a dream book because it contained a section dedicated to

dream interpretation. Slađana and I always leaf through it. It is full of beautiful drawings depicting different astrological signs, deities and ancient symbols. In the alphabetic glossary under the letter D there is a picture of the devil. An ugly, bold head with horns, a cynical gaze, warts on his face and a forked tongue in his mouth.

One time, the neighbour threatened that my mom would burn in hell if I keep rocking on the chair. The damage is irreversible. I have sent the Old lady to hell. My only hope is that neither of us will ever die.

The devil's face looms in front of my eyes – the devil that is going to keep my mom in hellish agony for the rest of time.

Today is 29th November 1961. A festive day. Today I become a pioneer. I repeat the song we are going to sing at the ceremony in my head: "We proudly march and raise our foreheads, today is a holiday in our honour..." But none of this manages to rid me of thoughts about death, about hell, about eternity. Slađana reads something from the dream book about my zodiac sign. Mars, Venus, Mercury, Saturn, I just hear the words, but I can't make out their meaning. "Your husband has to be a Libra or a Gemini," she says. There is a big pot of water boiling on the stove. The men are drinking schnapps in the yard. They give some to Dražen too. He is twelve. He's allowed. The butcher puts a big knife in his hand. Four men drag a squealing pig out from the pigsty. Dražen is squealing too. They shout at him: "C'mon! C'mon!" They're struggling to hold a two hundred and forty-pound saw in place. Dražen approaches it fearfully and thrusts a knife into the pig's throat. There is a plastic washbasin underneath her neck. The blood for blood sausages is pouring into it. Dražen pulls out the knife, tosses it on the ground and runs. He is bawling, but his cries are drowned out by the pig's squealing. "Quickly! It needs another jab!" The butcher swiftly grabs the knife and thrusts again. The pig is finally dead. They give Dražen some more schnapps. They're laughing at him. They're laughing at his fearfulness. On the day I became a pioneer, my brother became a man. Thirty years later, Dražen is now skilled at slaughtering. In addition to his shoe-making craft, he also "slaughters around," as the witty saying goes. There is always meat and sausages, greaves and blood sausages at our house. Dražen never takes any money for his services. He's a decent bloke.

11th April 1994

The TV is always on at the house. Dražen's daughters stare at the screen all the time. They take after their mother in their insatiability and petty malice. Mexican soaps are their favourite. And the American one called "Santa Barbara." "Our aunt is a dyke," that's what the girls say. "They get AIDS. It's some sort of disease that gets in your blood, and when it reaches your heart, you drop dead." The TV programme taught them that too.

When Dražen came back from the war, he told us a story about a chetnik who talked in great detail about the liquidations of our POWs for months over the radio. Eye pulling, tongue cutting, all kinds of things... When they caught him, and when they were sure he was the one who'd done all those things he'd talked about, they hung him from a hook like a dead pig. "Well, now, Vaso, you'll get what's coming to you!" They cut off his arms and legs with a chainsaw.

Dražen says he squealed like an old hag. He was so solemn and proud while he told us this story that an unusual sort of joy came over us too, because justice had been served, because in the end, this monster got his just deserts.

Ana comes home from school. She pulls her eldest daughter, riveted to the screen, by the ear. She slaps and hits her. "What sort of nonsense were you saying at school? Do you want your dad to go to prison?!" Ana is shaking her furiously. "What did I tell you? What did I tell you?" "That dad cut off the bad chetnik's arms and legs in the war." "But... isn't that what he said?" "You don't say these things, you stupid cow! You don't say these things! Off to bed right now, and no dinner for you!" The child runs off to the other room crossly. The Old lady secretly takes a sandwich to her.

I often wonder how many houses close to our own have these sorts of secrets buried in them.

I lie in bed and daydream about the pigsty. Let's turn pigsties into libraries! Ana says not to touch the pigsty. That you never know. Hard times are ahead.

But until pigsties become libraries, let them be used for storing the fishing rods of crazed veterans. That way, they're good for something, at least. But I'm not losing hope. I lie in bed and daydream about my pigsty.

Story number three

(In which Petar-Krešimir Vitez expresses a few general, poetic observations about music in 1994, the year he experiences his first sexual encounter, along with a newly-acquired sense of social inferiority.)

(From the diary of Petar-Krešimir Vitez)

15th December 1994

Mom is wearing pointed suede court shoes with a kitty heel. The shoes have a small opening at the front with her big toe sticking out. One, two, three, four... the sound of my mother's footsteps.

There is a metronome standing on the upright piano in my room.

Music teaches us that beauty requires order, that's what my clarinet teacher says when he's angry at me for not practicing my homework. I've been giving up on music more and more.

My mother knows nothing about music, but she adores order. Her steps are divided into symmetrical, bleak phrases of her routines. The home, the school. The home, the school. The church on Sunday, at half past six. We eat breaded cutlets on Sundays. Wednesday is stew day. We don't eat meat on Fridays. Fridays are for beans. Beans and pancakes. One, two, three, four... mother's footsteps resonate in the hallway when she comes back from school. Then she puts on her slippers and the rhythm dies out. Mother becomes a ghost. She is imperceptible around the house.

* * *

Mother puts on her burgundy dress suit and skin-coloured stockings. Her legs are streaked with protruding veins.

Father is wearing a black suit and a bow-tie.

Music is a celebration. Music is the eroticism of the spirit. Rhythm is like touch. Melody is like a kiss.

My mother's condition is called agoraphobia. She is the guardian of the hearth, of the fire of God's most beautiful gift - family.

Firmly holding my sister by the arm, mother courageously makes her way towards the concert hall. Distance: three hundred steps. Her other hand is clutching her purse. There is a handkerchief in her purse.

One, two, three, four...

Right now, they're passing by the church where my sister plays the organ at mass every day. My sister looks like a nun. She wouldn't want this said about her. Because she cares about her womanliness. She flirts with the curate and everybody knows it. The curate is a chubby country boy from Zagorje. He is somewhat brazen and unrefined. He smokes. After my sister finishes practicing the programme for her graduation pipe organ concert at church, the curate invites her to the parish office for a spritzer.

My sister's face is very red. Because of alcohol.

In today's concert, Držislav plays a solo accompanied by the town's chamber orchestra. He is the most successful musician in our family. For some time, his talent has been converted into decent fees which he uses to fill the freezer with meat for the Sunday Wiener schnitzel.

Držislav loves home as much as mother does. When he is not practicing, he sits in front of the television and drinks beer. One, two, three, four... Four each day. Držislav will go for a walk only when it's time for mom's TV shows. He'll walk by the river thinking about music. One, two, three, four. And when it's time for the Evening News, our whole family will gather around the little screen. I'm the only one who walks past them not giving a fig. As if I'm not interested in what's happening in the country and the world. As if I don't care whether my brother is

alive over there where he went to kill. P. is in love, says Uršula, my younger sister. P.'s got a rich girlfriend. Lea. Her dad owns a business. They sell photocopiers.

My older sister is laughing. Her name is Magdalena, like the one Christ exorcized the seven demons from.

- And when are we going to meet her? - she asks laughing. - Bring her to Držislav's concert.

Uršula already has a boyfriend, too. Mother doesn't approve because she's only fifteen. He is two years older than her. Like me. I saw him from a distance once, squeezing my sister underneath a big pine tree in the city park and shoving his hand down her pants. He is from the outskirts. A workers' son. His father is in Germany. He takes Uršula to the "Sermage" café for an ice-cream sundae and to the old cinema theatre with hard, faux leather-covered seats. We often run into each other there because it's the only place that's warm and young people can kiss in peace. The screenings often get cancelled because they need to sell at least six tickets to play the film.

* * *

Music is a celebration. Music is the eroticism of the spirit. Rhythm is like touch. Melody is like a kiss.

Lea comes to the concert dressed like a proper provincial princess. In a light blue satin dress reaching down to her knees and a white faux fur coat draped over it. Expensive stiletto shoes on her feet. She smells divinely. After the concert, I'll rip her stockings between her thighs, push aside her knickers, thrust a finger inside her and lick her until she goes crazy with pleasure. There's a small, discrete corridor leading to the back entrance to our apartment. My mother secretly smokes there.

Lea is gorgeous. Her beauty soars above everything in my known universe. This is the sort of beauty I call non-Catholic. Pleasant, brilliant, heavenly. And her brains. Intelligence no Catholic girl could ever demonstrate. The intelligence that every pastor would see as a threat. Her spirit bathes her face in curiosity and abandon.

Držislav plays masterfully. He possesses the lucidness of a genius, he is a sensitive interpreter, controlling the music like a snake charmer. Certain phrases bring out a smile to his face, as if the music was telling him inappropriate jokes. Sometimes, when he's winding through a longer melody line, he gets carried away, and, closing his eyes, feels such freedom that his playing transforms him into a listener enjoying the piece as if he was sitting in the audience, rather than being on stage. Haydn's Keyboard Concerto in D major.

I'm grateful to Lea for offering her body so generously into my hands, like some mysterious musical instrument.

I feel like a beggar entering her house for the first time. Don, the Belgian shepherd, is tied to a chain in the yard. A baseball bat hangs on the wall in the corridor, right next to the front entrance.

That's for just in case, says Lea. Some men came by, threatening my old man – as if all of it was funny, Lea takes me through her home. Her parents argue a lot. Usually when her mom finds out about dad's new "lady friend." Dad once drove the car into her on purpose when she stood in the yard, blocking the path. But it always somehow works out in the end... always ends and it's forgotten. At least for a while.

The interior of her house is luxurious, cosy. In that moment my flat feels like an outdated museum to me.

Don't worry, they're away. Only my brother is here.

Her brother has his own loft in the attic. He is smoking weed with two quiet guys. He's standing in front of two record players pretending he's a DJ. We take a few puffs and go to her room. She takes her clothes off. She is laughing with a bright, excited smile. Me too. We're happy. We kiss like we're going to devour each other. We're laughing. I love you! I love you! I repeat incessantly. She is a miracle that sets me free. She is a miracle and I want to give my whole life to her.

The audience finds the sentimentality of Romanticism the sweetest, the sound of the orchestra softly twisting around the tendrils of the stucco on the wall. Baroque, too. They consider it a part of their heritage. That's why our orchestra play the baroque pieces romantically, like lovers. Yet, under Držislav's fingers, the witty,

classicist playfulness of Haydn's first movement sweeps the audience away to a joyous feast.