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Blind Map

Excerpt translated by Mirza Puric

TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS – A LETTER IN FOUR ACTS

*As I walked into the rock and roll club,
I found myself with the usual bums.*

Lou Reed

Velvet Underground & Nico

Sunday morning, a street south of the railway. The place of writing, the detestable time of writing in the district of burnt tables, the mouldy fridges that are opened only for someone's reflection to disappear momentarily from the white side panel and drown in curdled milk and carrots. The view of the notorious Oleander Terrace of the Esplanade hotel, beyond which, allegedly, the Balkans start. The engines of suburban busses rev and despatch portions of smog into the air, trains brake and the carriages slam into one another, the sweaty tracks flash like headlights. The sparks, the bearing grease, the tapping of peen hammers – that is the time and the place of writing. A man listens to it all and writes, for one ought to write against time, place and people. The street south of the railway, perpendicular to it as if to cross and cancel it out, is named after a castle built in Trieste for an archduke who became the emperor of Mexico thanks to a slight sleight of hand and caught – typically for archdukes in those days – a Republican bullet at Cerro de las Campanas, a proper hail of bullets, in fact, whilst his wife lived long after in the castle with her nerves wrecked. The city whose reflection is wiped off the mirror by desolation is called Zagreb, the man's name is unimportant, which does not mean he ought to be spared – on the contrary, he ought to be

trampled down harder still for his unimportance till he drops the black 8-ball from his mouth onto his toes ripping out of his throat a short, well-deserved yelp.

Afterwards, as the hours pile up without surpassing one another, the first thing you learn is that you must wait. Mother would not hear of any such thing. She was carrying the man inside her, which afforded her, as a matter of course, a certain advantage, shifted the existing balance of forces in an intimate cold war, gave her the right to set ultimatums and have her demands met. It was a tedious early eighties winter on the Adriatic coast, brows of cypress tress swept the baffled air, foreign currency reserves melted and slowly washed red soil away leaving a wake of shite nuggets, when Mother fancied bananas. There would have been nothing contentious about that if not for a shortage, an *absolute shortage* of bananas which boiled down to the fact that there were no bananas in Yugoslavia to be got, thus Mother had to be supplied from afar, all the way from Greece, as rumours had it, via Bitola in Macedonia, through more than one military PO address and more than several individuals, mostly career soldiers. When the man who ought to be crushed with writing, stomped into a pulp till he was finally brought to his senses in and out of the text, was separated from her body by the black Non-Aligned doctor and broke into a bawl bruised blue all over a few seconds after he was casually pronounced dead, the banana situation in the country improved. It could almost be said that, just like the child's erratic breathing, it went back to *absolutely normal*.

Regardless of whether that outcome was regarded as favourable or not, which depended on how intensely fateful it was for someone to meet a human being beaten out of his mother, the man was there now, and that, too, was a fact. Afterwards he vaguely remembered that he had and had not wanted to write: quite unlike his mother's, his own demands in the matter were not enough of *ultimatums*. So then why was it, and still is, necessary to trample him down? The night is fading; slowly the day breaks and courage evaporates like memories of battles evanesce from the members of the Central Committee. It is therefore possible for the time being to conclude, in a conciliatory or rather cowardly manner, that he was merely too often lax, irresponsible towards the reader, which is to say that in his misery – his induced paralysis – he was weak to himself. And one ought to spit on the reader. Hawk up, and bespittle his reflection in the scratchy lavatory mirror. Then once again: spit and curse at oneself. To think yourself good, good enough, or worse yet to come to believe such a thing counts as the most revolting of sins, the *most amateurish* of transgressions. Juries and audiences exist solely to blur one's focus, they pat you on the back like an archduchess only to stick you in that Triestine tower.

The water spilt on the road by the cleaners glistened and sank into the asphalt, and morning yet again refused to thicken. The wind was rolling tipped over bins. The problem this time was not bad intentions, the *will* to anything in particular, but the general benevolence, the inadvertent obsequiousness, the authentic false consciousness of the text. It is for this reason and this reason alone that it is necessary to lick the guard's shiny boots, to polish the spurs of the consciousness, even if it entails consenting to repulsive Catholic metaphors. To scatter with a pool cue the ashes of carelessly penned paragraphs, pound them out of the mouth with a poker. Therein lies the essence of evil of this city, this writing and this man inundated with bananas: a terrible benevolence, tyranny of the commonplace. And if the terror of epiphany should eventually reduce him to fear, *sheer fear*, so much the better. Memory, falling short, yet *absolute*, says fear is an onion that sprouts in confined boxes, burgeons into unbearable layers. Then you remember that in the street south of the railway parties are sometimes thrown: billboards flash till the sun smashes them at daybreak, clocks hiccup, winds wail. Gusts sweep up pizza and burger wrappers, gravity lands them back. The weather is disgusting, in every sense of the word, but parties ought to be attended. One ought to spit point plank.

Berlin

Reichenberger Strasse is a bustling street south of the railway. It lies, to be fair, south of the route along which the railway *formerly* ran, *before* their last war, until it finally outran its usefulness. Those tracks were eventually lifted and ingoted or built into Teufelsberg, Devil's Hill, made out of discarded railway carriages and several million cubic metres of slag, on top which the Allies built a spy station. It too stretches south of the modern rail route, for good two kilometres, roughly between Oranienplatz and the canal, the river Spree and the best preserved fragment of the barrier known *formerly, after* their latest war, as the Berlin Wall, and in more recent times as a pile of rubbish, that grey idontevenknowwhatitis or, in the parlance of lonely tourists, the *East Side Gallery*. Where Brezhnev and Honecker snog savagely. In this case, the street was laid out to run perfectly parallel to the railway, as if to confirm or share in its obliteration.

I moved into a flat on the fifth floor of a listless house with a French milk bar on the ground floor with the intention of finding her. Although I knew her only casually, superficially (I could barely remember the smell of her), in considerable disproportion to the intensity of my desire, I had a clear idea about the task, and a promising degree of will to complete it. The idea, however, was clear only as pertained the *finding*. Regarding the content of what I might find there, there was a thick layer of pond-scum

surrounding the matter, of the sort that can apparently be walked on. Such was the nature of my quest: press onward, never stop, head-butt cobwebs laden with dead flies, rip bugs limb from limb and swallow air saturated with decomposition gases for as long as possible, for to stop was to fail. Like in a cartoon in which void can be traversed with ease until a downward *gaze* adds weight to the body and the realisation turns it into a coyote driven delirious by the queasy momentum – mass times sin – with which he is now travelling to his forebears.

She was, at the same time, on a quest of her own, but that I did not know. Her method, in contrast to mine, consisted of pure waiting. She firmly believed that any motion more ambitious than pressing the cork down the neck of a bottle of swill from Lidl or crushing a can of Kindl – whatever banal act of destruction of the form – set in motion an undesirable and disastrous series of events, the most disastrous of which was the fact of motion itself. She usually spent her time in bed, cutting out photos of wastelands from geography magazines and Sunday supplements. These badlands, as burnt as a home, she bricolaged with fragments of tech-house flyers picked up from bar toilets and pasted them into thoroughly dead still lifes with the odd Cadillac or a cock in close-up poking out. Portraits she spat on and kept under her pillow, which I subsequently proclaimed a symptom of quite rational misanthropy. It was a grubby autumn, dead droplets pinned dry leaves to the asphalt before the wind could sweep them up. I cursed them, because I was alive and in good health, yet I lacked such a power.

What I failed to mention, for a reason, was that I was trying to write a novel along the way. My quest was in that sense twofold, doubly pretentious. To try to splice these two stories, make *her* a character, turn the quest into the plot and compress all of that into a functioning summary was out of the question. Such shapelessness would have possibly benefited me, but not by any means my imagined text. To separate them completely, on the other hand, did not seem feasible. The two libidos that drive them have in some strange way been ripped out of one, and as soon as one of them tries to run behind the first corner or cover itself over the head with a sheet, the other whines and whimpers. This is why, amongst other things, the one who writes ought to be trampled down, spat on and made to piss his bed, shit down his trouser legs: in order that all else may be stomped out and humiliated, that libido may for a moment be one and only one. Still, the desire to find her prevailed.

On afternoons, which I was particularly fond of, gay hipsters chained to the fence in front of the block their expensive bikes cluttering them together into fearsome clusters of metal. Then they would go to The Frenchman's to wipe out a Milchkaffee, Möhrenkuchen and Litschi Bionade, during which time dogs would piss on their bikes with sovereign self-assurance. He, the Frenchman, had a peculiar weakness for

animals. She had a weakness for methamphetamines, alcohol, the odd glitch noise club and her bed. My dark loyalty to mathematics, or rather the characteristic melancholy of mathematics, pointed to the conclusion that the possibility of beating her with her own most powerful weapon, the cosmic inertia of mass, and somehow find her at The Frenchman's or in my room, quite simply amounted to zero. And it was at the same time quite destructive. It was therefore necessary to leave the flat, intertwine our hatreds, stab to death and completely discard one of the libidos.

Reichenberger Straße does not bend once. It juts out like a silver needle stuck straight into the flesh of the city and pins me to my fears. Yet, on the first Monday in December I got up the nerve to change cafés and went a few blocks down into the district of burnt-out light bulbs. From between the letters on the glass children's screams came resounding, a reasonless haste, but it all remained outside. I was sitting with a copy of *Die Tageszeitung* from several days ago, in the back, in semi-darkness although it was not yet four o' clock. Inside there were no young mothers anyway, it was not that kind of bar, not like one of those over in P-berg, and besides, she did not have children, although they had beaten one out of her before she turned sixteen. Then the clock struck four, someone opened the door, the cowbell on the chain gave a loud jingle. The wind, still bearably cold, slammed a dry leaf into some imbecile's forehead following a successful dribbling, and the waiter, obviously a Southerner, patted him on the shoulder and greeted her with *Griß Gott*. That is how I found her.

New York

At 210 Skillman Street, Bed Stuy, Brooklyn, the man writes furiously chasing an editorial deadline because outside a hurricane is raging, or at least it is supposed to be. They said nasty gales would sweep *everything* off and away, although nobody at all made any effort to describe *everything* with any degree of thoroughness. At that moment, *everything* to him is the obsessive peeling of a continent, the peeling of a big apple into an empty tin of Heinz Beanz whilst across the road, like a stone, Manhattan sinks into shiny shite.

In New York the man did not look for anyone, but he did look for that *everything*. He pulled it out of holes in socks, out of ribbed Greyhound busses and downtown-bound express trains that kept changing direction so the innards of the city churned like an upset stomach or a snow globe with the face of a beauteous Jesus. Here, under the grey light, he took it off open terraces, shut-in Italian girls whose brothers wore diamond crucifixes, stuffed it up his nose and in his mouth with both hands and regurgitated it

through all orifices. Night in this district of airways is soiled, but at night the stains cannot be seen. They have nothing in common, those other people in the night and he, although – and there may be some misfortunate contempt towards the nature-loving to it – they are difficult, at times almost impossible to separate. The road along which they move closer to one another uninvited is spotted with potholes, the burnt awning of Tony's Deli is smouldering. In this city, as in others, people can have only misfortune in common. And even this – Tolstoy, eat your liver out – holds true only for a specific kind of misfortune, the misfortune of *possessing*. Therein, at any rate, lies not the tragedy. That is the *everything*, held in common and unable to be possessed, which is why it drives us insane, and it is precisely what idiots like to call the *American Dream*. Not as the Buddha, not as Vishnu, but as perpetual halving of the object of desire, the always open dime store on the corner.

At the time the man and the woman lived at Ghost's. The single-storey house clad in something resembling red sandpaper did not belong to him, although he did aggressively claim it. It belonged to a studio musician they were unacquainted with who had set out to play a gig with a backing band in Lexington, Ohio, and vanished without a trace, so to them, he turned out to be a ghost, the absent one, whereas they reserved the shortest moniker for the fatty from the big ground floor room: J. He wrote for a newspaper, perhaps too zealously since the hurricane was forecast. She was at Rotten Rita's, a guesthouse on Stockton Street the aura of which was a perfect fit for the process, browsed through travel guidebooks with tarted-up weekend packages and photoshopped pictures of surfers, whilst J. busked in the subway. Each held their niche. The fatty, with his thick Italian accent, mostly belted out standards: Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Springsteen. As years passed and extorted from the flesh, in addition to boredom, numerous changes of little interest, he increasingly took to flipping his guitar and tapping a beat to the black kids' freestyle. She preferred the blond and oily ones, whilst the man's repertoire was made up chiefly of lies.

To write for the newspapers, regardless of the location, is to die a loud death unless one writes about politics. To write about politics worthy of such a running head was in this case impossible. A thunderstorm has been forecast, but the man, sitting naked in his red house on Skillman Street, will be obliged to invent it in the last resort if it fails, on some strange whim, to materialise. It is getting darker, a nasty cloud billows above the district and the smell of smoke flares the nostrils taut. A signal light from the brewery chimney cuts across the beam from the floodlight on the Kosciuszko Pool, the concoction then soaks up the headlights of overground trains and, reinforced with the lights of several million bulbs, hovers above the wide-brimmed hats of the Jews down on Bedford Ave. *Everything* shines in a somehow peculiar way, as he thinks up a story in case the storm falls short.

The bulk of the man's efforts back then, at the time of thwarted writing as well as before and afterwards, were directed towards creating as far-reaching a deterrent from nature as possible. Not only did he fundamentally and devotedly despise nature in its totality and, especially, the benevolently derived concept of the *natural*, he also – towards the end quite openly, too – feared it. Nature was not a sanctuary, a serene, balanced counterpoint to the implied chaos and superficiality of city life or anything like that, but rather the same thing it means to anyone even remotely sane today: the realm of the basest, purest instinct, the most fundamental stomping out all the hard-won *humanity*. Far from laying too many hopes in it, he was choosing, or so he thought, the lesser of two evils. Nevertheless, to take the paradox to the extremity, at the worn-out moment just before writing the man was left to the mercies of that selfsame nature, its cheapest whims, at that.

Jets were still leaving wakes of co-ordinated, undecipherable ornaments across the sky, fast trains casting sparks as they slowed down to enter the station. This was by no means a good omen, or it was, on the contrary, an excellent one. He took off his socks, too, because the heat had in the meantime become unbearable: the glue was losing its stickiness and the wallpaper was slowly peeling off, whilst a bird would zoom past from time to time precariously close to the window pane. The deadline was nearing in mighty leaps: the production of spectacle was not accustomed to waiting, and dull nature, otherwise nothing short of terrifyingly effective, had to be pressed into action, a kitschy ritual was to be designed finally to prod all that vanity awake, make it voice the resplendence of its horribility. He rose from the chair and opened the *Native American Cuisine*, an Indian cookery book that was rotting away in the built-in wardrobe, lead by the idiotic idea that it might contain a convenient appendix on matters of invocation, the Great Manitou's calling code. Instead, precisely out of nowhere, like an apparition, a winded Ghost appeared. He glanced through the window with his piglet eyes and went towards the kitchen, and the man who was beaten black and blue out of his mother heard him mutter: *You know, in Italy, when it rains it rains ravioli...*

A taxi pulled up in front of the house, a bloke with a bass guitar wriggled his way out of it, and somewhere, the sky finally cracked.

Songs for Drella

Railways, like African shiteholes and Japanese cities, have always suffered from a dearth of addresses, especially in those misfortunate yet halcyon days before satellites and GPS. All right, from time to time one does run into a station with the name of the place and in the best case the correct street and house number,

but we are mostly talking about barren, bloody kilometres, remembered only if someone perishes quite spectacularly at a particular point along the route. I am leaning comfortably back in the red upholstered seat, crushing aluminium foil into a ball as smooth and round as possible, staring through the window whilst kilometres clatter past beneath my arse, entire blocks of those blood-stained addresses. The great icy pane to my left catches my warm breath dispersing it into a delta of droplets, and beyond it, a rather unremarkable scenery stretches at a steady speed. The eye now and again catches a glimpse of a person's silhouette, a cow or a piece of farming machinery, but mostly it sees the same stiff, stripped trees, always planted deep in the ground.

I am travelling to visit a distant relation of a great painter across something that until recently was called Czechoslovakia, and is now Slovakia, or the Czech Republic, I am not quite certain but it is bound to be one of the two. I am not making any notes in my posh black leather-bound notebook, a gift from N., although I should be, I suppose. I am travelling on assignment, and my memory is, as usual, playing with me, at least as much as I play with it. All this, the trees, the people, the puddles, the cars coughing at railway crossings, will relatively soon be wiped away by eclipsing oblivion, especially the trees and the people. No great loss there, none of that is worth remembering. I travel and, as usual, I mix business with pleasure: I live at the expense of my work and I work off the back of me.

The first I heard of this cousin, the *news* of her existence, was part of an informal conversation with N. Few things about N. were informal, and were informal only contingently, but news is all that matters in my profession, news that, if at all possible, contains dead people. In this piece of news, only the painter was dead for now, for a while now and for sure, but that is nothing new to most people. The story, however, had a rather specific mass, one from the spectrum of *natural* interest. Certain individuals, self-proclaimed village bourgeoisie in particular, seem to claim a certain *moral* right to articles about the accomplishments of other no-names from other no-name shiteholes on the edge of the universe with whom to identify hoping to find themselves in their shoes sooner or later. For, growing up in a small town was and remains hell. In one such small town – if given a say I would simply dub it the sticks – in one such tiny town you cannot but hate and you only want to escape from, Julia, née Zavacká, was born and raised. In addition to angels, she liked to draw cats: just like that, draw cats and angels in that god-forsaken shitehole. Julia is the central point of my story, into which all things converge and diverge from at once. She was the painter's mother and aunt-in-law of the cousin I am travelling to meet, the first one to gather the strength and escape.

So, I am trying to conjure up an image of a *young Julia*, a Slovak or Czech girl, whatever, angry and with a blurry idea of a gentle life, but I am not yet ready for such an effort: on the inside of my eyelids mostly appears the silhouette of a young N. The cold sneaks in and seals my teeth together, rivets me to the radiator, makes me sink deeper into the seat under which crumpled up newspapers and chicken bones picked clean scum for space. The ashtrays are full although smoking is prohibited, whilst between me and the scenery a grey haze curls up and it may just as well be on *this* side of the pane as on *that* one, emanating from the cigarette butts, or the snow-scorched earth. I am balancing on the edge of sleep as the train enters an unnamed station, having slugged its way at minimum speed through the district of bloated sheep carcasses. A slim Korean girl enters the compartment, takes out a bottle of Coke, an iPad, a toiletry bag, confident, thorough, as only a flood can be. She puts on her make-up slowly, in precise strokes which she monitors in a small mirror. Through my glued-together eye-lids I observe the freshly initiated metamorphosis, a change that feeds on itself. I have just about enough time for a cheap thought: *art isn't alchemy; work, work is supreme, yet change is what counts in the end, there is no art without change*, I think, and I sink into greasy sleep.

I dream that, for some inexplicable reason, the day has been lengthened out of proportion. In the unlocked world of dreams everything is as usual, with a tiny yet surprising development: I have neither been travelling nor hibernating, but night now falls three or four hours later. Not sticky and heavy like in our part of the country round Midsummer, but more westerly somehow, diluted like in Brittany, or cold like on the northern rim of Europe. I wake up drenched in sweat, stuck between the ribs of the radiator, and *on the other side*, in the world, there is not so much as a speck of light left. I instinctively reach into my back pocket and feel the smooth leather, but I remember that none of this, not even that which is confined to my head, merits being written down, at least not until I find my cousin and in her, embedded in her flesh, the young Julia. Only then do I actually flinch.

Sitting quite upright in the girl's place, as white as a baker's apprentice, is a character from Manga, or some such Japanese abomination, her corpse-pale, undead yet unalive face is contorted into an unrecognisable made-up grimace. Her goggling eyes, stretched out across her cheek-bones, barely blink, and from the corners of her lips thinned down with make-up runs a red rivulet. In the neon light of the compartment hovers a haemophiliac hybrid of Dracula and Cinderella with earbuds stuck in her ears, a lecherous disco-vampire who, in expectation of the ultimate freedom of water, knocks back her Coke bottle. I flatten myself against the radiator even more tightly and try to look outside, but only murk thrives in the district of black holes, burnt villages and dead relatives, and the night blends with the blood of the

kilometres beneath my arse. I should have known, whatever I find here will taste of mud and relatives, goes through my mind. I take out my notebook, I write down.

RUIN IN FOUR BLADES. A PRIMER

It was a January so cold that the water in the central heating pipes froze, so beautiful that it stoked sudden yet justified fear in the eyes of the citizenry. In the twilight kitchen unwholesomely permeated by intermittent flashes of light from the outside I stood wrapped in an army jumper, squinting towards the greenish-blue flame. From the earliest childhood I had been developing the passion: sneak up to the stove and observe the boiling water. At times, though, it was other liquids. Milk, carefully decanted from a plastic bag into the pan, soup, possibly yesterday's, on whose surface at all times tremored a thin film of fat, with pasta letters and cooked-to-bits chicken bones floating in it, but in most cases it was precisely water that was brought to white heat in those dishes: the sly substance which, just as you are about to grab it by the back of the neck, turns into steam and vanishes. Water – and this I realised at a time when I still had to take a chequered kitchen chair to the stove in order to see the boil – behaves exactly the same regardless of what is to be dumped into it: fine, hand-ground coffee, heads of beef, eggs, soiled faeces-laden nappies owned reluctantly and due to coercion by my younger brother. Boiling, in practical physical terms, is the transition of liquid into vapour, a radical reduction of its tangibility due to heat-induced frenzy of particles. This lends it the air of a clean, easy, reversible process: it is a parable of perfect, almost tender death. Not to me. To me, liquid never boiled at the boiling point – when it reached, presumably, the temperature of a hundred degrees Celsius at the pressure of 1.013 bar and vanished – but at the moment when, too weak to strangle, it became sly: when the egg cracked, the milk boiled over, the hand withdrew bearing a painful burn. My

fascination with boiling, like venous blood, curdled round the subtle yet perfidious, specific *violence* of boiling.

In my childhood, as well as later, I mostly shirked from explicit exercises in violence. Partly out of (beauty-deprived) fear, partly out of cowardice, partly due to a shade of lucidity hanging over the ego that may have been more prominent back then, lucidity that has since been proclaimed an eclipse and now, demystified and laid bare, attends the self at times. The odd beating, occasional (yet highly effective) wanton destruction of property, but, admittedly, never: strangling of cats, pyrotechnics in the feathers of birds, wire round a lizard's neck. In the meantime, the Yugoslav wars have embroidered monograms of violence with a capital "V" on our underpants and stomped out men and cities, yet the mundane violence, which does not end in death though it leads to it, to me remains associated with the idea and the image of boiling, the archetypal notion of its destructiveness.

To Borges, in his youth at least, knives had much the same meaning. Swords, daggers, general-purpose blades: everything not meant for spreading butter but for stabbing and cutting. Cold weapons, the knife in particular as an iconic representative, have long been accepted as a universal metonymy of violence, yet the half-blind librarian elevated the blade to a complex, meticulously coded symbol, one of the central leitmotifs of his oeuvre. Later in life, on this symbolic structure he built a reactionary, conservative mythology of "toughness, honour and courage", which ultimately resulted in his support for Pinochet and the coup to overthrow democratically established Chilean socialism, as well as in his sympathy for Argentine military juntas. Still, as much as it grew out of everyday life in the dangerous *barrias* of 1910s and 1920s Buenos Aires – Borges mentions this in an extensive 1966 interview for *The Paris Review* – his youthful obsession with blades morphed into an individual archetype of "violence with a mission", a *destructiveness* in the service of a higher purpose, idea or force, as elusive as honour.

The Argentine's destructiveness is immeasurably far from the quite undirected, grassroots, non-manipulated, savage destructiveness which for years I had conceived of as boiling, just as my own fascination with blades, I do believe, is diametrically opposite to his. Far from any kind of myth, meta-narrative or any common intention, my blades were at once driven by lechery in the body of the steel and a fettered impulse of chaos: a murderous motion cornered, crammed into an impeccable statistics of objects. On the one hand – to use the slum argot Borges uses – there is *el vaivén*; the come-and-go – a word which the sudden, unexpected motion and the flash of the knife, the *mess of it*, inhabits most explicitly. On the other hand there is *el fierro*: iron with its much too heavy yet paralysed conscience, its potential which retains most of its value, its overtaxed strength, mainly in idling. The knife is *can*, rather than *want*. The

knife is the asceticism of restraint. The knife is, this much is obvious by now, the beauty of deferral. There remains therefore quite little of the animalistic in the knives that are of import to me, yet a knife is nothing if not an animal.

Blade One. Father

Just as Borges, just as in cheap films about valour which conceals and obscures a complete lack of humanity, the magic of the blade infected me through the male line, starting from the first man I remember: my paternal grandfather. I am not sure if it was him, a high-ranking navy officer, captain of a battleship retired for medical reasons a year before I was born, who was responsible for its procurement. I remember: during an excessively cold eighties winter, in our ground-floor flat in Split, almost ritualistically, somewhat ceremoniously, he presented it to me. A foldable hunting knife with a blade the length of which well exceeded the breadth of my four thin fingers, with a bone saw, security lock and deer antler handle, possibly: bovine bone surrogate. Folded, it was doubly enclosed – it rested, silently, in a tight-stitched brown leather sheath with belt-slits on its black-dyed back. Designed with a specific practical purpose in mind, it was not one of those knives which are carried at the ready and drawn lightly, *accidentally*. It is the only one among all the subsequent blades which I associate primarily with my father.

Father, a military lawyer, senior captain of the Yugoslav People's Army, worked in the town of Knin at the time, I suppose the worst place in the country for doing anything at all at the end of the eight decade of the century. He lived nearby, however, and he borrowed Borges's collected works (the 1985 edition) from the garrison library, visited us often and, even more importantly for me, in a way perhaps *decisively* for my acceptance of the imposed parent-child relation: he had a knife almost identical to mine. I spent many long hours observing both blades in the beam of yellow light from a torch, well-hidden in my usual spot, the darkness under the dining table. I looked at the knives without touching them, unsheathed, unfolded, laid out in their subdued sheen onto the hysterical pattern of the carpet: unknown animals lost in the familiar yet incomprehensible force of flora. Above all, they differed in one possibly crucial anthropometric fact: Father's fingers were significantly thicker than mine. This, even under the laws of an occupying force, and only if they were stretched, just barely allowed his blade to be classified as a weapon. During my childhood in a still mostly safe and care-free society, it was a knife that did not seek blood: the fuller, strategically swaged into the blade to facilitate its drainage, was to remain dry, and the circulation of blood, tamed with difficulty, to resume in its proper place.

The knife with the deer horn handle thus served as a seal of sorts, a family totem of masculinity, a direct link with Father. Only when they were laid out one next to the other were the knives grotesquely different in their almost absolute sameness. Furthermore, during phases marked by a complete lack of enemies (just as during the periods when the enemy was *everyone*), it served as an implement of the abovementioned undirected destructiveness, yet only in its consequence, the tangible truth of boiling.

Even thus unbridled, the knife was never involved in street displays of power, the skirmishes between Partisans and Germans in the crowns of wind-blasted nettle trees. In order to be effective, the weapons used – hand guns, assault rifles, submachineguns – had to remain abstract, on the edge of iconic recognisability, whittled out of light wood. Dull and lightly rusted, the knife, which still lies in a forgotten desk drawer, did once turn against its owner. One morning suddenly turned cold the safety failed and allowed me to see my own flesh for the first time, on the index finger of my right hand it opened a flaring cleft which bled, along with the blood, one whole childhood. In parallel, the state whose culture and political *idea* had a decisive influence on my growing up somehow disappeared from the map, leaving behind a still visible scar of deeply impressed contours of a trampled down identity, the blueprint of utter ruin.

Blade Two. Grandfather

In those times of tacit digging up of hatchets, especially during the country fair season in a town halfway between the towns of Livno and Duvno in Bosnia, the first winds of spring could sweep in dancing bears. Before the plain of Kupres was ploughed up with artillery shells and patched into garden beds of tank pits, a little house stood there which Grandfather had built on a plot he shared with two other army officers. I remember: a grass snake, its throat slit, writhing in blood in the clear stream rapids, its patterned skin stretched on a willow stick. I remember shepherd's whistles, foxes and horses, a hotel with an A-frame roof on the invisible chapitels of the sky, I remember: a ski-lift, cow dung, ferns and pansies, wild strawberries, fields of ox-eye daisies, ferns, elephant's ears, going to fetch milk, the warm foam, the clatter of the buckets, Gypsies, Atos, at the time supposedly the biggest dog in Split; I remember chess, dominoes, trowels, the tool shed and the winter garden, carnations in various colours, I remember the road to the Kukavica lake and the road to Mt Stožer, the track disappearing in the low-lying forest, bare hill slopes, pastures, a yew longbow and hazelnut arrows; I remember hunters, horned vipers, relatives, the wound on my left hand I cut open one afternoon with a hacksaw, mowers, the clatter of the blades and the scrape of

the scythe stones, I remember: wires, rakes, water boiling over fire in a cauldron, crickets, Midsummer bonfires, the strident smell of the sheaves, haystacks, snow, and how spring came, how the snow thawed and the rivers swelled, how lush the green was, I remember: some other bits and bobs.

The spirit of an animal broken by the tragedy of music; furious bursts of accordion fire, the conductor's baton beating the stiff air, all this was more likely to be found in the town of Bugojno. One had to dress up for the occasion and take the road along the side of which we used to harvest elderberry, break with our headlights the darkness in the bowels of a hill whose slopes flashed a great big sign, erected amid the white rock, that read TITO. There, on the other side of Tito, on a sweltering fair Sunday I was presented with my second knife. It was chosen for me at a stall by Grandfather: elegant, almost stern in its absolute simplicity it later seemed perfidious to me even on the outside, like an inauspicious sign – a blade that is drawn lightly and portends a vernal blossoming of blood. A black plastic handle swallowed up a somewhat curved, short blade honed to extremity, suited, at any rate, for the infliction of stabbing wounds. Everything about that small object clearly suggested flash, motion and repetition. In all its splendour, *el vaivén* came into my possession. That knife, obtained one late spring, too hot as usual, towards the end of my first year at school and our last year in Kupres, very much did seek blood, what is more, it hoped for it and transferred its unbearable urge onto hands, wrists, hearts.

I was picked up in front of the school, as there was not very much time to waste, although it seemed there was, for all of us, an unfathomable lot of it. On the classroom wall hung a portrait of the man inscribed into the hill, the Marshall counting our errors. I was still soundlessly reciting, like a mantra, the pioneer pledge which I never got the opportunity to recite and make performative, as the yellow Zastava 750, as asthmatic as Grandfather, hovered over the town of Solin wheezing heavily. In the meantime, everything was the way I remembered: the grass snakes, the whistles, the dung still warm from the body – the knife with the deer antler handle rested in its sheath awaiting a sharpening of arrow tips. The unbridled destructiveness, the well-kept truth of boiling, had already furtively abandoned my light body and, without me noticing, it was taking over the world around me; boiling over its sticky brim.

We cut short our spring holidays that year, never again to see the house that was never again to be seen by anyone. The smell of strawberries teased the nostrils insane, mules licked salt, scorpion grasses hastened to blossom. Tanks could already be seen on the Plane of Kupres and ravens were in low flight above the hills urged by a sudden absence of eagles. In dusty serpentines, the road snaked down towards Split, a flag I had never seen before fluttered on the Fort of Klis. My Slovene aunt, over a tinned luncheon meat sandwich, laconically said: *that's your flag now, that thing with the squares*. I did not, of course, grasp the

breadth of that symbolic death co-occurring with the death of the symbol, the fact that from that moment on, no flag or anything standing behind a flag would ever be mine. I was returning to the city of my childhood, heavy and doubly armed, with a new blade restless in my trouser pocket. That same steel, the same unbridled destructiveness which I was finally rid of when it decanted from me into the blade, were the metal and pogrom of the destroyers and MiGs, the opportunistic artillery of the lowlifes almost all of us had turned into overnight on the strength of an equation that was as simple as it was disgusting.

And blood did in the end run down that blade, appropriately enough, not my own blood. On night zero of 1999, on the roof of the former paddling club Gusar, drunk on cheap vodka I grazed the top of the head of the singer of Superhiks, an abysmal street-punk band in which I was trying to clobber tubs at the time. To top it off, it happened in a fit of residual, now somewhat directed destructiveness, as we had just removed from the nearby corner shop and were ripping up *our* flag – that thing with the squares. The wound was immediately cleaned with the vodka, and I folded the knife and, in a fit of intense remorse, hurled it into the night as hard as I could, wishing never to see it again.

Blade three. Son

Summer dripped down the teeth, ran down the throat and stuck the tongue to the palate like a stamp from an exotic land, and the war was growing elsewhere. Flooding the adjacent flats and drowning the tenants in the process, it sprinkled the tops of our heads with soggy chips of ceiling paint. It was a full year till the Olympic Games in Barcelona, where Croatian athletes were to compete officially for the first time under *our* flag: the same as the one that was subsequently ripped up. Atrocious weather struck the barometer, and not only the barometer; the war made its way under our fingernails, the filthy *spirit of the age*, its naturalised ideology, a murk still difficult to wash away. The destructive in its most concrete form, utterly devoid of infantile scruples.

The first and to date only knife I obtained personally, on my own initiative and at my own expense, perfectly reflected the moment in time, it was its precise analogon. Purchased for the price of a school lunch in one of those everything-costs-a-few-kuna shops that had taken the city by storm, its quality rather matched the price. The badly moulded plastic handle impressed its excesses into the flesh of the palm, the blade, barely possessed of any features that justify the name, bent and cracked under the slightest tension, whilst the rubber sheath lost the popping fastener from the safety strap on the way home. Its design, however, emulated the kitsch of the epoch in its megalomania: the combination of the Rambo combat knife

and the standard-issue AK-47 Kalashnikov bayonet loudly proclaimed its purpose. It was an open-carry knife, intimidating, one that threatens to be used and makes good on the threat. The display of power compressed into it, the picture of strength, strength which conceals weakness, and determination which conceals cowardice and unscrupulous interests, was and remains simply terrifying. The utter lack of elegance and hardness, of *solidity* which a dagger possesses, precluded any claim to comparison even with Borges's banal yet still dangerous ghost of the blade which secures the order, establishes and defends *honour*. There was nothing in it except pap and the false sense of anchoredness which pap of every type, political pap in particular, produces.

The game in which the knife was now for the first time actually used as a weapon, as knife-animal rather than its benign emanations, was just as vile as the times and the dagger of them: it was the culmination of that heroic narrative which conceals a lack of humanity. We came face to face with first dusk armed with knives and torches, in the overgrown army hospital park, an ill-lit patch framed on three sides by blocks of flats, and on the fourth by dilapidated vineyards that weeds were overrunning, reducing, purifying and drowning in brine. We shared the hospital with addicts cramping up from *smack*, with wounded soldiers smoking on the balconies and spitting blood from the windows: for both groups we were too fast, beyond reach. The summer made the jungle greasy and sticky, the Southerly stuffy and oppressive; bay laurel, henbane, cactuses and other vegetation gone wild and interwoven into tropical undergrowth made it impenetrable and dark. Only one rule applied: the knives, in most cases identical, had to remain sheathed, slaughter and sacrifice symbolic. War was waged, just like in the *real world around us*, at first in teams with clear line-ups, but later, as the nights progressed and thickened into an oily film of shite, it was every man for himself and all against all. The entire tactical logic of these pre-pubescent guerrilla formations boiled down to perfidious stealth, conspiracy and ambush, with a view to making the slaughter more effective, to piling up useless bodies on the other side. We did not play at Croats and Serbs, or Serbs and Muslims, or Croats and the Bosnian Army – everything was still quite abstract and faceless, yet never as reliable as the infantile skirmishes between the Germans and Partisans: our play now resembled an arranged massacre under the watchful eye of a mute Dutch Battalion in the sky.

A noteworthy detail: I never wanted such a knife. However, no blade I had in my possession was fit for the purpose, and so, lest I be disqualified from the game (possibly: the exercise) right at the beginning, I was forced to reach for the one I've just described, the acceptable one. I therefore once more did the most disgusting thing that could have been done under the circumstances, a thing that may be of use in defining

intelligence, but certainly does signify its defeat: I adapted. At the same time, similar acts of adaptation assembled numerous quite personal defeats into one that was general, broadly calibrated.

Blade Four. Death

Autumn arrived on schedule, like a steam locomotive towing a coal truck of death. We left behind: childhood, Flashes & Storms, several wars and a lot more than a few dead; a great gurgling quagmire, a murky morass lorded over and shat on at will by pigeons. On the horizon were: end of primary school, completion of “peaceful reintegration of occupied areas”, somewhere round the corner girls, dragged out of their homes, pale in May light, then punk rock. I entered: my teenage years, reaching that unlucky number sometimes conspicuously absent from aeroplane seats, train compartments and forever locked hotel room doors. I entered, immediately after my return from the “little” school trip at the end of year seven – a week-long excursion on which most pupils have their first pint of beer and their last sight of Hrvatsko Zagorje – our flat on the seventh floor of the tallest tower in Split, to face death for the first time, head-on. The fly-bespittled TV screen suffered the footage of Princess Diana’s funeral, aroma of stuffed peppers spread from the air duct, and the window panes caught first droplets of rain when I learnt that, due to complications arising from severe pneumonia, retired sixty-seven-year-old battleship captain, the first man I remember, had died: my father’s father, who loved song-birds and had spent decades fattening his own death in them.

I was greeted by a box of medals that had glistened on my chest during those early war games, a watch with a strap that still smelt of sweat, and a brief notice, because Grandfather, although still in fact young, knew full well where he was headed to, and that a document drafted beforehand was the only thing he could reasonably rely on from beyond. The most important thing, however, I discovered on my own and took possession of without asking somewhat later, when the summer finally withdrew before the more appropriate season, the one during which the transitory nature of victory, spectacularly beaten, was routed by the now obvious magnitude of defeat. On a bland afternoon oppressed by the Southerly I opened a nightstand drawer, found it without looking and laid it on the table to stare long at it, folded, cramped in its silence.

Before me now was a classic, a thousand times seen, ever-present in houses unmarked by the cult and conspiracy of the blade, Swiss Army Knife – standard model, “Spartan” in red plastic, with two blades, a bottle and tin opener, a toothpick, tweezers, awl and a cork screw – the beautiful, refined tool whose very appearance was so much at odds with its often-emphasised original purpose, portended an always

duplicitous, in a bourgeois way, and at its core always sham, *culture of the blade*. This carefully honed, precision-assembled device in a way represented the *anti-knife*, perhaps nothing less than the anti-knife archetype. Everything about it was strictly controlled, its animal tamed, almost tender, a thermostat set to switch off the heater automatically well below the boiling point. Thus only death, a tangible, close-to-home death drove the abstract destructive in me into a small light box, a precious blood-red relief valve I have on me at all times, and do not separate from even as I write this, a valve that is opened from time to time and it leaves a deep cut in the skin, a furrow which fetters madness. This does not, of course, entail any such thing as “the end of history of knives”, far from it: the dialectics of the blade is, on a personal and a universal level, unstoppable. I stepped, however, with that generic, toned-down, weekend-blade which Borges would not have so much as noticed, and yet I loved it, most definitely and irreversibly into the space of perfidious reality of death, a time in which no slaughter can be symbolic anymore. It was, perhaps it can be put thus, my first *real* blade: it had a specific (anti-)existential weight which pinned me down, keeping me, by pressing down like a weight on my always unready body, on this earth.

The four blades eventually merged in some strange way into one full year of the blade, its equinox, an always finite yet never final sum – they stood for all the others that had arrived before them and would arrive after them, all those I leave unmentioned. It is unlikely, however, that any other would ever mean as much to me, that it would, somewhat brazenly, ask for *the mercy of shaping* by text. A defeat is forged while it is still hot, one should grab one’s ruin while it is still young. Just as then, autumn has arrived on schedule, the locomotive this time quite electric, with death crammed into electrical cables that sparkle as they scratch the atmosphere. Waters come down from the sky and stir dust, straggling flowers blossom, sticky rain smells in every boiling drop; to the sky ascend birds with rotten wings, birds carved out of the bosom in one stroke, and suddenly the blade folds, look: nothing gleams anymore.