

*Little Deaths*

By Ivana Sajko

Translated from Croatian by Rachael Daum

I start to write in the train on the way from Point A to Point B, going from a little seaside town to Berlin, I gaze out the window at the remains of the city, at the unfinished houses at the outskirts, at the industrial zone warehouses and the stunted trees along the river on whose branches, like bats, hang torn plastic bags, it's hard to be in this train car, it's hard to be in this skin, in the role of a passenger, I've forgotten how to travel, how to surrender to the favor and the disfavor of the railway, how to say goodbye, how long one actually stands backwards and watches Point A quickly disappear, how long then they stand stand stand stand and look at nothing, will they begin to cry?, I open my notebook, but I have no answer, I write "on the way from Point A to Point B, going from a little seaside town to Berlin, I gaze out the window at the remains of the city, at the unfinished houses at the outskirts, at the industrial zone warehouses and the stunted trees along the river..." and so on, I write the only way I know how, spinning and meandering around what's hurting me the most and what there's no help for, because behind my back it's shrinking to nothing, I dig through last summer, I dig through last winter, I dig through even the fall before that, lose myself in the sameness of those identical days, come back to afternoons spent on a damp bed sheet, dying from a hangover, hangovers caused by depression, depression caused by failure, boredom, the countryside, as well as by the lack of talent to employ my sorrow to make my masterpiece, I listen to my own silence that the seasons pass through, that everything goes to hell through while I die on the tenth on the hundredth on the two-hundredth day in a row and from my bed I watch the shadows that crawl into the room through the cracks in the blinds, stretch across the ceiling and drip down the empty white walls, I do nothing else, just look at the light on the walls or at the colors on the parquet or at my toes, too wooden to move, I spend years this way, I have no purpose, I leave no traces, except for newspaper articles that only describe human misery and are accordingly miserably paid, she smokes in the kitchen, all the while looking out the window, like I'm doing now, looking at the nothing that we've reduced ourselves to, and waits and waits and waits for me to leave which I need an eternity to do, because I take the liberty of procrastinating, of staring at those walls, the parquet, and toes, of feeling sorry for myself and repeating that there's no space there for me, just like there's no space for me anywhere, how I seek nothing and want nothing, except to write, but even that I

cannot and cannot and cannot do, that's why I'm silent, although that silence leaves its scars on no one but her, no one misses the books I haven't written except for me, that's our life, that was our life, that was a week ago, those were our days, that was my corpse in the apartment that I blamed my inhospitality on, but that I never left from, she called it a lair, though she never really let it turn into a lair, she cleaned it, cooked, and decorated the shelves with cacti, she tried, unsuccessfully, to be more cheerful, I didn't try anything, I kept myself going with the idea that I was just passing through, that I sought nothing from her and expected nothing, and that therefore I was not responsible for her dissatisfaction, I looked for excuses and took the brusque freedom that a man takes from a woman who supposedly doesn't need that freedom, I played the part of that man and tried to make from her that woman, one from whom my leaving would take away the right to be connected, and the reason to be unhappy, in a lair, in the company of a depressed drunkard, a so-called writer, a sometime journalist, between my cups and her ashtrays, in conditions that calmer souls would call an abyss the majority lived in, and the abyss the majority lived in had become our habit, our decade, her third cigarette in a row mechanically lit, without thinking, as she watches the silent scenes in the windows across the way that remind her of what we had never managed to become, as she watches our neighbors' harmonious choreography showing that they don't need to ignore things in order to survive, in their interiors decorated with books and pictures, ordered with the intent to last, as opposed to our neglected rooms that silently counted on our impermanence, as opposed to our silences that we feared to break so as not to hurt each other, as opposed to our fear of the end that inevitably overtook our every gesture, breath or cigarette, to that galloping defeat of love that would surrender without a fight, without any negotiations, in the throes of death, which is why every moment we spent together crossed its fingers behind its back, why we had stopped trying, I lay down and read the news, lay down and stared at pictures shot by wartime photographers, lay down and perished, supine, in all of those wars, lay down and asked myself why, the pages in the notebook blank, except the ones I'd written SOS on and laid back down in that bed, and slept in it, drank, ate, jerked off, died, but I never got up, she smoked and suffered, sometimes cried, translated other people's books, staying longer in other people's heads and other people's languages, so that we maintained maximum distance, she couldn't get closer to me, just as I couldn't get closer to her, we had already been complete strangers for a long time when she said what she said, between two puffs of smoke, and I rose at last from the bed and did what I had emptyly threatened I would do so many times, I left, I saved us both, because I couldn't listen to her great big "I don't love you," a beautifully- crafted sentence I'll never forget: "I don't love

you, I don't associate my little inner workings with you, I don't count on your body even in my moments of greatest loneliness, I don't believe in our photos even when we're smiling in them," so that I'd understand that I had no right to stay anymore, which had really taken me far too long to grasp, so I finally went from Point A to Point B, ashamed of the peace she'd suffered my presence with while I'd been certain that I was the one suffering hers, I said, "About ten days," and really I'd needed at least ten days to leave and find myself there—in the train that was climbing towards the northeastern continent still imagining embracing her in the station, where she hadn't shown up—the head I'd brought with me was an apartment I needed to get out of, take out the trash, repaint the walls and leave the keys, I needed to start from the beginning, start from zero, start from yesterday, resign myself to the fact that the inventory of all the past years wouldn't amount to anything anyway: "What are the tangible remains of our relationship, except ephemeral feelings and scattered time?" a friend asked me, "We've come into strange times where we see no value in anything but the capitalization of everything that exists, even relationships, and now the question hangs over us in neon: what have we contributed all these years to our society?", we contributed nothing, fortunately, not even a child, the tangible capital of our decade is the fourth page I write as the train takes me to Germany, the day is somber, already drenched at dawn in rain, I'm trying to find a way to describe it, to return my thoughts to it, I'm trying to find a voice in myself that would in tone and rhythm suit the damp and the grey of the landscape we're passing through, that would at last suit me, the man I became in lying down, the voice that might calmly narrate fires and ruins and departures, a voice that would know something more than me, for example why things happen the way they do or why we didn't manage to be happy or why we say about a man that he left when he's actually been driven away, what's that elegance for?, that same voice I've been searching for for years, not bent over my notebook, but looking at nothing, drunkenly looking at nothing, hung-over looking at nothing, hoping for a groundbreaking moment that would cover the first page in writing, I thought it was when I found a chain in my palm with the medallion my father had worn on his chest, which had arrived in the mail in a yellow bubble envelope, it was sent to me after he died in the shack that shared a wall with a pig pen, it was on a hill he guarded with a rifle, they only found him two weeks after his liver had failed, when the starving pigs had already eaten his feet, they took off his chain and sent it to me with a clipping from the local newspaper that says he was buried properly, I don't know how they found me, but they found me, I hadn't expected that it would hurt, but it hurt me terribly, above all the emptiness in the place where there should have been some unforgettable shared moment, I remembered our

last meeting, his bloodshot eyes and that medallion on his chest, he patted me on the back and repeated, “son... son... son...,” he didn’t ask about my brother, didn’t ask about my mother, maybe he had forgotten that she existed, maybe he wouldn’t even have remembered me if I hadn’t called my name at least ten times as I climbed the hill despite the warnings of the locals that he might shoot, there was a beating in my temples, he didn’t shoot, when I finally made it, it was clear to him who I was, he even smiled, he didn’t have teeth, I expected that after so many years he would say something important, he didn’t tell me anything, we got drunk, and I did again when the letter arrived, I prepared the obituary, hung the chain around my neck and got drunk, maybe his death could have made me put myself back together, to start to write, to—as she used to tell me—try, “at least a little bit,” but it didn’t, I was drunk when she told me that she didn’t love me, between two puffs of smoke and the shuddering movement as she tapped her cigarette into the ashtray: “how long?” “a long time” “how long?” “I don’t know” I didn’t ask her anything else, fuck it, I should have hated her, for some reason it seemed like it would be easier to get over the fact that aside from her there was no one else who loved me, I’d long since lost any trace of my brother, and I hadn’t visited my mother in years, I’d phone her and share thrilling details of the fiction I called my life with her, I was scared to call at her door and see an old woman I’d fail to answer to for anything, who, really, I wouldn’t be able to lie to in the face, I didn’t want to confirm what she had often said, “I’m not to blame for anything,” I was old enough to recognize a part of what I had once resented in her in myself, but I looked for the voice inside that I’d be able to write with to say that it’s all the same to me, for example, to forgive you, I looked for it ceaselessly, everywhere, and so I have come here, to seat number thirty-two in the train that will take the whole night to get to Munich where I’ll transfer to Berlin, where I’m traveling to, refusing to come up with any goal except to finally leave, to fill up my notebook, to write without premeditation like letters written to dear friends and I’ll find a voice that’ll be my reflection in the mirror where I stand now totally alone since my mother left unobtrusively, arranging in advance all the details of her burial, she even left money for the wreath, and the agency took care of the cleaning and sale of the apartment, in the end I never even went through her door, I didn’t walk through the apartment, I didn’t stop the clock that kept fixedly ticking even after her time was up, I didn’t open her closets, though I could imagine the layers of arranged bed sheets and towels that smelled like canvas warmed by an iron, I didn’t breathe in the smell that she left behind her, I only asked the agency as they were cleaning to take care of the photographs, they gave me a flat box with Christmas patterns on the lid, I still haven’t gotten around to opening it, but yesterday I packed my suitcase and left, no one

brought me to the station, I didn't kiss anyone goodbye, I didn't wave to anyone, in the apartment her imaginary body bent over the table, unmoving as furniture, and we had been like a bed and a closet made of solid oak, we took up space, nothing else, but I left, didn't I?, and now I'll change my city, I'll change my language, I'll change my head, and when I've spent my savings, I'll find something that calls itself work for money and cut myself off from ambitions, I'll try, at least a little, to open up my notebook, fill it with tiny handwriting and so bid farewell, in writing, I'll mill our oak to dust, just as I'd always tried to do, but the sentences had crawled across the white insides like ants in more or less the same variations, automatic and by habit, shaping nothing and no one, not bidding farewell to anything, from what vanished I couldn't write over again and become a person who admits failure and leaves with no hard feelings, a person who could from now on work under the table in some bakery in Kreuzberg or wander through Grunewald, a person who writes books in secret but won't kill himself if he doesn't write them, he won't, he doesn't care, "does it make sense?", I asked a friend if it made sense to leave, he answered that he was jealous of me, he called me to ask if I'd already bought my ticket, my cell phone rang while we sat in a café with a view over the cityscape, we were silent over our two espressos as though we didn't care, she nodded to me to answer the call, I answered him and kept studying her profile, soon I wouldn't be able to anymore, I told him I was leaving tomorrow, she didn't react at all, her gaze was lost in the bay, because of pollution no one swam there anymore, there were no more tourists or fish, the lake was just a picture from a postcard without writing on the other side, then she drank her coffee and left, again her back sagged into a bow as she lit a cigarette in front of the doors of the café, "we're not together anymore," I repeated to him as she walked away, like I couldn't believe it, I spent the morning leaving paper notes with messages between her things, but I wouldn't admit that to him, I was ashamed, "we're not together anymore, this city is just keeping us together a little while longer."

Before I fall asleep in the seat of the replacement train, I open my laptop, the rails illuminated by the lights of the locomotive appearing on the black square, the introductory sequence of the von Trier film begins, the soporific sound of a steam engine can be heard followed by the disquieting repetitive theme, the voice of Max von Sydowa intoning the hypnotic prologue: "I shall now count from one to ten, on the count of ten, you will be in Europa," I know the text by heart: "I say one, and as you focus your attention entirely on my voice, you will slowly begin to relax, two, your hands and fingers are getting warmer and heavier, three, the warmth is spreading through your arms, to your shoulders and your neck, four..." and so on,

all the way to ten, when I open my eyes and wake myself from my own hypnotic sleep, here I am sitting in a café at the station in Munich and taking notes in my notebook, leaning over it like a woman over a mirror, I look back, study the waitress engrossed in counting up coins, her face is pinched in a cotton mask, her glasses fogged up, I write it down and look again, a swarm of children is running under streams of water that hiss through a slit in the roof of the station dome, their cries breaking through the thick layer of noise, I write it down, from nearby conversations I hear that yesterday the police surrounded the whole building because of an alert that a man with a gun was spotted in a regional train, they searched the carriages, stopped the other trains, they didn't find him, everything is back to normal today, the rain is pouring vindictively, I want to write it all down, I want to write that everything is okay, the end of the world is behind us anyway, there are no automatic weapons on the horizon, there are only visible signs of another impending flood, it's early, at the other end of the line she's slowly being awakened by seagulls and the room she's opening her eyes in looks different, so sleepy, maybe she doesn't understand what's caused that difference, she'll look around and then realize I've left, I'm finally gone, the rooms hover in the air, nothing will press or choke them, maybe she'll check her phone to see if I've crossed the border, am I really far enough away, or maybe she's holding it anxiously in her hand and wondering why I haven't called her, maybe she's writing me a message right now, something short, "is everything ok?", I'll answer as simply as possible, "everything's fine," I won't tell her anything that I actually want to say, that I'd hoped that at the last minute she'd stop me from leaving at all, that leaving is an art form and that with the force of our circumstance I'd make something great, I'll hold off, I won't write her anything because she won't write me anything and it'll probably be years before I recover from all this, "count to ten," I tell you, "count to ten, when you open your eyes, you'll be in Munich," I count to ten, I feel the blunt presence of a hypothermic body that has sat for too long, and then stood for too long, my back has stiffened, my shoes have gotten wet, but I concentrate on the pen, I try to collect the scattered image of the station in the reflection of my black notebook, although at this point, in this hub I don't manage it, I think of my friend's words, "every image from real life might serve as possible literature, there is no meaningless situation that cannot serve to be recorded, there is just being too lazy to record it," I keep writing, around three in the morning we were unloaded at the station in Salzburg because of construction on the line, because of a storm that knocked over a couple of trees, because of locomotive failure, because someone threw themselves under the train, what we'd read about the day after tomorrow, I guessed, I didn't have a clue why they unloaded us, they didn't say, they pulled us out of the overheated

compartments and we waited on the open platform for more than three hours not knowing exactly when the replacement train would pick us up, it couldn't have been more than five degrees Celsius out and the wind was blowing, I took a sweater out of my suitcase, pulled it over my shirt and stuffed my palms under my armpits, there were no benches, some people were sitting on their suitcases or huddled in place, looked for a wind block behind ice pillars or huddled together in pairs embracing, caught in a transfer trap, our bodies were the only thing we could take shelter in, someone cursed that it was all because of these fucking migrants, the vending machine with snacks and energy drinks was sealed with a padlock, two men unsuccessfully tried to open it, they shook it and hit it, but nothing, because of these fucking migrants, as the newspapers reported, at night they came down from the mountains in groups in search of food, armed with kitchen knives or tools they'd stolen in raids on isolated cottages, it was reported that that's why valuables and women should be kept under lock and key, alternative police detachments had even been organized to comb the woods armed with shotguns, there were photos in the newspapers of these village heroes with round red faces, bloated bellies, camouflage clothing and rifles, and barbed wire in the background whose razors sliced the necks of deer and wild boars, but it brought a sense of security, people were perishing again on European borders, which was apparently good news, and so we stood, paced, sat, or squatted, and then the two men got a piece of iron from somewhere and smashed it against the vending machine, with a few hits they opened it, took some chocolate and Red Bull and went to the other side of the platform and lit cigarettes, no one tried to stop them, they were probably waiting for security to come, but when after about ten minutes no uniform had turned up, one woman went over to the broken machine, took a bag of cookies and gave them to the child clinging to her leg, then someone else came, and then a third helped themselves, it was getting colder, I squatted and got up again trying to find my own shelter in my body thrown onto this random platform, I dreamt that I was in bed and, say, reading a book, and I wrote a text: "Berlin is a lot further off than it seems," my friend wrote back right away, he wasn't sleeping: "my dear Iv.," he responded, "maybe the discomfort of flying is a good way to stretch the world back out from the narrowness it's been squeezed into, maybe the construction on the rails is a secret name of that expansion..." between four and six in the morning I did really see an expanded picture of my own situation, it was a scene from my memory that was superimposed over the current scene, the place I was standing was no longer the station in Salzburg, but the border crossing between Croatia and Serbia, a one-story building with a modest customs office and a little space to sell tickets, I'm standing there with the same black notebook ready to write something down, an empty train

pulling into the platform in Tovarnik that was heading to Austria, a few thousand people already on their feet and clutching their bags and their babies, waiting twelve hours now, twenty hours now, a few days now, they're pushing towards the wagons, one woman in the crowd collapses from exhaustion, her son prevents her from being trampled with his own body, the police pushes the mass from the rails and tries to organize boarding, first mothers with children, and then the rest, the majority will remain in Tovarnik today, no one understands anyone, language is useless, only fingers indicating numbers work, I'm still standing with my open notebook ready to write something down, but I don't know where to start, and then in the foggy windows of one of the wagons someone's shaking hand starts to write a message on the glass, SOS AIR, SOS AIR, SOS AIR, the windows in the wagons are armored security windows, there's no more air in the crowded train heading into the depths of Europe, that's how the film by Lars von Trier ends too, the iron body of the steam engine pitches from a bridge into the river, the main character Leopold Kessler tries to open the lever on the door and swim from the cabin sinking under the water, he hits the door, swims to the barred window, takes a breath and again dives to swim to the door, he pulls at it and hits it, he goes back to the window for another breath, but the bars have submerged, on his drowning face we see an expression of unspeakable suffering, the narrator's voice counts the seconds until his death, at the count of ten the lifeless body of Leopold floats in the submerged wagon, "the force of the stream has opened the door," Max von Sydow narrates at the end of the film, "and is leading you on, above your body people are still alive, follow the river as days go by, head for the ocean that mirrors the sky, you want to wake up to free yourself of the image of Europa, but it is not possible."

I could travel like this forever, without any destination, never disembarking from the train to Berlin, but staying on longer, on the railway that runs to the sandy beaches of the Baltic Sea, to Stralsund, even further, over the bridge, to the white rocks of Rügen that dive from time to time from hundreds of meters high into the sea, I could dive into the sea and like Leopold Kessler float onward, break through the Kiel Canal to the North Sea and the ocean beyond, float alongside giant jellyfish, leave the story behind me of a man traveling through Europe in the midst of yet another crisis, who enters the train certain that it doesn't matter why he's leaving if there's no reason to stay, the story of a man who collapses into his notebook and in the collapse clings to the chaotic notes, each of which opens a new abyss he could fall into, a man who still hasn't been sentenced to open the flat box filled with photographs from his mother's drawer, although he's dying of curiosity and fear all at the same time, a man who



would so gladly break into tears, but repeats to himself that he has to look forward even though before him there is nothing to see, a man who decides he has to change, wake up, get up, move, make the first concrete step towards change, go to Berlin even when all of his peers have long since come back from Berlin, leaving there their scholarships and plans for a better world, so at last, very late, but least I'm doing something, I write, at least I flinched, at least I moved, even if it's in the wrong direction, now I can disappear into the wilderness of the north, no one will notice, maybe just a text from a friend that will remain unread, I'm a jellyfish, I'm a lazy sea creature that carries electricity, it doesn't matter where I'm going, anyway I've lost all the numbers in Berlin I could call, though I wouldn't have called and I didn't, because really I don't know what we'd talk about, what would I have to say to them at all except that long ago I'd declared the end of the world and since then I've been searching for work, we used to write petitions, yes really, for a self-sustaining economy, we organized demonstrations for freedom and equality, led workshops on passive resistance and disseminated brochures that depicted each new election as a chance for radical change that never came, when politics still belonged to everyone, we used to come up with strategies to overcome the crisis of democracy and led long hours of debate on dubious topics, for example, on the European Union, though European cohesion even then was barely perceptible, its humanity was even then mostly discursive, and then it would disappear from the discourse altogether like a meaningless notion, it was clear that any idea of collective salvation would be overridden by the urge that everyone must save themselves as they know and are able to, quite natural, very human, so he retracts into his shoulders, hunkers between the walls, lowers the blinds on the windows, shuts down the computer, learns to forgive himself for not saving the world and retreating into his own head just as I retreat now into my notebook imagining that I'm falling into the sea and sinking into the dark waters of the Baltic, as then into the dark waters of the Mediterranean, and we kept speculating about a better future hoping that no one would die in vain and that there's a death that would draw the line, that there's a death that would break the habit, a sacred death that would touch souls and wake every future division to make it monstrous and unacceptable, I hoped for this long and stubbornly, and in all of our conversations Europe managed to maintain the reputation as the lesser evil, an object of love and loyalty, even when it systematically produced uneducated, hungry, and disappointed masses that took revenge on us at the polls because they couldn't accept optimism and hope, which were inedible, despite their distrust our metaphors and dysfunctional concepts stood like European values, we called on the civilizational success of seventy years' peace on European soil, which was an obvious, if

popular, lie, which had persisted over those seventy years although those elections existed for the proclamation of a long and bloody war fought on our soil, exported from our soil, and every once in a while returned to that same soil, it took me time to realize how I myself maintained the illusion of that false success, from politeness, from best intentions and, finally, for the sake of mere existence, I own my statements and I held off on the state of emergency that had already occurred, with my own faith, hope, and positivity I exerted violence on facts, produced hours of risk-free thinking and used language without attrition, I wrote articles for online magazines that no one read, trying with the originality of my references to further reduce the circle of my potential audience, I took part in discussions where there was no more possibility for discussion because we unanimously agreed with one another or just differed in details that revealed our useless pettiness, I perpetuated the idea of eternal and inefficient conversation, no one forced me and I could have stopped anytime, because I was paid by the day for it, I hid my cynicism and my doubt and my confusion and my fear, but despite that I never failed to mention that above all else the dialogue with that same fear was necessary, that finding common goals in the crisis of neoliberalism was necessary, that an exchange of ideas that were, it's true, hardly comparable was necessary, even when I would think it through the delegate, but I repeated dialogue, dialogue, dialogue, we all repeated dialogue, what was laughable and naïve because we were systematically losing our privileged position from which we could have even offered deliberation, we were in the minority, we kept talking about the better tomorrow, while the majority was only interested in the shitty today, the shitty and difficult today which had started before dawn and ended with dusk, which had promised nothing but relentless competition in the era of political-economic catastrophes, my father had then long been on night duty at the cement factory on the island, where reigned the local hierarchy that never moved left or right, a different future except than the shitty one that didn't go there, he haunted dusty facilities with a rifle and a bottle of rakija, every night, even Saturday to Sunday, for irregular pay which he never managed to even fix his teeth with or tile the four walls that surrounded his house and separated him from the pigs, my father lived under a roof of tin shingles tied together with wire, at the ass end of the world between the antennae of a mobile operator on the top of a hill and the factory at the foot of it, and the one thing that could dislodge him out from his apathy was when he managed to shoot a cat on the brick wall, rejoicing in the suffering of the animal with the same innocence he'd rejoice in the first figs with, I would have just been a little pussy to him, best case funny and harmless, utterly useless to hold any sort of conversation with on his important topics, in due course I ignored these paradoxes, cleansed

my language till it was see-through and made a living from my wages, I restored dialogues between nemeses, dialogues between fathers and sons, dialogues between long-time enemies, dialogues between dialogues, in faith and the best intentions, they applauded my useless ideas in half-empty congress halls staffed with interpreters whispering into microphones, here I am in the auditorium, I hear my name, I straighten up in my chair, I give a discreet sign to the moderator who called my name that I'm present, he announces me, lists my educational qualifications, describes me as a journalist and a socially engaged author deeply interested in democratic projects, the audience claps, then I go, climb up to the podium and shake hands with the moderator, open my laptop, I start with questions, I always start with questions: "how far out of our comfort zones are we willing to stretch when it comes to the public interest?, how strongly can we resist the cynicism that nothing can be done?, because we can! we can always do something!", I find answers to the toughest questions with ease: "we'll turn to the people's feelings, their distrust, their insecurity, that's where the foundations of the irrational are that will move them to action," I say in front of thirty people with headphones, I use references from films and art, I describe photographs and stumbled-upon images, in this case projecting a photo onto the wall with the intention of interpreting it with a predictable metaphor: "on the white surface we observe stains that resemble geographical topography, they're black, floating in space, a group of people arrive to greet them, wearing red clothing, we don't see their whole bodies, just the upper torso, as though their legs have been sawed off or they're walking through water,"<sup>1</sup> I pause, allowing enough time for the metaphor to sink in, "one of them is close to a stain, but will it manage to catch it?", the stain resembles a continent or my father's island, the person in red waves making to grasp a rock on the shore, but my father raises his rifle and aims it forward rejoicing in the shot, it's not murder, he's just eating figs, he's just defending the cement factory, they're applauding me, then I applaud them too, I covered myself with a glass bell and polished my getup to a high gloss, I fight for a better world with nicely polished words, I believe that I'm a good person with good intentions, I hope that the others saw it too and the hope I call activism, I'm aware that I'm not changing the world, but my presence in it, my practical empathy and theoretical support—unlike, for example, the presence of my father and his practical cruelty and his utter disinterest—act as a sort of consolation, and then by chance I find myself on that border, on the platform in Tvornik, with a black notebook in my hands, an open blank page and pen, in front of the wagon with the armored security windows, which the hand of one woman shakily

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<sup>1</sup> The description refers to the work of Siniša Ilić, "Changes on the Crust," a mural in the Multimedia Cultural Center in Split, Croatia.

writes SOS on the glass of, through the transparent trace of the letters I see sandwiched bodies pressing against the window from behind, clutching an unconscious baby whose little body is stuck to the glass, and what do I do?, I turn my head, tears uncontrollably falling from my eyes, I can't look, I stop breathing, I breathe deeply and then I stop breathing, I don't know what else to do, I want to be there in solidarity, I want my own suffocation to make their suffocation easier, what a little pussy, my father would have said.

One man from the crowd threw a stone, there's always one that makes the first move to awake the courage in others to follow them, he grabbed a stone from the ground and with all his might hurled it at the glass, the stone glanced off it leaving a crack, and then a second one flew at it, another man standing right by the wagon held a stone in his hand and with all his might hit the glass to break a hole that air could pass through, all at once the body of the wagon swayed and the horizon filled with bloody heads, because it wasn't just stones glancing off the side of the wagon hitting the crowd on the platform, but the police too with their batons were beating people away from the train, I still wasn't breathing, but I had the feeling that my heart was about to explode in my chest, shots were heard being fired into the air, screams, and again shots, I threw myself to the ground and the trapped air flew out of my lungs, the next moment my body swelled of its own accord, I breathed in opening my mouth wide and spreading my ribs to get as much oxygen as possible into my lungs, there was a burning in my chest, it's easy now to set a timeline to what happened, but in the moment it happens, there's no structure at all, there are no elements doing anything, no time to do anything, no clearing where someone is watching from, no me either, I was just a man listening to commands, I hunkered on the ground and my conscience bites at me that I'm breathing, all that I had seen before, on the news, in pictures, in nightmares that suggest the inevitable nature of this repulsive world, at the tragedy of war which is ultimately the tragedy of travel and accurately maps the route of human to inhuman, from their living room to this overcrowded train, war is transmigration, everything else is the relationship of technology and death, in the station in Tovarnik I lay among the garbage and people who had come to the point where it was difficult to tell them apart, on the dirty platform which, ironically, the flag of the European Union flapped over, by a board which had Croatia and the EU written on it, which a discarded tracksuit sodden with someone's mortal weariness had been thrown over, I was partially hidden by the bag of an older woman, who like me had obediently shriveled up on the ground strewn with large stones and it seemed to me that I was falling through one of those photographs that filled the news every day, but their contents remain outside mental

and emotional reach because they cross every border of the imaginable, I fell through one of those photographs, it couldn't be recorded in my notebook, it was like skin stuck to a reality that was difficult to believe in, I only remember that after one shot the scream stopped, it turned into broken crying and invocations, I could hear the voices of frightened children, I turned, slowly, everyone was on the ground, the police were taking some men away, cursing them, the glass of the carriage was cracked, I couldn't see the woman and child inside anymore, I tried to get up to see better, but from behind someone grabbed me by the elbow and bent it till I had to double over, are you a journalist, asked the policeman, I answered that I was, I had ID, he didn't ask to see it but turned me towards the parking lot, "there's a woman with a child," he didn't answer, just walked behind my back still holding onto my arm so that I couldn't turn around, from helplessness I started to cry, I tried to stop, but he kept pushing me forward, "they're going to suffocate," we walked through the parked busses, he asked me how I got there, "by taxi from Vukovar," I answered through tears, he was still behind me and I didn't see his face, then we stopped in front of a car, he opened the door for me and said that his colleague would take me back, then he put his hand on my head and pushed me down so that I had to sit in the vehicle, the door closed, through the window I saw his belt, did I want to go straight to the train station or to a hotel?, to a hotel, I responded, and the car took me to the hotel, reality still crossed every border of the imaginable, all at once I was a man riding comfortably in the back seat, watching the landscape and crying, drinking a double shot of pear rakija before he even gets to his room, drinking a second double shot of pear rakija before he even gets to his room, drinking a third or a fourth double shot of pear rakija and stumbling to his room, vomiting over the toilet, crying and vomiting over the toilet, slapping himself, slapping himself harder to calm himself, to punish himself, to resolve himself, and the slap pleases him so much that he hits his head against the wall covered in tiles, first carefully, then harder, he hits his head hard against the wall, then he hits his palm against his cheekbone, he hits himself a few more times to feel the soothing pain, against his temples, his chin, and only then he goes into the shower to wash the proof of the Tovarnik mud off of himself, and he breathes with full lungs, and every time he breathes in, there's a burning in his chest.

What's a man to do who's fallen through a photograph he saw on the news, in the newspapers, which he thought he'd recognize well, and then finds himself face to face with someone's open wound or burn that is beyond healing and no one's sympathy can alleviate, that could be me someday too, since someone else's death is always the possibility of my

own death, as though someone else's death is the obvious evidence of my life that now separates me from death in the fullness of wonder at these fundamental opposites, but by sheer chance or even by design I'm not one who dies in this moment, calculated collateral damage, not yet, I'm lying in bed and open up a report by Aris Messinis in Mosul, then Shah Marai in Kabul, then Abdulmonam Eassa in Ghouta, Russian planes begin aerial attacks on the eastern part of the city in the name of Assad's regime, Eassa hops into an ambulance and goes to the scene of the attack, in the middle of the street lie a father and son, they're on fire, an upturned motorcycle by them, Eassa helps the paramedics put out the fire on their bodies, "it's horrible, it's terribly hard," he says, "I photograph them, but it hurts," some of the photos are covered with a black filter, but if I click twice I'll be able to see them, I don't want to do it, but I do it anyway, I don't tell anyone what I saw, I couldn't describe it anyway because what's in the picture isn't in the picture, the motorcycle, father, and son aren't the point of the scene, these pictures are meaningless if there aren't other pictures included with them, ones where, for example, they're tossing a ball to each other, where they're laughing, singing, or praying, the moment I look at them in no longer counts as a moment, "a photograph has two dimensions, like a television screen, which you cannot pass through,"<sup>2</sup> writes Jean Genet, and despite the detail of the photograph, it does not make one a witness, because to be a witness one would have to actually fall into the picture, crawl under the skin of reality, go down the street the photograph shows, skipping over the dead lying on it just as Genet does walking through Shatila in 1982, he approaches the body of a man about thirty years old disintegrating in the sun, his face turned toward the earth, his ankles bound with rope, Aris Messinis takes a similar photograph, a man in socks on a road in Mosul, a rope tied around his ankles and the upper part of his body covered with plywood, but again, what is in the picture isn't in the picture, that which is in front of one is again not there, the absence of life in every one of these bodies is the equivalent of the absence of the body itself, Genet writes, its retreat, the absence of its story, "did they drag him down the street with this rope?" Genet queries an unknown man that is abruptly standing by him, "I don't know," the man answers him, "who bound him?" asks Genet, "I know," the man answers, "one of Haddad's people?" "I don't know," "Israelis?" "I don't know," "Phalangists?" "I don't know," "did they know him?" "yes," "did you see how he died?" "yes," "who killed him?" "I don't know," the man answers and leaves, and I'm still lying in bed with my laptop on my stomach, I slipped my hand between two shirt buttons and pinched the flesh on my chest, I

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Genet, "Four Hours in Shatila," *The Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1983, 3-22, pg. 47

took it between my thumb and forefinger, hard, and then turned it like a screw, I discovered what animals in captivity know, hitting their head against the bars or biting their own tail until their own pain calms them, I'm searching for the page of a French news agency, a report by Bülent Kiliç from the crossing town Akçakale on the border between Turkey and Syria, a border where the police surely already know him, his ID card has an AFP symbol, for some time already he has been reporting on the movement of populations in border areas, especially along the line separating Akçakale from Tell Abyad, where the administration changed in 2011 from the Kurdish fighters to the soldiers of the so-called Free Syrian Army and ISIS units, empty plastic bottles scattered around the crossing point evidence the long hours of waiting, the temperature in May is already climbing over 30 degrees Celsius, and there isn't a single tree around, just sand dunes surrounded by a wire fence, at first there are no people, Kiliç writes, when from the Syrian side suddenly there appear a few, and then thousands, women carrying children, and men with sacks, suitcases, and fat blankets thrown over their shoulders, coming in like a tide and pouring down the hillside to the border raising clouds of dust, the movement resembles a massive scene in a giant Hollywood production, observes Kiliç, after five minutes clusters of bodies hang on the wire fence, while at the foot of it a hole appears, a small, narrow hole which maybe one person could crawl through, but now a whole nation is passing through, at maximum magnification I observe the expressions on their faces and the direction of their gaze, one man leaning on the shoulders of a second man reaches his left hand high over the heads of the rest of the people, and in his palm, like bread, he holds an infant wrapped in a white rag, on the other side of the fence and the other side of the border, a hand with outstretched fingers waits to take the child, the eyes of the first man strain toward that hand, Kiliç stays and serves in Akçakale even after hundreds of children have been transferred, because about 1500 people and more wait for the Turkish police to open the border, "from the place I stand I can see the whole border line," he wrote, "I can see the Kurdish fighters approaching the border, I hear the sound of lethal gunfire..."

In the train I'm traveling in to Berlin, time doesn't exist, although I'm traveling forward I'm going backward, it seems to me that at the station in Gesundbrunnen I'd be able to hop out into a gentle October day useless for literature, where we're just two ordinary people who sometimes hold hands, it's not even noon yet, we've taken the Ringbahn to Treptower Park, and then we walked along the river bank where luxury apartments have been built for wealthy families who have immigrated from southern Germany, we'd have gone along the remains of the amusement park rotting in the weeds in the middle of Plänterwald surrounded

by a fence which has no entry written on it, over the treetops, forty-five meters high, juts out a wheel covered in ivy which children had once ridden, the highest point probably treasonously revealed what was over the Western side of the wall, but the wheel hasn't turned in years, the machinery has rusted, the gondolas have filled with water, we walked around the fence till we found a spot we could jump over, we couldn't see a damn thing, we passed the Santa Fe Express, its paint was peeling off, we left behind us the giant dinosaurs on their backs and the plastic swans floating on the pond covered in algae when a fox appeared before us, "stop," she grabbed my elbow, I thought we'd run into security guards, but then I saw the animal standing in the high grass, all but invisible between the warm colors of the autumn leaves, its back was tensed, it looked at us and growled so that its fangs protruded from beneath nervous lips, it occurred to me that it could be rabid, I recalled a story from my childhood when rabid foxes had descended into populated areas driven by a madness that had made them careless, suddenly appearing in courtyards or playgrounds, biting dogs, passers-by or even children, and in so doing sparked a retaliation the whole neighborhood took part in, even the military, dozens of soft orange corpses succeeded in bringing a sense of safety back to the locals, rabies was the most awful of all diseases and worst of all deaths, between the bite and the first symptoms there was enough time for a person to imagine their own incurable end that would come for them in precise stages, first they'd become melancholy and quiet, then they'd stop eating, they'd stop drinking, every sip of water and every drop of saliva would make them feel like they were choking, then their muscles would start to convulse and their mouth would foam, they'd start to suffocate and yank the straps that bound them to the bed, medical staff would only be able to wipe away the foam from their mouth, taking care not to be bitten, there was no cure, for hundreds of years there had been experiments with ground-up brains of infected bunnies or with the development of cell cultures from hamster kidneys which were used in an attempt to vaccinate the animals, but still every now and again a new victim would fall silent and melancholic, withdrawing into themselves, and the first time they fearfully refused water, it was a sign that there was no saving them, I quickly grabbed a forked branch and waved it at the fox, "what are you doing!", behind the bristling fox the damp snouts of its cubs prayed, they were already big, but they still looked fearfully at my branch, "you're such an asshole," she took me by the hand and slowly we walked away, when I turned around they were already gone, "I wanted to save your life," she laughed and tousled my hair like I was a child, I don't remember any more than that, I try to recall the smell and the colors of those woods, some new detail of the decay of the train or carousel, a sentence or a gesture we exchanged before we ourselves fell



silent and melancholically withdrew into ourselves and so here we are now, in a mutual distance of some six hundred kilometers which grows larger every minute as she goes through her morning rituals as though she remembers nothing, as though we'd never been those two ordinary people who sometimes held hands, who could but didn't need to speak, eat, sleep, fuck, in whom everyday thoughts reside and have no idea that we ought to be grateful for that, on the way out of Treptower Park we ate falafel, in the evening we went to the Lichtblick Cinema to watch "Wings of Desire" for who knows which time, we sat in the last row of the miniature theater without taking off our coats, the familiar black-and-white scenes flitted across the screen: Bruno Ganz as the Angel Daniel sits on the shoulders of the huge sculpture at the top of the Siegessäule looking over the cleft city, Solveig Dommarin as Marion spins on the circus trapeze high over the heads of the audience, Peter Falke orders coffee from a trailer parked on a muddy field in front of the bunker on Schönebergerstraße, here and there documentary scenes of the bombed streets break in, a few seconds showing a burning tram or ruins where two boys are lying as though asleep, Wenders sometimes throws in a shot of nature, like a tree growing out of the calm waters of the Wannsee, we leave the hall after midnight and go downhill along Torstraße, if we found an open bar along the way, we'd have a drink and talk about important things, and then completely forget all of it, all of it, almost a whole decade will go by before I start to collect the crumbs of that autumn and it wasn't until the train to Berlin that I remember that before the end of the film she repeated into my ear what Marion had said to Daniel: "wir sind jetzt die Zeit,"<sup>3</sup> and I had smiled at her repetition and taken her hand.

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<sup>3</sup> "We are now the times."