

# A girl opens the door to his house for me

and I see him unexpectedly – his hands busy around the stove – in a light green sweater, smiling. The movement of his hand beckons me to sit. I look at the row of videos by the television; my first thought, curiously, is: could there, among all these tapes, possibly be a film by Yilmaz Guney? And that very instant, I give up asking him.

2) Efendi Spahic (the Imam of the Bey's Mosque) had three children and a grandchild that were killed by the shells that fell on Dairam. Before that, his wife too; as if God had taken her to Him, to protect her. So she wouldn't see. Here's what I think: there are neither major nor minor tragedies. Tragedies exist. Some can be described. There are others for which every heart is too small. Those kind cannot fit in the heart.

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*Imam Bey's Mosque, Corpse, Kids, and Curfew were translated by Ammiel Alcalay. Shelter, Massacre, Fires, The Grave of a Shahid, A Comparatively Quiet Day, and Death by Freezing were translated by Ivana Djordjevic and appeared in Erewhon I (1994).*

3) I first saw this man on television: I trembled at the abundance of spiritual power by which he gathered sorrow into himself; he seems younger to me now, as he nears the table, putting down a pack of cigarettes, holding an ashtray, offering me one and saying: "I liked tobacco once, then I stopped, and now I don't smoke anymore." He speaks softly. When I speak softly, my voice becomes hoarse because of the cigarettes. I stare at him attentively, searching for a sign to reveal the power that distinguishes him. We speak; he says: "People can be divided into the stronger and the weaker, but you can't chastise the weak. There are reasons to justify their weakness: physical constitution, for instance. And a lot of other reasons. I could never slaughter a sacrificial lamb, a *kurban*, with my own hands, nor would I ever have the strength to do such a thing. So be it." Pointing out his own weakness, he shattered my naive conviction that signs of his strength could be seized at a glance.

4) We speak; he doesn't improvise. His answers to the questions I pose have been thought out in advance. It seems that, in his solitude, he has thought through everything. That's why you feel a lightness as he speaks, his clasped fingers hugging his knees. His thinking is literary, visual. His answers are complete so that, gradually, the conversation unveils a small lexicon of the Imam's solitude.

**Army:** The Sarajevo soldiers are hunters, or so the story goes: like hunters, they go about their business all week and then, on Saturday, go into the woods and kill a rabbit before heading back home; that's how the soldiers are, or so the story goes – they sit in cafés and then hop into their fancy cars and head for the top of Bistrik, by Mt. Trebevic, to shoot.

**Bosnian Muslim:** I think of Tolstoy. He writes of Hadji Murad – awe-struck by his rugged strength, and says: "He's like grass in the fall, the hay carts pass over it, but when the wheels move on, every blade rights itself again." That's how the Bosnian Muslims are: blades of fall grass.

**Mudjahadeen:** The West has no idea what this means. In translation, it means "fighter." For them, he's a terrorist who throws bombs in Paris cafés. But he fights to fulfill divine justice; for him, killing in revenge is a capital sin. The West can't see this from its apathetic heart.

**Islam:** Faith in expansion, but without imposition; it has no

missionaries. An I that doesn't pronounce itself, while leaving its abundant, human traces everywhere. And that is the trait of great people.

5) I'm drawn to his measured way of speaking. All the questions I put to myself about this man have been betrayed. I call this, for myself and for lack of a better term, divine tolerance. As we pause – while Efendi Spahic gets up, pulls the door of the oven open, and turns back towards me with two pears on a tray – I take a look at the prints on the wall, one copper tint, all with motifs from Sarajevo's Old City. This is where I saw it, so that's why I'm appending it to the lexicon of our conversation here.

**The Spirit of Sarajevo:** Those Bosnian cafés come to mind: on the walls, the inevitable pictures with the same motifs: an old man with a fez holding a findjan; merchants gathered around a public fountain. There (in those cafés), pensioners in black berets with white packs of Drina cigarettes used to come by from their shops or from Friday prayers, and junkies used to come by, because of the cheap Coca-Cola. Sarajevo's tolerance, usually associated with the equilibrium of worshippers holding different faiths in the same narrow streets, simply illustrates the naivete of historians. This is truly tolerance, and no one has written even one word about it: the equilibrium of Bosnian motifs in a picture on the wall with Coca-Cola; the same water boiling coffee for the old man in the beret and the long-hairs in jeans shooting up in the shadow of a minaret. This wasn't of importance to anyone. Historians haven't, for example, written anything about the Old City's tradition of naive art. I peel the pear; the conversation moves on to a more serene level; I distinguish yet another concept, and enter it into the lexicon.

**Emir Kusturica:** He is like a cow who has given a lot of milk and then, banging his foot into the pail, knocks it down and spills everything, says Efendi Spahic. When we part, I go out into the street calmer than when I had come. As Efendi Spahic spoke of his misfortune, his eyes – as if from cold – narrowed gently. Nothing more. I went out with the scent of fall pears in my nostrils.

6) It's sunny, and the city is still enveloped in fog. Right at the bottom of the long, elegant steps to the Municipal Museum, Bokun sits: with his hair wrapped in a pony-tail, dark glasses and a black leather jacket, he looks like Michael Douglas's resigned

double. Saturday: the weekend Chetniks are up on the hills. I tell him it's time we got off the street; but he waves his hand: "This is my last cigarette. I want it to have the respect it deserves. And I can only give it that on the street. It's only here that I'm alone enough," he says.

7) I try to compare Bokun's solitude with the solitude of Efendi Spahic. I run out of breath walking uphill.

Reader, if you go up Abdullah Kaukji street another 50 meters, when you turn around, you'll see Sarajevo in fog, a cosmos of sorrow; over the fog, you can see the rooftops of the Old City and, right above, the minaret of the Bey's Mosque, isolated from the terrestrial, quotidian fog.

### **CORPSE**

We slowed down at the bridge  
to watch some dogs tear apart  
a human corpse by the river  
and then we went on

nothing in me has changed

I heard the crunch of snow under tires  
like teeth biting into an apple  
and felt the wild desire to laugh  
at you  
because you call this place hell  
and you flee from here convinced  
that death outside Sarajevo does not exist

### **KIDS**

S.: "Harun, come on, get into the house, it's grenading outside."

### **SHELTER**

I dart across the road to avoid a sniper bullet from the hill and run to meet the news photographers; secure in their shelter, they go about their work. Should a bullet hit me, they would take photographs so much more attractive than my life that – at that moment – I am no longer sure whom I should hate more: the Chetnik sniper or these apes with their Nikons. To the former I

**SEMEZDIN  
MEHMEDINOVIC**

*Imam Bey's Mosque  
and other texts*

am a target pure and simple, whereas the latter confirm my utter powerlessness and intend to profit from it too. For all of them now in Sarajevo, death is a job to do. Life has shrunk and reduced itself to gestures. How touchingly comic is the gesture of a man who covers his head with a newspaper before running across the same road, fearful of sniper bullets. Bernard-Henri Lévy has described the war in Sarajevo as a typical medieval siege. Yes, but present-day means of destruction are so much more devastating, which means that in this town you have no shelter; every second you are in peril of death. The feeling of powerlessness comes from the occupation of the space of my mortality by my own body, and mortality, due to constant shelling, is the most frequent thought here. Mental survival requires as comforting a shelter as can be found. Experience has shown that the most efficient shelter is made of books. In our part of town a shell hit the gas main and by morning the disgusting smell of hissing gas had saturated the street. Experts said this was very dangerous, and the next day we used books to bar all access to gas. There were plenty of books there, as the nuclear shelter that had served as library storage in peacetime had been emptied. When a shell falls, the books act as a net to collect the fragments. An acquaintance of mine owes his life to the fact that his wife used to work in the Marxist library, where she could have free copies of Lenin, Engels and Kardeljs. That books save lives is a typical Kafkian metaphor turned reality for us. A poet in Sarajevo built a bunker out of books; on the front window, as a sentinel observing the front line, stands a thick book with an expensive-looking glossy dust jacket: *To Victory with Tito*. What an unusual choice of book to serve as inscription and protect the poet's home. I have an inscription myself: a friend has given me a stylised drawing of a sword and a rifle framed by something written in Arabic script, copied on a fax machine. True, I used to think that an inscription had to be written by hand, and that it was as living writing that it had the power to protect. This way a fax machine mediates between me and God, and I believe myself safe.

**MASSACRE**

Pictures of the large-scale massacre in the Ferhadija mosque. Pictures of the dead and butchered have turned into advertisements for war. Who cares that these people have names:

they are no more than images. Television has translated them into its own cold language. The camera empties an image of its psychological content and turns it into information. All the ensuing massacres were merely the same image multiplied. The world, therefore, sees what is going on here. Does anyone in the whole wide world grieve with us? No one. Because television knows what human nature is really like, that there is no compassion in it as long as tragedy does not touch us personally. The sense of tragedy arrived with the coffins draped in the American flag, not before. Not through television reports from Vietnam. We are experiencing massacres; we grieve for our own tragedy. That is all. Perhaps we could derive meagre consolation from the fact that we are more aware of the nature of the media. We see through it as we see the inside of a computer drawing of a car, undistracted by the purplish glow of the monitor screen. The rest is scenery: a CNN cameraman, unreal in his novelty and completeness, looks down a blind alley in ruins at Bistrik. There is no one in the deserted street, just flames emerging from the door of a burning store.

## **FIRES**

Having finished photographing the Vijecnica in flames, Kemo Hadzic was wounded by a shell fragment on his way home. It is hard to avoid mysticism in a war. My first thought was: his wounding is a warning. Kemo says he felt no pain as long as he was in shock. To feel pain, one must be conscious of pain. Whereas a state of shock, as long as it lasts, is a kind of stay in the beyond. It is also a plunge into the world of one's own art: what else, indeed, was this photographer doing, walking round the burning library, looking for the ideal angle and good lighting, capturing the waters of the Miljacka in his wide-angle lens. What was this but an artist's passionate desire to wrench its savage beauty from the horrid scene of death, to approach it from beyond. The artist's need to step into the unknown is fraught with risks, but it is on such a step that the power of art rests. Perhaps the shell fragments were a punishment for this heretical step? But perhaps I am just being esoteric, prompted by wartime anxieties, so that in a boy – whom Kemo, in shock, follows to the hospital and whom he only notices later as the boy fans his sweating face with a folded newspaper – I recognise a being who

does not belong to this reality. Because of that angelic gesture.

### **THE GRAVE OF A SHAHID**

A body before burial. I watch a kneeling soldier; he is still a boy. A rifle rests in his lap. The muttering of guttural Arabic voices is heard. Sorrow collects in dark circles under the eyes. Men wipe their faces with open palms. During the rite I sense God's presence in every thing. When this is over, I'll take a pen and draw up a list of all my sins. Right now, everything in me resists death. I slide my tongue along my teeth and feel the taste of a woman's lipstick. No one is crying. I am silent. A cat jumps over the shadow of a minaret.

### **A COMPARATIVELY QUIET DAY**

1) When a dozen shells have hit "the central parts of the city," when crossroads have been targeted by snipers, and the number of casualties is low, reports from Sarajevo say that it has been a comparatively quiet day. People are comparatively normal or comparatively insane now that they have accepted death as a statistical figure. What we have in Sarajevo is, in fact, a surplus of death.

2) An agitated young man begs to be allowed to jump the water queue. He points to a plastic bucket. The queue before the tanker twists to make way for him. Having filled his bucket, he reaches the end of the street and then is struck by a shell. Just a bloody mark on the asphalt, resembling red lead but more easily wiped off; at that very moment the rain begins, and washes it all away: no trace remains of the young man or his bucket. Just water. Nothing seems to have changed in the street, except that people are slightly quieter. The tanker engine throbs; the soft thud of plastic can bumping into plastic can is heard.

### **CURFEW**

After curfew, Tito Street is dead. Wind blows the nylon windows without glass. When it stops blowing, you can hear cats walking on the asphalt. Then, out of the dark, a man calls out: "Who are you?" The narrow beam of his flashlight searches for my identity papers. One is meeting another – they signal to each other with their lights: the black-helmeted driver of a jeep without any windows, and a pick-up completely covered with

iron panels – *Dobrinja* appears on it in yellow letters. When I turn into a narrow street, I think about how someone must be preparing to make a set like this for a science fiction film somewhere. An extra in that film is not as mortal as Sarajevo. Less real. I walked the main streets carefully, afraid that, in the dark, I might be tangled up in the fallen trolley wires. There aren't any on this street but, nevertheless, I keep on my toes. You can't see a thing but I know that, to my left, there is a kiosk. The glass is broken, the doors have been removed, and its insides have been cleaned out. The plucked shelves hang off the walls. From what was left, someone made a precise installation. On exhibit, behind no glass, a row of color photos of Sarajevo has been hung on a string with clothespins. It's been that way for days already. The creator of this installation remains anonymous. It would be enough to simply reach in and take the postcards; it's quite strange that hasn't happened yet.

### **DEATH BY FREEZING**

When Sarajevo lies covered with snow, when pine trees are cracked by frost, bones in the earth will feel warmer than us. People will freeze to death: a fireless winter approaches, a sunless summer is past. The nights are already cold and when somebody's pet dog barks from a balcony, a chorus of strays barks back, in tones as sorrowful as a crying child's. Only in this city does an Irish setter – normally an unusually cheerful dog – howl dismally in the night like Rutger Hauer in the final scenes of *Blade Runner*. Snow will bury the city as war has buried time. What day is it today? When is Saturday? I don't know. The daily and annual rituals are dead. Who will print calendars for 1993 in December? There is day, there is night; within them there is a man whose existence is defined by the end of the world. He knows that the fullness of life would be diminished were it not for the looming global catastrophe. Therefore he strikes a light at dusk: a wick threaded through a metal ballpoint refill, affixed to a piece of cork wrapped in tin foil, so that it floats on the surface of the cooking oil which burns in a lamp made of an empty beer can. The cheerful flame allows him to see that objects and the faces of dear ones have an earthly glow; and that there is no plight but the failing of light.



*Sarajevo 1993. La jeune femme regarde la rue qu'elle doit traverser avec ses bidons d'eau. Un sniper vient de tirer.*