

Anc: The Plastic Bag with the Red, White and Blue Stripes

It was just a plastic holdall. What made it special was that it had red, white and blue stripes. It was the cheapest piece of hand-luggage on earth, a proletarian swipe at Vuitton. It zipped open and shut, but the zip always broke after a few days. When I was a child, I used to rack my brains over how they managed to get the cherries or other fillings into chocolates without a hole or a seam. Now I rack my brains over another childish question: who designed the plastic bag with the red, white and blue stripes and sent it out into the world in a million copies?

The plastic bag with the red, white and blue stripes looked like a parody of the Yugoslav flag (Red, white and blue! We shall e'er be true!) minus the red star. The first time I ever saw one, I think, was at a flea market. The Poles would bring their cheap Nivea cream, linen dish-towels, camping tents, inflatable mattresses, that kind of thing. If I had asked the Poles, I am sure they would have said they got them from the Czechs. The Czechs would have said, No, we don't make them; we got them from the Hungarians. No, the Hungarians would have said; we got them from the Romanians. No, they're not ours, the Romanians would have said; they're Gypsy-made.

In any case, the plastic bag with the red, white and blue stripes made its way across East-Central Europe all the way to Russia and perhaps even farther – to India, China, America, all over the world. It is the poor man's luggage, the luggage of petty thieves and black marketeers, of weekend wheeler-dealers, of the flea-market-and-laundrette crowd, of refugees and the homeless.

Oh, the jeans, the T-shirts, the coffee that travelled in those bags from Trieste to Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria ... The leather-jackets and handbags and gloves leaving Istanbul and oddments leaving the Budapest Chinese market for Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, you name it. The plastic bags with the red, white and blue stripes were nomads, they were refugees, they were homeless, but they were survivors too: they rode trains with no ticket and crossed borders with no passport.

When I ran across one in a Turkish shop here in Amsterdam, I snapped it up for two guilders. Then I folded it in two and set it aside for safe-keeping the way my mother set aside ordinary white plastic bags 'because you never know when they might come in handy'. I was aware that by purchasing one of the bags I had performed a rite of self-initiation: I had joined the largest clan on earth, a clan for which the plastic bag with the red, white and blue stripes was colours, seal and coat of arms rolled into one. The only thing I couldn't work out was who had unstuck the red star.

Our game derived from Ana's symbolic bag.

"The first thing to do is what "our people" used to do," said Meliha. "Te it up with string so nothing falls out." You'd have thought she was describing a hedonistic ritual.

"I must say I was ashamed of "our people" whenever I saw them picking up those wrecks from the luggage carousel at the airport," said Darko.

"It bugged me too," said Igor. "It made me think, "Look at the hicks I've got to travel with." But now I think it's cool."

"How come?" I asked.

"You know who has the most expensive luggage in the world?"

"Madonna?"

"Nope. The Russians. The top whores and top mafiosi. That's what turned me on to the Gypsy look: the plastic bag tied up like a tramp's boot, the gold tooth ... And how right you were about the missing star, Ana. We're proletarians all! The only thing is, Papa Marx is dead and buried."

"Right on!" cried Meliha. "And turning in his grave at this very moment?"

It was with a certain diffidence that I'd proposed it as a class project – or game, really: a catalogue of everyday life in Yugoslavia. Ana was the first to contribute. She brought her composition about the 'Gypsy bag' to the very next class. I then suggested that we use her virtual Gypsy bag to store all the items for our 'Yugonostalgic' museum.

"What museum?" they asked.

"Oh, it will be virtual too. Everything you remember and consider important. The country is no more. Why not salvage what you don't want to forget?"

"I remember the rally they held on Tito's birthday," said Boban. "We'd watch it every year on TV."

But we all remember that, man," said Meliha. "Give us something personal."

"My first bike. One of those squat ones we called "ponies"; said Mario. "Does that count?"

"You bet!"

"Just like a man: a phallic symbol," said Meliha in jest. "What about food? Bureks and baklava."

"Bureks, baklava and poppy-seed noodles."

"They all perked up at the reference to Balasëvić's song.

"If noodles count, anything counts," said Nevena.

"Anything that makes you happy," I said.

"Or sad?" asked Selma, his eyes lowering.

"Or sad," I said. "Why not?"

"What about Omarska?"

The room was suddenly still. I flinched.

"Do you want to talk about it, Selma?"

"What's there to say? It's the only virtual exhibit I've got. The Serbs slit my dad's throat there."

Selim had tossed in another of his mines. I can't say I didn't expect it: I'd been picking my way through a minefield from the start. We all had our war memories, and losses like Selim's were immeasurable. Selim and Meliha had experienced the war first hand and in all its intensity. Uroš and Nevena refused to talk about it though they too were from Bosnia. Mario, Boban and Igor had left the country to avoid mobilization and seemed thus to have avoided the virus of nationalist insanity – Boban Serbian nationalism, Mario and Igor the Croatian variant. Johanneke had followed the events from Holland. Ana, who arrived in Amsterdam with her Dutch husband before the war, had kept up with it in the Croatian, Serbian and Dutch media, but made periodic trips not only to Belgrade but to Zagreb, where she had close relatives. Compared with theirs my experience of the war was infinitesimal.

I realized I would have to find some common ground, because they differed in more than their war experiences; they differed in their interests. While Meliha had a degree in Yugoslav literature from Sarajevo, Uroš had only a provincial Bosnian secondary education and was just now entering the university. Mario had been studying sociology at Zagreb University. Ana had enrolled in the English Department at Belgrade University, but dropped out almost immediately. Nevena had done two years of economics. Ante had graduated from the teachers' training college at Osijek. Boban had made it through the second year of law school. Darko had graduated in hotel administration at Opatija. Selim had just enrolled in the Sarajevo Mathematics Department when the war broke out. As for Igor, he was something of a drifter: he once mentioned having done some psychology, but also told me he'd spent two years at the Zagreb Academy of Theatre and Film in the programme for theatre directors. I never pushed him about his past; it didn't seem that important any more.

As for the common ground, I could sense their inner fragmentation,

their rage, their stifled protest. We had all of us been violated in one way or another. The list of things we had been deprived of was long and gruesome: we had been deprived of the country we had been born in and the right to a normal life; we had been deprived of our language; we had experienced humiliation, fear and helplessness; we had learned what it means to be reduced to a number, a blood group, a pack. Some – Selim, for instance – had lost close friends and relatives. Their lot was the hardest to bear. And now we were all in one way or another convalescents.

Amidst such lunacy I had to find a territory that belonged equally to us all and would hurt us all as little as possible. And the only territory that could be, I thought, was our common past. Because another thing we had all been deprived of was our right to remember. With the disappearance of the country came the feeling that the life lived in it must be erased. The politicians who came to power were not satisfied with power alone; they wanted their new countries to be populated by zombies, people with no memory. They pilloried their Yugoslav past and encouraged people to renounce their former lives and forget them. Literature, movies, pop music, jokes, television, newspapers, consumer goods, languages, people – we were supposed to forget them all. A lot of it ended up at the dump in the form of film stock and photographs, books and manuals, documents and monuments ... 'Yugonostalgiá', the remembrance of life in that ex-country, became another name for political subversion.

The break-up of the country, the war, the repression of memory, the 'phantom limb syndrome', the general schizophrenia and then exile – these, I was certain, were the reasons for my students' emotional and linguistic problems. We were all in chaos. None of us was sure who or what we were, to say nothing of who or what we wanted to be. At home my students resented being typecast as

Yugonostalgias, that is, dinosaurs, but they felt little affinity with the pre-packed retrofuture of the newly minted states. And here in Holland they were stigmatized as 'the beneficiaries of political asylum', 'refugees' or 'foreigners', as 'children of post-communism', 'the fall-out of Balkanization', or 'savages'. The country we came from was our common trauma.

I realized I was walking a tightrope: stimulating the memory was as much a manipulation of the past as banning it. The authorities in our former country had pressed the delete button, I the restore button; they were erasing the Yugoslav past, blaming Yugoslavia for every misfortune, including the war, I reviving that past in the form of the everyday minutiae that had once made up our lives, operating a volunteer lost-and-found service, if you will. And even though they were manipulating millions of people and I only these few, we were both obfuscating reality. I wondered whether by evoking endearing images of a common past I wouldn't obscure the bloody images of the recent war; whether by reminding them of how Kiki sweets tasted I wouldn't obliterate the case of the Belgrade boy stabbed to death by his coevals just because he was an Albanian; whether by urging them to 'reflect on' Mirko and Slavko, the Yugoparisians of the popular comic strip, I wouldn't be postponing their confrontation with the countless episodes of sadism perpetrated by Yugowarriors, drunk and crazed with momentary power, against their compatriots; or whether by calling up the popular refrain 'That's what happens, my fair maiden, once you've known a Bosnian's kiss', I wouldn't be dulling the impact of the countless deaths in Bosnia, that of Selim's father, for instance. The lists of atrocities knew no end, and here I was, pushing them into the background with cheery catalogues of everyday rifles that no longer existed.

On the other hand, it was all intertwined; you couldn't have one without the other. Death chewed on Kikis. People killed and were

killed, looted and were looted, raped and were raped to the sound of cheap, popular refrains. Soldiers were hit by bullets as they dragged colour TVs, the new booty, to the trenches. Death went hand in hand with day-to-day detritus. A detail like Kikis could recur in an infinite number of variations – the image, say, of a girl hit by a sniper, the blood trickling from her lips sweetened by the Kiki she had been chewing. The evil was as banal as the everyday artefact and had no special status.

I did not see how we could come to grips with our past if we did not first make our peace with it. So as our common ground I chose something we all felt close to – the homely terrain of the day-to-day life we had shared in Yugoslavia.

Gradually our red-white-and-blue-striped bag filled up. There was a little of everything: the now dead world of Yugoslav primary and secondary schools, the idols of Yugoslav pop culture, all manner of Yugogoods – food, drink, apparel and the like – and Yugodesign, ideological slogans, celebrities, athletes, events, Yugoslav socialist myths and legends, television series, comic strips, newspapers, films...

Boban had unearthed a cache of Yugoslav films on video, so we had lots to watch. They proved a most viable testimony to the existence of a Yugoslav life. Reading that life from our posthumous perspective, we discovered detail after detail that presaged the future, prognostications that came true.

I soon set aside the worries that had beset me: our 'archeology', our 'spiritualism', the reanimation of our 'better past' made us so close that we found it harder and harder to disband. So we adopted another habit from the past: after class we would adjourn to a café and jabber on, dispersing only to run for the last tram, bus or train. To an outsider we must have looked like a tribe uttering the magic

words that call forth its gods; we must have seemed in a trance. Well, we were in a way.

The student I had the hardest time getting a handle on was Igor. His memory amazed me: he would have the most vivid 'recollection' of things he couldn't possible have experienced.

'You weren't even born then!'

'But I've got Yugogenes, Comrade, and they remember.'

He got a kick out of pronouncing the ostensibly nonsensical nonce-word, Yugogenes, in the Dutch way, substituting harsh, guttural 'h's for the 'g's. We laughed. My students clearly liked the idea that our past was remembered not so much by us as by phantom 'Yuhohenes' for which we bore no responsibility.

I frequently bumped into one or another of them in town. We were as happy to see each other as if we hadn't met for ages. We would cover each other with sweet verbal saliva and pat each other on the back, then retire to a café for an endless kopje kofje and aural fondling.

The student I most often ran across in my peregrinations was Igor. Suddenly the tall frame, the backpack, the inevitable earphones draped around the neck would pop out of nowhere.

'What brings you here?' I would ask.

'And you?' he would counter.

'What do you propose?'

'How 'bout a 'lope?'

That was how they spoke. It was their slang. For them a 'lope' was a 'walk', from the Dutch *lopen*. He might also have suggested a 'wandel', from the Dutch *wandelen* 'go for a walk'. They'd also say things like 'Let's go for a kopje kofje'. Selim's Dutch-Bosnian combinations were hysterical.

Even though my students made it clear that they enjoyed our

common project, I could never quite rid myself of the minefield image. One day when Igor and I were wandering through the streets, I tried to bring him out on the subject.

'Tell me, Igor, how do you feel about the class?'

'You know what Tito said to his future wife the first time they met?'

'No, tell me.'

'Hear my thoughts, Jovanka.

Your hands are less guilty than mine.

My forehead burns tonight.

My eyelids quiver.

I'll dream a beautiful dream tonight:

Thy beauty shall me unto death deliver!'

Thus did a line from a Croatian poetess and a stanza from a Croatian poet merge in Igor's imagination.

'Is nothing sacred?' I said, laughing.

Instead of answering, he asked, 'Tell me, have you noticed that angels never laugh?'

'I can't say I've given it much thought.'

'You've never looked an angel in the eye?'

'No, I don't think so ... Not that I remember ...'

'Well then, we have an urgent call to make.'

We spent the rest of the afternoon in the Rijksmuseum looking at angel faces of the old masters.

'See? I was right,' he said. 'Angels don't smile, do they?'

'Like hangmen.'

We both burst out laughing, though it wasn't at all funny. The laughter was a way of dealing with an invisible angst.

Convalescents, I suddenly thought – people recovering from an illness or a trauma of some kind, an accident, a flood, a shipwreck – they don't laugh either. We were convalescents. I didn't say anything though.

9

Surrounded by the indifferent walls of our imaginary laboratory, we breathed life into a life that no longer was. We took turns massaging the heart and giving artificial respiration. Clumsy and amateurish as we were, we eventually succeeded in bringing back the beat of that bygone era.

Most of them returned to their childhoods: it was the safest, least threatening territory. Whether the details were their own or what they had gathered from their parents or whether they had made them up, as Igor often did, was not important. Every detail contained its morsel of truth.

As for the whole, it was untranslatable: we were speaking an extinct language comprehensible only to ourselves. How could we have explained them to anyone, those words, concepts and images and – what was more to the point – the feelings the words, concepts and images called forth in us? It was alchemy: I had assured them there would be gold at the end of the line, knowing full well that a detail which shone brilliantly one moment could fade and vanish the next. As could the heart we had jointly resuscitated.

At times I wondered whether what I was doing wasn't diametrically opposed to what I thought I was doing. After all, the stigma the ideologies of the successor states had placed on memories of the collective past had backfired: it had made that collective past more

attractive. Perhaps by stimulating memories of the past I would destroy its halo. Or perhaps my attempt to reconstruct the past would end in no more than a pale imitation, thus exposing the poverty of the 'baggage' we deemed so powerful. Yet whenever I turned over these and related issues in my mind, the pleasure we derived from our memory game would push them aside, as I had pushed aside a discovery that hit me like a ton of bricks one day, namely, that I had forgotten a lot more than they had and was therefore not the best qualified memory tutor. But it was too late: I had set the gears in motion and could no longer stop them.

Nevena: The First of Every Month

My papa worked in a factory, my mama was a housewife. Our most important family holiday was 'first of the month'. Papa would bring home his pay in the 'pay pocket' (that's what it was called) and present it to Mama. Mama took care of the money: such and such an amount for gas, such and such for electricity, such and such for rent and such and such to pay off the things we had bought on credit. Then we would dress up, as if going out for dinner, and go out shopping.

Papa used the Turkish word for shopping – *bakaluk* – Mama the Croatianized German 'fasung'. Mama led the *fasung* expedition, because only she knew what we needed (how much sugar, how much flour, how much oil, how much salt, how much coffee and how much macaroni and noodles to last till the first of the following month), and we all pranced along behind her. Mama always bought unroasted coffee, which we then roasted ourselves in a cylindrical tin pot with little doors and a handle on one side. We'd pour the grey beans in through the doors, shut the doors and put the pot on the gas burner. Then we'd rotate the handle and the pot would rotate and the coffee would rotate in the pot ever so slowly and roast on the fire. The whole apartment would smell of freshly roasted coffee. How I loved that smell. We needed a lot of coffee, because neighbours came to

see Mama and drink coffee every day. We didn't buy many other things. Mama made jam and preserves, she pickled cucumbers, she turned red peppers into paprika and ajvar – that kind of thing. She was also good at making liqueur out of cherries, nuts and chocolate, so we didn't buy that either. We kept everything in the pantry. Mama would paste labels on the jars with the name of the produce and the date. The most exciting time for us kids was dessert. Mama would buy a few boxes of biscuits and 'cooking chocolate' (that's what it was called), because that was the cheapest kind. There was a kind of biscuit in the shape of a slipper with strips of chocolate on top and a kind called 'housewife biscuits', which were the best for dipping in milk. And Mama always bought each of us a round, crisp chocolate wafer called a napolitanka. Us kids always thought 'store bought' tasted much better than 'homemade'.

Mama would also buy ten packets of bread sticks and ten packets of pretzel sticks, but that was for company. Whenever we had company, Mama put the bread sticks in one cup and the pretzel sticks in another. The guests would sit on the couch. 'Have some pretzel sticks' she would say as she put the cups on the long, low coffee table, and the guests would take a pretzel stick or a bread stick and start munching on it. They looked like rabbits. Then Mama would take out her 'ikebanas', as Papa called them, two or three flat plates she had filled with rings of sliced pickles and sausage and peppers and cheese. Each slice had a toothpick coming out of it and in the middle she put a mound of ajvar. Guests always complimented Mama on her ikebanas, but they got on Papa's nerves.

'Some day somebody's going to choke on one of your toothpicks,' he would say angrily.

'You have no sense for what's in,' she would answer.

I think that 'in' was the most popular word of the day. Mama always knew what the in furniture was, the in lamp, the in hair-do, the in curtains, the in shoes, the in eyeglass frames. It was the time when everything just had to be plastic. Plastic was the inest of in.

After dessert Papa would turn the television on. Our television had a plastic filter like a rainbow across the screen to make it look like colour when it was really only black and white. We would die of laughter whenever *Citizen Molycoddle* was on.

Now that I write all this down, I'm not so sure it's the way it

was. It's all so hazy and dreamlike; it's like I was telling somebody else's story rather than mine.

Boban: My Favourite Comic Strip

There weren't many books in our house, but there was one that caught my fancy even when I was little. It was more portfolio than book. It had black leather covers and gilt-edged pages. In the middle of the front cover there was a round metal insignia that looked like a large metal coin. It had the profile of a bearded man engraved on it. When I was a kid, I would scratch at it and try to get it off, but I never did. Inside there were some sheets of typewriter-size paper, yellow with age: documents, paintings, maps and photographs. There were many more illustrations than text. It looked like a badly organized comic strip.

'It's a book about revolution,' Granddad would tell me.

'Revolution,' I repeated after him.

'It's the book of the Great October Revolution.'

After learning to read, I would mouth the title over and over: *The Life and Work of V.I. Lenin, 1870-1924*. What I liked best about the book were the portraits of the revolutionaries. The portraits always showed them with dark, brooding looks, and they were often sitting round a table arguing. Even though the book was about Lenin, Stalin was always in the foreground. Lenin usually stood behind Stalin, who was seated at the table. I liked the fact that everything in the pictures was in semi-darkness. The light always came from a lamp or a window. But most of all I liked the books. There were always bookcases filled with books in the background. One painting showed Stalin visiting Lenin in his room. Lenin is standing to greet him, and there is an open book in the armchair. Another painting showed Lenin and Stalin having a chat with 'delegates from the Central Asian Republics'. I remember it as if it was yesterday: 'delegates from the Central Asian Republics'. The delegates were all wearing those Asian skullcaps, and in the background there was a big bookcase. You could see how impressed the delegates were by the number of books in the bookcase. I also remember a picture entitled *V.I. Lenin and His Wife N.K. Krupskaya in Siberian Exile*. It showed

Lenin standing next to a chest of drawers engrossed in a book while N.K. Krupskaya stands next to a bookshelf.

Later I read the inscription. It was written in a fine, round hand.

It said: 'My very best wishes to my very best friend, Nebojša Krsitić.

Major Veljko Vukašiniović.'

My grandfather's name was Nebojša Krsitić.

My grandfather was a partisan. He was what they called a 'prvoborac', which means someone who joined the resistance early. My old man called him an 'udbaš', which means a member of the Secret Police, though he didn't start calling him that until the Commies started losing ground. My old man was a shit. Then again, most people are shits. They blow hot and cold. By the way, what makes you think the Commies are so different from Sai Baba? The Commies tried to perform miracles too. Until the lid came off, that is. And I don't believe they read all those books.

If anybody asked me to paint a representative portrait of my family, you know what I'd put next to the old man? A Zastava 101, because he paid a lot more attention to that old jalopy than to me. And next to the old lady I'd put the plastic holdall she used to carry groceries back from the market. And next to me a football. And next to Grandpa the old revolver he kept in his bedside table and never let me near. The old man and the old lady were a couple of hicks. The Commies were cool!

Ante: Invitation to a Ball

I remember the tea dances we had in school when we were twelve or thirteen. They disappeared after discos came in. They never served tea at tea dances or anything else for that matter, and I'm still not clear about why they called them tea dances. The room had chairs along two walls. Boys sat on one side, girls on the other. Every tea dance had its 'matron'. The matron's job was to make sure we didn't drink too much of the tea they didn't serve. Somebody else took care of the music. Those were the days when they still had record-players and tape recorders. They're gone now too. Each of us would go up to a girl and stand in front of her. Like a beau or something. Without a word. That meant we were asking her to dance. Every once in a while the matron would

call out, 'Ladies' choice!' and the girls would stand and come over to us. That was how you could tell which girl liked you.

Those being our 'hormonal years', we all looked forward to the close dances or what we called 'squeezers'. They were slow – 'Only You' – slow – and you'd press the girl real close, so close that both of you could hardly breathe. You were almost numb with excitement, but you made believe it was nothing. Just the thought of it still takes my breath away. It was like I was diving and I'd come up with my cheek against hers. We'd be so close my eyes would lose their focus and cross. I could feel her transparent, milky white skin; I could make out the blue veins in her eyelids. Her breath smelled of green peppermint drops. Just the thought of it makes me dizzy still. The girl's name was Sanja Petrinčić.

Meliha: Bosnian Hotpot

Memory aids survival.

Marcel/a Proust/i/c

Ingredients: ½ kilo boneless pork and ½ kilo boneless beef, cubed; ½ kilo small potatoes, unsliced; 2 onions, sliced in half; 10 cloves of garlic, unsliced; 400 grams of fresh tomatoes; 4 green or red peppers; 300 grams of kale, 200 grams of cabbage; 2 carrots; 2 bunches of parsley; 1 bunch of celery; 1 kohlrabi; 10 string beans; 2 heaped teaspoons of sweet paprika; 15 to 20 peppercorns; several bay leaves; approximately 300 grams of water, broth or white wine.

Chop the vegetables coarsely. Place the meat, onions and vegetables in a pot, preferably earthenware. Add the liquid. Place a border of dough along the pot lid's inner rim (to prevent steam from escaping) and cover. Bring to a boil, then simmer for 4 to 5 hours.

Johanneke: Vanilla Cones

I come from a big family. My parents loved Yugoslavia. So did us kids. Now I see that another reason we took our summer holidays in Yugoslavia was that it was so cheap. We would make the rounds

of the camping sites along the Adriatic with one of those big house tents. We were among the first foreign tourists. I had seven brothers and sisters. My father had a job, but my mother stayed at home with us, so we had to watch every guilder and couldn't throw money away on holidays. Even the Dutch were poor back then. After the war the Dutch went off to foreign countries (New Zealand, Canada, Brazil) and worked by the sweat of their brow just like the Yugoslavs. So for us the Adriatic was heaven. Every day we'd line up, all eight of us – little, bigger, biggest – with Mama and Papa bringing up the rear, and go out for ice-cream, and every day Nazif would greet us with the words, 'You Dutch, you're as white as vanilla.' Well, word got round, and soon everyone in town was calling us 'the Vanillas'. 'Hey look! Here come the Vanillas!' (Our real name was Ter Bruggen Hugenholz, which nobody could pronounce.) We each got first names too. Summer names we called them. I was Joka, my brother Gerard Grga, Frans was Frane, Wouter Walter. After Walter in that movie everybody saw, the one about the defence of Sarajevo. 'Das ist Walter!' they'd call after him in their pidgin German. 'Das ist Walter!' To this day I call him Das ist Walter.

That ice-cream was my earliest memory of Yugoslavia. Our parents never took us out for ice cream at home. It cost too much. The locals called Nazif the ice-cream vendor a Shipitar. I didn't know about your different national groups at the time, so I didn't know it meant Albanian. You all looked the same to us. We looked like vanilla to you, you looked like hazelnuts to us.

Selim: Homesick for the South

We were all required to study the history of Macedonian, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin literature, as you are well aware. I never got more than a D. There was this one Macedonian poem called *Homesick for the South*. I only knew the title, because I'd never read it, but the title always sounded funny to me. More like an ad than a poem. Then one day I found a fax of it in the departmental reading room here. It was written by Konstantin Miliadinov more than a hundred and fifty years ago, as you are well aware. Anyway, you know how our Dutch friends are always

rambling on about their summer plans, their summer holidays, getting ready for them or just back from them or wondering where you're going this year – well, this poem is like that. You'd think it was written by a Dutch rather than a Macedonian. I just had to translate it for my Mieke. So I start reciting it in Macedonian, and – Tito be my witness – my brain scans it without a glitch! I don't want to bore you, but let me remind you how it starts in case you haven't got the book handy.

Darkness is everywhere, darkness enfolds me.
The blackest of mists encircle the earth ...

Well, this weather report goes on for a while, but then he makes his point, which really hit home.

I cannot stand to live in this place;
I cannot live amidst snow, hail and ice.
Lord, give me wings, that I may fly,
That I may back to my homeland hie,
That I may feast my eyes once more
On sun-drenched Struga and Ohrid's fair shore.

And when I got to the end, when I got to the lines that go:

There shall I pipe my heart's last good-bye,
And when the sun sets, there shall I die.

I burst into tears for Christ's sake. There I am, spouting Macedonian like a son of the soil – and bawling my head off. I thought I'd gone off the deep end. So anyway, I translate it for my Mieke, the tears still streaming down my cheeks, and you know what she says? 'Mooi!' Well, when I heard that Dutch 'mooi', I smacked her one hard, and then she fucking burst into tears. I could have kicked myself, of course. I don't know what got into me. Something in that 'mooi' made me crack. I don't get it. The word does mean 'beautiful' after all. Maybe it was the grass. Maybe the grass had something tear-jerking about it.

Darko: My Mother Holds Hands with Tito

This isn't a memory of my own; it comes from my mother. Like all the kids in her school she belonged to the Pioneers, and once, because she was at the top of her class, she was chosen to attend Tito's birthday celebration. It was the custom to send the best Pioneers to the celebration, Mother told us, and when the photographer came in to take the traditional 'Tito and the Pioneers' picture, she rushed over to Tito and grabbed his hand. I've seen the picture. She is leaning against him, pressing her hand in his, and he has a Cuban cigar in his free hand. When the photography session was over, Tito tried to take his hand away, but Mother wouldn't let him. She stuck to him like glue. He gave another tug, but her fingers had turned into live tongs. People started getting uneasy. One of the security guards had to come and unfasten her. She let out an unearthly howl.

'I don't know what got into me,' she told me 'or where I got the strength.'

I once saw Tito in the flesh. It was at the Zagreb Trade Fair. Mother and I happened to be in the crowd lining the street as he passed by with his entourage. He looked smaller than in the photographs and film clips. He looked old and feeble, like a mummy. And when a sunbeam suddenly lit up the top of his head, it jumped out at me, all speckled with liver spots and covered over with strands of dyed hair turned orange.

'Come on,' my mother said, tugging me by the hand, and took me for ice cream. She ordered so many scoops I couldn't eat a quarter of them. I don't know what got into her.

Mario: Trains with No Timetables

Looking back I have the impression that everything in the former Yugoslavia had some connection to trains. String together all the significant and insignificant trains in our lives and you get a history of the country that is parallel to – and no less valid than – the official one.

1. What united Yugoslavia more than the slogan 'brotherhood and unity' were its Austro-Hungarian tracks and stations. I get a lump in

my throat each time I see the stations' yellow façades, the geraniums in their flower boxes. The very sight of them means home.

2. The first train in my life appeared in the children's book *Train in the Snow* by Mate Lovrak. The first event in the history of Yugoslavology – and in the history of the Yugoslav cinema – was Veljko Buljić's *Train with No Timetable*. It is about the exodus of a group of people, by train, from the rocky Dinaric Alps to Yugoslavia's 'breadbasket', the rich, fertile Baranja (or was it Bačka?) region in the north. In the course of the journey they fall in love, they fight, they have ideological debates, a child is born, a man dies. *Train with No Timetable* began a spate of train episodes in the Yugoslav cinema, all the way to the cruel love scene in the filthy WC in Emir Kusturica's *When Father Was Away on Business*. Incidentally, it was with Kusturica that the Yugoslav cinema breathed its last.

3. Railway tracks were an icon of the fifties, the time of the youth shock-worker movement, international and domestic. The younger generation was assigned construction of two important stretches: Brčko-Banovići ('Brčko-Banovići is our aim/By summer's end we'll make good our claim') and Šamac-Sarajevo. For a time youth brigades were a hot item in movies made for domestic consumption. *The Extra Girl* starring Milena Dravić is one of many.

4. Once the tracks were built, we couldn't get enough of the trains: we took trains on school outings; we took trains to the seaside; we took trains to the army. All trains had JDŽ painted on them in Latin and Cyrillic letters. Many people came into contact with foreign languages for the first time on trains: 'Do not lean out of the window' was engraved on small brass plates under the windows with a translation into French, German and Russian. It became a catchword in books and movies and had its moment in the sun in the refrain of the popular song *The White Button* ('Take the train, Selma, but don't lean out of the window ...'). There was a framed photograph of some Yugoslav town or tourist attraction over every seat. My favourite was Makarska-by-Briokovo because of the 'by'. The tastiest sandwiches we ever ate we ate in the train. The juiciest roast chicken we ever ate we ate in the train. The most important invention of the day was the thermos bottle, the most memorable sight, engraved in the memory of millions of Yugoslavs, was the sight of the Adriatic as it emerged

on the horizon after a long absence. Everyone taking the train to the Adriatic played the same game: the first one to sight the sea would cry 'Waader!' and get five dinars. Or whatever the going rate was ...

5. The sixties and seventies were characterized by 'Gastarbeiter trains', the preferred means of transport for the Yugoslav, Greek and Turkish workforce making its way to and from the West until it began acquiring cars. The hunger in an anonymous Yugo on the train trip home comes out clearly in the Gastarbeiter ditty:

Pull your pants down, love, it's no holds barred.
All the way from Frankfurt I've been hard.

6. The icon of Yugoslav consumerism of the eighties was the train to Trieste. It was a train loaded with black market goods: jeans, coffee, rice, olive oil, T-shirts, briefs, panties – you name it. The peak of the Trieste shopping spree coincided with Tito's death. Tito died at the age of eighty-eight, and one of the ways the event was marked was by a flurry of agricultural activity: one community planted 'eighty-eight roses for Comrade Tito', another 'eighty-eight birches for Comrade Tito' and so on. Hence the Gypsy joke: a customs official on the train from Trieste asks a Gypsy, 'What have you got in those sacks?' The Gypsy responds without missing a beat: 'Eighty-eight levis for Comrade Tito.'

7. The last Yugoslav train was the 'blue train' that carried Tito's body along the Ljubljana-Zagreb-Belgrade line to be buried in Belgrade's House of Flowers. Hundreds of thousands of Yugoslavs flanking the tracks paid homage to 'the greatest son of the Yugoslav peoples and nationalities'. And the years of Yugoslav 'brotherhood and unity' were immortalized in powerful lines like:

In the railway tunnel, in the dark,
Our five-pointed red star makes its mark.

8. The break-up of Yugoslavia and the war it engendered trace their origins to the historic day when the Krajinia Serbs in Croatia blocked the Zagreb-Split line with boulders and put an end to train service for several years.

9. The Zagreb-Split line was reopened two years ago. It took the

train, baptized 'The Freedom Train', an entire day to make the trip, which was broadcast live on Croatian TV. The reason the Freedom Train took so long was that the Croatian Prime Minister got off at every whistle stop to make a speech. Meanwhile, the Serbs we chased out of the Krajinia made their way to Serbia on foot, by bus or car, by tractor or horse-drawn cart, by anything but the train.

10. Last but not least, one of the best arguments that Serbian and Croatian are different languages and that the war was accordingly a historical necessity is likewise train-related, namely, that the very word for train differs in the two, the Croats calling it 'vlak', the Serbs 'voz'.

Igor: Horror and Horticulture

(Comments on Yugoslav poetry by my friend Mikac after looking through the *New Anthology of Yugoslav Poetry* [Zagreb 1966] I lent him.)

They're all there: Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, Slovenians. There aren't any Bosnians or Montenegrins or, rather, there are, but they don't have their own sections. The biggest eye-opener for me was reading the Slovenians in Slovenian and the Macedonians in Macedonian. Sans translation.

Okay, I said to myself, let's see what the old folks at home were reading before you were a twinkle in their eye. So out comes the calculator – you know, like in the marketplace, Dolac, say: What are your eggs going for today, love? – and do the arithmetic. Out of the 173 poets in the anthology, fifty-six are Serb, sixty-two Croat, forty Slovenian and sixteen Macedonian. Okay. Cool. So then I count up the females. The Serbs have one, the Croats three, the Slovenians two. That makes 167 guys and six gals. And of those six one was so browbeaten she wrote under a male pseudonym. Another thing I picked up along the way is that our poets are so name-conscious they prefer three to two, like those partisan heroes they name schools after, so you see a name like Jure Franičević-Pločar or Milenko Brković-Crni and you can't tell who is the man of the pen and who the man of the sword. The same holds for the current crop of wannabe Nazis: they're heavy

into triple names too. They really get off on them, the longer the better. Which makes me wonder if they're not trying to make up for an anatomical defect, you know, down where a centimetre or two can make a world of difference. Oh, and something else. Our poets have a thing about dedicating poems to one another. Know what I mean? Like one guy chatting up another. Need I say more?

Anyway, on we go. And surprise, surprise! Circa fifty percent of their output is about mama or the mammland. Which kind of turns mammland into marna. And vice versa. Whereupon they boo-hoo-hoo over both. Fucking unreadable, let me tell you. Oh, and then circa ten percent is made up of these horror stories, I mean literally, graves and tombs and that shit. Man, it really traumatized me. I mean, our poets are a bunch of fucking ghouls, always digging up some enemy or other. One of them marks out his territory ('This is the ground where my dead are sown') and then picks up his shovel ('I summon you, my shades'). You fucking body snatcher, I think. You'd put the fear of God into Stephen King, you would. And just as I'm getting over it, what do I see but:

O mirrors of horror! Show scenes without gallows or noose!

'Blood! Blood!' screams my blood in this land of Croaitians ill-used.

Shit!

But onward. To the ten percent belonging to what I would call the megalomaniac or me-me-me poems, poems where the guys talk one on one with the stars, the universe, like 'If man you be, walk tall beneath the sky' — that shit. Poems where every man's a fucking superman.

Okay. Fine. Next category: the twenty percent that sing the beauties of nature, you know, the seasons, rainfall, crap like that. You'd think they were a bunch of — what was the name of that Serbian weatherman? — right, a bunch of Kamenko Katićes. Our freaks are into flora a lot more than fauna. True, I did find one poem about a calf, but I didn't get it till the end. At first I thought it was about this hot little number — the language was nice and sexy — and then in the middle of it all comes this line about dung ... But to get back to the flora. There were all kinds of poems about fucking trees — aspens, willows, poplars, oaks. After all the horror stuff I was surprised our guys had a thing for flowers — lilies of the valley,

pansies, roses, cyclamen. I didn't think horror and horticulture went together. Though one guy had something about bloody cyclamen.

How much does that make altogether? Ninety percent? Okay. So then I went through them with a fine-tooth comb on the lookout for sex. Well, you could've knocked me over with a feather: our guys don't care a shit about sex. It jumps right out at you. No calculator necessary. Believe me, the only time they can write about a woman is when she's dead and buried. It's like they can hardly wait for the gal to bite the dust so they can write a poem about her. The sadder the better. You know the poem:

I saw you last night. In my dreams. Sad. Dead.

In the fated hall midst an idyll of flowers.

On a lofty bier midst the throes of the candles.

Of course you do. We had to learn it in school. Well, the same necrophiliac wrote:

I know not what thou art: art woman or hyena?

Shit! Did that guy get my goat! I mean, what's the point if you can't even tell a woman when you see one. And then there was the guy who couldn't find a place to bury his brood ('Where can I bury you, o my love, now that you're gone?') and the guy — the more I read the more they pissed me off — who was away for so long that by the time he got back his girl had kicked the bucket:

But when I arrived,

I found you no more.

What did he come back for, the shithead? And then there was another one we had in school, remember?

Love may yet come, befall us yet, I say,

But do I wish it or wish it away?

That always made my blood boil. Your problem ain't whether you want to, pal; it's whether you can! So pack up your wares and get a move on. I'm not buying.

They're a bunch of sickos, our poets. And not only the ones in the anthology. There hasn't been a sound mind among them in the past two hundred years or how ever long they've been at it. Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Macedonians – it makes no difference. Old farts all. You don't need a calculator to tell you that.

Uroš: I Wish I Were a Nightingale

During our second year in elementary school the teacher assigned us a composition about Tito. Tito had had a leg cut off, she told us, and was recovering from the operation. It would make him happy if we wrote something nice. I wrote I wished I were a nightingale so I could fly to Comrade Tito's hospital bed every morning and wake him with my song. The teacher praised me to the skies and read my composition to the class. My classmates made fun of me. They called me the nightingale. 'Hey, here comes the nightingale,' they would shout with a *guftaw*. When my family heard about the composition, they made fun of me too, especially my old man. Then, not long afterward, Tito died, and my old man cried and the whole family sat in front of the TV for the three days of the funeral and cried. The thing that impressed them most was all the foreign dignitaries attending the funeral. 'All those famous people,' my old lady said. They had a good time pointing out the announcers' mispronunciations of the statesmen's and celebrities' names. But when I said that Margaret Thatcher's name is Thatcher, not Tratcher, my old man said, 'That's enough out of you, Nightingale. Go and get me a bottle of beer from the fridge. And mind you don't drop it from your beak!' Which got a big laugh out of everybody.

Yugoslavia was a terrible place. Everybody lied. They still lie of course, but now each lie is divided in five, one per country.

IO

[...] I think it best to state straight away that the Northern Netherlands have always made me feel a certain Angst, which I write with the capital letter the German requires, as if in the early doctrine of the Naturphilosophen it were one of the basic elements, like Fire and Water, of which life on earth is constituted. The capital letter gives one the feeling one has been placed in a black box from which there is no easy escape.

Cees Nooteboom

Amsterdam is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Overused a platitude as it is, I would have no hesitation putting my name to it, and with scarcely a blush at its banality, were it not for what it leaves out: a sensation, an almost physical sensation of absence about the city, a sensation that occasionally pursued me and whose source I was unable to pinpoint.

Roaming through the city, I would pass through a number of olfactory zones, urine ceding to the mould that grazed my nostrils as I ran down a flight of stairs, the mould ceding to the rancid oil that wafted from the cheap seaside food concessions and lodged in my hair, the oil ceding to the human sweat that clung to me as I made my way through the crowds, the sweat ceding to the heavy, sticky aroma of hashish. The ever present physicality all around me had no