



**Péter Zilahy**

From the last window giraffe: a picture dictionary for five and above

**a**<sup>1</sup>

A is the first letter of the Hungarian alphabet.

Now we see through bulletproof glass.

Disperse me if you can, but I will look him in the eye. Stock–still bodyguards in sunglasses, the quicksilver glint of a cigarette case. The Golden Age was just an arm away. If only we'd listened to the Zastavas gliding by, and to our excountry's countrymen, if only we'd believed that it's magic, like in a fairy tale, not the chained watchdog of the West, neither lefties nor socialist sidesteppers, but simply non–aligned countries, Surda, Dubrovnik, Opatija, the Sarajevo Winter Olympics, a window opening on the sea where the view isn't blocked by the Struggle for Peace. A green and pleasant land, noble rivers, one federation where Albanians, Bosnians, Croats, Hungarians, Italians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Serbs, Slovenes, and Romanians would all find their uphill and downdales. Their nostalgia fills me with envy. It conjures up the golden age of the Monarchy. A as in Aurum, let this be the first window of my window giraffe.<sup>2</sup>

Watching the news in the flesh is an old dream of mine. Knowing the place and the players as if it were a home movie shot on a school trip. In November 1996, the authorities in Yugoslavia tampered with the local election results. The disgruntled people of Belgrade took to the streets. In this dictionary, you can learn a lot of interesting things about Belgrade. You can also find out about the jungle under the letter Ö.

They're protesting because they want something else. Everybody wants something else. Free elections, freedom of the press, power, women. Greater Serbia. Milosevic they don't want. They want him not to be.

I first saw Serzhan on CNN, then we met at the demonstration. He was conspicuous by his silence. As he grinned, only his teeth showed from under his hat, pulled over his ears. I could make out the Cyrillic letters on the book in his pocket. I had to know why he was reading *A Hundred Years of Solitude* at a mass demonstration.

He said he wanted to find the girl who lent it to him before the war. This was his chance to give it back

Colonel Aureliano Buendía started thirty-two civil wars and suffered thirty-two defeats. He survived fourteen assassination attempts, seventy-three ambushes, an execution, a strychnine poisoning, and a suicide attempt. After the war he retreated to his alchemist's den and made gold fish from gold coins.<sup>3</sup>

In Belgrade, time is measured in faces. After a week I begin to recognize faces. After a year I'd recognize everyone. Everyone who has a face also has time. Watches are worn as ornaments, the hands form an angle to match the mood of the wearer. If I stay on the street, I can't be late. The time of the demonstration can be read from the faces. You look at someone and you know: it's time. Neither of you will get there at the appointed hour, but you meet somewhere else where you wouldn't have met had you been on time. In Belgrade time is no longer measured by the stars. People look each other in the eye. They merry-go-round in the raining confetti. A chain reaction of faces in an activated explosion. Belgrade faces are incendiary, quick to flare up. Invisibility is not an option, the masses of Belgrade are not faceless. Out of any two faces, one is always you. Serzhan is a cheeky grin. The people of Belgrade part with the past cheerfully. The shared naughtiness and mischief. Farting, belching, whistle-blowing, horn-tooting. The old dear standing next to me is shouting her head off. She knows she's free to. Watches have become historically redundant. Down with time which has no face!

The window giraffe was a picture book from which we learned to read when we didn't know how. I could read already, but I had to learn it anyway, because that's what school's for. The window giraffe revealed the world to us in alphabetical order. Everything had its rhyme and reason, both symbolic and everyday. We learned from it that the sun rises in the east, that our hearts are on the left, that the Great October Revolution was in November, and that light comes through the window even when it's closed. The window giraffe was full of seven-headed dragons, fairies, devils and princes, and told us they do not exist. I remember four kinds of dragons that do not exist, and also three princes. Syllable by syllable, the window giraffe taught us to read between the lines. It was taken as much for granted as the teddy-bear on TV before bedtime. Nobody thought of questioning it. The window giraffe was the window giraffe. The window giraffe is my childhood, the changing room, the P.E. class, and growing all the time, an age before a better age, the soft dictatorship, my homework, my innocence, my generation. The window giraffe is a book, and I was one of its characters. Twenty years later, when asked, I realized that the first and last words, the alpha and omega, are window and giraffe.<sup>4</sup> Yes. The window is the beginning, light comes through the window, the giraffe is the end of endlessness, surrealism, flaming giraffes, we will live for ever! A lexicon which contains what's been left out.

Paris has its own window giraffe. I saw it on a postcard. It's called the I-fell-tower. Zsófi Brünner sent it after she defected with her parents to France, and was now studying from a French alphabet book. The I-fell-tower has a long neck, four legs, and an awful lot of windows. It is both window and giraffe, and its name sounds good too, excitement and promise in one, the promise of a sudden leap, the final break from a worm's eye view, which the express elevator inside degrades into a question of technology. Zsófi looked a bit like a giraffe herself, except she didn't have a window or an express elevator inside. The express elevator was in my throat when she tip-toed over to my desk on her matchstick legs and let me smell her scented rubber. I spent the whole night in an ecstasy of syllable-practice. The letters came towards me like cats' eyes on a dark road. The next day, Zsófi defected. Our headmaster told us they had to leave unexpectedly. He could have said "cut off in their

prime", the way our Party leaders go. The scented rubber left an un-erasable mark on my heart. Later we found out it hadn't been a holiday at all, when she sent the I-fell-tower as a substitute for herself, which was just like the window giraffe, except it made some sense, provided you could read between the lines.

The police are running in the opposite direction, we run past each other. They beat up a couple of passers-by on the other side of the square, then stand around, at a loss. An over-zealous riot policeman rubs out the graffiti of a gallows with his rubber stick. Underneath in red: Slobo, you pig, you will hang!

"Peter wants to draw. He's thinking of his coloured pencils and sketch books. He stops playing, sits down at his desk, and begins to draw. When Peter wants to do something, he does it."<sup>5</sup>

## á

Beds run out in a city under siege. Katarina, the Italian journalist, finds a '68 romanticism in the correspondents napping peacefully in the classrooms. *So many sharing the same mattress!* I wasn't living then, so it's hard to pay attention, Yugoslav border guards woke me up three times on the train, as if I'd crossed three borders. I yearn to put my head on a pillow, I try to make them believe I'm a VIP. By stressing my world-wide experience of demonstrations, I'm given a bed in the old Jewish quarter. Kabbala carved on French doors. After I left, Bibi Anderson apparently slept in the same bed. Bibi Anderson was in the film, *Excuse Me, Whose Side Are You On?* and had come to show support for the students of Belgrade. On my next trip, lying on the convertible armchair of my unheated servant's room, I thought of Bibi Anderson every night, the *Touch*, the *Persona*, and the *Hour of the Wolves*.

The poet compares the confluence of rivers to a woman's lap. The castle of Belgrade is situated at the confluence of the Danube and the Sava, at that point and protrusion which the self-styled cognoscenti consider the most sensitive part of a woman's body. Five hundred years ago, the fate of our country was decided at this point. Greater Hungary fell at Belgrade's clitoris, Mohács was just icing on the cake.<sup>6</sup> A castle under siege which we were unable to defend, Belgrade is still a castle under siege. For three months, the attention of the media was concentrated on this sensitive spot, as hordes of voyeurs marched from the gentle slopes of the train station to the steep wall of the Danube Embankment to have a look from above.

Apparently the dictator's private fortune is kept in Cyprus. That's why the Mediterranean fleet has been put on alert.

When a state of emergency is, or will be, is decided by the state. The state decides what a state is. The state can be a prison, a homeland, a motherland, a haven, a united states, friendly states, and allied states. The state can be an emergency, a war, inertia, affairs, a state of mind. The state oppresses, civilizes, grants privileges, signs mutual non-aggression pacts. The state nationalizes, incarcerates, honours, arms itself to the hilt, and celebrates anniversaries of its birth. The state inspects its citizens: state exams, state police, state security, secretaries of state. The state decides what isn't a state, *look at the state you're in*. The state is statesmen, stately homes, state visits, Coup d'États. The state is department stores, restaurants, pubs, railway restaurants. The state is pioneer railways, funiculars, cog-wheel railways, look out towers, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Leaning

Tower of Pisa. The state is the Opera, the Ballet Institute, the Sport Stadium, the Race Track, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Music Academy, the János Hospital, the Farkasréti Cemetery, the Érdi Elementary School. The state is a movie theatre, a barracks, a self-service restaurant, an archive, a church, a cultural centre, a zoo, an amusement park, an artificial ice rink, an orphanage, a retirement home, an institute for the blind. The state is the Szabó Lőrinc Municipal Library. The state is the outdoor pool on Margaret Island. The state is a language. C'est moi. Everyone who lives in it. The state is on its own, it lives in constant fear, it makes friends, establishes diplomatic contacts, reaches international agreements, terminates, reneges, declares war, attacks, calls for cease-fires, signs treaties, joins the UN, joins NATO, joins the EU. The state is a club, a circle with restricted membership, state secret, state capitalism, state interest, state religion. The state is grants, delegations, dinners, funerals, a craft. It's Mount Rushmore, it's Wembley, it's Père Lachaise. The Leaning Tower of Pizza, a craft. The state guarantees, issues, prosecutes, collects taxes. The state is a financial institution: state bonds, state treasuries, state debts, state securities, state loans, state bankruptcies. The state changes its shape, size, language, religion, friends. The state is a border. The state is a state within the state. At times, the state falls apart into smaller states. When this happens, all the state's horses and all the statesmen try to put it together again.

## b

One discount ticket for the Balkan Express, one way. She wants my passport, I push it through the small window, under her glasses. Do you know you're not eligible for a student pass, she says. *Is that a question?!* Couldn't you stamp it a bit further down, I say, just look at me, I don't look a day over fifteen. She looks. I'm impertinent, the date of my birth is right there. I'm not thirty per cent off any more, and that's that. Do I really think I can trick MR? Magyar Railways are not a bunch of idiots. It never occurred to me, cross my heart, to think MR are idiots, never, I swear. BPT, yes, the Budapest Public Transport, definitely. She throws me a reproachful glance, what do I take MR for? It may be filthy, but not stupid. What'd the world come to if everybody got their tickets by their looks. She's telling me off as if I were fifteen.

I'm the only Hungarian on the train; the conductor warns me to lock the door. Our men (*the police!*) are getting off at the border. And from there, God knows. I watch the stars through the spokes of the trees and with my back to the engine I softly hum *Every time Yugo...* From my reading I seem to recall that having left Budapest by train, Leo Trotsky and Bram Stoker anticipate the approaching Balkans with a thrill. The war correspondent and the horror writer depict the countryside in a similar manner. Trotsky believes he has discovered the Noah's Ark of the Nations in the third class. This inspiring environment gave birth to each man's masterpiece: *The Legend of Count Dracula* and the Red Army.

I'm bumping along, sleepless, a full-price passenger on the Balkan Express. If I can't sleep I have to drink, if I drink, I have to pee. The carriage is jolting, the train is slow on purpose, we've entered another time zone. A beer bottle rolls along the corridor. In search of the buffet, I go the way it points. From one of the couchettes the sounds of gusla and bagpipe, wine, women and song. I ask them if they could tell me where the buffet is? They shake their heads to the rhythm of the music, and send me to hell in virtually all Serbo-Croat languages.

Just before Belgrade the fog descends. If I didn't know we were in a valley, I'd take it for a bad omen. The fog is so heavy you can't see farther than a couple of inches, and that's fog too, and beyond that the rest of the fog; and Belgrade, something tells me.

Arriving in a strange city is a familiar feeling, you walk as if you know where you're going, as if you'd been there a hundred times before, the cab drivers don't even stop you, you watch out for details, legs, watches, street lamps, butt-ends, women's hats. You buy something, anything, you don't stick out any more. Sit down on a bench and watch the movement, the colours, the proportions. Belgrade. I must have been here before.

"Fog is a cloud that's very close to the earth. When we walk in fog, we are really walking in a cloud."<sup>7</sup>

During an evening cocktail I hear shots. Next day, two wreaths at the crossing. In the newspaper, young boys in identical coats. I saw a film once about Belgrade's underworld: *The Crime that Changed Serbia*. By the time it was finished most of the actors had been killed. In the seventies the police let the hard men leave the country. They were given forged passports in exchange for certain trifling favours, the liquidation of political opponents made to look like an accident and so on. The guest workers went home regularly to spend their German marks, Swiss franks, and Swedish crowns, then in the nineties, war broke out with the new gangs. The reason there's no organized crime in Belgrade, a mafioso complains in the film, is because everybody's thinking short term. They'd rather shoot each other for peanuts than wait for a bigger deal, all you really have to do is wait. Just think of Bosnia and Arkan.

B is the third letter of the Hungarian alphabet. B is for Bilbo. My first friend in Belgrade is Filip David. He walks his dog in front of the cordon every day. His name is Bilbo, he is my second friend in Belgrade. It is a literary friendship. Bilbo Baggins is Babó, translated by Árpád Göncz.<sup>8</sup>

I didn't want to come to Yugoslavia during the war. A friend of mine was discharged from military service with a first class marksman classification. His mother is half Croatian, half Hungarian, his father is a Bosnian Serb. I didn't know which side he was fighting on, if he had deserted or not, if he was alive. I didn't want to be within range.

At the siege of Sarajevo Saskia, Karadzic's son, a good boy and a good soldier, found himself face to face with Jusuf, his childhood pal. Juka, the old gangster, had become one of the commanders of the Igman Mountain resistance. Juka showed Saskia his wounds, and they talked about the good old days. At night, Saskia snuck across Bosnian lines so they could live it up a little. Rumour had it they became great big benders.

The riot police come by bus with packed lunches, like a bunch of tourists from the countryside. After a quick city tour, they form a cordon, march down the Road of Revolution, and barricade Republic Square. They have to wait hours before the demonstrators show up. They buy roasted pumpkin seeds from street vendors, they slide their rubber sticks inside the turned-up aprons of their bulletproof vests. Passers-by try to befriend them by telling political jokes and handing out leaflets. Bobby-soxers pin flowers on their shields and offer them cake. It gets smeared all over their visors.

## C

In films about the illegal Communist Party we saw pretty girls in glasses and innocent, baby-faced working class youths throwing fliers from factory chimneys, rooftops and train windows at the feet of the working class who, giving a furtive look around, snatch them up, and move on. Paper slips on the ground, in the air, glued to the walls of houses. Stuff to read showers down in torrents, its aim to educate and inform when and where we should go to protest, the planned schedule of the more interesting events. Cartoon slips, urgent appeals of a sexual nature, sheets of paper from the sky: "Help the police. Beat yourself up!"

I buy dinars in the shoe shop, the plainclothes police are on my tail. As if I were studying in Moscow in an old black-and-white film. *Pharmacy* in Cyrillic letters. "It's a Knock-Out" atmosphere in the demonstration. CNN attempts a random sample of the crowd. What would you like for Christmas, the reporter asks a little old lady with a cooking pot pulled over her head. The answer is short, it can't be translated, the interpreter says after a moment of reflection. They're running after me, they like my hat, where is it from? I'm from the west too, how embarrassing. My first clear western thought is that I'm a prat. The UN are prats, NATO are prats, Yugoslavs know it. Not prats like the Warsaw Pact. There are rules, the rules are honoured, it works. The civilised way of doing it comes from inside, with the illusion of security. Feels correct, even in the guts. To forget your wife's name with easy nonchalance, to build a mausoleum for your cat, to wear a tie when you go out bombing mourning women.

## CS

Hungary and Serbia, mutilated. You're Hungarian: you know what it feels like. Nostalgia at a bare minimum: Trianon<sup>9</sup> and Dayton. Memories of a big and prosperous country. During the embargo, Budapest was Belgrade's airport. The Hungarian minority never rebelled. The one and only sensible minority. All good points. It's good to be a Hungarian in Belgrade: a rare moment. Budapest and Belgrade are both regularly razed to the ground. A shared sense of history: vanquished little nations with big mouths, melancholy, a bricked-up window on the sea. We lost the very same seacoast. Is this a common fate or what?

"Peter patched things up. This means he made a mistake, but put things right."<sup>10</sup>

The guests arrive soaking wet, they joke, is it the done thing to mix hot tea and water cannons? They know how to live. A bulky historian got it full in the face, the ice is melting from his beard. Mileta tells us that when he was young, they stood on Brankow Bridge with small flags and waved to the dictators. He remembers the Abyssinian emperor gliding by in an open car, Hailie Selassie who traced his ancestry back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Mileta holds a mirror up to the cordon: the police watch themselves watching the demonstrators, who are watching the police to see how they're watching them.

Cedomir says the opposition politicians have compromised themselves and must be replaced. His favourite group is the Love Hunters, he doesn't trust journalists. *L.A. Confidential* is the healthiest film to come out of Hollywood, he calls my attention to Kim Basinger's monologue, adding that without Kosovo the Serbian people will have no living space.

A school girl with disheveled hair comes in, can't look him in the eye, bites her lip as she speaks. She brought him a doll as a good luck charm. It keeps the

police away. Her trembling knees show under her coat. Ceda nods, smiles, and takes the doll, but still looks sad. Girls bring chocolates, cake, flowers, and ask for autographs and marriage. One of them carries a protest sign: Ceda, won't you marry me?

Ceda is finishing drama school, he likes to live life on the edge like Belmondo, *à bout de souffle*, that's the way to live. He goes around raising the students' spirits. There's a striking number of girls and lots of high spirits. He drags his leg ever so slightly; the artificial knee-cap, a sport injury, hardly shows. He's been a war correspondent in Slavonia. Ceda doesn't sleep, it's more than ambition, he's a born leader, he shrugs off his pneumonia. At dawn he addresses the shivering crowd, he raises three fingers, they can't beat us, he says – a fly buzzes in his pause for effect – with God's help we'll break through.

Cedomir is writing a play. The title is *Death–Wish*. It's about the conflict between a father and son in the maelstrom of history. The father is the devil incarnate. His name is Freedom with a capital F; his eponymous Death–Wish with a capital D is the catalyst for the oedipal sequence of events. There is also a Beautiful girl in the play, with a capital B, who deserves to be made vvverry happy, but the circumstances are not favourable and the girl has to sacrifice herself.

Milosevic's father had been promoted from teacher of religious education to Russian teacher before he threw himself off a rock in Montenegro. His mother hanged herself, his uncle the general shot himself in the head in stereo with two guns. One of the signs at the student protest stresses the importance of keeping family traditions alive.

## d

A party in the diplomatic quarter. Over Grappa and smoked salmon we argue about why the students are protesting. Because they're students?

"The drummer beats a drum, he beats it with a drum stick."<sup>11</sup>

My bumpy road to sexual maturity was paved with the death of communist dictators. My first sexual experience coincided with the death of Mao Zedong. I was bitten by a girl called Diana in nursery school. My voice broke when Tito died, and I first came when Brezhnev went. For three days there was nothing but classical music on the radio, which I thought was overdoing it, some schools even closed. Then for a long time, nothing. As an experiment, I took a girl to the movies, but the film was too good, and I got cramps in my hand. Events accelerated in high school. It was only a couple of months between the first kiss and the first frantic fumbling. Following Andropov, Chernenko also checked out. A couple more weeks, and it was Enver's turn, but I'd rather not go into that. I first found out about the G spot when Ceausescu was executed. Kim Il Sung cast new light on my broadening horizons, luckily, the charges were dropped. Fidel. Bring me my spear, Oh clouds unfold.

Everyone starts for home at the same time at a deliberate crawl, the government supporters tooting their horns. Our progress is slow, it's a traffic jam, a traffic demonstration. In Belgrade you take the car, even to demonstrations. It's so America. A drive-thru demonstration. The happiest traffic jam in the world, half the city are pissing themselves, we're putting the brakes on time, the pedestrians are beginning to slow their pace on the pavement. A pantomime protest, they lean into the curve and fall on top of

each other, they can't keep it any more, you can't laugh slowly.

Milovan Djilas, Tito's friend, did nine years in two rounds. In the interval he spent a year and a half on probation. In 9 years he was allowed 116 visiting slots of half an hour each. His wife kept the time. His son lives across the street, I go to visit him. Aleksa is busy, he's working on a foreign affairs show for television, but he's got half an hour for me. The conversation gets off to a good start. Alex calls the Hungarians the greatest losers of all time. At least I don't have to make excuses. A short detour on the terrain of suicide statistics, Mohács, Kosovo, Trianon, and we're fast friends. His father talked Tito into permitting jazz. Stalin liked him and wanted him to replace the Marshal, but Djilas happened to mention that the Soviet soldiers raped women at the siege of Belgrade. He couldn't keep his mouth shut. He was arrested in 1956 because he objected to the occupation of Hungary. When they searched his apartment they found his gun, a present from Marshal Koniev. A bullet rolled away, Aleksa picked it up and tried to force it into his toy gun. They're taking his father. Djilas's last picture of his home: the henchmen laughing, the child trying to load his gun.

**e**

Mileta Prodanovic recounts an episode from the history of ethnic wanderings in the Balkans. In the sixteenth century the Catholic Albanian Clementines fled to the Muslim region of Sandjak. They converted to the true faith and adopted the language of the surrounding Serbs. One group wandered further north to Srem, where they reconverted, and picked up the language and customs of the local Croats. With the Serb refugees from Croatia in 1993, the ethnic scale tipped in favour of the Serbians. The new mayor of Hrtkovci called for a spontaneous celebration to rename the streets. When the new signs were put unveiled, the mayor condemned the past, and renamed the street of the infamous Ustasha leader Vladimir Nazor<sup>12</sup> in honour of Czar Dusan. Then he changed the street of the infamous Ustasha agent Josip Juraj Strossmayer<sup>13</sup> to Prince Milos. And finally, Sándor Petöfi, he said, then paused, whose life is alien to us, from this day on, let his street be known as King Peter Avenue. Little did he know that Petöfi was the son of the infamous Chetnik butcher Petrovics.

Twilight with police cordon, the light dancing on the shields. A guy comes up, he's anxious, he wants to see his sick mother. He asks the police to let him through, she's right there in that house, otherwise he'll have to make a huge detour. He's driven away. A dog comes up and snarls, the cordon opens up.

We never realized, but it's always been here. They've been standing here all the time, and it's only now we've noticed how many there are, at the same time, at the same place. Now at least we can see them face to face. It took this many of us to face the cordon, this many people wanting it at the same time, to know for sure this is not what we want. They won't hurt us, they just won't let us pass. We can stay here, we can go home, we just can't go the one way we want. One by one we can move around freely, together we're helpless. Whatever road we take, a cordon lines up as if we were prisoners of an invisible force field, imprisoned in a country, although I can leave any time.

A non-aligned tale. Marija lived on the right bank of the river in Austria, Franjo on the left bank, in Hungary. Franjo would steal across for fire-wood, and since these two countries were one, nobody cared when Marija and Franjo fell in love. They were as poor as church mice, they starved, they were cold,

eight of their children died. But seven survived, and Marija hoped that her seventh son would become a priest. Franjo wanted to send him to America, but he couldn't raise the 400 crowns for the passage. Josip was called into the imperial armed forces, he fought, was taken prisoner, and escaped. In the summer of 1917 he tried to flee Russia via St. Petersburg so that from Finland he could take a ship bound for America. He was caught, he served time. America sailed away, the revolution broke out, the great October one, then came the Soviet Union and bright new opportunity. He married a Russian woman, met a worker from the Putyilov factory, and was recruited into the underground movement. He was wearing glasses as a disguise when he returned to his village, and through these glasses could see that the river no longer divided Austria and Hungary, but Slovenia and Croatia, but still nobody cared, because these two countries were one. He had been to prison, he climbed the ladder of the movement, he became a hunger striker, a guerrilla leader, and then Yugoslav president. When Stalin sent assassins after him, he lost all interest. The Soviet Union sailed away, too, and he longed for new, third world, something that would be both without being either. He looked at the map and discovered the non-aligned countries. As uncrowned king of the third world, he toured the globe, and Richard Burton played him in the film of his life. In a television interview before he died, he said not everything had happened quite the way it was written. His diamond ring glinting on the screen, the eighty-something dictator gave the impression of a satisfied man. Tito didn't live to see the Yugoslav basketball gold, nor the end of the second world, nor the time when the little river, which once divided and brought his parents together, would become a real border.

"Once we let something go, it will never stop."<sup>14</sup>

é

The enormous park at nursery school was full of secret hiding places. Most of the stuff is probably still where I hid it. I found a night butterfly behind the hedge and hid it among the dead leaves. I thought it was a toy, but at dusk it flew away. Life took him from me, the bully. No problem, I was getting ready for my big act, teaching my kitten how to fly. I stood at the top of the cellar stairs, I explained to him what to do, then let go. Living things are unpredictable. My night butterfly collection was growing: cats, dogs, turtles, friends, relatives, lovers flew around above the city. I'll come back for them.

Organic buildings, human ivy round the windows, they're whistling, gesturing, flashing their lights: caryatids and putti come to life. The assistants are standing in the shop windows, staring out, the dummies are waving. On the scaffolding construction workers are cheering, brandishing their hammers. Leaning from a fifth-story balcony, a man swings a three-armed candelabra in the air as if getting ready to fish in the crowd swimming below. The streets become river valleys, I let myself be swept along, a woman jumps on me. I don't speak Serbian. No problem. She loves me just the same.

"Oh life, how sweet to be alive!"<sup>15</sup>

The doctors decide on November 7th as my date of birth, the anniversary of the Revolution. My mother announces that even if it kills her, she's going to hold out for one more day.<sup>16</sup>

The bottle goes around, no glasses, but if we behave they promise us whisky. We're bracing ourselves against the cold, it's minus five. I'm not dressed

properly for a demonstration, I just popped downstairs to have a look at the evening cordon. Someone hands me Slivovic. The music of the *Underground* roars from a couple of speakers, if you want to stay alive, you dance. The riot police are replaced every hour. They get extra for the night shift, like snow shovellers. They don't drink, they don't dance, they stand their ground below zero, fuelled by hate. The demonstration is like a picnic, you have to eat if you want to break through. Sandwiches, cakes, chocolate fingers, a choice of four kinds of drinks. Some students show up and say there's going to be tear gas, do we have any gas masks, or can we get hold of some, it won't be a picnic without them. And I thought I had prepared for everything! The wind starts up, so it seems that the tear gas is out. The police are packing up. Whistles, clapping, ovations, at one a.m. the city opens up. Five hundred start off, an hour later there's thirty thousand of us. Cigarette lighters and candles in the windows, lights being switched on and off, we march through the streets to the sound of drums, if you hate Sloba, come with us. We pelt the Milosevic residence with snow balls. We soon run out of snow, but we still got balls. Three undercover men drive into the crowd, they get out in one piece. A disciplined demonstration. Around three a.m. a mix of beer and vodka rules, general euphoria, we dance forwards, we go to places no demonstrators have ever gone before, narrow streets, fancy neighbourhoods, then downtown again through the Street of the Partisan Platoons. In this moment, the ten-metre banner at the head of the procession doesn't seem overstated: BELGRADE IS THE WORLD! Somebody passes me a smoke, I step behind the banner and hum a line from Morgenstern: a knee rotates around the Earth, a knee and nothing else.

f

Bath time was during the news. Every now and then mother would look in to see if I was all right. Dad was watching TV in the living room. To protect me from the lies they had to know the details. I could hear mother sighing – what a shambles I'm making of the tub, I'm flooding the apartment. I dived down. Under the water I heard a voice telling me what had happened in the world that day: a landslide killed a hundred and fifty people in Bangladesh, a revolution broke out in West Africa, a new kindergarten and an Olympic pool were opened, and MTK beat Fradi 2–1. I had no idea who was sending me messages in this way, or why, but they clearly had plans for me, because they also told me what the weather was going to be like. The following day I could distinguish several voices in the tub, which pointed towards an organization. This manner of communication seemed to be a logical one. I couldn't send them messages, because you can't talk under water, and they could only get in touch with me during bath time without my parents and teachers knowing. I didn't understand why it was so important for the organization that I should have detailed information on the latest war games in Poland, or which Transdanubian towns were being granted city status, but I knew that if I paid attention, sooner or later I'd be given a sign. My life gained a deeper meaning under water. When one Sunday mother was washing my hair and, unsuspecting, she pushed my head into the water, a pleasant female voice whispered in my ear that the hail had ruined the crops. I knew immediately what they expected from me, and to be honest, I had no objections. To make a big mess. After going to bed, I used to battle submarines and fighter planes in the dark even before this, sometimes I ended up on the floor, and it was only due to my dogged persistence that in the end the victory was mine. From that day on, I sabotaged the development of our people's democracy like a busy honey-bee. Earthquakes, power failures and gas explosions marked my way. Based on the information I received in the bathtub, I discovered the location of

military objectives. When a factory or a power plant was inaugurated, I was there, doing what I had to do. The COMECON was anxiously fidgeting behind the Iron Curtain, not knowing that it was me who was chopping down the bean stalk.

I was a virgin, but it didn't bother me. I didn't have a clue. The world was black and white, you could watch it on TV. It's still in front of me: the extra time in the Holland–Argentina final, the link–up of the Baader–Meinhof and the Solyut–Apollo, the death of the King (I didn't know who Elvis was, but Dad was gutted), the gas explosion at Zsana, the volcanic clouds over Mount St. Helens, the Hungarian space flight, and the Rubik Cube World Championship in Budapest. Sports were exciting in black and white: in a boxing match you had to count the number of stripes on the guys' socks. I even remember how many stripes my first date had, I'm not sure about the colour of the eyes, I see her in black and white. After the first kiss my parents bought a colour TV and it turned out that the Dutch are orange–yellow, the Italians are blue, and there are green and red devils; only the Germans remained black and white as if they were being punished. Their country was split in two as well. I almost felt sorry for them.

Milosevic's boy is a racing car driver, he crashes Ferraris. To wave a Ferrari flag as a joke is on par marching with a MAY 1st factory banner on the First of May. The symbolic opposition camp is demonstrating with Brazilian flags bearing Senna's picture. How many more Ferraris does he have to crash before he catches up with Senna?

We stop for a beer between two demonstrations. On Terazije, the boys are leisurely warming up, checking their shoes, forming into a line. The protesters are slowly coming out, someone produces the ball, they start passing it in front of the police cordon. The hard core arrives, Red Star fans carrying flags, trumpets, and drums. Hip–hip–hurrah, we're coming through, they shout at the three–thousand police.

The sports reporter inside stirs, and you start a commentary for whoever is standing next to you. Ladies and Gentlemen! Today we will find out how much home advantage is worth. Milosevic's squad is very strong, but they might just get a surprise from a small side street. There is reason to assume that the visitors are invincible. There are rumours of transfers and bad blood in training camp. Immediately the ball goes into play, the home team gets possession. The police try to block the play with darting interceptions. There's confused action in the centre, the clearance shot is late in coming, the home team pull the opposition on top of themselves, there's a gap in the wall, someone shoots, goal!

The revolution must go on, Tito said. The Avenue of the Revolution is the longest street in Belgrade, Bulevar Revolucije, even though there has never been a revolution in Belgrade. The protesters throw rotten eggs at the television building and the tower of the government papers. They pierce the eggs with a needle, then let them stand for three days. When the stench is unbearable, it's time to throw them. Egg grenade à la Belgrade. It's all in the timing. The sky–high price of eggs put a stop to their use for military purposes, but folklore preserved its memory, the name stuck to the demonstrations, like rotten eggs to the wall: yellow revolution.

On the night before the battle of Nándorfehérvár, the defenders light fires on the shore of the Danube at Zimony for the greater glory of Christianity. From

the other side, the thousands of bonfires look like an unbroken sea of flame. Every time the Turkish pipes sound on the other side, the Crusaders make an ear-splitting noise with whistles, drums, trumpets, zithers, bells, pots and pans, and shields. They can't tolerate monophony.

Three generations dance hand in hand in front of the police cordon like excited debutantes. The immanence of punishment makes their movements raw and erotic. Teenagers twisting and jiving, pensioners waltzing in a soft embrace. School girls tease the riot squad: you dancin'? A young policeman quips: sorry, they're not dressed for the occasion. It's getting dark, they continue by the light of cigarette lighters. The flames are mirrored in the policemen's visors. In the surrounding apartments the lights are flicked on and off, on the top of the city council tower the star shines an incendiary red, the Danube sparkles through transparent sheets of ice. Belgrade, the city of light.

## 9

Through bulletproof glass. To watch the past, the golden age gliding by, the backs of the police, the face of the driver in the mirror. To memorize a Swiss bank account. To walk around in sunglasses in winter. To control the media. To know how to win elections.

The Yugoslavs are a head taller, there's a spaceship on their vests and they wear size 46 boots. On the camp field in Csillebérc the shadows grew long. Drazen leaned leisurely on my aura. I didn't want to punch him in the solar plexus, I went for the throat. That's when they introduced the three point rule. It wasn't long since my voice broke. It all happened so suddenly. I asked for time out. An eternity under the backboard. I'm still growing and they're casting a shadow over my aura. In my hand a torn Yugoslav T-shirt. That's when the Olympics were on TV, the one our Party and Government boycotted. Romania had just won its twentieth gold. If it hadn't been for Trianon, there wouldn't have been a single Hungarian medal in Los Angeles. There I stood, out for the rest of the game, bursting with outdated revolutionary fervour. I was pissed off to the point of no return. The coded objectivity of the referee – personal foul – seemed to confront me with the failure of my very existence. In the locker room I courted death in vain, my shoe strings were too short. Genetics, Drazen explained after the game when I first saw a Pioneer dunk it. The Yugoslavs are all geniuses, he went on, they invented everything: take the ball point pen, matches, the zeppelin.

I dreamt that one day I too would hold the ball between two fingers, my pinkie in the air. I had the Golden Team by heart: Gyivác, Páspáj, Rádzsa, Kukocs, Petrovics, Vrankovics, Danilovics, Grosics, Pusás, Czibor... Gods in their own right. A third world team, non-aligned basketball: they gouged, elbowed, punched, murmured sweet nothings in their opponents' ears, cursed fluently from the Baltic languages to Aramaic. Unforgettable trips and faultless shoves. A morality of a higher order manifested itself in their surprise attacks, a partisan bravado daring to stand up to superior odds, the guts to win even against the rules.

I looked up to Yugoslav basketball, it gave me strength when times were hard. When, for example, under the guise of a physical, they weighed and measured me. They stood me under a bar which was disproportionately taller than me, made me take off my shoes, and pulled a shovel over my head. According to the law of physics it should have stopped at my skull, but it slid down instead, this school guillotine, cutting inches off my height. They cropped my hair short

so I couldn't put up a defence, I stood on tiptoe but they pushed me down on my heels, and just when I thought my head would get stuck between my legs, they whispered an arbitrary number in my ear to test me.

"Peter answers his teacher with pride: he stands up straight and he speaks loud and clear."<sup>17</sup>

The news arrived at the same time: the Yugoslavs had won the European Championships and invaded Slovenia. The Slovene player was missing from the Final, the tanks were on their way over the Fraternity and Unity highway. The old wound had suddenly opened up, and we watched helplessly from under the backboard as the south-Slav Golem shattered into many small nations. The mythical partisan troop disappeared into the mist, the Yugoslav invention was dead, impudence and resourcefulness melted into the world order. I didn't know who to root for any more.

## h

Father asked me to come home, they were going to knock down the house in which I grew up to make a better and bigger one. On the train I drank the health of Hungarian girls with three mafiosos from Novi Sad. We will have Hungarian wives, they said. I go to the Rudas Baths to melt away the Belgrade winter. I lie on the light coming in through the six-pointed gaps in the ceiling waiting to be shaken up, like a paperweight with snow inside. The dome of the Rudas Baths is a continuation of the traveler's forehead. A building with predesigned holes, even without a siege, the perfect Budapest. I'm floating below the arches, an inside-out snowfall, between the hot water and the scorching sun, a Hungarian skull slipped inside a Turkish turban.

In the morning I go to pack up my childhood. The house is small, as if it were a model; the trees have shrunk. Tiptoe through the bonsai garden. My parents' house stands empty, without curtains, bereft of anyone to please, but my room is packed with the seventies, or seventy-five to eighty-five more like. Books and stones, photographs, love letters. I pack them all in whisky boxes. I walk around the old villa, it only takes a few moments, I've outgrown the garden. The stairs were under the old walnut tree, but they covered it with earth when the slope was nationalized. They built a pharmacy where the orchard stood, a boiler house in the place of the apple trees. I stop by the stone blocks that once held the palms, the stairs several metres below me in the ground. I lie down on the ground and roll around until I'm covered with snow.

I dream we're roasting fatty bacon, I got greasy up to my chin. I climb the walnut tree, but slip back down. I keep climbing until I've climbed all the trees. Children and trees of various sizes appear, they grow together, leaves and branches, nails and hair, all the children are me, I climb all the trees in the garden, I won't get down though I know the dream will end soon, but the children won't come down from the trees and the alarm clock goes off, the school bell rings, class is starting, the tram hoots, the ship's siren blasts, the conductor blows his whistle, the bells of Nándorfehérvár toll, but all the trees and children have grown into one another and they're laughing at me, I'm standing on the ground, old and helpless, and on top of each tree a child is swinging its legs, that's how the dream ends, unfinished. As far as a child or a tree can be unfinished. Not to mention the swinging.

A is the first letter of the Croatian alphabet. A is the first letter of the Serbian alphabet. A is the first letter of the Bosnian alphabet.

- <sup>2</sup> Ferenc Mérei and Ágnes V. Binét, *Ablak–Zisiráf – Képes Gyermeklexikon* (Móra Kiadó, Budapest, 1971). An illustrated lexicon for children.
- <sup>3</sup> "Gold is a yellow coloured metal. It is mined from the depths of the mountains. Gold fish are not made of gold." (*Ablak*, p. 7)
- <sup>4</sup> In Hungarian, "window" is *ablak*, and "giraffe" is *zisiráf*. Take my word for it.  
<sup>5</sup> *Ablak*, p. 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Five years later Hungarian King and army were defeated at the battle of Mohács.  
<sup>7</sup> *Ablak*, p. 83. be sure to read the section on clouds, p. 42.
- <sup>8</sup> Göncz, who went on to be President of Hungary, translated J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* while a political prisoner.
- <sup>9</sup> In 1918, with the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary was reduced to a third of its former size and lost five million native Hungarians.  
<sup>10</sup> *Ablak*, p. 37.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ablak*, p. 152.
- <sup>12</sup> A.N.: Communist poet and partisan hero.
- <sup>13</sup> A.N.: Catholic bishop with liberal views who stood up to the Pope in favour of the Orthodox Church  
<sup>14</sup> *Ablak*, p. 126.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ablak*, p. 42.
- <sup>16</sup> "Check in the calendar to see what day your birthday will fall this year, and what day May the First!" *Ablak*.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ablak*, p. 17.

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