

Basements *and* Other Museums

Vedran Husić



Black
Lawrence
Press

To Naira

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A Brief History of the Southern Slavs

They knelt upon the land, unable to walk any longer, blessed the ground, named the river, flourished and multiplied, had a God for each season, then had only one God, the winter God, broke their faith upon a stone, divided the tribe, died standing up, hid in the hills from tax collectors, slept fitfully through dreamless nights, grew cunning, reaped the harvest, raised pigs, turned landlords when there wasn't war, passed down in song how they lived, how they suffered, how they were trodden upon but overcame, rebelled against kings, rebelled against the weather, against the heights of mountains, and what stood beyond, their divided blood, formed a state, fought a war, fought another, fought one more, were invaded, were enlightened, were betrayed, wore progressive shoes, put on reactionary hats, whispered in the presence of books, became prisoners of ideas, then arrogant like all nonbelievers, then violent like all who regain their faith.

*I hear, the axe has bloomed,
I hear, the place is not nameable,
I hear, they call life
our only refuge.*
—Paul Celan, “I Hear, the axe has bloomed”

Deathwinked

We called sniper alley the alley of wolves. We were young and boys and had nicknames for everything, first of all the girls. There was the Nanny, the Epilogue, and the Soulcrusher. We thought these nicknames very clever, breathless with truth. We were thirteen and easily excited. To be killed by a sniper meant to be deathwinked, a verb. I came up with that. I had a minimum understanding of poetry, a maximum amount of fear.

We ran across the alley of wolves to test our recent manhood, among other things. We ran because there was nothing better to do. We ran because it was more bearable than standing still. We were young and anxious to be brave. We were practicing martyrs. Our fathers were gone; mine gone forever, heaven-swallowed one winter night at the front. Miralem’s father was still at the front, firing his gun at the threatening distance. All three of us dreamed of soldierhood and feared that the war

would soon run out. Edin's father had come back from the front and was gone in yet another way, halfway between the gone of Miralem's father and the never coming back of my father. He was crazy, according to the completely not insane. He spoke the names of the dead, but not in his sleep, like normal people. He confused the living for the dead, which worried the living. We all smiled at him and pitied him the best we could. We smiled at him and measured our sanity against his truth. Edin took it all in stride, in run, explaining it away through philosophy, intellectualizing the problem until the problem grew wings. His father's rants did not bother him, but it bothered his family, who wanted to institutionalize the father. But there were no institutions left. Edin argued that to call somebody insane was ridiculous in time of war. Nobody in his family listened to him; he was thirteen, which is its own form of insanity.

Our fathers were gone, and our mothers had no authority over us. We loved them, our unreluctant Slavic mothers, but we loved our courage more. "War is our true mother," Edin once said, inspired and dumbfounded. "Unable to give birth, men make war," he said another time. Edin was the oldest by a month, a small lifetime, had slow blue eyes, and spoke deliberately, like a drunk wanting to be understood. He liked Kierkegaard; he liked the idea of Kierkegaard. He argued about religion, for and against it. His father had taught philosophy and was now insane, or within untiring reach of insanity. His family had been wealthy, but now money did not matter, had lost meaning. It was wartime and everything was free, and everybody on the eastern side of Mostar was equal as the dead are equal. The dream of communism bloomed among casual shell bursts and articulate sniper fire, on the eastern side of a town without bridges.

Eastiders have nothing to lose but their lives, and an afterworld to gain. Alley-runners of all countries unite!

The family library lay in rubble, but some of the books had been saved, and being the only books left, they were many times read and meticulously understood by Edin. Edin came up with the name “alley of wolves” and it had been his idea to run across it. To impress the Epilogue more than anything else. Larger reasons became apparent only later, and by virtue of their late arrival sounded like excuses. Ideas were Edin’s guardian angels; he had a whole tear-bright choir of them. Beyond the grave there will be singing. He had bulletproof testosterone. A missionary’s courage. There were doubters to convert to something less than doubt. There were detractors to prove wrong. And death proved everybody wrong, eventually, always. We congregated near a spilling set of trashcans, behind buildings bruised by mortar fire. Houses in every state of uninhabitable lined the alley on one side, walls left to stand as monuments to futility, while on the other side stood nothing, open space and a gravel path sloping toward the river. And up ahead, the nothing-goal, more desolated houses and the mute storefronts of empty shops, and the stone remains of a mosque, with its third of a minaret, and the promise of intermission and the burden, almost motherly, of the run back. A small and narrow street, strewn with garbage and garbage-scented, our ground of play. These adjectives come easy, self-compounded at birth.

Mostar, my city, you are far from me now, but I peek through the spyglass and you appear so near. In my third-floor apartment, in the neverdesperate America of my childhood dreams, at my desk, armed with pencil and paper, sensitive as a landmine, fumbling similes like live grenades, I, the young,

triple-tongued poet, write down the name of my birthcity like the name of a former lover. Mostar. Mostar, my city, stunned quiet. They took the Most, threw it into the river and made you unnamable. My city, one night you went dark all around me. You trembled and could not be embraced. The bombs fell on you, near constant and heartbeatloud. I recommend war-tourism to any artist, poet especially, a month or so of up-close death, a month, or twenty-three, of dark-houred explosions in a world maddened by sirens. You'll never lack material, or have to account for sudden mood swings, and you'll never lose at those drunken games between friends, intimate games, those poetic games of whosufferedmost.

Three floors are enough to kill a man. The truthhearing poet gives the truthsharpened tip of his pencil a lick, he writes: Three floors are enough to kill a man/There can be no hate without memory/To love is to imagine/In the white noise of other feelings. That with his pencil the poet writes the truth is implied, was implied, is implied no longer. He gives the pencil another swift lick, he writes: All children pretend/Their games are serious/All games have rules/Even the games of animals/Have rules. Our game had but a few rules. If you ran last yesterday, you must run first today. That was one rule. If you ran across the alley to the other side, you must run back. That was rule number two, for there was another way back, sniperless but long. And there were rules of which we were ignorant, the secret rules of the sniper. But whether the sniper followed any rules was left to debate. Sundays we did not run. Yesterday, Miralem had run last; he would run first today. Who would run second was decided by a coin toss. Edin would run second. I, last. Tomorrow I would run first. Tomorrow I would not run.

The time leading up to the first run was the happiest time of the day, our concentration lax, our muscles fearful and limber, the words between us intimate, unexpected, binding. Sometimes we sang. It was morning, during the week of lentil soup. Miralem stretched his arms and legs, while Edin and I sat on opposing stubs of stone arguing in war-hushed tones. The blue sky promised no rain, and the sun looked a blotchy and vague yellow. Miralem threw one arm behind his back and pressed the bent elbow with his other hand, his legs wide apart, his torso stout and armless. The amber sheen of autumn leaves, the gazelle-like wind, the abashed leaf-rustle, they all spoke in different languages about the same things. Beauty. Nature. Truth. Poetry. We spoke of philosophy, Edin and I, while Miralem quietly and thoughtfully stretched, and in the new dawn's unraveling silence, under a sky morningpureblue, the sniper fired the first shot of a long day. Bullet, trashcan, a metal *ping* almost adorable, almost loud. We turned our heads toward the sound, then toward each other, then back. We resumed our conversation and Miralem joined us. He was arguably pretty, one of those who narrowed their eyes when they grinned, one of those who gestured with their fists. His eyes were green, a little blue, and he had a full Slavic forehead, broad and thought-pale. He was short but athletic; he was short and had a temper. He did not like tall girls. He did not like the Soulcrusher, with whom I played games in death-proof basements. There we spoiled each other for our future selves. He brought daily lilies for the Nanny and kissed her deeply, with a more meaningful tongue, with more daring and saliva than I ever did Selma. I write her name like the name of something lost. She knew how to swing the hips she did not have. She knew how to haggle good enough and

long enough to make you give up everything. With her smile she fooled you into laughing at yourself. With her laughing eyes she crushed your soul. She dreamed of a husband with money. She dreamed of big hips. A skirtful of memories, everything I have, for a handful of her skirt.

Miralem had played soccer before the war, before the cemetery turn of every idle field, before the dead packed stadiums; he was fast, his run was urgent and blind, it was a sprint, and he ran with his head down. And yesterday he'd tripped and fallen a yard or so from safety. The sniper had fired and missed. He did not fire again. A little dust rose, it settled. Miralem was on the other side by then, bent over, with his hands on his knees, breathing greedily. He did not fire again as if to let us take in the full magnitude of his miss, or to impress us with his patience. The confidence of those with death on their side, how could we ever understand it? Miralem said nothing when we got to him, his tender calm edging on some kind of bewilderment, and after the run back, we walked home in silence, and parted from each other in silence, the silence of raised stakes. Now Miralem ridiculed the sniper, saying that he missed because he was a bad shot, and not on purpose, saying he was some fat, pimply boy playing at war, and not a man of many battles, not a man at all, just a novice at death and not worth the fantasy of our revenge. But Edin wouldn't have it. No, to him he was a man and a master, a Machiavellian sniper prince, with a nihilist's love of beauty; his aim is steady and true, he shoots you with a shot made of lead, his slit eye is Catholic blue. Edin had read his Celan, saved from the rubble. Death is a master from the Balkans. But it is more intimate than that. He is a close relation, the mysterious uncle bearing strange gifts at each prophetic visit, the one who winks

at you behind your parent's back. We were brought up on his knee, on the black milk of his wisdom. Our blood is his blood. The one who waltzes you across the alley of wolves, the one who lets you stand on his feet as you move against each other in this gently wicked dance. Our songs are his songs. He sings into your hair as you dance. He whispers in your ear, forbids you to stop.

Miralem ran across the alley, with his head down, with his head only slightly lifted toward the end. Alive on the other side, he grinned at us, his eyes almost closed. Then it was gone, the grin, memory-wiped, collapsed into a thinking pout. The sniper had not fired. Sometimes he didn't. And when he didn't he blessed our run with innocence, like running before the war. Sometimes that was what we wanted. We had run for a month now, had been in this war for years, and weren't getting any wiser. So why not go back? To a time of sparrow-enswired minarets and non-firewood lindens, to a time of packed café terraces and their murmur like rushing water, when death and its mirror image, life in war, were as distant as nightmares after waking. In front of our buildings, punched blue and black by rockets, was a large courtyard, and this courtyard had been the setting of our first game, a game of collection. Under the spell of sunlight and tall grass, we'd search for bullet shells and find also glinting syringes, uncapped bottles of pills, an occasional limb abstracted from the body. One day, we found a mortar shell the size of a baby seal, unexploded. We dared each other to touch it. Edin moved toward it, extending an unsteady finger. "BOOM," Miralem yelled at the point of contact, and Edin jumped back. Miralem laughed and Edin fumed. They fought it out, and afterwards both fumed. And as they sat on opposite sides of the projectile, not looking at each other, I got up from my seat and

placed my palm against its belly. The metal was scorched by the sun and felt smooth and naked to the touch. I let my fingers linger haughtily, waiting for them to notice. I felt an upward rush of courage, like a declaration. Miralem and Edin joined me, our three hands pressed against the hot metal in a silent oath. That was when we knew we wanted to be soldiers and never die.

Beyond the broken-down stores and houses, beyond the kneeling minaret, on the side that we first ran to reach, was their headquarters, in the sandbagged gymnasium of a shell-bitten and nearly roofless elementary school. We peeked on three soldiers, all three young; we watched them gather by a corner table, watched two of them sit on upturned milk crates and the other stand; watched them eat lentil soup from a can that was warmed by old-fashioned fire; watched them listen to a portable radio as they ate with no hope of satiation; watched their hands busily scratch and their lips seldom move; watched all three turn toward the radio when the human voice got lost behind an unrelenting tearing of sandpaper. The soldiers went back to patrol the rubble and we watched them walk away, toward danger, unafraid and amused. There was something solemn about their amusement, something sensual and elusive about the way they carried themselves, in their warstained boots and burden-heavy uniforms, something eerily casual about the guns slung over their shoulders, lustful and sentimental about their lack of helmets. What bleak respect we had for them, all God-like and dusty-loined. They were not so much defenders of our city as defenders of our dream of the city. The odds were against them, but the crowd on their side, the cheer of the wind in the trees.

We wandered about for a while, wasting time before our run back. It was getting to be noon, the shadows growing long

and ragged. Women appeared on the street, braving their way to market located makeshift in one of the rear classrooms, smuggled goods. Once, we had looked for ingredients to make a cake for my birthday and found nothing but a nestful of eggs. We had the party in a basement, with no cake, but with many candles, more than was my age. In another yard, a new breed of child explorers rummaged for shells in the overgrown grass, their pockets full of singing. Farther east, toward Stolac, a blue-gray tower of smoke had risen, straying from its origin, swallowing houses whole along its path. We saw the absence of the bridge and a gentle curve of river below. The Old Bridge was gone, but the Neretva River was still here, flowing bright and prewar green. The river doesn't care. The river has seen worse. The river is not concerned with what we throw in it: debris, bodies, blood, and stone, the water stitches it all to a mend, never stopping to wonder what we send downriverflowing. We climbed a garage and flopped down on our bellies. With our voices love-timid, our stares remote, we looked over our half of the city. Behind us, the boughs of a large tree whose name we had not yet learned shielded us from danger. Green mountains and hills enclosed us on all sides, separating us from our enemies but not from ourselves. The piled smoke rose still higher, spread out greater than a cathedral, more clouded than the idea of God. Sparrows chirped, crests chirped, gunfire chirped. The waxwing had flown south, summer was over. The dandelions had been beheaded; the lilies had hanged themselves. It was autumn now and nothing bloomed, except the yearlong ax.

Miralem was on the starting side again, alive and well and one day braver, while Edin stood on the edge of safety, waiting

to run. He stood just behind a little shop, its interior gray and plundered. Before the war, I'd run there to get emergency Vegeta for my mother, and sometimes its owner, old and Hellenic Mr. Salemović, would call me into the back and ask me to stack some items for him, rewarding my impromptu work with free candy. I remember red jars of Ajvar, tall glass bottles of Laro Juice, and those compact silver cans of Eva Sardines, with a waving walrus dressed as a sailor on the blue cover. I remember Dorina Chocolates and Bananko Bars, Bajadera Pralines and Napolitanke Wafers, and Jaffa Cookies with their chocolate skins and orange jelly hearts. I remember a balance scale on the counter, with numerous dust-colored weights in increasing sizes of mass; I remember the slow sway of its thin shoulders, the delicate movements of its plates, their eventual, hard-earned symmetry. One surging whiff of Vegeta and I'm back in a light-filled kitchen, beside my mother who smells of red vegetables and spices, standing innocently in the way and marveling at her instinctual measurements. Just one whiff and I remember my mother, half-orphaned by one war, wholly widowed by another, tasting the sauce and smiling down at me her expert opinion. Music comes from the living room, where my father is taking his afternoon nap. This tells me that we already ate, that the food being prepared is for tomorrow, that despite the Sunday texture of this memory, this is more likely a work day, a day my mother will end at the hospital, where she will begin the new day, working at her typewriter, giving injections, changing sheets. The number of coffee cups on the table tells me there will be guests, our next-door neighbors, a Catholic man who always guessed the card in my hand and his Muslim wife who could read the future in the muddy remnants of the coffee.

Edin stood on the brink of danger, waiting to prove his bravery. But in war everybody is brave, even the coward. Even the sniper at his post, beguiling the fates. The three soldiers patrolling the rubble, they were braving another day of boredom, their courage doomed. Huddled around the radio, they waited for the news to tell them what they already knew. The war will not end today. The children in the tall grass, in the bloom of their inexperience, they were brave without knowing. The women in search of food, carrying their grief inside them like a long pregnancy, their bravery no conciliation for their loss. Everybody is brave in wartime. Everybody wise, even the fool with his warning. We were just braver, the answered prayers of our patient tormenters. Victims of our own death-mined wisdom. Strange prideful lambs, we made our courage our God. Like every rose is a flower, every Slav boy is an Icarus.

Edin was on the verge of his run, waiting for a favorable sign that only he knew how to tell. Then, suddenly, he was off, his footsteps echoing bluntly in the empty street, his thin vicious elbows stabbing the air behind him. The sniper fired and Edin crashed to the soundless asphalt.

Deathwinked.

I thought I screamed, I thought I tore my mouth with my voice, but my cry, its angular fury, was only imagined. I took a couple of steps toward Edin, to soothe the distance between us, but Miralem raised his palm and I obeyed. We looked on from the disbelief of safety, looked at his unflinching body, waiting for loyalty to move us, for fear to release us, for courage to break us free. I wiped my tears on my sleeve; I looked at Miralem and knew. He lowered his hand and we ran. A new game had begun, a game of retrieval. I grabbed Edin under his armpits and

Miralem grabbed him by his ankles. We carried Edin home, running. The sun was in my eyes; I thought I would trip. I felt the weight of his body like never before. The sniper did not fire.

And now? What now? Why stop one's war story in mid-exhalation? Why bring in the present to take revenge on the past? The past, which is our only refuge. Now my sleep is fragmented by nightmares. Now I'm ghost-weary, my tongue a cripple. Now I lean out of my window and think about ending this chance-riddled life, but can never keep my eyes closed long enough. Now I walk barefoot in my dark apartment trying to catch in a mason jar every flicker of my insanity. Now I sit at my desk and write.

The sniper did not fire.

Now that the war is over we laugh that it ever began. But even now we hunger for the right man to lead us down the wrong path again. For even now, in some small, divided village, a Milošević is waiting to be stubbornly born.

Now the exhumed graves are again silenced with our soil.

Now the past is burned like sheets of infidelity.

Now, in comfortable prisons, under supervision kind and condescending, sworn enemies bond over a game of cards.