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THE WAVES OF
THE BELGRADE
SEA

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Beograd, 2014.

*To my mother Mirodinka,
waves receding into the sea.*

In this story only Belgrade is real.

Have we come here to laugh or to shed tears?
Are we dying or, otherwise, are we being born?

Carlos Fuentes, "Terra Nostra"

OUR AGORA

And then my exact visions appeared.
I am an archeologist who does not know why he digs.
I woke up in a railway station waiting room.
At 5 in the morning, when the dawn disperses the darkness
And wakes up the roses sitting in the windows, this waiting
room is
our agora, a Greek meeting place where everybody
preaches to their visions.
We all share our women here.
Homeless bodies lie on the benches.
A petty thief comes out from a fusty buffet, and with a
cognac-dark face,
he stares at the peculiar passengers.
A gypsy girl, incredibly young, took out her breast from her
shirt,
it's pointed like a pear and the child sucks milk now,
until it falls asleep.
An encounter with a mirror in the station's bathroom is painful;
this is a mirror with no one before it.
Not a single passenger has reached his destination, nor has
a hider hidden anywhere;
the years we seemed to exist in are the roots that anyone
can pull out.
Nothing is left that could be weighed on a scale.
This waiting room is our agora and our home,
and home is a place of exile where sadness, like lowlands,
spreads to its ultimate insufficiency.
Nothing can choke the inevitable words,
as they are mute and persistent like time itself.
Why is it here that they had to be left unsaid?



THE FIRST WAVE

**A WINTER MONOLOGUE IN A TRAIN
EN ROUTE FROM POŽEGA TO BELGRADE
(a dream-like prelude)**

I saw my father in a dream for the first time, and he was on his deathbed! I scribbled this sentence into my diary when I was an eight-year-old boy. This was the kind of sentence to be understood literally at that age, but which sounds entirely differently after many a year, because it spent time in his heart long enough to renew itself there and shiver in its nakedness. A true story is before us, a love story that took place in Belgrade. In love, the ground is light under your feet, and your breath emerges from the depths of your chest. This is a Hermes-type story sprinkled with melancholy and at the same time a lively thriller; a narrative about the Bay-lony's market, about the homeless people of Belgrade, about Čarna, the girl I love, about being awake and dreaming, and many other things.

It is above all a story about the Belgrade National Library, which burned down, and, naturally, about a son and a father, the hero of this story, who is not merely an ordinary mortal. Fatherhood is always a struggle. It is impossible to get rid of the father. "Accept my baggage, it is light, for everything I own, I inherited from my father," the Bible says. Isn't a father an abyss surrounded by a whirlpool of meaning? No rush, I say to myself, rush belongs to the Devil himself, and I will narrate everything sensibly later on. My name is Pavle Bogunović. I am fifty years old, which is the age when a man begins to feel desolate. Even though I plunged into a careless



writing adventure, I trust my patience not to betray me, and that I will keep my chin up until I bring this story to a close.

The world is a collection of stories, not atoms. Every piece of memory is in itself a distortion. I feel stale and musty when I remain in one place, or in one city, for a long period of time. This is particularly the case with P., a small remote village where vapidity shackles the soul and where the Devil himself would perish out of boredom. Everything surrounding us has been calculated to destroy our will and self-respect. When I feel the vapidity creeping up on me, I don't wait for it to demolish me, but I embark on a journey. When I hear a steel horse approaching from Uzhice, my heart warms up, and I feel as though I am leaving behind some sort of stale evil. My soul rejoices because of it, I brighten up as if I were born again. The instinct to escape never ceases to live in a man; I feel the need to be restless, to keep moving constantly. I reside in this narrow space, torn between a longing to leave and a desire to renounce it. Thin is the line that separates starving hunger from being overly sated. This hunger for new cities cannot be sated because it reaches out beyond the tides. Our greed is open to new treats and new deaths. No kind of logic rules the wanderlusts. I am a man of trains. I have spent half my life sleep-deprived, at railways stations' waiting rooms and restaurants and in trains.

As long as we are healthy and balanced, we lead false lives. People in good health have no identity. I enjoy listening to those who have had their fair share of suffering. Conversations with happy, fulfilled people resemble empty blabbering by rule. We get attached to people and objects, and then we are unable to untangle ourselves from them. Where there is security, destruction is close-by. Searching for comfort means the absence of drama, and this anti-drama leads to unstoppable decay. Only those who do not know where they are headed truly migrate, disguised in

who they truly are, they walk the city streets where no one recognizes their faces.

The night is a drug, it deceives us with pleasant delusion and we become capable of impossible hopes. Alas, waking up is always horrendous. In a freezing morning, at a cold railway-station waiting room everything assumes a different, surly and, in any case, more sober appearance. A sadness sleeps inside me whose origin I do not know, nor do I look for it. Every feeling is but a prelude of sadness that overwhelms the soul as the waves flood the banks. It is a kind of dejection that makes us crave for unfulfilled lives. Melancholy brings us closer, not erudition and courtesy – far from it. Beams of tiny light are what reaches us, undetected by radar. Reality is merely an imprint of our bodiless nightly visions conceived in dreams, which leave behind only false and murky silhouettes upon waking.

So here I am, sleepy and oversensitive, in a freezing cold train compartment. It is the beginning of a white winter. At this lonely crack of dawn I am traveling towards Belgrade and I already feel its calling. Everything inside me is shivering from some lingering thirst. Trains are packed with the earthly specimens filled with dissatisfaction, people destroyed by boredom, by the slow moving cyclone, in the words of that Romanian philosopher. Every one is drowned in their own thirst and hunger. I am no different from my fellow passengers for I am equally prone to decay, tossed and forgotten. It would suffice to say *me* and feel ashamed. A kind woman, her hair gray as a birch tree coated in frost, who keeps reading *Demons* from time to time, is anxious to start a conversation because she noticed several books in my open bag. She doesn't realize that I am traveling after a sleepless night and that sleeplessness is a measuring unit of our suffering, atonement and self-deceit. It could not be otherwise. I feel drowsy. The woman is attempting to create

a moment of intimacy, and intimacy encourages confidence. For a second, she manages to draw me into the spider's web of conversation. She is confiding something in me, asking me to keep it between us, and immediately afterwards, I am thinking of the first person to share the things she's told me with. As if I were in some sort of mad confusion, I am overpowered by the nausea of staring into alien faces. Past misery and past happiness gather in my chest, dishonoring me. I am surrounded by distrustful and somber people frequenting the morning train. Elderly ladies, always frightened of something. The woman, swollen like a drowning victim, like flabby sourdough, watches me as she would do a dog. She tells me that she practices astrology and palmistry, asks for my palm, says she wants to see whether there's a line on my palm indicating suicidal tendencies. Fully convinced in the magical power of stars, she sees a sign in everything, some kind of warning, at least she says so, and I refuse to give her my palm because I can see that she is not quite herself. I study the faces around me and wish to build a wall guarding me from the rest of the world, to stop talking and not share a single word with anyone ever again.

Just to look at someone, let alone reaching out to that person, is a big promise. Our brief and gratuitous enchantments, mere reflections in water. Our asthmatic trains with their Slavic charm! Belgrade, Bombay, Krakow, Požega, Mokrin, Prague, they all look the same when you are alone. I am not fabricating my own insignificance, it is real. To cover up what is obvious would be a lie. We dwell in deprivation, necessity and burning out. We are alone and we all need compassion. So many moments are intertwined with unattainability. And how fragile our relationships are, how flimsy the stability of our passions! In a train I become clean. While I urinate, the bathroom mirror knows it does not belong in a fairy tale. In front of it you are what you are, an illusion afraid of itself, yet

you cannot escape yourself. I return to my compartment and glue my face to the window that lets the healthy December cold air in. It always hides some of the painful, early budding of a hyacinth out of the snow. I don't tell what's on my heart to anybody; there is something inappropriate and shameful about it. I hear a voice coming from somewhere, it's Amy Winehouse. She calms me down and then lifts me up. This sinful saint marries and reconciles nostalgia with deadly anxiety of today's world, which is lulled into sleepwalking. Only someone who ended up like Amy did can offer genuine comfort. These godforsaken lands of ours, which I adore, move rapidly past me. Desolate lands, willow forests and bushes glide by. Deserted railway stations with no passengers. I have watched them from my compartment so many times that they have become a part of me. Alongside the tracks, in a deserted field, plumed evil pheasants fly off and for a fraction of a second, a wild rabbit runs into the window pane of my compartment only to disappear into bushes a moment later chased by fear, like an unquenched desire.

Our experience is parochial, a philosopher of ours says, inspired by some dark urge. But whose experience isn't unconditionally parochial? Aren't we all residing in a truthless existence? Abandonment, a word which cannot be replaced by any other. There is no such investigative procedure that can prove everything. Is there such a place where they issue a confirmation of non-existence? Ever since we passed Laykovac, I have been trying to forget about myself, to think of my grandma lighting up a parochial fire, if you will, with her shaky hands, in a freezing cold kitchen.

It is terrible when people use up their time, and still go on living – I hear somebody's voice as if from a distance.

A little girl is reading a picture book, stops at the word *fly-ing* and asks her mother what that word means. Reluctantly, the sullen woman explains: "This is like when a bird flies,

when leaves fly in the fall or when the wind blows." The wise little girl carefully listens to the examples and I notice that she is not happy with her mother's explanations, as if they were somehow too concrete. That girl, and I am almost positive about this, was an angel, I saw the wings above her head. And I asked myself what *flying* meant. Possibly competing with saints. But how could I manage to whisper this answer into her ear unobserved? How could I explain that we live in these bodies of ours because our wings are broken? Only children pose metaphysical questions. And in this story there will be some more talk about flying.

A moment later, my attention is drawn to the following spectacle: a young woman and a young man, about ten meters away from me, moving their hands in a peculiar way. They are both deaf-mute, I realize. I observe their faces, all lit up. Them, those smiley faces, in this early winter morning, are perhaps proving that words do not necessarily have to be the driving force for everything.

As the train approaches the Resnik station, I recall a cruel sight more than a decade old. A middle-aged man is sleeping in a seat across from me. The train stops in Resnik. The sleeping man, who was obviously supposed to get off in Resnik, wakes up, grabs his bag in great alarm and runs towards the door. He opens it, still half-asleep, but the train is already taking off. He climbs down the metal stairs and steps out onto the platform, instead of jumping off. The train speeds up and the wheels spin him in a circle and leave him behind on the platform with a cut-off head and his arms pulled from his shoulder joints. A train dispatcher blows a whistle and stops the train. The building workers rush out from the station's building and they cover the remains of the unfortunate man with cardboard and newspapers. In about ten minutes the ambulance arrives. The doctor on duty pronounces him dead, and to this day, I cannot dispel the image