

WHERE THE RIVER  
TAKES ME IS NONE  
OF MY CONCERN

SELMA ASOTIĆ

*is a bilingual poet from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her poems and essays have appeared in Tinderbox Poetry Journal, Michigan Quarterly Review, EuropeNow, The Well Review, and Calvert Journal. She was a runner-up for the 2019 Brett Elizabeth Jenkins Poetry Prize. She also received a Pushcart nomination for her poem "Nana" and was named a semi-finalist for the 2021 and 2022 92Y Discovery Poetry Prize. Her debut poetry collection Reci vatra was released in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in 2022. It won the 2022 Stjepan Gulin Prize for best poetry collection in BiH, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro. She is currently working on the English version of the manuscript. She holds an MFA from Boston University and will be starting a PhD program in Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2023.*

On August 18, 2019, I returned to Sarajevo. A month later, on September 18, I left again. To get to New York, where J. and I lived, I first needed to get to Belgrade; from there, I could catch a direct transatlantic flight. This meant traveling east to arrive west, down a road that paralleled the river and weaved up the mountains of Bosnia, cutting through pine forests and corroded industrial towns. From the backseat of the car, I watched the river and the trees spurting out of the limestone cliffs at impossible angles. It was early morning. The dew had not yet dissipated, and the sun lay low, visible only when the hills dipped before recovering their upward stride. Wisps of fog lay about the houses, some still bombed out, their roofs replaced by treetops.

On my way to Sarajevo a month earlier, I had taken the same route in the opposite direction. We drove through the towns and villages of eastern Bosnia in darkness, spoiled now and then by light from wooden lampposts. Once my eyes adjusted, I could discern the different shades of the dark: the impenetrable murk encroaching on the road from either side, the slightly brighter shade of hills in the background, and the bruise-blue sky against which their ridges were outlined. In the puddle of light cast by the lampposts, one could glimpse behind guardrails sometimes shrubbery, sometimes faceless brick houses, and tent-shaped haystacks. The car slowed and turned into a parking lot. Marble stairs led to the sliding door of a building whose black-shingled roof sloped up at a low angle to the neon sign that announced in Serbian Cyrillic the name of the place—Hotel Vidikovac, famous for its terrace

restaurant overlooking the River Drina. There was the smell of tobacco and the jittery sound of an accordion coming from the rolled down window of a car. Unseen in the darkness, the river heaved. Full of teeth, I thought in English. Then I translated it into Bosnian: *puno zuba*. The night was full of teeth. I was home.

\*

I was becoming good at this: thinking in two languages, flowing from one to the other, starting in English, continuing in Bosnian and vice versa. I'd moved to the US in 2018 and lived in a Brooklyn apartment with the woman I loved. I also traveled as often as I could to the place I and others close to me habitually referred to as my home. Returning to Bosnia was supposed to feel like a homecoming, but as I inched forward in the security line at JFK, constantly turning to look at J. who still stood at the same spot, wearing a smile of encouragement, I felt terror. I was going back to a place I knew well—too well, in fact; a place that would extend its arms toward me, assuming I was the same flesh of its flesh, the original me that existed in no other version. This had not been true for a long time, even before I stuffed all of my belongings into a suitcase threatening any minute to split at the seam, and escaped. My physical relocation only rendered the schism apparent.

I was born a couple of months before war broke out in Bosnia and its aftermath formed the backdrop of my early adulthood. My family was an unremarkable one: law-abiding,

God-fearing, casually nationalistic, and more solidly middle-class as the country and its people recovered, at least outwardly, from the devastation. In school, I stared at the framed coat-of-arms above the blackboard and listened to the teary-eyed teachers speak of our victorious homeland and the martyrs who had sacrificed for it. Confronted on all sides by the stories of slaughter and rape camps, of executions and the bodies tossed into the silence of the Drina, as a child I felt reverence for and sought refuge in the word *homeland*. But I wasn't to stay a child forever. Growing up, and devouring the books I found in our modest home library or at school, I came to view homeland as a treacherous thing, an illusion that served the interest of a few at the expense of many. There were other moments: laying my head on the chest of the first girl I fell in love with, eavesdropping on her feverish body; later, in the tram, riding home, feeling the tremor at the bottom of my stomach as I imagined trying to explain to those who knew me what had happened, anticipating their shock and disapproval. The tremor persisted, and suddenly, the city and the world I'd felt so comfortable inhabiting, became alien. I was heading back there now, and as soon I cleared airport security and J. disappeared from view, I began steeling myself for what was to come: the silence in my parents' living room and the questions carefully worded not to elicit any mention of J.; the waltzing with friends and family around the ruins of assumptions we once shared; Sarajevo's intolerably humid summer; the collective urge to assume the very worst in everybody—all of it nibbling at my mind and soul. Everywhere, teeth.

There was yet another cause of anxiety. My stay in the city would coincide with the first-ever Sarajevan Pride Parade. The whole spring and summer were consumed with news coverage of the upcoming event. I'd witnessed only one Pride in my life. In June, during a visit to New York before my move there, J. and I took the N train from South Brooklyn into Manhattan. The train spat us out into a shoal of pink fishnet crop-tops, leather boots, and glittery cheekbones, all moving in the same direction. We made our way to a spot on Fifth Avenue where we could observe the parade. A giant T-Mobile float came down, the half-naked boys on the platform gyrating to the booming techno beats. The crowd waved their rainbow flags and cheered. Above us, on the third floor of an elegant townhouse, a blonde woman danced with a champagne flute in hand next to an open window. Higher up, guests of what appeared to be a rooftop party leaned over the parapet to look at the procession. Then a group of marchers unfurled a flag with an inscription I couldn't see and one of them gestured to the crowd to get louder. *We will not be quiet, Stonewall was a riot* echoed all over downtown, against the gleaming glass towers and the clear-eyed sky under which the floats—by AT&T, Walmart, and Coca-Cola—rolled on. The woman in the townhouse continued dancing. Words such as justice and liberation also rang out—hollow notes adding a slight dissonance to the overall composition. When the gay NYPD officers showed up, to a mix of cheers and boos, the cop in front of us popped his chewing gum and grinned. The woman in the townhouse continued dancing.

The Sarajevo Pride, however, would be a different affair. At the time, Bosnia and Herzegovina was the only ex-Yugoslav republic not to have successfully organized one yet. With some of my friends I discussed decisions that could depoliticize Pride—reducing it to a series of self-congratulatory gestures similar to the ones I'd seen on Fifth Avenue—and bring it into uneasy alliance with the very structures that had terrorized us. Pride would be heavily secured. We were being asked to march shoulder to shoulder with the cops who, on at least two occasions, had stood idly by as masked men stormed a gay-friendly establishment, injuring several people. NGOs had spent a lot of energy—and a lot of grant money—on awareness training for law enforcement, to no avail. Other friends displayed only a faint interest. They were too busy trying to pay rent or take care of ailing parents to participate in something they felt wouldn't have a tangible effect on their lives. I understood their apprehension. I had known the activists and the NGO employees. Some I hated, some I liked, and some I fell in love with. But mostly I'd come to disagree with them about what it meant to fight, to be proud, and to be free. Yet, not attending Pride never crossed my mind. I was going back, pulled by a current I couldn't name, longing to return to a place I had broken away from and decided I did not need.

\*

My first week in Sarajevo, the heat was unbearable. Like all self-respecting Bosnians, my parents were staunch opponents

of air conditioning. We kept the windows open at night and closed them early in the morning, hoping the insulation would do the rest. Shortly before I left Sarajevo, my mother had taken up decoupage. She started by decorating jewelry boxes, then matured into ink painting, and was now, she joked, an entrepreneur: making magnets, dolls, and wall decorations that my father sold to gum-chewing tourists from his shop in the city's Old Town. He had a well-drilled pitch. As soon as the customer's eyebrow twitched with the slightest interest, he'd pull up his shirt sleeve to reveal the shrapnel-inflicted crater on his left shoulder. "Surgery, no *anestezija*. In war. Three years. My wife, she make this," he'd fire at the Westerners. They'd pay however much he asked, banking on their omnipotent dollars to soothe the stirrings of guilt and persuade karma to keep the horrors this mangled, weather-beaten man talked of permanently at bay.

I awoke around noon, on a Sunday, unable to shake off the jetlag. My plan was to eat, get dressed, and go explore the city. I was now part of the diaspora, a person neither here nor there, just like those people we used to mock along with the tourists, whenever they stumbled up the cobblestone streets into our unadorned childhoods, baring teeth as they squinted at the remains of Ottoman fortifications or the hunched figures of our fathers and uncles at the back of dusty workshops, desperate to rediscover and capture on their cameras the authentic human experience from which they were wrenched by war, persecution, or circumstance. My parents were out in the garden, and the morning TV show addressed an empty living room. It was

about Pride. It seemed that anytime I glanced at the TV, my eyes alit on someone I knew: an acquaintance, a former lover, justifying their existence before an unsympathetic audience. The thin, blue smoke of my father's cigarette somersaulted in the air. He wouldn't quit, not even after a heart surgery he had barely survived. Whenever we pressed and pleaded with him, his response was the same: "I'm not afraid to die." That was the end of the conversation.

In Sarajevo, I couldn't write in any language. My mind was swept clean. I was confronted with a place that time and distance had transformed into myth—a story whose origin was forgotten but whose veracity couldn't be disputed, if the world were to remain standing. I am what I am, the city seemed to say, and if you don't understand, it's because you're not among the initiated. To reply, I needed something equally absolutist, impervious to doubt. So I did what the diaspora does—I took pictures: of the flowers in the courtyard of a mosque on my way to the city center, of the old Ottoman square, of the popular tree I've loved my entire life. A flurry of pigeons parted as I turned onto Sarači Street, bottlenecked by a mass of people strolling between the rows of shops. The shopkeepers smoked in doorways, unamused. At the crossroads where Sarači ends, the architecture morphed from Ottoman to Austro-Hungarian, a divide marked by a sign in the pavement: the letters W-E in the center and, on either side, the words "Sarajevo—meeting of cultures."

The city prides itself on being a border. It has constructed an identity based on a border being at once a juncture and

a demarcation. Any Sarajevo would boast that Sarajevo had a mosque, a Roman Catholic cathedral, a synagogue, and an Orthodox church within two blocks of each other, that it was a mixture of West and East, a city of diversity and acceptance. These statements were pure kitsch and revealed only the city's capacity for self-delusion. Sarajevo wasn't unique in what it claimed about itself. It wasn't even unique in what it ignored. Right there, at the entrance to the sixteenth-century *bezistan*, a Middle Eastern boy, a refugee, stood in the shade. He held two packs of tissues in a slightly extended hand, not quite selling, not quite begging. The so-called migrant crisis in the Balkans was acute and the Bosnian government's treatment of the men, women, and children pouring across its borders was brutally racist. Most of the help came from ordinary Bosnians in smaller towns who organized and gave whatever they could. Sarajevo, where the concentration of wealth and power was much greater than in the rest of the country, proved more sluggish in its response. The boy stood there, painfully self-conscious and tired, his other hand stuck deep into the pocket of a ragged windbreaker he wore despite the heat. I thought also of my friends, holding each other, whispering to each other in the darkened rooms of this city. I felt fury. Beneath the fury a mellow voice implored: *You're being unfair. There's so much you've forgotten*, but I wasn't yet ready to listen.

I roamed, westward. All along the main street, people lounged in the chairs of sidewalk cafés. In front of the confectionary Egipat, customers waited in line for their famous vanilla ice cream. I took a picture of the river, reduced to a brown

stream lazing down the stony riverbed. I crossed a bridge called “Festina Lente”—make haste, slowly—and, in front of the Arts Academy, greeted an acquaintance I knew from college. He sat cross-legged on a low wall, smoking and selling his self-published novels. The sun beat mercilessly on the yellow awnings, the cars, the tram battling through the traffic and ringing its feeble horn. Then I went uphill again, this time on the other side of the river, to my favorite spot in the city—the Old Jewish Cemetery.

A burial site for Sarajevan Jews from the beginning of the sixteenth century until 1966, the cemetery was known for its peculiar tombstones and for the snipers who, during the war in the early 1990s, had used its convenient location to pick off people in the valley. I went up a flight of broken stone steps and entered through an opening where the perimeter wall had collapsed. In the high grass crouched the elongated, moss-covered stone slabs, rounded at the top, a result of the mixing of medieval, Sephardic, and Islamic burial traditions. A footpath led between the graves to a rectangular monument of white cement situated on the north side, facing the city. I took a seat, leaning against the stone. I was the only human present. A few feet away, a brindle stray stared at the chicken sandwich I’d started to unwrap. He approached, putting one paw in front of the other, without taking his eyes off my hands. I threw him a piece of chicken which he caught mid-air. Then he and his sadness waited. After a while, a woman appeared on the balcony of a house next to the cemetery and began taking in the pants and shirt from the clothesline. The façade of

her house was covered in bullet holes. The monument I leaned against had a band of black granite across the middle, with four etched inscriptions. Above my head, a string of names: JASENOVAC-STARA GRADIŠKA-ĐAKOVO-JADOVNO I OBOGRAD-AUŠVIC-BERGEN BELZEN. Another side bore the message: TO JEWS, FALLEN SOLDIERS, AND VICTIMS OF FASCISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, 1941-1945. These words, dedicated to victims of WWII, required some decoding, as half were blown off by a mortar shell fired five decades later, during the 1992-1995 siege. I looked down at the quarrel of birds, telephone lines, and red shingle roofs that was the Sarajevo skyline. From my vantage point, I could see the building where one of my aunts lived, and further in the distance, a sparse crown of trees on the opposite hill, the neighborhood where I grew up. During winters with plentiful snow, we used to sled down the slopes on plastic trash bags. There were two dozen kids growing up on my street, almost all older than me. It felt like having two dozen older siblings to rely on. They took me to the nearby local pool, before it closed and fell into disrepair. During Ramadan, we broke fast together, gathered in someone's house, sharing the food we had. I remembered one time going to play with my friends a few doors down. They were two sisters and a brother, who was the youngest. We were going to watch something on TV, then go out and play soccer or volleyball on the dusty, unpaved clearing between the houses which we generously referred to as the playground, and our parents, even more generously, as the parking lot. I'd come in just after lunch and my friend, the boy, was in the room which

tripled as a living, cooking, and dining space, struggling to cut an oval, hard candy into perfectly equal pieces for himself and his sisters. We were adults now, most still living in Sarajevo, a handful strewn around the world. I wondered what they'd say if I told them about where I'd been, what I'd seen, whom I'd loved. I gazed at the city. It lay, beautiful and distant, and a tremendous longing sank its teeth into my flesh.

By early evening, my skin was sticky with sweat, and I headed home. Miraculously, the yellow minibus connecting the neighborhood where my parents lived to the city center arrived at the stop at the same time I did. I paid the fee to the driver and made my way to the back. The faces in the seats smiled at me. I didn't know them, but they were familiar. I would have recognized them anywhere, the particular arrangement of bright planes and dark ravines—eyes that were at once a verdict and an invitation. I looked forward to seeing the lights come on in the valley, lights that existed nowhere else—tiny, tremulous breaths, the nightly cityscape a prayer mat shaken out and still hovering in mid-air. The vehicle swayed uphill like a drowsy elephant. I got off at my stop and walked behind the minibus as it spat a puff of black smoke. The corner store was closed. A red VW Golf was parked in front of the house on the other side of the street. The minibus slowed down and threaded through the space between the car and the store awning. As it inched forward, it revealed some graffiti sprayed on the wall. Someone had written, in English: NO LGBT.

In one of the rooms in my parents' house, I discovered an old writing journal. A writing journal is not what I called it aged ten, because I had no concept of literature as something practiced. I flipped through pages of rickety letters—poems, descriptions, the beginnings of short stories and novels. What arrested my attention the most were the translations. I'd completely forgotten that in my early adolescence I was a prolific translator. If I read something in Bosnian that moved me, I would immediately feel compelled to translate it into English, the only other language I spoke, even if only rudimentarily at the time. Through translation, I was trying to pin down something vaporous, the elation words caused in me and my wonder that they could do such a thing. I was wholly unconcerned with the result. For me, translation was an attempt to uncover the mechanism that underpinned the production of wonder. What excited me was the process, the feeling that, for each choice I made, there were endless possibilities and an equal number of effects I could create. My endeavor was megalomaniacal. I was translating for an audience of the whole world. I imagined, quite literally, every living person on Earth gathered in a large auditorium, watching on a screen as I replaced a Bosnian word with an English one. I imagined what stirred in them with each choice I made. I was too young to question the assumption that, if I used English, the whole world would understand.

When I enrolled in a graduate translation studies program in Sarajevo, wanting to forge a career out of translation, that early sense of playfulness disappeared. A translator's job, I was

taught, was to move from source to target, cutting through the wilderness of choice and stoically suffering, at the end, the tyranny of the final result, knowing full well how many different paths, other versions must be consigned to oblivion. Another piece of advice I routinely received, both as a student and later as a freelance translator, was always to aim to translate from my acquired into my mother tongue, the assumption being that the level of proficiency I had in my mother tongue could hardly be matched in any other language I spoke. When I moved to the US to study poetry at Boston University, this hierarchy—ranking the mother tongue above all others—collapsed.

In Boston I was expected, for the first time in my life, to produce work in English. Writing in English was like breathing a different atmosphere. The words felt inscrutable, reticent, only ever allowing me a superficial acquaintance. For weeks and months I labored, trying to go deeper, to reach a point where language ceased feeling like a borrowed skin and became instead something within the body, an internal organ secreting sense. Luckily, I never did get there. My efforts flew in the face of everything I had intuitively known. When, as an adolescent, I tried translating the poems I loved, I was looking to estrange myself from both the language that had affected me so deeply and my emotional response to it. Translation helped me do the impossible—replicate the initial moment of discovery, make literature do its unique trick again. It also helped me become a poet: to estrange myself from the familiar and therefore put myself in the position to question it. Instead of trying to eradicate the foreignness of writing in English, I leaned into

it. I took the words that lay in my mouth like stones and hurled them at the glass jar inside and around me. For the first time in my life, I was writing poems about the war, about the shell crater on my father's shoulder, about the questions my mother would never ask. Most importantly, I was coming out, publicly and without self-censorship. I never wrote about lesbian desire in my mother tongue, a language to which I ought to have belonged. I wrote about it in a language that supposedly wasn't mine. At the same time, I was also becoming aware of the tacit expectations that stemmed from my position. A poet from Eastern Europe, living in the US and writing in English, was supposed to conform to the myth of a persecuted wretch who found freedom at America's shores. I refused to oblige. Whenever an American asked me about Bosnia, expecting a tale of woe, I felt the same spite and calculation I had so often seen in my father's eyes as he dealt with the foreigners in his shop arise in me. So I'd wax lyrical about my country's splendor, nonchalantly inquiring if perhaps my interlocutor might have heard that Sarajevo had a mosque, a synagogue, a Roman Catholic church, and an Orthodox church, all within two blocks of each other? But the most important result of that period was my breaking away from the notion of a mother tongue. Mother tongue was a form of coercion, a bind—to homeland, soil, the essence of our nation which could not be expressed in any other language. Therefore, the myth went, it had to be protected and kept pure, because if we strayed in any way, we would damage the crucible of our identity and spill away into nothing. I, on the other hand, was becoming accustomed to spilling away.

In my thoughts and in my writing, I switched between languages, watched them flow into one another and mix waters. Words such as original and translation, source and target lost meaning. Translation and writing merged into *transwriting*, a two-way process that worked best when I didn't try to define or restrict it.

\*

Saturday, I met H. for coffee. We chose a café we knew was gay-friendly and sat at the far end of the outdoor patio, at a table obscured from the street by a bramble bush. We talked, of course, of Pride. Earlier, I'd read on an online news site that snipers would be securing the marching route. Pride was becoming aggressively militarized, and we discussed the effect this might have on survivors who had suffered the daily terror of snipers during the siege and the general optics of Pride marchers being granted the kind of protection no other group in the country could get.

When I asked H. if she thought there would be trouble, she let out a cynical laugh. She believed Pride would go well, despite the counter-protests that had been announced. Sarajevo would receive another affirmation of its grand spirit—and be afforded another excuse to ignore what it did not want to see. The funding for the Pride Parade mostly came from foreign organizations and embassies. Ambassadors and other members of the diplomatic corps were planning to attend. Law enforcement would prevent the unseemly image of cracked ambassa-

dorial heads because, although our lives might not have mattered much, theirs definitely did. In a country that was de facto a colony, it could hardly have been otherwise.

After the war ended in 1995, Bosnia was placed under an international semi-protectorate, embodied in the Office of the High Representative. The High Representative serves as a kind of colonial administrator who oversees the natives and keeps us moving steadily towards the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow—accession to the EU. Even the Bosnian constitution was written in English and, to access the rules that governed our existence, we had to translate. To this day, no official translation of the constitution exists; it turns out our precious mother tongue is not all that precious after all.

As part of EU accession, the Bosnian government was supposed to uphold “human rights” and the “rule of law” while implementing economic reforms, such as privatization, that caused widespread destitution. As the social state was being strategically dismantled, the civil sector took on many of its roles, providing crucial services to a pauperized population. The grants poured in. They created an entire class of professional “human rights defenders” who managed to parlay their activism into a more or less comfortable middle-class existence. But there was a price to pay. To keep the grants, and their status, they had to toe the donors’ party line and avoid conflicting with their interests. Those interests did not include the welfare of the people, despite the self-righteous spiel about “human rights.” While foreign officials in Bosnia lectured us on the “rule of law,” they also, for example, pushed heavily for

the construction of hydro plants that would destroy Bosnia's rivers and didn't seem to mind the crackdown on protesters who were trying to prevent the devastation of their communities. The people of my country both despised the international community and sought its protection. When Westerners cried "beware of balkanization" we scoffed at their hypocrisy—and secretly believed them. Decades of being conditioned to view our lives as a synonym for disaster had forged a collective psychic split between self-loathing and spiteful resistance. Pride was the perfect example: while some championed it as a thing that would align us with the "civilized" world, others decried it as a "corrupting Western import."

After I said goodbye to H., I took the tram to Central Bank in Titova Street. My destination was a bar that served pricey burgers and cocktails to a crowd of expats, tourists, and local young professionals who could afford to splurge on a Saturday night. I elbowed my way to the table where my best friend M. sipped a beer and chatted with a group of people I didn't recognize. Our friend L., who I hadn't seen in over a year, was also there. We happened to be wearing the same t-shirt. Together we joked that it was the official uniform of the lesbian paramilitary. Pride was all anyone talked about. "Are you scared?" M. asked. I wanted to say no, but thought better of it. I was scared. And I desperately wanted Pride to succeed. I had the wild hope that, if it did, despite all I knew and felt, the rift I was straddling might close. Around us, bodies swayed to the music, spilling over onto the sidewalk. The Sarajevan air bore no sign of its usual summer heaviness. A wave of energy

moved through space and buoyed us up. It was past midnight. Everybody looked beautiful as they surfed the crest of the wave, suspended between today and tomorrow, not thinking about the merciless law of gravity and what happens when a body in motion meets an immovable object. The rock on the shore. The armor. The fist.

\*

The roar. It started in front of us and traveled all the way back, lifting arms, flags, and banners as it moved. I blew my pink whistle until I was dizzy. M. was next to me, shouting hi to someone she knew. Pride, I thought, would be a gathering of a few dozen people—pretty much the entirety of my friends and acquaintances in Sarajevo. I expected to go around kissing cheeks, squeezing hands, nodding and smiling my way through a panic attack. But there weren't dozens of people there. There were thousands. And they kept coming. Another roar. Drums beating a marching tune. I was part of something large, something heaving. A cell in a muscle that contracted and suddenly I had no space to stand, let alone move. I lost balance, but there was nowhere to fall. Then, a release. The crowd crawled forward under a dome of noise. Old ladies waved at us from their windows. We waved back. Someone broke into "Bella Ciao" and those who knew the words sang along. From the cafés, onlookers waved. Workers behind shop windows waved. Two muscular men on the terrace of a shopping center lifted a middle finger, then watched as a group of women shop assis-

tants who had left their posts to see the march jumped next to them and waved like windmills.

No rocks were thrown, no heads cracked. The day passed without a single incident. After the march finished, streams of people moved through the streets, trickling into bars and cafes. I sent jubilant messages to J. I wanted her to be there, to see what I was seeing. At a bar, my friends merged with other groups seated at adjacent tables. Everything was a jumble of arms passing around cigarettes and ashtrays, pints of beer and shots of *rakija*. We laughed, incredulous. Sarajevo was more charming than I had ever known it to be. We were back in love, the city and I, as if neither of us had ever forsaken the other.

I took the same minibus home, up the same hill, and, getting off at the same stop, looked at the city twinkling like a promise in the full-bodied, amber light of late afternoon. I walked past the same store with the same awning. On the wall across the street, there was some new graffiti. Someone had added, next to NO LGBT, in thin, red letters: DEATH TO FAGGOTS. I'd think about it tomorrow.

When I came into the house, my mother looked up from her decoupage to confirm I was without visible wound. My father watched the news. They were broadcasting footage of the march, of the rainbow that appeared after a brief sprinkle of rain, as if the day hadn't been perfect enough. My father's cigarette burned in the ashtray. He said nothing. I went to my room. I lay in bed and squeezed my eyes shut. But they kept opening, kept taking in the shadow of leaves on the ceiling.

I was awake when the first call to prayer sounded just before dawn. I listened to the voice speaking to me in a language I did not speak. Then a second voice joined, beginning the same prayer. Then a third, and a fourth. Voices rising and falling, echoing off the hills and into the valley, back-snapping against the surface of the river. The air in the room was a clinking of crystal glasses. Voices like a cloud of fireflies, pulsing. Until one by one they went out. Afterward, the silence felt vertiginous. I drifted into sleep.

\*

It was dawn when I left, a sole passenger in the backseat of a white Skoda. The driver took us up the canyon and into the forest. I watched as Latin letters gave way to Cyrillic, mountains gave way to fields, and the rivers grew deeper. I was made of those fields and the rivers, the fog nuzzling the pines, the desire to leave and forget all of it and the longing which turned vicious as soon as the city disappeared behind me. I was relieved to be going back, back into my self-imposed exile. And I was saddened, and a little ashamed, by my relief.

B E C O M I N G   A   H O M E L A N D

At first, you are land—  
a pause between a place to leave  
and a place to get to.  
From a window someone tosses out  
a forest of palms. Daylight winces.  
Inside you, someone is now  
clearing vistas,  
inside you are houses, erect  
interruptions step out to exchange  
barley and fat, cut down  
the linden tree and carve  
nightingales from its wood,  
for no reason other than nightingales  
are pretty. How silly.

P O S T A J A N J E D O M O V I N O M

Na početku si zemlja—  
pusta pauza između mjesta  
kojem se treba vratiti i mjesta gdje se stiže.  
Potom s prozora neko prospe  
šumu dlanova. Jutro se namršti.  
U tebi sad neko čisti vidike,  
u tebi su kuće,  
iz njih izlaze uspravljena osujećenja,  
razmjenjuju pšenicu i mast,  
sijeku lipu i od njenog drveta prave  
slavu, iz razloga  
što su slavuji lijepi. Kako blesavo.  
I tebi su lijepi.  
Onda neko povikne

You too think they're pretty.  
Someone then shouts  
*mine*, someone sets a suspicion  
rolling down the road.  
Deep within, you feel  
the moss bristling, terror  
in calyces. Door at the wolves.  
Palms whet the wind into winter,  
unripen to fists.  
Everything you touch  
starts to growl.

*moje*, neko drumom zakotrlja  
podozrivu misao, od drveta lipe  
napravi sklonište. Osjetiš u sebi  
naježenu mahovinu, teror  
u kaležima cvjetova. Vrata pred vukove.  
Kad vjetar pođe šumom, dlanovi ga išamaraju  
u cijuk. Sve što dotakneš  
počne da reži.

O D E T O N A T I O N

everything that does not love me  
is you, invigilator, blister  
on my soul, my sleepless flight,  
fight me or uproot  
from my blood, gone be your delta of murder  
beneath the skin of my wrist, you neverending  
graveyard of clocks,  
every sun in you dripping rust  
into my irises, lip-hasp, lullabied  
sear, welcome me with a crucifix  
that is my citizenship, welcome me with life  
whittled down to a whistle, whistle me  
like a pretty tune in the dark for no one  
to hear, hurt me loveless, snarl

OD A N A C I J I

Sve što me ne voli  
si ti, majko slinavih sinova  
i njihovog glagola imati,  
izađi mi na megdan ili se istrijebi  
iz moje krvi, dosta tvojih očiju  
u kojima lije *kao kod Prevera*, jadnice,  
mezarju satova, sva tvoja sunca kaplju hrđu  
u moje zjenice, usnorezu, uspavana opeklino,  
dočekaš me raspećem  
mog državljanstva, dočekaš me životom  
stesanim u zvižduk, izviždi me u mraku  
kao finu melodiju koju niko  
neće čuti, rani me u nevoljenost, kezu  
moje more, crna buniko presovana

of my nightmare, nightshade pressed  
between the ribs, come at me my debt my un-  
forgivable, come  
let me tell you something.

između rebara,  
dođi, moj duže, izdajice, moje ne-  
oprošteno, dođi,  
da ti ja nešto kažem.