

PILVAX

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from Aftermath: A Broken Siren That Speaks A Foreign Tongue (1999)

by Chad Faries

He speaks truly who speaks in the shade.

-Paul Celan

Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me....

I stand indifferent.

-Walt Whitman

1

In a Mini-Bus with a Serbian Geologist En Route to Belgrade

8/4/99

It is light out now. 6:00 p.m. There's a yellow glow everywhere, like when the film's not processed correctly. Women with scarves sell watermelons near the narrow road.

"No politics," he says. We talked about the old black shale in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He said the rock off of Manhattan is older, 2 1/2 billion years. And without a history and raw fingers, I fidget the black vinyl of my seat. I eat my own pause.

Everybody's talking Serbian now—I'm looking out the window, wondering at the honey light. The Hungarian countryside is nice, mostly poplars and some kind of scrub oak. Passing through a small community. Clay shingles, houses of cracked stucco or broken mortar brick, and wooden fences, every single house has a fence with immaculate paint. I can smell the shade of trees, cigarettes. Wow—beautiful female hitchhikers going toward Budapest in platform shoes, standing wide and sure. Older women carry reusable burlap bags. Their men wear dirty chinos and stand near automobiles and draft horses. Spit.

From the airplane it looked like most of Hungary had been cleared of trees. (There is a trailer in front of us with a horse loaded in backward). The geometry of the farm plots was smaller and more random than those in Wisconsin.

Fence. Serbian pop music is playing and we're smoking. I ask what kind of rocks are in Serbia. He says the kind that are good for throwing and building. It's a light charcoal outside now but I'm still squinting. It is nice and I think about the sleek neck of the horse from the trailer, good for hugging. We fill up on gas. The border will be soon.

2

I Have Every Reason to Believe I'll Get Better at This.

8/4/99

At the border the queue is short. I make out the Cyrillic characters to pass time. There isn't much light and my eyes are straining. Something of an identifiable emotion is felt. I can't give it a name but it moves me like a child singing from around a corner. There is an intensity in the sound of the idling engine. I smoke more cigarettes than ever in this mini-bus with the geologist and the two young drivers. One driver is lying down trying to nap in the back of the bus. We were two passengers short in Budapest so there was extra room. I can see his reflection in my side window. He isn't sleeping. His eyes are looking straight at the ceiling. He takes off his glasses and continues to stare into the blurry darkness. He will have to get up soon, we are moving up in the line. A girl passes everybody in the queue on her bicycle. She has a plastic bag full of breads hanging from each handlebar. The guards must know her.

In the distance is a flooded field. There is a humid chill. I don't mind it. It's like when I ride my motorcycle the back way down Webster Dr. next to the bay and my nose is cold and my eyes water and the tears get my temples all wet.

3

The Woman with Bread in Her Hands

8/4/99

At the flooded border the driver turns to the backseat and says, welcome to hell, but I'm thinking of loving Ljiljana in the dark stone stairwell of Zagrebačka 6. We pass through without problems waved on by an adolescent in fatigues. The locals are everywhere, wandering back and forth across the border. An elderly woman stops us and beckons for a ride to the next town. The young drivers say no. Everyday she must ask, and everyday these young drivers say no in the name of their passengers. But I want her to board, we have plenty of room. I think she offered some bread. It looked so fresh, uncut, offered under a harsh cone of streetlight that interrogates the darkness. As we drive off, I lose sight of her face. Only her scarf tied in a knot under her chin is lit in the streetlight. As we distance ourselves from the border more cones appear and fade subtly into a cosmology of lights that were. And I realize this isn't hell, it's only night has fallen.

4

Little Saturday

8/4/99

We are approaching the first city beyond the border now. A white sign with black letters spells Subotica. I read it as the prefix sub and an ominous otica, some odyssey of brass bands and accordions that will follow me through the streets like the ass end of a Balkan history. It is beyond black in my otica. The headlights of the minibus break the darkness with bumpy strobes.

A young couple waits near a bus stop, a mutt with saggy teats enters from a gap-toothed fence. Maybe a gaping moon behind that cloud over there. I record these notes onto paper in a nervous darkness guided by memory of where my pen should be. I hope I can make out the scribble when I see it in light.

Two men pull a wooden wheeled grain cart. A broken traffic signal. We have driven into the fold of sub-landscape. I smooth the blackness with the back of my hand as I wipe my breath from the window, but I think I like the mist better, the way it cracks light like a sparkler. My mouth gapes in the black like that moon behind the cloud. I exhale at the window and nobody knows how loud I am screaming. I am screaming really fucking loud.

There was the same brief strobe of headlights, the dizzying of this and this beyond the fold: Drunk at an Upper Michigan bonfire party engulfed in the twirl of notes blasting out the hatchback of a Ford and I laid in the giant drops of dew-night, screwing in the grass. It was Saturday. Saturday. And it bled black like a swollen blackberry.

5

Artaud Said "All True Freedom Is Dark, and Infallibly Identified With Sexual Freedom, Which Is Also Dark, Although We Do not Know Exactly Why."

8/5/99

The whole trouble lies in words—what have I left out and what do I owe to “saw.” The first beat here approaching the Sava is always the cruel moon with its bleeding fist striking the cataract of sight. Highway narrows into a thin marrow of city. Karadjordjeva Street. I thought Belgrade would come at me like a damaging punch to the gut, knocking out my wind but leaving me pretty. Instead it yanks at my genitals. I don’t want to be reduced to the “theme of the dark passage.” I don’t think I want to come out of this. In this city I will reside swollen.

There is the police station and the blue-and-white Skala 55s with the single sirens; the short-sleeved officers with cheap shoes, flagging people down. Trams are beaten, bruised red, and hobble down the tracks to long lines of people: the scarved pious, the couple (the long-legged woman in platform shoes and her jet-black-haired young man in Italian loafers), the one with books tucked under the arm who goes home to a dim lit room to try and make sense of all this, the evening ultimately ending with a hand cupped between the legs and pulling.

I have forgotten that I am traveling in the mini-bus with three other men. I have forgotten that I am to be a guest. I sit up, straighten my hair, and prepare to connect the faces with the names, all the while thinking that couple may twist under a night sheet, coming.

6

Feeling Tired and The Move Into Sleep

8/5/99

I am sprawled on my stomach on a couple of couch cushions. Dušanka, Dorian, Dejana, Slobodanka, Vladimir, Jela, Dušan, Jelena, and Ljiljana have all left to their own beds. I stare at the string of names I just wrote. Utterance is irrelevant and I'm not sure it will change anything. It would be better if I said

Душанка

represents a cluster of chrysanthemums tossed into a green sea. They greeted me at about midnight with Turkish coffee and cakes. I was uneasy. The walls were a chalky white and rose about 15 feet. What I remember most was the vibration of the granite floor under my feet. It was the refrigerator running continually from the heat. I distributed gifts: art supplies, chocolate milk, Eternity cologne. My feet were getting numb. Baywatch was on television with subtitles. All this writing is just restraint. I have come to Serbia after the bombing to see my friends who had protested for three months in the winter snow of 96-97 against the Milošević regime. I keep this writing at a distance from interpretation but everyone will think I am biased because I haven't the other names, Ramiz, Agron, and Hamdija, in my poems. Rather than explain, I contort my body into uncomfortable positions (some are quite beautiful), dress in exquisite costumes, and speak only in shadow.

All these names must be sticky like me, restless from a humid 4:00 a.m. They are all cut to the brain with the physical rhetoric of booms and flashing light. If it were Wisconsin, I would hear the birds singing. Instead I only detect the heels of a transvestite who paces Gavrila Principa.

There is that motor running all night and night revving its engine at the edge of my sleep. I smell the urine and wet cardboard of the riverbank in a moment with lids closed as I descend into sleep on this first lucid night in Zagrebačka 6.

7

Pulling Images and Hollow Bodies

8/6/99

My first day writing in the light. All the western cultural centers are demolished and looted, full of graffiti in English, and it seems like it's there just for me. My gums ache from the gnashing of late, late morning. I create my own 3 p.m. morning here. I bathed with cool water but the asphalt heat of the city shows no mercy. Now I sip ice coffees after climbing uphill to the city centre from near the bank of the Sava that smells of benzene.

Cafes are packed with Sicilian Mafioso look alikes: shaved heads, gold chains, and athletic wear. Sweat pants with naked ladies down the seams, the same ladies I see on the mud flaps of semi-trucks in the States when I'm driving down the highway too fast listening to Neil Young on a cheap radio in my rusty car thinking I'm cool as shit. There must be a lot of lovemaking here

since the war is over. I think in this humidity with a worthless currency, that's all that can be done—slide the jig-saw swoops of body into perfect places.

“Today when we fit together, I want it to be like new slacks that make my ass look perfect,” the waitress might say. For him, over there behind that counter, essence is the song that he bobs up and down to. He mouths all the words like he's reciting some great epic. Since I don't understand much of the language, I am free to prescribe meaning to what's being said around me. “Branko, they say the women here shouldn't have children for at least the next five years.” “I would like another coffee.” “I need some new shoes to match my love-making this evening which will fit me like a Versace dress.”

I sip the deep black coffee among these broken down desiring machines, swish the grains in my mouth and swallow them like silt from the sick river. I throw a little sugar over my shoulder.

More of Chad Faries's poems can be found in the NOVEMBER 2005 issue of PILVAX. Locally available in Budapest.