Milorad Pejić

• *Hyperborea*

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Hyperborea

Translated by

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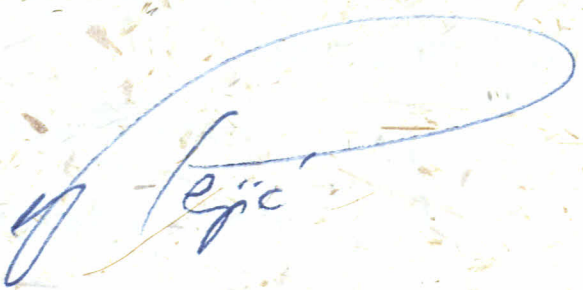

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The person who finds his homeland sweet is a tender beginner;
he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong;
but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place.
The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world;
the strong person has extended his love to all places;
the perfect man has extinguished his.

Hugh of Saint Victor (1096 - 1141)

• *The Decks of the Titanic*

New Zealand, South

Good is the country that has no history, a new country.
We descended to Milford Sound crawling down foggy
canyons, but the cruise was sunny. You remember
longest the fast boats that in their zig-zag paths
leapt from one shore to the other like water bugs.
Lacking ruins, they showed us some rare moss
and squeezed us through under the waterfalls.

Fortunate is the country that has nothing to remember,
a young country. You open it gladly and with curiosity
like an outdated encyclopedia in which Che is still
not executed, our cities still intact.

New Zealand, North

This land is sleeping on its grave. Beneath
the gentle hills sprinkled with sheep, volcanoes
are simmering like crocodiles buried in mud.
It's a matter of hours, not days or years. Just
as long as it takes for the tide to rise and flatten
the hot seals of our footprints in the black mud
along Muriwai Beach.

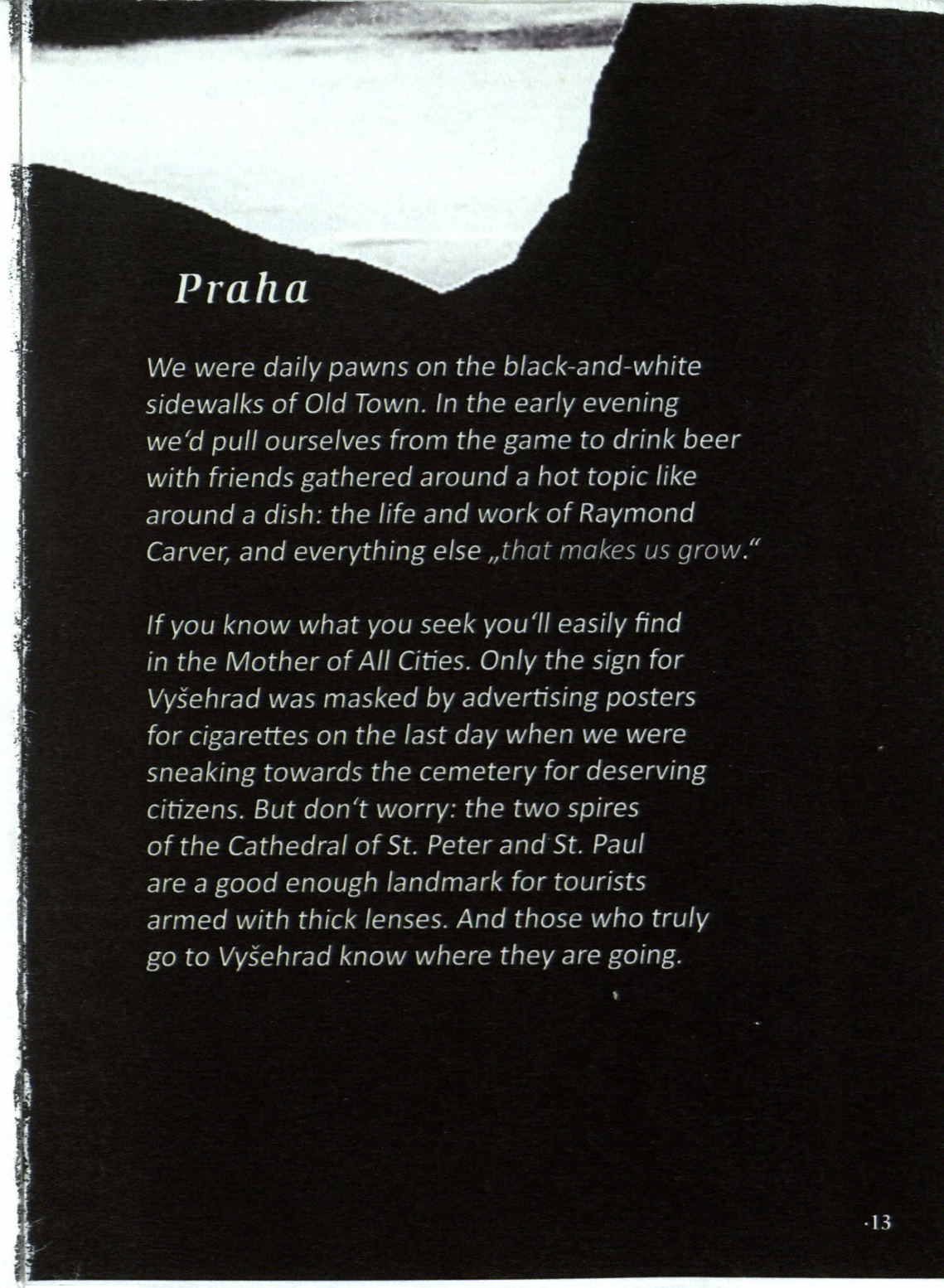
This land lets us into her parks as if onto the decks
of the Titanic. In her short future we look somehow
dated, you and I on the bench under the thousand-
-year-old kauri trees. We love this last trip on which,
disguised in our true faces, no one recognizes us.

Cologne

Thrice have I gone to Cologne to marvel at the Cathedral.
And every time in the anemic month of April when
the city parks, weary newborns, are recovering from
the wet winter and when stone dominates on both
sides of the Rhine. Nowhere are you so faceless
as by the Rhine, a businesslike river that makes no
distinction between corpses and torn-off trunks
that it keeps rolling northward.

The first year we examined the underground treasuries,
blood and sweat conserved in gold. Strict guides strove
in vain to conjure up the power of the all-powerful,
to bring to life greasy bishops' staves in showcases.
Another time we climbed up among the bell towers
to feel the loftiness of the lofty, but the magic was
gone when we saw a dove's nest in a dragon's jaws
and a facade washer with a stereo hung on a lightning-
rod spike.

Thrice have I gone to Cologne to marvel at the Cathedral.
To ask and not be answered. And every time in the panicky
month of April, when ant people dominate the squares.
Don't ask why and wherefore such a glorious edifice!
You won't be answered until you yourself, an anemic ant,
stand in front of those four-sided doors. Nowhere are you
so puny and insignificant as in front of Cologne Cathedral,
with the German God.



Praha

We were daily pawns on the black-and-white
sidewalks of Old Town. In the early evening
we'd pull ourselves from the game to drink beer
with friends gathered around a hot topic like
around a dish: the life and work of Raymond
Carver, and everything else „that makes us grow."

If you know what you seek you'll easily find
in the Mother of All Cities. Only the sign for
Vyšehrad was masked by advertising posters
for cigarettes on the last day when we were
sneaking towards the cemetery for deserving
citizens. But don't worry: the two spires
of the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul
are a good enough landmark for tourists
armed with thick lenses. And those who truly
go to Vyšehrad know where they are going.

New York

The homeless of New City live underground.
In the off-limits labyrinths of the disused subway
they have found a roof over their heads. „Ferdinand
the Bull," a good man from the state of Texas,
has not seen the light of day for thirty years,
but in the darkness thick as tar he's found peace
and calm. On the ceiling of the central station
he painted an oak-tree crown, with gigantic limbs
forking into blind tunnels.

He goes up into the occupied city only at night,
during the curfew, after the south wind from the sea
mows down the stench of urine and gasoline. While
picking through garbage containers, from the corner
of his eye Ferdinand weighs out the power relationship,
an advantage that keeps shrinking but with which
he always unerringly returns home, fleeing the charity
of city authorities. Every morning he packs up again
all that he owns and with the folded mattress on his
back, like with a snail's house, he sniffs the air.

Queenstown

In Queen's Town we waited for our lost luggage
sunning ourselves all day long at the small coffee
shops on the pier. I don't know what we were ordering,
but they brought us just what we'd thirsted for.
We'd remembered Queen's Town from before: this time,
the town, too, was recognizing us until our delayed
backpacks – our house and bed for the days and nights
in the mountains – arrived and until we said goodbye
to people.

In the jungle, wherever we spent the night, we spent
the night amidst birds that recognized us, defending
their invisible nests to the last drop of their blood.
We slept also on the glaciers, on the snow that
remembered us, melting our bodies into the whiteness
of paper. And when we descended into the valley,
on the pastures that recognized us, we lazed in the grass
among the sheep as among scattered stećaks.*

* *Medieval tombstones in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its neighboring countries.*

• *The Guest Book*

Padjelanta

Here is where clouds start to reflect themselves
in the black holes on the slopes of Ahkka, and where
patches of snow dry on invisible clotheslines.
In the evening, tents mill around on reindeer pastures
like turtles. That sight will stay with you for days,
whenever you look back. As will the suspicion that
you are at the end of the world.

Everything here is in its right measure, but the terrifying
roar of the waterfall does not overwhelm the squeak
of a grouse. Vast is everything and inaccessible along
the path through Padjelanta, but the codes of strength
are in the rolling of tiny stones or in the helicopter attack
of a mosquito.

It ends nowhere. Wash your face therefore in a handful
of the cataract from which, little by little, an ocean will hatch.
If at night while you are sleeping on the rocks the scent
of ironed pillowcases comes into your dream, pack up your
vitamins and soups, go home – it's late. From Padjelanta
you will not take anything else but the knowledge
that you live in the wrong way and in the wrong place.

Sarek

Fear not my darkness if you are infinitely happy
and have your own light when you fall into my
jaws, like a glowworm.

I'm a draftsman of maps, the most precise ones.
More accurate even than the originals of nature
itself. Into the cobweb of watercourses and bluffs
hung from the sky I draw you also on every trail
you are walking on. For each a point in every
instant. Thus I squander centuries on a task that,
being without purpose, can't be completed.
With a cloudburst I flush down the two-legged ants
in the evening and shut down the guest book.

But be not afraid of tomorrow's day, of the open
sea of fog under which, like under a pillow,
either paradise or hell is sleeping curled up.
You are not lost even if you are infinitely unhappy
provided that you follow the scent of a moose.
Only keep away from your thoughts: deliberate
suffering, calculated loves... Watch out for those
precipices. They are the hollow teeth in my jaws.

Sylarna

Every new step on the stairs of travel takes me back
in thoughts to some previous floors. Like drunken cars
at weddings I drag behind myself all the remembered
faces, empty beer cans. Telephone poles move aside
and pass by.

Last summer the whiteness of the city from Vršani Hill
reminded me of an old hiking trip to the Sylarna Massif.
We were snowed in in the middle of September so we
looked for shelter at the wind observatory. The days
as short as the time it takes the tea to cool down.
In the nights thick as ink, the sleeping-bags zippers fart.

I know exactly when and how the moment of deliverance
comes, but it always surprises me. Under the morning
sun's magnifying glass, like in a reflector's beam,
glaciers emerge. Like snowdrops. On the way home
I keep warm by climbing down the stairs of travel
from time to time. Across from the Center Movie Theater
under renovation, the homeless in the park sleep wrapped
in the pieces of the cinema screen like in the snakeskins
of movies we have watched.

Tarfala

I don't like intact nature when humans
have their hand in it: combed-up waterfalls
and made-up glaciers all packed for sale.
Let them dry freely and drip into Tarfalajaure.
It's enough that on your way to the heavenly
lake and back you are spied upon by an alley
of telephone poles screwed into the precipice.

Civilization woke me up only when the bus
burped stopping outside Gällivare Hospital
to discharge its humpbacked passengers.
On the bench in front of the main entrance
a huge body of a woman was sitting. It was
struggling to stay awake and pull itself together,
but the drugged mass kept pouring onto
the pavement like dough. I don't find joy
in the wonders of nature that God's had his
hand in.

Geiranger I

The sun descends into Geiranger every day like into a well. Like a needle onto a gramophone record, the beak of a gull slides down onto the water, green and blue.

The same age-old idyll. Only the houses under the sky are empty, not a wisp of smoke. The people in them Geiranger has used up, but it still watches over the houses and cultivates them like mushrooms. Nailed on the precipices they suffer from gravitation like from a headache.

Tour buses crawl up the serpentines like ants at dusk. There's no panic in the harbor either: unhurriedly, the campers with their doggies go out for a walk, the fishermen shower their boats. No one suspects that the sun, like a dropped sequin, is sinking for the last time into the dark-blue depths of Geiranger, forever and irrevocably.

Geiranger II

All my life, when awake, I've sought a small plateau from a dream of long ago, a place for a house by a thin cataract, white like a ribbon from a half-opened book. I saw such a clearing when traveling once over the "Sju søstre" waterfall, but I couldn't recognize it, blinded by the sequin of the sun in the dark-blue and dark-green depths of Geiranger.

From time to time I open my bird-cage of wishes, but my birds do not fly out any more. I'm too old to begin and to dream ahead. I don't see well any more. I cut my nails from memory and voices, too, come to me colorless, as if from the loudspeaker at railroad stations: the clamor of children on the precipice above the „Seven Sisters" waterfall. When we played in the yard, they used to tie us around our waists with a clothesline so we could withstand the magnets of the abyss. So we could keep together. Today we are scattered out across countries like crabs across fjords.

Gaustafallet

When we returned from Serbia, we did not stop
at home even to check our mail. Craving for
the wilderness, we pushed on still farther north,
like a drug addict reaching for the merciful dose
after a weekend spent with the parents in the country.
I drove all night through Stribor's forests. From*
time to time we would get out to breathe the air,
and when the dawn stopped us suddenly by the sign
„Gaustafallet," we were no longer fit for great
undertakings.

Like sleepwalkers, aimlessly, we climbed down
the steep path to the explosion of white water that
had awoken us. You, from your dreams, and me
from my thoughts of a vineyard on Fruška Gora
in which a stooped old man is milking the grapevine.
Between the charm of Gausta Waterfall and that
of the parched slope in bleak Hopovo, in my thoughts
he chooses his own suffering.

* *In the story by I. B. Mažuranić, the enchanted Forest of Stribor must remain enchanted until it is entered by someone who prefers his own misery to all the good fortune of the world.*

Friends in the Universe

Discoveries

I read the papers while they're still cold, just brought in from outdoors, from minus twenty-seven. From this morning's papers I remember only one forlorn article: stuck in among the ads and Christmas greetings like a quick cake recipe was a list of scientific advances in 2003. Glass had been invented that refracts light at a negative angle.

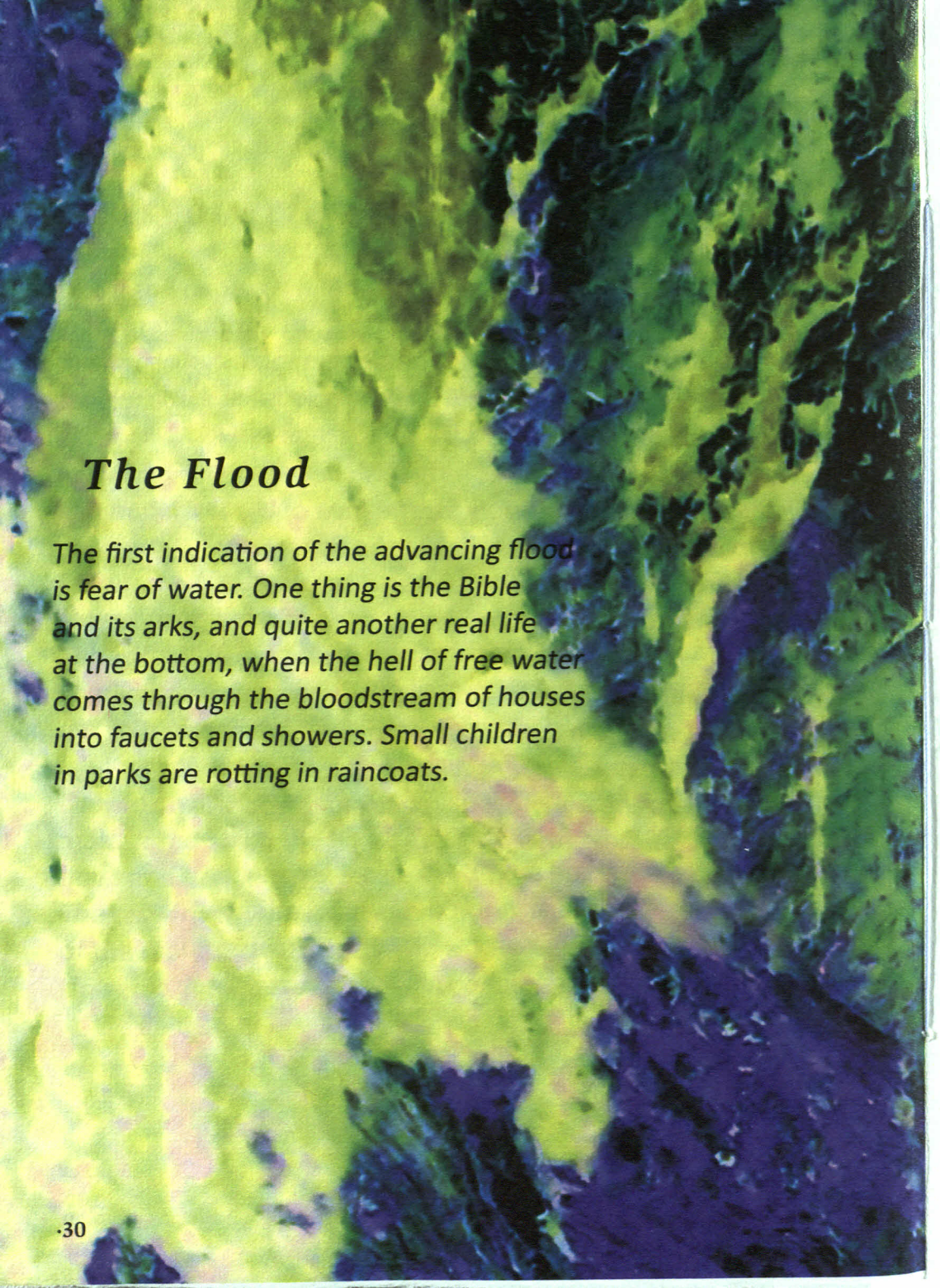
Fortunate are those untouched by this, whose bodies always find their way back from every mirror. The wife of a real-estate executive puts down her comb and perks up her breasts a little before heading out to the annual bridge-club dinner.

Only four percent of the Universe you inhabit is normal matter: the stars, the hills, the cars. All the rest is black mass and dark energy. At peace is he who doesn't know. The taxi driver who is selling minutes waiting for the wife of the real-estate executive. In a 13-billion-year-old Universe, his life is not the blink of an eye. It's nothing.

The Planet

I don't understand my children - such devastation. That I still go to work is only for the love of the last bird in the sky and the last fish in the water. Until recently I'd spun around my axis in a rapture, like a ballerina: today, I no more feel the joy of rotation.

Profiteers are falling from fatigue, losers go to museums to see the sunset in the Amazon jungle. I don't play favorites with my children. When I take off my shoes and step into the darkness of space, all of you will be at my funeral.



The Flood

The first indication of the advancing flood
is fear of water. One thing is the Bible
and its arks, and quite another real life
at the bottom, when the hell of free water
comes through the bloodstream of houses
into faucets and showers. Small children
in parks are rotting in raincoats.

Friends in the Universe

Those I know have grown old, my scattered friends.
The snow is rusting in Sweden, from the other side of
the globe meager electronic messages: either there's
a fire – or there isn't one. No news is news anymore,
they've heard it all, my tired friends.

Only memories are news we are still curious about.
We approach memories undoubting, yet carefully.
As when, back on our street, we were teaching a stray
cat, black with white paws, to eat from our hands.
Though hungry, she'd smell our rings first.

The Crash

Simple is the mathematics of life and death:
it is enough for place and time to coincide.
Odd Knutsen, a physical laborer at the Stavanger
canned-fish factory had planned his vacation
at a warm sea. On his way home from third shift,
he would check the status of his credit cards and
around noon, before going to bed, he would sniff
his sunscreen lotion.

At last the day arrived and snow-white clouds
stuck on the peaks of the Alps reminded him
of cotton candy amid little children's hats at spring
fairs in Boknafjorden. A wonderful sight,
an unplanned opportunity for a break, will be
rejected for the sake of travel discipline.

What we learn we learn too late. That black point,
that magnet in which place and time overlap,
you can't fool. The mustached driver of the Greek
rig had decided for the sake of travel discipline
to forgo his habitual steak at the little restaurant
with plastic ivy near the small town of Airolo.
Those clouds reminded him of the toxic fumes
around exhaust valves in the industrial zone of
Milan when a white Volvo, blinded by the setting
sun at the St. Gotthard Tunnel exit, crashed under
his feet. When leaving its own it vanished into
universal darkness.

The Citadel

On the noose of the polar circle I'm using up last
summer's last days: the color of my tanned skin is
finally reverting to the color of snow. The body forgets.

But the camera lens remembers. For months not a drop
of rain on the Pakleni Islands. The oldtimers sit among*
beer bottles and stare at the open sea through a curtain
of rhododendrons. They no longer recall what they miss.
But we, who are foreigners everywhere, have not lost hope.
We climb at mid-day up the town's dorsal fin, on narrow
steps, like mercury in a thermometer, to the top
of the fortress. We then go down into its bowels,
saved in the grave.

The small dungeons are built in the shape of horizontal
cones, narrowed down to points of light in the rampart,
tiny windows through which the prisoners, as through
a peephole, peer into the world. They crave for a bunch
of mandarins on market stalls, for the cry of a seagull
between the two blues... Through the peephole of the
dungeon, as if under the microscope, the longing for
freedom grows manifold.

* *Islands located off the southwest coast of the island of Hvar, Croatia, opposite the entrance to the Hvar (city) harbour.*

*Vršani**

I came from afar, invited by a friend, to look
and to see. We climbed together with the sun
up the desolate orchards on an overgrown path
between the prehistoric haystacks that looked
like knocked-down church bells. From the top
of the pyramid: two separate towns on two sides
of the world and two century-old forests down
the northern and the southern slope.

My friend invited me from afar to listen and hear
the blood of water at the Dragon's Fountain
and the water of blood in Mad Hašim's Well.
The secret of the indestructible. But as far as the
eye can reach and thought can grasp, the closest
to me is that which has perished: the windows
of Vršani. Outside, the grapevine gone wild around
the iron bars is dragging, like an octopus, its prey
to the bottom. Inside, the black holes of forsaken
life hold with their mass the structure in balance.
Until the apocalypse prevails.

* *An abandoned village on a hillside near Tuzla. The Dragon's Fountain, „Zmajeva česma" in the original, is a fountain with famously good drinking water that springs from Zmajevac Hill. (The water there is said to be, in the Bosnian idiom, „dobra ko zmaj"- „good as a dragon," i.e., exceptionally good.) Hašim was a mentally deranged man who, in 1936, first killed his wife and then his daughter, whose cut-off head he threw in a well, later known as Mad Hašim's Well.*

• *The Gurgling of Sand*

When Death for the First Time...

When death for the first time knocked at our door, it had come across a mine field, like an empty boat. A pollen cloudlet on the hazel twig it had brushed against was still quivering, that I remember. Also, that those who have the softest stride are those who don't know where they are going, sleepwalkers across a fire-swept zone.

Here, in the bigger world, one annuls oneself with the keys on the keyboard. Death is prescribed with a prescription, or it comes quarterly like a water bill. The dying of the body is nothing else but material fatigue, and souls are archived into brown files. Even the cemeteries are calculated: occupied and vacant squares laid out precisely like Lego cubes, with contents on notice boards like in books.

For More than Ten Years

For more than ten years we've been doing the same things, each in his yard, and yet I've not exchanged a single word with my neighbor. I heard his voice for the first time when he learned that he was mortal: colon cancer, an aggressive one.

„Though it seems to you, friend, that I've been living without purpose, I've had many plans since I began carrying my death behind my belt. Since darkness can descend any moment now, I simply see things in a new light. I no longer approach things with self-interest: a pheasant and any bird make sense. Even toward my grave I move without hind thoughts – with the curiosity of a calf approaching and sniffing the butcher's knives before slaughter."

Einstein

I don't ask questions, but answers come to me
from your students, Albert! Albert, I know less
and less! What are they seeking in the dark? Light?

With every new discovery I am a step closer to
the already seen. The mathemathics of the future
takes me back to your childhood, to a sunny fair
on Schrannenplatz. Sibylle the Gypsy had stolen
you for a moment, that famous-fortune teller
who reads palms as if she were reading poetry.

Sibylle the witch enticed you for nothing, just for play,
to amuse the brutes. But when you reached out your
hand to her and when she brushed the dust off, she fell
silent. She gripped the counter with the skins on it.
Everything stopped, everything turned to ice, as in
the tale of Sleeping Beauty. Only, from a different
fairy tale, the dripping of chestnuts here and there
on the green could be heard. She was looking
for the light in the gloom but, like a merry-go-round,
there was a black hole spinning in your tiny palm.
Something not yet seen! And Schrannen Square
was tumbling into it as into a concrete mixer.

The Pharaoh

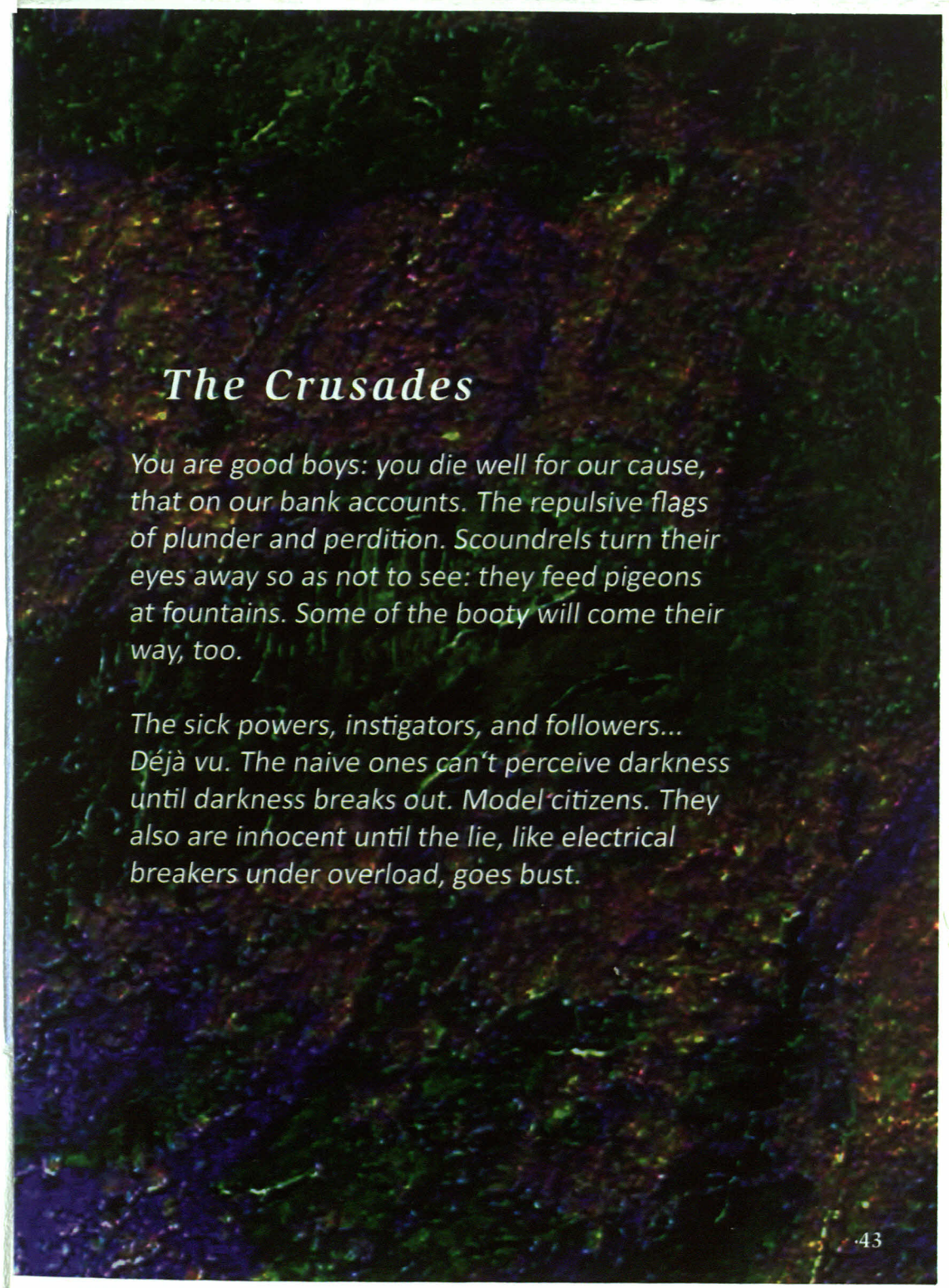
When I, a tyrant, was laid down in the sarcophagus,
and when the stone block clicked like a key in the lock,
everyone heaved a secret sigh of relief. The blades
of grass rose up as after rain they shake off the weight
of water droplets in the wind. Only the cressets were left
to burn down. And the masons to be beheaded so that
the memory of the labyrinths leading to me would be
erased.

Still, I'm not resting in peace – I, a ghost in a bottle.
Those who still keep the memory of the masons
haunt me like a bad dream. They've been picking away
around me day and night for generations, digging
into my brain. Because of their picks I cannot hear
the gurgling of sand: the chirping of tiny birds in the field.
Tyrannical dreams! But sooner or later the gates will open.
The cork will pop out of the champagne bottle.
Welcome to my grave!

The Story of Bonnie and Clyde

Frank Hamer loved his job, but it seems to me he was quick-witted. That's what Bonnie and Clyde felt also, although they'd never met him. The days grew tedious and meaningless when they began to suspect that their pursuer was losing control and was lagging behind. She'd then leave the key in the door on purpose or would leave, as if by accident, one extra glass for the unexpected guest.

I can't conjure up spring in Bienville Parish in color. Blood had been spilled in black and white: America heaved a sigh of relief. I suppose that only Frank could not fall asleep: he lay all night with his eyes open as if listening to the pillow. Life had become empty and meaningless. He stopped blackmailing paper carriers, he stopped spying on their neighbors, he stopped contriving decoys... Little by little he completely lost his human face.



The Crusades

You are good boys: you die well for our cause, that on our bank accounts. The repulsive flags of plunder and perdition. Scoundrels turn their eyes away so as not to see: they feed pigeons at fountains. Some of the booty will come their way, too.

The sick powers, instigators, and followers... Déjà vu. The naive ones can't perceive darkness until darkness breaks out. Model citizens. They also are innocent until the lie, like electrical breakers under overload, goes bust.

Afghanistan

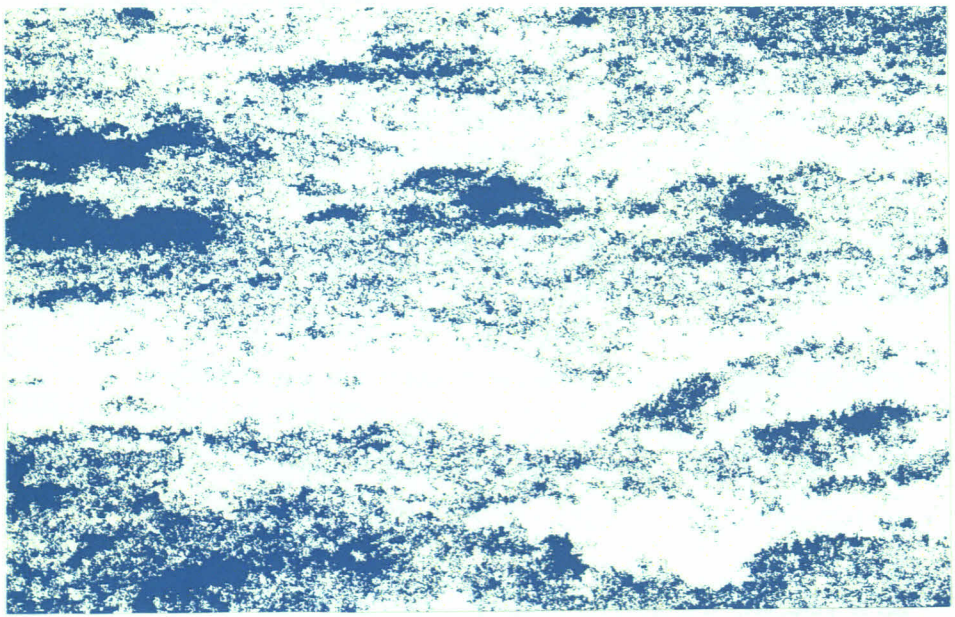
They've killed our interpreter:
who will interpret for us?
Who will take us out of
this fucking movie
when we have no interpreter?
When we are deaf to
what we hear
and blind to what we see
even without an interpreter.

The Terrorist

I have consideration for your honorable intentions
if you are indeed sent to tear down capitalism.
But your suicidal stings are piercing my five-year-old
daughter's sleep like a soap bubble. Like acorns
onto plates, your shrapnel are falling into a Sunday
lunch.

A summer evening in the life of an ordinary man fans
shameless lust here as well as in Samarra in spite of
lies from my TV channels and in spite of the exhortations
of your prophets. Sunshades drooping like snowdrops,
sunblinds at half-mast...

We are what we are when we shed our wax-paper
shirts and change into our naked bodies. But in light
of double darkness we hardly recognize one another,
marionettes of a puppet theater. Then we go down
onto the stage, into our play, and you come to me
as if you were a guest, emptyhanded and dead ahead
of time. A bang, and then applause. Behind the set,
the gloves of your and my executioners are shaking
hands.



• *Hyperborea, the Reserve Homeland*

Mycenae I

I'm fed up with people, Giorgos, give me*
your hand, let me into one of your poems
so I can rest in the shade of an olive tree!
Long ago, when you told us of the injustice
that lies heavy on the scales of civilization
and of the greed that like a plague spreads
to everything it touches, that peers even into
baby cribs – we didn't quite believe you.
We thought you were exaggerating but we
were with you because we knew how to suffer.

Today when I talk of the greed that like a black
hole devours everything it touches I have nobody
on my side. No one wants to know because no one
wants to be unhappy, Giorgos. I was with you
when you were suffering – let me end up in one
of your poems! Set me down, say, in Mycenae,
like a porcelain homunculus in the button box,
among the huge stones.

* *Georgios Seferiades (1900-1971), Greek poet and diplomat.*

Mycenae II

When shall we live, Giorgos, when shall we live?
I don't see a way out of the vicious circle in which,
like mice in a wheel, we run ceaselessly without
ever seeing a way out. The only escape: while locked
in it, to lock ourselves into ourselves. But shall we
ever again lie under the pines above the fallen-down
stars on the waters of Lake Modrac and talk?

Today we have a place to sleep and something to read,
but we are nowhere as happy as when, long ago,
we were unhappy, when we had nothing – neither „mine"
nor „yours." We forget fast, Giorgos, where we are
and where we are going. When shall we talk? Who
will get us out of this vicious circle of pride into which
we sink deeper and deeper as into quicksand?

Hyperborea I

I don't know who I am nor what my name is,
but I had a happy childhood. Many years ago
I was taken from a cage in the „Phnom Penh"
orphanage and adopted. They chose me out
of several girls like me, just as the fine people
at the Bodéns flower shop select the most
beautiful of many identical orchids.

They took me to distant Hyperborea, to night
without day in winter and day without night
in summer, but I had a beautiful youth.
I traveled everywhere and returned home
from every place to my native Hyperborea
never asking who I was nor what my name was.
I didn't care. Only now, in advanced old age,
my fingers sweat for the first time and stick
to the cellophane when in summer-vacation
photo albums warm waterfalls and gigantic
ferns come along. The blood remembers.

Hyperborea II

Whenever I return to Hyperborea, I carry
heavy thoughts from my native land.
They are an added burden for the plane's
engines, but after so many years without
a home and without a key of my own,
I don't watch over them carefully,
as I do over my personal baggage.

But I still gladly eavesdrop on conversations
in both languages about dried-out river beds
that are empty graves back there and about
rainy summers here. I look with curiosity into
the lives of others the way one peers into other
people's shopping baskets at supermarkets.

I gladly return home to Hyperborea, but I
would not die under its flag either. I love it
in a profiteering way. When the wings slice
through the clouds and roll out the forests
and meadows and lakes under me, I fall
exhausted into them as into an aired room.
Into freshly changed linen.

Hyperborea III

When I arrived in Hyperborea, my reserve homeland,
I came as a man in his prime. The long days of summer
were drying strung on the nail of a calendar like tobacco
leaves, smelling sweetly, but my thoughts were still
roaming far away, in the basements of Gradina Hospital,
where I'd left my father behind, alone in his last night.
I know that shells were falling on the city all night,
on the living and on the chestnut allée, and that they
stopped at dawn, but to this day that night's shrapnel
seek me out: the peeling underground shelter's ceilings
in which no one is sitting by one of the deathbeds.

Before I arrived in my reserve homeland, I'd only heard
of it from a Greek myth. That it's a lonely island where
no one dies a natural death, but when the time comes
and children grow older than their parents they go out
on their own and throw themselves off a cliff so they
won't be a burden to anybody. I'm fifty now and time
and again dawn finds me as hoary as a birch tree under
frost. In a couple of years I'll be older than my father,
who is no burden to anyone. Who knew a lot about
Hyperborea.

About the Author

Milorad Pejić

was born in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1960.
Since 1992 he has lived in Sweden.

His books of poems include:

The Vase for the Lily Plant
(Sarajevo, Svjetlost, 1985)

The Eyes of Keyholes
(Tuzla-Wupertal, Bosanska riječ, 2001 and 2012)

The Eyes of Keyholes
(Sommerville MA, USA, Červená Barva Press, in English, 2015)

Hyperborea
(Prague, Aula, 2011)

Hyperborea
(Sarajevo, Fondacija Mak Dizdar, 2013)

The Third Life
(Tuzla, Bosanska Medijska Grupa, 2015)

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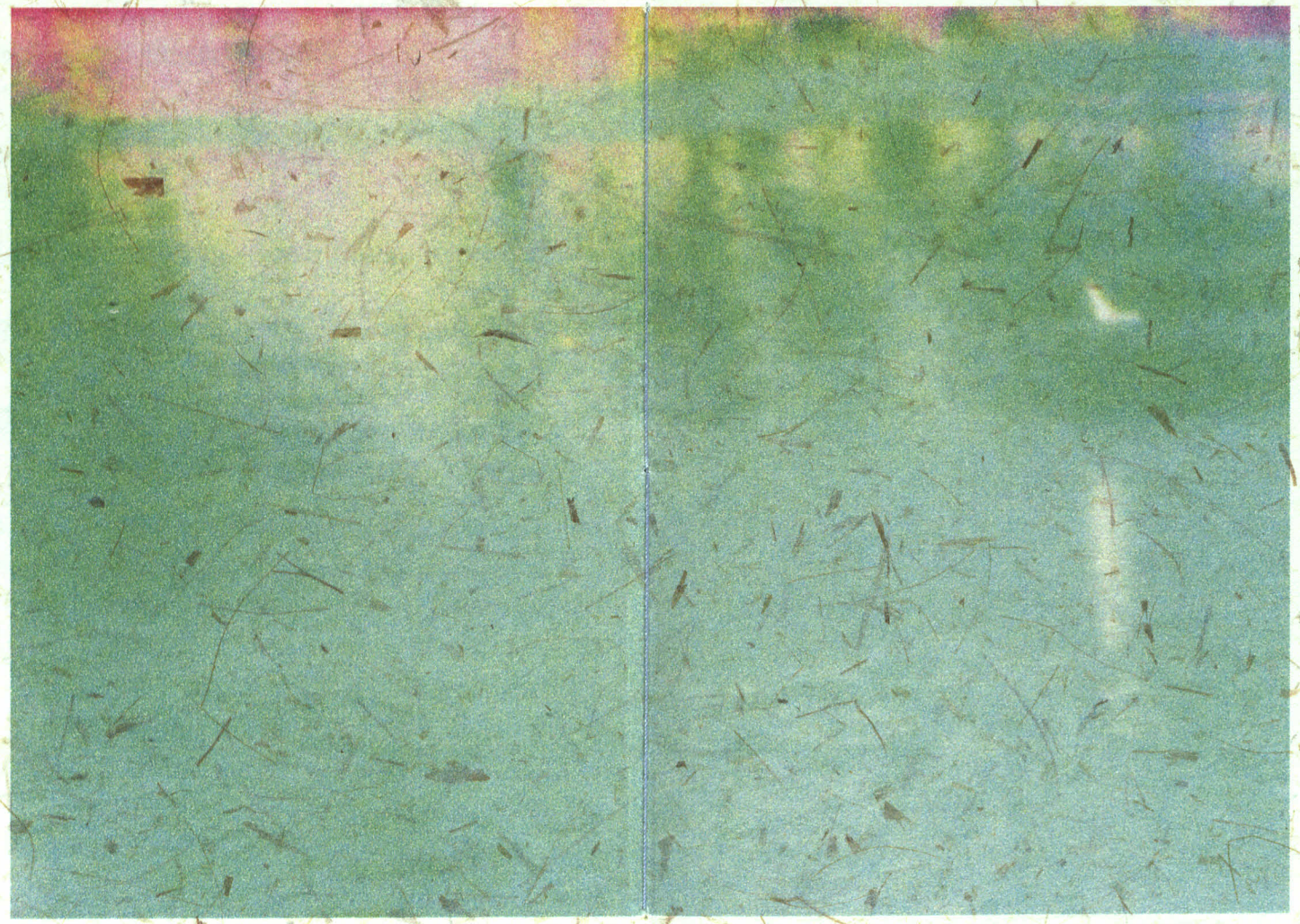
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