

Zoli

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Extract

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‘If you keep quiet, you die. If you speak, you die. So speak and die.’

Tahar Djaout

‘But in our century, when only evil and indifference are limitless, we cannot afford unnecessary questions; rather, we need to defend ourselves with whatever there is to hand of certainty. I know that you remember ...’

John Berger
And our Faces, my Heart, brief as Photos

‘To get back before dark is the art of going.’

Wendell Berry
Collected Poems

Slovakia
2003

He drives alongside the small streambed and the terrible
shitscape looms up by increments – upturned buckets
by the bend in the river, a broken baby carriage in
the weeds, a petrol drum leaking out a dried tongue of rust,
the carcass of a fridge in the brambles.

A dog, all bones and scars, noses out in front of the car,
and within moments the dog has brought children, crowding
up against the car windows. He tries nonchalance as he snaps
down the locks with his elbow. One boy is agile enough to
jump onto the bonnet with hardly a noise – he grabs the
windshield wipers and spreads himself out. A cheer goes up
as two other kids take hold of the bumper and skate behind
on the bare soles of their feet. Teenage girls jog alongside in
their low-slung jeans. One of them points and laughs, but then
stops, still, silent. The boy slides off the bonnet and the skating
kids let go of the bumper, and suddenly the river is in front
of him, swirling, fast, brown, unexpected. He yanks the
steering wheel hard. Brambles scrape the windows. Tall grass
crunches under the wheels. The car swerves back towards the
mudtrack, and the children run alongside again in uproar.

On the far bank two old women stand up from where
they're washing bedsheets using riverrock and lye. They shake
their heads, half smile, and stoop once more to their work.

He steers round another tight corner, towards a blind line
of trees, past the remains of a shattered lettuce crate in the



long grass, and there, across a rickety little joke of a bridge, is the grey Gypsy settlement, marooned on an island in the middle of the river, as if the water itself had changed its mind and flowed either side. Shanty houses. Windowless huts. Jagged pipes and mismatched wood. Thin scarves of smoke rising up from the chimneys. Each roof pock-marked with a satellite dish and patched with scraps of corrugated iron. Far off in the distance, a single blue coat flaps in the branches of a tree.

He guides the car into the long weeds, stops, pulls the handbrake, takes a second to pretend that he's looking for something in the glove box, searches deep, though there's nothing there, not a thing, just a chance to get a small respite. The children crowd the windows. He pushes open the car door and all he can hear from the settlement across the water is a dozen radios blaring all at once, songs Slovakian and American and Czech.

Instantly the children thumb his sleeve, knuckle his ribcage, pat his jacket pockets. It's as if he has become a dozen hands all at once. 'Quit!' he shouts, swatting them away. One boy hops on the front bumper so that the whole car bows to the rhythm. 'Okay,' he shouts, 'enough!' The older teenagers in dark leather jackets shrug. The girls in unbuttoned blouses step back and giggle. How immaculate their teeth. How quick the silver of their pupils. The tallest of the boys steps forward in a muscle shirt. 'Robo,' the boy says, puffing out his chest. They shake hands and he pulls the boy aside, has a word, face close to his ear.

He tries to block the deep smell of the boy, wet wool and raw smoke, and within seconds a deal is struck – fifty crowns – to bring him to the elders and to keep the car safe.

Robo shouts out a warning to the others, backhands the child who is tiptoe on the rear bumper. They make their way towards the bridge. More children arrive from along the river, some naked, some in nappies, one in a torn pink dress and flip-flops, and the same girl seems to appear from all angles, but in different shoes each time; beautiful, coal-eyed, hair uncombed.

He watches the kids cross the bridge like a strange line of



herons, one foot heavy on the solid planks, high-toed and light on the rest. The metal sheets vibrate under their weight. He totters a moment on a piece of plyboard, sways, reaches for a hold, but there is none. The children put their hands to their mouths and snigger – he is, he thinks, every idiot who has ever walked this way. He feels the weight of what he carries: two bottles, notepad, pencil, cigarettes, instamatic camera, and tiny recorder, all hidden away deep in his clothes. He pulls the jacket tight and leaps the final hole in the bridge, lands in the soft mud on the far side, just twenty yards from the shanties. He looks up, takes a deep breath, but it's as if a thousand chords have been struck in his blood all at once, his ribcage is thumping, he shouldn't have come here alone, a Slovakian journalist, forty-four years old, comfortably fat, a husband, a father, about to step into the heart of a Gypsy camp. He takes a step forward through a puddle, thinking how stupid it was to wear soft leather shoes for this trip, not even good for a quick retreat.

At the edge of the shacks he becomes aware of the brooding men leaning against woodpole doorways. Women stand with hands folded across their stomachs. He tries to catch their gaze, but they look beyond him and away with thousand-yard stares. Strange, he thinks, that they do not question him, maybe they've mistaken him for a policeman or a social worker or a parole officer or some other government fuckwad here on an official visit.

He feels briefly powerful as Robo leads him deeper into the warren of mudroutes.

Doorframes used as tables. Sackcloth for curtains. Empty čuču bottles strung up as wind chimes. At his feet, bits of wood and porridge containers, lollipop sticks and shattered glass, the ground-down bones of some dead animal. He catches glimpses of babies hammocked from ceilings, flies buzzing around them as they sleep. He reaches for his instamatic but is pushed on in the swell of children. Open doorways are quickly closed. Bare bulbs switched off. He notices carpets on the walls, and pictures of Christ, and pictures of Lenin, and pictures of Mary Magdalene, and pictures of Saint Jude lit by



small red candles high above empty shelves. From everywhere comes the swell of music, no accordions, no harps, no violins, but every shack with a TV or a radio on full volume, an endless thump.

Robo leans over and shouts in his ear: ‘Over here, Uncle, follow me,’ and it strikes him how foreign this boy is, how distant, how dark-skinned.

He is led round a sharp corner to the largest shanty of all. A satellite dish sits new and shiny on the roof. He knocks on the plywood door. It swings open a little further with each knuckle rap. Inside there is a contingent of eight, nine, maybe ten men. They raise their heads like a parliament of ravens. A few of them nod, but they continue their hand, and he knows the game is nonchalance – he has played it himself in other parts of the country, the flats of Bratislava, the ghettos of Prešov, the slums of Letanovce.

In the far corner of the room he notices two women watching him, wide-eyed. A hand pushes him at the small of his back. ‘I’ll wait for you here, mister,’ says Robo, and the door creaks behind him.

He looks around the room, the immaculate floor, the ordered cupboards, the whiteness of the one shirt hanging on a nail from the ceiling.

‘Nice house,’ he says, and knows immediately how foolish it sounds. He flushes red-cheeked, then draws himself tall. In the corner sits a broad-shouldered man, tough, hard-jawed, grey hair tousled after a bad night’s sleep. He steps across and announces quite softly that he’s a journalist, he’s here on a story, he’d like to talk to some of the old folk.

‘We’re the old folk,’ says the man.

‘Right,’ he says, and pats his jacket. He fumbles in his pocket and breaks open a packet of Marlboro. Stupid, he knows, not to have broken the seal already. In the silence the others watch him. His hands shake and a bead of sweat runs down his brow. He unwinds the plastic of the cigarettes, lifts the cellophane and shoves three up like peeping toms.

‘Just want to talk,’ he says.



The man takes a cigarette, waits for a light, blows the smoke sideways.

‘About what?’

‘The old days.’

‘Yesterday was long,’ says the man with a laugh, and the laughter ripples around the room, tentatively at first, until the women catch it and it builds, unravelling the tension. He is suddenly slapped on the shoulder and his grin breaks wide, and the men start to talk in an accent that starts low and ends high, musical, fast, jangly. Some of the words appear to be in Romani, and from what he can make out the man’s name is Boshor. He reaches past Boshor, throws the cigarettes on the table, and the men casually reach for them. The women step across, one of them suddenly young and beautiful. She bends for a light and he looks away from the low swing of her breasts. Boshor points to the cards and say, ‘We’re playing for a little food, a little drink too.’ The man pulls again on the cigarette. ‘We’re not really drinkers, though.’

He takes his cue from Boshor, opens his buttons, slips back his shirtfront, exposing his flabby chest, and removes the first bottle like a trophy. Boshor picks up the bottle, turns it in his hands, nods approval, and rattles off a salvo of Romani to more laughter.

He watches as the young girl reaches into a cupboard. She takes down a mahogany box with a silver clasp, opens it wide. A matching set of china cups. She lays them on the table, unscrews the bottle. He is given, he notices, the only china cup that is not chipped.

Boshor leans back and gently says, ‘Health.’

They clink cups and Boshor leans forward to whisper: ‘Oh, it’s for money too, friend, we’re playing cards for money.’

He doesn’t even flinch; he slaps down two hundred crowns.

Boshor takes it, slips it into his trousers, smiles, blows smoke towards the ceiling. ‘Thank you, friend.’

The cards are put aside and the drinking starts in earnest. He is amazed how close Boshor sits to him, their knees touching, the dark of the hand on his jacketsleeve, and he wonders now how he will navigate their secrets – even their



Slovak is a little difficult to understand, their country dialect – but soon enough the second bottle is on the table. He does it calmly and quickly, as if to suggest it's always been there. The drinking unfolds and they begin to talk to him about crooked mayors and bent bureaucrats and subsidies and the dole, and how Kolya was beaten with a pickaxe last week and how they are not allowed into the pubs – 'We're not even allowed within fifty fucking metres' – all the things they know a journalist wants to hear. Even the Gypsies have soundbites, he thinks, as if he should be surprised, all the words down pat – *racism, integration, schooling, Roma rights, discrimination* – and it's all horseshit really, though he's getting somewhere, they become more talkative as the bottles drain, the voices rise to a clamour, and they fall into a story about a motorbike taken by the cops.

'Everything that gets stolen is what we steal,' says Boshor as he leans forward, his eyes slightly bloodshot and tinged with yellow. 'It's always us, isn't it? We're prouder than that, you know.'

He nods at Boshor, shifts in his chair, seeks a pocket of silence, passes around more cigarettes, and flicks the matchstick to extinguish the flame.

'So,' he says, 'are motorbikes the new Roma horses?'

He's briefly proud of his question until Boshor repeats it, not once, but twice, and then there's a giggle from the youngest girl and the men slap their thighs in laughter.

'Shit, friend,' says Boshor, 'we don't even have bridles any more.'

Another round of laughter goes up, but he pushes his question harder, saying surely horses are among the ancient Romani things. 'Y'know,' he says, 'pride, tradition, heritage, that sort of thing?'

Boshor's chair scrapes against the floor and he leans forward. 'I told you, friend, we don't have any horses.'

'Different times?'

'It was better under the Communists,' says Boshor, flicking ash towards the doorway. 'Those were the days.'

And that's where his heart surges, he's momentarily high



on the lift of it, and just by leaning forward, ever so slightly, he has Boshor by the neckscruff, a newsman's trick.

'Yeah, back with the Communists we had jobs, we had houses, we had food,' says Boshor, 'they didn't knock us 'round, no, friend, may my black heart stop beating if I tell a lie.'

'Is that so?'

Boshor nods and, from a battered wallet, takes out a photograph of a travelling kumpanija long ago in which the men are elegant and the women long-skirted. They are on a country road and, from the caravan roof, a red flag with a hammer and sickle flutters above them. 'That's my Uncle Jozef.'

He takes the photo from Boshor, turns it in his fingers, and wishes to Christ in the clouds above that he had clicked his tape recorder on, for now it has begun, but he wonders how he will reach into his pocket without attracting too much attention, if the small red light will shine through his jacket, and where he should begin his real questions. He wants to say that he is here about Zoli, do you know about Zoli, she was born near here, a Gypsy, a poet, a singer, a Communist too, a Party member, she travelled with harpists once, she was expelled, have you heard her name, did you hear her music, *We sing to sweeten the dead grass*, did you see her, is she still talked of, *From what is broken, what is cracked, I make what is required*, was she damned, was she forgiven, did she leave any sign, *I will not, no, never call the crooked finger straight*, did your fathers tell stories, did your mothers sing her songs, was she ever allowed back?

But when he mentions her name – leaning forward to say, 'Have you ever heard of Zoli Novotna?' – the air stalls, the drinking stops, the cigarettes are held at mouth level, and a silence descends.

Boshor looks towards the doorway and says, 'No, I don't know that name, do you understand me, fat-neck, and even if I did, that's not something we would talk about.'

