

Marko Pogačar

**God Will Not Help**

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović

## I Slaughtered

“I lost all of my hair in the summer of 1940, when I was nineteen. Before I knew it, just like that, it was gone, *si señor*. It was willy-nilly for a while, and then nothing; as smooth as a baby’s butt, I was as pretty as a picture!” he said. “And that’s the best thing that ever happened to me, boy, believe you me,” he said, folding his handkerchief into four squares—it’d been folded many times before so it had a grid of parallel and vertical lines, like some drunken chessboard—and then shoving it into the pocket of his checkered jacket; as checkered as a tablecloth at a pizza place or a blanket given to the blacks as charity.

A look across his shoulder, in the direction where, at the end of the trajectory, stood the sky, as bright and as smooth as a salad bowl, would first meet a concrete block seven stories high. Just under the sky, and in a way maybe *in* it precisely, the gaze would cut through the naked branches of sycamores, which, when looked at more closely, when listened to more attentively (in order to hear their silent pulse), unmistakably announced the winter was coming to its end. However, the boy didn’t look up. Shifting his weight from one foot to another, at one moment he stared at the tips of his fur-padded boots, at the next, at the bare, shiny skull of a man who chewed and then swallowed the darkness.

“That’s how it was, boy, it was the war,” he said, forcing the smoke to come out of his nose and disappear. Sparrows with tiny stripes, resembling woolen socks that give a horrible itch, entered the boy’s field of vision. At a driveway, a postman climbed down from his moped, a white balcony door flashed at one of the higher floors. “Back then there weren’t any lotions, hair care products. I had four brothers.” He pointed the rubber tip of his crotch in the direction of tables with chessboards carved in them. The knees under him gave out some unusual restlessness, or it’s usual, when the death is near.

“One is still alive, *si señor*. He’s good at chess, excellent, let me tell you. And all four of them were like me. Our old man could play bocce with us, *si*. All of us joined our side, the Ustashe. The Protection Battalion!”

At the tables, among the dials of the chess clock—the boy could see the ominous ticking of seconds, one after another—two men in the prime of their seventies mostly made all the wrong moves. He also saw the wind that rolled an empty Coke can along the stone slabs and slim grass, picking up clouds of dust, their thoughts too quiet for anyone to hear.

“And the other three had a long life, they lived to a good age! Imagine how much my father saved on barbers! Imagine... Enough to buy a car!” he said. He lifted his index finger, moist with saliva, and it

danced, soon completely dry, at the level of the boy's eyes, just one shade colder blue than the boy's winter-coat, buttoned up all the way to his throat.

"The Bora," he whispered. "They have no clue, those weather people on the TV, believe you me. They have no clue!"

Thinking it resembled the head of the man who was speaking, maybe even an egg and a picture of the Earth spinning around at the film's opening credit, except that the colors were different, the boy placed the ball he had been holding under his right arm down on the ground.

"You're never gonna go bald, I can tell. I know your father," he said. "With that hair of yours, not a chance. It's African. That's why the blacks create problems, *si señor*. Cause they're hairy."

Not giving it any thought, the boy ran his fingers through his light curls, possibly too long for a six-year-old of his height. The smell of resin in the branches crammed his nostrils, like wads of handkerchief when they bleed, wads that are then swallowed by some drain or by their personal, completely unexpected night.

"I know your father and your mother, of course I do, your genes are rotten!" he barked and gazed at the chess players. Then he threw his cigarette and stomped it with his heel until it completely merged with the ground. He shoved his right hand deep into the pocket of his brown corduroy pants. The fabric's stripes were stained by a wild quince compote that could have just as easily been urine. The stain had already taken the shape of Norway, but all he saw was the bishop devouring the queen.

"I had all kinds of jobs, I did whatever it took, was the best at it, no hairs to get in the way. You don't know me, I lived far away from here. Places you've never been to. And I know your granddad. And your grandma. Hehe, she was one of ours too, *si señor*", he said, blowing into his open hand, "they shaved her to her skin too, it was a long time ago, you don't know about it," he said, "to her skin," he repeated and laughed. The northerly bent the fleaworts, the dead leaves of grass among the stone slabs, the shadows and the mallow that blossomed, nevertheless.

"They say I slaughtered pigs—*siiii*, I say, I did that too." The boy rolled his ball through the puddle left after that morning's shower. He rolled it with the tip of his boot, trying to create the same effect as one of the fountains he had seen at the bank building at Fruit Square, but there was nothing to get the water going.

“But the pig’s good only after you remove its hair. After you scald it good. And so is, by god, that thing down there,” he whispered, “the *snatch*. But you haven’t heard it from me. I haven’t told you this.” The boy listened, didn’t hear. He wished the temperature dropped instantly, to freeze the water and leave the ball captured in the ice, like Walt Disney, except that this ice would be his and round.

“General they called me, general! And I’ve never been a general, you don’t know me, do you, you’re too small, boy!” He glanced at his watch, then at the boy, then at his watch, then back at the boy. The boy had rolled up the sleeve of his blue winter coat and counted the digits on his wrist. There the image of the sky speeded straight into the gilded, antique watch on a black belt, three times too big for his wrist. All the digits were accounted for. He assumed they told the same to both of them, but he wasn’t sure. The man moving his lips was so much older; he didn’t know how the thing with digits worked in that case.

“I slaughtered all kinds of things, but now it doesn’t matter anymore, it doesn’t count. And women loved me, I married three times. Pigs paid for it,” he said. “That’s what women just love. The blood and when you have no hair, *si señor*. They go crazy.”

He lifted his crotch in greeting. The chess players, their pockets swollen with pieces, left their black and white squares, the traffic swelled, swift and vibrant, spilling over like chocolate pudding from the main road to the deserted alleys. He spat after them. The postman climbed on his moped, and he spat once again, because he thought chess players were bad, and he knew postmen were even worse.

“A newborn, I say,” he said and ran his hand across his bare scalp. “As pretty as a picture, a saint, hehe.”

The blemishes on his head jumped around like drunken puddles of oil, pixels on the worn-out skin threatening to become airborne and jeopardize the winter’s sharpness. “And I slaughtered, I did. So what,” he said. The boy stared at the spots, then at the glass of his watch. White and fast clouds sailed across the dial, the dry air winter uses to close shut the wounds on the city’s body, the moment anything peeks out of them. His hand in his pocket, his boot on his ball, the ball in the water, which was just water. If he extended his hand, he could almost touch it, the wind scattering cans, scattering thoughts. The fleawort’s aroma: when its leaf is put on a wound, puss comes out from within.

A hand with its thin, bony fingers came down from above on the blue fabric of his shoulder cutting his last thought short. A layer of orange nail polish, which, like a swarm of mad, rambunctious fireflies,

performed all kinds of more or less complex figures at breathtaking speed right in front of his eyes, could have been applied yesterday or the day before yesterday. After thirty seconds, when the play of the fingers went hush and the fireflies disappeared somewhere, she looked up for the first time. Regardless of what she had just said, he didn't seem alarmed. After all, he knew that, a long time ago, like a candied cherry at the bottom of a stocky bottle, he had been floating in her bellybutton for days.

"Uncle Mladen! Good that you're here, he sometimes..."

The fireflies, like always, resurrected, passed through the blond curls, then landed on the blue coat's edge and pulled it down. He kicked the ball out of the puddle with the tip of his boot and it rolled up to her feet. When she bent down, an eerie top of the sycamore grew out of her hood. Then their eyes met, and a giant blue pupil swallowed the treetop.

"Ah, it's nothing." He pulled out his handkerchief, opened it, spat into it, and once again folded it into four quarters. "All the things we used to do, when we were kids, before the war... And look at them now..." The smile revealed dark gums, rare teeth brown from smoke and age, metal frames, like the swimming pool ladders, rusting away in empty corners. "And he's a real boy already, look at his hair, right, like his father's. He doesn't take after his grandparents." He flicked his lighter twice, ran his hand across his skull, and agitated the spots that were ready to escape somewhere and now gathered and spread into a single blotch, like Gorbachev's. She thought all of it was so sad, but it could have been worse.

"Take it easy, look after yourself," she said. "Everything's going to be all right. We're late for lunch." The old man waved, winking at the boy who was clutching his ball. *A pig*, she thought, the runaway chess moves peered from the bushes, half-hidden by naked branches. Someone pressed the horn and the sound, first loud and long, then short, broken, bouncing off the grey facades, drew an invisible sound railing.

She pulled his hand and the veins on her wrist showed gently: for a second, the tone that had just been played seemed higher on them. "Say goodbye to Uncle Mladen," she said, the fireflies churned once again, and he waved. As they walked towards their block, they left behind their backs the clouds of smoke carried by the wind and the cough and the lurching of some internal combustion engine. A black cat jumped out of a black bin and the pigeons flew up immediately. She could sense the elevators plummeting towards the ground, she could hear the cosmic buzz of the intercom, the letters on the kiosk giving out a reddish, eerie shine, but it was too bright for her to notice.

“Barba Mladen’s very ill. See, he’s lost all of his hair, it’s hard for him to walk,” she said slowly while the fireflies were going wild. “Don’t bother him too much. He’s very ill,” she said, and the thought *pig* echoed through her mind once again. The boy lowered his eyes for a second and stared at the squares on the ball, black and white, wondering if one could keep the carved chess pieces on it, just like people stand on the ground.

“Is he going to die?” she read the question from his slow, safe fingers. The fleawort forced puss to the surface, between stone slabs and pieces of brown and green glass, the wind in his curls, in her hair, just like in the bushes.

“At least once,” she said, more to herself, and the fireflies kept quiet somewhere in the pocket of her jacket. “At least once,” she repeated and allowed the wind to scatter her words. The rook on G-4, the pawn attacks the queen. The sunrays pounded her forehead, it swallowed, like a trap, every available image; to him it seemed as if, all of it was just so strange, the rays came out of that ball, out of that man’s bald head, they came out, flashed for a second, and then went who knew where.

## **The Pizzaiolo Who Carried Death in his Mouth**

### *Four Descriptions of a Room*

You're my man, Gary, that's just the way it is. I'm with you at your most intimate moments, when you're clipping your toenails, when you're fucking Đurđa, and I know almost nothing about you. It's winter, the year has just begun, Ottawa is all snowed in, it's no Čitluk. Plows clear snowdrifts, their horns blaring, salt squeaks under someone's heavy boots. All of it is of little concern to me. Immobile, pinned down against a single spot like that dried up, hollow stag beetle in the amateur entomology collection you had once brought from somewhere, and that, right around Christmas, your three-year-old son smashed with a tennis racket, that's the way I am. Confined to this space, I never leave these 180 to 200 square feet of my bedroom. How do I know all these little things? I counted the birthday candles, among other things, that's how. And I've been here for a long time.

Of course, I can say a few words about the room. After all, to brag a little, that's sort of a hobby of mine: finding as many different ways to accurately describe this room, to present it to the strangers who can't see it. Let's put it like this: I collect descriptions of this room. Let's begin with a common thing. White-washed walls, here and there speckled with tiny drops of dried-up blood under light winds, if you've ever swatted an animal. On the southern wall, there's a crucifix; Our Lord suffering, with the crown of thorns and all those rusty nails, it hurts to look at him. Under the cross, there's a coat of arms. It resembles a chessboard; a white square, a red square, a white square, a red square, white, red, white, red, red, white, on and on forever, until your head begins to spin, or someone waves it and marks a start, so the races begin. There's nothing else on this wall.

At the foot of the eastern wall is a double bed made of Norval maple covered by a wool coverlet. I personally knitted the coverlet during one whole hockey season, and the tips of my fingers bled fourteen times as I did it. You counted this as the blood spilled for homeland: the strawflower on the pattern got red flowers, and the cloud of tiny, cloudlike birds got red eyes. The wall carries two framed photographs of people I believe to be your father and mother. The one with the girl with the icy gaze frantically clutching a bouquet of flowers—their color added after the picture was taken—as if she's afraid she'll drop it has uncanny likeness to you; as if you're the one clutching the little roses. Under the photography, making a kind of a triangle with them (the regularity is imaginary), hangs a red-white-and-blue flag of FC Adriatic.

The northern wall is occupied by a large double window through which, during warm days, all kinds of sounds I dedicatedly follow sneak into the room. The whole west, however, is blocked by a massive wardrobe made out of full wood, the wood whose surface is still somewhat rough, wild, which only increases the erotic impression it gives. Next to the wardrobe there is a desk crammed with typed pages and newspapers in different languages and formats, and by it is a chair, neatly tucked in under it. Above the desk is a calendar with that little movable box in which the past year, 1989, is slowly rotting away. Currently there's no desk lamp, and it would be best to cover that horrible thing at the ceiling with a kitchen towel, like a parrot, and not only at night.

In the middle of the room, on a square carpet, you stand. Tall and dry, somewhat resembling that stag beetle, in a white shirt, a tie, barely noticeable specks of dandruff on your shoulders; the top of your head is still covered with thick albeit almost completely gray hair. In front of you is an open suitcase; you're packing, Gary, you're going somewhere, everything is uncertain.

It's Friday afternoon, that disgusting snow outside. White silhouettes of the moon hang over Greyrock Crescent. I see its pale halo through the window, and I look at it for as long as I can; gray, dull clouds, I know, are going to steal it from the twilight any second now. The rest of the view is obscured by needle-like, dark green branches, heavy and bent under the white powder: it's either snow, or one of your buddies emptied the fire extinguisher; unlike in that poem, there are no swans here. Sometimes, skinny black birds do land on the branches, the birds that peck gold teeth out of the dead people's mouth, and steal soap and beer caps from the living. Their call is nasty and luckily sporadic. Nights come early here, but chainsaws nevertheless whirr and spit out tiny clouds of smoke, the smoke that is then swallowed by the larger and heavier smoke of trunks split in half, and then that smoke disappears in the night that is already thick, the night that, it seems, is just a smoke of a forest fire someone started on purpose a long time ago.

But enough about me, Gary. You're a pig. I don't like your manners, I don't like the way you gesticulate when you speak, when you holler and bellow while others listen: drops of spit and white foam flying to all sides. "My dear," which is what I sometimes whisper into your ear, but only after I've been watching *Dallas* for far too long and because I don't actually know you hear, is the result of my melodramatic nature, and the fact that sometimes I too feel a bit like a pig. Your pig made you famous, how many times have I heard that story? Newspaper clippings with your pictures, you and the pigs with the dreary city in the background, slightly yellowed or completely bright, depending on the paper quality, covered the desk for a while. They lay there until your son spilled a large cup of coffee over them, soaked them in brown fluid and got slapped. I can't remember what was written about that pig that it was so important.

The room, by the way, can also be observed from above. As if the owner of the eyes lies under a layer of impenetrable dirt, three to six feet thick, or is a snake, or a root. In that case, the whole room is a square white ceiling, a rectangle whose order is disturbed by the tiny outlines of the bed's legs, of the table and the chairs, and their giant shadows. Similar to the smudge on the lungs of a heavy smoker, as heavy as crates of weapons, Gary, as heavy as the lipstick on the lips of a singer that goes by the male name of Harry, they carry a premonition. The wardrobe's black rectangle is the darkest blindfold on the face of the white square; maybe the one used for execution by a firing squad. From here the cross, the coat of arms and the flag, similar to a cooked tongue, look like tiny cuts, insignificant groves in sharp paper sides. The extravagant position is now occupied by a ceiling light fixture, but it gives me trauma. Only once have I, however, come near to that perspective valuable from a collector's point: on the day I lost my consciousness, fell and briefly rolled along the hairy Italian carpet, which smelled of sadness.

It's Friday afternoon, the biting winter day that's slowly fading. Even the sound of boots that crush the coarse salt with the grid of their soles is becoming scarcer, more unreal. You cram your suitcase with your underwear, socks, whole piles of paper, four identical white shirts. Then you add a load of something I don't recognize, several photos, packages carefully wrapped with brown tape. You light one cigarette after another, that's not good, Gary. The smoke envelops the room, like blankets envelop small dogs, the Pugs, Poodles and Pekingese, it floats, barely moving. Its smell pushes out all other smells; and the wardrobe's wood loses some of its fine eroticism. I see the dials of the alarm clock digging into the swollen stomach of the six, a bunch of keys on a keychain, Snickers chocolate bar; the savior's face that writhes in an ugly grimace. In that white cloud, still, it looks somehow soft, distant and completely surreal, which suits him nicely.

The room could also be imagined as a fish tank. The air that fills it from top to bottom is somewhat more material, thicker and thinner at the same time; as if everything, people and phenomena and objects, is immersed in soda. Like the remnants of some recent, horribly fatal shipwreck, swollen pieces of furniture, Christ our lord on his surfboard, and typed papers float through the space, and in place of fish you swim in it; two big and several small fish. I myself, when this is the case, most often watch Jesus, the cramp on his face that not even the joy of bubbles that rise into the sky on their own can chase away. I watch because I'm getting ready for the pain, which, I believe, is imminent. If, by some chance, the lights switch on, the night in the water seems starry, and the fishermen fully at work. One of the fishes floating about the room is larger and more voracious than others, and the question is how this parable is going to end. That larger fish is, of course, you.

But, tell me, Gary, fish, what exactly are croatovores, I've always wanted to know. Whisper it to me. You mention them so often I'm sometimes afraid to look across my shoulder, it seems they're coming from everywhere, jumping out of the wall closets and fruit yogurt, out of teabags. I imagine them like the langoliers from that film. More like a soft noise and shudder than something that could grab you by the neck, something that, in any case, devours the past; like the langoliers, uh-huh, but scarier. And outside the snow, the fear that has swept over Ottawa, there's not a trace of light above Greyrock Crescent. The clouds of smoke above the top of your head, Gary, above them mortar, and then the sky. From time to time, you shake your head nervously, your skinny body casts chilling, elongated shadows against the walls, it seems, there's more of you than just one, at least a few. You're going away, Garry, going on a long journey, and everything is uncertain—who are they, Gary, tell me; why don't you say? The dandruff flakes from your shoulders noiselessly catch up with the ground, as if the snow has moved inside, and for a moment it seems sadness has taken a grip over me. But it's more likely it's just Dallas—either that, or the swans after all.

The room, in the fewest words possible, can be described as a pigsty.

In the light of Miss Horrible Chandeliers 1990, in the light that will once, by grace, finally go out, in the puddle of smoke, like at a disco club in Trebinje, you're almost done packing; the scene is somewhat exhausted. Nothing can be heard from outside anymore. The shirts have, quietly, landed one on top of another. The boots have vanished, their owners squat in warm rooms or flip TV channels, only the darkness sprinkled with white can be made out through the window, headlights flash here or there. All other scents have retreated before the yellow nicotine wall. You're going away, I'm staying here, alone, I'm here where I am. I, a wardrobe quince. The smell of home, the spirit of homeland.

## The Letter

I sat down to write. Up to my throat in rust, like handles on the windows, chicken wire on them, to write a letter, a real, paper letter, a one-way ticket to the last space, the letter in which I was ready to explain something, say everything that could be said: the letter to my brother. For that occasion, I dug out an old typewriter from the storeroom's darkness, an Olivetti with its gnawed, naked ribs that glisten in the sun, similar to a bird rotting away in a trap and picking the sky with its beak, with its crushed bones. The Olivetti accordion that makes the sound of a blunt huff thunder; the one I sat down at in my housecoat the color of walls sprinkled with red poppy flowers, in my house slippers, surrounded by the walls, framed; as empty as the blank page in front of me trapped by its black platen.

It doesn't matter what I've told you and if I've told you anything at all. That's the first time it happened; when I brought my fingers down on the smooth scales of that animal; when that thunder finally began to flow. I'd kept all this somewhere deep in my stomach, deep in my hollow bones for far too long. All those thoughts, like birds against windowpanes, had been smashing against the walls of my skull and then, stunned, fell down at my feet, into my throat. It's so hard, István, my brother, to speak when there's a wet bird in your throat! The words get stuck against the gummed feathers, leaving letters in it, losing their edges. This is why, my brother, I never talked. This is why I decided to write.

On the wall behind my back, there's a clock. A pendulum hung from the clock, peaceful and dead, like a tongue. The northern part of the room, its center, its barren walls reflect in its concave heart. Then, in the second plane, the window through which the spring, ejected from the room and separated by bars, can be made out, but to notice all this, one needs to train his eyes, every carefully, very intensively, at the pendulum. Such observer will surely notice that, in the outside world, the cherries have blossomed a long time ago; their petals already shedding and covering the green ground. On the other side of the cherries, with that rusty fence, this world also comes to an end. A more superficial observer will unavoidably pick out me in the heart of the pendulum. Sitting at my desk, over a single empty page, in my housecoat and slippers, trying, for some time now, to write a letter to my brother.

This is exactly when it first happened; I had just put my fingers down on those keys. This is, more or less, how that thing came to me, the thing that, since that moment, like a sniffer pig, keeps following me and digging me out from the ground with its snout, making my life in the presence of letters more and more unbearable. On the page in front of me, on the other side of a thick prescription glass, it said:

My deAr

brother

I accidentally looked up from the keys and, more disappointed than taken aback, I paused. How could I even go on, István, my brother? And where to across those heaps, their sharp blades, two-sided roofs down which, like in our village, muddy rain could flow for hours on end? I still wonder where that giant letter, completely redundant for me, came from? I'd like to say it is *too big*, but that's beyond my power. What's too big for me, for someone else, you will agree, is completely normal. Its inappropriate size was likely just a reflection of my own nonconformity with the world, its graphic representation. But I paused just for a second; I didn't allow myself to be seduced by something I first considered just a well-conceived trick, a conspiracy devised by some demonic force, the Party, or the result of my somewhat disturbed perception at the time. By the by, I'm still waiting for that rain.

In any case, I slowly typed on. A black and reliable trail in the whiteness nevertheless went against me. On that same paper it said:

my obligAtion And desire, my deAr brother, is to

Here, understandably, I had to stop again. I pulled out the paper from the platen, tore it up into several pieces, then crushed the pieces into a paper ball, and used it to start a fire. As I watched the flames swallow that demonic alphabet, I tried, in every way possible, to figure out why the giant letter had attacked me and who stood behind it, but I couldn't move away from the initial fascination with its size and the short, already mentioned digression on the nature of my perception, which I, by the way, expanded. When the paper burned out, and with it some other papers and a good pile of wood, I walked out of the room banging the door shut as I left. As you know, I didn't go back to that letter for a long time.

The second time it happened it was just as unexpected, but it seemed, perhaps because of the circumstances, much more natural and, for me, much less fateful. A man gets used to all kinds of things,

István, my brother. That day I gave up on my customary seclusion because I was unexpectedly pressed by the feeling I had completely forgotten about. Somewhere from deep within me, from that dark space behind my ribs, I felt the clear pangs of hunger. I had already learned there's no need to argue with this feeling so I, despite the surprise, hung the robe the color of the walls on a hook, let the poppy flowers scatter throughout the room, pulled on my mac and rubber boots, and I set sail into the outside space. What I saw there doesn't need to be mentioned, so I'm going to skip it here. In this brief account of death, I believe, only essential things matter.

I walked into a grocery store guided by a simple and clear intention. Since time immemorial, the path to the abyss is paved by such intentions. I walked along what seemed to be miles and miles of shelves in search of a section containing canned beef, which, you'll remember, I have utmost respect for, and eventually I managed to track it down.

It happened when, checking its weight, I took the first can into my hand. From a blue-edged red label a canned cow stared at me with its giant brown eyes. But it wasn't the cow's dull and watery gaze that made me unexpectedly drop the can. My surprise didn't come out of all those things within the can, but from the very cold, ribbed object; its surface.

#### Canned Beef is A trAditionAl

it said on the tin, which, by that moment, was already rolling along the dirt floor of the hangar. I kicked the can as far as I could without bending down to check once again and, without looking back, I ran out of the store. Hunger, however, just like that damned letter, was pressed into me so, as I ran, I grabbed a clot of brown bananas, which I then, the moment I regained my breath, began shoving into my mouth with both of my hands. They, one after another, disappeared in that cavern where, when it feels like it, my hunger resides.

That, my brother, is exactly what happened. Since then, you of all people understand what I mean, I lived in a constant and undisguised fear of the letter. I kept running into it everywhere I went, even when near me there was no writing. You can assume what my everyday life looked like, even though one day wasn't particularly different from another, and how special I had to feel at the same time! This assault was extremely personal; directed only against me. And even if it got between us for some time, got entangled,

by separating us, into our lives, it didn't do anything that shouldn't have been done. That letter, which started everything and with which everything must end, will happen sooner or later, just as a new day always happens somehow. Who will take credit or blame for it, I, I have to admit, do not know.

For now, that strange and dangerous letter last appeared at the most unexpected place; it, like a bird or flu virus, came from the air. Can you imagine how far away I kept from a written text back in those days! I covered the shelves with the books, in order to forever silence their spines, with a wax military canvas. I cancelled prescription to all daily papers, and, without thinking twice, I burned all stationery. At those rare moment when I left the house, I would walk, my eyes sheltered by dark glasses, looking straight in front of me: never once lifting my eyes towards the glowing billboards, never once lowering them towards their reflection in muddy puddles, towards the colorful waste of letters.

Besides the hunger that sometimes frequents me, István, my brother, I have other hungers too. One of them is the cause of my third misery; the one that postponed my letter, perhaps forever. I'm talking about the hunger for women, for that flesh of theirs. I felt that hunger on one of those days, the same as all others and not at all special, and left the house with a clear goal in my mind. I headed, still looking into the ground, across the hardened, unplowed piece of land, towards the house of the one who fed me. The soil was toughened by the ice. I heard as my soles crumbled the dirt into a mush of irregular crystals, I saw its dark torso separated from its veins; the long and narrow groves that were frozen solid too. Besides this I actually heard nothing. The wind was blowing, true, but in some unusual, quiet way. There was nothing in sight to bend besides myself, and I was nevertheless too heavy. I pulled my hat down to my eyes, lifted my collar, and walked on. I didn't care if anyone saw me, but, as far as I can say, no one did. For a while at least, so I thought, I was safe from the damned letter: my eyes following the dirt, avoiding the dark outline of the sugar refinery on the horizon, I was careful not to allow any written text to get into my field of vision. Here or there my shoe would get stuck against what was left of the roots, against the roughly hewn planks soaked in oil, which had gone from here a long time ago, or against a can. I would pick up the can out of habit to check if, by chance, there was some beef left in it. And when there was none to be found, and there never was, it made me happy if warm and large cow eyes gazed at me from the metal object. Unfortunately, as I felt its insides with my fingers, I wasn't allowed to open my eyes. So, in the end, I wasn't able to tell if great happiness befell me or if it, on the contrary, avoided me.

I was near the first row of houses, the row to which belonged the one on whose door I was to knock and then enter. Then something startled me. From the air, very much like the sound of a storm, or a swarm

of locusts coming down from the sky and onto the crops, an unknown, disturbing sound came down on me. The sound grew louder, the fast shivering of the air was almost visible, the birds could no longer fly straight, when I decided to look up. I saw a giant, metal bug hanging from the sky, a gray metal cylinder with a propeller on its forehead: the sound was made by this surreal spinning. I crouched down and pulled my hat lower over my eyes.

The low-flying gray Sukhoi, that insect, suddenly opened its womb and something spilled out of it without making a sound. A rain of white paper poured down on the frozen field, as if the plain was covered by some gigantic, overly regular snow. Something was sticking out of the beaten, crushed ice, it could have just as easily been a thorn, a hand, a sliver. The pieces of paper kept falling with a barely noticeable hum. Knowing well I shouldn't do this, I reached after one of the pieces; by then, leaving me no choice, the paper was pouring over the back of my head, my shoulders, my back. I didn't try to make out what was written on those papers. However, the moment I glanced at one of them, more of those same giant letters came after me: almost every word screamed its A noiselessly, and then again, from one row to another, A, A, A, and I no longer knew what to do with myself. I began, at first silently, then louder and louder, to scream.

The noise of the plane slowly waned, and over the plain, similar to a water circle or the amplitude of a strong earthquake, my voice, clearly separated from my body, spread. What the voice said remains unknown, but, as you know, I still haven't written that letter. So much has remained unspoken. For a long time, my name has remained unspoken too: the forest, Andrija, hunter; Bar Kohba.

## The Voice

I am the voice. Everyone who is just their voice, its hollow echo within the walls of the skull, either is a god or an apparition. It's hard to say which am I.

My name is not Andrija, just as yours is not István, just as this is one of the few things I still remember. My name is Bar Kohba, the son of the star; lately that's how I still manage to find myself. The star is located at the highest point of the sugar factory on the horizon, it is red, it is the bright point on the horizon. Between us lies the frozen wasteland over which, seldom, those dumb black birds fly. Most often there's nothing above it. Under it are, everywhere, the dead, but it's hard to say who the bodies belong to. The star is often the only thing I manage to see, it is my guiding light, the dense point of my voice. Despite this, I seldom talk to it. I think there's something not quite right with the man who talks to the star, so I talk to you, even though I haven't seen you in a long time. As you know, I can't write to you. It's so strange not to write anything for so many years, to be haunted by the letters, from the thing for which and off of which you lived for a good part of your life. I burned my books a long time ago. The smoke of their merry burning shielded my star for a couple of minutes too. Then the paper disappeared, and the star remained to keep watch over the horizon. Beneath it, one after another, greasy freight cars enter the black mouth of the processing plant, which expels white and sweet dust through its nose. With freight cars, people enter the mouth, those people live on the other side of the unplowed icy wasteland, but none of them approach me. That's why I approach them from time to time. Mostly when one of my hungers wakes up.

I am the voice, all I do is speak. This means I can say anything, but at the same time it is necessary to keep a watchful eye on what I say. My voice is too weak to wake up the dead. Besides, no one can wake them; even the pigs that rut through the barren wasteland are too weak to get them. Those pigs feed on rotten walnuts, acorns, rubber and old shoes, and I hunt them. I set traps of rusty iron in which I put stinky meat that makes sows greedy, and then they stay at that spot, their leg caught in the craggy yet strong teeth of the trap. I prey on them, because meat most often remains within their reach, so it needs to be snatched out. Then I wrap the meat in wax paper and take it to the one who feeds me. Hunger for hunger, I tell her. Welcome, she says, even though I know the only truth in all this is that I came. I came in my boots. My hat pulled low over my eyes, a rifle on my shoulder for which I have long run out of bullets, but no one in the village knows it. If they'd known, they would've long ravaged my traps.

Once a man got caught in the trap. I found him, István, my brother, wrapping the fracture with a dirty shirt; his yellow, cracked bone was sticking out the wound. He'd eaten the meat, all rotten and stinky, so

I had to kick him across the cheek with the butt of my rifle made of walnut wood. Here they make all kinds of useful things out of walnut: rifle butts, brandy, bait for feral pigs. Don't, the main said, I said nothing. I searched his pockets and found a hunting knife. I could make out my reflection in the rusty blade. Hairs from my face, all glued together, fell over my lips; that's why, among other things, my voice wasn't what it used to be. This land is also not what it used to be. Until recently, I was an exile in it, an island from the edge of the icy wasteland, and the land happened on all sides. Then the land came to me. Silos and long hangars are empty, the food is paid for in gold, and oil in someone's blood. That's why that man ended up in my trap.

I didn't leave him there. I butted him once again with my rifle and separated the jaws of the iron beast. I could've had a pig in the trap instead of a thief; and my bait had already been deep inside of his gut. But that's not why I smashed his head. I went back to my house and poured the coals out of my wheelbarrow. The largest snake I've ever seen crawled out of the peat, and I caught it with the iron heel of my boot. Then I took the empty wheelbarrow and headed back to the wasteland. My star showed me the way as clearly as ever. That's why I'm, I thought, its son and not someone else; that's why I'm the one it speaks to every day. The whole time I mumbled under my breath: pig, pig, pig, and then an owl flew over me and, starving, landed on an overturned tree trunk. Never speak evil of the owls, they carry the souls away, some say, but I don't think it is so. I don't believe in souls, so I cursed the owl, then butted it with my rifle, even if this meant someone's soul would fall out of its beak. I left it there, on the ground, because I don't eat things that come from the sky. I picked up the wheelbarrow again and went back to that man, who, meanwhile, regained consciousness and crawled a dozen or so yards away. I butted him once again with my rifle, and then, with great effort, loaded him on the wheelbarrow. That's the way it had to be: the star was my guide, the meat in his gut was my meat, and the pig that was now far away would've been my pig. Hunger for hunger, people from this region lately say; my hunger for someone else's hunger.

I first took him to my house. I put the wheelbarrow next to the kitchen table and then, from the carefully locked drawer, pulled out a piece of paper and a blue pen. He looked at me just as pigs sometimes look at me, before I hit that empty space between their eyes with a dull mallet. István, my dear brother, I could give a flying fuck about the way he looked at me. I am the voice and I told him write, and nothing else. As a sign of good will, I hung the rifle on a pin on the wall, outside his field of vision. It's hard to say what he saw, but I'm allowed to assume.

He saw a giant antique clock that was no longer ticking; if someone were to judge by that clock, time stopped long ago. He could see, to his right, a wooden wall layered with tanned pig skins, that's from most of the pigs I had lately killed. To his right he saw a small table and on it a radio whose red lamp I

once clubbed with my meat mallet. At night, it seduced me, sometimes presenting itself as my only star, even though I knew perfectly well that it wasn't a star nor could ever be one. The radio was on. The dark hum of the host mixed with the white noise of the background and the two of them together, like the soldering paste, flowed through the room, bouncing off the walls and stopping deep inside of my ears. There the hum ended up packed in the thick lining of grease and, if the noise lasted long enough, made its temperature rise, the grease melting, sizzling.

For a long time, he then stared at that paper, hesitating. The whole time I gazed at his naked skull, covered in scabs, with a greasy strand of hair here or there. If I wanted him to do my dirty business, to do something I was no longer allowed and couldn't do and write a letter to you, István, my brother, I had to use force. When he dropped the pen, instinctively, without actually wanting it, I butted him between the eyes with my rifle.

After the third crock of water, which, fixing my eyes on the reflection of the star in the bucket, I had drawn out of the well's shaft, he lifted his head. Jerking suddenly, he almost fell out of the wheelbarrow, and then, realizing where he was, he calmed down and bluntly stared right in front of him. Once again, this time using the tip of the barrel of my rifle, I pushed the pen towards his hand. He picked it up, as if picking up a knife, ready to slaughter, lifted himself up, and, as calmly as he could, on the paper he drew a shivery dark blue cross. The obvious fact, which the cross more than clearly indicated to, provoked an unexpected surge of rage in me. Looking straight into the eyes of one of the pigs whose scruffs support my walls, I hit him several more times, completely randomly, with the nicely carved butt made of walnut wood.

The star shimmered on the horizon as if waiting for something, as if something sudden and unexpected was about to happen under its watchful eye. Pushing the wheelbarrow with my catch across the icy wasteland, I wondered what they produced there now and if sugar could still be found somewhere. I also wondered where the fuel came from for all those trains that made the ground shake, who watered them and with what, and where all of them went in the end. I had no answer to any of the questions. I pushed the wheelbarrow in silence. From time to time, a whine echoed out of it, but the scraping of the wheel along the frozen soil, along the ice as thick as someone's arm crushing under my boot, silenced it out. I pushed the wheelbarrow, István, my brother, I pushed it, even though I've got nothing in the world save my star and you. I'm not allowed to go to my star, just as I'm not allowed to go to you. Perhaps it would be good to ask what has become of the world today, what it has of us and what we have of the world. Is such a world worth anything, and to whom?

So, I pushed on, not knowing any better, towards the edge of the world, towards the house of the one who feeds me. Along the way, I checked one of my traps. There was nothing in it; neither a pig, nor bait, nor a person. The pigs today, it seems to me, are smarter than people, so I believe the sow tricked me. The tracks said this, the like of which no man would leave behind. Even though my man, the one I pushed in the wheelbarrow, left a completely unexpected trail. Beneath him, only a narrow groove of the wheel cut into the ice and anyone who didn't see him would never assume a man had passed through here. The only thing that truly travels without any evidence is my voice; that god or that apparition within me.

Because the day was very cold, because of that advanced state of the soil in which the earth seems to send a message from within telling us that this time it is truly finished, it took me an unusually long time to get to the house of the one who feeds me. Of course, my load didn't help me at all. Despite all this, now I stood at her barren walls, sometimes light blue in color, now gray and cracked. From the inside, if I pressed my ear against the boards of the door or against the window covered by the curtains, I could hear the monotonous voice of that radio host that I had, a bit earlier, back at my house, mercilessly silenced. It was nevertheless impossible to make out what the voice was saying. On the other hand, on this side of the wooden surface, there was almost no sound; only my prey occasionally marked its presence with its recognizable whine. I turned around and scanned the plain. I couldn't see the star, because the steep roof of the house behind my back prevented me. I knew the problem was only a matter of perspective, I knew my star was still there, visible as always. All I had to do was to make a few steps towards the icy sea of soil, turn around, look up and search for it somewhere to the right from the chimney; and then find it as it, red, floats in the thin strand of smoke. That's exactly what I did. I stepped away, turned around, watched.

Then I told my star.

## Pressures, Steps

Derek was my name and I stepped on snails. Precisely that. Stepped. On snails. I'd pause for a moment, throw a brief, experienced glance at the animal, position my heel a couple of inches from the victim, then direct the edge of my sole, the mixture of rubber and screws, yellow wire, cubes and crosses, in the direction of the sky under the thirty degree angle, wait for a second, and then slowly, with pleasure, lower my leg. For a while then, satisfied, I would crush the remains with my shoe, as if dedicatedly, thoroughly extinguishing the just discarded cigarette butt. The sound that came from below; the sound of crushing limestone against the damp asphalt, I loved it more than some other much more popular sounds. It didn't excite me. At least not sexually. I simply loved it. I didn't care about the ritual, not necessarily. Sometimes I'd simply walk over them: without looking back. When I was in a hurry to get to the unemployment office in the morning and it had rained the night before, the sky had descended on the body. When there were too many of them. On such occasions, as if playing some dumb hopscotch, I'd zigzag around, barely noticeably, trying to step on as many of them as I could, all of them empty and almost washed out from the slime and the gale; trying to collect the worthless, crunchy points. I generally avoided slugs.

I lived in a prefabricated house in a line of prefabricated houses on a hill. Four days from today I would've turned forty-four. My house number was four and that was more or less all that distinguished it from other houses; no other house had a plate with number four on it. At least not lonely, completely separated from all other numbers, white on blue. If the number can even exist outside of its sequence. Separated from other numbers. I hadn't had a job for eight years, and the half of that number presented the number of black fillings in my teeth; it wasn't bad. From time to time, I worked at a construction site, carried support beams and kept an eye that the concrete didn't slip out of its mold when being poured, but most of the time I didn't do anything. The hill was in the shade. Moist. The steps—that descended towards the city from all sides, towards everything that people carried hidden in their coats and under their arms—were vaulted by the forest. Snails where everywhere, even without the rain. I developed an unusual sense of belonging with the hill, some irresistible closeness, like Holyfield with the snake, toothless pig, or the Doberman with its ears cropped. I loved that hill.

I used the element of surprise and got up the moment the alarm went off. That is, the moment I heard it. I wasn't allowed to be late. I needed the money from the unemployment office, without it I didn't have enough. I hadn't managed to squeeze anything, from the war, and I mostly hated those who had, that's why I got up; it was part necessity, part spite, part righteous anger. The muted TV rammed images into

my head. On the other side of the wooden, thin walls began something I would, had anyone asked me, say it was just another day, as empty and as deaf as a cartridge case, there was nothing in it worth remembering or trying to forget. However, no one asked me anything. Summer had just begun to leave the shell of the hill into which fall was supposed to creep in, a giant hermit crab; the hill's color led to that conclusion. Most of it was still green. Here or there the green gave way to other colors, for example, red and something similar to rusty rot. This still couldn't be seen in the city. That's why, among other things, I loved the hill; everything got there early. Or it was actually running late. I didn't shave. Not every day. Especially not today. In theory, I had enough time, but, I thought, it didn't leave a good impression among the female employees at the unemployment office, that excessive neatness—that's what I thought, but not exactly, definitely not so literally. Then the fog swallowed the thought, the robin swallowed the fog, the cat swallowed the robin, and then the thought disappeared without a trace.

"Morning," I greeted the old man from the house next door who, leaning against something that looked like a branch to catch birds—people cover it with glue, stick it into the ground and then it leave there—stood on his porch, looking somewhere into the distance. The old man was at least twenty years older than me and he also lived alone. Sometimes we drank beer and brandy at the bar at the foot of the steps, right next to the tram station. The name was The Black Son, the bar's name, even though I'd never seen a black person in it and, I thought, such person wouldn't have a good time there.

"You do what you have to do," the old man said and unfolded the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt, the red and white checkers wiping away the dirty gray siren and the ace of hearts from his forearm covered in blue, branched out veins. "You do what you have to do."

I didn't exactly understand what he meant, but I had no time to think about it. Instead, I went down the steps towards the tram station, waiting for the trails of long-gone jets to fall over me. The sun was still low, but the shade pleased me. Swarms of tiny flies that filled my mouth and eyes in the summer were fewer now, and that pleased me too. I didn't meet anyone on the steps. Not even the kids from the neighborhood who drank beer non-stop, and I wondered where they went when they weren't here.

I arrived at the station before the tram. Or after the tram. I wasn't exactly sure, but the tram wasn't there. As I waited, I studied the window of the sporting goods store. A smooth and heavy hammer, used for hammer throwing, caught my eye just as the traffic light turned red and pressed a pause in the recording of the dense morning traffic. In the window, besides the hammer, which I could clearly see, I made out the reflection of myself. Dark Wranglers. Stomach, not too big, it could be sucked in if needed. Denim

shirt, tucked in. Jacket of the same fabric, light blue, its pockets worn, right there where the nervous, wild horse was rearing up.

I didn't hear the tram that had just arrived. Its large movable reflection slid into the scene, like a commercial on the TV, and for a moment it merged with my silhouette, had it not, I probably wouldn't have even noticed it. I took an empty seat, because it was empty. Had it not been, I would've simply stood, I thought. Across the way sat some guy with sunglasses and a hat drawn low over his eyes. The sun wasn't that strong, I thought. All of it was over the top. Perhaps someone caught him good, I thought. When twenty or so minutes later I heard Derek and then again Derek from the waiting room's PA system or from the sky, when I got up from the red plastic chair and headed towards the door number four, I wasn't thinking about anything.

Without stop, as persistent as death, dull drizzle. The water that drags old moisture out of the throat of the earth, drenching more than wetting it, it makes the head heavy and the body doughy and soft, like a sausage. As I descended down to The Black Son, I stepped on every snail I saw. I had time. At the moment, I also had money. And this wasn't me, treating the animals like that, never, that's what I thought. I held concrete hostility only against the Rottweiler that belonged to the gas installer from the house across from mine. It just slobbered, snarled always the same screwed up *Derek, Derek*. I had a solution for him. In the back yard, some coral or damned fireworks, there was a giant wild chestnut. I collected the fallen chestnuts into a cardboard box I kept in the hallway, right next to the umbrellas and shoes. I had a slingshot too. And I bombarded the Rottweiler with the green spiked mace heads whenever it let out that *Derek, Derek* of his. The dog didn't like it one bit, but that's what I wanted—I didn't want him to like me at all. I seldom saw the installer and that woman of his. Mostly at night, in pale light, always somehow dim and out of focus. Like a worn-out porn flick tape.

The old man wasn't at The Black Son. Actually, there was no one I knew at The Black Son except for the barman with his transparent, watery eyes. The kids who were playing pinball, slamming the machine every so often, I knew from passing. When they weren't here, they were drinking beer at the benches. Fucking Nazis. Football fans. Whatever, I thought. They act tough, but they have no clue about anything. The dangerous types, shouting out every so often, slammed against the machine with the image of a woman wearing high heels, tiny leopard's fur wrapping her body. It must've been a baby leopard, I thought.

“A double,” I said. The barman pushed a beer and a shot of brandy towards me. “Get one for yourself,” I said. The barman poured himself a beer, the fish tank that were his eyes took on a gentle pale-yellow shade. That’s when, just for a second, I saw the devil taking a piss in the shallow bowl of his skull. I didn’t feel like talking, but I didn’t like to drink alone. Silence and drinks do not go together, I thought, the head hears too much then, every thought echoes too loud in it, bouncing off like a pinball against its sides and creating a deafening, disjointed sound, like when you drag the tip of the knife against the plate, a sound no one needs when drinking, that’s what I thought. The old man was usually here. He didn’t speak much, the old man didn’t, and that was fine. The pinballers were seriously getting on my nerves. On a couple of occasions, I stared in their direction for a long time. The barman just waved his hand; one image after another jumped around on the screen above the mirror and a single sound. I drank in short, silent gulps. Fucking fans. Idiots.

“Fucking Nazis,” I said. “They have no clue. They have no clue about anything.” A new beer landed on the square pad with the logo of the imported Guinness. This time the beer was of domestic brand.

“Kids,” the barman said, wiped the puddle that had created between him and the glass with his hand. “Kids. If they saw a drop of blood, they’d run away as fast as their leg can carry them. Back to their mommies.”

And I never, that, never too much. Even before the war, I was spending a lot of time at the same bar, at The Black Son, if you can claim something like that about a bar or anything at all. The barman was someone else. The old man was the same, except that back then he was much younger. Those kids hadn’t even been born yet, and I was slamming the half-naked woman in the leopard fur. I was good at it. I listened to Partibrejkers, Azra, Film. And Riblja Čorba, but later I never admitted it to anyone. Not even in the war did I ever too much, never too much, that. I never stood out, never in the first line. But I did kill. I killed a couple of them, I thought, but I left some room around the thought, so that something else could sneak into it. In short bursts, behind a cover, from afar; who was I to ask questions, who was I to disobey? But I shot one in the head. And the stomach. Several times in the stomach. From close by, a Chetnik; I Đerek who brought the night into the village and took it out of it. He was on his back under my boots, these boots, the best ones I’ve ever had, in a puddle of blood and squealed. Like the installer’s Rottweiler, I thought. But without *Đerek*, *Đerek*. Later I wondered where the dead went, did someone cover them, or the pigs scattered them, or the southern winds picked them up and then put down, one after another, at the mouths of cities and back doors of restaurants. Fucking Chetnik, he kept coming back to my eyes in the form of that American singer who, a couple of years later, because of an ulcer, blew that same Chetnik head of his with a shotgun.

The kids were becoming louder, my stares longer. I felt dull vibrations in the bar surface and the tall chair, every time the tram passed by outside. Its snakelike, elusive shape silently crawled in the glass of the window mixing with the already peeling letters, leaving behind just a discarded skin in the eye. It drizzled outside, still, and tiny, foul streams ran meandering down the glass. I stared at the kids at the pinball machine, at the barman, at the mute messages on the screen; at my shivery reflection, not always clear, that got lost in the play of the light outside. I wasn't sure how many beers I'd had, but I ordered another one. The barman was washing glasses, wiping them, stacking them neatly on a square dirty white surface. Right about when the tram, coming to a stop, rang the bell, and the glasses let out a clang. Vibrations, I thought. Just vibrations. I don't even know when I hurled the half-empty beer glass at those bald kids. Or it was half-full. I wasn't even sure if I hit one of them. I only remember the kids took off after some time.

I barely managed to climb up the steps, no longer paying attention to the snails. They were everywhere, but I was afraid I might run into those kids at the landing, I didn't want them to see me like this. But there was no one there. Neither the old man, the installer nor his dog. The only thing that existed for certain was that giant chestnut to the right of the chimney. A frozen explosion in my back yard, a black pictogram of a beast, and that means its signature.

The next morning, the alarm went off a whole hour earlier. It wasn't the alarm clock's will; I'd set it up. The day before, they had called from the unemployment office, they'd had an offer for me. So, I decided to shave, carefully, thoroughly, and that's why I'd set the alarm. This time I wanted to leave an impression, a good impression, by no means I wanted to appear shabby. I wasn't dead; that thought crushed me from the inside, like a series of good uppercuts, and it grew stronger and stronger as the hangover abandoned me, as the images went pale and pressed back into the night fog. They had called, and who was I to question anything? One phone call changes everything. Even though the payphones are disappearing, and I don't have a phone at home. No one has a phone anymore, I thought, even though they are all ringing all the time, and the city sprouts under its lights.

I shaved slowly, being careful not to cut myself. I wiped the drops of water from my eyelids and came face to face with my image. I put on some coffee, buttered two thick slices of bread, sprinkled it with paprika and ate it all. I rubbed the specks of paprika from the tips of my fingers into the sensitive skin of my face as I scratched myself and it was supposed to burn, but I had already gone completely numb.

The sun, despite the morning dew, chased away most of the snails and I didn't like it. The old man was not in sight. The installer's dog barked, from the yard next door, its *Đerek, Đerek* at me, but the slingshot was not at hand. I went down the steps, at the landing, I spat on an empty bench with its ribs cracked open. Fucking skinheads, I thought. I passed by the tram station without stopping; I went on foot towards that comfortable, actually quite comfortable chair across from the prettyish, actually quite pretty unemployment office assistant. It seemed she was smiling at me. Nicely. Intimately. More intimately than it was necessary, just as secretaries smile in porn movies before some gigantic, tattooed department head, wearing a leather muzzle, impales them with his rod, but I couldn't have been sure this actually happened. I mused over such things as I made my way through Petrova Street, through the city that unfolded under my feet like a carpet with some sickening pattern.

For five minutes I sat in a plastic, red chair in the waiting room. I was waiting, what else would I be doing in a waiting room, I thought. I was waiting for the well-known, metallic sound that came from the sky, from the speaker set up high, in any case closer to the sky than me, to say my name. It hadn't announced it yet, the voice hadn't, although eight had passed a long time ago. In this country only death comes on time, I thought. That's all right, I thought—who was I to defy anything and anyone? And right at that moment the voice made itself once again heard, this time addressing me. It sounded different that the Rottweiler, that *Đerek*, and *Đerek* again, but still similar, and there was no room for doubt. I flew out of my chair like I'd been glued on it against my will, and that voice brought me instant and unexpected freedom but—who was I?

I liked the job they offered me; it's nice when you like one thing and don't like another, it's nice how everything is organized, I thought. A gas installer. I thought: funny. That's exactly what the one from the house across the way does, the one from the worn-out tape. The surreal one. Does this change my relationship towards his dog, towards that apparition that growls and growls my name like a broken machine? Are we going to greet each other nicely from now on? Stop to talk about work, go have a brandy, or whatever it is installers drink, down at the Son? As I left, questions, such as similar, electrons in TV cathodes, swarmed through my head.

I walked in the Marinella Bar, I ordered a domestic beer and a brandy. I'd never been here before, I'd passed by often, but I'd never noticed it. Inside I saw no Marinella. I liked the pictures of boxing champions cut out of the newspapers then framed and put on the wall across, their reflections dancing in the long mirror. It was just past nine, the waiter at the bar was reading a weekly supplement dedicated to fishing and hunting. The deer season had just begun. Two men in blue overalls drank coffee and something short, leaning against the stall stretching the length of the window.

“That’s not the way,” one of them said immediately. “It’s just not. That’s not the way at all. It’s not my problem, whatever, but not like that. Those boys don’t have it, the soul.”

I said nothing. I finished my drink, left a smooth, almost new bill that had been folded only once at the bar, and left.

That day I repeated the same thing at ten or twelve different places. Meanwhile, I tore off a strip with a loan offer from a flyer at the tram station, crushed it and threw it away, and then I stopped at the kebab place at the corner to eat. I didn’t want to drink on an empty stomach. When I filled it, I could start over, as much as I wanted. In my way. Special way.

The shadows had melted into the surrounding darkness, and the sky had taken the color of overripe plums and nasty bruises by the time I once again arrived at home turf. When I walked in The Black Son, the old man had already been sitting at the bar smoking. The barman just nodded. The old man just nodded. The kids were not in sight, good, I thought. I’m not in the mood for them, not on a day like this, I thought. You don’t get a job like this every day. That much I knew. A double, I ordered, for myself and the old man. The barman poured himself a beer, turned down the volume on the machine in the corner, and sat down; slow, colorful fish swam in his eyes. Around them he.

“A job. This morning I got a job,” I said. The old man nodded. The barman brought his glass closer.

“It’s not every day you get a job,” the old man said. “Jobs don’t grow on trees. It’s not like it used to be, a job for everyone. Now it’s: make do on your own. Just like that. It didn’t use to be like that. But you still haven’t gotten it. A pig in a poke,” he said. I nodded, the barman pushed two more doubles from across the bar. It was still early, and the night was crawling out of the dull box and the flares were shining and the trams often stopped at the station, people went in and out of them, hordes of people, I thought. I could barely see the barman, the old man not at all. The siren from his forearm, its fangs bloody, bit off larger and larger pieces from the confused ace of hearts. The vibrations from the chair became unbearable, it was as if I was sitting on a drill bit, like in some rodeo, it occurred to me, although I’d never been at a rodeo, let alone sat on a drill bit; at least not like that.

I left another new, still fresh bill at the bar and staggered out into the artificial streetlight. The tram stopped at the station, I paused too. It seemed I saw someone I knew in it, a kid who’d been at Banija Front with me: he carried around a wrinkled, dry ear he claimed he’d bitten off a Chetnik’s head with his own teeth, he a madman, a vampire. Afterward I heard someone had given him the ear, wrapped in a picture of Illona Staller. I pounded on the window, but no one turned to look. I watched the blue

caterpillar for a while as it disappeared in the invisible darkness around the first corner, and then I slowly headed towards the steps. I had to hold on to the rail, that's how much I staggered, but with my eyes I searched for the snails. It took an enormous effort to separate from the railing, to aim at the animal with the back of my heel and slowly, very slowly, put my foot down on it. That sound lined the membrane of my eardrum, climbing from below like the darkness that this year again had been invited into this city and all of us were and are its particles, free anti-photons, spots of blindness; the darkness doughy and deaf, like a pipe opening, or a basement, or the bottom of a glass. Despite everything, I felt well. I'd gotten a job. It wasn't something that happened every day. Today I'd gotten it.

Something heavy first hit my kidneys. First the kidneys. Like a sting of some giant insect, it spread open the thick drapery in front of my eyes and made me fall to the ground. Then something even heavier, if that's even possible, landed at the back of my head. And then again and again. I was still holding on to the railing my left hand, while with the right I protected my face. I managed, somehow, after a while, to bring the other hand to it too. I felt something firm break my wrist joints, my finger knuckles, I felt it break through the chain mail of my skin and bones and stop at my teeth. It didn't stop. It went through like through a snowed-in tunnel, with slim resistance. The sound of it passing through reminded me of something, I couldn't remember what exactly. A dark veil danced in front of my eyes, it was as if some invisible hand had drawn new, thick and heavy drapes over everything. I listened; nothing could be heard. Breathing. Quick and heavy breathing. Mine. Theirs. Someone's. Bodies pounding on the body, a silent hum of a flood that slowly, very slowly meandered around my face.

"Let's go," someone said. "That's enough." "Fucking Chetnik motherfucker, kill him," someone else said. I could barely breathe.

I heard some low, deep wheezing. As if all around me, in some kind of a circle, there was a pack of large, wild animals, somewhat exhausted from the hunt. Then another heavy thing landed on my cheek. Like a butt of a rifle, I thought. Resembling some heavy metal stinger. I no longer saw anything; my name was fading until all that was left of it were flashes, echoes and smudges on the horizon. I heard the leaves rustle, everywhere around me, on the ground, in the treetops. The leaves that would, soon, be all over the ground, and then back in the treetops.

