

The Nature of Noise / The Noise of Nature

Luka Bekavac

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(selected prose)

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Drenje
(novel, 2011)

(excerpts)

Marta is now doing well for the most part and is, in principle, mentally stable. She hasn't told anyone about what happened last March, or about the surgery that ensued; by the end of June, she went for check-ups only once a week, and the bleeding had stopped completely. However, she could not escape the impression that the whole story, the circumstances that had led her to this place, at least partly stemmed from the events of last spring; perhaps it had to do with rehab, or with going to a place where her condition would be irrelevant, where she would have the chance to let go, both physically and mentally: she hadn't decided yet, but she was thinking about it less and less. In any case, objective circumstances were enough for the faculty board to send her to the *penal colony*. In Osijek, this is what they used to call any place "occupied" by Professor

Marković. It was during the central, most intensive part of her studies, at the most important stage in terms of laying the foundation for a possible scientific career, that everything that eventually led to her hospitalization began to happen, at first completely preventing her from focusing on the final set of courses, and subsequently keeping her in a certain state of mental paralysis when she first tried to return to her studies. She simply lost too much time: by the time some of her colleagues were already employed – not only in Osijek, but in other centers that she herself once considered – she hadn't yet enrolled in the fourth year. Although as a freshman she already started volunteering at the Echolocation Center, where she was one of the favorite “interns” because of her hard work and intellect, as well as her ability to adapt to the most difficult coworkers, by the time she was supposed to graduate, her presence at the Center and in the classroom, her responsibility in carrying out assignments, and finally her basic willingness to

communicate coherently eroded to such an extent that she was ultimately fired without explanation, and none of the professors in the Department of Zoology wanted to take on the responsibility of supervising her thesis and two-month internship that she had to complete before the final exams. In the next few months there were no external incidents, which led to the said disruption and ruin, and she was now *well* again; except for the gloominess that cast a shadow over her social ambitions and abilities, she was just as competent and keen as a few years ago. However, in the meantime she had become an “old student,” a senior who had been left behind and who was mostly moved from one registrar’s office to another, from one additional requirement to another, from one supplementary course to another, from one exam that she should have taken with a senior professor to another that she now had to take with his former assistant who had assigned a new list of required reading. Quite understandably, the school treated

her as if she simply had to be *dealt with* for the sake of the common good, making it clear that her right of first choice was out of the question. When the moment to choose her “specialization” finally came, it was understood that she would be assigned a mentor; the area of specialization was never discussed.

Thus, as a “returnee” to the school, she got a place in the *penal colony*, now located somewhere in Baranja, with Professor Marković, whom she apparently hadn’t ever even seen during her studies; she vaguely remembered the rumors that portrayed him as “problematic,” although the subtext of such qualification changed with respect to the speaker (apart from a dose of cautious ridicule due to some procedural shortcomings, mild and condescending condemnation of a certain unorthodoxy that probably has eccentric deviations, older professors mostly felt respect, maybe even admiration, marred only by the fact that Marković’s heyday belonged to the distant past: they talked about

the Ivan Regen Prize, one of the earliest, and certainly the only one ever awarded to anyone at this school, as well as about his work on creating the first workstations for digital signal processing at a time when it took a whole laboratory and a whole day to process one second; among the younger generation, students or recent assistants who were already moving into the category of assistant professors and steering the department in an entirely different direction, his description represented the sum of all the objections that students may have against their professors: not showing up for class, dull and extremely difficult lectures characterized by the lack of examples and communication with students, aversion to argumentation, heavy dogmatism, non-transparency of criteria, inconsistency in course contents and exam materials, required reading that was too extensive and too demanding, abnormally long exams, alcoholism). She seemed to remember him, perhaps incorrectly, as one of those who traveled to Osijek – from

Zagreb, she assumed – once a week for lectures, rushing back as soon as they were done with their classes. She wasn't sure of any of this as she never attended any of his classes, perhaps never even met him: all she knew was that only students who had been rejected by everyone else worked for him; no one chose him.

Marković's project was titled "The Impact of the Homeland War on the Bioacoustic Image of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmia"; she assumed it was one of those vaguely defined projects with a generic name that guarantees longevity, a steady flow of funding from relevant ministries who are hypnotized by certain magic words and an implicit suggestion of national interest, if not national security. The fact that she spent most of her studies observing bats around Osijek was not actually incompatible with the project she was assigned to, but she knew that she was at the mercy of her mentor, as usual; it was with a certain reluctance that she began printing out her most

representative papers, *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum* in the Quarries of Papuk, Gestation in the Terezino Polje Roost, and *Microchiroptera and Electroacoustics* (for which she received the Rector's Award in 1997), all the while prepared for the possibility that she might have to forget about all this and move on to recording birds or, who knows, maybe frogs, or even domestic animals.

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Drenje, a settlement in the center of Baranja (it's hard to call it a *village*), looks as if it is located somewhere else: observing it, even thinking about it, makes it easy for an onlooker to forget where they are, disoriented by the arrangement of its surfaces that form a miniature, geometrically not entirely convincing and sustainable world. A simple, almost primitive center was formed by the accumulation of a few smaller buildings or single-storey houses (post office, health center, fire station, convenience

store, tavern, of which only the tavern still opens daily), which, without clear traces of planning, have crept like caries into a tectonic anomaly of monotonous Pannonian desolation: the terrain to the south, covered by wide meadows and pastures, fields of wheat and corn, spackled with groves, and framed by an elm forest, almost unnoticeably climbs, so that the onlooker might at the very *top*, if that word isn't too much of a stretch, look back and find themselves on a kind of viewpoint that offers vistas in pale green, blue, dark brown, yellow, silver tones that open towards the south. The ascent ends abruptly, bare cliffs plunging steeply into the ground. Observed from the south, this space, this *hole* in which Drenje is located, is therefore not visible: it seems as if the dense forest or pasture simply lacks another, presumed northern point.

However, only someone flying over Drenje would be surprised by this discontinuity in the terrain; another person, taking a regular route (an old railroad line that cuts almost straight through this

panorama and reaches the settlement, its last station, in a wide easternly arch, bypassing the ascent, or the road – either a dangerous and winding, completely neglected local road that was destroyed by tanks during the occupation, or a large, complicated road grid that covers the southeastern access to Drenje no longer used by anyone), would have a completely different experience, void of the climatic upheaval a *fall* into Drenje offers: the plain would slowly begin to concede and unfold in a series of apparently unnecessary turns, ostensible circles, minor rises and falls, tunnels created by seemingly tropical plants, shrubs, trees, sudden hills that would obstruct the view from one side to the other, until all vistas disappeared completely. Then, exiting the tunnel, Drenje would appear, looking mostly like an abandoned industrial coastal town that managed to end up in Gorski Kotar due to some natural disaster.

Observed from the northeast, the village sits in the eternal shadow cast by clusters of coniferous

trees and a rocky white cliff. Certain perspectives, especially the eastern one, reveal that the shadow is actually split in two; some water (a weak stream, a channel that sometimes dries up and looks more like a factory spout than a natural stream) runs between small buildings that look like bad scale models standing below cliffs resembling an unconvincing photographic montage as they rise in two planes at an obtuse angle, bringing the wings of a bird to mind. The notch between these stone wings descends into the depths, allowing direct sunlight to penetrate only for a few dozen minutes each morning, revealing spaces that are not immediately visible from either the north or the south: a ravine that leads further south, towards new deserted and uninhabited spaces, meadows and woods, is often illuminated by the sun that never reaches Drenje, except for as a series of reflections in the water and on the rocks. Nevertheless, and against all odds, it sometimes seems to directly reach the strictly

underground character of this landscape, which was only recently opened up and is inaccessible from any other direction. This landscape is carved by a rich network of waterways, clean streams that at some point plunge into the throats of gorges or ravines. The deepest of these leads to a dead end, where bare, orange-brown rocks with sharp edges, punctuated only in places with tall trunks of poorly overgrown conifers, form an almost two-dimensional surface, a wall in front of the onlooker. Going further down, it turns out that there's more: in addition to the pale marble monolith, always a little cold and damp to the touch, inscribed with verses dedicated to the fallen heroes of some war, lies a narrow, steep, and deep crevice that leads to a system of caves full of groundwater.

The north side of Drenje brings another set of layers: towards the east, the irregular terrain covered by rocks, conifers, and grass quickly dissipates and, in the immediate vicinity of a large,

abandoned, largely demolished cement factory, which can only be reached on foot following an old, abandoned industrial railroad, turns into a swampy tangle of vegetation, mud, water, and wild fauna, which, in its northernmost, much tamer parts, already crosses into Hungarian territory. The northwestern side – after the road junction that, passing by a desolate badland, leads straight towards the west – slightly ascends over a huge meadow, stretched like a sheet between two pine forests, clearly exposed to the south side. There, at the top of the hill, at a place where dense bushes overgrow an ancient ruin, a group of monumental boulders of pale stones that probably belong to another century, perhaps a millennium, the meadow dissipates into the forest that starts descending towards the northern parts of the terrain. After that, everything is back to normal: the ground relaxes, stretches out, turns into a plain again, into a different land.

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The introduction is completely impersonal, merely a handshake, a nod, and a somewhat old-fashioned exchange of surnames (“Marković.” – “Vaszary.”). During the first consultations, Marković tells her how it all started (barely concealing the fact that “we,” the entity that represents the project, actually was, and perhaps still is, only *him*): following the signing of the “reintegration” agreement, they immediately returned – at first armed or accompanied by an armed escort – to all the positions in the vicinity of Osijek where they had begun to record in the late 1980s, and discovered some quite functional equipment that the Serbian army probably did not see, or at least did not want to touch, perhaps mistaking it for booby traps. In Baranja, they began by creating a new file of ambient sounds; almost simultaneously, they began to systematically record birds, using new automatic systems that documented specific locations for five minutes

every hour. However, they quickly realized the situation was worse than expected; Marta did not fully understand everything that Marković recounted, trying to clarify or illustrate the situation they had found. This was partly due to the unfortunate fact that his way of speaking caused almost immediate boredom and a lack of concentration, and partly because he unexpectedly accompanied some very concrete data, which served as a basis for publishing analyses and scientific papers in the journals *Periodicum Biologorum* and *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment*, by vague digressions or misplaced analogies, which, she thought, only further complicated his already cumbersome and unclear sentences. Marković offers an explanation as to why he is now stationed in Drenje by stating that a catastrophe that occurred near here represents a deeper cause of most of the disturbances to the bioacoustic system resulting from the Homeland War. Marta does not ask any further questions; she assumes he is referring to some kind of ecocide,

perhaps chemical pollution or extinction of some kind; however, as the monologue continues, Marković mentions catastrophes in various places, alluding to something less concrete, to the point that Marta thinks he is actually trying to tell her that he considers the politics of the occupying army, entailing the cultural, social, and economic ruin it caused, directly responsible for changing the timbre of heron's call during incubation, or for the altered distribution of the recordings of white-tailed eagles and great cormorants in relation to the ecosystem census made in 1990. The role of Drenje, which – in this Baranja variation of the place – Marta had not even heard of until yesterday, remains unclear; in any case, when Marković talks about the fact that her task, at least during the first week, will be to record and make a preliminary analysis of the bioacoustic structure of the environment in places that have not yet been completely destroyed by the catastrophe, she assumes that this will include going to locations in pristine nature,

perhaps conducting a survey of the habitats of birds or mammals, maybe insects, with the help of a telescopic pole, only for the results to later be compared with archival recordings, probably through a spectral analysis, so as to assure that in the end, when the next generations of students assist Marković, the reached conclusions are in line with somebody else's needs, as was regularly the case in other research she was a part of: the results were generally pre-determined, the hypothesis that would keep the project alive and extracting as much money as possible from the ministry established; the hypothesis would then be proven or deliberately refuted by field and laboratory materials and analyses, while all anomalous data would be covered up or shown to be irrelevant. Marković responds to Marta's carefully formulated questions about the change in biotope boundaries as a result of the war and the likelihood of the disappearance of some ecological niches with vague comments. At one point, he even claims that none of it matters

because there are almost no animals left around Drenje, practically consoling her in advance in case she returns from the field without having recorded anything.

He took her to his office, so chaotic and neglected that it was hard to believe that he had only been using it for three years, and dug out the installation disks of several programs for digital signal analysis and real-time generation of ultrasonic and infrasound spectrograms. He immediately gave her a new highly directional condenser microphone, a slightly beat-up UltraSoundGate mobile, and a laser vibrometer, even though she had never used one before; he barely explained the role of the Doppler effect in non-contact recording, all the while neglecting to explain what surfaces it should be directed at, but she didn't ask him anything. Whatever happens next will be nothing more than the keeping up appearances, role-playing, or, at best, completely routine work that has nothing to do with her, which is why she completely ignored

Marković's comments on the plans for the development of the project: he said that such field work is only partly organized as an internship for future graduates, and in fact serves him as a process of selecting people who could remain employed on the project or at the school in the function of research assistants.

When she tries to be optimistic about her future, Marta thinks only of writing papers, of renewing her contacts with the IBAC regional centers, of visiting their sound archives in Slovenia, Austria, or Hungary, of making acquaintances and gaining experience that will allow her to return to the field she is interested in, because she finally thinks she's able to work, cured not only of her problems, but also of the complete apathy that she believed to be the only result of her college education. In more depressing moments, when she imagines the next six weeks in Drenje, she relies on her capacity for total submission: she will do whatever

is asked of her, as long as it is over as quickly as possible, and then she will run away.

* * *

The weather in Drenje is chaotically unpredictable: after a sunny, hot morning, Marta makes her way up the southern hill as if it were an inaccessible mountain, her shoes sinking deeper into the mud and her face whipped by the cold, stormy rain; the yellow-green sheet of water and wind sometimes thickens, reaching the colors of mud or tree bark, becoming so opaque, creating a kind of twilight, that she thinks of turning on a pocket battery, only to remember she left it in the room. At the top of the hill, however, the torrential rain stops, and after about a quarter of an hour, the wall of cumulonimbus clouds breaks down, letting out all the moisture and creating a completely different atmosphere: as she sets up the recording equipment and watches

the sun's flash turn the meadow into an overexposed photo, Marta can almost feel the air pressure rising, like caffeine being released into her system. Bright, almost flaming dots of red, blue, and yellow, probably poppies, chicory, perhaps lady's bedstraw, lie scattered across the field of pale green grass. A light, fresh breeze rises, and suddenly it's hard to believe something bad is happening nearby.

After the introductory, general instructions, Marković basically gave her a free hand when it came to recording. He asked her to briefly explain what she was interested in and what she had done to that point; he seemed pleased to see the texts she had brought with her from Osijek, and only frowned at the mention of the award. He told her to simply decide which species she wanted to record, since the bats had almost completely disappeared from the area at the beginning of the war, and somewhat inexplicably suggested that she start recording the ambience wherever she wanted. He gave all the other associates probes and sent them

out to record the area around Drenje: they recorded about ten minutes of material in specific locations at the time he would specify. Marta wasn't sure what all this was for as she assumed that such preliminary work had been completed several years ago and only certain species were now being studied, but she decided to let it go and went along with his suggestion as it ultimately meant she didn't have to commit to anything. As the time passed, the project seemed more like a front, although she was not sure what for: financial fraud seemed the most likely solution, of course, although Marković seemed not only completely incapable of, but also completely uninterested in that side of academic life. Of course, he could have some private issues, such as running away from a woman or cultivating cirrhosis of the liver, but she was surprised at how little time it took her to switch to autopilot, which would hopefully get her through the "internship" without too much trouble and bring her back to Earth at the end of August.

That is why she spends the whole afternoon in the meadow on the southwestern slope of the hill near Drenje, watching the changing panorama, which is now more reminiscent of early fall than of July: the scratched gold of the sun, already a little tired, fills itself with darker tones, melts into liquid, lazy oil, and pours into the landscape that slowly loses its bright colors, giving way to warm yellows whose glazes cover and erase any stronger contrast. Marta soaks up the warmth and takes a nap in the tall grass, surrounded by oxeye daisies and surviving bellflowers, lets a few ants run across her face, listens for sounds, if there are any; indeed, apart from the occasional gust of wind, a rare bee or fly, and the distant syncopation of a lonely train, there are none. At times, it seems that Marković was at least somewhat right: there are *no animals around Drenje anymore*, certainly no mammals, but this does not mean that there is no life; in those moments when she tried to suppress analyzing the landscape around her, to eliminate anything she

could discern as an individual object, reducing it to a homogeneous plane, she had the impression that everything was still pulsating and alive, like the scintillation of something passing unnoticed through that curtain of vegetation.

After a few hours, as she decides to stop recording, noticing that the sun is setting, drawing bright colors from the landscape, intensifying the collisions of light and shadow, once again illuminating the flowers in the field and the bushes, pushing the green toward darker, almost black tones, Marta hears a tern suddenly chirping. She turns the recorder back on, even though the scheduled time has passed, notes the place, hour, and minute in the recording log, and searches the meadow, bushes, and trees with her eyes, trying, but ultimately failing, to locate the bird. After the birdsong goes silent, she picks up the equipment and slowly starts descending towards Drenje, taking a detour along the ruined road, through the hot dust and ashes of what eventually turned out to be a summer day,

listening to the clean, shrill calls of corncrakes, following a long tree line of poplars, now dark gray and mute, for orientation, carefully averting her gaze from the desolate badland.

That evening, Marta turns on the computer, activates Avisoft-SASLab, transfers documents from the DAT to the hard drive, puts on her new Sennheiser headphones, and discovers that it was all in vain, all the effort useless: all the recordings are spoiled by one and the same interference, an electronic sound that sharply cuts through the organic murmur of the ambient sounds of the meadow. Against this soft, featureless background, it sounds strangely loud: it begins and ends abruptly, as if roughly cut from another document, lasting about thirty seconds in some places and only a second or two in others, but sounding almost the same, not like a repetition of the same signal, but like a series of signals coming from the same source. Marta first thinks it's a *glitch* caused by

transferring the tape material to the hard drive; she checks the document durations, selects the shortest one and repeats the process, but the interference is there again, in the same place, as if it were part of the recording. Theoretically speaking, it is not unusual for microphones in the open, especially at higher altitudes, to act like radio receivers, picking up fragments of telecommunications waste that, inaudible to the human ear, float on the ether, but this had never happened to her; besides, the frequency was inexplicable as all the recordings were destroyed by this clean, high-frequency hiss, completely different in structure to that of the monotonous, annoying buzz of telephone or TV interference. Centimeter by centimeter, Marta inspects the insulation on all the cables, looking for visible damage that could explain this kind of noise, but finds nothing; she will simply have to check the microphone and the rest of the equipment in Marković's office in the morning. The day

was pleasant, but the work was completely pointless; she wishes the coming weeks would be exactly the same.

Translated by Jan Ruk

The Curfew
(novel, 2015)

(excerpts)

That coffee house where – mid June, at one of the first such gatherings that could have comprised two or ten people, and end after five minutes or five hours, even though both values always leaned towards higher numbers and unclear structures, so the sit-downs seemed to last forever, without any limitation of the time of one's arrival or parting – the moment I have mentioned happened was located right next to the cathedral, almost at the city square, but its atmosphere stood completely apart from what one would expect (the hordes of passers-by, the noise of cars and trams, the hell of church bells, the irritant clientele of young businessmen from nearby banks and government institutions); after all, this was Osijek, this was 1992, and those first meetings with them – while we sat hidden under giant oak trees whose large, dusty leaves,

shivering on the airflow that did not reach the tables, at the same time offered pleasure of an occasional play of light and shadow and served as the indirect visual index of oscillation of temperature, which, outside of the shade, broke every known record – remained in my memory as grainy group portraits taken in backyards of some unknown houses on the periphery, or even summer gardens of those unforgettable countryside restaurants where, more often than at city coffee houses or taverns, I would, as years went by, spend truly a lot of time with some of them. During those months, the surrounding tables seldom had other visitors; the sidewalks and façades cracked under the scorching beams from the Sun, and the central station tram, imprisoned in its miniature circle of four or five stops, passed by the terrace every half hour, like the last reliable unit of time, regularly completely empty because at that deaf time of mid-summer there really was no one to ride it (that year, of course, even less than any other); all the sounds of

the city overlapped into a deep and completely quiet murmur (perhaps of voices of distant bathers, scattered along the north bank of the Drava), and at moments – when, from time to time, the fountains would shut down – into a complete, slightly disturbing silence: everything around us, from one minute to another, would gradually slow down and, while doing so, seemingly, become even more empty, as if the city turned into the bottom of a dry, stale sea, and at intervals of one or two hours only a lonely dog in search of water, or a drunk from some other tavern, stumbling on his unstable feet like an apparition – temporary images one can sometimes make out in the shivering of the last traces of moisture which, gathered in the pale cracked slabs on the ground, escape the heat – would pass along the sun-washed surface of the square, well visible from our tables.

The “early coffees” I’m talking about were such only in my perspective, because, by now it should already be clear, I entered this whole sequence of

events as an outside and overdue observer, and everything I am going to try and write about was actually already at its end when it happened: the “group” itself, which had been dwindling almost from the very moment it had coagulated enough to be noticed as an organized group, even if informal, was at its last, but I, understandably, did not know that then. At moments such as this one, when I allow myself to look back across all the years that have passed since, inhabited exclusively by disappearances, it seems that, following the footsteps of the people who left and who, honestly, already at the first meeting I assumed I would never see again, everything crumbled down *systematically*, it converged towards a point I could have only sensed but could not have explained or described, the point of reintroduction of absolute ignorance in which I had lived before this whole story even started. I wanted to reach this point as soon as possible, without realizing what it actually meant, believing wrongly that it could give a new (not

necessarily comforting) sense to the collapse of everything I considered to be my life, but when I finally reached it, I, naturally, no longer knew why I had searched for it in the first place.

As I write about all this, I find it most difficult to separate (not only on paper but also in my mind) the first impressions of some things from their true nature, which I only learned later, to eliminate from the text the knowledge founded in what would come later and what – at the time the events I'm describing took place – could not have been anticipated. It is easiest, of course, to let oneself go to the bitter, shortsighted path of the lived experience, to describe those people like a procession of visions: shadows that disappear in the infinitude of the past never to come back again, that can barely be made out as I use my pen to try and capture the last features of their faces, like the hem of a dress of someone already falling into the abyss. They appeared and then vanished forever: this banality, yet the only thing I can say about them with

at least some authority, is valid of every other person, of me and of anyone yet to come, of the ones who at this moment cannot even be made out behind the impenetrable wall of the future, where I can only imagine them as some stir of the magma of possible. Yet again, as if everything they talked about, at least when observed from afar, through this perhaps falsifying telescope, can be understood as the disproof of the elementary fact of life: as the complete certainty that our lives and deaths are just passing manifestations of something else, ephemeral variations – easily replaceable, even *repeatable*, which is much more difficult to accept – drawn on the basis of one and the same “fund” that does not change or diminish with time. (Whenever, during those earliest months, in conversations or letters, I tried to describe such “origin” to my friends and sceptics, I would have regularly reached the point in which it seemed that *every* word, not only “key words,” needed to be put in quotes, because nothing, except in terms of

broadest possible analogy, referred to what I wanted to speak about.) Straining my brain beyond its any real capacities, I began visualizing us and our world as a closed circle expanding and shrinking, and thus giving its inhabitants an illusion of progress or at least a growth of entropy, while in all actuality it presented something like a “preparation,” a model assembled and disassembled using the materials from the fund, stored somewhere outside the circle. With time a different scheme seemed more logical, and I found confirmation of its validity in some disparate notes from the time: that origin or source would stand on the inside of an endlessly compressed space, coagulated almost to the size of a point, and, following some indecipherable yet regular order, ages and worlds, people and their lives, everything we recognize as “history,” would emanate “from” it like heat or smoke rising above the burning matter. The only way to explain the coherence of this history of ours, the possibility to even reorganize the simultaneity

of the fund into a timeline, I found in the following explanation: the “opening” through which this emanation exits is so narrow that the particles need to pass through it consecutively, one after another, thus leaving no possibility that two mutually conflicting particles will enter the world “simultaneously.” What we imagine as the passing of time is actually just the gradualness of our “admission” to the fund’s holdings. Of course, nothing could stop us from establishing the following thesis: such “openings,” in other words, different timelines, or mutually strictly separated worlds, built by combining the same repertoire of matter and form, in theory, are endless...

No one would believe that the conversations that took place during those “coffees” (although most often beer, wine or brandy were served and drunk) looked like the previous passage, and this suspicion would be completely justified; as I said, sometimes it is difficult, counterproductive even, to prevent the tip of your pen from sliding into

different levels, into different times, from which the past appears to be richer, better articulated, and sometimes, for that very reason, less clear. However, all of it came out of the topic of remembrance, which they were obsessed with, from literal meaning – faster and firmer monumentalization of everything that, during the armed struggle, had happened to them only a couple of months earlier, but that, reworked several times through the discourse as sophisticated as oral poetry, with permanent motifs and forms, repetitions and digressions, seemed like something belonging to a different millennium and some archaic age – to less decipherable levels which I am trying to write about and which made their way into our conversations only as irregular and hazy fragments that I would most often remember much later, usually half-sleeping. It seemed that when they introduced this topic into a conversation, at least when they talked to me, they were led but some low perfidy, a want to draw me into their story, yet it was never entirely clear

whether they were using it to trick me or to welcome me into their circle. “Do you remember when we...?” many of their sentences had such beginnings, directed somewhere into the space between the chairs, and I was often uncertain if they were supposed to include me too, or isolate me from others completely, or, on the contrary, put me at the group’s center. “One only needs to remember...” the remark these excursions ended with, almost as a ceremonial gesture of patience and understanding, was actually hiding something else, yet another idea that would sometimes unexpectedly flash between their disjointed and disoriented dialogues: the situation in which we are now presents *the lower time*, a fallen era that corrodes in the gradual oblivion of everything that happened, but we can, with a certain kind of specific effort, annul this ignorance, “forget the forgetfulness,” draw out into the light something that remained temporarily hidden. It was evident they considered this the most important task left for them to do, and it

was easiest to understand the whole story as an extension of their *not to be forgotten*, in principle directed at the genesis of war condition whose subtlety by that moment, by mid-1992, had already been so destroyed by media actions that even then it was almost impossible to explain it to anyone who did not participate in our battles. However, it became more and more clear that the *timeline* of oblivion they talked about had nothing to do with that war, that these were some things that often stood in the past before the date of their birth, and as if it was not important to only remember the things that happened to you *exclusively*. From here, as I'm filling up this page, I have the impression that this is precisely the only thing I have left, but then, on those oneirically slow and hot days, I began having notions I was not sure where they were coming from, which they would comment on by giving me the laconic, "well, you always knew this," as if all of it was completely normal; with time I truly began remembering some concrete things,

which most likely I had not experienced personally, which most definitely had nothing to do with them and their stories, but those used bricks of an unknown origin slowly fitted into a construction that, with every new element, took on a clearer meaning, even though I was yet unable to discern its ends. As if out of nothing, this other life rose, a life that had for the most part already been lived, except that I wasn't sure where was, when was and *whose* was this life supposed to be in relation to mine. They hardly responded to it – for them this was a well-known process which they had obviously gone through before and which left the margins of who we were and where we were uncomfortably open, but this opening filled them only with peace and certainty. One of them – who was especially unreliable, it has to be said – the *eel* whose deceitfulness and mythomania were the butt of many jokes, told me, when we said our goodbyes at the end of one of these coffees that had dragged until midnight so he had already been very drunk: “If you're with

us now, you've always been with us... You'll remember.”

I have never “remembered” what they talked about (at least not in the way I expected I would), but from our first meetings in May or June 1992 and all until 1994 or 1995, it seemed I ran into people from the group so often that it defied all statistical probabilities; I didn't have an impression that this was *surveillance* of any sort (they were kind and *always* in a hurry), and it is possible, of course, that I had simply not noticed it before, given that they all looked rather neutral, but during those first couple of months spent at the fringes of their circle, I was almost frightened by all the places where I kept running into them: from relatively predictable locations such as numerous coffee houses and restaurants (at the time, burdened by some private problems, I began to systematically avoid all gathering places of “subcultural” color and I frequented only completely drab venues, marked by the absence of any sense of esthetics and

offering a catastrophic choice of music, but open to an accidental cross-section of guests among which, like they were on some duty, I could always run into one of them), to the City Library at whose reading room I spent the whole winter copying articles from *The Technical Encyclopedia*, which I needed in order to solve some issues with the equipment at work (one of them would appear behind one of the two long, tall bookshelves that at the time functioned as bearing walls of the adult section, but they also were known to emerge, which was much more bizarre, from the unnatural darkness that, like a heavy, black curtain, veiled the closed section of the holdings and the path that led to the entrance into the reading room). On one occasion, at nightfall at the end of November, as the last silver of the sun barely made its way through the drizzle, I, frozen and desperate, went for a walk along the Drava towards the old Water Company building, a ruin filled with animal carcasses and used syringe needles; this part of the promenade

was empty even in the middle of the summer, so I noticed a silhouette from afar and wondered what could have made a reasonable person venture at the completely deserted end of the promenade in such weather, without an umbrella (and when the motionless contour reluctantly moved, I thought I unwantedly prevented someone from committing a suicide); only after the person had come some ten meters away from me, did I suddenly realize it was one of them, hidden in the collar of a black leather jacket. He barely uttered hello and just went along his way, seemingly uninterested in me and the bizarre circumstance of our encounter. Nevertheless, such events, of course, could always be “rationally” explained using some far-fetched assumption (not far from the Water Company, for example, there was a tavern, and it was not improbable to walk down to the promenade from it), but their logic eluded me; the only time I tried to open a conversation on the topic with one of them, I received a neutral commentary that could have meant

anything – that it was normal, that it was not normal, but that they knew of it, that it was unavoidable considering what their (our) meetings, in themselves, *did to time*.

It is, however, difficult to emphasize enough how odd it was to hear *them* speak of any metaphysical topic – those people, mostly in their forties or fifties, who, without exception, could already at that point be best described only as hardened soldiers whose characteristics, if stereotyped by some sociologist, someone who does not understand them and who has never lived with them, would correspond perfectly with the profile of a disciplined body of voters of clumsily masked chains of profiteers and criminal organizations. In a certain sense, they were actually *apolitical*: they had no doubts about who was the enemy, but they exhibited irrational hatred towards the political scene, because of which – given that, as either freshly retired, or, for the most part, still active soldiers and police officers, they were by default the antagonists

of the recently overthrown false communists – one could easily and mistakenly see them as an obscure fraction of the extreme right, men armed to their teeth (which, in all truth, they were), in other words, as potential criminals themselves. Already at that point, it was clear that their difficult, dynamic and exceedingly dangerous political potential would go through the roof once they die: only as dead men they would become a mystical, dark and interminable valency of someone else's ideological capital whose manipulation would allow its new owners to expand the domain of their command to such an extent that every voice raised against them would be considered sacrilege and, by default, represent a certain road to prison or death; by trying to sabotage such a scenario (which, in the end, overcame some of them too) through the act of ultimate defiance against those obscure institutions, those political funeral parlors that wanted to feed on their posthumous energy as if it were pre-election fuel, they decided to remain alive.

I have to admit that I too, following long hours of completely untheoretical discussions on social and economic issues, such as they truly were – incompetent of observing any kind of hierarchy and deeply reserved towards the country they had just defended – found it easiest to describe them as anarchists, even though they doubled over laughing when I said something of the kind (some of them, moreover, stopped talking to me after this). The undeniable genius of these people, otherwise of modest education, was purely intuitive, and maybe it was the source of their feeling of superiority over anyone who tried to “professionally” engage in politics, but it seemed that, somewhat unexpectedly, they found all those ideological positions equally irritating. Like anyone who went through what had been happening to us in the past few months, they lost patience for the nonsense of the advocates of the failed quasi-pacifist perspective that kept relativizing the aggression and the occupation as a “conflict,” however – most likely because of their

forceful local-patriotic position, which the bombardment thinned to the blade of violence – they rolled their eyes at anyone who tried to approach them by talking about Croatia, using this word as an amulet that would unite them in the struggle against foreign forces, an emblem whose strength, like a sedative or acid, would cancel all the differences between them and dip them into a passive, impenetrable fog, into a dream in which they would become friends or brothers. On one occasion, a few moments before the worst brawl I have ever witnessed (hiding behind the toilet door, having no delusions about my fighting capabilities), a general havoc which by pure miracle did not end up with guns blazing and murders (at least not that night), I heard one of them, standing at the bar, say to some ape with a shaved head: “... is a *tall tale*, an idiot’s toy,” emphasizing the preceding word – the name of the party, army unit, maybe even the country itself – as if it were some exaggerated label, a funny nickname, an obviously bogus title. Only

much later, long after we had buried him, I realized what he'd had in mind, an almost illiterate man who had driven himself into the ground first defending his village and then my city, ready to give his life for his fellow-soldiers, for an unknown civilian, who maybe even despised him, for the building, for the river, or for fifteen yards of an empty field behind his backyard, but never for some Homeland. During those first months, things were a bit less clear: I often laughed at them in secret, because all of them, in their own ways, over the edge of a paranoia that could perhaps be explained by facts, were completely obsessed by *the enemies of the country*, as well as a certain idea of a *territory*, which, however, could not be compared with the present situation in the occupied Slavonia and Baranja, or with the trade that allowed the aggressors and their domestic friends to divide the land as they saw fit. They engaged in endless, intensive deliberations about *borders*, about the abyss or the wall that at the time seemed to separate us from

Serbia, even from our lost territories; I mention all this because, in a similar context, someone introduced yet another of permanent motif of the conversations I, so to say, eavesdropped on.

“*The end of the world,*” one of them grunted after taking a sip of his beer, “that’s all bullshit. At least you’re an educated man...” he added, like every time when, benevolently yet mercilessly, he wished to put the worthlessness of all of my education into the perspective of the new circumstances we lived in. In this conversation, the shift from “the border” to “the end of the world” was unpredictably sudden, as if the whole time this implied something that had nothing to do with a stroke of a pen across the blind map but was in fact an apocalypse. “But it’s not exactly like that, only old women imagine it like some kind of a... *cataclysm*. Nothing will be destroyed...” he went on, to what another one added: “Bah, nothing will be *changed*, it will only *show*, right?! The true state of the matter, as it always has been, will be seen...” The first one nodded,

at first moving his head up and down, as if agreeing, and then, less convinced, in some undetermined direction, more like tilting his head towards one shoulder then another, but not shaking it in unequivocal denial, concluding after a couple of seconds of silence: “All in good time.” He waved his hand and went back to his glass, like a carpenter who had just explained the realistic expense of procuring and processing lumber we were talking about and therefore he could simply not come up with a lower price. (I think someone later told me he actually was a carpenter.) This was the way almost all of them spoke – firmly on the ground and completely pragmatic – with the exception of those few from the Information and Propaganda Activities as well as those from some other sectors who, like me, remained mobilized as part of the “general work duty.” They never spoke in riddles, but what they said was so fragmentary and tangential that it took incredible effort, often retroactive, to understand, especially as there, at those empty

terraces, with all the beer and the air that by the end of the afternoon all but stopped circulating, it was easy to skip over some of the details either on account of the speed with which they were delivered or because they were so peripheral to the topic discussed.

“The end is near,” the phrase that, just like “there’s no time left,” got stuck in my memory as that summer’s unyielding refrain, in reality was most likely uttered just two or three times, dipped in a series of other remarks concerning the robbed or devastated companies, stupid editorials published in *The Voice of Slavonia*, acquaintances they had not seen in a long time, or the repairs of cars and motorcycles, without any emphases that would make it stand out. I am still having a hard time deciding on the final and absolute explanation of those words; as I go through this pile of notes and quotes (actually paraphrases, patched together from memory) that cover the whole left side of my desk, next to the empty pages I am using right now,

the yellowed piece of paper on which these words are written is swarmed by the fragments linked to the time that stands still, to the change that will never come, to the impossibility to leave the circle in which we are shut. I have long given up on the explanations that, back then, I wrote down using microscopic threads on the back of these pages: “after-effects of shelling,” “stopping the front,” “the city under siege”; on the back side of a piece of paper bearing the inscription “the end is near” stands a phrase “the screen (~~removed~~),” and whenever I look at this crossed-out word, my memory is once again flooded by some other mutually unrelated sentences spoken on the occasion of these meetings. “You don’t wait for it,” one of them said, “it *cannot* come.” “*You* must come,” another one added and laughed, the first one just rolled his eyes and went on, “It happens all the time, it is *here*, in other words, it does not happen, it just *stands*...” It took a series of slow and painstaking steps, as if emerging from the deep sludge of stupidity or torpor, but

the connection between “the end of the world” and “there’s no time left” became more palpable: the end is not a point in time of some unforeseeable future, but *the edge*, the world’s border, and time, which they obviously regarded only as a matter of perspective (which was difficult to dispute during those boggy afternoons) presented only the inner-worldly phenomenon that no longer meant anything *beyond* “the end of the world.” *There’s nothing to wait for.* There was never anything to wait for: if time stands still, if it actually does not even exist, everything, including future is still *here*, it is *here* since forever, and it will remain *here*.

It was, to be honest, easier to talk about the “here” than to understand *where* and *what* it was supposed to be. As one of them, a bit more inclined to technical descriptions, said, one should try to think about it as pure geometry that is only conditionally, as circumstances dictate it, connected to our world as if by rough analogy. It seemed to me that the others had a much more concrete

understanding of this, they saw it almost as a *location* on which they had once been, on which they had even – for many years before the war – *worked*, but back in the day all the prospects of any of this becoming any clearer to me were completely negligible. Others still were more comfortable using metaphors and they satisfied themselves with the thesis that “the end” was near ever since this illusion of time existed: once it is gone, it will become evident that “the end” was just as illusive.

However, none of them thought this solved the issue, not even on the theoretical level, let alone in everyday life on that simultaneously mesmerizing and terrifying “draft of air” from the other side, which I have already mentioned. There were voices that wanted to explain this undoing of the border as the decisive, epochal change: “Once it opens, no one can close it again,” the one who had just retired from the Teacher’s College said (I no longer remember what he taught), he was yet another one of the people from the margins of the group whose

actions intersected with theirs just as the comet's trajectory meets the orbits of planets, in regular, but rare and precious moments; he explained that for twenty years he had worked on a book about these issues, about the destiny and logic of these territories, about *us* as "the border," trying to tie it all with something he called "oral tradition" (it was obvious these weren't stories and legends): the book was published, by chance, in June 1991, and he, in the interval between sending the last edits to the printer and picking up the first bound copies, realized it was completely "senseless," and became obsessed with the impression that his time had all but run out, that now everything truly came to an end, that he would "have to give up on it all just when he should start his work all over again." I met that man only twice, but I remember him well because he stood out from all the other participants of our gatherings: this perfectly neat, even elegant gentleman with a goatee and glasses seemed much older than anyone else, perhaps like someone's father,

and what impressed me the most about him was his way with people which was so cultivated it bordered on class, as well as his position as an object of unquestionable respect, which, as it seemed, he deserved first and foremost on account of his benevolence and only then on account of the fact that – maybe in an even more distant past, given that he did not take part in the fighting like the rest – he had seen horrors words could not describe. It was he, when trying to explain the relation between our “universe” and the externality of what that other member called “the circle,” who first used some new and, it seemed, “more confidential” terms than the ones that others, as if in some kind of a blur, kept tossing over my head: “The Archive or...” – “The Abyss,” someone jumped in to help him. “The Abyss, yes, *The New Abyss*,” he chuckled under his breath, remembering someone else’s name for it, while the other one shook his head, and went on, “Stipe... Always so melodramatic,” he puffed on his cigarette and added, “But, that’s

not something to screw around with... If we're serious, I mean, the truth is that we should have new names for everything, but where do you find new names... Well, fuck... It would've been better if we'd enumerated it all, then we could use codes, numbers..." His eyebrows raised, the professor nodded, as if indicating this was the real truth, but it referred to an entirely unattainable goal, as impossible as the voyage to Saturn. The second and last time I saw him, sometime in the summer of 1995, if I remember correctly, just before he died, as a king, in his sleep, in his bed and his house, which is today a long demolished Art Nouveau one-story house in one of the streets behind the cathedral, he once again brought up that same thing he had mentioned back then, three years earlier: this undeterminable, timeless space (even though this name is wrong too) that all the attributes assigned to Heaven and Hell applied to, an endless foundation of everything there is, illusory and ephemeral. He said that it was the only topic he wrote about

now, albeit in a completely different way, and that he thought, if there were time, the material could make up another book, a sort of a sequel to the “wasted effort” which, when we had first met, he had just finished. He wanted to describe the unimportance of it all, of those stories about the war, the territory and the border, about the *old science* and the lack of words to describe the real world; that quiet before existence was the topic he dealt with from the early 1970s on, and all of the effort invested into it remained scattered in a multitude of provisional *Sigetic Studies*, shorter and absolutely hermetic publications of limited printing runs and even slimmer perspective of reception (only later it became clear to me it had nothing to do, as I originally thought, seduced by the influx of military terminology, with Szigetvár). In the middle of the sentence on his futile work, he absentmindedly patted the thick, hard-bound volume similar to a dictionary, whose perfectly fresh and white pages, covered in dense lines, had already

been broached by the new reading, underlining, notes on the margins; it stood on the desk like a textbook above an open notebook, also hard-bound, in which he was writing his other text. When he left the room for a moment to get us coffee, I glanced at the book's shiny protective cover, a miniature masterpiece of minimalist design, that seemed so fascinating, so perfect and so *new* as if it had been devised in the near future and then teleported back to us in a yet unknown way; it was that same book published in June 1991, in the editor's note described as the definitive systematization of reworked and expanded versions of Sigetic Opuscula, accompanied by a bulk of new, previously unpublished material. On its back, weaved with silver threads, which, depending on the angle of light, looked like dark cloth or metallic surface, without his name, there was a title printed in red letters: *Finis Croatiae*.

“The end is near,” someone said before all of this happened, at the beginning of that sticky and

endless afternoon, and someone else, quieter and more sarcastic, added, "It is... But on the other side of the Drava, some twelve kilometers south of Osijek." Someone laughed at this, and the first one just shook his head, like a teacher in front of a hopeless hooligan, and muttered, "Lucky you." Yet another one of those silences, which actually presented the vital juice of our meetings, settled: now, writing from memory and trying to squeeze from it everything that could offer at least some semblance of a story or theory, I'm not saying enough about that caesura without end, about that pleasant hum of the passing minutes, like the movement of an empty audiotape in the tape recorder, which was our basic frequency, like a collection of invisible walls around us, around our diffuse but isolated group, the space within which, as if it were light years away from everything that surrounded us, messages of different manuscripts and emissions from undeterminable sources could be spread freely. I don't think there was another place where

I felt as safe as on those terraces, back then, with them, surrounded by the façades of the empty city center, wrapped tightly into a soft, densely weaved blanket of empty, blank channels of silence. “I don’t know how long we can go on like this...” one of them said, looking around, glancing up into the sky, while another one added, “...I know, fuck it, the head in the bandages...” “He doesn’t know what you’re saying,” the first one retorted after a couple of seconds, and I just shrugged my shoulders to what someone else, blowing smoke, smiling benevolently, said, “He’ll remember.”

In those first months, I believed we had met by pure chance, as I did not fit into their circle either by my generation, or my profession, but now it is almost impossible to present everything that followed (no matter how miniscule it might be, just like what I've already described, just like all those memories that are destined to make up one empty and tepid book) as the result of anything else but careful orchestration, micrological synchronization of sequences of events that were supposed yet to roll towards us from the hazy and unstratified future. All of it was, namely, preceded by a series of events that could also serve as a kind of a frame for this story, but it is now too late to unravel it and retrospectively set it up at its material beginning. At the end of May 1992 (I'm relatively certain it was 20th or 21st), in my mailbox I found a letter in a robust,

yellow A5 envelope, with my address written in an unknown, neat handwriting and the return address in the upper left corner:

Tihomir Deželić
Ilmin Dvor 32
54531 Viljevo

I am not going to copy everything from the letter (a part of it is difficult to even evoke, given that most of it was composed on a typewriter, in red and black letters, but much of it was crossed out or added later in pen); I am also going to explain why, but most of the things will be easier to show than to explain. I have corrected just some grammatical errors and typos that simply irritate me too much to reproduce and preserve them here (first and foremost prepositions, chosen contrary to the rules or simply out of place), but everything else, the style and the content, I leave as I received it:

Dear Sir,

I hope I do not intrude: You wrote about the power network, Your Colleagues call it installations, some say “silk” (as in the village of Habjanovci), that is Curie-Hartman, or underground corridors, while many agree on electrification (just as You do), even though they have something else in mind when they say it: that there is some other “ElectroSlavonia” (in Brijest, but some of Your People already know about it).

I also ask you to send me, if You have it, a copy of that book of Yours, because there is no way of obtaining it here (I will pay for it), I had it but used it, or it was stolen (by Ivanošić or Grebar). The police have been informed, but let me get to the point:

I openly admit I fell into the “Stream” by chance, but You and Yours do this professionally (You can do it whenever You want to) (that’s what I hear). My witness is “Jesus Christ.” I didn’t know any of it was possible from the beginning (I’m just a regular man). Dip ONE HAND into the stream, not more, and there’s no back. A word to the wise, because I have

supposedly heard that he is too smart (the whole in the stream, over his head), that's "HELL LTD"! (If I've heard it correctly that that's how Your Friends call it.)

This channel that opens like that goes forward and back, and the thing going back was already here: Your People know of it too, because I met the "Gentleman" who recorded it all some two or three years ago here at our village (around year 1987). All this in the future has already passed and is now "ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SUN," and it will come from there "for the first time" when it's time (soon). So, this is how I would say it: everything You are interested in has already been tried, many years ago, here in the vicinity (I live somewhere around Viljevo): holographic cut, then the voice started (they will admit this themselves), all of this is supposedly published already. I've heard it was supposedly published in the newspapers (I read it), supposedly in *The Voice of Slavonia*, but before the war: that's close to You, so You can look up those "feuilletons."

But, back to the point. I'm writing because

I have EVIDENCE: I can offer “evidence” that it is so, and that the place is the “generator.” My Dear Sir, I know that those from Osijek think they are smarter than anyone else. But why don’t You ask that man of Yours where it is, by now he should already know, if I know it (and I’ve got only four years of Elementary Education). It is an ordinary place, so to say, around the corner, but he writes there: “that the *high window* will cause a reflex in the East” and “the amplitude of erosion happens more gradually than the eruptions, so we still don’t have a candidate,” but I’m not the one who says this, the birds in the trees already sing about it, however, this Eruption (as your Professor calls it), it has not come and gone: it is “Breathing Down My Neck” as I write this to You! I am, excuse my French, “fucked,” as our people say. I know what You’re thinking now, it’s impossible, “CENTRAL” (everything is there). No one would say something like this about a small village in our Slavonia and Baranja, but it really is true (I could offer “evidence,” should there be interest (there’s as much of it as You want (in Osijek))),

but they there want to do it all by sitting in their chair, just by calculating, so nothing. But it's the way it is, a man has to be a bit of a Drifter (a "Gypsy") to learn some things.

P.S.

(Let's not speak anything about the ones "FROM THE LIGHT".)

Your True Colleague

Tibor Deže (CNG198649183)

54416 Slobodna Vlast (no street number)

As I'm now picturing the letter in front of me, even if in this, somewhat edited and polished form, it is difficult to decide where to even start commenting: from the differences in the names and addresses on the envelope and in the letter (Ilmin Dvor is a village to the west of Viljevo, not an address in Viljevo), as well as the postal code, which was stamped in Orahovica, then the meaningless code next to the name, which they most likely wanted

to sell as some fictitious ID card of the Croatian National Guard, or the style that seems to belong to some serious mental patient, an obsessive neurotic, with all those repetitions, grammatical inconsistencies, “key words” and capital letters, sporadic complete madness and nonsense... Despite all this, I did not throw it away immediately; those were, as I have already explained, the days of private *interregnum*, a time of deceptive “freedom,” coming just after one life ended, when the human being squirms in the vacuum and every banality seems like a sign, a possible first trace of a life that will follow. At that moment, of course, I did not see any continuation of my life in what that man had written in his letter, but I was more open to strange possibilities than usual: the very fact that the letter was so lengthy, supplemented with very detailed and completely unintelligible sketches similar to maps or blueprints of some unknown structures, suggested significant effort someone, malevolent or not, invested into reaching up to me,

informing me, even informing himself about me. The remark about the power network at the beginning of the letter referred to something I had completely forgotten about: in 1989 or 1990 (the episode is so unimportant that it is difficult to reconstruct the exact year when it happened), a republic gathering of electrical engineering students took place in Osijek; at the time, I was also a student, some even thought I had perspective, so I delivered a short and incoherent paper on the history of electrification in Osijek and its surroundings, which the audience gathered at what was then the People's Technical Hall not only found boring but also funny (for the most part, all other lectures dealt with programming languages). It was completely unexpected, but they asked us to submit our presentations in print because they intended to publish them in conference proceedings (it was unclear who and when would ever want to read them, given that the participants themselves listened to one another's talks with much effort and

without any interest); while working on the text before sending it to the organizers, I tried to learn more about the topic, so I started going through the Historical Archives as well as specialized journals buried deep in the City Library (my oral presentation was patched together using phrases from textbooks and general places that could today be found after a very superficial online search). I have to admit that this was the first time, as I worked completely alone, without a compass, collapsing to the very bottom of the problem, I realized why someone would be attracted to “an academic career.” The paper grew to some fifty pages in length (not including the illustrations and bibliography), and I was truly proud of it; they refused to accept it as such (most other submission had between two and ten pages), so I brought it down to a combination of introduction and conclusion, and eventually, roughly at the beginning of 1991, it got published in this unfortunate publication that, perhaps unintentionally, carried an ambiguous

title: *Slavonia on the Verge of the New Technologies*. I received a copy – it was horribly designed, it had soft light-blue covers while its layout resembled sloppy high school essays – which I lost, if I remember correctly, that very week, but by that moment the whole thing got so far-removed from me that I did not even bother to look for it again.

So, I did not have another copy I could “sell” to this person, but I could not just give up on continuing our communication: I found it deeply upsetting (so much so that I was on the verge of serious consideration of immediately calling the police) that the letter contained two or three details from my personal life, moreover, some of the circumstances were most certainly not know to anyone but me: the arrangement of different household items in my apartment, some newer texts I had not yet published, in a word, things that could not be part of some “paranormal” knowledge – all it would take was that someone very careful and skillful break into my apartment while I was not

there. Still, taking into consideration the tone of the letter and the horde of completely vague references to people and phenomena I was supposed to be “familiar” with, it seemed ridiculous to take those messy papers to the boys in blue and complain I was in danger; the police had better things to do, considering they were trying to find the cause why, a couple of nights before, their entire supply of explosive devices had blown up. At that moment, it actually seemed more cunning to play along, to pretend I took the bait: I replied with a postcard and explained I no longer had that text, but that I would like him to explain some of the terminology (ElectroSlavonia, Hell Ltd, “stream”). I received no reply.

At the beginning of June, by when I had already forgotten about it, yet another letter arrived, typed in a similar fashion, but this time with a different signature:

Dezső Tibor
Nikola Tesla Street 2109
Kapelna – Tišina

The envelope also contained a 30-minute audiotape, a “homemade” recording; I think it would take at least twenty pages to explain what was exactly on it (I listened to the whole recording only once, and barely; I’m sitting at the sun-lit desk as I write this, but the memory, unwanted as it may be, of some sentences and sounds recorded on it still sends shivers down my spine), but none of it actually belongs to this story. Besides, several years ago, Lea unintentionally taped Balint’s *Microfilters* over it – one evening, by chance, we had caught it on Radio Slavonia – and now it would be difficult to reproduce the details from memory. The letter itself was much shorter than the first (I’m copying it here without omissions):

Dear Sir,

Thank You for Your reply, I know You are very busy. I called You to come here for real and have a look at these “satellite dishes,” as the EVIDENCE of some things, but it’s better not to put it on paper. (Or the phonelines.) I have a hard time explaining something without concrete examples, but, well, let me tell You once again: look for a two-story house, made of red brick, with a basement, it has plenty of rooms and an attic (there’s a meadow behind it), in an area as scarcely populated as this, You can’t miss it, there are no two alike. I mentioned the “stream” I had already talked about before, and that might be really dangerous, if a man doesn’t know, others can see it as the other end of the ballad (the so-called “Paljevina”), but that’s lack of brains. I know THE EXACT LOCATION, I’d prefer to show the Location to You and Your Colleagues, personally, so You can see, if only it weren’t in the occupied territory. But those Chetniks do not know the location is occupied from another position, as the army says: “before

them,” so their occupation is occupied. Here’s the copy, on my life I swear, let me drop dead right here and now (the so-called “Paljevina 99,” 54423): “There exists a territory they will never be able to take.” Eh, now, what did the Poet want to say, You know this better than me, but it’s not I’m crazy either: this “kingdom” (*basiléia*), that’s the Territory. We are that KINGDOM (“domain”), and as long as we live, our kingdom will not fall, because we are the end. To pick up on it immediately, as the saying goes, it’s difficult to make ends meet, so to say, I know, but everything will be sorted out only after the thread is met. I will come to Your Osijek on June 12, 1992 (Friday) because I have some additional check-ups then, so I propose we talk in confidence. I will be at the Hanging Bridge at noon (twelve hundred hours) on the said date (Twelfth of June 1992), it would be an honor to meet You and to show You the “evidence,” which I have mentioned before. Even though You maybe know all this, if You have not perhaps forgotten. As it says in the Bible (“The

Holy Scripture”): “The history of all names is but the history of one and only Immortal man: AND WE ARE THAT MAN.”

Dear Sir
(do not reply to this letter)

Tibor Dezső
Kapelna – Tišina, 21:09

I hadn't been at the Drava since August 1991. It was truly unreal to once again pass through the part of the city that was so close, within reach, but that I had avoided as much as I could, like everyone else in the city, because it was so open, with its completely unarticulated buildings, lines of trees, and all other verticals, that everyone who found themselves there felt completely exposed to death (I have already mentioned how safe I felt in closed spaces, but in the street, at the first sound of gunfire, I was overcome by a panic as if I were an animal); at that moment, observing the scars of those countless and

senseless explosions in the promenade's concrete, perhaps I would have found some trace of fear within me – after all, the shelling had stopped only recently, and no one could forget the fact that the army and the “civilians” that had bombarded us for months still lived on the same positions, probably with the same weapons in their hands, and were still keeping us in their sights – if all of my more delicate feelings had not been conquered by something else, something much more concrete. Without any doubt, it was the warmest day of the year, and its oppressive heat was only made worse by tangible humidity; in the afternoon, while I circled the Teacher's College on some other business and passed the streets between Vukovar Avenue and Bulevar, the sky was still clear (even though any trace of blue had long disappeared in the scorching heat) and the façades bright, as if, for a few consecrated moments, we had fallen back to the end of the 1980s and into a giant photograph where the grimy patina of the war year had not yet

coagulated the pastel shades of the city: as if they rushed to deliver the earth's juices through chemical processes in the atmosphere, the plants' colors were so intensive that their profound and oily layers spilled over the edges of petals and leaves, all the while emanating their heavy, suffocating, perhaps even toxic scent; however, when a minute before noon I finally reached the wide, muddy-green course of the Drava, low, white clouds had already settled over the landscape, creating an enclosed corridor where the heat of the hidden Sun mixed with the blaze of the concrete, producing an unexpected visual effect: the vaporization of all colors that, under the hot iron of the cyclone, disappeared as if melting in water or retreating to a different wavelength at the click of someone's remote controller, leaving behind only a blank canvas on which pale strips of grey, green and brown extended along the length of the horizon.

The promenade was completely deserted and quiet, as if lined with cotton wool, and for the first

couple of minutes, I took pleasure in it; I had a hard time adapting to an increasing number of people returning to the city and I soon realized that now, regardless of how dangerous and sick it were, I could finally see the depopulated and uneventful face of Osijek as its true nature. However, as minutes went by, the impression the sight of the promenade, devastated and abandoned as if after a catastrophe, left on me was slowly becoming more and more uncomfortable: I felt something was going on, but this happened directly under the surface of the activities I was aware of, as if someone observed me from afar, perhaps because I was brought there for the purpose that was completely different from the one I had been presented with. I sat down for a moment at the only bench that had not yet been destroyed, believing I would calm down if I stabilized and quietened myself down physically, but I immediately stood up and started walking up and down at the foot of the bridge: the year before the fogging of the mosquitoes had been

partially deterred on account of occupation so there was so many of them that their number is impossible to explain to anyone who did not experience such days; swarms roamed the promenade and kept flying into my mouth, nose, even eyes, forcing constant arm-waving and head-jerking, incomparable to the usual struggles against bites and the standard average of several dozens of blisters a day. Just as it happened in city parks, without regular maintenance, the somber plants in concrete flowerpots along the Drava had gone wild: under the absolute greyness that had now settled on the whole scene, dried up from the endless spring sun, the giant bushes and flower gardens obscured by nameless weeds snuffed out from the boom of orange, blue and yellow stars into the ossuary of a tangle of ashen, pale-purple and grimy-brown wires that seemed not only to contain those swarms but produce them too, disintegrate into them, as if collective mimicry allowed the insects to look like a leaf of grass, a clump of dirt, or a thorn, and then,

a moment later, disperse into a thirsty swarm whose approach was first heard and only then seen.

Two faint metallic clangs from the cathedral's tower made it through the mush of that overheated air: this meant half an hour had already passed, and I realized I could no longer take it; deeply convinced that the day, in an hour or two, would end in blackness, with the arrival of the storm, hail, thunder and deluge, my only thought was that I should go back to my apartment, take a cold shower and wash down this new, sticky skin, flop naked on the covers in the semidarkness of my bedroom, which I had definitely returned to the weekend before, then play a record, one of my favorites in those months, depending on the weight of my mood: *Holy Money* or *Prayers on Fire* for the wave's crest, *Shame, Humility, Revenge* or *Your Funeral...* *My Trial* for wallowing in its trough, *Loveless* or *Victorialand* for floating on the surface – and once again read those letters that had gotten me into this mess in the first place. My pride was not hurt,

nor did I feel stupid for answering that senseless invitation: I found the whole thing interesting enough to try and see what it was about, and I didn't care about the possibility that all of it was just someone's complicated set-up (that "regular man" from the village was becoming more and more suspicious, and I also recognized the last quote from his second letter, and I knew it was not from the Bible, but it only made the whole story more interesting). Besides, today it is easy to forget that, back then, before the internet, such anonymous letters, ranging from chain letters, love messages and friendly jokes to futile threats, were much more common than today; I can't think of anyone who didn't receive one, and sometimes even tried to discover the sender's identity. Just as I had accepted the challenge, I was also ready to forget all about it; just about that time I had gotten a new job offer and was supposed to take my new position in September: it was supposed to be the final end

of one whole period, marked by the state emergency and all of those sleepless nights I had spent on duty.

Back then I had already known Andrija, although in a completely different context: he worked at the same computer center where I had been “mobilized” to, but he always came to work in his uniform and conducted checks around the building that were completely unclear to me; at first, I thought he was there to keep an eye on *me*, considering that the past fall military paranoia towards civilians had reached such levels that every man not wearing a uniform had automatically been considered suspicious, if not a potential member of “the fifth column.” (Afterwards I realized that all of it, of course, had nothing to do with me.) He was the reason why, from time to time, I thought that war, after all, did have a redeeming characteristic or two: under previous circumstances, there had been no chance of the two of us getting to know each other, and his occasional and relaxed

presence in those years carried a fresh air of normality, seriousness and perspective that was just as uncharacteristic of the armed hot-headed savages who, when the artillery attacks on the city had stopped, presented the main danger for Osijek survivors, as well as of my former friends, people “of culture,” scattered all over newly-founded countries and sadly bewildered by the cacophony of everything they were trying to “understand” and “tolerate.”

Andrija knew of the letters, I told him about them in some detail; we roared with laughter, of course, but even then I was troubled by the impression that he had somewhat different reasons for laughter, as if he was not amused with the madness of the whole correspondence but with the awkward delivery of its content – the material that, sometimes, seemed familiar from before (as if it perhaps belonged to the group of my “friends” that the letter addressed). I believed he could find the correspondence interesting for a number of reasons;

already at the beginning of spring, during long, quiet hours when our shifts occasionally overlapped, he told me, completely openly, as if it were some common trade activity, about the Radionics Circle in Habjanovci: he was a long-standing active member and he even published some texts in their yearbooks. He didn't think about it as something "paranormal," that's how his folks searched for water in the fields and lost objects in the house for as long as he could remember, but he was aware what city people thought about it; at the end of the eighties, all kinds of "crazies," as he called them, without holding back, most often from Zagreb, Osijek and Sarajevo, sometimes even from Belgrade and Novi Sad, appeared at their door and claimed they had healing powers, or wanted to show them their UFO documentation, or said they communicated with dead poets and great generals, all of them convinced dowsers were their "natural allies." Andrija was never rude to them, but he did think they needed serious treatment, and he never allowed

that their interests interfered with his; now, after so many people had “lost” it in the war and in many previously unseen ways, he expected, as soon as the artillery attacks seized, a new invasion of similar “patients.”

On account of all of this, I was caught by surprise when, one morning after our shift had ended (since the temperature was going through the roof, it must have been mid-July or early August, even though, according to all of the notes I kept, it should have been June, its middle or end), he suggested we simply got in his car and drove to Viljevo, completely unannounced (Dezső had not left his phone number anyhow), and see what and who was there. The whole trip was imagined as a “joke,” at least that’s what it seemed back then, and we were not particularly disappointed when it did not bring any result: along the way we ate a fantastic zander and got a little drunk on some cold Welschriesling, and I think that the day, extremely dry and hot,

mostly spent on forgotten roads and nameless places, while Slavonia burned with its full, dilapidated and monotonous, hallucinatory blaze, was actually the beginning of this whole story, perhaps “set up” in advance, most definitely made easier by Andrija’s initiative, regardless of whether it was calculated or not. After that, all other faces – whose names I have omitted from this text, not only out of respect for the deceased but also because if one name got disclosed, it would be relatively easy to reconstruct all others (and I’m going to keep that up because I don’t want to debase them in something that could one day be read as “literature”) – began floating in and out of my life with much more spontaneity, just like Andrija himself: after this, there were periods when I saw him on a daily basis, then months would pass and we would not see each other at all, and finally, at a moment these sentences yet have to climb to, I realized that years had passed, that he had been long gone, that I no

longer knew him, that I barely remembered him – as well as everyone else – and that I had become someone else myself.

That afternoon, first we tried to find the last place Dezső had sent his letter from; we drove towards Kapelna, because I remembered he wrote he lived “somewhere near Viljevo” (this, as I see it now, was actually written in the letter from Orahovica), but there was no address he had listed (we also checked house numbers 9, 10, 19, 20, 21, and 29; 219 and 2109, of course, did not exist). We both immediately thought of a different option – the village of Slobodna Vlast; we had enough time, so we drove to that region, hillier and completely different from the north, giving up almost immediately on conducting the search ourselves because at that moment I could not remember the exact address (I forgot it had not even been listed). At the local tavern, Andrija carefully interrogated its owner, the only man at the bar, trying to learn something about the name we were looking for;

the owner had never heard of him, but, like a device tuned only to select frequencies, from his cloud of alcoholic fumes, obviously listening in on our conversation, which I did not believe could even be heard over the noise of some terrible music from the radio, he yelled, “Paljevine!”, a fraction of a second after I had mentioned, more likely whispered this word – one of the more mysterious terms in Dezső’s letters – to Andrija. He told us it was the name of a village, not far from Slobodna Vlast, so we drove back north through thick forest and by the leaden waters of Borovik, an artificial lake in the shape of a scythe Death had left behind in the field; at the end of the seventies, one whole village had disappeared beneath it, so we wondered what the church at its bottom now looked like and what had happened with sunken graves, all the while passing through countless villages of most incredible names (Rozmajerovac, Paučje, Razbojšte, Drenje). We were not particularly surprised when the only inhabitant of Paljevina who we ran

into the street, an old man almost a hundred years old, told us he didn't know of the man we were looking for or of anything resembling the house described in the last letter; street number 99, as the only possible clue, did not exist either. However, when we were getting back to the car, ready to return to Osijek, he yelled he had remembered something: at the western exit from Paljevina, "a bit down the road," when you turn left, there is a dirt road leading to a large farm: "That's where a man named Tibor lives," he said, only to correct himself in the next moment, "No, no, it's not Tibor, *Todor!*... Yes, Todor..." as if this were just a slight variation of the same name. A moment later, he was once again sure the owner's name was Tibor, but it turned out he had left the farm "after the war"; the old man, of course, did not mean *this* war: this "Tibor/Todor" had left the farm, as his memory served him, back in 1967, 1968 or 1969.

At the place he had described there was a huge sunflower field; we almost missed the turn and the

narrow, extremely overgrown path that led to it and we barely managed to push through with our car. After five minutes of an incredibly slow drive, on a grassy clearing surrounded by bushes and scrubs, we saw a scene that can be found in deserts or in prairies from some westerns: a wooden barn as tall as a two-story house, all boarded up from outside, even though – like smaller buildings around it, wooden shacks whose purpose I could not determine – it seemed relatively well-preserved, if not new. We had expected a ruin, of course, but this was something completely different: a functional and long abandoned structure enveloped in a cloud of comically eerie silence, as if somewhere beneath the sunflowers there was some artificial isolation that cancelled out all the sounds coming from the nearby roads that were empty anyhow. The afternoon was coming to its end, we didn't want to stay there long: the heat was subsiding, the light was becoming warmer, the shadows longer, and we had a feeling we had truly reached the end

of the road. However, after a short conversation, we decided we would nevertheless, as we had no dishonest intentions, break into the barn in order to see what was inside; we had, after all, crossed all that way so nothing else made sense. It turned out it wasn't necessary: the door was open, the lock well-oiled, and the interior clean and tidy as if someone still maintained it on a daily basis. Not even the smallest trace of animal or human presence was to be found, and just when we were getting ready to leave, after my eyes had accustomed to semidarkness, I noticed the last detail I am capable of writing about at this moment: on a vertical, dark wooden beam on the front wall of the largest room, there was an old phone, made of black plastic and nailed onto the beam, it was a device that would have perhaps been more at place in some government institution, some fifty years earlier, than there, in the middle of nowhere. I immediately picked up the receiver: it seemed as if the specks of yellow dust under our feet flowed through

the wires and then dispersed through the frail sound channel, but, under those wild clouds of grainy sound that spread apart and condensed at lighting speed, as if in a fast-forwarded film, a clear dial tone could be heard. On the wall to the right, there was a mesh of barely visible, darkened marks of names and numbers penciled into the wooden boards, covered by the grimy coat of use and time, and across them all, as large as a title, hovered a line of numbers written in white chalk: “41-068”. It was my phone number.

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović

Gallery of Fine Arts in Osijek:
Studies, Ruins
(stories, 2017)

Signature

Relja Butorac, 2003

The signature is a frame that needs to be jumped through: it's as if I can hear that sentence, through the interference in this channel, being uttered by someone braver and more patient than I, someone who is no longer there. If every sign is a sign of death, if every signature is a signpost to the inevitable finitude of the signatory, then every letter, every word, can only be a funeral oration for the object it wants to grasp. But every sign, every stone that builds a crypt that will survive the moment when I cease to exist, petrifies all that's been lived through in yet another way, like a lever rejecting this surmounted experience. The signature can thus be an *opening*, a separation of biological

existence from the concept of biography that holds it back, and autobiography is a necessary precondition for such a liberation – a constitutive death that logically precedes both my own biological death and my life.

On a dead summer afternoon in 2003, pleasantly dazed both by the sun and by the trepidation caused by the silence of the city center, I stood frozen stiff before a dirty metal plate bearing the inscription “GALLERY OF FINE ARTS,” nailed to a red brick pillar in front of a building painted orange at 9 European Avenue. Large, slightly pixelated digital photographs dominated the posters for the exhibition which was to be open to visitors between August 1st and 31st: the left one showed my navel (along with a bulging, dark brown mole placed on the hypothetical fifth “hour” of its clock face) under a perfectly delineated rotating web of black hair, and the right one my left eye, clearly

highlighting the lashes, the amber clumps of sleep, a network of cracked capillaries in the whites, and the *op art* textures of the dark circles. In an ominous conjunction with such photographs, suggesting a concept similar to Natacha Merritt's *Digital Diaries* project, the title of the exhibition seemed like irrefutable evidence or a final accusation: "LUKA BEKAVAC."

Having gone through the front door, I left behind all hope of this being an error or a coincidence. Stretching out over a monumental diagonal across the easternmost wall of the Gallery, the genital landscape, painted with terrifying photographic perfection, hung on a glass surface at least six square meters in size. The proportions were real, there were no significant falsifications, but there was something immensely devastating about its condition, the way it inexplicably equilibrated in the air. A retired couple carefully studied the minute anomalies, scars, and wrinkled skin of the scrotum, as if it were a flow of magma, threatening to

spill over the frame. The central figure of that *veduta* seemed to be depicted in a refractory period, while the *corpora cavernosa* had not yet released their blood; the swollen veins, the slight irritation of the skin, and the clearly outlined contours of the purple head, were, more than anything, reminiscent of a beaten boxer. On the opposite wall, perhaps attempting a visual parallel or a “montage” joke of questionable taste, my right hand was placed, in an unrealistically warm color, as if prepared for a palmist; the background looked like a foaming turquoise and emerald-green sea, but the focus of the hypothetical lens was sharpened on tiny drops of water, conjured in unbelievable detail while they distorted the lines of my palm and the old forked scar at the root of my middle finger like a fisheye.

I won't describe all of the exhibits: there was a Pollockian detail of a balding, greying, and dandruffy scalp in an extreme and chaotic close-up, followed by a profile of a tailbone, and then a

meditatively static, wine-red “internist” diptych of hemorrhoids. In spite of seeing through all the comic exaggerations of younger artistic cliques, who regarded this Neo-Renaissance ruin as a temple of the worst academicism, a museum of landscapist mediocrity, I was taken aback by the radicalism of this exhibition. All this happened immediately after the spring fluctuations in Osijek’s cultural policy, when a number of center-right curators were dismissed, followed by the emblematic *Tyto alba*, and a number of delegates from the Ecumenical Church of Apiculture replaced them. I found out later that, before the opening of the *Luka Bekavac* exhibition, cabinets full of old Masonic certificates flew through the Gallery windows for weeks, and a large owl farm in the southern fields was destroyed; it was owned by the Gallery, and its echolocation wars with the “Mursa” Bat Training Center have been the focus of political party wars in Osijek for years, but this is beyond the scope of this text. After its renovations, the

bowels of the Gallery no longer looked like a poorly furnished Biedermeier salon; the drastic remodeling made it twice as spacious, and the whiteness of the rooms was only disturbed by the exhibits and the occasional metal bench. I was petrified to find that there was also a luxurious hardcover monograph *Luka Bekavac*, sold at the extravagant price of 129.99 €; it contained many paintings that were not a part of the Osijek exhibition, as well as a number of theoretical essays on the relationship between the fictional and documentary aspects of the entire series. It was unspeakably distressing to see all of that, and it is distressing to write about it today; nevertheless, the exhibition set in motion the unexpected process of renouncing the fiction I had been reluctantly working on since the late 1990s: it demonstrated in the most devious way what my writing was supposed to be, and it mercilessly mocked everything that, unfortunately, it was.

I knew the author of the exhibition, of course; if that were not the case, this would be horror

fiction, not a banal account of a real anecdote. It was Relja Butorac, an artist from Rijeka; when I found him in Barutana the next night at a Kneip-pkopf and Azot concert, he reacted to my dread with a roaring laugh, noting how someone who was already “formalistically mature” should outgrow an identification with *texts* that refer to him. This was probably the epicenter of my discomfort: Relja said that he had done the same thing to himself, and that it was only after this “semiotic suicide” that he feels completely artistically emancipated; my texts, in contradiction to this, still stubbornly clung to other texts like lifejackets, carefully avoiding the burning problem of *my life*. For example, my short story collection *False Bottom*, printed that very summer by MD Publishing in a run of 25 copies, included the works “A Slow Fade to Total Transparency” and “Complete Opacity,” the titles of which were stolen precisely from Butorac, more in the form of mechanical citations rather than actual intertextual parasitism. His *Slow Fade*,

published in 1994, begins as a perversely fastidious parody of realistic stereotypes – a gloomy depiction of winter on the country estate of a destitute aristocrat in the early twentieth century – and continues as an account of the family’s final years, providing a painstaking reconstruction of their bizarrely entangled Austro-Hungarian genealogy, and expansive, extraordinarily elaborated descriptions of furniture, food, clothing, the family stables, etc. However, starting from page 99, the conventional and somewhat boring course of the story simply disappears – what follows are the previously seen pages 83-94 (but printed backwards), and page 87 repeated nine times, before the novel “ends” with a new page from an unidentified book resembling *Logarithmic Tables*, which is repeated 99 times; a “slow fade” is enacted by printing this network of numbers in ninety-nine different shades, starting with black and ending with a few completely illegible, almost totally white surfaces. *Complete Opacity*, a “complementary” erotic

fiction, was given away with the first copies of that book: this baroque gem was almost devoid of content, all symmetries and reflections, choreographies and figures, like a nightmare organized with geometric precision; the text was embossed in the darkest shade of blue on black paper, and bound in a small volume in which it was repeated sixteen times.

In the summer of 1999, Butorac turned his back on such ultraformalism and published a gigantic art monograph entitled *Relja Butorac; Luka Bekavac* – similar to a number of other “personalized” exhibitions which, as I later learned, were put on throughout the former Yugoslavia under the common title of *Liberated Territories* – is a reproduction of its poetic model. The book featured a series of “photographs” – in fact meticulously executed hyperrealistic oils on glass – that systematically cataloged Relja’s private world, ultimately aiming at a visual transposition of the problem of the author’s unbreakable anonymity and his

necessary disconnection from the work. There were family scenes, school diplomas, pornographic self-portraits, store receipts, the floor of a barber-shop covered with handfuls of his hair, and whole series of worn-out T-shirts, pants, socks, and shoes; one painting depicted a soiled toilet bowl, the legend of which contained a detailed description of Relja's stool and the frequency of his defecations; a few pages later, a falsified memorial plaque on the front of the building where Relja was born heralded the imminent revival of Croatian literature with incredibly pathetic paraphrases of Kranjčević's *The Lion of Chaeronea*. It is difficult to say to what kind of art Butorac's work actually belonged: all his earlier books were crafted so perfectly in technical terms, as "art monographs without pictures," that they regularly led their rare readers to perceive him as a paraliterary or para-artistic phenomenon. This position was further strengthened by the reputation of his publisher: the elitist manufacture Scrittura Metafisica, primarily dedicated to the

production of expensive collector's editions of art books, was better known in Italy and Switzerland than in Croatia at the time, and it favored authors such as Relja, whose "conceptual literature" was polemically opposed to the "representational." All this, it should be repeated, took place in the mid- and late-1990s, when the eruption of the "new realist fiction" was looming in Croatia, and its audience would, understandably, remain completely deaf, blind, and mute in the face of such difficult and self-absorbed works.

Relja did not directly comment on *Luka Bekavac*; he just said that all those *Liberated Territories* reminded him of jumping through flaming hoops or, better yet, of building new hoops through which one could jump; he said that's exactly why my next book has to be an autobiography. Everyone laughed, this sounded completely insane; only much later, when I told this to a friend as a joke, did I fully appreciate the necessity of the program of textualizing one's life, and not just for my own

“work.” *The signature is a frame that needs to be jumped through*: this sentence sounded to me like a transmission addressed to someone else, perhaps a long time ago, but it reached only me, grabbing me like a hook.

Gallery of Fine Arts in Osijek, the novel from which these texts were first adapted to be presented under the guise of “Terms for the *Dictionary of the Third Program*” and then returned to this limbo, represents my tomb under construction, just as all the “Galleries” described in these texts – fluid objects whose materiality, location, and function oscillate – liberate the real Gallery of Fine Arts in Osijek in its capacity as a disembodied generator of events, an “institution,” but not in terms of museums or libraries, rather in terms of parenthood, brotherhood, marriage, perhaps interment. Therefore, the Gallery cannot become the over-arching concept of this cycle, which will include all of its heterogeneous moments: the hypertrophy of a different *realism* should put the referents of these texts

out of the reach of lexical definitions, revealing them as entities whose characteristics have yet to be deduced, perhaps only by means of the echo they create in space. That echo, let's be very clear, comes from the future. In a similar manner, autobiography becomes the figure of a signature stretched out across the whole discourse: a slow and elaborate suicide by which I destroy all the impersonal banality out of which I was created, and with each destroyed piece I resurrect and discover one of my uncharted parts that suddenly *exists*, out-of-text and alive, and which will remain thus: a part that will remain permanently *closed* for this and any other inscription. At the very moment that this text comes to its end, to its final point, I will begin to live.

* * *

Relja has recently been working on coordinating a project called *Collected Works*. It will be, as he announced, “the most monumental ekphrasis in

the history of Croatian literature,” stretching over several thousand pages – a single title that will textually condense all his work so far. He will pay a multitude of journalists, academics, and novelists to ghostwrite this “catalog” of his oeuvre, and as a textual model he will offer them the “zero” chapter of Claude Simon’s *The Georgics* or Foucault’s analysis of Velázquez’s *Las meninas* from *The Order of Things*. However, since the whole project is not explicitly attributed to anyone, it will not be specified that these *Collected Works* are in fact “his”: the books will devour giant pieces of cited material, and appropriate texts from numerous other people who played a role in shaping his poetics, or – in his own words – “the *Relja Butorac* research area.”

In a recent e-mail from his official address (“luka.bekavac@hotmail.com,” despite all my pleas), Relja has sent some new information about this work and, as he says, its “nostrification.” He will adapt it to the domestic market: it will be printed in a run of 100 copies, in ten thick volumes

that will be published twice a year, approximately by the end of 2008; the price of the set will be equal to the average monthly salary, and the design will closely replicate the *Pinnacles of World Literature* series, with its brown leather, gilded lettering, and authors' portraits. However, the project will ultimately retain the phrase *Collected Works* only in the subtitle. Instead of limiting himself to reconstructing his own past work, Relja will try to engage in a kind of *invasion* of other people's bibliographies: each volume will include a plethora of new, carefully selected and arranged artistic, textual, and documentary "strategic material," and be attributed to persons who, between 1995 and 2005, ended up among the ten best-selling authors in Croatia: Ante Tomić, Arijana Čulina, Miljenko Jergović, Ivan Aralica, Zoran Ferić, etc. All the numbered volumes, regardless of the signatory, will carry the title *Relja Butorac*.

Translated by Brian Willems

I Was Born to Watch the Paint Dry

Interview with Luka Bekavac

BRANISLAV OBLUČAR: In your first novel, *Drenje*, you play with the line between fiction, i.e., fantasy, and reality in a particularly seductive way. *Drenje* has created a completely new literary image of the Slavonia-Baranja region, so tangible that many have accepted the literary fact that *Drenje* is a place in Baranja, simultaneously trying to interpret the novel as an allegory and place it in reality, even though the novel disputes or breaches this reality on several levels. How would you comment on the attempt at reading reality into the subtext of the novel?

LUKA BEKAVAC: Given the complete dominance of this “reality-like” approach to reading and writing over the past ten or fifteen years, it is difficult

to tolerate it as just one of many “legitimate interpretations.” This is not to say, of course, that the places and events described in *Drenje* have nothing to do with reality; I think that some people liked the book precisely because it appeared to be a faithful representation of the region, beyond everyday political and “folkloric” stereotypes (and their accompanying styles). However, I was surprised at how often it was necessary to “defend” the possibility of this irregular, unevenly regulated coexistence of fiction and fact in the text. This is the space that still appeals to me the most: the possibility of juxtaposing, at times radically, levels of fact closest to the essayistic or autobiographical with levels of fiction bordering on the hallucinatory or fantastical – a process that is found in different forms and to different degrees in Genet, Breton, Blanchot, Leiris, B. S. Johnson, and so on. I was puzzled by the comments that referred to the “real” Drenje, which allegedly really exists “in Baranja” and has a similar, completely astonishing geographical

profile, as well as by the comments that, by claiming that (this) Drenje does *not* exist, understood this to be some kind of fundamental “failure” of the novel – after all, what is *Drenje* about if there is no Drenje?

The feeling of discomfort that arises from such interference of levels is, at least for me, the most interesting aspect of the work I just mentioned. As far as my texts are concerned, the parts presented as completely unproblematic are often the most far removed from reality, while others that seem to be obvious fabrications use only slightly modified facts. However, I am not sure how much all of this has to do with the instances of *Drenje's* reception that you mentioned; the ossification of some textual practices has led to the possibility of interpreting all of the above as a mere “stylistic solution” of a *story* that “still,” above all, despite one approach or another, actually speaks about the transition, the Homeland War, the state of science in Croatia, and so on. In general, I believe that some kind of

“reality-like register” is unquestionably present in almost every text, but the problem is this naive, allegorizing “but still.” A kind of criticism I can’t seem to grasp, that long predates the so-called “reality-like fiction,” uses this “but still” to “breach” the text and enter the field of “narrative,” where all the undefined creation is stabilized in favor of the alleged correspondence of the “reality-likeness” of the text with reality itself. To employ this alleged “breach” is to actually misread the text altogether.

B. O.: The plot of *Drenje* culminates in theoretical and essayistic passages in which the protagonists Marta and Marković try to explain the mysterious noise. The names of researchers of the obscure phenomena (Raudive, Jürgenson, Estep, T. C. Lethbridge, etc.) appear at the edges of Marković’s interpretation. A little research on the reader’s part opens

the door to the labyrinth of “instrumental communication” or EVP (*Electronic Voice Phenomena*), which increases the mystery of the text. What exactly is this all about, and what is the connection between this parascientific field and the noise that appears on the tape recorders of the bioacousticians in Drenje?

L. B.: In the context of *Drenje*, the point of contact is the noise – the acoustic “staging” of infinity, every millisecond of which contains all forms of articulated messages that could theoretically be formed in the given frequency band. It is, therefore, an amorphous, inarticulate substrate from which everything that can exist will emerge, nevertheless, the encounter with it, before this articulation, always causes some kind of shock, a negative response, the impact of which can be compensated for by psychological mechanisms such as apopheonia. “Instrumental transcommunication,” a twentieth-century form of spiritism based on the belief

in the possibility of contact with the “other side” through technical devices, has been the most frequently commented on viewpoint of the recognition of proper structures in chaos – whether they are illusory or real, which is indeterminable. Noise is seen as the only medium, but also the cause of the impossibility of such contact: a weak and indistinguishable signal on that “other side” can be transported beyond the threshold of recognizability only by adding noise, that is, by provoking the “stochastic resonance” of the elements of the message we are trying to hear. It is clear that in this case the alleged “message” that we are “amplifying” does not even exist outside of the noise – *in principle*, we cannot determine whether what we “hear” or “see” is a sensory manifestation of something that existed before, or just the fruit of our encoding.

This is a much more bizarre and complicated topic than you might think at first glance, so I’d

rather not go into the history of the terms and researchers you've listed (there's plenty of data and "examples" available, if one does some basic research). If we could go back to *Drenje* and the "neighboring" texts, I would like to add just one more thing, perhaps in the wake of the effects of Gysin and Burroughs' cut-up and fold-in techniques. The noise, like any other type of "chaos," acts like a modern version of the crystal ball: if it really contains all the possibilities of articulated realizations in advance, then everything we "see" in the noise, as in a kind of "timelessness," can equally come from the past and the future. The question of reliability of such "messages" is, of course, at the core of the whole problem – it forces a choice between a completely different understanding of temporality and "reality" (the direction the texts around *Drenje* play with) and writing the whole thing off as an illusion, a disorder, perhaps a loss of reason.

B. O.: In the hybrid genre of the *Gallery of Visual Arts in Osijek*, which can be read as a companion to *Drenje*, one of the characters makes a distinction between “representational” and “conceptual” literature. How willing are you to support this distinction yourself? Or should I rephrase the question – as an author who also deals with literature on a scholarly level, are the premises of literary theory important for the literary writing process?

L. B.: I feel like these are two separate questions. As far as the distinction in the *Gallery of Visual Arts* is concerned, it had a somewhat exaggerated function, given that we accept that these are not necessarily opposing concepts, nor do they exhaust a field that they are supposed to define. Perhaps this is another variation of the problem of the relationship between “reality” and “fiction.” The focus of the chapter we are talking about was actually the Rijeka-based *visual* artist Relja Butorac, whose

primary medium is text, but also the book as an object: the “mimetic” aspect of the text (to which this “representational,” “realistic” prose was reduced for the needs of the *Gallery*) is mostly absent from his works. These are books in which the “action” is mostly graphic (such as the variation of tones used to print dozens of pages of one and the same text) or paratextual: the monograph for which he was introduced to the *Gallery* was called *Luka Bekavac*, and my text ends with a description of his long-term project *Collected Works* (without the author’s specification, it would “absorb” more or less random materials from other people’s oeuvres); he ended up abandoning it in favor of publishing a series of ten volumes entitled *Relja Butorac*, which he signed with the names of the best-selling contemporary authors (Tomić, Jergović, Čulina, Aralica, etc.).

As for my scholarly work in the field of literature, it is extremely important to me; contrary to the established stereotypes about the “forbidden

fruit,” I believe that it has not diminished my ability to enjoy a wide variety of texts but has only expanded it. I think it has influenced my writing in an indirect way, but not more than other areas that I am interested in or that I have studied more intensively. It never offered me a kind of “epiphany” moment, nor did it fundamentally change how I felt about literature, but it did help and it continues to help me articulate my own impressions and intuitions. More importantly for your question, if I read its subtext correctly – I do not believe that theory is a field that automatically generates usable ideas for writing literary texts. I have never been “motivated” by a theoretical thesis to write a text that would serve as its problematization, reenactment, exemplification, illustration, or anything else... On the contrary, when I encountered literary texts in which I could recognize such a process, I always had the impression that the whole thing could be presented more adequately, more completely, more impressively, even “naturally” in a

strictly theoretical vocabulary. Perhaps I am old-fashioned in that sense; I really think that there are spaces that can *only* be reached by theory, as well as spaces that can *only* be reached by a literary text, so it seems more profitable to intensify these specific advantages in writing than to force some “hybrid” formations that, at least from my point of view, instead of doubling the effect, mostly halve it.

B. O.: As you said yourself, *Drenje* (2011) is a part of a trilogy that also includes *August After Midnight* (2013) and the *Gallery of Fine Arts in Osijek* (2017).

L. B.: *Drenje* was not actually meant to be a part of the trilogy. However, there are a number of texts with which *Drenje* forms a kind of sequence or, even better, a set, since this would not imply the order of writing and reading (*Drenje*, in fact, is certainly not the “first” text in this group, neither in a logical nor in a chronological sense). This group

– in which each text can be read separately from one another – could also include the *Gallery of Visual Arts in Osijek*, maybe one or two titles from *Double Bottom*, a few more shorter texts written before *Drenje*, etc. *August After Midnight* belongs to the same narrative world: it is a thematic area that is very similar to *Drenje*, with occasional concrete “intersections” in terms of its characters and events. But whereas *Drenje* presented certain events in a rather “linear” narrative, *August After Midnight* was divided into three parts that are completely different in terms of the writing “technique,” this is to say, three “documents” on which a certain series of events could possibly be reconstructed. They were more or less systematically stripped of a number of features that some readers recognized (and praised) as the “style” of *Drenje*. For my part, such a choice of procedures was not motivated by the positive or negative reception of *Drenje*; in fact, *August After Midnight* was already “included” in it, conceived more or less simulta-

neously with it and completed around the time of its release. In other words, without such a “complementary” *August After Midnight*, no such *Drenje* would have been written.

B. O.: In 2022, you published *Urania*, a novel in nine books and six volumes with more than 2000 pages, your most ambitious project to date – both in terms of procedures and in terms of shaping a narrative world, a work that is in many ways unique in contemporary Croatian literature. The story in *Urania* is organized around eight protagonists located on two time axes. Each character has their own narrative “channel,” however, their “sections” include multiple echoes and blends – they are simultaneously separated, yet sometimes appear to be approaching and permeating each other. At the book launch, you called them “probes,” and

I really like that metaphor. They are psychologically convincing, but character believability was never really your end goal, or at least not the only goal, correct?

L. B.: That's right, writing never starts from the impression of being in someone else's consciousness, from someone else's perspective, colored by characterization, that is, from the need to write in someone else's "voice" (although I often write in the first person, and some texts were conceived as transcripts of monologues). For me, characters are usually something that slowly emerges from the fusion of the aforementioned "ambient" and material elements. Only then does the question arise – who occupies such a space? But "someone" does not have to occupy it, at least not in the form of a human person.

These "probes" came about as an improvised idea, but in retrospect they actually address the problem: how to access a particular world in the first place? More often than not, I find an

undefined “omniscient” perspective unattractive and uninteresting. The character, on the other hand, really acts as a probe in that foreign environment: a precisely located and quite concrete medium offering a limited but unique range of information, inaccessible through other channels. I would argue that characters are not primarily people; a character can also be seen as a series of events that shape a story, which only a posteriori implies an identity as the focus and archive of that story. Going a step further, a character can be reduced to a specific *sensorium*, a type of sensory contact with the world that only subsequently takes on an intellectual, emotional, cultural profile, etc. If my characters have psychological “three-dimensionality” and emotional credibility (as it seems to many), I would like to believe that this is at least to some extent a happy side-effect of such a construction of the character “from below,” in which they are never a person, a symbol or a “bearer of values,” but above all a certain *body* through which

the world in which they live breaks through in a unique way, and in which the body of the reader can also participate (which has nothing to do with the “life story” of the character the reader is reading about).

In *Urania*, we have seven such probes (Bekavac and Schlesinger may be probes of other categories), so that the fictional space – although mostly narrated in the third person – is represented mosaically in seven “sectors” of the text, captured from seven angles. What is perceived in reading (at least I hope so) as a temporarily habitable “world” is nothing more than this intersection zone, point of “leaks” and interference between probes and their channels. In these novels, however, there is another level to the problem, a recurrent thread from *Drenje* onwards: the semi-permeability of the membrane of the “world” itself, the contamination of one world by another, the problem of the “right of access” to foreign spaces of life, knowledge, etc. These are the edges of these novels, perhaps the

most interesting places in my mind. Once we get used to the idea of a world as an artificially constructed environment, a series of questions arise: what can be found nearby, what do other worlds look like, is communication possible between them, what would groups that can move between them be interested in, what would the beings that exist only between worlds be.

B. O.: Let's dwell on the characters a little longer. In your novels, we encounter very distinctive, strong female characters – from Marta of *Drenje*, the Felsövány sisters of *August After Midnight* and now Katarina, Iris and Mira – who are the key narrative and energy hubs of the entire network of characters in *Urania*. I would say that you deftly avoid gender stereotypes in your writing. How important is this dimension to you, both as a writer and as a reader?

L. B.: The fact that such a question is raised at all – equal, detailed female characters as something out of the ordinary – is indicative of the situation in which we live. This dimension is definitely important to me, on all levels – as a reader, as a writer, and finally as a professor of literature. I owe this largely to my daily conversations with Maša Grdešić. The process of becoming aware of certain problems, however, is not a thing that you “do” at some point (if you are lucky enough to get to that point at all) and then you are done, formed, immune from your own stupidity in advance, “redeemed” for past failures, etc. It is a continuous form of growth that corrects an old and distorted image of the world that was, until recently, completely “normalized” and reproduced, among other things, by the educational system and by the hypermasculine history of what was considered the universal artistic canon. These things are difficult to change overnight, but fortunately they are

changing; the growing panic that is gripping some parts of society is certainly a positive sign...

Going back to the female characters in my novels, the rule is similar to that of other factors: more came from intuition and “spontaneous” construction of the narrative world than from a conscious “political” decision to construct certain characters in a certain way. It is unfortunate that avoiding gender stereotypes is perceived as an exception, which brings me back to the beginning of my answer. For me, female characters could never have been anything else, because I honestly do not see them as “special cases” in comparison to male characters: they are equally important, equally complex, equally capable of the best and the worst... To answer your question, however, I think we would have to admit that if there is an imbalance in these novels, it is to the detriment of the male characters, who are often trapped in a passive, observant position while enduring something they have no

understanding of and no power to change. From Marković to Rosenfeld, there is this constant of apathy and fatalism, an inability to see the systemic structures that are ruining them... The fact is that the female characters you mentioned are agents of a healthier attitude towards the world, generators of change, initiators of fundamental new processes, although this often has ambivalent results: success, the achievement of set goals, as a specific transformative experience, represents a kind of self-destruction in itself.

B. O.: Descriptions are extremely important in making the fictional world of *Urania* tangible. They act as a brilliant blend of meticulous detail and lyrical analogy. Sometimes one gets the impression that the description multiplies the image of the object or space it refers to, finally shedding what it describes and acting as an independent entity. How much lyrical

impulse is there in your descriptions? Or does what I call lyricism merely “fill” the framework, which is primarily rational and planned? And why is there this tendency to use description in your prose in the first place?

L. B.: This tendency stems from the fact that, as I’ve said before, my “creative work” doesn’t begin with a story or a character, but with an image, a scene, or a space. *What’s it like to be there?* (Maybe while there is “no one” there?) That’s the first question. However, I never get the impression that I am creating a description of the finished image that is there for information (“frame filling”); it is closer to the “lyrical” processes you’ve mentioned: the linguistic capture of matter through sensation, the attempt *to shape* the image (*to construct* the object?) through the observation of materials, textures, lighting, density... Once it has been turned into a “such and such a thing,” it becomes information, perhaps essential to the progress of the story, but

by then already pacified: the material has been re-written into a concept.

These things were also discussed in relation to *Drenje* – a description that is not just a “postcard,” a background for “the thing itself,” for the character that will give the space its meaning and orientation, for a story that will “trigger” it all. If we temporarily leave phenomenological literary theory aside, the text is still the only place where the world of the story exists, where it must be materially constructed. Only then do the reader’s variations on this semantic minimum occur, and they allow – now in a completely different way – a new space to come to life as an agent that will carry all that the text projects as a “story.”

Insisting on descriptions might seem like the most boring thing in the world to many, but slowly generating space through the text never ceases to fascinate me. I recently saw a great quote by Ed Rusche that immediately resonated with me: “I was born to watch paint dry.” It can truly be the most

fun you've ever had. After all, in need of a more "classical" authority, one only has to leaf through Leonardo's *A Treatise on Painting*, in which the artist who lacks inspiration is advised to look at an empty wall, tiny imperfections of color, cracks or stains, anything that "does not represent anything special," because from this visual noise, something on the edge of "nothing," as from ashes, clouds, or mud, everything one could ever need will eventually emerge: living beings, landscapes, conflicts, entire worlds... In my opinion, this is better advice for creative writing than any amount of talk about plot, motivation, and story arcs.

B. O.: In *Urania*, as in earlier books, you use several time perspectives. The main plot is set in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Your version of late socialism, however, seems strange – there is no expected image of the period; it is a mix of elements that produce a dislocated,

unrealistic impression. At times it seems like you're writing an alternate history, mixing what might have been with what is quite unlikely – there are union rallies and socialist department stores, but also obscure corporations and works of art that transcend time. Why did you choose this period?

L. B.: I find this period extremely important and fascinating for very ordinary reasons that I share with millions of people. On the one hand, there is a generational factor: these were the first years of our lives, when we first learned about “the world,” “reality,” etc.: something that, because of this perspective, always seems bigger, more impressive, more mysterious than it really was. No less important, it is also something that has since disappeared – not only or primarily as a political system, but as a texture of the period that we shared with a number of other countries, and which is immediately recognizable in the records of the time: in the

quality of the photographs, the television footage, the music production, the design, and so on. On the one hand, there is a lesson here about the utter transience of the “real world” and automated notions of it; on the other hand, there is the happy fact that material objects outlast the long-gone “realities.” In short, the choice is related to a very ordinary formative experience, inseparable from a certain impression of unreality and the feeling of melancholy.

However, *Urania* obviously has little in common with the industry that is based on the nostalgia for this period, which has been booming for decades. As a consumer, I am not completely resistant to it, but as a writer I find it has always had an extremely repulsive quality to it that has only grown stronger with time. That is why it did not occur to me to make some kind of “reconstruction,” a historical novel, an autobiographical album; it would not make sense generationally, and certainly not in “poetically” (as far as I can judge my own

work in this respect). I find the fabrication of time to be inseparable from the fabrication of space: there is a similar relationship of evocation, completely uncontrolled growth, and extremely concrete real elements that are placed in unexpected configurations. The “Osijek” of my novels is created by connecting a sea of concrete data, addresses, objects, localities, phone numbers, etc., but the belief that it is possible to recreate a city or a period in the text at all could possibly pass as a joke Joyce once said – that it wouldn’t be a problem if Dublin were to one day disappear, because it could be reconstructed quite well from *Ulysses*. In short, *Urania’s* “Biotope 54” is an artificial world that combines the real elements of late socialism with technological, formal, and other factors that became possible only in the 1990s, and with equally important elements that belong to neither of these periods, nor to any other local historical context.

What emerges could perhaps be presented as a

question: what do the “seventies” or “eighties” look like as someone (badly) remembers them, imagines them, without worrying too much about anachronisms, retroactive uploads, teleporting objects from one’s own everyday life into historical scenarios, ignoring the key analytical factor – erasing everything that was *not* there at the time – and focusing on tangible, convincing things that could be reached by a “probe,” a real body immersed in that space. It is something like a dream (“it was *me*, but I was actually a group of people who do not know each other and live in a different Osijek”), unsustainable in the face of any kind of external analysis, but also something that does not care about such analyses: all this does not matter at all if this image is somehow sustainable while you are in it.

For me, it was important to cultivate that very moment: *not* to remember everything exactly, *not* to reconstruct things in an exact and coherent way. The incompleteness of the evocation, the fact that it sometimes seems to be *intentionally* false,

perhaps even has a counterintuitive ethical note (in the wake of our theoretical reading, Blanchot and Derrida): it is the ultimate respect for the past that does not consist of believing we “preserved” it in our memory, where it still lives and persists in some way, but in being attentive to the rhythm of its slow evaporation and disappearance.

B. O.: If I am not mistaken, money in *Urania* represents the same thing that “instrumental communication,” as a channel through which connections are established between characters (or entities) from different ontological levels, represents in *Drenje* and *August After Midnight*. Money whose origin is unclear, but whose effects are very visible in the world. Could we say that money here is what that noise was in *Drenje*, for instance – a way to the paranormal, the occult? And what in *August After Midnight* was

an obscure “switch station“, here takes the form of a sinister corporate octopus?

L. B.: This is a great idea, although it was not a conscious starting point for *Urania*. Money as an “equalizer,” as a scale that transforms objects into abstract values or into other objects, is similar to other filters that have de-substantializing effects, and it is not uncommon to find places in theoretical literature where money, language, and death are more or less equated as systems. It is a *conversion* machine, something that could be interesting if the story is about communication between worlds, if “recomputing” is another word for “transcompiling” or migration between codes. Money, from this perspective, could be an operational subsystem of the “noise,” if the noise is reduced to digital parameters (zeros and ones): a platform that exists not only to “convertibly” describe different worlds, but also to open passages between them, to create a whole network of liminal channels. (*Currency exchange* as an occult term?)

Much of this corresponds to the idea of Biotope 54 as a “simulation,” but also to the theme of digital “transubstantiation,” the transition of matter to code, an immaterial recording, introduced in *August After Midnight* (in this sense, *Urania* is a distant prequel to *August After Midnight*).

From this perspective, assimilated into the language of fantasy or horror, money becomes something sinister: it is an entity whose origin we do not know exactly; it is in search of hosts, but they may not be necessary for its survival. In such “paranormal economy,” money – despite its existence purely as a form – has the potential to act and embody, to cause real material effects, to initiate and maintain various processes in real histories, while it can, like a virus, exist somewhere in virtuality, beyond life and death, beyond the “gold standard” and the earthly economy, as in a cryogenic dream.

Because of all this, money is also a screen for psychic projections, a space for a variety of “investments” – emotional, onyric, physical. The

complexity of its networks gives rise to naive questions and anthropomorphizations – *who is in charge of all this?* – while it is most difficult to accept it as a permanent flux, a flow that has no clear source and sink; it is a “fixed medium” (perhaps among all possible worlds), “spectral” and devoid of clear ontological foundations. That is why the network of corruption in *Urania* is relatively unclear; corporations are only fronts, they lead us to understand them as subjects of key processes, but they are actually models of something invisible in itself.

B. O.: Technology is a big part of all your writing, and *Urania* is no different – the entire left side of the book carries a text (the aforementioned “control channel”) that indicates that the narrative on the right side is the result of machine processing, although the details remain largely obscured. The technology is rudimentary

and futuristic at the same time (in short, retrofuturistic). It is interesting that it does not contradict nature, on the contrary, it also seems to belong to the world of elementary forces. How much of your literary treatment of technology has been shaped by classic science fiction and how much by other factors (e.g., electronic music)?

L. B.: I think other factors were much more important. SF has played one of the key roles in my life, but less through the systematic study of the genre, and more through an almost nostalgic and dreamy component, related to *Sirius*, to Kentaur Edition, actually a period that *Urania* evokes. The fantasy in my books often comes from other sources, and I have talked about this before: those who do not treat fantasy as fiction at all. The geography of the “paranormal” changed over time, along with the new media and “theories” that tried to follow it all, and my novels were probably most

influenced by the “hard pseudoscience” of the middle and end of the last century. I think that explains the “rudimentary-futurist” flair to some extent: *Urania* was largely created by imagining a technology that would connect neuroscience, cybernetics and various types of word processing with less clear-cut areas and elements that are only marginally interpretable.

The key to this was the narrative perspective that would make such a technology numinous. To a certain extent, it is a creative parasitism based on one’s own ignorance: the lack of understanding of existing technologies, programs, their histories and capacities, causes a certain fascination with these interfaces, which seem completely alien, inconceivable, and yet they are quite concrete, tangible, not a hallucination, but a materially realized *technology*... The so-called “third Clarke’s Law” roughly states that “sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”; it also means that – if you know little enough – any technology can take

on “magical” qualities, even if it is completely simple and seems *retro*. *Urania* sought to convey this impression of the “impossible” by exploiting the limits of comprehensibility, by combining techniques that serve a practical purpose for the reader and make it easier to move through the text, with moments that, even after multiple readings, seem impenetrable, “wrong,” or nonsensical. The “neurophylogenetic” vocabulary of the control channel was created precisely because of the problem of the fictional language of this new technology.

All of this leads to the other thing you mentioned: technology is not passive, automated, dependent on an external driver, but has an inherent capacity to act, a power that may seem “elemental,” as if something living or at least natural, “impersonal identity” or multiplicity, were behind it. It is very easy to imagine some super-competent “person” behind such processes, and in recent months it has been equally as interesting to see a wide range

of reactions to ChatGPT, some along those very lines.

Electronic music has played a larger role in earlier texts, although it also repeatedly appears in *Urania* – through the albums that the characters listen to, the concerts and exhibitions they attend, the sound documents they create themselves; Kezle and Szalay are, after all, a kind of “curators” of the semi-fictional sound archives of the Osijek library... The most important trace of electronic music in everything I do is certainly methodological: the *glitch* aesthetic, which of course also exists in other arts, and can also be read as a distant descendant of various kinds of ruinism, was most important to me twenty years ago in music but has since grown into an interest in similar phenomena in other fields, including texts. *Glitches* can have a “compositional” function: the whole of *Urania* can be read as a *slow-motion* record of the collapse of a data processing system, and thus has distant

twins in albums such as William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops* or The Caretaker's *Everywhere at the End of Time* (which Vatroslav Miloš warned me about). However, similar phenomena at the micro level are just as important: tiny mistakes, poorly printed components, "typos," redundancies, spacing problems, word fragments, seemingly random gaps in the text... *Urania* is a gallery or an archive of such graphic disturbances, where the complete arbitrariness of the printed interference is always combined with the possibility of reading them as "symptoms," as the consequences of a hidden cause.

This opens up another possible reading perspective: *Urania* as a "cacographic" document, resulting from a conscious effort to "write badly." The publication of any book involves a whole team of people working to refine and "polish" the text, aided by software that additionally controls, anticipates, and corrects every wrong move, so it was interesting to work on a novel that persistently "escapes" this

kind of control (or requires the establishment of entirely new levels of control). Here, I feel, lies a new frontier of writing: in the struggle to reclaim the impurity, illegibility, waste, and error in texts.

B. O.: In the same way that you like to create “knots” of time in your storytelling, space is also a category that undermines the realistic expectations of the reader. The obsession with the space of Osijek continues in *Urania* – the imaginary topography is fascinating in that it is partly based on real places. Šamačka Street, Jagoda Truhelka’s Garden, and the Urania Cinema as opposed to the futuristic Melpomena and the dystopian Malaria complex, which is entered through a narrow, eerie tunnel. To what extent are the fragments of the real surroundings your point of departure? How does the

space of Osijek resonate in your imagination?

L. B.: My work is certainly inspired by real moments, partly drawn from my own experience, but sometimes fathomed indirectly: from old postcards, photography monographs of Osijek from the last century (Marin Topić, Stjepan Kes), from historical studies, from worn out videotapes... This is always the starting point for some kind of creative process, upgrading and mystification, often just daydreaming, and the results vary greatly. In *Integrated Circuits*, for example, the idea for the “Novi Osijek” project on the north bank of the Drava River was partly taken from the documentation of the actual urban planning competition held by the Croatian Architects’ Association in 1983. Malaria is completely fictional, but it shares certain similarities with the so called “unregulated construction” at the outskirts of the post-war Osijek. Other projects, such as Muses and Zodiacs, have more futuristic features and ultimately resemble

London's Barbican more than anything that has ever existed in Osijek. Something similar applies to legal entities and cultural institutions in *Urania*: Reticulum and Solvent, Kronovizor and Hofbauer, CPU Osijek, Grotlo and Dionysus stand side by side with the City and University Library, Faculty of Education, Osijek Radiotelevision, Gallery of Visual Arts, in very real places, but create a different cultural landscape.

This is the question I am asked most often, for understandable reasons. Osijek is an obvious constant in these novels, but I find it increasingly difficult to explain why. Real space is definitely the driving force, regardless of the fact that hundreds of details, even a few big moments (even in a geographical sense), can significantly detract from it. This combination might seem to be the opposite of the usual approach to fictionalizing space: a free and almost fictional macrostructure, an unrecognizable big picture, with a convincing, almost tangible microlevel. Here we could return to the

“probes” and the materials they bring from the fictional world: virtuality becomes real only by passing through someone’s sensor, creating a position for someone else’s “immersion,” but less into the story and more into the body. On the one hand, therefore, given the “plasticity” of all materials, one would conclude that it does not really matter that this is Osijek. On the other hand, the texts themselves contain so many verifiable details that it obviously did matter where it would all take place. That’s the main thing I can’t explain: it could never have been any other city for me.

B. O.: All of your texts require an engaged reader. Given its scope, this is especially true for *Urania*. At the very beginning of the first volume, connections to your previous novels are discreetly signaled, and the characters of Ignac Schlesinger and Luka Bekavac represent the most direct narrative links to the rest of your oeuvre.

I get the impression that you are creating separate texts, but at the same time you are writing, reshaping and expanding a single, unique text that hovers somewhere below or above the individual books. How important to you is this metatextual dimension in your writing, that moment when the text turns in on itself like a snake swallowing its own tail?

L. B.: Sometimes it seems to me that this continuity is actually quite traditional, bordering on the way Balzac built a narrative world. In any case, it makes my work a lot easier: there is always this feeling that everything has already started, maybe a long time ago, and that it will probably not end in the near future... This may be confusing, but in my opinion, it contributes greatly to the “three-dimensionality” of the world in which the novels take place. On the other hand, I try to make each novel stand on its own, to be written differently from the

others, to have a clear compositional, formal, and “atmospheric” identity. I don’t know if these things are contradictory, but so far, they have somehow worked in parallel with each other.

However, there are some problems with this type of continuity. It can lead the reader to believe that as one moves through these books, there is a final point at which all the elements will be connected, everything will be explained, folded, and closed into a complete puzzle. This is especially true of the “theoretical” (more explicitly metatextual) element of these novels, their pseudoscientific umbrella story: as if the data related to parallel worlds, channels between them, navigation technology, etc. were organized pyramidally, leading to a privileged point of view that sees and understands everything. Contrary to this, I’ve always had the impression that these theories are more like a network where transparency is an inherent property: it is a heterogeneous and hybrid pseudo-theoretical field (not Science), interspersed with uneven

histories it shares with our world, full of conflicts between interest groups, theoretical factions, even different ideologies... So, much like our world, it has no edges, no end, no prospect of getting “solved.” On top of this, all the theories that this world tries to explain are still part of this narrative world, not the world from which we observe and analyze it all. In other words, theory is only one of the resources of this story; one should have an affinity for it rather than “competence” with it, see it as a kind of text on a par with others, read it as one would a description of a tree or someone’s internal monologue rather than as a textbook.

B. O.: Finally, let’s address literary context. Are there any pieces of contemporary Croatian literature that are reminiscent of or close to your prose writing? What would be its “kin” in terms of world literature? What writers and works inspire you creatively?

L. B.: This is a pretty simple question, but it somehow always seems to throw me off guard. I think that everyone who writes has a kind of “private” approach to literature: spheres of influence never coincide with one’s own time and context (in literature, in my opinion, even less than in other arts). The things that feel current to me were tested ten or fifty years ago; some phenomena are visible to everyone, others apparently to no one; time and space seem to have little meaning here. As far as the national scene and approaches combining popular genres with atypical procedures are concerned, some have already commented on the proximity of my novels to the works of Asja Bakić, Zoran Roško, perhaps some books by Ivana Rogar, Nenad Stipanić... I do not think that this is a false assessment, and I take it as a compliment, although it could just be the result of our respective deviations from the “mainstream”; everyone “stands out” in their own way, we seem to be similar because we are positioned as the “others.”

I would say, however, that inspiration often comes from other arts (music, film, visual arts), from works that I enjoy in their medium, so that they force the question – what would their literary equivalent be? In writing, this can only be manifested indirectly (if at all), but *Urania* draws more from Rivette’s *Out 1* and *Scenes from a Parallel Life*, from Lynch’s *Inland Empire* and related short films, from the early days of YouTube’s *Unfavorable Semicircle* channel, from Autechre’s oeuvre, especially data dump projects such as *elseq 1-5* or their *Quaristice* era, than it does from novels it might at first appear to resemble (Nádas and his *Parallel Stories*; Danielewski’s *The Familiar*; B. S. Johnson’s *House Mother Normal*; Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* or *1982, Janine*; and, if I’m really going to flatter myself, Marianne Fritz’s *Naturgemäß*).

The most interesting ideas also sometimes come through the “broken telephone”: *imagining* what a text that is currently inaccessible looks like and how it works, a text that I only know through other

people's descriptions, online fan comments, references in theoretical texts, historical studies, or bibliographies (a title can be enough). The end of this story is quite predictable: when I finally get my hands on text x , it is, of course, completely different, better, worse, more complex, you name it... All that remains of what I imagined is the memory of something that never existed. Such virtual objects can become a great platform for your own writing: to work according to the model of the novel you wanted to read, but it turned out that it did not exist, that you "invented" it, as if you dreamt it...

Let me go back to the beginning: for some reason, I always find it difficult to list inspirations and influences, peers and counterparts, even "old favorites"; everything always seems inadequate and reductive. So, instead of a private top list, I'd like to end with a random sample of some books I've read (or reread) over the past few months, without any particular hierarchy: *Debths* and *Concordance*

(Susan Howe), *Patternmaster* (Octavia Butler), *Little Scratch* (Rebecca Watson), *Novi stanar* (*New Tenant*) (Bora Ćosić), *The Cage* (Martin Vaughn-James), *Three and Passages* (Ann Quin), *Books of Blood* (Clive Barker), *Diego Garcia* (Natasha Soobramanien and Luke Williams).

Branislav Oblučar (1978), assistant professor at the Department of Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. Published work: *Trail of the Turtle—Prose Poem and the Material Imagination in the Poetics Danijel of Dragojević* (2017). Poetry: *Pucketanja* (Crackles) (2010), *Mačje pismo* (Feline Writing) (2006), *Anđeli su pali na tjeme* (Angels Must be Crazy) (with Boško Kuzmanović, 1997).

Translated by Jan Ruk

Luka Bekavac was born in Osijek in 1976. He graduated in comparative literature and philosophy and received his Ph.D. from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, where he has been working in the Department of Comparative Literature since 2006. His first novel, *Drenje* (2011), was nominated for a number of regional literary awards, the novel *Viljevo* (2013; *August After Midnight*) won the Croatian Writers Society's Janko Polić Kamov Award in 2014, European Union Prize for Literature in 2015, and the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts Award for Literature in 2014, while his novel *The Curfew: Premonitions, Recollections* (2015) won the 2016 Josip and Ivan Kozarac Award for the book of the year in the field of literature. In 2017, he published the collection of stories *The Gallery of Visual Arts in Osijek:*

Studies, Ruins, while his novel *Urania* (2022) won the Sfera Prize for the best SF novel. His works have been translated into a dozen languages.

DRENJE

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VILJEVO

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Вилево. Sofija: Persei, 2018. Trans. Tanja Popova.

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Titkosírás. Budapest: Metropolis Media, 2019. Trans. Viktória Radics.

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GALERIJA LIKOVNIH UMJETNOSTI U OSIJEKU / GALLERY OF FINE ARTS IN OSIJEK

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“Rumore: Ignac Schlesinger, 1994.” *Cross-Cultural Studies Review* Vol. 1, No. 1/2 (2019), pp. 191-196. Trans. Srećko Jurišić.

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Tomislav Kuzmanović translates between Croatian and English. His translations of fiction and poetry have appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Granta*, *6X6* by Ugly Duckling Presse, *eXchanges*, and *The International Literary Quarterly*, and were included in *New European Poetry Anthology* and *Best European Fiction*. He has translated about thirty novels, short story or poetry collections, and plays, among others, *The Death of the Little Match Girl* by Zoran Ferić, *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann, *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts, *A Frame for the Family Lion* by Roman Simić, *Waiting for the Frogs to Fall* (with Damir Šodan) by Drago Glamuzina, *Why Do I Hate Myself* by Senko Karuza, *Birthday Letters* (with Dubravko Mihanović) by Ted Hughes, *Packing My Library* by Alberto Manguel, and *New Selected Poems* by

Carol Ann Duffy. His translations of Igor Štiks' *A Castle in Romagna* (with Russell S. Valentino) and Ivica Prtenjača's *The Hill* were longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award in 2006 and 2018. He works with the *Festival of the European Short Story* and serves as the translation editor at *[sic] – a Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation*. Tomislav earned an MFA in literary translation from the University of Iowa's Translation Workshop and teaches literary translation at the University of Zadar, Croatia.

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Brian Willems is associate professor of literature and film theory at the University of Split, Croatia. He is the author of *Sham Ruins: A User's Guide* (Routledge, 2022), *Zug efekt* (Multimedia Center Zagreb, forthcoming 2021), *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), *Shooting the Moon* (Zero Books, 2015), *Facticity, Poverty and Clones: On Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go* (Atropos Press, 2010), and *Hopkins and Heidegger* (Continuum, 2009), as well as a co-editor of *Reconsidering (Post)-Yugoslav Time: Towards the Temporal Turn in the Critical Study of (Post)-Yugoslav Literatures* (Brill, forthcoming). His essays have appeared in *Textual Practice*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Film-Philosophy*, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *After the Human* (Cambridge University

Press), *Economic Science Fictions* (Goldsmiths),
From A to <A> (University of Minnesota Press),
Security and Hospitality in Literature and Culture
(Routledge), and elsewhere. He has also curated
new media exhibitions in Croatia and Slovenia.

Contents

Drenje (novel, 2011)	5
The Curfew (novel, 2015)	33
Gallery of Fine Arts in Osijek: Studies, Ruins (stories, 2017)	101
Signature	103
I Was Born to Watch the Paint Dry Interview with Luka Bekavac by Branislav Oblučar	119

Luka Bekavac	169
Tomislav Kuzmanović	173
Jan Ruk	175
Brian Willems	177

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