

Abstract

Title of Thesis: Egg from the River's Ice
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Drawn from the experiences of enduring genocide, displacement, and resocialization in the United States, "Egg from the River's Ice" acts as a demonstration of irreparability as the poems shift emphasis from past to present. Beginning as rooted in a more traditional, romantic-lyric/narrative formation, these poems—as the weight of experience presses heavier on them—come to embody a more radical, disjunct, and often fragmented poetic.

Egg from the River's Ice

by

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I.

*Oh devil on the lash
of my eye—I see
the windows burned,
the house aflame.*

Crossing Illegally from Poland to Germany, 1992

Early morning when there is no sun.
The lightless blue of my mother's face,
My father's, drawn to some point inside
Their thoughts, like a needle tucked in cloth.

Morning with glum purpose, force
Of body to right itself amongst the bobbing
Current, to continue still against strangers
Like scattered beads on the floorboards.

Morning without rest, croak of snow on the sidewalk,
Dirty and matted, tracks on the street directionless.
This morning—we're scared and a dog growls.

We wait on the platform for the gurgle of tracks—
And the steam arriving like billowy, ash elephants.
Then that hoarse sound of metal, the long, great groan
Of machine, makes me pull at her overcoat—

Know nothing worse than my mother's eyes, paler
Than the sidewalk saplings, bent with clotting snow.

Coming Apart at Length

To the fish scales and gasoline pooled inside
the boat, they wade. Through spoiling
plums and snarled garbage, drag paddles
and plastic jugs of water. The father and girl
like solemn possums, bellies to mud.

The water sunning between the hills,
border line

between two parts of identical wood: Serbia,
Croatia.

Always, he thinks about the war,
the men who shot at him when they'd crossed
the Danube a decade ago

here. His arms jerk around the motor,
bare back sizzles in late sun.

He ferries the mosquitoes and flies
to a shaded cove, strings dough
onto a hook with bronze fingers.

The girl consoles the thing in her
whispering for a future.

No one told her of the other men
she would carry through this world,
the country namesake
and loyalty, collecting like mud
on her clothes.

In the trees, concerned swallows muse on
the saplings, make an assessment,

flee. Move rapidly from the river,
its drainings and floods
apart from the sky.

At sundown, the boat heaves from the jetty;
the girl, the man, and the river
suspended between
two wide worlds. And the father and daughter,
destined to the crux,

lessening into the river, moving
down the line out
of anyone's sight.

Picking

I lack the skill my mother, the expert picker, calls the most important. With her deft fingers plucking blue, straw, black berry after berry in the Polish forest. To me, the milky sheen of one was another's dark plumpness, and no matter how hard she tried, she could not make me understand ripe. In the lilac stains of my hands she would show the good ones and the bad. "Picking is not about finding fruit," she said in the cool, green space. "You have to know when it's ready." And the fellow refugees would laugh at my novice, flicker between the trees or bend to the earth, baskets at their side, carefully coming through layers of shrubs in the new country. Everywhere I saw the fruit waiting, without knowing its time.

Draining the Danube

On a bright day I can almost endure
to take this river of green gray silt
and rid it of its šaran and tepid water
centuries deep.

Drain the Danube
that won't let us rest.

Maybe the sickly twined knobs of trees,
limbs of thick, hardy plants,
every gas canister, shirt, shoe, paddle
exposed, and the rust red shells, ammunition,
making pock-mark craters
would give it a face.

Perhaps it's kept the bones of generations
of border crossing wrecks and poor kids and men
and made it a backbone we could see. And we would know
once and for all what holds us
together. Whether there are dark things nesting
in the bottom sand, hollowed deep.

Srebrenica

What I knew of lye soap weathering on the balcony
in a china dish, sometimes white towels—
 and a djezva of coffee grounds that predicted the future.
 The fist at market all day, and at night,
the long curtains of summer that treacled the walls, voices
gliding from Srebrenica down, like taffeta brides.
 Amongst the old gypsies' calls echoing
in the galleria, the shouts of gone men. Laden with relevance,
perhaps, striving for song.
 But now I have lost all chords, have lost
 a common speech.
Down, to accept the dimming cloak of nostalgia,
the coffin of home. Someone took Djoko by his hand,
led him to the bridge where he shouted for his mother's dress.
 God knows it's wrong to want
to give him memory. Staggering down the water's bank,
 moving, stagnant, through debris,
 while the city fumbles towards morning.

Unnamed Language

The sky changes color at night; it is something I notice
one night in Vinča, my body less than one short trail
from that eternal river. My mother once said
that when she met him, my father would swim across it
from his country to hers, shaking his hair out when he reached her,
waiting by the river bank in Croatia.

There is some kind of violent purple in the distance
above centuries of trees. A wind brings the sound of the dead
language, exchanged by a couple passing in the dark.

Behind me, the house is full of relatives I have met once,
the link between us a faint path of what should have happened,
if. Had I known the words would want me back

I would have learned to read this language. Now,
it raises eyebrows in the markets. I say bread
and they shake their heads. I speak: tomorrow, goodnight.

Nothing. Gone. Coming back here
is like entering a familiar house
through a basement window. I am relearning speech,
I am waiting to see a path through trees
when I touch my grandmother's soft forearm.

Blood, my mother once said, is the way
we recognize each other; we don't need to understand.

The river is not motionless. The river
I am seeing is not the sky, the changing
of the light as time moves, always, like a pendulum
in one direction. I am one short trail from the river.

I am one short trail from if. If is the violent country
I am living in when I speak. The river can't cross,
or bridge. The trees by the water, even fallen or uprooted,
are shadows sloping into the bank.

Between Sarajevo and Belgrade

Before anything started, the people
in our lives began coupling off with strangers
who had level ideas. An aunt became paired
with the Socialist down the street, the fortuneteller
took up a kiosk and sold daily papers.
There was no place for us,
watching their fears make love in and out
of the homes at sundown. We drove
from every city and saw rust powering the lampposts,
varnished in the red streets. Every radio made threats
for a civil war, and said we didn't have a choice.
There were no crows—vultures.
No definitive beast. The pigeons ate everything
and scattered the papers. The mice left the fields
for more daring stakes. The choice was already over
for those who looked. Our soldiers opened the zoo
to let the great elephants into the streets
and shot them, standing, with liquor at their feet.

On Vuk's *Women's Songs*

Where is the book I once read that said the true thing
about the old women? That tells of the land and how we
fought for it, and then
 didn't, or know what we had? The one
 that filled the wives tales
of my childhood fat, like Hansel in the cellar?

 Mercifully, Lana has left with her grandchild,
lost in the Russian-doll-print baby-seat. Thick pines of silence
in the house left to me,
 where I am left, away from her talk of the tall Slavic evergreens,
and how her grandchild will never know them.

What happened to us was a fairytale—the combed-closer strangeness
of forest and ravens greedy on crumbs.

It was land, that much is true, and the rest is moonlight
 on the draining Sava.

Vicious actions afloat in sweeping speech.
 But the saying doesn't mean.

 If the language comes back it is the flashing script
of a silent movie. In the book I can't find we are forever scattered
like beads on the board

of the earth. But what of the old women, run long
on metaphors?

We are the man, flat, a makeshift pin on a pulled grenade
in between two trenches, two forests,
 and everyone gathers—stays
with him until they are sleep-spent and they turn from the field—
 leave him raving on the bone of land.

Sevdalinka

Danube.

Dunav.

Drina.

River of a cosmos, battle trench of the fight,
gliding now like a ribbon through grass, a blade
through the fishing line.

I am here
more than a decade after we fled
trying to finish a story:
to come fishing with my father
on the river of our childhoods.

A gunshot sound echoes between the trees
and I am startled in the boat, stringing bait,
but my father lifts his hand and says
it's just someone's motor, firing back.
A short time before dinner but we're not going home.

Tonight he'll take me to a spot, where,
in his stories, fish as big as his calves
rise to the surface. *You don't need luck,*
he says, *and really, luck is just patience.*

Calling down
swallows in the trees,
the bend in the distance
like a quarter moon, calling.
Drina cutting through Bosnia. *Bosnia*, the song goes,
What a strange name for a girl.

Now at the widest part of the river for miles
the tree line shorter, further than I can imagine swimming
(the people who crossed before
taking hours, the steady green
of the water against them, their ghost shapes
reaching back and forth, arms
glistening under a flood-light) now or ever.

Sun already set,
the boat turned twice, since,
nowhere among the green-gray
a sense of direction. Then a moon,
no craters, man or
ridges anywhere.

Only the world inside a skull.
Only the small glow
of the lantern in the boat now. We are the
only light, hovering,
reflected on the river.

Between hills the forest is darkest,
though the moss-armored trunks
 line the bank, dense,
 until I can't see distinct trees on either side.
 And worse, then, not knowing how we can move
in either direction, when we will come against the bank
 or how fast. I cannot see
the fences of gardens, the furthest houses.
The flicking
 of a single road light
 atop a hill (a gravel road).

Who even knows whose houses
are whose.
 (A goose in the yard, wandering
all evening and a woman yelling for her kids
to come inside the house—at the end of a lane
with the black iron gate—
all of which is nobody's, but a family of seven
has lived there for a decade since the war, with a goose
on a car, a gust of air carrying the smells of cooking
 from the doorway when the children come in
 shouting "see you!" and "čao!" from the yards
 along the river).

Drina in the moonlight; I think Pushkin
imagined Tanya there, in that moon orb, suspended like a drop of water—
a tear—representing a girl.

As a young girl, I remember running beside a creek in Poland
and the evergreens flashing past, a silent film.

Of course

they didn't film that, says a Simic poem. But I was there.

I was running from my father because he wanted to
throw me in the creek. Catching silver fish
 in the February water, him to his knees, me to my hips.
The refugees behind us picking mushrooms
and my mother
 calling down far from the water.
Forest, which forest? But I was there.

A gunshot again, and my father laughs
at my grip on the boat. I think about the story of the rifles
my mother says were pointed at us (in this forest
on one side)
because my father wouldn't ask for directions
when we escaped
and they took us into the trees—

Are you scared? he asks me and I grasp the boat—
we were on the wrong side
and nothing stopped them (but something did).
My father laughed when she told it
like this:
Not something, nothing. Nothing happened.

(We ran/and the planes grazed our hair).

When did the lantern go out? I'm in charge
of the matches and I strike a light,
bring us back to the task at hand.

He says, *You are learning the things you would have known,*
I have a lot more to tell you. I grew up
on this water. You would have, too.

He throws some sinkers in the river.

He hands a pole to me.

The waiting seems endless—
waiting for the play to end, the curtain to move.

Nothing happens, nothing but a breeze
and some creaking in the wood—

Branches snapping
beneath my feet, running through the Polish
evergreens, lost in the forest,
in the unidentifiable wilderness
I had to be taken from. And different somehow,
from the wilderness (where nothing happened)
that my country divided, used as barracks
for shooting across—

My father is silent. The water
is ceaselessly still. We have been here for hours,
(before this, days) like the trees' roots digging
so deep through water, then mud.
The silt that is left, the ground that is left
has a different name.

Can you tell me where we are?

No.

It's too dark, I say, I can't even see my hands.

Or river, Danube:

Of course she's a symbol, that Bosnia,
but the song makes her sound so real.

Trust my instincts, Ena, we've never gone wrong.

But the moon can't help.

Tanya and Bosnia will never leave

and they can't tell why—

one restrained by the moon's gravity,
the other by the river, slicing the body—

I am certain of that pulling,

that stretch of body around the heart

as my father takes my hand, gestures

for the pole and line and I can hear

voices in the distance.

The early fishermen beginning the trade,

the sky, so slightly, growing fainter from night.

My father turns the boat

the motor louder than before and our ears

adjusting to its sharpened noise

from the state we've been accustomed to.

And we're driving back, taking the river

through the middle and moving past

lightened sections of landscape,

of widenings and clearings of shrub,

of patches from protruding tree roods, of houses,

of familiar fences and forests

I cannot yet name.

Preparing the Garden, Kobaš, 1991

The fig tree doesn't bend like the apple
when the woman pulls its branches down.
It's level, the twigs stiff akimbo where,
if pulled, they break jagged from the center.
The sun goes around the leaves before she'll pick,
search like a bird in a field for cover. It takes
a practical kind of pain, scrapes merely, and
when she comes out she has the kind of eyes
that will look at nothing in the distance
for hours, or at the house, white and red-roofed
in the sunset. She watches the shingles, the bare
patches as unreachable as mountains. There, her
husband fell, only once, from the roof. This pain
is far more practiced, letting it in, just enough,
and turning her head. But she can still see him
on the ladder, can see him greeting the mail boy
walking stern, solemn, through the orchard's rows.

II.

The Wolf's Politics

*Someone is at the door
Knocking to be let in
But the goat children
Don't recognize their mother*

*What wants to enter
Is nothing that they know
The door stays closed
Summer through winter*

*When it does enter
It has learned
To take the shape
Of the mother*

*Its paws are white
like goat fur
Its stomach is full
With us inside*

Origin Story

What she said would appear and so she created the world.
The weaving, the touching of things as they met
or do not meet in their touching, that is why they called her
spider woman. The web, I imagine, is the gold strands
from other truths:

 the Fates' string; the weaving movement of the gold
 fish in the well who would grant
 one wish. Until the girl fell in
and was swallowed whole.

My mother tells me I was born in Derventa
in the heart of a snowstorm.

 I am certain this is true.
If I try to remember that first day I was

 not a child in a child's body, it is cold
 and I see the running creek in Poland,
and underneath it,
 a ground of sediment the uncertain color of bark.
My legs blue, breaking at mid calf from the water

 to rise into my body.
 There, my father stands in front of a cutting sun
 dying in the gold distance.

He is cutting open a fish,
 and it is then that I know
it isn't ours, not the šaran, nothing in the well—not even its guts.
 “This is it”, he says, those fine metallics
 glinting in his palms.

Main Street

Her father walks like one already sixty,
with his hands behind his waning back.
In the bright afternoon, her mother meticulously
picks lint off her shirt, all three walking the shopping
block of Knoxville. The street is a hologram
that flickers between all the places
the girl has lived. That bench in Omiš
is a lamp in Copenhagen, a tree in Tennessee.
No trajectories, merely revival. Her father
reaches to take her hand, simultaneously
slapping her face at age eight. A blast
of wood smoke from a restaurant now
poses as a breeze in Kobaš. There,
the shades are as steady as grandfather clocks
as she walks through the packed village
past two stores, one selling slippers,
the other Turkish Delight.
The road unpaved, but on the left, her mother's
girlhood house, two stories grayed,
has a concrete drive spit in the dirt, fuchsia
hibiscus encroaching the terrace (an Urban
Outfitters to come soon), swiney air, big Rex
chained to the pig pens and over the fields
crooked posts from the vineyards that suture the sky,
the same color she sees now in Knoxville,
her mother smiling in sunglasses. Stopping
at a small park near Gay street—at her
grandfather's new house where he is dying
in the guest room, desperate to remember if,
decades earlier, the soldiers at his door
had come at morning or dusk.

In Tennessee

One morning in winter
Bruno and I found a dead bird
mostly encased in a frozen puddle
behind my parents' apartment.
He prepped a pocket knife
and I watched as he dug
the ice underneath its body—
carved around it—until he held
in his hands some grotesque
Faberge egg, glinting
between us. And he said
watch how far I can throw.
And I watched, feeling
cold in the daylight,
knowing nothing yet,
but seeing the thing arc
above us, disappearing
into everything else. Years later
I will hear our parents
speak of the old country, and
Bruno in jail for shooting
his friend, and I will
stand in the kitchen and
say nothing. *It could have
happened at home,*
they say, but America?
After he had cleaned off
his knife he'd reached in his pocket
and offered me a caramel.
Mine is all squashed, he told me,
and we chewed them there,
standing on the frozen ground,
until we swallowed the last of it,
until my mother made us come in.

History

Haven't we found him yet? That man in the picture
is not my grandfather. You've kept the afternoon heat
from lashing our skin with your talk of a sorrow

I could not describe. The word escapes me to say
something about a particular kind of regret in our
language. And which day is it now that we would

go to the gravestones with our roadside lilies?
I wasn't there for his funeral—the processional
that walked his body to the grave on the other side

of the town. But I was there for the dying:
his head bent between his legs sitting on my favorite
rose-print couch, the nonsensical words

from his throat. Here in the Tennessee warmth
I shouldn't know about his mistress, what he did
to your mother's heart and yours. The picture

you show me is taken in front of a house and you stand
beside him, a pale daughter with her shoulders squared.
Not my grandfather, not yet. Not in this lifetime

of forgetting more words than I knew
was possible; an absent heartache in German;
the flower that blooms only in shade, from the Serb.

An impossible knowledge? "No. Think of it this way,"
you say above the coffee mug. And the sun
has moved into my eyes. And you are writing

on the back of the picture: Kobaš, 1981.

Surge

When I saw you after, sleeping
from whatever drug had knocked you out

before surgery, I could not imagine
a gland powerful enough to kill somebody.

That your body could become
the weapon, even as I hold its hand.

And these

conditions we are in, passing into them as
between rooms, our orientations changing—

which hands and palms are holding
whose? As long as there is holding. Whatever else

you've done. The causeless beatings to keep me
good. I remember the little Muslim boy

in the camp with the top of his scalp pried open
and you, a political enemy, cradling his head

and saying over and over again the soft words
neither he nor I could understand.

Those words

we are never ready to hear. I think I understand
the difference between what we say

and what it is: glands hiding behind their cavalier
names and that the body can not lie.

His head cut open and your hands then—as now
on the sheet—trembling and pressing, unable

to hold any of it in.

Landline

In east Tennessee my hill was a slope
above the rocks. I went
to talk to God and watch the horses
graze rocks in the next farm.
I felt foolish on the hill
when, thousands of miles
away, my family had
the bloodline tied to the farm
and the chestnut trees,
like rope wound up on the horses,
where it stood in for the bridle.
I never said a word aloud
there, so still, in Tennessee farmland—
and the trees on the rocks
never smelled like they should:
like leaves or flowers
or dirt. Not even the horses moved
between the fences, but stood still
in mild, mile-long grass; stood,
bloodline like bridle, all bound to a hill.

Caricatures

My father put the bat in a glass jar, after,
though I'm not sure that's the whole story.
I never saw and can't be certain. But I'd

watched it leap through the window, and
the forked wings circled my head—as in
old cartoons when incredible blows strike

against the striving orchestra. So Bruno
always cut off their wings. He'd show me
trophies of caterpillars, crickets, and melt

live bugs in the microwave. If he'd stayed
back in Belgrade, he'd have shelves creaking
with guns. Yet, it was in strange opposition

that above his bed, gold and turquoise
wings were pinned near a pencil drawing
I'd done of his dog. Of course, there persisted

something low, dank. But if he stole a beer
from downstairs, we'd share. Keep the
lights on. Sometimes, there was even music.

The Colorless Lives

I.

Outside my window I can hear my father
watering the hibiscus at midnight, or, the dull
shlep of the shovel, digging in the yard. He's
jet-lagged, we say, and watch him all year tunnel
for strawberries. Sometimes he pauses and looks
in the house, motions for a glass of water. We watch him
frown, mouth soundlessly, though there's a comfort in his need,
the plow, the grind. And every day the fish,
piling together for weeks and months in old grocery bags.
He guts and cleans, fills both freezers, and always
makes dinner with lemon, garlic from a hot pan.
Sometimes there is no distinction in actions:
for pleasure, for love or habit. A man gone wrong
with nothing but his life left to live.
Some years later, he calls me from Tennessee
about writing a book about the neighbors
he sees every day, their unchanging routines,
"Call it, *The Colorless Lives*".

II.

I see my first real snow in five years begin
on a bus from Belgrade; I am riding to a still unfamiliar
aunt's house in Vinča, an hour away. There are maybe
two-dozen people huddled, wrapped in thick,
hard looking clothes, peaking out of their pulled-down
caps. We are making the windows fog: the white steam
begins to disappear, parts softly to grays outside.
The stops cease a half hour in—
we ride with two bare bulbs for the remainder,
the dark outside stepping in like a neighbor to visit.
The dogs in each field we pass bark, routine
in their yards—raise a higher pitch until their whines break
in an uncomfortable note. In Vinča the trees seem to rise
as I look from the doorstep, but between us is the Danube
at the end of the field. Sometimes I can't see it:
it takes on the color of the sky.

III.

My father takes me night fishing some time after midnight

years after he leaves this river behind, now looking to escape
Tennessee. I sit in the boat as he pushes it into water, jumps in.
There is only the low light of the lantern as he baits the old hooks
my aunt has kept all these years. We can't see the shores for the light,
tunneling our vision. My father starts the motor, drives us further
upstream, and I imagine a finger on the blue line of a map, tracing us
to the right, gliding between similar greens. A dog barks
while we're waiting, sounds like nothing I know:
from this point on the water I can't tell which side we left from.

War Stories

He's telling stories at a crowded party that no one wants to hear. They—assorted Yugoslavs—again gather in someone's basement or garage and talk to people they wouldn't have been caught dead with before.

Before the war, they begin, and their voices diminish into the clamor, gunfire into gunfire.

He's saying from a plastic chair, *We were something special back then.* They're serving lamb at the table, and two men by the door, angry at each other, are rolling up their sleeves.

Here, the Americans ask me to tell them what it was like. And I tell them stories that make their grins rot off.

But nobody is listening—are continuing to say *pass the bread and hand me that knife.* And the meat's carved out of the body, and they gather to find their piece.

Warehouse

On the main level of a warehouse store
people swarm to the cafeteria lines
for lunch, move slowly in the roped-off lanes

with their trays, their bowls and plates.
A large woman with four children scoots
along the counter with a girl in her arms.

She's yelling, red in the face, body
without rhythm leaning, jerking, bracing
forward and back, balancing the child.

She won't see me trying to get around,
trying to move away from her harsh shouts
and determined bulk in every way I turn

or want to pass. One child with a shopping cart
rams it into someone's side. The girl is pulling
her mother's shirt, another wants some chocolate.

I have seen this before. I thought it was safe
to consider my living room, and the new curtains
I would buy so no one can look in at night

and maybe some plates. I didn't expect this,
the same long white walls of a corridor—
discovering in the communal bathrooms

of the refugee home in Berlin, a small boy
quietly trying to sweep away his waste and dirty
underwear before his mother saw. His broom

catching the hanging laundry in the room,
scratching brown marks into someone else's sheets.
And his mother appearing, furious, beating heavily

into his body. There bruises will appear,
will show like stains on the washing, returning
to the surface, brought there by another's' hands.

III.

The Journeyman

*Someone is a journeyman
He wanders the fields
And sleeps in taverns*

*The mountains rise for him
And the horses run
For his pleasure*

*After he takes
To inspecting the roads
And probing the cattle*

*The citizens say
There is the man
Who the journey abandoned*

*The first flood
Of the season
Won't let him pass*

*The journeyman wanders
Like an eye in a pond*

Confession

after Elizabeth Bishop

I awoke this morning thinking I speak
as darkly as a photographer's cloak,
and wondering since when do I
 need a hook
 to stand on.

Meanwhile, the morning is sun, is
afternoon, is poisonous light seeping
and come.

And I was sleeping too so long
and listlessly I forgot?
To call for the anniversary of a death
is never enough.

 On my drive to Memphis
 I pass on
the darkest parts,
the rotting through city
showing porous bone. To maybe
choose what I see, or take in,
 or give back.

But what is here licks the sides,
keeps me awake for days
all still as fish, open mouth
 gasping, gasping
 at what I have to do.

What I have yet
to tell you.
And who'll be left to bear.

Badnje Veče

Begins the end of the rest. The night still fresh
as new snow and I can see the tall blue of buildings
and the lamps like hot rust. This city like every city
or its image, Belgrade like Oslo like Naš,
holds the grid of the story, the walkways of people
and I am trusted to see, to take in the sights.
My father wants to show me what my mother
doesn't tell: the statues and history, the life
as seen from the hillsides or in alleys,
away from the dancing, the singing, the talk.
And because I can give him this, we begin the last leg
of my stay in the city, walking in the new night,
slow, to the hillside. My father, the image
of tall life, a solid building thrust among the singing
people, walking which way, allying off with their talk.
We climb until we are tired and lagging, hot
at the finish, and my legs can't be trusted to see
the end of the drop-off, where the history is city,
is a grid of lights and a way of streets that make it
a moving statue, outlined. And how we stood there
was the end of imagining, when I saw the real
thing. This city, their city, trusted to none,
the history only on the memorial plaques
of empty squares, like the streets now sectored off
in lights, and for which people again? What I say
is no story. No rest or break from the thrust
of the past, here commemorated in light,
and the dark still fresh, the black corners
of this visible, mapped country slumbering willingly,
knowingly, perhaps hoping the lamps are never turned
on the rest of it, that they rust without showing the
torn buildings, the limbless in the street. And this
my city: what have you done while the world slept?

Fire Burnt Out

When Marko came down from the hillside
they swore he was a ghost. He told them
that he had to bury his horse and shield
and if they found them, they would find him.
The last news of Marko was never confirmed
though they said he buried himself
underneath Labud, his swan horse, and
that the silver shield is there if you dig deep
into the soil.

*

Watching the stove, the boy runs his black tipped
pencil along the page, underlining a sentence
then into the picture of the great Marko
in the text. But he does not notice. He is looking
into the coal and wood embers of a fire
that his grandmother started, and the way
two gold eyes were there—the great Marko's!—
or none, or many.

His textbook shows him the year of Marko's death,
estimated to several decades, and the degrees
of his success. But the boy is concerned
for the fire, the way the light is spinning up
and out into the room.

*

*I'm telling you the story for the details,
the way it was—the feel of it.*
I am listening to the story he's telling
trying not to take something away.

*

When the grandmother comes back, she finds
the house empty
the fire burned out.

She searches the yard and trees
but the tracks in the snow go so far around
and away that she has nowhere to start.

*

In the old Republic the stakes were high for generals and the continued prosperity of the country. Marko was such a general, whose leadership and contributions were invaluable in a time of great need. First reports of him are vague, second hand accounts, but there is no question he was—

*

The boy returns when the fire burns out.
The grandmother scolds but takes him to her chest
her large white arms covering his back like wings.
He says his imagination ran away and he couldn't
catch up—he can't say why.

*

When they built it that year they might as well
have covered the hero in bronze from head to foot:
the likeness, they said, was striking. But a village
in Naš where Marko once feasted
did not agree. “Our hero did not look like
a common blacksmith. Those are not
that general's eyes”.

When Marko came down from that side
of the mountain no one thought to record it or him.
It wasn't a story yet.

*

*My grandmother always fiddled with the fire and made
me sit close by so I wouldn't catch cold. There would be
just one room and we would always eat and sleep there
all together all the time and she would tell me these stories,
flesh them out from the books I was reading for school and
they would amaze me, the way people were long before
the way you don't think about them now, like you would
have to uncover things because it wasn't common information—
I tell you it was different in that house the feeling that
the world was something you could just step out or into.*

*

The boy is thinking of history, looking into

that fire. It's why he's distracted, drawing lines
where they don't go. The boy is my father
before time makes him so.

This is clear, in the scene, the fire
rages: wide, bright and, at some point,
it burns out, or it must have.

*

*In '91 the war started, though no one
thought it would. I remember thinking—
But I never heard what he said.*

*

I will try this:
maybe the night the boy ran away
was a different night.
What is the order, the sequence, the cause?
The telling is the story but the substance?
Even if you were there, had stayed through
the first shots in '91 Dad would you know it all
better, to tell me the truth?

*

*It's not that history lies, exactly. It's all just
too difficult to say. I have no stake in it;
no stake in it at all.*

*

Marko, as I read him, was as varied as Arthur, rescuing the hopeless, or maybe fighting,
and maiming them. The authorship changed or he could not stand the role he was put in.
A strong child born in hard times having to make stale-mate decisions: grant territory,
resolve town tensions and feuds. Starting from nothing, traveling to an end where there
was no home to meet him, only the countryside he had to roam. Maybe when he
wandered through the plains the work got harder to witness, to control—to define. Maybe
the people expected too much.

*

*Sing me a song. I'd like your
voice to be like when I was small
and had a feeling like I would always*

*have that nice house to visit. I could
see her, and the fire's warmth like
a night I only know the ending of.*

*Not even sure why I would think
to run outside; guess I got so tired
of reading all that boring history*

*

The horse from the ground, his famous shield
held above as he dug himself into the black dirt.
Reached fingers into land
masses of sediment to bury his bones and balanced
the symbols he had left with his other; tenderly
covered his body with the earth, and muffled the swan.

And in turn the dirt heaped itself down upon
the rest—layers so thick there was no trace
above ground except for the marks of boots, hooves
gone by next rain, impenetrable at first frost.

And on the hill there might be a house and
it might be burned down: in the ash, black soil
might mark the site off all this, his story
before the fire burnt out.

Leaving Hours, Kobaš

He is seeing her as if from mountains away
though if it were mountains her hair glint, fearful face
would be lost. The distance
referring to familiarity.
He almost cannot tell in her
what he's found missing in himself: a self,
routine—
a steady, familiar I. Who is his
body and who is she,
pressing hand to forehead and speaking rapid
past wide, sceptor-full eyes?
The suitcases appear as if by ghost
and he cannot remember finding his boots
under the hills
of other clothes, papers, object landscapes.
Should they bring the television,
her mother's duvet slip or dishes?
She has her blue coat folded on
one arm, writing furiously
family numbers, inconceivable
lines settling cross-hatched in one book
to take with them. Who'll
know when they arrive?
He is seeing her from distances he hasn't traveled,
lengths
he has no perspective from, but the waves that move,
rummage her hair as she packs
are near—are television
static from un-receivable information
traveling between downed power lines
cut from the ghost of an explosion
some distance away—settle on the blue wool
and remain there no longer
than an I's width, then
no longer even there.

Article the Figs

They come from a village you hear about in books
and world-concerned articles. Maybe your grandfather's
world, all dust road, and rough soap. The poets—swine in sties
and dogs in the magnolias—lie low in this place. Bear-paw figs
lump in your sight-line, clots of recognition, only less comparable
less manageable. You have nothing but a bus ticket
waiting on the bench, wanting to get some water
while the sun sets, hot, on a different location.

Maybe they are your people here, some coming through wild scented
gardens or laughing, boisterous, under trees,
though it would sound nothing like your own laughter.

The grandfather's world is dust and he in it,
silently, sitting now in the house you left, too close
to death to leave. The articles always talk
about the country but never the land, the hilltops
stretching wide as wingspans, water cool and glossed, but even here
your presence is too conscious.

They come from a village where you sit at a bus stop,
unsure of the time or place or the road falling out of your vision
into sky. The village in your sight-line, unrecognizable
with its dust ash, the boisterous dogs running
from the grandfather's house. The world is not manageable—
the one that you come from—so you come here to sit on a bench
to see the death in the south of the country, to article, categorize, the soap
and figs into something, concerned with your consciousness.
So the vision is glossed and land spans to the sky when you
are here. The people don't recognize your laughter or what you ask
about the bus. How can they speak to

where you come or go? You left. And if villages form close to death
and stretch to the people and their needs, and the swine, and gardens
and the trees who live in a place—they will come to you. Lie low.

Poetry to Disenchant Us

And it's good that sometimes I begin in the present
and stay: the iron bars on the windows of the apartment
segmenting the street outside: porch light and half a
window across, the roof of a parked, mint Oldsmobile,
the middle of a late fall tree, almost bare,
the sky in slivers of blue and silver standing in
for the whole of it: each piece continuing interrupted. And
I am the thing that has become merely witness
to the suburban winding of mind. Outside it is so still
and this window so raised that I never see the street
from this screen, or trunks or basements, so blank
walled on either side—never see the end of it.

Bells in the Afterlife

Nothing came as a surprise. We'd seen the news reports and still had family living there, remarking on the damage over coffee, easy as anything. *They're renovating the old theater now, only one wing really got it. If you're up here this summer we should see a show.* My mother and I saw it all the same, pock-marks on faces of buildings, the bald, toothlessness

of houses without roofs, windows, doors. Ugly acquaintances we made on the drive up and through the mountains, out of Sarajevo and to the beach, my uncle driving his racecar so fast my mother had to close her eyes and press fingers against dashboard and window, looking like she was holding up the sides. Up here the country looked empty, as if the people

had been shaken out and flicked off. The trees were not dividing: there was nothing left to hold. We pulled over for lunch by the road, but found an old gravel path leading down the hillside. At the bottom we saw the sea first, glistening inhuman, then the lone gray beach. The house came after, like all the mismanaged others and we discovered a frying pan sitting by a tree full of unfamiliar birds; the yard belonged

to someone likely dead. The light changed slowly. We ate lunch with our feet in water, knowing no one would come, thinking we were the luckiest people on earth to have found it. I picked up some stones to carry with me; my mother read the paper. Uncle played his guitar, every song he seemed to remember—ballads, riffs, Hendrix—the sounds echoing and coming around, all bells in a dome.

Twice I dream of

Kaput. As in broken, not fixable, from the German.
I know that in my mother tongue it means “overcoat.”
Kaput is the blue wool of her arms, coming out of a room
in my memory to take me away. The things
in this space are always changing: where we’re going,
the time of day, but my mother is eternal in that coat,
frayed, kaput, tearing when she lifts me—

Kaput as I stand on a hillside watching
my father trying to light a fire—his zippo won’t work.
He doesn’t understand that the thing is broken and not worth
the effort. It’s a relative’s lighter or maybe it’s just
that he doesn’t want to fail, stop—

Kaput when it is necessary
to get out. Broken, overcoat: I feel the meaning of both
and it seems so large, this doubleness. On the hillside,
the branches I see are countable, I think.

But if kaput, splintered, and irreconcilable?
*What good does it do, girl? To pin these things down?
Over and over you’ve been in kaput, holding my long sleeve,
feeling like no child could, holding us together—*

Kaput in this bleeding into, waking this morning
to look out my window: every tree limb in the distance
overlapping, spreading the same sky apart.

Hole in the World

“How long
I have been unable to stay
somewhere and just look,
or have the time.”

You say this morning
without prompting,
the leaves yellow in this wind

stirred into sunshine,
into expanse that blinds
and gives way as fast.
“Have the time” you say as if

you’d just come out of it again,
as if you’d turned your head twice
between two lifetimes and they were there
inches, seconds, wind gusts

apart: one haunted, one haunting.

And nothing to bridge the gap—
the hole in the world
between death and...

Today we sit under the same
chalk sky, the leaves in their new
yellow lifting—the sudden sun
shining them into white or

casting their shadows to ground
depending on the turn
of your head; depending on the stir
of mind, so sudden to cloud.

Train from Warsaw

I cry afterwards, together
in the dark train, my mother's perfume
fading into the compartment, growing used
to the swells and depletions of her chest,

her lashes down, the train leaving
one station for another, us having stopped
running for a moment—everywhere
around the window there is only dark

screaming into dark, the tempo of the rails;
fear like a copper coin in my mouth.
We are suspended in the night, like voices
underwater, a bone in soil.

I have forgotten to be a girl, just a mind
watching it all grow dark and another station
appears, the outside fluorescents moving,
and even before they sweep us over, build

the world up, they're gone, then hounding
again; a light in a revolving door, carving us out,
making us shapes in the world—heads leaning,
shoulders adjoined—among the dozens

of other shapes sloping in place in the vinyl
seats, all of us moved, carried silently
over borders that will be claimed in books,
pages you can trace your fingers over.

From the Bank of Holston River

The sun is permanently
 stuck in a pocket, folded back into
 the horizon like a peach in an apron,

no chance of coming undone, leaving stains
between branches. I watch
the cold rearrange itself into steam, then frost.

The river, apprehended, is no longer here,
 but moved beyond recognition—
how the sediment has come unsettled:

quickenings cold in the autumn has caught
a bird unaware and it flaps on the stones,
 moves breathless by the shore,

 agape. And fixed under a nearby
overpass, a light cat watching, still

as a shadow underfoot. We wait
for the fight to settle, the small body
 relenting, like softening fruit;

afraid, in our ways, that the thing isn't dead.