



YU
THE
LOST
COUNTRY



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YU: The Lost Country

Yugoslavia fell apart in 1991. With the disappearance of the country, at least one million five hundred thousand Yugoslavs vanished, like the citizens of Atlantis, into the realm of imaginary places and people. Today, in the countries that came into being after Yugoslavia's disintegration, there is a total denial of the Yugoslav identity. Now, more than twenty years after the war(s) started, I feel at the safe distance to recall and question my own memories of both the place and the events I experienced.

I am calling myself an exile, and not an expatriate – because I can't, even if I wanted to – return 'home'. During the 1990 census, I was also denied the right to be Yugoslav, the nationality I had identified myself with since birth. Being a child of a Croatian father and a Serbian mother, this left me somewhat confused. The census taker's answer as to why this was impossible mirrored very closely something that Mussolini once said: "Yugoslavia does not exist. It is a heterogeneous conglomerate which you cobbled together in Paris."

Central to this project is British writer Rebecca West's masterpiece *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941). "There proceeds steadily from that place a stream of events which are a source of danger to me", she wrote in 1937. "That place" was Yugoslavia, the country in which I was born. Realizing that to know nothing of an area that threatened her safety was a calamity, she embarked on a journey through Yugoslavia. The resulting body of work, initially intended as a snap book, spiralled into half a million words. It is a portrait not just of Yugoslavia but also of Europe on the brink of the Second World War, and is widely regarded as one of the masterpieces of the 20th century.

Rebecca West thought of Yugoslavia as her motherland. This may be because, by its very nature, Yugoslavia was a land of displaced peoples. Rebecca West shared their fate. Born to

an Anglo-Irish family, she never felt as if she truly belonged anywhere. “In any class I feel at home, and I am never accepted, because of the traces I bear of my other origins.” She said that she could only remember things if she had a pencil in her hand, so she could write it down and play with it. The reason she wrote half a million words about a country she knew would soon be only a memory, is because she did not want to forget anything about it, and because she wanted to preserve this memory for millions of Yugoslavs who would later live in exile. She thought of art as a re-living of experience.

YU: The Lost Country was originally conceived as a recreation of a homeland that was lost. It was a journey in which I would somehow draw a magical circle around the country that was once mine and in doing so, resurrect it, following Roland Barthes’ assertion that photography is more akin to magic than to art. Instead, it turned out to be a journey of rejection. My experience was one of displacement and a sense of exile that was stronger back ‘home’ than in the foreign place where I had chosen to live. Photography contains elements such as fleetingness, which allow it to capture that sense of rootlessness and dislocation with relative ease. Both exile and photography intensify our perception of the world. In both, memory is in its underlying core. Both are characterised by melancholy. In Easter 2011, in search of both the lost country and a lost identity, I started retracing West’s journey and re-interpreting her masterpiece by using photography and text in an attempt to re-live my experience of Yugoslavia and to re-examine the conflicting emotions and memories of the country that ‘was’.



“The artist says I will make that event happen again, altering its shape, which was disfigured by its contacts with other events, so that its true significance is revealed; and his audience says, ‘We will let that event happen again by looking at this man’s picture or house, listening to his music or reading his book.’”



"Where do you come from?
From Yugoslavia.
Is there any such country?
No, but that's still where I come from."

“I have learned now that it might follow, because an empire passed, that a world full of strong men and women and rich food and heady wine might nevertheless seem like a shadow-show.”

Easter Eve. Walking around the abandoned city like a stranger. Everything is so familiar but very distant. It feels like I have been given a new pair of eyes to see that things are not as one remembers.

ZAGREB | CROATIA



By a small village along the coast, a 10-year-old boy is killed by a passing car. Waiting for someone to take him away.

Three hours later, we're still waiting. Family howling in a house by the road. And the father ... If pain had a sound. I did not know at first if they were people or wolves. The older onlookers wince; they know that sound well. It comes with the territory, it seems. Younger people laugh nervously... They will not remember the inappropriateness of their behaviour, when their time comes to experience pain like that. There's a dandelion by the road. I take a picture. Don't know what else to do. More screams. The old man standing in front of me bends over and picks up the flower. Gently, he blows.

STARIGRAD | CROATIA





“Blood flows, and life goes on.”

SPLIT | CROATIA

“Were I to go down into the market-place, armed with the powers of witchcraft, and take a peasant by the shoulders and whisper to him, 'In your lifetime, have you known peace?' wait for him to answer, shake his shoulders and transform him into his father, and ask him the same question, and transform him in his turn to his father, I would never hear the word 'Yes,' if I carried my questioning of the dead back for a thousand years. I would always hear, 'No, there was fear, there were our enemies without, our rulers within, there was prison, there was torture, there was violent death.'”

SPLIT | CROATIA



98

EEP

PE

POP

ESP

SP

81

FOS

POP

008

BOSNIA

ROAD

A MOSLEM woman walking black-faced in white robes among the terraces of a blossoming orchard, her arms full of irises, was the last we saw of the Herzegovinian plains; and our road took us into mountains, at first so gruffly barren, so coarsely rocky that they were almost squalid. Then we followed a lovely rushing river, and the heights were mitigated by spring woods, reddish here with the foliage of young oaks, that ran up to snow peaks. This river received tributaries after the astonishing custom of this limestone country, as unpolluted gifts straight from the rock face. One strong flood burst into the river at right angles, flush with the surface, an astonishing disturbance. Over the boulders ranged the exuberant hellebore with its pale-green flowers.

But soon the country softened, and the mountains were tamed and bridled by their woodlands and posed as background to sweet small compositions of waterfalls, fruit trees and green lawns. The expression "sylvan dell" seemed again to mean something. We looked across a valley to Yablanitsa, the Town of Poplars, which was the pleasure resort of Mostar when the Austrians were here, where their officers went in the heat of the summer for a little gambling and horse-racing. Before its minarets was a plateau covered with fields of young corn in their first pale, strong green, vibrant as a high C from a celestial soprano, and orchards white with cherry and plum. We drove up an avenue of bronze and gold budding ash trees, and lovely children dashed out of a school and saluted us as a sign and wonder. We saw other lovely children later, outside a gipsy encampment of tents made with extreme simplicity of pieces

300

C. N. 19. Left Mostar 15 minutes ago. Felt claustrophobic there. River recedes on my left. Unreal green

PEP

484

333

405

303

445

301

471

486

e 11 33, still so many burnt houses. Fuck. The driver is a maniac. It's like being on some mad rally through the mountains. So green and so many burnt houses, but it still



makes me smile
— Just the idea of Bosnia

Bridges hanging broken over a great green canyon
Your side.
My side.
Your side.
My side.

e 12 23
Man and a woman digging.
People selling honey by the roadside

COSTUME OF MOSTAR

A young man mowing a smallest patch of grass. Boys on chains. Snow still on mountain peaks, like it was in 1937. A huge man, a salesman in the local grocery shop, riding a bike meant for a 6-year-old girl.

653





The corner where Franz Ferdinand met his end.

SARAJEVO | BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA



“The dead here also make for handsomeness, for acres and acres above these suburbs are given up to the deliberate carelessness of the Moslem cemeteries, where the marble posts stick slantwise among uncorrected grass and flowers and ferns, which grow as cheerfully as in any other meadow.”

As I walked downhill from the large Muslim cemetery overlooking Sarajevo, I saw two men that looked like professional hit-men. Shaved scared heads, oversized black leather jackets, dark deep-set eyes. When I passed by them, I overheard some of their conversation; they were discussing how beautifully birds were singing.

SARAJEVO | BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



“Any one of these Bosnians could have made a single mouthful of a Victorian traveller, green umbrella and all.”

SARAJEVO | BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



Looking for the 'grand' railway station. I followed directions given to me by an elderly couple with linked arms. Couldn't find it anywhere. Stood in the front of an old dilapidated building that is still a home to at least one family and two businesses and asked passers by where the old station might be. Three young girls shrugged their shoulders, a woman sped by pretending she did not hear my question. Eventually, an old man answered: "Evo" (Here). In a glassless window on the other side of the building amid falling debris, there was an old army jacket hanging from the rafters.

ILIDŽA | BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA





On the corner of the street. Light so beautiful.

SARAJEVO | BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



Not even magnificent nature could hide all the devastation. Visited former US Special Services base. Nothing left there. Only some horses. Like it never happened.

TREBEVIĆ | BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



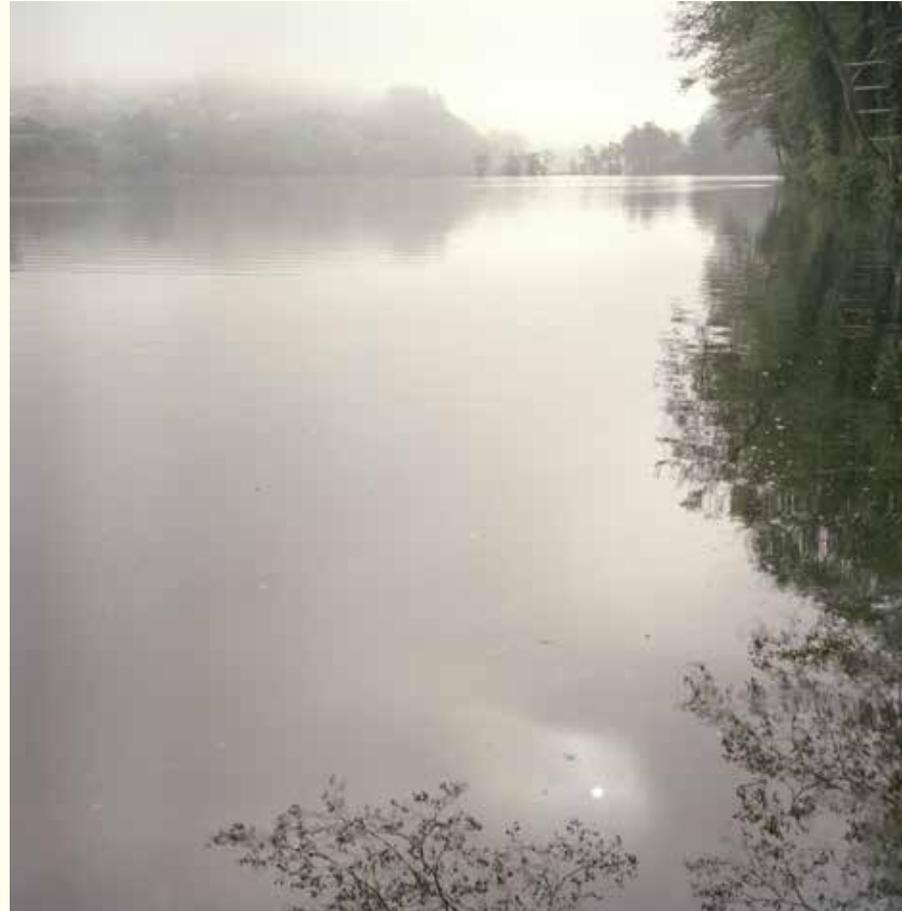
Looking at the shops by the side of the road; curtains, garden gnomes, plaster swans and tombstones. This country is fucked.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

“...went into one of the mills, but lost heart, because there was a beautiful young man lying on the floor under a blanket, who woke up only to give a smile dazzling in its suggestion that we were all accomplices, and closed his eyes again. So we went on our way by the river, widened now into a lake, which held on its rain-grey mirror a bright yet blurred image of the pastoral slopes that rose to the dark upland forest, and which seemed, like so much of Bosnia, almost too carefully landscape-gardened.”

Went to the mills, but lost heart, not because I found a beautiful young man asleep in one of them, but because they were burning. Set on fire, smoldering on the water. I felt like crying. I think I did.

JEZERA | BOSNIA





“...those pale women with dark hair who even in daylight look as if one were seeing them by moonlight.”

KALEMEGDAN PARK, BELGRADE | SERBIA



Memories of my mother throwing an ice cream into the bear enclosure in 1990. The poor animals fighting over it.

BELGRADE ZOO | SERBIA



“...one of the children in the crowd lost grip of its balloon, and we all saw it rise slowly, as if debating the advantages of freedom, over the wide trench of the cleared street. Then we all laughed, and laughed louder, when as usually happened, since the wind was short of breath, the balloon wobbled and fell on the heads of the crowd on the other side of the road, and was fetched back by its baby owner.”

NEW BELGRADE | SERBIA



On my last day in Serbia, I stayed with my aunt Milanka. She lives in a small room sandwiched between her two sons and their warring families.

As she was putting her nightdress on, Milanka turned her eighty-something-year-old-back towards me and asked: "Do I have a hump?"

For some reason, we both started laughing hysterically.

Sharing my compartment with Amanda, a girl from New Zealand on her way to Albania and Bogoslav, a middle-aged man from Niš. He asks me how old I am, repeatedly. I tell him, again and again – thirty-six.

“I am just seven years older than you,” he states, smacking his fat moist lips with an approving sound. He looks at me, like a plump cat eyeing up its dinner, just before it pounces.

Amanda is twenty-three. She looks older. She tells me she envies the Balkan history. I think, is she for real?

“... in wonder at the unique architectural horror which defiled that spot.”

The whole country is wi-fi central. Completely covered. I've taken up smoking here. It's difficult not to.

Main square littered with ridiculous Wizard of Oz-like sculptures.,Disney art vs. infrastructure. It's very clear which has taken precedence. A nation in crisis. Flags everywhere. 'We are Macedonians, whatever that means.'

SKOPJE | MACEDONIA





Strolling through neighbourhoods that smell
of chewing gum and underage sex.

SKOPJE | MACEDONIA



“There are two thousands houses here which means ten thousand gypsies.” “Yes,” said Gerda, her voice hoarse with indignation, “that they are thousands of them I can easily see, but the question is, why are they allowed?” “Why are they allowed?” repeated the Professor. “I don’t understand.” “Yes, why have you allowed them to come here?” persisted Gerda. “But, Gospodja, they have always been here,” said the Professor, “they have always been in this district, for six hundred years at least, and most of these people have been actually settled here in Skopje since the time of the Balkan wars.” “They should be driven out,” said Gerda, trembling with rage. She pointed at six children who were making mud pies outside a cottage just beneath us, under the care of a grandmother who had the delicate profile of an elderly Maharanee. “Look at them! They should be driven out!”



The biggest Roma neighborhood in the world. Big, golden skirts flying in the wind. Twisted swings and young lovers. Toppled wedding cake palaces surrounded with shacks. You know who the kings of this place are. Mighty ear-deafening noise. Two small girls, toddlers really, are carrying a large heavy wooden chair across the road.

ŠUTKA | MACEDONIA



Set off for Nerezi monastery early in the morning. Discovered it was closed that day. A Shar-mountain dog chained to the tree, growled at us. Left for Tetovo. West described it as a handsome town. I doubt it bears any resemblance to its 75-year-old self. Arrived during Wednesday's market. Streets full of people stepping carelessly into the path of oncoming traffic. Like holy cows in some Indian town. Albanian schoolgirls like grey birds.

SKOPJE TO OHRID | MACEDONIA



“I had remembered this hotel at Ochrid, so strange, like the word ‘hotel’ acted by children in charade, and this year it seemed stranger.”

Stayed in a freezing room. Covered myself with something resembling a fake bear. Weariness slept with me.

OHRID | MACEDONIA



“... the water was dead as a pond in a public park.”

On the lake's still waters, a bird boat going nowhere. Raining all day. My shoes leaking. Sick with a cold.

OHRID | MACEDONIA

“They’ve got a museum there, where you can see all the birds and beasts to be found in the district; you can go in if you like.”

The Museum of Natural History. The man that opened the door looked like an old smoked-out ham that had been left hanging in the chimney for far too long. He charged me 50 dinars. Never uttered a word. The place was indescribable. It was not a natural history museum at all; it was a ghost museum. At the entrance: a wolf, slaughtering a black lamb for the last eighty something years. A grey falcon, looking at me from the same branch it had looked at her two-thirds of a century before. Dead birds, chirping the same old song.

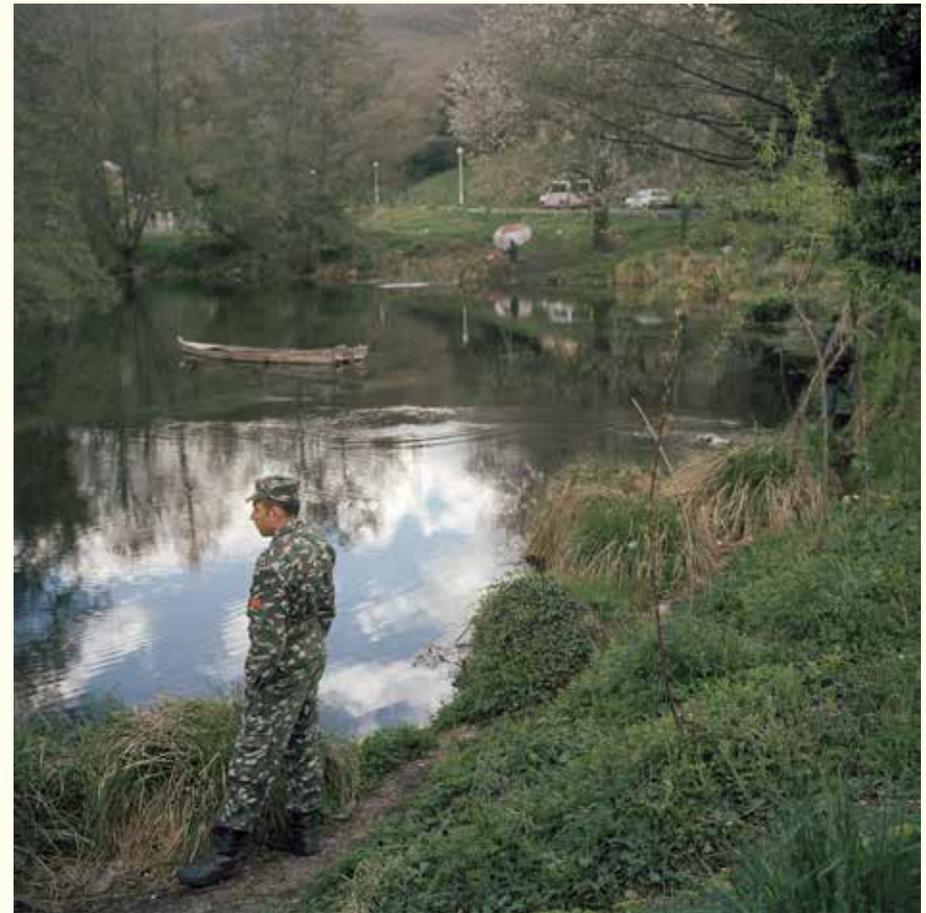
STRUGA | MACEDONIA



“It was perfectly made,” lamented the old man, “it was perfectly made.” “Did it live after its birth?” asked my husband. “Did it live!” he exclaimed. “It lived for two days, and it should be alive to-day had it not been for its nature. For the peasant who owned it brought it here to our great doctors as soon as it was born, and here it did well. I tell you, it was perfectly made. But for two days did the beautiful head open its mouth and drink the milk we gave it, and when it came to the throat, then did the ugly head hawk and spit it out. Not one drop got down to its poor stomach, and so it died.” To have two heads, one that looks to the right and another that looks to the left, one that is carved by grace and another that is not, that one that wishes to live and the other that does not: this was an experience not wholly unknown to human beings. As we pressed our faces against the case, peering through the green dusk, our reflections were superimposed on the calf, and it would not have been surprising if it had moved nearer the glass to see us better.”

STRUGA | MACEDONIA





“This river, the Drin, is clear like no other river, it is brighter than water as crystal is brighter than glass, it is visible only to the point that it can give pleasure to the eye.”

We are at the border here. The other day five men got executed while fishing. On the walls of the monastery above, the ancient saints staring blindly. Tensions are swelling like the river Drin.



“There is a proof of the Turkish wealth the town held in the fabulously extravagant marble tombs that fill the Moslem graveyards with colossal wedding cakes...”

Went to see these “extravagant marble tombs that fill the Moslem graveyard”... They lay now in the tall grass. Destroyed like the teeth of someone who had been hit in the face repeatedly, savagely. Human bones poking out of the earth. I find someone’s jaw among the wild flowers.



“It was a flat-topped rock, uneven in shape, rising to something like six feet above the ground, and it was red-brown and gleaming, for it was entirely covered with the blood of the beasts that had been sacrificed on it during the night.”

GOVEDAROV KAMEN | MACEDONIA

“I knew this rock well. I had lived under the shadows of it all my life. All our Western thought is founded on this repulsive pretence that pain is the proper price of any good thing.”

It took a long time to find the fertility stone. Through the orchards and vineyards. And there it was. I mounted the rock, amazed to see blood in the crevice. Last years' sacrificial blood, with cigarette butts thrown in for a good measure. I squatted over the bloody hole and watched the fertile landscape in the distance.

GOVEDAROV KAMEN | MACEDONIA



On the bus to Priština, a prominent ‘NO SMOKING’ sign. It does not apply to the driver, who has been chain-smoking from the moment we drove out of Skopje bus station.

Almost turned back on the border by Kosovo police. Taken out of the bus by a man who looked comfortable with his authority. My Croatian passport was of no help here. My fine Serbian name seemed to be the issue. “Dragana,” he said repeatedly, each time making a grimace as if something unpleasant was scratching his throat. He was trying very hard to think of a reason not to let me in. Eventually, after realizing I was not traveling on my own, he relented. Still, not a great start to the Kosovo part of the journey. He was worried about my safety, he said, as I left the office. And maybe he had a reason to be?

The bus dropped us off on the south Albanian side. We had a coffee on the promenade full of beautiful young things. A product of the 1990s baby boom. "They are breeding an army," my friend Michal said.

Crossed the bridge to the north - the Serbian side. Staying at the No 1 Hotel. Went to see Trepča mines. Not allowed in. Our taxi driver asked me where I was from. "Ah Slavonia, I was there fighting in the 90s"... He smiled and winked into his rearview mirror. Should I have asked if it was him that had burnt down our house?

Around 17.00 hours I walked up to the monument at the top of the hill. NATO soldiers standing by with mean-looking machine guns, nonchalantly hanging off their shoulders. Beautiful gold light shining down on that fucked-up divided dust bowl.

KOSOVSKA MITROVICA | KOSOVO





It all started with a sunken child. Chased by dogs, they said. He jumped into a river he could not cross.

KOSOVSKA MITROVICA | KOSOVO





The Kosovo Albanians, like the rest of the people from former Yugoslavia, seem to believe that drafts will kill them. No air conditioning. Hellishly hot outside. All the windows firmly shut. Sitting in a boiling pot on wheels.

KOSOVSKA MITROVICA > PATRIARCHATE OF PEĆ | KOSOVO

to her. But there was no force here to tell her youth, as the Church had told Katerina Simitch when she needed the lesson, how to take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm. I looked nervously over my shoulder lest I should see the only emissary of the faith that was likely to appear in this place at this hour, since he was likely to appear anywhere at any hour. I could well imagine him capering and curvetting down the twilight street, coquetting with his shadow, while his blond curls swung.

The starlight waxed stronger, and colour drained out of the world. The stream in its deep channel glittered like a black snake; the houses were pale as chalk, as a ghost, as a skeleton. I might be wrong; I would be able to check it when I got back to the high-street, where Petch was sitting down for its evening meal, for this was Friday, and a fast-day. When we got back to our hotel and sat down in the restaurant, I said to my husband, "Eat what you like, I want to make an experiment." I asked the waiter what I could eat, and he mentioned dish after dish containing meat or eggs or butter, or fish cooked in butter, or cheese or milk, and all these things are forbidden by the Orthodox Church on fast-days. "These will not do," I said; "though I am a foreigner I want to keep the fast. Have you no dish that fulfils the condition? Haven't you any beans, or fish fried in oil or boiled in water?" "No," he said. "Is that because this is the evening meal?" I asked. "Perhaps at midday you had such dishes." "No," he said, "we are never asked for them." I said, "Very well, then, I must eat somewhere else." My husband by this time had become interested in the test I was applying. We went up and down the high-street from inn to inn, and they were all full of people eating their evening meal, none of whom was fasting. This was a strange sign in a town which lies in the shadow of Dechani, which for centuries lived not only in a state of ecstatic faith, but by it; for man loves his little abstinences, and he does not abandon the obscure pleasure of fasting until he actually wishes to dissociate himself from the belief which is its apparent justification. If the West had failed to provide Yugoslavia with a formula for happiness, it could not be pretended that the failure of new things did not matter, because there were old things here which were all the country needed. In parts of the country these old things are as valuable as they ever were, as they have ever been. In other parts they are not

EF
OPE

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10E

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101

About 12 persons waiting in it at the bar stop. I've given all my own rolls to the priest, just in case. They would find it more difficult to circulate something from

valid. The people will no longer accept them as currency; and here, since no new currency has been minted there is bankruptcy. As we went back to the restaurant the wind came down from the gorge ice-cold, and like a battering-ram; there was a sound of splintering wood and the crash of sheet-iron. A small shop had come to pieces.

The church said that some pilgrims had reported our behaviour as suspicious. After 20 min of interrogation, it was shown that we would be watched during our stay here.

Remember, we decide to push on for the old seat of Serbian Orthodox church. Our Albanian taxi driver seemed like a wolf once the rearmost door had closed and when told the Albanian and some children gather in the stream about five through the moonlight.

At the entrance, our passports were taken by the 1944 soldiers guarding the entrance. In the churchyard, we had a quiet night, with a tree. Near the door 'Marta' was told when that is charge. They eye us up suspiciously, and after a very brief conversation refuse us lodging. (I think I mention that I am relative of Patriarch Paul, but recently divorced spiritual leader, they will relent. Nope, I am allowed to bed around the monastery. Inside the church, a black like our horses around me. Later on I know the reason that she's lost her mind as a consequence of being tortured during the war.)

I kept fighting back the tears. All those children coming over, looking at me from the walls. Once again I am drained. Neither here, nor there. No one will claim me.

"Cardov is no help, all the things? (A noble neither in heaven, nor on earth)

403

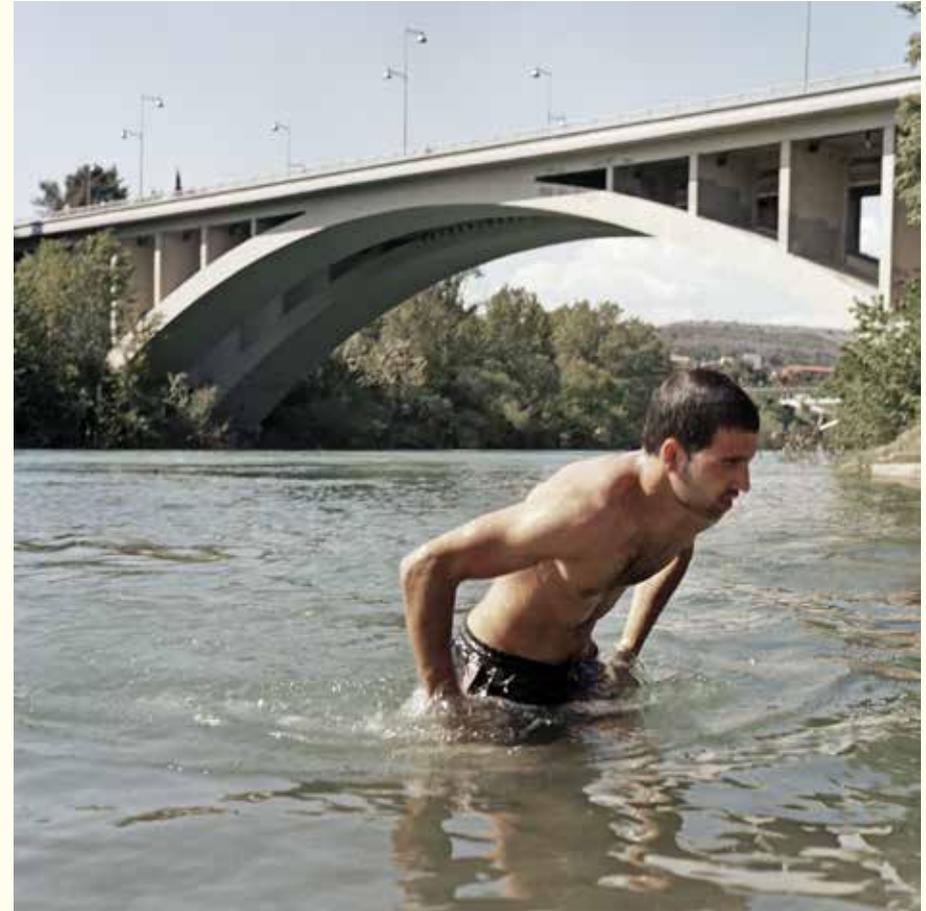
524





We arrive to a town of fake houses.

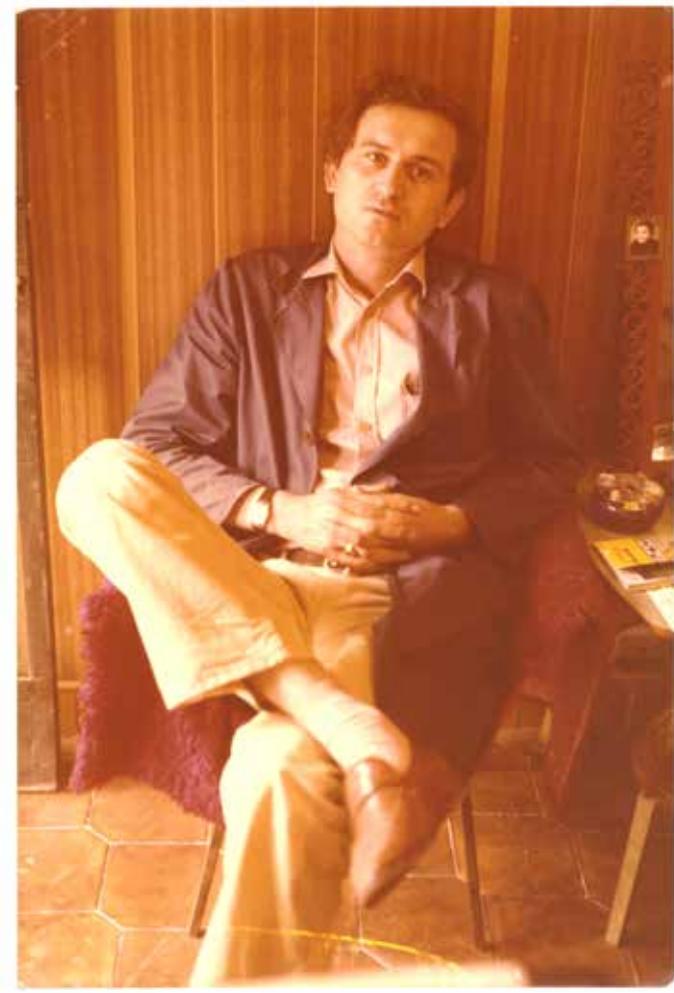
CETINJE | MONTENEGRO



“... you must look long at the water of the Moracha, which runs through Podgoritsa, for it is very beautiful.”

Trees bent over, like girls drying their hair after a swim. A stork flew over my head. I made myself a bed at the end of a small pier. Let time just wash over me. Could have stayed there forever.

PODGORICA | MONTENEGRO



"This woman was of no importance. It is doubtful whether walk as she would on these heights, she would arrive at any conclusion that was of value even to herself. She was, however, the answer to my doubts. She took her destiny not as the beast takes it, nor as the plants and trees; she not only suffered it, she examined it. As the sword swept down on her through the darkness she threw out her hand and caught the blade as it fell, not caring if she cut her fingers so long as she could question its substance, where it had been forged, and who was the wielder."

"If during the next million generations there is but one human being born in every generation who will not cease to inquire into the nature of his fate, even while it strips and bludgeons him, some day we shall read the riddle of our universe. We shall discover what work we have been called to do, and why we cannot do it. If a mine fails to profit by its riches and a church wastes the treasure of its altar, we shall know the cause: we shall find out why we draw the knife across the throat of the black lamb or take its place on the offensive rock, and why we left the grey falcon nest in our bosom, through it buries its beaks in our veins. We shall put our own madness in irons. Then, having defeated our own enmity, we shall be able to face the destiny forced on us by nature, and war with that. And what does that mean? What name is behind nature, what name but one name?"

- | remember thinking it all must be some sort of a
- | remember being excited and scared at the
- | remember how I put all my LP's into the hallway
- | remember that my father and my brother
- | remember bullets spraying the front door of
- | remember hearing what sounded like someone
- | remember my mother thinking 'it's them' and
- | remember grabbing onto her until all my
- | remember thinking 'pity I met them only
- | remember the building burning above us.
- | remember ~~the~~ being sad about all those books
- | remember being pissed off that I would die
- | remember when they came to pull us out.
- | remember how I learned to zigzag run
- | remember taking shelter in the local supermarket
- | remember falling asleep on bags of washing
- | remember him waking me up at 3am and whispering
- | remember asking for ice-cream and champagne.
- | remember captured Yugoslav army soldiers
- | remember Croatian soldiers handing them
- | remember walking into our burned down
- | remember feeling relief that all the mess
- | remember that everything melted except for
- in red crackling 'coals', waiting to go off

- | remember the soles of my red converse

- | remember walking out.

joke.
 same time.
 so they wouldn't get damaged by the crossfire,
 were out that afternoon,
 our building,
 trying to get in.
 running towards the door.
 nails broke.
 now when we are all about to die.'

my parents brought through the syndicate and never read
 a virgin only consumed by me and the fire.

in order to escape ~~the~~ sniper's bullets.
 powder, next to a bag I had a secret crush on (he was
 "What can I get you, Madam?" our local basketball star)

sitting scared shitless opposite from us.
 box of sweets.
 apartment the following morning.
 was gone and I would not need to clean up
 a big orange gas bottle, laying my room
 like some post-apocalyptic witches cauldron.
 shoes melting.

On the 15th of September 1991, I went for a walk with two of my closest friends down by the banks of the river Sava that flows through my hometown of Slavonski Brod. It was Sunday; we were bored after a three-month-long summer holiday and very excited about going back to school the next day. We were sixteen years old. The usually busy river promenade was eerily empty of people that day. However, we did meet a group of moustached men. It was immediately clear to us that they were army officers... it's strange how you can always recognise policemen and military even when disguised in their Sunday best. They told us to go home immediately, and stay there. Under my breath, I muttered where they could go... As we ran off giggling back to our own homes for lunch, one of my friends, I forget which one, shouted back towards me "It's soooo boring, I wish something exciting would happen."

My family's apartment was on the 8th floor of a building positioned right on the town's main square. The windows of the apartment looked at the large Yugoslav National Army (JNA) garrison. I remember my mother cooking Sunday lunch and then the doorbell rang. Outside our front door was a group of Croatian soldiers. They told us to put all of our valuables into the hallway and go down to the basement. And then it started. They attacked the JNA compound.

The story of me as a photographer starts on the day when our family apartment got burned down together with thousands of prints and negatives my father, an ardent amateur photographer, had accumulated. On that day I became one of those 'refugees' with no photographs, with no past. Indeed, my memories of the events and people I encountered before that Sunday in September 1991 are either non-existent or very vague. As Joseph Brodsky wrote: "Memory betrays everybody, especially those whom we knew best. It is an ally of oblivion, it is an ally of death. It is a fishnet with a very small catch and with the water gone. You can't use it to reconstruct anyone, even on paper." That day I learned the power photography has over memory. The day after the fire was the last time my father took a photograph, a perfunctory snapshot to record the damage for the insurance company. Where he stopped, I started. The act of photographing, of looking at the world through the camera lens, helped provide a semblance of control over an otherwise unpredictable world.

Once upon a time, a fair-haired woman from France drove by this oasis. She shot a photograph of me. She told me: "I will send you the picture." I never received it. And I am in Paris now, for work. I am seeing photographs everywhere. Photographs of Africa, of the Sahara desert and its oases. I do not recognise anything. They tell me: "This is your country, this is you."!? This? I do not recognise anything.

Michel Tournier (1986)

One day, during a particularly bad air attack, I took shelter with few of my friends, in an old abandoned basement nightclub. There we met a group of Italian filmmakers, who were also hiding from the bombing. They decided then and there to make a documentary about how it is to be a teenager in a war. We were all minors; and I don't remember this television crew running their idea by our parents. For the first time in months, we felt like someone cared about what we had to say. After they were done filming, the film crew went back to Italy. They promised they would write. They promised they would send us the film. We never heard from them again. Through acquaintances in Italy I found out that the documentary was shown numerous times on RAI2, the Italian national broadcaster, and that it was very well received.

From the very beginning of the conflicts, my family decided to avoid watching any news by Croatian or Serbian media; they were bombarding us with lies constantly, relentlessly. The media war was almost as vicious as the physical one. So my father purchased a satellite dish and we watched international news, trying to figure out what was really happening outside our front door. Except, that then, we were confronted with another lie. Like that young Bedouin in Tournier's *La Goutte d'Or* (1986), I could not recognise anything, I could not recognise my own country, I could not recognise the town I had lived in all my life, I could not recognise our neighbours. What western media was showing us instead, were people that even to me looked like 'the others': dirty, uncivilised, with matted unbrushed hair and desperation in their eyes. I remember being very angry. I wished that some of these international news broadcasters would come down into the basement with us, and sit there in the dark while the building was burning above them, without any running water for weeks. Once the bombing had stopped, or the city had surrendered, and they could finally come out from hiding, I wondered what would they feel like if someone shoved a camera into their faces, to be transmitted then into the living room of a family in London or Paris or anywhere in the shiny West, looking at this and thinking, 'Well, these people are not like us, look at them, they look like savages.'

Somehow as the war raged on, I managed to finish high school and enrol in university to study psychology. In 1999, after successfully completing my studies, I applied for a job as an army psychologist. The political situation was still very tense. I expected a reasonable amount of scrutiny and background checks in order for my job application to be processed. However, I did not expect that my phone would be tapped and a thick police dossier with my name on it would be produced (I have never committed a criminal act). Growing more and more disillusioned and irritated with the way the new Croatian state started to resemble a Stalinist-style police state, and especially with the way my peers just took this situation as given without even questioning it, I decided to leave the country. Above all, I decided not

to comply with the politics of forced amnesia. My parents were distraught. Somehow via Prague, I ended up in Ireland. This is where I came across Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. A friend who was studying International Relations said I should read it. So I did. I read it first in 2000, then again in 2003, 2008, 2010 and over and over again as I was working on the project. Every time the book provided some new revelation. As I changed and floated from different points in my own exile, from unskilled and underpaid jobs - to reasonable ones, from tiny damp flats - to my own home, from people with whom you were thrown together by necessity - to the friends you chose, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, always appeared different but with one persistent question: How did this foreign woman understand that place, that is so complex and complicated, so well? Of course I noticed the inconsistencies and exaggeration present in West's account of Yugoslavia, but the essence of what she tried to immortalise in her words was real. It is still real. I realised while researching the life and work of Rebecca West, the sense of displacement, isolation and not belonging is quite prevalent through her existence and was a major factor in the formulation of her world-views and by proxy the way she saw and described Yugoslavia. Being 'the other' herself, Rebecca West never 'othered' Yugoslavia.

The clarity of Rebecca West's vision and what she saw is extraordinary – clairvoyant, especially when one considers the events that took place there in the last 75 years. West calls it a “preternatural event in my life”, where she had “an extraordinary rapture”, in her words it “was like being dead and arriving near total comprehension.” Why else should she write such a huge inventory of a country that “ceases to exist?” West said that she could only remember things if she had a pencil in her hand, so she could write it down and play with it. The reason she wrote half a million words about Yugoslavia is because she did not want to forget anything about it, and because she wanted to preserve this memory for millions of Yugoslavs, who now live in exile.

On the tenth anniversary of my exile, I decided it was time to try and deal with the conflicting memories and emotions I had about my lost country and to attempt to engage with the meaning of identity. Is identity tied to a nation or a place, or can a person build their own metaphysical home, one that can't so easily be annihilated and taken away? The subject I was attempting to investigate was incredibly complex: Yugoslavia, exile, memory, identity. I needed a definite roadmap, something to adhere to almost ritualistically. It would be, otherwise, too easy to get lost in the project. And who better to follow, than another displaced person, traveling through the land of the displaced? Rebecca West's huge tome provided the itinerary almost to the hour.

Jean Baudrillard wrote that part of the pleasure of traveling is “to dive into places where others are compelled to live and come out unscathed, full of the malicious pleasure of abandoning them to their fate.” Unluckily, my journey was

not that much of a travel, but a return to the home that was no longer mine. I did not manage to come out unharmed. The thing with exiles is that they change their home for a suitcase. There is no proper return once you forsake your home. So, it made sense that I 'returned' to what was once Yugoslavia, with a camera. As Susan Sontag writes: “photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of a space in which they are insecure... Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs. The very activity of taking photographs is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel.”.

Although I started work on *YU: The Lost Country*, as a way of putting my scattered worlds, thoughts and emotions into some coherent shape, it became evident, quite early on, that this was not an endeavour of creating some metaphysical space in which my identity could reside, quite the opposite, it was a funeral procession. I was following a ghost on her travels through a country that had disappeared. To photograph is not wanting to be present. It's a discomfort with reality. It's a perverse activity of vanishing but also fetishising that moment of vanishing. Photography reinforces this act of fetishism. What happens in exile is that you remove yourself from reality, as you know it. You disown a home that you feel disowned you.

So what is photography? If I had to answer that question, I believe that my answer would be somewhat similar to that given to the narrator of Dubravka Ugrešić's novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. While sitting under the rain of artificial stars in a planetarium in Prenzlauer Allee, she asks her friend, an artist, what art is. He answers: “I don't know. An act which is certainly connected with mastering gravity, but which is not flying.”

DRAGANA JURIŠIĆ

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