

From **NOTHING'S LIKE IN THE MOVIES** (*Prague, 1993*)

Translated by **Wayles Browne**

and the members of **OSIP** (*the Organization for the Singing of International Poetry*)

### **BLACKOUT**

We've doused all the lights, stuck  
three layers of wallpaper on the broken  
windows (last night a patrol came because  
the ON light on the VCR was showing).  
We're cut off from people, from neighbors  
hiding in the cellar, by fourteen storeys  
of fear. Cut off from the sons of bitches  
cannonading us from the hills  
by a sound-screen of Ramirez's Missa Criolla.  
It lends our love-making on top  
of the punctured skyscraper  
a note of the astral, of almost  
divine epiphany.

*Published in the **Bookpress** (Ithaca, NY, Vol. 4 No. 2, March 1994, p. 7)*

### **THE OCCUPATION IN TEN SCENES**

The birds are leaving us. They mass in flocks, upon  
the sound of sirens they fly—and disappear.  
Telephones keep ringing. When it hits,  
dogs and car alarms howl moulfully in answer.  
Kids pick up bits of shrapnel, housewives  
with makeup on drink coffee in the cellar;  
Boca, Kljuja, Franca and I play rummy.  
The elevator's stalled, the water tap stops running.  
The old deaf Spanish Civil War vet stands outside  
the house door, leaning on his cane, clothed in his best,  
surveying the horizon—no doubt seeing Spain.  
We huddle close around the radio news. We wait.  
They say it takes two sides to have a war.

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## **MASTER CRAFTSMEN**

(for S. Sontag)

The analogy of photography and dying,  
the death of the moment, or freezing it  
is all too obvious, even banal.  
A sniper and a photo reporter  
on the corner of Marshal Tito Street and Maxim Gorki  
in the same way make an abstraction  
of my fate, reduced to a dozen  
metres of street I must traverse.  
The craftsmen, skilled in their trades, are waiting.  
My hesitation fills them with  
a professional nervousness which,  
certainly in my favor, increases  
my chances. Here we are at the heart of the matter:  
murderers, like artists, are prone  
to romantic exaggeration,  
to mutual glorification, striving for effects.  
They shoot past the mark. The sniper and the photographer.  
The cross is the same in the center of their sights.

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## **SYMBIOSIS**

Last night the eight-story building across the street  
was hit by a shell. Blew the roof  
framing and the top floor right off.

Glance through the window this morning:  
between two burned-off beams  
somebody's hung out their fresh washing.

*(Unpublished)*

From **NOTHING'S LIKE IN THE MOVIES** (*Prague, 1993*)

Translated by **Francis R. Jones**

**Billie Holiday**

Nitrates poisoned the tenuous soul  
of my old love. Mia Z, jazz singer and first lady  
of the Maribor Spring, from 7 to 3 a worker  
in the local nitrate factory, loved my thin  
body, bathed it that summer in cold  
water from a broken boiler. On the photos that  
remain, her figure is unreal, floating  
on the sandalwood smoke of joss-sticks and gazing  
at the big black-and-white poster of Billie Holiday,  
as if acid has flowed over its contours.  
Something similar has happened to her voice  
on the cassettes, ifs going hoarse. The dull spleen  
of the double bass and the despair she bewitched me with,  
mezzo-soprano husky with nitrate fumes.  
In the autumn of our love, despairing at my  
youth, my leaving, she swallowed some pills,  
had an abortion... Loneliness. A bitch of an autumn,  
melancholy.

**Craftsmen**

(for Susan Sontag)

Photography and death—killing, freezing  
the instant—is too hackneyed an  
analogy, nothing short of a cliché.  
The sniper and the press photographer  
at the Tito-Gorky Street crossroads  
are making the same abstraction  
of my fate, condensed to the ten metres  
of street I have to sprint across.  
The artists, the master craftsmen, are waiting,  
my hesitation fills them with  
professional angst, which works  
in my favour, ups my chances.  
And that's just it, the root of the problem:  
murderers, like artists, tend to  
over-dramatise, go for mutual  
glorification, cheap effects.  
Firing at nothing. Sniper and photographer.  
The same cross-hairs centre their shots.

**Untitled** (*Midday Express*)

Landscape chained in the lenses of your  
sunglasses, thought given rhythm  
by the even rattle of the speeding train, your  
hand in my groin. This is a joy, sweetheart,  
this is my love, the best that's left  
of me. The outcome came out of the blue,  
where we last expected it. I no longer  
remember how, or why, just that you're here beside  
me. Emerging too slowly, the scent of your skin,  
factions of perception in the lenses of your  
sunglasses. Travelling. How can we keep  
our cool, sweetheart, how can we hold out?

*Published in Scare on the stone: Conterporary poetry of Bosnia.* (Edited by Chris Agee) Bloodaxe  
Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 1998, p. 196-197)

From PRAGUE FRACTALS (*Prague, 1996*)

Translated by **Wayles Browne** and the members of **OSIP**

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**My three-day friend from Slovenia**

is suddenly going to Berlin. He's leaving. We got drunk in some bar, confided some painful masculine things to each other. At 2 AM we're saying goodbye at the railway station, it lasts too long, we fall silent in the boundless intimacy of people who are sure they won't meet again. A bum comes up and asks: Yugoslavians? No, we answer in unison, Vietnamese. O.K., my Vietnamese brothers, how about a beer for me to say goodbye with?

\* \* \*

**A sign in the beer cellar that says PRICE CATEGORY**

THREE, my friend Mario, the last failed attempt to standardize the world, the only signpost you can still be sure to find me by. Prague's towers like broken high-tension lines (the last image I recall from my old home), revision of the streets, address books and phone directories, kaleidoscopic statelets, hours of curfew or months, or years... Lassie comes home. But screw a home that's no longer there. Lassie remarried, had pups, swapped passports and married once more. A total dog's life, my friend Mario, fits into a handful of human years.

\* \* \*

**The kind of unease that strikes you when you find in your pocket**

a left-over ticket from the horse track that you, keeping it from yourself, bet on a complete outsider: if you dared trust yourself entirely to the devastating feeling, you might, while there's still time, realize something of the final things. But daring comes when it's all too late. It's just that all this has lasted too long; I don't know how else to put it across. The smell of fruit trees flowering in the air, matchless moments when her breasts seem bigger than my horrors and it seems there may be some sense in surviving. A long street is in front of you, you come home from work in the crowd: to someone, to someplace.

As if nothing were happening.

As if nothing had happened.

(Unpublished)

## Why The Dwarf Had To Be Shot

On June twenty eight, Nineteen hundred and ninety two, in the basement of the Sarajevo City Hospital we sat with professor Dževad Karahasan and his wife, who were serving as hospital volunteers, since the city had been massacred day after day. They were devastated by their family tragedy, her mother murdered in her apartment by a grenade, and we came to console them with conversation, with desperate hope that military intervention was on its way. But instead, along with pomp and unprecedented measures of security, Mitterand came, to give us and our slayers a lecture in morals and mutual understanding. Horrified starving old women sobbed beyond consolation, while confused passersby and children hurried toward international television cameras, behaving, like pandas born by Caesarian section in a zoo in Indianapolis. The whole world applauded with praise the French love of justice, the French *courage*, French altruism — while Mitterand senilely smiled at the decor of a destroyed building which had been, in his honor, renamed *L' hospital France*. Murderers did not bombard us for a few hours, taking their time to shake his hand, and all went smoothly, almost like an ecumenical colloquium somewhere in Paris.

A local TV crew came to the basement asking for an interview with Dž. K. What did he think about the surprise visit of Mitterand, they asked. He said, "Disgusting filth." They asked him what he thought, in his opinion, ought to be done. He said, "to shoot the dwarf dead." They asked if he would do it. He said, "If I had a weapon at hand, for sure."  
TV crew: "Would you do it, professor, to go down in history?"  
Dž. K.: "What history, friend? I would do it in order to reach sense."

No weapons were at hand, and the interview, unfortunately, never saw the light of day till now.

(1992, edited 2004)

Translated 2004 by S. Skenderija & Aaron Tate

### I had always wondered how it would feel

to survive an airplane crash: chosen by the mercy of a statistical paradox, *deus ex machina*, one of the thousands who still remains . . . Always the cases fascinated me of deserters and women who committed suicide, that sentimental belief in human dignity, in fate. Always I was a dog: I was afraid. I was not able to endure any longer and for that reason I survived. For days I cried like a dog, I howled at myself alone. I had no choice but to remove myself from that, to undertake something, to change. And so on the 23rd of November, Nineteen hundred and ninety two, I came to Prague.

(1993, Transl. 2004 by Aaron Tate)

## Fourth of July

I  
Orange fire hydrant, iron dwarf, into which the police car crashes often in silent movies, turning the thing into a stunning water palm tree, and the housefront mailbox metal-flags whose sole meaning I have for a long time grasped (since the dwellers of Donald Duck City gave with them a sign that it is time, for the postman to retrieve)—in America, in state-subsidized housing, beneath my window turned to the warehouse of furniture, here is where the immigrant destiny came to an end, and the future began, dreams too too easy to achieve:

You need only move two blocks further and already you are eighty six payments closer to the cocksure neighborhood foyer, white-skinned purgatory of an American heaven.

In the American dream, in broad daylight, as if when water-calm comes, to lay—so easy it is, to remember everything that has happened, as when through sunglasses you look at the sun, it is that easy, so easy not to have desire.

### II

As I carry Mirna on my shoulders she asks, *Why are there fireworks, daddy?* "Because it is my birthday today." *And where do all the rockets fall?* "Nowhere, honey, they vanish, just burn away." And suddenly, finding its way, the song comes into my head, an old forgotten gem:

"When the cities will burn one day, the smoke will rise to heaven, a magnificent firework display, just as it once used to happen, on the good old First of May, when they would take us to the parade."

And I pause to consider, without horror, how the singer then could have known, how slight is the visible difference between a celebration ignited by matches and a capital city by grenade, and I wonder whether Mirna herself will ever have to discover such a completely unnecessary matter.  
--Daddy, she says, *is it that fireworks melt like ice cream in the sun?*  
--"Oh yes, my sweetheart, exactly. It is exactly like that."

(2000)

Translation 2004 by Aaron Tate

## CAPE OF GOOD HOPE

I promised Zekida  
To bring a poem  
From the edge of the world  
From the Cape of Good Hope  
Though she hadn't  
Asked me to

Unfortunately  
But when one's written  
A few poems  
Good poems  
He doesn't write poems just for nothing  
Or make promises

I was flying from Johannesburg  
To Cape Town  
A masculine-looking woman  
On the seat next to me  
Asked me  
What language that was  
That I was reading a book in  
I answered like a shot  
BOSNIAN  
Aha she said  
Uncomfortably

She said We have Bosnians here too  
In South Africa  
I know  
But tell me, how many kilometers is it  
From Johannesburg to Cape Town?  
About 1400  
Aha  
Like Atlanta to New York  
I said

The book I was reading  
Was by Amir B.  
The Bosnian  
The man who  
Unlike me stayed  
And put up by himself  
A grave marker to his father  
He wrote a poem about it  
What a poem!  
I had never met him  
But Adin  
An old buddy of mine  
Got him to write dedications in two books  
And send them  
With Fatima  
On to America  
One he signed *In friendship*  
And the other *With respect*

Reason enough  
To take his books  
With me to the edge of the world  
(I'd never had a better friend  
Than that old buddy Adin  
Other than Zekida  
And maybe  
Teno)

The plane landed in Cape Town  
At dusk  
The most dizzying sight  
I have ever yet seen  
I thought  
Maybe only the descent into Rio  
Is comparable with this  
Thanks to Cendrars  
But who knows  
Even Rio isn't out of the question  
Now that I have landed at the Edge

The hotel room was cramped  
In a one-time prison for one-time bank robbers  
But the furniture was OK  
A window part way open and a storm every little while  
Then calm again  
I left the TV on  
Since I was frightened alone at the edge of the world  
In the dark of the cell  
Soft-core porn on Channel 6

In the middle of the night I woke up and shut it off:  
*I went out into the world to rest a  
Body confused by the fear of disappearing  
But my courage left me in the first gloom -*  
And then I remembered  
That Semezdin hadn't gotten in touch  
Ever since I asked him  
To send me an invitation letter  
In the name of the Voice of America  
For Teno  
To get a visa  
What crap

It's strange

It seems to me that  
There's a certain point  
On the life map of each of us  
And when you reach it  
Every trip becomes a return  
And every mile takes you  
Further and further from your companions  
And closer and closer  
To those who stayed at home

In the morning  
In the coach  
The guide told us  
How the First Voyage  
In fact was a failure  
And how the Navigator returned broken and embittered  
To tell the King about the *Cape of Storms*  
At the edge of the world  
Beyond which nothing lies  
But the furious sea  
And the fatal shoals hidden in fog  
Sharper than Levantine sabers

Later the King changed a detail  
In the log of the voyage  
And rewarded the Navigator with riches and glory  
For  
The disheartened homeland was in need of  
Places of good hope  
New horizons  
Words of comfort  
And encouragement

(9/2003)

Translation **Wayles Browne**

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**Unconditional childlike trust in the world**

as the train speeds into the haunted house. Or when appear  
the majestic zodiac figures in the dome of the planetarium,  
or the devotion I give to finding an escape  
from the labyrinth of mirrors. Cotton candy, popcorn, circus  
pleasures—enchanted moments of joy, rare, at ease.  
Another day bound by its own limits, seams.  
Exhausting confabulations: the transvestite in the telephone  
booth, twisting the ends of his platinum-blond hair, how he turns  
his body, holding in his hands a military magazine with images  
of the tanks of the world's armies. Or, say, an American student  
of creative writing, with his video camera on the monstrous  
communist city square: trying to record something, to embrace it,  
soon he withdraws, leaves—it is too difficult for him.

(In recent times I dream only commonplaces: I dream  
of childhood, sailing, how I fly, how I make love  
with the heroines of Krzysztof Kieślowski's movies.)

(1993)

Translation 2004 by **Aaron Tate**