

ADISA BAŠIĆ

Fall and Recovery in Five Easy Steps

Someone dreams of having a horse
Someone has a horse
Someone dreams of riding a horse
Someone rides a horse
Someone dreams of falling off a horse
Someone falls off a horse
Someone wakes up on falling
Someone gets up and rides again.

– *Horse and Dream*, a poem for children by Dušan Radović

1 DENIAL

The neighbors have disappeared suddenly and without a trace

One day he asked me, *Do you want to come with me to my hometown?* It was the most genuine and the gentlest declaration of love I had ever received. I knew how painful it had been for him to return to the town where, a decade earlier, he and his family barely saved their skins. Three thousand people were not as lucky. He never wanted to come back. Then again, it was his special place: there were the streets where he grew up, his school, his grandfather's back yard, where he used to meet the world when he was a baby. There was an especially green river that marked his childhood, and there was a terrace on the top of his former apartment building where he took me just to check something. *What does this hill resemble to you?* He asked excitedly and a bit ceremonially when we met on the terrace in the evening. *What do you mean, what does it resemble? Well, isn't that obvious? A whale, of course, that big hill is its back, and that little one beside it is its tail.*

Judging by his radiant face, I knew that was the right answer. It was a marvelous visit, even though everything was smaller, different and shabbier than it was in his memory and his stories.

And then we passed through a street that was completely deserted. Soon I realized that all houses in it were damaged and empty. Some were burnt down, others just thoroughly robbed, wiring and plumbing cut off, plucked... *Look, the whole street is empty. Where are all these people? What happened here?* He looked at me for a long time in amazement *What do you mean, where are they? Well, killed and driven away*, he said very tiredly. I felt my cheeks blushing in embarrassment. What nonsense. What a stupid question. As if I was a reckless tourist who accidentally found herself in an unknown country, not knowing anything about its recent history. We were hurrying to leave the town before it got dark, as if the ghosts would be waking up then, as if the town had not been spooky enough by day.

It has been years since then, and of that day I remember most the back and the tail of the imaginary whale, and that frightening silence in the street without people, windows, or life. A few years later we came back to his town: a small group of rare returnees, with the help of cousins and friends from abroad, managed to reconstruct just one of the many mosques in the town that had been destroyed. During the war the Serbs had destroyed all the mosques in the town, changing its face thoroughly. Just a piece of a wall and a half-melted metal dome remained of one, of all the others all that was left were parking lots and lawns. We came to the inauguration of the first rebuilt mosque in order to visit friends of his family, and to show respect to the couple returning to their former town. We were standing to the side so as to not disturb the believers participating in the prayer, and watched the arrival of several luxurious cars. The main Islamic religious ruler in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Grand Mufti, arrived in one of them. Dressed in nicely designed attire he stood superciliously in front of the people and delivered a speech. He spoke insultingly of those people

who were not coming back to live in their hometown in Eastern Bosnia, criticized the gathered for returning in large numbers only in times of festivities, while they continue to live in other cities and countries, in which they found shelter during the massacre. He referred to the victims, all those killed people, who were making it impossible to give up on the town. The survivors looked ahead, a bit ashamed. And then the Grand Mufti in his well-designed attire got into his luxurious car and buzzed off with great speed toward his distant and safe world.

The deserted street with the destroyed houses and with no people was still mainly empty. Some of the survivors would occasionally come to visit the site of their former, now burned-down, homes. Their Serb neighbors often pretended not to recognize them, or sometimes offered to purchase what remained of their estate. What would recovery mean in a town like this? How appropriate is it to ask people to return to a place where they suffered torture? And where are those who do not share their memories, and who each and every day pass by empty houses without wondering how it was possible for whole streets to have died? What does it mean, and what should recovery look like in towns in which everyone is accustomed to these strange landscapes, having learned not to ask themselves where the neighbors they'd known all their lives disappeared to? How come there are so many black holes of oblivion in the façades of their towns, the weird grassy plinths right in the middle of the streets, on the spots where 200-hundred-year-old pearls of Islamic architecture used to stand?

Nowadays, almost twenty years after all the carnage, banishments and mass rapes, Foča, the place I visited in the aftermath of the war, is an ethnically cleansed town. A rather reputable School of Medicine was opened here. It will be easier to enroll in it for those not quite up to the competitive pressure of the bigger cities, like Belgrade or Zagreb, easier to get an education, a diploma, a career. So that the irony will be complete, the future humanitarians, here to learn to save lives, will not know anything about the previous inhabitants of this town. An

acquaintance, whose sister is completing her study of medicine in this east Bosnian town, says to me: *Foča is a nice little academic town. Kind of like Cambridge, or Oxford. My sister is about to have a baby, she has been offered a job at the Med School there. She is very, very happy.* In the town where she sees an academic idyll, the surviving victims see the killed, the banished, and the raped.

A common path to recovery is denial: all we have to do is shut our eyes and (as in books by Paulo Coelho) make a really big wish. Then all our guilt, and the guilt of our ancestors, will disappear as if in a fairy tale. In what previously were concentration camps we will again open mines and factories. We will send cleaning ladies with buckets to scrub the walls of the camps that had been the sites of murders or rapes and then to reopen those same buildings as pleasant hotels and spa resorts, in which we'll wish guests a warm welcome. Now and then we will stumble and get our noses bloodied a bit—it's not easy to go through the world eyes wide shut—but we'll soon stand up again and celebrate our recovery.

2 ANGER

A cut in a black neck

Not one but dozens of empty streets welcomed me in West Baltimore. Beautiful Victorian houses, threaded one after another like pearls in a necklace, gape empty. Almost no one lives in them; some city districts look irretrievably deserted. *Look, the whole street is empty. Where are all these people? What happened here?* I thought to myself again, this time in totally different circumstances. Charlie Duff, our charismatic and genteel guide, clarifies that there are three reasons why this is so. The first is that cars enabled people to move to peaceful suburbs; the second is the de-industrialization of Baltimore; the third is race. Freshly arrived immigrant workers who might live in these houses had stopped coming, and the small number that remained had moved away, grouping

themselves in their “cleansed” black and “cleansed” white neighborhoods. Much more time is needed for segregation to be abolished in reality than it is in theory, and in the law books. A majority was determined to live separately, so the City Councils did their best to help them: Charlie is showing us the gas station, the street and the shopping center that were built a couple decades before, as a kind of buffer zone between *white* and *black* districts. Even in the official documents this project is mentioned as a *fire break*, the cut made to prevent the spreading of a fire. The American racial and the Bosnian ethnic segregation shock by how similar they are.

Following Baltimore and its introductory lesson on race issues came Birmingham, Alabama. And the depressing lesson was repeated, for the human race does not learn from experience. We repeat our mistakes with persistence and determination. After burning our fingertips on a smoldering surface, the next time around we press the whole palm against the same surface with all our strength, without flinching and without hesitation. Historic lessons are nonexistent; history as the teacher of life only exists in dusty Latin textbooks, cracked open by a few new but distracted students of a classics grammar school. Just when one Calvary is over, we hurry up another one. World War I was followed by World War II. *No more Auschwitz, No more Holocaust* was followed, in short order, by apartheid and genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia.

At the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, where an interactive exhibit depicts the history of the struggle against race discrimination in the U.S., one feels the same abashment as after the visit to The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, or to The Memorial Centre in Potočari, Srebrenica. First the disbelief that someone could even think to play God, to decide the life and death of other people, to consider oneself so superior in value and dignity. Then the same insight about the banality of human evil. Then the exhibits telling the

story of someone inventing the division of the most ordinary daily lives into two colors, black and white: separate urinals, classrooms, means of transportation, restaurants, barbershops, grocery stores...

Several exhibits in this memorable Birmingham museum are especially striking. The first is the snow-white uniform of a Ku Klux Klan member, with its neat (a poet fond of romanticizing can barely refrain from writing “loving”) seam work. Next to it, a small explanatory tag with two words: *anonymous donation*. That means someone kept this item in the family closet, perhaps hidden and perhaps not. Someone realized that the world is after all a bit better if this white gown does not remain a home relic but is to be found where it belongs, in the Museum of Madness and Senselessness of Segregation. Someone anonymous: that is perhaps even more important. Because that means that the anonymous donor feels fear and discomfort, but also that he or she is slowly overcoming them. Recovery is perhaps just the decision that one day all the skeletons in our closets will end up in the second-hand shops of history, where they belong. Apart from the uniform, the glass showcase also contains a half-burnt wooden cross, which the FBI used as evidence in an investigation against some Klan members, and which was later handed over to the Museum. The year in which the cross was burnt is also frighteningly recent — 1997.

The second exhibit that attracts special attention is a picture of a black woman, a nurse. This part of the exhibition contains life-sized images of people of different backgrounds and professions. They illustrate how segregation permeated different levels of society, and ways in which people have found excuses and justifications for it. But the detail in the exhibit that makes it special was not supplied by a museum curator. Rather, it was clearly supplied by a visitor: the neck on the picture of the nurse is cut with a sharp object; the symbolism of slaughter is more than obvious. Someone did not like the concept of the Museum, or the idea of abolishing segregation. This *intervention* is again, most probably, the act of a reckless and spoiled teenager on a

school visit, one who thought cutting the black neck would be really funny. We don't know, and can't know, for certain whether the explanation really is that banal. We don't know, and can't know, for certain whether anyone was there with the person who cut the neck of the nurse, and we don't know anything either about how that made the participant or participants feel. Were they thinking about what had happened until the end of the day? Did they tell anyone? Did they brag about their *mischief*? It is interesting, though, that the staff of the Museum did not correct or repair this act of vandalism. And that they did not offer any additional explanation for it.

The third Birmingham exhibit at which I stopped for a long while was a picture from the protests *against* the abolishment of segregation. After all the marches and protests had finally ended, after the humiliation and discrimination had finally been outlawed, groups of citizens started organized *civilized democratic* protests. One woman in the photograph attracted my special attention. She is pretty, wearing lipstick, her hair neat, dressed in a beautiful cinch-waisted dress in the 60s style. Smiling, and obviously in a good mood, as if she had just come back from a date. This attractive woman (she would have to be an old lady today, and might well still be alive) has been captured in a public protest, struggling for those absurdly separated urinals, classrooms, restaurants, barbershops, grocery stores, public transportation, for all that had been abolished after a great effort... It is hard to accept that there is a democratic right to fight for an unfounded, pathological really, idea about one person's domination over another. I imagine how that attractive woman comes home after the protest, takes off her elegant but somewhat tight shoes, lies down on a sofa and puts up her feet to have some rest. Perhaps she is welcomed by her loyal black servant, who raised her, offering her coffee and a sandwich as a refreshment, to get back her strength after the protest march.

3 DEPRESSION

Just wait for the witnesses to die

When does the process of recovery truly begin? Does it happen with the death of the last witness, the one who still remembers all too well? Traumatic experiences cut deep into one's memory with a terrifying precision. A decade after it has all been over one can still hear women in Bosnia describe how their husbands, sons, relatives were taken away to be killed: *This is how they took him away... He looked at me this way... He was wearing a tracksuit just like this one... As we were parting, he told me... I gave him... He turned back, I can still see him so vividly... That hair of his... And how he shuffles a bit as he walks... I told him "take your sweater, you'll catch a cold"... He turned toward me and smiled... I can still see him so vividly...*

As long as people who remember are alive, the recovery is painful and slow. Because only a recovery that is slow and sticks in one's craw is somewhat bearable, and just, in this unjust world.

Once the living witnesses are gone, only myths remain. Once the witnesses whose stories have never been heard die, the only thing that remains is a blank blackboard, ready to be inscribed with whatever we wish. When witnesses die, new children are born. Prospering, rosy-cheeked, happy. The children for whom the world begins with their birth. They have no sins, no obligations, no memories. Fluttering like beautiful flags raised high on their poles, they are pledges for a better tomorrow. They haven't done anything wrong. Nothing can be held against them...

And when the witnesses who saw people being crucified, hung from a tree, set on fire in locked buildings or blown up, have died, the time comes for the new, the different, the better.

Once the witnesses are dead, new children grow up to believe that the world is a magical place. Some of those children are born in countries that have, in the meantime, become quite civilized.

As witnesses die, kids grow up happy and free from responsibility. *That's our American optimism*, says a nice boy who does not know whether his grandfather was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. He does not know because that story belongs to yesterday, and it is for them to look far, far ahead. It would be impolite to ask the elders. Because yesterday does not exist, does it?

And so, if we choose amnesia, we will never find out. That is how we can pardon thousands of murderers, who remain nameless and faceless. That is how we will never have to attribute responsibility to any of those who pulled the trigger so many times it left a blister on their finger. That is how we might never find out who the skillful miner was who brought the explosives and set the wires the night a church was blown into the air. Or a mosque. We will never find out who shot a bullet into the back of a head. Who cut up sheets day and night to make blindfolds to cover a person's eyes before they were shot. It is impolite to ask a nice old lady, a grandmother or great-grandmother if she at least once made a cake or sent a bottle of home brew to a Klan meeting. We will refrain from asking a grandfather how it felt to hold the torch high in the air. High and proud, upright, like the Statue of Liberty. Or when he tightened his gun belt. Or when he put on the sinister hood. The *ušanka*.¹ The fez.²

What was on his mind as he slashed across somebody's throat with a knife? Or as he tightened the noose?

We will sit forever at a family dinner, under nicely framed photos of our ancestors, looking optimistically ahead. Far, far ahead...

1 Ušanka – a fur hat worn by the Chetniks, a Serbian ultranationalist irregular military force in World War II as well as in the Bosnian war of 1992-95.

2 Fez – a hat worn by the Bosnian Muslims in the past, worn also by the Muslim members of the Handschar Division, a notorious unit that was part of the Nazi Waffen-SS force in World War II.

4 BARGAINING

If we fix the facades, everything will be as it was

If we cannot or will not fully understand the reasons of the fall, let us at least try and get up as soon as possible. If we fix the facades and the roofs, perhaps everything will be as it was.

Every day bold headlines in Bosnian newspapers catch the eye. The international community is dissatisfied with the progress of reforms. Bosnia is on a slow track to join the European Union. Foreign officials are dissatisfied with the BiH situation, two decades after the start of the war. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not do this or that... Slow, lame, confused in this fast world of ever faster technologies, we are not getting up quickly enough. When so many billions of dollars have been invested in the recovery. Our super-modern bionic prosthetic legs were so expensive but we still walk stiffly, like so many Franksteins. And this is what disturbs the others so much.

The need to move on, so deeply rooted inside all of us, has been a useful tool throughout the centuries when people have had to rise up from the ashes over and over again. But what is recovery, and what is the *illusion* of recovery, its outer manifestation?

In the suburbs of New Orleans, entire neighborhoods have been reconstructed with so much detail that it is difficult to even imagine the disaster we heard about during our visit. It is quite difficult for the present-day visitor to the city to believe that the devastating effects of the flood have been almost completely removed in such a short period of time. Thousands of houses have been repaired, some are being repaired right now and more are completed every day. The tourist office of New Orleans offers a tour to visit the parts of town most affected by Katrina. Standing in front of a list of tourist attractions, an American woman says to her friends, all of whom obviously came to

the city for a good time: *Visiting sites most affected by hurricane Katrina? Who wants to hear about that? As if we haven't seen enough on TV.* However, the minibus that takes the curious on the three-hour tour is full. The first part of the trip is so boring that it nearly puts us to sleep, passing as we do through neighborhoods (white-middle-class) that have been completely reconstructed. Some houses have been rebuilt from top to bottom, some just repainted, and only a few empty grassy spots make one uneasy, for houses used to stand on each one of them.

Most of these houses were built on pillars similar to those of lake dwellings. Some of them are about half a meter tall, some over two metres, making the houses look like strange castles floating in the air, or perhaps like strange long-legged birds that came down to this pleasant area for a short rest. Here, nature is being bargained with: we are hard workers who rebuilt all that was destroyed, but we also are smart, trying to prevent foreseeable disasters. We want to believe that there still is some order in the world, and some logic, and we truly hope we can prevent catastrophes, that we can prepare for them.

And yet, every day before our eyes, giant waves, earthquakes and floods wipe entire towns off the face of the Earth.

As parts of New Orleans are becoming ever poorer, the number of collapsing, abandoned and half-rebuilt houses is growing. In front of some of them people continue to live in trailers, gathering money and strength to repair their homes. Some houses look eerily empty. Many still have the visible sign placed there by the U.S. National Guard: the date when they entered the house, the unit's name, the number of bodies they found inside. The dates from the wealthier residential areas of the city show that help came ten days too late. In the poor areas, the help was over a month late. These neighborhoods are mostly empty even today; not even shops, hospitals or schools have been repaired.

Passing a trailer parked in front of a ruined house, our guide is talking angrily about the owner's *laziness*, for he did not manage to repair his

house even six years after the disaster. We are very confident when it comes to assessing the time needed for a person to get back on his feet. Being slow earns, once again, our mocking laughter. We are not interested in peoples' lives but rather in the outer manifestation of their ability to fix something. We don't care if they were so scared or disappointed that they now hesitate to return to the ruins of their earlier lives, from which they were chased off by a flood or a war. The imperative is: move on, look ahead, forget about it... As if there were no situations in which people need a lot of time and courage to move on. As if there were no situations in which it is impossible to move on.

A friend of mine, an American, a poet, survived a terrible family tragedy ten years ago: he lost his four-year old daughter. After many years he wrote a book of poems about it. When I asked him if the writing had a therapeutic effect on his life, he said that the process never had anything to do with therapy, for he rejected all offers of psychological assistance. He rejected them for they begin with a premise that one can heal, that one can feel better. He said that he did not want to get over it, that even today he does not want to get over the one he loved but who no longer is here: *I want the pain to stay with me and inside of me, for it is the way for my daughter to be with me too. Therapy brings you back to a normal state of mind, and people who have experienced something very traumatic became anti-normal in a way and there is a part of them that does not want to (and I am not certain that it can) return to the normal state, that they can bury their trauma.*

This manner of understanding things is rare in the present-day world of fast repair, of belief that shards of a broken world can be (and must be) mended with a strong glue and fixed with high-quality construction materials, as if nothing had happened.

There was a great deal of compassion for and anxiety about Japan in Bosnia and Herzegovina this spring because of the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami there. With surprise, and with respect, we watched the calm faces of the people handling despair with immense

discipline. In a TV interview, a woman said quietly that water had ripped her child away from her arms as she was trying to save it, in vain. The dignity that Japan had throughout the catastrophe was amazing. Seven days after the earthquake, a picture appeared on the internet, showing a highway broken up by gaping chasms, then fully repaired a week after the quake. This speed was awe-inspiring. But what about the gaps that weren't the result of natural hazards, but were created among people? Is it appropriate to ask people to return to small towns where the oppressors, whom they managed to escape, are still living—as is the case in Eastern Bosnia? Is it appropriate to ask people to take out a loan and set out to repair their home in New Orleans? Does a person have the right to not recover? Or at least the right to a slow, long-drawn-out healing process?

Do we have the right to our own ruination? The right to our destroyed house, in front of which we'll park a trailer and live in it even when all our neighbors repair their homes and start looking with suspicion upon our eyesore, standing there as witness to something they themselves wish to forget?

5 ACCEPTANCE

Life goes on, or rather...

We tend to believe that things are replaceable. Our clothes last barely a season or two, we throw away super-durable plastic dishes as soon as we are sated, our hunger satisfied. By tomorrow, everything we own will appear in a better, smaller, more perfect version. The only problem is that we are slowly beginning to believe that people can be replaced much the same way. No doubt, our job could be done equally well by many others. There are also those waiting in line to jump into our lives, to love our lovers, take our kids to day-care...

Because whatever happens, *life goes on*... There are very few things so encouraging and yet so frightening as knowing how much truth there is in this well-worn phrase. One stands up after falling down, sometimes slowly and painfully, with hesitation, other times easily and energetically, without fear. And then what? We shake off, count our losses, move on. We round off casualties to the nearest whole number. History rounds off skeletons to zero; a thousand and one is still only a thousand... When anniversaries come around we pay our respects, fix what is broken and quickly put on the mask of normalcy. We hail recovery as a sign of strength. Should a tear appear after some time, we wipe it away quickly, secretly, with a feeling of uneasiness...

One can have a pleasant time in New Orleans, remaining completely oblivious to what happened here six years ago. The city has been given a makeover for tourists, it has put on a smile, opened its shops and restaurants, offering souvenirs, massage, sightseeing tours. New Orleans again is what everyone comes for — a place of great and unlimited fun, where one can smoke in bars, listen to street music, feel free. The music festival is on, and the French Quarter is swarming with people. Old people dance vigorously in front of the stage as if faith in *flower power* never died. A group of tourists is laughing, taking shelter from the warm spring sun under a small tree: they are all wearing cheerful red lobster hats. Beautiful students dressed up in that carefully careless way move their hips to the rhythm of the music. Life triumphs. There is no yesterday. We do not look backwards.

This abundance of colours, aromas and sounds — a sunny day always makes the world look more beautiful — fights gloomy thoughts, and invites oblivion. Amnesia is healing, it makes life easier. How else could we live? On a day like this, how would it feel to think about which one of those pleasant and hospitable people, just a few years ago, was the first to take a step towards bestiality, was the first to pull a gun. And who among them was standing on the roof, with no hope of being rescued.

Blissful in our forgetfulness we taste the gumbo, throw coins to street musicians, drink cocktails called “the Hurricane” (!), and for the first time this year expose our pale bodies to the warm sun. Everything is happening *for the first time*. The power of life forces the green stalks through the cold earth of April, “the cruellest month.” The explosion of this magnificent cruelty occurs right before our eyes.

All the way in the corner of the picture, a young mother of ample bosom is feeding her baby on a lawn, both unperturbed by the clamor around them. Relentless and unstoppable, life goes on... The shivers going down the spine of a bystander may just be those of excitement over the power of nature, not of bewilderment and horror.

IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

Wait for me and I will return...

Having examined the perennial and world-wide success of the novels of Agatha Christie, a true master of crime fiction, literary theorists have concluded (in a text I read somewhere a long time ago) that a small English village, ordered and reliable, is the perfect metaphor for the world. A crime that happens there destroys the existing balance, and it is then the detective’s ability to find the perpetrator that brings back the good old world of harmony. This sense of order and harmony is like a glass of milk before bed: millions of readers all over the world crave it and never turn it down.

But all the armies of TV detectives, forensic scientists and other justice-minded men would be powerless in the real world. In reality, the investigators are not quite skillful enough, the prosecutors not incorruptible, the legal systems not all that reliable, the judges not always that strict and not even always awake (literally: take the well-known scandal of the judge Adolphus Karibi-Whyte, discovered sleeping on several occasions during a trial at the Hague Tribunal). In reality, the

criminals impudently say that the witness is lying. And they say this with a straight face to dozens, hundreds of witnesses. They say to these people that they shot themselves. The war criminals stated that the two massacres that took place at the main Sarajevo market on 5th of February and 28th of August 1994, and in which over a hundred people lost their lives, were staged, with mannequins in place of corpses, even though the results of the massacre were clearly recorded by TV cameras and broadcast on many TV stations. The criminals are telling the world to its face that it is lying.

Thus, the first step on the way to recovery is to convict the criminals. It does not matter on whose side they fought; nor does it matter how fiercely, or in whose name. Until the water is back in its riverbed, until the fire is put out, until the trembling of the ground has stopped, the removal of the consequences is useless. All the peace conferences and all the rebuilt homes in the world are in vain until the world itself regains its balance. For until people regain their sense of security, and until the criminals are found and convicted, all such efforts are like houses built on shaky foundations.

In Birmingham, we visited the 16th Street Baptist Church where in 1963 four girls, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair, had been killed in a Ku Klux Klan terrorist attack. The killer, Robert Chambliss, evaded justice for a long time before he was finally convicted, fourteen years after the event. The trial is the only reliable beginning from which to start: otherwise the world loses its clear outline, making the recovery long and painful (as can be seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Even in historically clear situations (and there aren't many of those) there is, unfortunately, space for relativisation and for the clouding of the truth. In spite of the verdict of the International Court of Justice on the Srebrenica genocide, and even though the European Parliament declared July 11th a day of commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide (a resolution Bosnia and Herzegovina

did not sign because the Bosnian Serbs blocked it), it is possible to publish books and make documentaries, mere parodies of truth, which are advertised with the slogan “*how it really happened.*” It is possible to deny undeniable facts, to claim that the genocide never took place, that eight thousand people were never killed. Without the verdicts, the recovery is unquestionably harder. If our firm belief in slow but achievable justice is undermined, we’ll be left with nothing except a windswept ground of different interpretations and historical phantasmagorias.

Justice must be the first step on the golden path to recovery. Not only is it slow and blind but also—experience has taught us—lame, lazy, hesitant, easily frustrated. It is capricious, hard to reach, and does things in its own way. And yet, there is nothing else to do but to fight and to wait for it—determinedly and steadily, like the girl waiting for her beloved who (to borrow from the Russian poet Konstantin Simonov) tells her: *Wait for me and I’ll return/ Only wait and don’t give up / Wait when you are filled with sorrow/ Wait in the sweltering heat/ Wait when the others/ have stopped waiting/ Wait even when others are tired of waiting.../ Wait for me and I will return/ Wait when they tell you to forget/ that your hopes are deceiving you/ Even when my dearest ones/ say that I am lost/ And when friends sit around the fire/ Drinking to my memory/ Wait and do not hurry to drink to my memory too/ Wait for I will return/ defying every death.*

POST-SCRIPT

At the time I first wrote this piece, Ratko Mladić, the general of the Bosnian Serb Army, was the most wanted fugitive in the world. Accused of war crimes, including the genocide in Srebrenica and the siege of Sarajevo, he remained hidden in Serbia for many years. His Bosnian victims had been waiting in vain for his arrest and thereby for the first real step toward recovery. And then, after so many years, when all hope of justice had almost disappeared, the news came of his

arrest. In Sarajevo the excitement was noticeable, but there was no euphoria. The TV stations kept on running endless footage of war destruction, bringing to life difficult memories. In the news we saw once again the scenes of horror we had all witnessed. People were agitated.

This evening the atmosphere is quite unusual. The weather is warm, summer has finally decided to come, people have moved from indoor bars to street cafés. While some are toasting the occasion of his arrest, most are quiet, deep in thought. Exactly nineteen years ago, on a May night in 1992, Mladić ordered his troops to bomb the blockaded Sarajevo: "Attack them so they can't sleep, stretch their minds!" I remember those days; it was the very beginning of the siege, we were still afraid of the shelling so we'd go down to the basement every day. Our neighbor had a shelf in his basement where she kept useless old stuff. When the siege began, she turned that shelf into a secure place for her greatest treasure: it became a bunk bed in which her daughters (three and five at the time) slept. Today, these little girls are adult women, both very beautiful, with good jobs and families. One of them has recently become a mother herself.

I look at a picture of Ratko Mladić: an ordinary worn-out old man, one hand crippled from a stroke, grey hair, a sickly-pale face. I know he will spend the last of his strength trying to discredit the court in The Hague. Helpless, the self-proclaimed *God of the genocide* is no longer the god of anything. Neither has he any power left.

People in the café around me sink slowly and thoughtfully into their private memories. Somewhere behind me I hear the clink of a glass in a toast. Someone has come up with the idea of drinking to the General's good health and long life, so he can see the end of his trial and receive a fair and stiff verdict. Again I feel that life triumphs, and surprisingly that feeling does not scare me but is ultimately encouraging. No one shoots at Sarajevo anymore; the city is so quiet and still... Somehow it seems to me that tonight Sarajevo does not want to sleep at all.