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SEVDAH

ELEGY FOR A SOUTH IMAGINED

TRANSLATED BY

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AND

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I ask them: « Why did we leave the South ? ».
They tell me: « Forget it. What's the point, don't think
about it any longer. There is no South. »

Wajdi Mouawad¹

¹ Wajdi Mouawad, *Incendies* (Paris, Actes Sud, 2009), my translation.

CHAPTER I : NOSTALGIA

- What are we doing here? I am hot, can we go back home?

Theodore, my ten-year-old son, is sipping his coke in a café alongside the narrow stream, running dry in the summer time, in the old part of Bitola, at the southern tip of Macedonia. Both my parents grew up here, and I decided to visit relatives this summer. As a child I regularly spent my summers in this town and I wanted to make a pilgrimage to relive old memories. This morning, we set out to find my grandparents' house, sold long ago, hoping to see it from the street. But Ted follows reluctantly, wincing at the sight of decrepit houses, the worn-out clothes of passers-by, the weeds growing in the municipal garden. He doesn't like this unknown, dusty town with narrow, irregular streets, its semi-poverty visible in the storefronts, the dirt and the cracked walls. He was born in Los Angeles and knows nothing of his Byzantine roots except his first name, which means "God's gift" and has been Americanized as Ted. He likes all things new, modern, and trendy. He looks at his phone.

I want to tell him that we are here because Macedonia is his ancestor's country, because he needs to see his grandparents' birthplace and, just outside the city, the antique site of Heracleia Lyncestis, founded by Philip the Macedonian, the father of Alexander the Great; because Bitola is a high place of Balkan antiquity, and a picturesque old town. I want to describe for him my childhood summers spent running over the irregular Turkish pavement, smelling roasted peppers, mint and basil, gorging on ripe watermelon. But I can't find the right tone: "Too emotional," I think to myself. Suddenly, I see the street through his eyes and I realize that he isn't entirely wrong. Old mansions are in ruins, newly built ones display garish colors and ugly facades. What's so beautiful about this sleepy provincial town? How can I communicate to him my attachment to this arid country, far removed from today's tourist routes?

Somewhere in my divided self, I am still a Macedonian girl-child, even though life has taken me far from my parents' birth place: I was born in the capital of Yugoslavia, where they moved after the war, educated in Serbian and in French in the countries where my father, a diplomat, was posted. In my late thirties I moved to the United States. Ted was born in Los Angeles, where my multilingual family now lives. My childhood memories of Bitola are scant but for ever etched in me.

In the sweltering sun, I'm struggling to find the street where the old house should be. We are sweating. I suddenly realize with a pang that my son is a "foreigner." He doesn't understand a word of my native tongue, knows nothing of my past, shares none of my

attachments. He is “mine,” but not “ours”. I say it in Macedonian: *ne e naš*.² The expression, engraved in my memory, carries an immense weight: it divides the world into two entirely separate categories. When it comes to identities, everyday speech is telling: we commonly say that someone “is ours” or “not ours” simply to specify whether they are foreigners. What “ours” designates remains unspecified, but the divide is unbridgeable. The shock of realizing the utter “foreign-ness” of my own child makes me a little tearful: he will never be able to feel the magic of this world. His gaze breaks the spell and shows its dereliction. My memories are frayed, my bond of love distended, my childhood recedes....

I say nothing, but Ted, who senses my melancholy and our distance, tries to comfort me: “Maman, it's not important if I don't like Bitola, I like our home in Los Angeles.” We walk silently back to the hotel: we'll see my grandfather's house another time. At first, I am sad, then I fall back into my life with the two “foreigners” who are now my closest family, my husband and my son. And yet, once we return to Los Angeles, I can't help thinking about our visit. After a while, I decide to write about this long-gone place I loved as a child, to bring it to life for the “Western world” where I now belong.

Nostalgia connects me to my roots, which feel as intimate as the stuff of dreams. To grasp this elusive connection, I search the internet for a poem I loved as an adolescent, a poem that renders it best: “Grief for the South,” *T'ga (or Taga) za Jug*. Konstantin Miladinov, a poet claimed by both Macedonia and Bulgaria, wrote it in Moscow, where he studied at the turn of the twentieth century, shivering with consumptive fever and dreaming of his southern homeland. In the cold winter of Russia where the sun “darkly shines” and the fog engulfs him, he dreams of growing eagle wings so he could fly to his beloved “South” to see the limpid waters of lake Ohrid, to play his flute in the lush greenery of his native land, to fly over the beautiful city of Stambol and to die under the splendor of the setting sun. Miladinov did indeed return to die in Istanbul, but jailed for subversive political activities. As I am reading his verse, I follow him in his flight and longing.

My personal story is more complicated. Born in Belgrade I was the child of Macedonian immigrants, but also a diplomat's daughter, educated in French, often on my way to or from Africa. Nostalgia for the scents, sounds, and sights that no longer surrounded me, for a beloved house or a friend left behind as we moved around the world has always tainted my peripatetic existence. Presently, such sadness is compounded by the break-up of my country and its disappearance from the current geographical and mental maps. An essential part of my being, Yugoslavia has vanished from the world, partitioned into puny states in which I feel alien: Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia (with the affix Northern imposed by foreign powers), Kosovo, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, each speaking their own language and reinventing their nationalistic, mostly antagonistic, history. The ageing “Yugoslavs” of my generation all feel orphaned of the vast and diverse country that was once ours. Visiting familiar sights as a foreign tourist increases the melancholy. And I

² Serbian and Macedonian words are transcribed in the latin alphabet. The pronunciation is as follows: š = sh; ć=ch (as in child); č=tch; c=ts (as in cats).

ask myself: in which language would I even be able to reminisce of our common past with my fellow ex-countrymen now scattered all over the world?

As I think of my relatives in Bitola, Skopje or Belgrade, I realize also that my regrets are tainted by guilt. By leaving the country, I feel that I deserted them: I didn't see their children grow, I didn't participate in their losses, we didn't mourn our dead together. I feel an urge to put words on our memories, yet writing feels like a poor amend: is my desire to look back simply an attempt to excuse my leaving? Am I trying to poeticize the dreariness of poverty that I have fled like so many others? Every Macedonian family has relatives abroad, and I remember the visits paid to Bitola by our token "American cousins," whose children didn't understand a word of our language. They brought us cinnamon scented chewing gum and sat for hours, hunched over with my grandparents, endlessly reminiscing about the past.

This "Grief for the South" voiced by Miladinov is a well-known Balkan malady, as testified by the enduring popularity of his poem, often quoted, set to music, and giving its name to a popular Macedonian wine. Exilic nostalgia cultivated and expressed through poetry and music is endemic to the poorest regions of Europe whose young men always had to expatriate themselves in search of work. For centuries, Macedonians made the journey North to toil as laborers, leaving behind their tearful wives and mothers. Later, they journeyed overseas. An entire category of folk songs is dedicated to the hardship of emigration and as I am writing this, I sample them, joining the on-line community of exiles, from Australia to Brasil or Sweden, and sharing their *sevdah*.³ I spend hours enjoying the music and reading through listeners' comments, as poignant as the songs, in broken Macedonian or English, tearful or melancholy, speaking of their distant cousins in Australia, the Macedonian grandparents they never got to know, coming from Sydney, Paris, Moscow... I am one of them: I also come from *Tuginata*, abroad.

The old expression feels heavy when I say it in Macedonian. Still used in folk songs, the word *tuginata* designates vast foreign expanses. I struggle to translate it: foreigndom? Alien lands? It has a dark, threatening consistency: it takes away the men, separates lovers. In traditional folklore, it is accursed, a land of no return: "Cursed be Australia who took my man" runs an old folk ballad that my father hummed at times.⁴ His own father spent many years in America. In Serbian and Macedonian, men who went on such laboring lives were called *pečalbari*. Today we use the German *gastarbeiters*, guestworkers, but the ancient Slavic word has none of its euphemism: its roots denote

³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLK99f0M59M&list=RDGLK99f0M59M&index=1>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1gAW8-cYCo>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWu4EXmYkoA;>
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Anpz44cE2s.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Anpz44cE2s)

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ai31X8g83VQ> .

hardship and grief. Of course, Macedonian women were not alone in singing about abandonment: strewn all over the Balkans, abandoned and ruined houses testify to distant heirs who forgot their home. From Greece, to the Adriatic sea, almost every family can curse Australia or America for taking "their man." I recollect the poignant sight of an old man getting out of a transcontinental flight and kneeling to kiss the native soil. And yet, I chose to make my life *vani, nadvor*, an "outside" similarly expressed both in Serbian and Macedonian.

I know that this nostalgia for my native South is in itself a first mark of forgetting. It is my natural lot as the offspring of a family whose members, generation after generation, have regularly had to abandon their homeland and their native tongue, either by necessity or by choice. Becoming "very foreign" suddenly strikes me as already inscribed in the meaning of my grandmother's ancient Hellenic name, *Polixéni*. Am I not her true offspring, and isn't my life "outside," married to a foreigner, already foreshadowed by my grandfather's migration to America, by my parents' move to Serbia? When they settled in Belgrade and switched to speaking Serbo-Croatian, they were taking up a familiar strategy in this part of the world. I did the same when I left the disintegrating Yugoslavia and turned to speaking English. And yet as I write today, I feel nostalgic for all the languages and dialects of my fading past. Like the old Bitola, this past now exists in a spectral, sepulchral way, as a palimpsest. It lives only in old people's memories, in worn out books and dictionaries, in the "patriotic" name of my friend Yugoslava, or in my expired passport... And yet, it is this mythical South, Yug, home of the Southernmost among the Slavs that I would like to resurrect here.

CHAPTER II

LOWER BITOLA: *DOLNATA MA'ALA*

For us children, the Southern vistas would unfold at daybreak, in the train from Belgrade to Bitola. Smelling with excitement the tar and soot spewed from the steam engine, I would fall asleep on the narrow bed of the sleeping compartment, in the rough, worn-out, but freshly washed and ironed bedsheets of the Yugoslav Railways, rocked to sleep to the regular sound of the wheels. At dawn, the whistle of the engine would wake me up in a landscape entirely different from the green and hilly Serbian countryside of the night before: rocky, barren mountains, narrow, dark gorges, a railway station with the strange name of a mediaeval Christian heresy, *Bogumile*, "pleasing to God". The train would enter a perilous gorge, the landscape intermingling with my dreams. Later on, when we woke up for good, we were already in another world. Past the mountains to the south of Skopje, past the gigantic boulders above Prilep, named *Markukuli*, "Marko's towers" after the medieval giant-hero who threw them at the Turks according to the legend. The landscape was dry and rocky, the vegetation scarce. After some time, the train would descend onto a vast plain, slow down, stop and start again, in fits, as if the hurried manners of the North no longer concerned it. And I would see with delight the plain turn into huge rice paddies dotted with black buffaloes, splendid with their large lyre-shaped horns, as indifferent to our impatience as were the train, the driver, and indeed the whole universe into which we had just penetrated. The South! We were getting closer – faster, faster, please! – to Bitola, where my grandfather, Filip, whom we proudly called "Filip the Macedonian," after the father of Alexander the Great, would be waiting for us with his smiling blue eyes, in a carriage pulled by two horses harnessed and decorated with tinkling gold bells. Around noon, as we were getting hungry, the train would finally slow down for a good reason: we had arrived to Bitola. The first recollection is the smell of dust, the scorching sun, and the surprise of seeing everyone getting out: ever since the border crossing to Greece was closed to rail traffic, Bitola was the furthest stop to the South. For my sister and me, it was both the end of a long journey and the beating heart of our childhood world.

This space of wonder was located in "lower Bitola," still bearing the Turkish name for neighborhood, *mahala* or *ma'ala*, in my father's family house, the house I wanted to show my son. THE HOUSE! I mourned it the summer it was sold, after Filip's death. Staying with other relatives at the time, I was fully invested in teenage life. Like Ted now, I despised the province and anything old. I swam in the neighboring lake, laughed and bantered with my cousins, spent my evenings listening to friends playing their guitars and singing romances. The sale of the house was not something I cared about, and yet, I was a little sad and decided to see it one last time with my sister. We kept the visit secret and had trouble