

Lidija Dimkovska  
**Poems, and a novel fragment**

Contest

To the prize question in the *Macedonia Times*:  
 “What do you do when overcome by suicidal thoughts?”

for a seven-day holiday for two at Ohrid,  
 a weekend for two in the Paris Disneyland  
 and another 50 consolation prizes,  
 we received precisely 2479 postcards and letters  
 awarding the first two prizes to the following replies:

“When I am overcome by suicidal thoughts  
 I stick my head in the inhaler  
 and breathe in deeply with open mouth  
 until my nose is clogged with Echinacea  
 and the secretions experience their own dialectics,  
 then I drink the now cold mixture to its dregs  
 and carry on with my life without mucous membranes,  
 but with beautiful thoughts.”

(Kuzman Markovski, village of Budim, near Prilep)  
 and

“When I am overcome by suicidal thoughts,  
 usually when the cat’s locked in and the potatoes are sprouting,  
 a 90-60-90 deity forces me to shove my hand in my pocket  
 in the garage with the ambulance-car  
 while my wife screams from the kitchen at the top of her voice:  
 ‘Do you hear me!!!! I want to be a re-tread,  
 advertised in the Car Mart!’ For a moment I’m blinded with rage,  
 but a second later infinite light unfolds before me.

I let out the cat, and make a bouquet of the sprouting potatoes,  
 but my wife’s been lying on the kitchen floor three days  
 and doesn’t move

not even when I tell her I’ll take her to the Old Witch in Paris.”  
 (Kole Stojkovski, Pehchevo)

We, the others, who got consolation prizes,  
 (XXL T-shirts printed *Life is beautiful*  
 and key rings with the SOS telephone number)  
 we formed an Association of Injured Citizens  
 and beat up the editor of the *Macedonian Times*.  
 Since then he has never been overcome  
 by suicidal or by murderous thoughts.

“No more contests!” he said to himself.  
 “With this lot only crosswords are safe!”

## Post-recognition

That's it, the day has come for me to wrap my guts on curlers,  
to prepare for the great confession  
that art no longer is though it should above all be massage,  
should smell of the soft touch of a King Markovian hand  
and slide through life like ethereal lavender oil.  
What else can I do now, when in the glass of the book case door  
I can measure my muscles, tense my strength,  
harden my soul with toning cream,  
but cannot sink into the poem as into a bathtub  
if it's cracked, corroded and there's no rich foam?  
Such times have come, when the widower will spend the day of mourning  
in his black long johns lying between white sheets  
watching a programme on extinct dinosaurs  
and that era of bell-bottom trousers flapping down the corridors of music  
I can only call it a cultural acquisition.  
My brothers are retro-refugees in the new exile of the asylum-seekers' hostel  
I am a midget among the models, my housedress is a rubbish bag.  
I address the bathroom heater with "My God"  
and ask how to go on through the blizzard with this hardened womb,  
with my plastic jaw, with my curdled blood. Red-hot and passionate,  
he licks me behind the ear, there where the core of art is hidden:  
"Find yourself a water pitcher and a go-between for a muse."  
Even embodied in a ship, God would still be old-fashioned,  
and art – a headless fly. We are all muses to each other,  
and we have curlers, but no guts. My flesh is hard, A.,  
and my body as light as a page of the Bible.  
At night your skin is my winning number in the Macedonian Lottery,  
the American dream of every Balkan bagpipe.  
I'll make myself gloves of it that will caress me during the day  
at the foundations for modern artistic vision  
and I will confess that art is not, but should be  
a delight, an elixir, communion, massage homeopathy.

## pH Neutral for the spine

My womb's gone sour. Who will import me now?  
I told my close ones not to overdo  
the clutching, squeezing hands and red cells  
for it isn't only the essence that flows out through the fingers  
but the pH of fullness, with no consequences for the emptiness.  
I've known for a long time that death is only the neutralization of life,  
a sweet-and-sour lining of the brain cavity,  
a bait for the worm that will eat dead me for only a week or two,  
but it nibbles me alive in every transformation of my bottom  
and in each of its fashionable accessories. Neither alkaline nor acidic,  
lately not only my womb but my spine as well  
is only good for the lumber-room, bounding back  
like a coil-spring when I bend it over  
this piece of land to make it love it as its own.  
I got an offer through secret channels to send it  
to a painters' colony in the south, only three weeks,  
it'll be fine, it'll sleep in the bishop's cell,  
and enjoy the monastery's well-being,  
and artists from Eastern Europe will copy it  
on canvas with paints to be used once only,  
send it, you'll be better off too without a spine  
what are three weeks for a straight life?  
I spent days alone in the bathroom with my spine,  
washing it with anti-stress bath gel,  
scrubbing it with a micro-fibre glove  
and rinsing it with distilled pH neutral water for vertebrae,  
giving it advice on how to behave as a model in the colony  
and instructions on how to cope with the monastery mystique.  
Then I wrapped it in aluminum foil,  
put it in a metre-long neon light box  
and sent it via Rule Tours (for several milk loaves and a bottle of mead)  
to a painters' colony in my country.  
It's the fifth week now, and there's no sign of my spine,  
the worm is nibbling at my heart, my womb is going mouldy,  
and I have a Cosmodisc to hold my left side and my right together  
and increasingly it neutralizes them and straightens me.  
The day I was shown in a telly commercial  
my spine sent me a message: "I'm a rosary  
hanging from Father Ilirion's cassock pocket,  
when he prays for seven generations back on my vertebrae  
I think of your neutralized destiny  
and I know you're neither acidic nor alkaline, neither for export nor import,  
and though you were good for massage and Chinese food

you remain pH neutral to me,  
both as a spine and a rosary.”

Originally published in *Absinthe: New European Writing*, no.4 (2005)

\*

### A decent girl

I took it to a "Second Hand" view in the future  
but nobody would buy it. The net is prickly  
and there are no more heroes. Sorrow is purely physical pain.  
If there's no water, let the eye-fluid hanging off the  
glasses drop. If you wear no glasses,  
pretend you are Chinese (one eye looking eastward  
plus one looking westward equals *écriture féminine* in  
a male society). The fashion of the Orientals  
comes back in a package with diet food.  
Bless me too while I'm still  
a decent girl. Tomorrow or the day after I'll lose  
my sinfulness,  
I'll wear embroidered blouses from the Ethnographic Museum  
of Macedonia, and somebody will have to pay for them.  
To survive, we'd best turn the lector's apartment  
into a gallery. We shall exhibit  
varicose veins, dried umbilicuses, retinas  
and broken hearts in direct proportion  
to South-American soap operas  
(tell me why you left me and married my sister)  
and sorrow is purely physical pain  
and in my country is cured by surgical operation.  
Here I recognise it by the pain in my index finger  
crucial in the expansion of mobile phone networks.  
I don't know why my uncle didn't beat me in a sack  
At this age it's best if somebody else  
cuts your umbilical cord, and I  
am not afraid of Virginia Woolf,  
I fear Lidija Dimkovska. Have you heard of her?  
A woman not wholly christened, whose friends  
have all taken the vow,  
the bodiless woman and all those she's loved remain unmarried.  
That almost to exhaustion non-woman of yours  
(probably sponsored by Soros to become tender?)  
almost to the negation the idea of Medea, Judea, of  
her.  
No, I'm not afraid of the numbers 1, 4, 7

in the eye-clinic, or of mortgages  
or religious holidays, what I'm afraid of is the existing attitude towards God  
of the God who does not exist, and I'm afraid of his great eyes  
Alas, what a multitude of words! Dictionaries are a lucrative job.  
You sit at home and play: Something beginning with...!  
From now on I shall speak in onomatopoeia,  
Or better, in metaonomatopeia. Be that as it may,  
it was nice meeting you, Father. Were I not a woman  
you could've taken my confession. But I don't mind this either.  
We're having tea, biting each other's nails  
and we're licking our lips. Chirp-chirp! Metachirp-metachirp.

\*

Excerpt from *Hidden Camera*

At about five in the afternoon, the Pakistani arrived. Klaus brought him, saying on the doorstep that he had to go back to the airport, because in an hour and a half the Albanian photographer was arriving from Tirana. So Lila and Joseph had to introduce themselves to each other. Thank God I don't need introductions, those formal presentations that just get on any normal person's nerves. Joseph was not very tall, a man of about thirty, dark skinned, with eyes like a tame doe and full lips, dressed in grey trousers with a crease that was not so sharp after his long journey, and a Hawaiian shirt. *Pants like my father's, shirt like my uncle's*, Lila thought, and helped him bring in two green travel bags with floral patterns and countless zips... "Oh, it's beautiful!" Joseph exclaimed as we entered the living room, and was even more delighted with the room that was to be his. "At home, we're four brothers and three sisters, and I've never had a room of my own." "Neither have I," Lila said, though both of us knew it was only half true: the room in Skopje did become ours alone when her sister got married, and in the six years in Bucharest we spent the first four in a bed-sit, then had a flat, though always with A. as an occasional flat-mate. It was going to be great here, he said, and the Austrians were surely good people, and then he asked her in the most natural way if she had a boy-friend. *No*, she said, *I've got a husband*. "Ah, I see. Well then." She laughed, and I thought, "This one doesn't waste any time, asking questions like that straight out!" Lila had not imagined the meeting with the Pakistani singer like this. He said he was so tired he had to lie down for an hour or two. We'll see how the meeting with the photographer from Albania goes. She arrived two hours later, with Klaus again, who said he had to go back to the foundation to pick up all the documents they needed, the director had told him on the mobile that she wouldn't be able to come, so he'd come back alone. Both Lila and Joseph stood and stared at the newcomer, and I fixed directly on her eyes. Slim, medium height, with big green eyes, a slightly crooked nose and a pale face that blushed easily, dressed in a pink windcheater and drip-bleached jeans. (*Just like my Albanians!* Lila thought, and almost laughed; well, jeans bleached like this are the Macedonians' stereotype of their Albanian compatriots). She said her name was Edlira and asked them

straight away where they were from. Joseph told her he was from Lahore (both girls pretended they knew of the city and nodded their heads; so what, they might have seen it on TV but I knew they were pretending) and when Lila said she was from Skopje, Edlira quickly said, "Ah, from Shkupi? I was in Shkupi two years ago to visit an aunt of mine, she lives in Gazi Baba, you know it? I took zillions of photographs of coffee grounds." Well, what should she do now? Withdraw into her room, as she had promised herself, because the newcomer said Shkupi instead of Skopje, or pretend everything was just fine, that she was not offended by this linguistic intervention that she had always seen as more political than linguistic? They were just getting to know each other, and this girl did not look very nationalistic (but what does a nationalist look like?), plus she had said something very interesting: that she had taken zillions of photographs of coffee grounds! "Yes," she said, "it's my speciality, I only take photographs of coffee grounds, in all conceivable cups, coffee-pots, glasses, saucers - they make such beautiful photographs, it's amazing. In the Balkans, thank God, we still drink Turkish coffee and still read the coffee grounds. I don't know what it's going to be like here, but you must drink normal coffee, don't you?" Indeed, there's nothing like Turkish coffee to wake Lila up in the morning, but we have to admit that for the last few years she's been drinking instant coffee at midday, not out of some special love of it, but because A. drinks instant, and it's easier for her to boil water for two, stir a spoonful of instant into the two tall, fashionable greeny-yellow mugs that Olivera gave them, put some milk in and that's it. Frankly, it's easier to wash up after instant than after Turkish coffee; when you run the tap over Turkish coffee grounds they get scattered all around and shoot up in the air, and then she has to wipe the tiles and wash the entire kitchen sink as well. Here, then, Edlira had already found the object of her art: she asked Lila to be careful not to wash her cup in the morning while they were there, but to turn it upside down on the saucer, the way they do for reading the grounds. She would see what beautiful photographs Edlira was going to produce, and how much she herself would discover in them about her own personality. After so many years of experience with all sorts of coffee grounds from all kinds of people, Edlira had learned to read the grounds. I hope there will be no trace of me in Lila's coffee grounds. Joseph said that unfortunately he could not help her, because he only drank tea, and had never in his life had coffee, and he didn't believe he could change this habit, imprinted by tradition in his Pakistani culture, and then asked her the same question he had asked Lila: "Do you have a boyfriend?" Embarrassed, Edlira blushed, then laughed and said that yes, she had had one, but not any more. "Ah, I see. Well then," he said. I couldn't believe it, that someone could ask such a question twice in two hours. In the next forty minutes, until Klaus reappeared with a fat file with *Artists in Residence* on it in felt tip, we were all doing something: the two of them unpacking their bags and putting away their clothes and arranging things in their rooms, Lila tidying the living room and offering help through the open doors, and I was shooting the ceiling sprinkled with grey and white spots, probably to match the chess-board design of the carpet. Then Joseph handed Lila a coloured plastic bag to take to the kitchen, saying that before he left (yesterday morning) his mother had baked him traditional pitta bread for the journey, and his sisters had tucked in some rice and chick pea cookies, but the food on the plane was so good he'd still got it all, and Edlira said she had brought something from Tirana, something very interesting, sour cabbage *pita*. *We make that kind of pita, too*, Lila couldn't help saying, *and funnily enough, in Romania only the Vlachs make it*. "Yes, I should've remembered, but in Shkupi I only had cheese *burek*," Edlira blushed. Shkupi again! She will have to tell her some time how much it gets on her nerves and that she wants her city to be called Skopje. I was afraid she'd be too quick to react, she's

so sensitive, but there was time, they still didn't know anything about each other, it would be a pity to fall out before they got to know each other better.

Their first evening together in Vienna was also the most strenuous because Klaus, reclining in the armchair, wanted to hear about every little detail of their previous projects, successes and activities, and was asking specific questions such as: "How highly are you regarded in your country? Are you a media person? Where else in the world have you participated in projects? Have you ever been or are you politically persecuted? What religion do you belong to? What kind of family do you come from? Why did you want to come to Vienna?" and a whole heap of other questions requiring lengthy and detailed responses, but he knew how to get the shortest possible answers he needed and was writing it all down in his leather notebook. It was a good thing I wasn't in their skins! *A virtuoso coordinator*, Lila thought, sitting like a little schoolgirl on the six-seater corner sofa, a metre from both Edlira on the one side and Joseph on the other. *This one is really going to coordinate us.* And indeed that night, whether they wanted to or not, they found out many important things about each other that did or did not satisfy Klaus. For instance, he was not very satisfied with Lila's reason for moving to Slovenia - her love for A., when a Balkan writer is expected *a priori* to have a predisposition to an exile that the world of art will only recognise if it is of a political nature. *Ab, if I'd been a dissident*, Lila thought, *if I had left Macedonia because of political harassment* (which category does not, of course, include an incompetent and corrupt government's harassment of its own people), *had I fled from the Albanian UCK or at least from poverty and unemployment, a completely different rapport would be established between him, the 'benefactor', and me, the 'protégée', but as it is, because of my love for A...* Understandably, Klaus does not know that love too is an exile, sometimes even harder than political exile, because it does not only involve a person's views and opinions, but that which is most fragile in a human - the feelings. He was not satisfied to hear from Edlira that, well, it so happened that she (looking down with a burning face) had a grandfather who had been a close associate of Enver Hodxa, and that was why they lived in a 'palace' in the very centre of Tirana, together with the families of other members of the communist regime. After 1989 the democrats had sentenced her grandfather to prison, where he had died two years ago, but had not taken away their five-room apartment. "I was a child," she said, as if justifying herself, "and I really didn't know, and my grandfather was a strict man, but good." Joseph said that one of his brothers was a dissident in France, because seven years earlier he had written a book, together with a French journalist who had come to Pakistan, about the ruling Moslems' treatment of Christianised Pakistanis, a treatment Joseph explained thus: "For instance, when you go into a shop, the shop assistant fixes his eye on you and asks you if you're a Moslem, and as we Christians in Pakistan are very faithful, and don't want to be like Judas, we say *No*, and then he says *We don't serve Christians*, and calls for somebody to come from the stockroom, and then you'd better make yourself scarce before half a dozen of his people beat you up." The book had been published in France, but when they found out about it in Pakistan the Islamic fundamentalists in Lahore attacked the Catholic church during Sunday mass, killing three men and two women, and there were forty other casualties, with some children among them, "and my brother got off with a broken rib," he said, and: "Immediately after that he left for France. I haven't seen him for a whole seven years, but now we shall finally meet in Europe." I think Klaus liked Joseph's story, though he wanted to know what Joseph himself had been doing at the time, and whether he was in any way involved in it all, but Joseph simply said: "Well, I was singing. I sing in the church choir and when we have holidays, concerts or picnics. You know, we have a Christian youth association, and once a week we

gather in the priest's house and sing hymns to Jesus. The other thing, that I do on my own, the ethno-jazz, that's something entirely different. But there's no chance for anything avant-garde by a Christian artist in Pakistan. I earn my living in a timber factory. I took three months' unpaid leave to come here." From what we heard it appeared that Edlira was the youngest and that she had had three solo exhibitions of photographs in Albania and two group shows, in Budapest and Milan; that Joseph's stay in Vienna was his first ever time in Europe, that he had recorded only one CD of his music, sponsored by the church in Lahore, but that he had material for at least three more, so he hoped to be able to record at least one in Vienna; and that Lila had participated in the largest number of events abroad and that because of moving, 'abroad' as a paradigm determined her in every sphere, both as a human being and as an author. *Just like the astrologist in Skopje told me!* she thought, *abroad - that is your path.* And because of her, abroad became my path too, but who cared about that? Edlira said she spoke German - at that, Kalus's face lit up and he forgave her her family tree and immediately checked and, evidently pleased, promised her a free photographic studio three days a week where she could develop her films, and, of course, an exhibition as part of the presentation of the project's results. Joseph would get a studio and a session band to record his CD, and Lila should write a book on 'the abroad in her life'. That was exactly what Klaus told her: "Write a book about 'abroad' in your life, in fact about your life abroad. That's what interests us. A kind of diary, not the Bridget Jones kind of course, but not a Dostoyevsky kind of diary either. A sort of autofiction diary, in fact like you said in your scholarship application: 'The Hidden Camera of Memories'". I almost fell out when I heard that phrase 'hidden camera'. How could he possibly know? Could he be clairvoyant, or did the Austrian information bureau use Balkan-style intelligence when dealing with people from the Balkans? No, I didn't have time to think about myself, I had to follow Lila, who was philosophising: *I don't know why they all insist on the word 'abroad', though I use it myself, probably it sounds better and more exotic to them than the word 'home', which is what every country that I visit for three or four days is to me, as well as every country where I stay longer. If you don't instantly accept and adjust a country to your own needs and your own needs to a country, abroad will be just another 'distant land' and 'a foreign land' and 'the devil take that land', but still, I believe that it is by God's will that I find myself in a certain land.* The subject was too broad to begin to explain, and we were all tired, and Klaus had to leave, so Lila just nodded her head, and he took out three white envelopes with 900 Euros each - that month's scholarship - and a pile of documents that they signed without reading them first, much to his amazement. That's what annoys me most about Lila - she'd sign a mortgage contract or a death sentence or, even worse, an agreement to surgery on her left toe, and that would be the end of me! And just because she can't be bothered to read the contract, she could sell me as well as herself! But I can see the others are no better, even though A., for example, would certainly read the contract first before signing it. Alone again, everyone immediately retreated to their own rooms and then the bathroom shower was heard till late into the night, as if it had devised the order itself: Joseph, then Lila, then Edlira. Lila laughed at this Balkan (but also Asian) order: first the man, whoever he is, then the older of the women, and then the youngest woman last. *The natural selection of respect,* Lila thought, *there's folk wisdom for you.* Naturally, I always take my shower with Lila. As we stood under the shower, squinting as always without her lenses she tried to read the labels on the toiletries (Joseph used a soap with a familiar herbal scent and a lemon shampoo, as far as you could tell from the picture, because it was printed in Urdu; Edlira had not put her things on the shelf in the shower) and thought of A., his soft skin that she loves to write on with her finger - letters, phrases, names, until he guesses his own name and whispers to her, "No one has ever written my name in Cyrillic before."



Shared life in the artists' flat in Vienna got under way. Those first days, Lila was the one to wake up first (which I appreciated: while I revel in insomnia, I'd rather be "on my feet") and made coffee for herself and Edlira and tea for Joseph (black, Indian, so strong its aroma overpowered the smell of coffee), but Joseph would only get up at around 12, when Edlira was already leaving the apartment, and the tea was almost cold. Once he got used to European time he started to wake up as early as five in the morning, as if he was going to work in a factory, and clatter with doors and dishes, and when she and Edlira did not chide him for that, he stared turning on the TV at six in the morning, opening the fridge, taking a shower and generally behaving as if it was late morning. I rejoiced in those sounds - well, life is action, isn't it? Lila eventually got over her early waking, and now her dreams were invaded by the smell of toasted bread which he did on the hotplate, just as Lila's mother in Skopje toasted peppers or old bread. One day Joseph tried to make coffee for her and Edlira, but by the time we got up the coffee had turned into a cold black sherbet, so thick you could only sip it with a teaspoon, and certainly not drink it. "Five teaspoons of sugar to one teaspoon of coffee," Joseph said, "or the coffee might cause a heart attack, that's how unhealthy it is!" "What about diabetes?" Edlira laughed, and said: "I'm sorry, I really can't drink it. I'm not supposed to have coffee anyway, but I do for the photographs." Lila had already finished her sugar-coffee, she wouldn't miss anything sweet, and she could feel the sugar crunch between her teeth like the sugar roosters that you could only get from old uncle Pero in the City Park, if you don't count Slavko Janevski's sugar soldiers, and passed her cup to Edlira to take her *photograph of the year*, "Sugar Morning". Joseph only mumbled something and retired to his room, but two or three minutes later a soft sobbing could be heard, like a panting. *He's bonkers, he's crying*, Lila whispered to Edlira. I felt sorry, while they were seized with uncontrollable giggles, laughing silently, clutching their bellies, tears running down their cheeks, and Lila's lenses almost dropped out, and then Edlira fell to the floor with her face screwed up in pain. *What is it? What's happened to you?* Lila cried, but Edlira just waved her away, pulled herself together and said, "It's nothing, I'm fine, I just had a belly cramp, it's over." Half an hour later she was already out of the apartment, *in search of unwashed coffee cups*; as she had said, "I've got some addresses of Albanians - restaurant and café owners, I'm going to find them, maybe they'll let me take a few photographs in their kitchens, who can tell." Joseph came back to the living room with red eyes and sat on the six-seater (though he usually sat in the armchair which we - as non-feminist women-artists - tacitly let him have, being the only man in the house, so we always sat on the six-seater, Edlira on the one, and Lila and I on the other end of it) and asked her, "Do you want to see my album? This is my mother, this is my father, ah, yes, this is my brother who's in France now, these are Rosie and Rahat, my sisters, they're twins, and this is Nisan, my eldest sister, a nun for more than ten years now, and these are Emanuel and Tony, my other two brothers." Good heavens! It's probably only in photographs you can see people as beautiful as this. Seated in front of the porch to their *small, very pretty house* (Joseph's face lit up when he said that) his father, old, grey-haired, dressed in a white kurta, looked like a wise guardian angel, and at the sight of an image like that you cannot but feel respect, even if in reality the man might be the greatest criminal. The reality of a photograph is, in fact, virtual. It stirs emotions that may have nothing to do with the truth, but when they do then life slips into the photo as if into a mould and lies there in its own shape. Just as I, her hidden camera, accommodate Lila's life and the lives of those around her. Lila immediately pictured his mother, a large woman in brown shalwar kemise, in front of the kitchen stove toasting slices of bread for breakfast and stacking them one on top of the other in towers half a metre high, two for each of them!

And his brothers are handsome too, especially the dissident now in France. "He was married," Joseph said, "to a girl my father chose for him, but the marriage was a failure, she didn't want to sleep with him or have children, so he had to leave her. All Lahore laughed at my father when they found out she couldn't make love, I don't know the English word for it." *Frigid*, Lila helped him. "They didn't laugh at her, but at my father, for having found him such a wife," he said, "and ever since then my father hasn't gone in to town, he doesn't even go to church, he just sits on the doorstep with his eyes cast down. My brother wrote to us that he had found himself a French woman, that they were going to be married soon and that this one was good at everything." Lila was most impressed by the twin sisters, to say they were like angels was not enough, dressed as they were in purple shalwar kemise adorned with wonderful golden embroidery and tiny round mirrors. *They have mirrors on their dresses?* she wondered. "Yes," he said, "the mirrors are sewn in the fabric and these shalwar kemise are only worn by very young girls who still aren't betrothed, to help them recognize their man when they meet him. If a girl sees him head to toe in the mirrors, she will know it is him, but if she sees only a part of his face, an arm, or a leg, then he's not the right one and she has to wait for another." *So married women cannot wear these dresses?* Lila asked, concerned. "No, not in our country, but they can in Europe," Joseph smiled. I knew how much Lila wanted such a dress, more than anything in the world! So what if she's married, married women should check their love in these mirrors too, to see their husbands in them, to confirm their choice. I'm sure that barely twenty in a hundred married women would see their husbands in those mirrors, and Lila is lucky to be one of them, at least for now. All right, I admit there's one other dress she would very much like to have, although it's a sin to say so: the dress worn by St. Nedela in the icon in the Church of St. Dimitrija in Skopje, at the very entrance to the church, opposite the little room where they sell candles, calendars and icons. It's a long dress, oriental, in a soft orange with a yellow and brownish pattern, a pattern that reminds Lila of the uniforms of the Singapore Airlines stewardesses, but cut in the style of a monk's cassock. Whenever we go to Skopje, she drags me first to St. Dimitrija's to see St. Nedela, to admire the dress, re-fashion it in her mind, put it on and surprise A. I need not tell you which dress he'd like better, need I? Nisan, the nun, had the purest face ever, almost white, like European nuns. Nisan – like the car – Lila will certainly remember her name. She sustains them in their Christian faith, Joseph says, " writes us long letters from the convent encouraging us to persevere, because Jesus is great and He is with us. You know, we used to be Hindus, we believed in Shiva, but one day my grandmother had enough of talking to him and begging him, and him not listening to her, so she said to him: *Well, Shiva, I'm sick of your silence, I've got no one to have a chat with, so I'm leaving you and going over to Jesus Christ.*" His voice shaking, Joseph said: "You know, we still laugh when we remember it, but Jesus really did appear to my grandmother and said *It was time* and that's how we have been Christians ever since." I watch Lila, and Lila watches Joseph, looks at the photographs, and has the feeling she's among a flock of lambs. I wish I could call them 'does', but Lila and I have never seen a flock of does, and anyway 'lambs' was more appropriate to the situation. It felt like being among grandma Lenka's lambs, white and cream, so soft and trembling that Lila had always felt grown up and mature with them, even when she was just a child. I have to say that this Joseph was just like a little animal, like a puppy – soft, gentle, so good he'd let himself be stuffed dead or alive and put in the hall for the neighbourhood children to play with him. Lila could not possibly (luckily for A.) fall in love with anyone so innocent. She would have to be born again and grow up in a cell where she could not be corrupted by this world - so attractive, beautiful and evil, so passionate and exciting, so different from this singer with the soul of a child. It would, of course, imply that I for one did not exist: only

then could she be pure and genuinely innocent, and not filled with good and bad memories, with the past and its bulging file of data, codes, information, images, zooms...

When Joseph went to the recording studio and we were left alone, Lila sat in front of the computer and scuffed her right toe off the floor, a sign that she was about to start writing. As Klaus had told her, she was supposed to write her "Hidden Camera of Memories", her A-fiction diary. Country after country, life after life, one after another. "Give us your perspective," he had said, "something we haven't had before." It's easily said, but in her memory her entire life surfaces as a single whole, as a mixture of countries and people and lives, because as an inhabitant-amateur of this world she has taken pictures with me, her hidden camera, of both what should and what should not be recorded, she was filming the here and now, and everything in life, before it becomes a memory, is a here and a now, important, unique and unequalled. I, her camera, am hidden not only figuratively, but literally: I'm neither digital Sony nor Canon, but even more perfect than them: I'm a half-millimetre chip stuck in the big toe of her right foot, in the scar from the surgery she had when she was only six months old, ultra-sound, and ultra-vision, but in fact an invisible chip, which is why Lila does not declare me at borders, doesn't carry me on her shoulder, doesn't introduce me to anybody, smuggles me without a trace of bad conscience, and in places where cameras are forbidden, in churches and museums for example, I play ignorant and take pictures, and the priests or the museum guards aren't even aware that they have become characters in Lila's film, or that next to icons, precious paintings and visitors I've caught live their secret nose-picking or bottom-scratching, yawning and half-voiced thoughts, like those of the priest in the church in Bucharest who was having difficulty trying to read the word "*slavoslovam*" in his sermon, and muttered "hell!", or the equally (in)audibly reaction from a hefty security guard on the first floor of the Museum of the Vikings in Stockholm on seeing a couple of well-built homosexuals standing in front of the jewellery case: Fuck off! I know, and Lila knows too, that we are violating both human and international rules of behaviour in terms of a variety of legal norms and regulations, but we only live once and "we're no strangers to anything human," as the saying goes. If the neighbours anywhere in the world can peer through their peepholes or the windows of their homes and follow every movement Lila makes, if old women in Balkan villages can sit in front of their porches from morning till night and stop every female passer-by with blunt questions like: *Where are you going, girl? Are you one of Mirko's? Where's your husband? What, your sister divorced that bloke? Got your pay? How much do they give you, child?* and so on ad infinitum; and even more, if communist regimes can plant microphones in the bedrooms of ordinary and therefore suspicious citizens and then listen in some grey office to their marital fights and sounds of passion, if they can be so shamelessly present in people's lives without being on the scene itself, then why shouldn't I take pictures of Lila's life story, being a hundred percent witness of it all? Of course I can, and the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia guarantees that to Lila Serafimska, as long as I'm hidden, invisible, and there is no proof that I really exist. And how could it occur to anyone that somebody could carry an omnipotent little eye of a super-camera, a perfect memory chip, hidden in the big toe of their right foot? So Lila started drawing on me for her A.-fictional diary thus:

*When I was six months old I cut the big toe on my right foot with the ruby from my mother's ring when she was giving me a bath in the pink tub we still have at home in the bathroom where it sits like a cover for the bathtub. (Yes, yes, they keep a sort of coffin in the bathroom!), and since I resented having a bath even once a week and was kicking like a foal, no wonder the millimetre-long chip of stone got stuck in my toe. My mother got terribly angry and burst into tears, though we don't really know if it was*

because of me or the stone, and even while running to the hospital my father, to console her, called over his shoulder that he'd buy her a new ring to console her, just as long as the child did not bleed to death, but could not help adding "The two of you will drive me to distraction!" This 'distraction', that to me was identical with hospital, was my first "abroad", my first "not-home", even if it lasted only a few hours. In the hospital, the doctors were understandably taken aback when they realized they had to perform surgery on a skinny six-month-old baby whose toe was even smaller than the midget nurse's smallest nail, but they somehow managed it, and extracted (or thought they had) the millimetre of ruby. Well, they didn't take it all out, because buried in the flesh there remained an even smaller piece, a crumb of a ruby that was, thanks to the then still unrecognized bond between God and Lila, transformed into the chip that I am today, Lila's hidden camera. As soon as Lila and her father returned from the hospital (myself with them!), there was her second, my first, 'abroad' awaiting Lila and thus me too, one that would last for no less than six whole years. We had Shlegovo awaiting us, with its box-tree shaded houses, with Dushan's store where at the age of one Lila tasted her first *strumka*, and at three her first *dextrosa*, we had the vineyards in Gabresh, Manastir, Zavoj and Spas awaiting us (the last three she memorized even as a baby, but Gabresh she would fix in her memory only after her uncle had told her the story of Cosette and Gavroche, who were his idols at the time, so Gabresh-Gavroche became her tongue-twister phrase), we had six years of life with Granny and Grandpa awaiting us, and without Mum and Dad, who'd come to see her every 11th October, 29th November, first of May and for two weeks in July or August, and they certainly didn't want to see me, especially not her mother - who as soon as we left for Shlegovo was consoled not with a new ruby ring but with round gold earrings, radius 2 cm, with no stone, lest another misfortune befall the family. I can tell you that life "abroad", whether it was Shlegovo, which is two hours from Skopje in a Skoda, or Bucharest, a 15 hour drive from Skopje, or Taipei which is a day and a night's flight from Ljubljana, etc., etc., is a life that can be on the same wavelength with a camera, but is incompatible with a human individual as a socialized being, and is only compatible with certain forms of their ego and the changes in their adrenalin level. *Life abroad*, said Lila to Joseph and Edlira one night as they were drinking coconut liqueur in the sitting room and we were all watching a documentary about Solzhenitsyn's return to Russia, *is total derangement of nerves, and I'm not saying this to show you how clever I am to know Rimbaud. Look at Solzhenitsyn. Did you see how he was hugging and kissing the young pianist who brought him a radio for his new Russian room? He all but put his tongue into his mouth, he was so excited and touched. But I can understand it. When someone is marked with the syndrome of life abroad, that person will act, everywhere, even when at home, like someone at the beginning or at the end of their tether, but never like one at its middle, the way people with a permanent home feel, so all their life becomes feeling or euphoria or excitement, and then even their organs function differently, and their glands secrete more saliva, their eyes water more, their heart beats like mad, their brain stalls at the level of the flustered and silly, their arms open to embrace every fool that just smiles at them, their legs shake on meeting kind shop assistants in the supermarkets who are really only repeating their lines when they offer you fresh bread, nice minced meat for super meatballs, and then they wish you a nice day and ask you to visit them again. Indeed life abroad, as an oversensitive response to loneliness amidst a priori not-lonely (and therefore happy) people, is forever on the brink of kitsch, and that's why the diaspora was invented, to socialize such a life while nourishing it. I've heard more Macedonian songs and I've seen more Macedonian folk dances abroad than in Macedonia, more patriotic poetry has been produced in the emigrants' literary societies than in the whole of the Macedonian Writers' Association! If you ask me, it's best to abandon the category "abroad" at the very start and make abroad Home, or you can lose both talent and art. To preserve the sense of cynicism and if possible further develop it, and to combine criticism with self-criticism – I'd say that's the formula of how not to be a part of the diaspora, i.e. of the kitsch. I'm not sure*

how much of her fervent speech (yet another consequence of the "abroad") Joseph and Edlira understood, and they were even a little uncomfortable, having never before lived abroad and thus having had no similar experience, but there was some truth in what she was saying, something I can confirm she had experienced already at her, i.e. our, first and most important "abroad". There, in Shlegovo, there happened only things and events that were on the wave-length of something above (or below) her, supra-sensuous, surreal, and thus abnormal, so you can imagine what fun it can be for a camera! The first such event happened a few days after her parents left us in Shlegovo with her grandmother and grandfather, and Lila was only six months and six days old. Her grandmother dribbled some boiled sheep's milk into Lila's mouth, wrapped her in nappies and a white blanket, and left us on the bed in grandfather's room, where there was no cooking so there were no flies either, and only the ticking of the clock broke the silence. She went to fetch water from the village spring, and Lila and I were left alone, me awake, she half-asleep, lying on the bed covered with a pinkish bedspread with hearts with "May my heart and your heart bound by love never part" embroidered in them. I could tell you what happened precisely as it happened, but let's have her granny's account of the event: thus, when Lila's granny came back and opened the door to the room, she stopped petrified on the threshold, and mechanically covered her mouth with her hand. She couldn't believe her eyes! All around me and Lila it was teeming with ants, half the bed was covered with small black creatures circling in a hoop around Lila's body and me, but there was not one single black dot on Lila. "Dear Lord," Granny muttered to herself, and grabbed Lila up and inspected us all over, but there was not a single stray one even in the nappies - the ants were still circling at great speed around the depression left by Lila and me. "Dear Lord," Granny repeated, ran out of the room with Lila in her arms, and took us to the other room where it was hot and the smell of beans was coming in clouds of steam from the pot on the wood stove, and flies were flying everywhere, and having put Lila on the bed she ran out. Later Granny would tell every guests and chance visitor, and especially potential suitors for Lila, that she ran straight to Old Mada, the chief village fortune-teller, and told her about the ants around Lila. "And you're saying not one ant got onto the child?" the fortune-teller - who was just making lard soap in the pot on the stove and therefore could not run to the house and see it for herself - asked suspiciously. "Not one, Aunty Mada, not one, why, would I lie to you? Lila - clean, white, with a throng of ants all around her," Granny said, her voice shaking. The fortune-teller pulled her kerchief off her head, then put it on again, tying it under her chin, the way they wear them in Shlegovo, and told her: "I'm going to tell you something good. Your granddaughter will meet with fame in her life, but ordeals will always surround her. The fact that not one single ant crawled over her means that she'll endure, she'll become somebody, and God will watch over her, but it won't always be easy for her. Gather the ants in a cloth and shake them out in the yard, send them off towards the north." "As long she's alive and well," Granny concluded the interpretation of the ant-omen in a more optimistic tone, and did what she had been told to when she got home. That night, when grandpa Sime came back from the vineyards and Lila's granny told him what had happened, he didn't believe her at first, and as always in such macho-authoritarian circumstances he snapped at her, "You stupid old bag, why would ants be crawling in the middle of the house, you must've spilt the sugar," but after he had eaten his beans and hot peppers he told her in a softer voice to bring him a brandy glass of water, then he dipped the ring finger of his right hand into it and made magic for Lila, pressing his wet finger on her forehead, cheeks and where he guessed her navel would be under the nappies. While he was doing it a sound like "tsu, tsu" could be heard, like when you purse your lips for an air kiss to a baby, and even I felt a kind of warmth in

the toe of Lila's otherwise notoriously chilly feet. Then Lila slept all night and so did Granny who, from the moment Lila's parents left us in Shlegovo, slept at Lila's feet until she was six so that I, hidden in Lila's toe, listened for a whole six years to Granny's broken breathing, her wakings and her mumblings to herself or the sleeping Lila. Until she was six, and after that too, her grandpa would make the "magic" for Lila for every little spell of crying, cold or belly-ache with the finger bitten long ago by a snake which had told him in her silent language to put the finger bearing her bite to good purposes – to soothe whimpering children. Such were nearly all the children in Lila's wider family, and the children from the neighbouring villages whom their parents used to bring in the evenings "for the magic", and they would sometimes offer grandpa Sime a bundle of walnuts, apples or eggs, and sometimes even red thousand-dinar banknotes, but he always refused them, not because he didn't want to take it or because he had enough money but because the snake had made it clear that the gift of magic was her own, and he was only a mediator, and should not even think of asking or taking money in return for it.

*Translated from the Macedonian by Ljubica Arsonska and Margaret Reid*

\*\*\*