Fragments of Peace

The spring of ’99 forgot to bloom.
I barely remember the light,
only darkness,
rain, desolation,
car bombs splitting Tophane at night,
Rakovica’s basement at the alley’s edge,
my mother’s eyes,
wide as bomb craters,
and tanks across the street.

I smuggled peace in a backpack,
stitched from scraps of memory
gathered like shells from a broken shore.
War, they said, *makes you forget*
who you are.

Inside my shirt,
my mother sewed two hidden pockets
lined with names and phone numbers,
a map back to each other.
War, they said, *makes you disappear*.

That backpack,
my little queen of peace,
wore a crown of smiles
from the family photo album.
Crushed, dragged,
pressed between my ribs and strangers
in the train cars to Bllace.
It defied suffocation,
like sunlight blazing
on the pale face of the border.

As we waited
barefoot
in the barbed silence,
my backpack spilled
open and then peace,
like a lute crooning
for us, women, men, children,
the brave, arrived.

*Tophane – A neighborhood at the center of the old part of Prishtina capital of Kosovo.
*Rakovica – A family name, the family which sheltered over 100 residents in their basement.
*Bllace – the border area with Macedonia where refugee camps were built for Kosovo Albanians expelled from their homes.

Legacy of Loss

Mom cries when she showers
and thinks the water drowns
the sound of her weeping.
In the photo frame,
we're still there–all three of us.
I'm tiny–maybe two.
Mom is smiling,
Dad's got that frozen grin
grown-ups wear posing
with Santa Claus.
I don't understand how love disappears.
Where it goes.
I picture it like a balloon
floating from one heart to another.
I saw one fly off.
I begged Dad to catch it.
"Too late," he said.
"It's flown too high."
I asked Mom too.
She talked about gravity,
forces pulling things apart,
not how to hold on to them.

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My son hates being alone.
When I shower,
he stands at the door.
It's the only time
I loosen the bow of grief,
let it slip off me like rain,
until the knot in my throat
shrinks smaller
than my wedding ring.
My muscles
call for a ceasefire.
He asks every day,
relentless
in his attempt to understand
how love vanishes.
Maybe physics can help him understand.
I'm still looking for my soul.
Maybe I left it in the elevator.
Yesterday I lost my keys.
The day before, my phone.
Love?
No clue.

Maybe it's trapped in a photo
or was buried
with my mother
a month ago.

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On our bed, there are three pillows.
That's where we sleep.
Whenever she tries to take
the third one away,
I lose my mind
I won't let go of that pillow.
I hold it tight when I'm sad.
It's strong.
It keeps monsters away at night.
Sometimes, when she doesn't mention it,
I remind her to wash the pillow.
Then her nerves twist into knots,
and we go to the psychologist,
she tells me to draw our family.
I do:
Mom, Dad, my sister–
drawn in our dream house,
all lying in a field of flowers.
I'm running through mud.
Mom says:
"He doesn't have a sister."
I just look at her smiling eyes.

*

I don't feel anything anymore,
just the whisper of emptiness
echoing inside my ribs.
I don't believe in anything.
I'm not even sitting here.
This isn't my house.
Maybe this city doesn't even exist.

Then: "Mom."
My son.
The last petal clinging to a wilted flower.
I see the third pillow in our bed,
a nest for ghosts.
It stalks me
like a killer in a horror movie.
I want to cast it away,
but words strike like hail,
a storm I can't outrun.

I take him to the psychologist.
She works with him.
Then she turns to me.
"Do you visit your parents?"
I break. Completely.
"It's not just the pillow,"
my son says.

Who Cares

Everything that needed saying
about the fatherland
has already been said:
"*The fatherland is an ache*."
"*Kosova is my unforgiven blood*."
Blood feeds the land.
The land feeds others.
Pain and blood. Blood and soil.
Blood is the lock. And the key.

The fatherland was made.
We made it.
They made it for us.
Who cares?!

We've got
one fatherland, two, maybe three,
all fluent in fire.
A language that scorches the earth,
melts names off headstones,
makes no room
for dawn.

But what hasn't been said—and maybe shouldn't be:

The fatherland became
a corpse transport agency
with special deals for late patriots.
A one-way road
for those of us who never left,
with a brief stop
for a minute of silence.

This place is no more a father,
nor land,
nor home.
Just fragments

that kneel before the dead,
but never for
the living.

Who gives a shit?!
The fatherland's a commodity now,
bought on Monday,
sold by Thursday,
traded for silence
in an open-air market.

Disobedient

In the morning,
the first ray of light found me wide-eyed.
The dust rose to its feet,
a witness to a night
that should have never happened.
It settled on the white sheets
still carrying the scent of cheap soap,
the kind women use
to scrub away other people's sins.

The smell reminded me of my grandmother,
who died in that hospital
wearing white underwear,
because she wanted to leave this world covered,
not for God,
but for the women
who would spread her legs
in our final ritual.

Since then,
I wear only white underwear,
especially when I travel,
in case death is in a rush
and confuses the colours.

I've always loved the light.
Even when it burned me.
Even when it clawed at my eyes.

But this morning it pierced me.

My mother once warned:
"*Never look straight at the sun,*
it'll ruin your eyes."
But my eyes had already turned to sludge.
I left them
in guilt, in streets,

in photographs
that no longer recognize me.

I waited for the light
like a lover who comes only to undress you,
without asking if you're ready,
without kissing you,
then leaves you standing,
clothes in your hands,
his scent still on the back of your neck.

I waited for it
with a red lipstick on my lips,
and called out:
"*I'm ready. Come.*"

And one day, it did.
Struck me from behind,
while I bent down to tie my sneakers,
as if to say:
"*You're here.*
Still.
Unprepared.
Unfit.
Disobedient."

COMET

Time dragged. Life inched along like a snail on wet leaves, drawing itself into another dull eternity. It seemed to move counter to history: the Cold War had ended, but the Bosnian War had just begun, and in our neighbourhood, the "pickle season" reigned—a different kind of war for survival.

At that time, a divorced woman appeared in our neighbourhood—the first we had ever seen. It was like witnessing a comet bursting through our ordinary sky. Like comets, she came from another universe, upsetting the neighbourhood's unspoken rules.

Divorced Serbian women didn't surprise us. They were always different from us anyway, their hair was either very black or very white, dressed in clothes that clung to their bodies, with long red nails. Whenever they left their apartments, the scent of their perfume followed them all the way to the bus station. Men talked about them with a pleasure they didn't bother to hide. They liked to say that these women didn't know how to cook but knew how to have fun. "There's no such thing as a good Serb man, or a bad Serb woman" they used to say.

We kids didn't know what they meant by 'fun,' but from the way the men laughed, we knew it wasn't something our mothers were allowed to do. But to see an Albanian woman divorced! The whole neighbourhood buzzed with curiosity, especially we children, our eyes wide open and eager to uncover every small detail of her new and strange world...

The neighbourhood square had been transformed into an open kitchen. The smell of roasted peppers and the aroma of warm ajvar mixed with the afternoon air. Gathered around the pots, the women stirred red peppers skilfully with their hands, but also with drowsy words that were hard to catch. They whispered among themselves, occasionally raising their eyebrows and narrowing their eyes as if searching for something hidden in what was being said. They moved their heads slightly and let out sighs that, though silent, weighed heavier than words. Their lips, parched from the heat—or maybe from too much gossip, thinned when they saw the woman.

One of the women leaned toward another, lowering her voice as if revealing a great secret: "No one ever opens her door!" "Could it be she has no one alive?" the other replied. "Who knows what's going on with her? Maybe her family disowned her?" They speculated, releasing words like dark vapor, rising through the air alongside the smell of ajvar.

Back then, among Albanians, women didn't divorce; they were 'let go' by their husbands. For a long time, I tried to understand how someone could be let go—just dropped! Sometimes it seemed to me that these women had been held in the air, tightly grasped by their husbands, until suddenly, the men decided to ‘let go’, and then they would tumble to the ground as if falling from a high mountain. I imagined them being taken to a tall building—since we had no mountains nearby—and being let go, crashing hard to the ground, as if falling from the sky. From that moment, they became ‘the let go’, no longer women, no longer people. And every time this happened, the 'let go' woman would return to her family, while the children always remained with the husband's family.

Such was my father's aunt, Aunt Çamë, a woman 'let go' several times because, according to my grandmother, "her tongue was longer than seven fortune-tellers put together." When my grandmother got angry with me, she'd call out, "Oh Çamë," and to make her point, she'd say, "You’re worse than Çamë! If anyone holds onto you for more than 24 hours—come and slit my throat! " Then she'd draw a line across her neck with her index finger.

The idea that someone could hold me scared me. Not just in the arms-around-you way, but really hold you, like claim you, keep you, trap you. But the idea of being let go? That was worse. I imagined women slipping from a grip they didn’t ask for, falling straight down—bam—onto pavement so hard it cracked open. Sometimes, I pictured volcanoes erupting under their feet, lava spreading fast, swallowing everything: houses, toys, us. I stayed up at night thinking about that fall, wondering how anyone got back up.

My grandmother continued to call me "Çamë" with a hidden smile, doing everything to convince me that a woman's fate depended on how big her mouth was. Meanwhile, my grandfather constantly played the devil's advocate, hiding Çamë's big mouth behind her misfortune. He sat cross-legged, amber prayer beads in hand, wearing a plis (he always liked to wear that traditional white felt cap to show off his Albanian heritage), he'd say, "She had no luck, the poor thing." This made me think that my grandmother was right—that to have luck, a woman needed to know when to keep her mouth shut. Therefore, I was convinced that the mystery of the 'let go' women revolved around big mouths.

This divorced woman was a new mystery and she wore a scent of freshness that reminded me of my grandmother’s hair, which she washed with laundry detergent. This freshness kept us both enchanted and bewildered, like something too special to touch, the kind of thing grownups put behind glass. She had a young daughter and worked at the hospital. She walked

briskly, her body stiff, as if she were holding her breath. Her hands were often full of bags, she pulled an old black suitcase as worn out as her face. The daughter, with almond-coloured curly hair and a white dress, followed behind her. Every time the woman passed by the other women, her daughter would glance back with a slight smile, as if hoping someone was watching or waving to invite her to play. We children didn't dare make a sound. Each evening, before our mothers called us inside, I would take my place on the stairs, waiting for something to happen. Perhaps the woman's feet would begin to glow, or wings would sprout from her back like a butterfly's. Sometimes, upon seeing her approach, I'd close my eyes, hoping that when I opened them, she would have vanished or had transformed into something else. But nothing ever happened. She just walked on, a bag in one hand, her daughter in the other, a suitcase rattling behind her.

The woman appeared entirely ordinary. Her hair was neatly combed and precisely cut just below her ears, in a nondescript shade of brown that seemed absent from any colour catalogue. She didn't stand out—her height, her build, even her clothes seemed designed to slip past your eyes. Like someone who had trained herself not to be noticed, she didn't even have red-painted nails, let alone long ones. Unlike the other women, who were always curious, asking, "Where did your mom go? She's been out for a while!" or "Why hasn't your grandma come by?" or "What did you buy at the store?" she didn't ask questions. She didn't seem to care.

She moved quickly, ascending or descending the stairs to reach the courtyard where we played, sometimes beneath the stairs, sometimes atop them. She never said a word. Never even looked at us.

After some time, I came to a disappointing realization: divorced women were no different from other women. They were entirely normal, like a pale flower dissolving into a whitewashed wall. They had ordinary hair, regular bodies, and, surprisingly, no distinguishing marks to set them apart. I couldn't understand why I had expected these women to look different—perhaps to have tails or horns. Maybe it was because I had heard my grandfather confidently declare that women today had gone mad: "They've grown horns, turned loose, wagging their tails, leaving their husbands."

So, since she had left her husband, she must be loose, even though I had no idea what that word meant. Nevertheless, I had just examined her from head to toe, trying to spot a tail or horns, but in vain. And, there was no visible sign of madness!

Perhaps, at that time, we were too young to comprehend such "phenomena." Our parents, went to great lengths to shield us from these "truths," as if protecting us from some hidden danger. However, they didn't shield us from the news of the war in Bosnia, nor from the sighs of distress about the war that was drawing closer to our doorstep, instilling fear in every corner.

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A year later, another divorced woman arrived in our neighbourhood, holding her young daughter's hand—a girl with long hair and large, curious eyes. By then, I had already seen a divorced woman, without a tail, without horns, and, surprisingly, without any sign of

madness—so my expectations had completely faded. The whispers started, curiosity flared for a while, but soon died down.

Yet, there was something unusual in the way she faced all those watching eyes, with an upright posture, head held high, and deep eyes that conveyed a silent strength—a kind of magic that made the invisible feel alive. But to me, she was no longer an enthralling subject. I couldn't find any reason she might be more important than the other women.

Another mystery began to captivate me. All these divorced women had daughters. It was as if fate had written an unnamed rule, an unspoken law, linking divorce to the birth of daughters—a secret code that only these women understood. I began to think that this code must be the key to solving this enigma, just like the big mouth in the case of abandoned women. Endless questions swirled around my mind, one after another, like stars igniting the dark night. The birth of daughters must be the key that unlocks the door to divorce.

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Time passed, as it does. The women left, or stayed. It didn't matter. No one knew what to do with them once they were no longer strange.

Translated from Albanian by: Vlora Konushevci and Curtis Bauer