

ANGEL ON MY SHOULDER
Extract from the novel *Yellow Snow*

WHAT IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN IS IMPOSSIBLE. IT DOESN'T MATTER THAT YELLOW SNOW HAS FALLEN. ANYWAY, THAT PROPHET IN INDIA HAS SAID THAT THERE WON'T BE A WAR.

The south wind beat straight against my chest, tore through my hair, penetrated my eyes to my very thoughts which responded with a weariness I only then recognised. That wind, that *yugo*, struck deep into my very being, aroused desperate anxiety, numbed memory itself somewhere in the deepest silence of my brain, destroyed every tranquil thought, and shattered my nerves so that my hands clutched even more tightly the ski sticks across my knees. My solitary seat on the ski lift was carrying me high above the tops of spruces and firs, I was drifting slowly though space, I seemed to be travelling towards the sky itself which was greying into yellowish light of sun still hidden deep behind thinning cloud. I seemed to be rising into the very source of the wind.

The wretched wind was blowing straight from the Mediterranean at the summit of a freezing mountain which was covered in yellow snow.

What did those tired unslept eyes convey to the brain and the spirit - all steeped in last nights *Badel* brandy, *Rubin* cognac, the stupefying plum brandy, the mulled wine, the cold *Sarajevo* beer, the peppermint liqueur - what did they see?

The whole mountain above the tree line, all the ski slopes, even down into the trees - everything was covered in a snow which was yellow, not exactly egg-yolk yellow, but truly and honestly - yellow. In the hollows and near the summit the wind has made islands of fresh, pure white snow, while on the peaks the warm gusts laid bare the damp, deathly-grey earth. Why should my Jahorina, the mountain on which I had been skiing practically since I first learned to walk, why should it suddenly resemble the scenery of some cheap science-fiction film, the imaged landscape of some distant uninhabited planet, the worst vision of some dyspeptic nightmare? Should one believe the radio? Believe that a single cloud had of its own accord absorbed fine sand from the Sahara, which a certain wind, again on its own accord, had lifted high into God's heaven? Believe that this was simply one of those things that happen, just like that, once in a hundred years? Or should one believe in the talk of this being the portent of a great disaster? Or go

all the way, and accept that it was a sign that the end of the world, and of time, was at hand?

My flight ended; the lift had brought me to the summit, and my skis were sliding on the yellow snow. The summit was completely empty. There was no sign of my friend - that toothless and always smiling peasant who had worked there for years, shovelling snow onto the spot where the lift deposited its passengers, or helping novice skiers (especially the ladies) disentangle themselves when they fell. On fine days I would stay up there with him on that summit; I would bring my Dubrovnik or Belgrade friends with me, he would lend us his binoculars, we would gaze all about us and then he would explain: "That sharp white summit, that's Durmitor in Montenegro; that ridge is Zelengora; and over there, those lower mountains, that's already Serbia... That one over there is Vlasic; in that direction lies the sea; and that down there, beyond Chalet 'Youth', that's my native village of Praca.."

I hadn't seen him at all that winter, and only much later, during the summer, was I to meet him again queueing for water at Bistrik, while bursts of anti-aircraft-machine-gun-fire passed close above our heads and exploded somewhere in the vicinity of the already burnt-out National Library. He, like me, was hauling a collection of plastic canisters. He smiled when he saw me, he was really happy. I probably reminded him, just as he reminded me, of Jahorina and skiing. He told me in a few words that he'd been driven out of Praca, half of his family had been killed, he was a refugee.

My skis raced down through the yellow snow. The truth is that yellow snow is one of the most beautiful things a skier can experience (and perhaps only once in a lifetime, as they were saying) - it is neither too fast nor too slow, it does not need firming down, it allows complete freedom of movement and manoeuvre, it is not tiring, in its surrealism it simply provides a sensation of true weightlessness and bodilessness, as though consciousness alone was skiing, it frees the spirit from the body, one does not need to slow oneself down or to brake, it is exactly as now when, in the most blissful depths of sleep, I dream that I am skiing. But what was any of this to me when (just in my unconscious floating) I was speeding down the slopes of Jahorina entirely alone? Since the March barricades, no one had come from Sarajevo, except for us few who, with a sort of suicidal obstinacy, still came skiing every weekend. But this morning my friends had stayed below in chalet, drained by hangover and depression which (and not merely because of the yellow snow) had come over all of us; the locals meanwhile had more important business. The only person I saw was the young man from Pale who managed the ski lift. Of course it did not even occur to him to check my season ticket, he had even left the beers and colas, which he usually overcharged for from thousands of brightly dressed, out-of-breath skiers, neglected on the fence at the ski lift entrance. I saw him walking about, waving a bottle of *Zvecevo* brandy which he dangled by its neck between his fingers; then he shut himself in his hut; and then he sneaked off somewhere, leaving the lift running by itself. In the afternoon, as it was already getting dark, I noticed him with a pistol in his hand near the shed where the great caterpillar-tracked snowploughs were kept, ostensibly practising his aim. The shots echoed about the empty mountain, cracking as they multiplied.

We were the only ones on the bus. Just the four of us. On our way back we were not stopped and searched at Lapisnica as we had been on our way up. The groups of armed men carrying kalashnikovs and semi-automatics, some in the uniforms of the Yugoslav Army of the Police reserve, some in no uniform of any sort, faded behind us into the shadows and into the mountain darkness, and in a front of us the City opened up, all its myriad lights shining, divinely beautiful when seen from above. And later, as we got onto the tram with our skis and people stared at us, we laughed amongst ourselves, convinced that, despite everything, we would be going skiing again next weekend. Anyway, the newspapers had reported that a famous prophet in India had said that there wouldn't be a war.

DEAR GOD, I HAVE JUST DREAMED ALL THIS. NO MATTER HOW TERRIBLE
THE DREAM, IF ONLY I WERE DREAMING NOW.

Later on I realised that prophets don't make mistakes, but that people interpret them according to their own wishes. It was true that the Indian had said that there would not be a war (a statement which our newspapers immediately reproduced as a banner headline), but he had added that everyone in Yugoslavia must immediately to convert to Buddhism and start praying a whole lot..

Dreams appear...who knows from when and where. Some from far-off childhood, some perhaps only a night or two ago, and as with all dreams one soon forgets them (as well as the time when one had dreamt them); but later, when their dark geography begins to impose itself on reality, they return to one's mind and blend in with some sort of normal, as it were rational, order of things. Thus on a number of occasions I was forced to remember certain dreams which had been exactly of those places where bloody and violent events were now occurring in the City.

Ilidza, the level area beside the three-lined avenue that leads to the head of the river Bosna and Mount Igman. Darkness of the kind that only exists in dreams, totally black yet in which one can see everything. I'm walking though a field, I come upon some houses, a new settlement apparently. I am surprised I have never noticed it before. The settlement is completely empty, no people, nothing growing. A darkness which swallows its very self. Then a wedding, the bride in a black wedding dress.

I am climbing mount Trebevic and high up, instead of the forest and the steep rise a level place, a plateau, and again unknown dwellings. Blackish earth, no people.

A flight of steps, that corner in the city where Kosevo and Breka are situated (when I dreamed this, the Breka estates with all those terraces and staircases had no yet been built), and somewhere down below (towards the

maternity hospital, the Zoo and the cemetery) strangers of some sort, street hooligans, speaking East-serb dialect - and everyone fearful of them.

A steep street in the Bjelave district, a strange fear inside me, I run uphill, then down again.

I ride my moped towards Sedrenik or Lapisnica, when I reach the top the view opens up, the hills are covered in yellow sand, all the way to the eastern horizon a deserted landscape without people or vegetation.

I see a pack of dogs, some fancy breeds but dirty and thin, running along in the street. It seems to me that one of them is carrying something in its teeth that looks like a piece of a human foot. I hear the whistle of another shell. I throw myself down on the wet ground. I run though soggy, hindering snow, my legs ever more weary. I have no strength, I have eaten nothing in two days. Another incoming whistle. I plunge face down in the dirty, half-melted snow.. Again I try to run, my feet seem glued to the ground. I am breathingheavily. I reach my block of flats, the entrance door is locked, I wait for a friend who has the key. I urge him to hurry. I crouch in front of the door, my breath rasps in my lungs. He searches his pockets for the key. He struggles to fit it in the lock.

Clarification: this happened at Breka in March 1993, during one of the many shellings of the Kosevo hospital, and it was no dream.

HOW, BY FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES, WE BECAME MAGICIANS

During that summer of 1992 as the evening approached I would go every day to the Academy of the Performing Arts to bake bread. It was extremely dangerous to go out of doors at all, it was dangerous to be in the open (it was not particularly safe indoors either but in comparison this was always somehow forgotten). But there were a thousand reasons for going out and pretty much all of us spent several hours each day in the streets. But this was not at all easy. One had to invent one's own rules for something that was entirely unpredictable, that had no rationality or regularity, that most often went by the official name of "non-selective bombardment of the City," and was actually more of less continuous. When there was some sort of pause, when "the guns fell silent" as the saying goes, the possibility that all would start up again was present at every moment. Particularly the mortars - their shells could fall unheralded from the sky just anywhere, at any time. Anytime, anywhere - this was the only real rule of all that killing and destruction. The snipers would shoot all day long from all the surrounding hills, anti-aircraft machine guns would pepper any part of the City they saw fit, again without rationality or regularity, there was always the occasional bullet or tank shell, sometimes a rain of projectiles from some multiple rocket launcher.

But little by little, for some sort of pattern tends to emerge even in the most unpredictable of situations, people would discover regularities for themselves, and each would construct his own, private, eccentric defence mechanism. Later, as the war progressed and that first summer passed, as initial confusion gave way to a general familiarity with the situation, you could sometimes see a person on the street who, regardless of what was happening around him, would stroll at ease, as though promenading, calmly and collectedly - even across those bridges of crossroads which were deemed the most "open," the most dangerous places," in that illusory gradation of risk. "The Sarajevo people have reconciled themselves to dying," was the interpretation of some, meaning that certain citizens had voluntarily accepted the possibility of death, that it was all the same to them whether they were killed or continued to walk. But I don't think that this was quite accurate; reconciliation to something doesn't necessarily mean its acceptance; rather it was a matter of understanding. You can only be reconciled to something or someone you know very well, like a friend or a former lover.

People simply found rules for themselves in this situation which cannot be expressed in words or described in any way, yet which were understood. I remember one old man who went out every morning and walked at the slowest, feeblest pace, to the market or the park. On one occasion shots began ringing out all around him; a youth began to run, and old man sneered at him: "Run, run, you young fool. D' you think you're faster than a bullet?" Yes, a person learns to distinguish the scarcely perceptible dividing line between existence and that which represents something "other," to discover the secret map of safe ways though his native city, according to which the shortest is not necessarily the quickest. A person learns to sense death in the air, sometimes long before it actually arrives; he learns the strange metaphysics involved in recognising the right moment to cross an open space - since, in fact there is no point in waiting, you just have to choose the right moment.

One learns to read the hidden omens in the apparently most ordinary things (the order in which a few pebbles lie upon the ground, the angle at which a door stands open, the direction from which a pigeon flies and its choice of which branch to flight upon). Put simply, many learned to *see* (as Castaneda puts it), or entered deeply into the art of what the ancient Greeks called *entelechy*, or acquired knowledge of a secret science (in Rudolph Steiner's phrase) - although, of course they had no idea that they had done this, and when they spoke of it at all, would call it luck ("I imagine - I stopped to tie my shoelace, and a mortar fell and killed three people right where I would have been"), or fate ("I was literally two paces ahead my own death"), or impulse ("on an impulse I turned the corner by the department store, though I was actually headed for Marijin Dvor"), or instinct ("I simply knew that something was going to happen, so I ran outside and brought my kid in"). In this way many Sarajevans became metaphysicians (even though many of them had probably never even heard the word), or more simply, wizards - magii trained in that subtlest of all arts, that balancing on the narrow tightrope between life and death. Naturally, without intending or desiring to do so - by force of circumstance, as some like to say. And what was in question were not merely necessary (and sometimes "unnecessary") venturings out into the open, and the presence of Death which breathed down our necks constantly; but the

many other things which were in agreement with the ancient disciplines of occult practices: isolation, as in some Tibetan monastery, a reduction of intake as in the strictest ascetic tradition. There was no electricity, so night after night we kept vigil in total darkness, looking only "into" ourselves. All life was reduced to the four basic elements (fire, water, earth and air) in which the material world lost all meaning. Time lost all indicators of process or change (in Sarajevo only the seasons changed), and was reduced to single, totally empty moment that simply lasted.

But a count was kept in Sarajevo, every day : three, five, ten, twenty-five... The news gave us the horrendous count every evening in bulletins to which, sad to say, we all became habituated and indifferent, despite the fact that people are certainly not numbers. And while we are on the subject of numbers - they hurled so many shells at us, so much ordnance, it was enough to kill every one of us a hundred times over . They should have killed us all, but they didn't.

And me? I had an angel on my shoulder.

GOD IN THE SKY ABOVE SARAJEVO

He wasn't exactly sitting on my shoulder, but he was there, right behind my ear, on the nape of my neck where I couldn't see him. When I needed to, I heard his voice, my sense of security gave me the idea that he was always there and was looking after me. Sometimes, too, I would try to speak directly to the Almighty, but on the whole it was easier to communicate with his deputy.

It was around Whitsuntide in Sarajevo in 1992 and, just as with occurrence of the yellow snow - many didn't even notice it (why did the Almighty manifest Himself at precisely the moment when everyone had to take shelter in the cellars?), and those who did notice did not ascribe the least significance to it. People in the main gave credence to their radios, they would press their ears to their sets praying that they would at last hear a bit of good news. There was no good news, every fresh bulletin was worse and more terrible than the last, until finally the bulletins began to repeat themselves, as though going in a circle.

My child needed milk, so in the midst of all uproar, I had to run upstairs to the flat. Hurriedly I poured the milk into the pan, heated it, and drained it off into the bottle. I was drawn to the window, and I thrust aside the curtain. The building was high up, and most of City was visible. Strange and dismaying was that scene of bombardment from above (almost as though on cinema screen), it looked magical and marvellous - the red-lit night sky, the glare of fires, the flashes of exploding shells, the light of illuminated bullets like comets, the rockets leaving traces of themselves behind them, bursting into a thousand colours, the marker shells descending on parachutes shedding a warm-yellow light. Fuck it, I could even have enjoyed the beauty of it all were it not my City that was burning, were

those houses not ours, were people not burning inside them, were they not breathing their last seeing own arms and legs lopped off and thrown about their rooms, were those not our children in the cellar, was that not my own child's fear that I saw in his eyes. I thought of that general up there in the mountain, fucking bastard, in charge of all this - sitting in some folding chair and gleefully directing the fire. Like a film director, fuck him, who has realised all his dreams - may his own film fuck him, may he be hoist with his own petard. Yes, the Devil himself was manifesting his magnificent and magnetic beauty. Yes, fuck it, and maybe I too could succumb to the ghastly fascination of the evil that was taking place all about me; and maybe I would deliriously have continued with my pornographic-aesthetics "fuckings" had I not, God be thanked, raised my eyes - much higher than the paths of the rockets and shells straight up, to the stars (it was May, and the heaven was absolutely clear), where, despite everything, the universe still survived. I saw the moon, full of light, radiant; and right beside it, high above Hum hill and all Sarajevo, a tiny solitary cloud, a cloud in the shape of Heavenly Personage holding out a hand palm-upwards. I could hear that Tija had also come upstairs, he was stirring some pap for his daughter, and my aunt was searching around for a possible cigarette. I called them to come quickly to the window, held back the curtain.

"Look! It's God Himself!"

"Uhuh", said Tija, and made off downstairs while the pap was still warm.

THE ANGEL OF MY SHOULDER, "THE TOWER OF BABEL,"
AND C₂H₅OH

As I hurried down the stairs, I would recite the Lord's Prayer to myself, and then a Hail Mary (these exactly fitted the time it took me to run from the fifth floor down to the ground floor), and when I got to the bottom and only a few metres of lobby floor separated me from the street I would stop, usually on the third or second step, holding the banister (if someone else were to appear, it would look as though I had forgotten something upstairs in my flat, and was remembering it). Then I would wait for my Angel's voice and, no matter how urgent my business, or that something "had to" be done, or that I had promised that I would meet someone somewhere, or the impulse to simply go out, if I just sensed that he was saying "no," or that he was hesitant, I would return upstairs. And if I already found myself in the street, I would leave it to my Angel to choose which way I went, and sometimes he would take me a very long way about, through courtyards and passage-ways, but I always obeyed his directions. Was he always right in his choices? I don't know, I never tried to test him - but here I am, in space and time, and this must mean something.

It was only when I went to the Academy of Theatre Arts to bake bread that I never asked Angel about anything. I did not pause on the third or second step, I would only ask him to take care of me, and would rush straight out, across the street, over the bridge, around the yard, and straight into the Academy. I had a two-year-old son and a pregnant wife at home, and they had to eat.

At the Academy they had an oven, and were using stage sets as fuel. The first to go had been *The Bald Primadonna*, and currently we were sawing up the props and properties of a production called *The Tower of Babel*. At this time a lot of people were living at the Academy. The *Obala* gallery was also on our premises, and there were the director of the gallery and his painter wife, a number of young men in hiding from army call-up, one old woman, some refugees from Grbavica, and a student-director. They had organised themselves efficiently, and the life they lived was certainly not dull. Every day they were visited by a number of us who came to bake bread or to cook rice. Besides myself, an actress called Milijana with her boyfriend or husband, I can no longer remember which, would come, also an architect and a rock guitarist. From time to time many more people would gather and, in spite of everything, sometimes great parties would happen. The Teaching Academy was situated on the floor above, and included a deserted chemistry lab. Once I told them how we at the Television Centre had drunk all the alcohol used to clean the heads of video equipment, and that it was actually only methyl alcohol, CH_4OH , that was dangerous (since it could blind you), what you could drink was $\text{C}_2\text{H}_5\text{OH}$, and how we had not been sure whether what was in the bottle was the one or the other, but had mixed it with water and drunk it anyway, and that afterwards no one had gone blind.

"What was that again?" a stagehand asked, chuckling.
" $\text{C}_2\text{H}_5\text{OH}$."

He got up and left the room, repeating the formula out loud to himself.

He returned with a large white plastic bottle on which $\text{C}_2\text{H}_5\text{OH}$ was written in large letters.

"Fuck it, if only I'd known, I would have studied harder," he winked at me.
"So, what shall we do with this?"
"We'll mix it with water."

But he insisted that I drink first, then waited a bit, then got going himself. And while we sipped our $\text{C}_2\text{H}_5\text{OH} + \text{H}_2\text{O}$ it finally became my turn to use the stove, and I put my bread into it, while on top of the stove some pepper-sprinkled rice simmered, and music played from a transistor plugged into a car battery. The bombardment started up again outside, but who cared? Then Glava, the student-director, approached me - he who during the first months of the war had worked as volunteer in the surgery department of the hospital where, after amputations had been performed, it had been his job to carry human body parts to the crematorium. He seemed angry, moody and nervous. He began to scold me and demand that next time I bought some firewood with me. How could I explain to him that had already used up all my furniture, and that I did not know how to (and in a case would not) cut down trees in the parks, that...? I couldn't say anything, and he went off into a corner, sat down on the floor, and stared miserably into space.

"What's matter with him?" I asked Miro, who was sort of in charge of the group. "Do I really need to bring fuel?"

"Ah, don't worry about it," said Miro. "He's upset. He's been telling everyone they should start bringing wood. We've just about finished the sets of *The Tower of Babel*, and now it's the turn of *Woyzeck*."

I knew that there was no point, that Glava would never again put on that production of *Woyzeck* that he had directed just before the war. But before the next time I went there I did collect a few dry branches. It was only right.

As a reward for my "scientific discovery" I was given two decilitres of pure alcohol. I used one half of it immediately in our spirit stove in order to make some tea for the little one, but my wife and I fought quite a bit over the other half, because she wanted to use it to make coffee. Dear God, where in the world do you use liquor to make coffee!

And something else. When I returned that evening from the Academy, I was a bit unsteady on my feet. Some sort of false joy possessed me, and I forgot about my Angel. Just as I got to the entrance of my block of flats, a shell exploded directly behind me and the force of it threw me - just as if someone had suddenly pushed me - straight through the doors into hallway.

I was lucky - the shrapnel flew heavenwards.

MAY DAY IN AMSTERDAM

After twenty months in Sarajevo I got out at last, and after more than a year apart from my family was able to meet up with them.. I also got to know my new son. My Angel came with me, still sitting on my shoulder. During my first days there I continued to talk with him as I wandered along the bridges and canals. He probably still felt a need to look after me, to make sure I didn't fall into the dirty water, or get run over by a car or a tram. But little by little he spoke to me less and less often, and when he was sure that I had learned again how to handle city streets, he fell completely silent. I know that he is still there, but I think he's asleep.

On May Day 1994 I went walking with a Sarajevo friend. He too had once lived in that highrise block known as "The Star" which stands across the river from the Academy of Theatre Arts, and by whim of chance we were now again almost neighbours. It was a Sunday, a calm and peaceful day after the pandemonium of Queen's Day. We enjoyed the peace and emptiness along the banks of the canals, and the trees with their first leaves. Then we heard some music, a voice making a speech, the shouts of a crowd. I thought that they must be celebrating the First of May, the International Workers' Day, so we turned our steps towards Leidseplein. We wondered why there were so many police about. The closer we got, the louder the noise became and the more police there were, with enormous Black

Marijas and truncheons a metre long. Was this the way to treat the Progressive Workers' Movement about the merits of which, before the arrival of "democracy" and the war, I had been brainwashed all my life? What was happening in this tolerant Holland? Then we saw a group of youths perched all over the facade of building waving an Israeli flag. Gradually we realised that these were supporters of the Ajax football team, and that they were celebrating something. Then shooting began, and smoke filled the whole space. There were bursts of fire and explosions. I knew that this was all pyrotechnics and fireworks, but the sound was the same - only the whistle of flying shrapnel was missing. I did not dare to wait for the smoke to clear, because of the sight of human legs, arms and shattered skulls, firmly lodged in my memory, which always came back whenever there was this sort of smoke. We ran around the first corner, fled across the bridges, and only slowed to a walk when we got to Watelooplein. In Sarajevo I had never been so frightened. Never. This was no doubt because here my Angel was asleep and - the hell with intellectualisations! - because, as they say in soccer, this was not a home game

A SHORT STORY ABOUT AIR

Fire. Water. Earth. Air. The worst is air. Fire is shells and conflagrations, machine-gun bursts and multiple rocket launchers. Fire is the cigarette you don't have, an armful of branches for boiling water, a handful of rice. When it is absent fire is cold. Fire is terrible, but air is worse. Water is a torment hauled through the streets of fire, water is blood in the street. Water is terrible when it is thirst, but air is worst of all. Earth is the clay of the football field where we bury the dead, earth is the debris of razed buildings, earth is sandbags in the windows, mud in the hair, ditches and trenches. Frozen earth is terrible, but air is even worse:

Air is what remains above the tree felled in the park
Air is the imagined pain in the limb severed by a shell.

In Sarajevo, October 1993

Translated by Antonije Zalica and Christopher Merrill