

David Albahari

BY THE LIGHT OF THE SILVERY MOON

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My name is Adam and I don't know why I'm here.

Here: in a city standing indecisively between the Rocky Mountains and the Great Prairie, not really part of the snowy peaks or the grassy plain, always at the cusp of the divide, on the cutting edge of difference.

In a certain way, all this began as a joke, or at least now I see that it was a joke I was playing on myself, though then, when it began, it was coloured with a grave sense of decision. When we distance ourselves enough from watershed moments each of us demonstrates an awe-inspiring capacity for altering the past and falsifying history. I remember how miserable this made me feel a few years back, while I was still in my former

country, when our propaganda machine began to chug full steam, manufacturing various chronicles of honour and dishonour. Then it hit me that I was doing precisely the same thing, regardless of the fact that in question were more innocent matters: a present which has no objective vantage point—for, in fact, no such vantage point exists—can hardly produce an objective past; instead the past is composed of the same number of small, smooth surfaces, a little darkened, perhaps, like an old mirror, that comprise the multiple face of the present.

Of course I did not come up with this immediately. Days, weeks, months went by, there were cities reduced to heaps of rubble, people again became numbers on lists, cows wandered around the devastated regions and gazed at the

pale moon. Life turned into a department store where all manner of versions of the past were on display. Some were attractively packaged, others were crude and coarse, but everyone was supposed to buy one. Anyone, like me, who opted for passing through the store and going out the other side with no purchases in hand ended up, slowly but surely, alone. Men separated from him, women showed him no kindness, children looked straight through him as if he did not exist.

And indeed he did not exist: I did not exist. And that is why, perhaps, from here everything starts seeming joke-like. Here, where every sense of self merges into the overabundance of space, this convulsive attachment to something which, as they said on serious television shows, "defines identity," had to look pretty silly. In vain friends and acquaintances knocked on my door, called me on the phone, ran into me in the street.

"Life exists," they said, "only when you see it in historical continuity, the present is no magic carpet propelling you through time and space, the only person who will have a future is the one who in it sees the re-shaping of the past."

I kept quiet and retreated into my loneliness. Mine was no noble solitude which man chooses of his own volition, but rather a plagued apartness imposed by

others. In short, no matter where I turned I was met by a void: people moved aside as I walked by, and sidestepped my destination. The only things remaining for me were the dead ones.

And so it was that one day I got onto a city bus, went to the Canadian Embassy and took my place in line. I filled out the first form, returned home, waited, received new forms, filled them out, waited again, went for a doctor's examination, got all the necessary documents, went for the interview, shook hands, signed for receipt of an emigré visa, bought an airline ticket. All those verbs, the string of independent clauses, all of that was accompanied at the time by gravity and decisiveness, even a feeling of the inevitability of destiny. Only later, here, I began to see that all that time I did believe it really was some kind of a joke, that I was waiting in lines, going for interviews and holding my breath at the X-ray only so that I could mock someone, that I could show that, aside from the present, nothing else existed, least of all the past, especially a past we choose ourselves.

Now I wonder: what have I chosen? I cannot find the right answer. Everything I come to, regardless of whether I am standing in front of a window or walking along endless streets or staring into a mirror, is: silence.

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At first, in this city, while I hurried from office to office, filled out forms and was assigned an array of numbers instead of my name (and my former life, of course) in powerful computer systems, I had the feeling that something was opening. I didn't know what. I thought in simple images, like: life is a corridor lined with doors, or: life is a stage, or: eyes are the mirror of the soul, the heart is a machine, the stomach is a sack, a dream is a post-card from a journey, I am someone else.

Then I felt how I was falling: I sank, and over me, with a slam, lids and shutters clanged shut. When the first snow fell, the whiteness blinded me. When ice covered the river I went out on a bridge, took off my cap and gloves, and let the frost bite me. The sun neared the far-off mountains and day became night.

This didn't worry me, I thought. In a certain sense, it is easier to walk in darkness than in daylight. You needn't worry about anything. You can be naked, the way you really are.

All of this was, of course, pure denial, vain efforts to find comfort, and I talk about it all now when words have long since lost their meaning and when every word, when it is said aloud, sounds foreign and I have to look it up in dictionaries.

In fact, the decisiveness and firmness drained out of me while I was still in the airplane. As I flew I thought I was getting further and further from that seething abyss which was caving in on itself, but, though I didn't know it, I was getting closer and closer to another abyss, one hidden inside of me, every bit as seething and empty, every bit as subject to doubts and uncertainties. When I stepped off the plane, straight into a freezing north wind, I swayed in my clothing like a scarecrow of straw. Only my heavy shoes kept me, with their weight, on the ground; everything else no longer existed.

I rented an apartment in the northern part of town, on the edge of the artistic quarter. The apartment was small: a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom. The walls were bare, the floors covered with worn carpeting, the windows had no curtains. Next to the refrigerator there was an outdated promotional calendar. Beyond the sliding glass doors, on the terrace, two plastic chairs were collecting dust.

There is always one easy way to see whether some "place" can truly become a "home," my mother used to say. You buy a plant in a flower pot, and you try keeping it alive. If you succeed, you can get a cat. If you do not, there is no furniture or hearth which will warm your soul. But watch out, she said, each person has his own plant, each person has to raise his own flower.

OK, I thought, my plant, my flower. I found a florist shop and went in. From the dozens of flower pots, flower arrangements, bouquets and wreaths of dried flowers spread a close, oily smell. Cactuses, exotic blossoms, vines, violets, ficus plants, nettles—never before in such bounty, I was fearful that I would not find myself. Then my eyes lit on a cyclamen. I knew nothing about cyclamens, or rather I knew nothing about any of the flowers, and the salesgirl, when I asked her, only smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "Everything is written on the tag," she said. It said on the tag: "Keep out of direct sunlight; do not water excessively; do not keep in the dark."

I could not imagine why anyone would want to keep a cyclamen, or any other plant for that matter, in the dark but those three commandments became the foundation of my entire being. Everything was subjected to them: my first activity in the morning, my last gaze in the evening, my movements during the day, my search for work, hamburgers and pizza in stand-up joints, in shopping centres, beer when I came home, staring at the muted television set which I turned around, just in case, so that I might reduce the influence of its ghostly radiation. I bought a water-

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ing can, a little bottle with mineral nutrient additives, a miniature set of gardening tools—a little spade, hoe and rake—for working the soil; the only thing I couldn’t find was a handbook on cultivating cyclamen plants. I would enter the apartment, after a brief or longer absence, take off my shoes and rush over to the flower pot sitting on a shelf by the window.

Light, water, minerals, dark. Soon everything became that simple rhythm. I would open my eyes, drink a glass of water, eat corn flakes and french fries, sink into sleep. The cyclamen did not budge. At first it looked as if I might be succeeding, although I felt that, for true success, I ought to start speaking in the first person plural, that the cyclamen should become a part of me only if I became a part of it.

One night, when I couldn’t fall asleep because of the strong light of the full, silvery moon, I sat in the other chair, next to the cyclamen, and stared out into the empty street for a long time. Once, as a boy, I had believed that things will happen if you believe in them long enough. I tried to tell this to the cyclamen. I did not tell it that now I know how things happen in spite of our will, attending to the will of others, perhaps, but not to our own. We are mere witnesses to our own lives.

I fell asleep on the chair with my head against the sill. When I woke, I saw two wilted leaves. I raked the soil, added a few droplets of the liquid with the minerals, poured water into the little dish under the flower pot. At noon I had to go out to a meeting with my adviser from the government employment agency. The agency was on the other side of town, and while I was still quite far from home, in one of the buses, I felt a momentary lapse, as if my heart had stopped for an instant or as if

it bent over to peer into a newly formed void. I got off the bus and began to run.

No matter how I ran I couldn’t change reality. Superman may be able to turn the course of events back and spin the world in the opposite direction, but as far as all the rest of us are concerned we can only go along in the general direction and follow the inevitable sequence of day and night, waking and sleeping. When I entered the apartment—the “place”—the cyclamen was already dead, though it took a few more days before all the leaves and flowers had drooped over the edges of the flower pot.



Then the snow began to fall. It fell all night and all the next day and again all that night, and in the morning when I got up it was showing no likelihood of stopping. I opened the window and the large flakes began to float into the room. One fell on the wilted cyclamen, I felt another on my face, three nestled into the yellowed carpeting.

I sat on the chair, crossed my legs, hugged my arms, closed my eyes. Under my closed eyelids I saw myself striding over whiteness: I was walking away leaving no trail behind. I put out my hand, without opening my eyes, and tried to find the edge of the chair across from me. I couldn’t find it. I stretched out the other hand, again without success, and I sat there, like a blind man, while the voice from the whiteness shouted out words in various languages, none of which was mine.

David Albahari, the author of six collections of short stories and seven novels in Serbian, came to Canada in 1994. His novel Mamac (The Bait) won the NIN Award for the best novel in Yugoslavia in 1996. His books have been translated into ten languages. Two works available in English are Words are Something Else (Northwestern University Press) and Tsing (Bayeux Arts).