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Damar on Fridays

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Damar on Fridays

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B.A. English, Biology, Saint Louis University, 2011

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Missouri—Saint Louis
to Satisfy Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts: Creative Writing, Poetry

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Abstract

These poems are about the first hand witnessing of the Balkan war and its visceral repercussions, ripping of families across generations and continents due to religious intolerance, and an identity crisis within the diaspora of the former Yugoslav people. They interact with appeals of loss, in terms of bodies, memory, and material, despair within the identity of the self in and outside of religion, and the perception of love and belonging, but not necessarily in that order. They are largely inspired by victim story-telling, translations of conversations with natives of the former Yugoslavia and their children, and ramifications of searching for the self and a place to call home.

*To the people of Keraterm, Omaraska, Manjača, Trnopolje, Tomašica, Sarajevo, Srebrenica,
and Saint Louis*

Dr. Georgia K. Johnston, Ph.D. 1958-2017

Nafija Sadiković née Okić, 1941-2016

Ajša Sadiković née Hoždić, 1970-

Part I: First Step Into a Permanent Disaster

On Names

After my birth on
May fifth
my parents took a week to finalize my name.
And when they came
down the dirt road
carrying me in white lace, they needn't announce
what I'm to be called
since the whole
neighborhood was already in pandemonium.

*They named her what?
But that's a Croats name.*

*(They even had a tree for the holidays—my,
they're turning into
Christians.)*

My majka overheard while sitting on the stoop of her door, crying over my gender.

When Departing

*The drivers were calling for us to load the busses.
We entered and my little daughter walked down the aisle
finding a seat on the right side, somewhere in the middle
so she could wave goodbye to grandma and grandpa out of the window.
She sat down and immediately leaned on to the window of the bus.
The bus loaded a little while and then finally the doors closed shut.
We were leaving.
We were leaving and going into places unknown.
I'm watching through the window with her and watching my city get left behind,
watching my mother-in-law stay in tact but out.
She just stood there as if buried in the concrete in the sidewalk, hands crossed across her chest,
watching her granddaughter, with the hottest tears streaming down.
Her little blond granddaughter was leaving her, and my father-in-law shaking his head in
disbelief—*

Maja—turn to grandma and grandpa and blow them a big kiss.

She did and then turned to me saying how grandma was crying. The child knows. The child feels.

No honey, grandma just got sun in her eyes. It's just bothering her.

*My chest felt the weight of an airless space, pressing my breasts back, wrapping my ribs in a
hundred barbed wires, its own electric cage.*

Sevdah for a Serb

Way up west in Prijedor,
(bracing myself for their return)
they raped young mothers
against fences lined with ferns.

Way up west in Prijedor,
(clenching railings under a moon),
I asked non-gendered Allah
what was the point of Dua.

Way up west in Prijedor,
(bruising myself for what may come)
War crooned to me
while Satan made me unfurl.

All My Sons

Today, I went to get my son
tell him to come inside; ma was making corn bread.
It would have been a good night.

But out in the distance, amber colors setting,
I smelled a funny thing; something was burning.

It was the damn neighbors again.
They were roasting lamb for fun.
But really though, it didn't smell like them.

And then I saw my son
revolving on the spit bar
and my neighbors rejoicing.

And I thought to myself,

the war is coming.

Wedding

It was the day of my wedding
she pinned the last of the baby's
breath into my hair

My father, two sisters
and cousins walked me out of
the house like was always
done

my heart was full.

and then they shot
my mother in the chest
the sniper shot my mother in the chest
and she collapsed right in front of me

I stepped forward. I stepped
forward again and the shots
again and I stepped back
tears pushed

and my heart was full.

Bosnians,

fleeing up the hill
like targets, the United
Nations only watched

Desolate

I long for that rope swing.
I was three when they took it off.
Majka put it in the attic so the Serbs wouldn't find it.

Now all that remains are the screw
hooks, corroded and feeble.

My childhood died in that swing,
retained in the folds and clefts of the wood.

They roped men with jute like that,
corralled them like cattle, hung them like meats.
It was quite a sight, majka told me.

I long for that rope swing.
My childhood died in that
swing.

You don't know a war

is going on when a war
is going on
you can't get ready for a war.

They were cleaning; they were having a cleaning fest
they killed my uncle
but saved my dad
my dad watched my uncle die and since he watched, they beat
him for that.
They were cleansing, cleansing us all.

First we went to Osnovna Škola Bradstvo in Trnopolje—that's an elementary school turned
concentration camp. It was mid

July and they put us into trains like sardines
we smelled like sardines

We stood asleep in the trucks. There was a sick
lady with us; shot in the leg, bleeding
out. When we were let out

*just go straight don't look back, don't look
back don't step to the side. mines. the tunnels. Go
through the tunnels. kil-
ometers. kilometers.*

We ended up in a theater
floor, the nicest
thing I've felt in days.

Then a hodza's house for a month
then a new school for a month or so thereafter
the food cans were rotten and we slept
on school tables and chairs no blankets or pillows or

and all this by foot.
and all this as I'm crossing the border
from Croatia to Slovenia illegally I see
the corn and I finally knew what season it was.

Some people still need to experience a war because they still haven't learned what it means to be
a human.

They still need a chance to learn, to see the discrepancy.
My neighbor with money drinking his coffee watching us watch him drink. The bus

demanding money to transport us fresh after the camp but won't move
or will leave empty without payment, and he, just watching, eating, drinking.
At Omarska (iron ore mine) they made us take shoes off dead
people and wear them, take their jackets off of them and wear them
because they took ours for fun.

It was almost impossible to escape Omarska they even killed
women there
whomever survived, went on to Manjača
they chopped off our genitals and let us bleed to death

Tomašica was an iron ore mine turned camp
Keraterm was a ceramics company turned camp

They were killing in the name of god
and we were dying in the name of god

Bosnia went months and months without a single
drop of rain but on the days we decided to bury
the shahids, it poured, like it was a sign from god

Intrusions

When you told me how he held the rifle so near to us,
you thought your blood would drain. Watching you retell
the story today, does the same thing it did then.
You said the blond curls bounced on my ivory face
and that I snapped my head

and turned to him.

My child self spoke to the soldier curious about his
weapon. I killed us in that moment—killed you—in a million ways.

But you never ceased to be my mother, not even
when I could have made us disappear.

Part II: The Middle—Self-Theft, Confusion

Tracing

Tracing up lines from Florida to Maine
I remember in the third grade, drawing a map of the United States.

Over and over again, teachers made us draw the U. S. of A.
and *make sure to memorize each state*

bird.

I asked about Canada once and the teacher said not to worry,
stay focused on America.

When Nature Lapses

It was over these mountains that they slaughtered each one and spread the body parts across the landscape covered with foliage of leaves. Lavendered fields, fragrant, grew and outgrew the marching of feet that once trampled the path to a gravesite.

It was down these rivers where they threw bones, where frogs brood on lily pads, where the blood pooled with water, ambled, and then glided down the brook. The blend, now dark, disappeared into depths as if they belonged in deep.

Egrets took bits of skin into their bills and waterfalls eroded everything that was and is: Balkans try to move on from a memory of what was but can't because there's this foaming at the bottom, all this filth.

And then there were the wild horses. Cutting, each muscle outlined when hoofs hit earth running from them, from something bigger. Running from the spirits that remained.

But the waters still run here; they will run still.

Object Permanence

white people told me that I'm not white enough
that my parents' thick accents made just strange enough
that the šamija my granny wore was just foreign enough
to not make me a real American
and then
some black people once told me
that I wasn't like the others and that my understanding
of oppression made me like one of them
but what I think they really meant is that I wasn't
that kind of a white, but rather a different white that was actually once, too,
a slave to a white, that too had to bow down to the orthodox sword
and before that the ottoman

what they really meant is that my white was the kind of white
that were slaves as much as they were slaves as much as my family plowed and sowed the fields
of other landowners who have stepped foot on foreign ground
who have demanded plots of land owned by pagans before Christian blood wanted spilling
and then the Turks and their housing of children and teaching them *the right way*
that in my ancestry, too, plants were picked to make spools of fabric strung together on cold
nights in a little shed with five young girls, dressed in rags, pushing the loom into the proper
position under some little candle light, just so they could make a little bit of money and do it all
over again, just to give the lump sum to their owners

and people might say oh that was *so long ago, centuries really* but I just want to laugh and say
oh god no
it's my dead grandmother who was the one that had to make due
it was my grandfather then who was the one hunted like a fool, it was the white and not-so-white
skinned men in my family that carry scars on their bodies
while women were simply raped and displaced

Part III: A Transient Dénouement

What Sarajevo Really Became

We walked and we gazed at the antique, ottoman buildings
and we watched the residents there and the art that didn't hang
but rather was worn on their T-shirts.

And the architecture, hanging on to some lost time, *that* time.

Remaining are these cinder blocks of consequence.

But every step or so, we tiptoe around a lodged bullet and a splatter of blood.
Where the once mines were,
etched into the cement with splatters of permanent paint, you know

in memoriam shit. Right next to it some old bubble gum stretched apart.

Just here in 2013, walking, then watching 1992.

Witness: Shahid

I drove my shovel into the cold earth, flinging debris left and right,
how they commanded I dig deeper
and faster—deeper—to be mute, to close my eyes but watch what I'm doing.

I tossed them, dozen after dozen,
limb on top of warm limb, heads collapsing onto each other,
hair tangling in heaps. There was forest dust everywhere.

When I was finished and he told me to kneel;
He clipped off
joints. One by one, he moved into my body, first
my fingers, then my wrists, until

he shot me right in the center of my atlas, where my neck starts
and my spine collapsed in on itself.

I laid there for 22 years and they found me finally, unmoved—History's new addition.

When Blood Isn't Something We Share

I was walking over a bridge on Muse
Ćazima Ćatića Street when my head
jerked to the side. I heard a man
say *jebem im Muslimansku krv*
they're just a bunch of Turks—Muslim blood.

Again I thought.

My cheek twitched
a little, my face
made something
foul. That's when my hands contoured
involuntary fists and I felt Lucifer
breathe down my neck and
Then I remembered: the war still is.

Again I thought

about who raped
whom, thought who was in what camp
wounded by the *mêlée* through Germany.
And lastly, after everything, I remembered
us. The lunatics in America, the lucky ones that made it out.

Then, I just kept walking.

When Blood Isn't Something We Share [2]

Ivana Horvat called my idea that we come from different bloodlines primitive. But I guess she never would understand what that really means, because you see, I couldn't tell her the story of when I was walking over a bridge on Muse Ćazima Ćatića Street in Bosnia and that asshole said *jebem im muslimansku krv*—literally translating to fuck their Muslim blood.

I didn't know what to do, not then when she humiliated me in front of people, not then when I was on the bridge. I wanted to go over and ask the man why he said it just as much as I wanted to shake Ivana and tell her we really are so separated and the bloodlines do matter

because to this damn day the Jews have something to say
about me and my family and anything
Muslim-esque all leading back to maternal blood.

She wasn't a Jew, no; she was a hybrid Christian-orthodox, Catholic, Muslim mutt
and I just think she was pissed because actually she didn't know where she belonged.

We Take Things, We Refugees

We get free money from the government
and we get really nice Beemers
we get houses handed to us
and we sit on welfare and the WIC program
because we don't work

Part IV: Damage—a Lifelong Harvesting

First Jump Into Sana

I remember my summer visits to Bosnia—each one was filled with hope that I'd get to swim in the Sana my mom and dad spent teen summers in, each year was filled with hope that I would get to have a memory of my own a memory I get to have that all the other real Bosnians have a memory of swimming in the cold, clear current, feeling the fresh water fauna graze my toes but my mother made sure that my disgust became as big as hers and that the only thing that could graze me were bones.

I never told her but I jumped
in once. I jumped off
a makeshift dock, creaky and
old, all at once
with friends together at their weekend home
and the jump felt redeeming

but the moment I started swimming my mind got a hold of my body.
The fishes moved away from me
and all I could do was contain my panic in
the tiniest form of a knot in my throat that just *maybe*
underneath me really were dead bodies, the ones dumped in
from the war. I heard the rumors about Bosnia's currents and how people just disappear.
I didn't want to risk appearing

a fool so, I lied and said I was chilly, because the water really was that freezing.
My whole outside me was shivering,
and the inside me, as well.

My heart's only ache is roped

to my throat.
Because of this,
it beats
differently. Because
of this, I can hear the rips
in the valve seams when I sleep at night.

Slowly, surely,

I long for things that were not my things that should have been my things.

I long for majka's azure, silk dress
and aunt Dina's wedding gown mama wore back in the 80's.

I want

those things.

The things and the loss of those things consume me and chew the nadir of my little heart—pop
the seams just like in the dresses.

The things and the loss of those things sew in threads of fine copper. Where there should be love
billowing in my heart, there is anger.

The Hows of This Kind of a Love

I loved you in ways I didn't know how.
I loved you when your palm met my face—the
grandest embrace I'd ever receive.

I loved you in ways I didn't know how.
I loved you when you pulled me through
the house by my silk soft hair.

I loved you in ways I didn't know how.
I loved you when you left me
alone and for days I didn't know if you went missing.

I loved you in ways I didn't know how.
I loved you when you threw the vase and pushed
me down, watching my limp body gather.

I loved you in ways I didn't know how.
I loved you when I was your daughter
who never had a child but always wanted a mother.

I loved you in ways I didn't know how;
I just
 —loved
 —you
in ways unknown.

On Depression

Tell me that feeling—numb. I don't understand,
he said as we laid down on that frozen night. Snow glittered over the parking lot.
My eyes glazed like freshly blown glass bulbs.

I tried to warn him before his heart embedded its strings into mine.
Ha! I can't form synapses—told him I lived in a place

where when I woke up, I wanted to believe my eyes weren't open in my own bedroom
that my mouth and nose were finally, permanently sealed.

I wanted to believe that my eyes shot open somewhere in some ebony someplace
where my screams made my throat

stop bleeding. From the razors. From my over cut fingernails.

I lived in a place where the alarm clock rang at six-o-five and my face met my hands under my
down cover scraping at my cheeks because for one more day I was there and breathing.

And at six-o-seven I would make a fist, just like this, and start hitting my own chest, start beating
myself to death because all I felt was

nothing.

When I Was in a Garden in Prijedor

I was hanging up some pillow cases in a garden
on a clothes line to dry in the sun's heat,
and then I saw some blood spots
on the corner of
one and
remembered that those were just a memory

of a time when blood
washed
down the city.

Part V: Last Step Into a Manifesto

When Everything

Here I go to the sound of Ludovico. It's called "Run" standing at 5:32. He had it right. He knew what he was doing. Because this will all be nonsense. Remember that. All of this is nonsense. Make sure its

in one
ear
and out the
other.

I'm not sure where to begin. Is this a confessional. I want to be a rider said Kaspar Hauser. I'm not sure where to begin because at this point it's just rant—ing again and again and again and again. My obsession with Hauser goes up every year.

Man. Can I write some random shit. My dad said the line between insanity and genius is fine. I remembered that. It's the smartest thing he ever said.

Fuck poetry. None of us are any good at this. And we all blow smoke up our own asses, thinking we have something worthy and lively to say—some confessional that hasn't been made yet. Intelligent use of words and line

dropping.

It's all the same.

We're a burlap bag of suffering, sealed by bitter rope, trying to exist happy and just *oh yes I'm fine thank you how are you.* stop.

I come from a town no one can pronounce. Prijedor. Cute.
I come from a place only now people hear of. And yet some how, the Serbs still think we owe them something, some piece of land or a land mark.

They'll never move on. They'll never admit they were wrong. The Turks were fucks yea, but I am not one of them. I don't like 'em either—they think Ataturk is god.

I didn't choose my "Muslim blood." I chose Islam after losing my mind in chapel on Thursdays with JoHannah and Sarah and Rachel and Rachael shoving Jesus down my god forsaken throat, fastening him to my heart. I cried not because my sins were washed away but because now I see what a mistake that was. But I was only in the sixth grade.
No one cared.

When I told my majka I believed in him she said oh honey that's fine, he's one of God's prophets, too, you just go on

believing.
—what—
is that.

Believing.

Like the time my mama said she wouldn't leave, I think I was six, when she crossed the street and I sat on the fourth floor bay window watching, screaming at her not to leave and my tears

greasing the thing, suctioning my cheek. I wanted to press my head through the glass and fall out so I could run after her.

But she just turned and waved at me.
She waved at me and I collapsed of a broken heart. I cry now remembering.

Kaspar spent his life in a dungeon while my heart was made of one. He was in Nuremberg and I in Berlin. None of this matters.

My mother was a gem.

but she really was though.

She was really the one who saved me when
all that shit finally came down in Prijedor. Thanks ma.

Thanks for noticing the tanks parking at our favorite ice cream shop
and soldiers
patrolling the streets with bullet necklaces
wrapped around their torsos.
They weren't all that fashionable I'd like
to point out.
She packed my stuff and told my granny we're
leaving and that they should come with us
that it *isn't safe here anymore*. They laughed
real good at that.
I felt sorry but I knew what she was doing.

And so we did. We left.
Believe that. We

left.

The convoys took us to the Serbian border and told us to get out. Some women rolled up money and forced it up their vaginas so that they could try to escape with a little-bit-a

something. My mom didn't do that. She put her bills flat against her opaque tights and had jeans on, on top. She put what jewelry she had in the feet of my onezies. Smart woman. She knew what she was doing.

They still felt her up, put their hand on her private parts and asked her what that was.

A pad. I'm on my period.

I turned my blond head. I didn't understand.

•

It's hard
sometimes

in prison
because

you miss those
little
things like really getting
laid.

I would know. I've been in one.

"It's cancer." doc said.
I don't have that. How long.

"We'll try to regulate it as much as we can"

I'm fucking diseased. I am a disease.

Sometimes I wish I could write a serenade for my cancer.

How hard is it to find a place to get sick?
How hard is it to stay ill in one spot?

If you ask me where I've been, I'll answer with my eyes.
If you ask me what I'm doing, I'll show you with my mouth.

Why is there so much light when I shut my lids?
Why is there so much dust coming out of my chest?

If you ask me where I come from, I'll answer with my scars.
If you ask me where I'm going, I'll show you with my forty-five's.

I think I have finally mended.
Mended myself and the loss of myself through the man I once loved and hated all at once.
Mended from the cancers' waltz in and out of my life, through the ones I have loved most.
Love comes in strange ways but no loves come when wounds stay open.
I am living with the living and the nonliving and I have mended

and.

The time has come to write.
The time has come to express these repressed beads, glass
lodged in between my eyes, my nose
bleeds don't matter anymore.

The time has come to write.
The time has come to squeeze the bruises, the burns
change and turn different colors, these
days it doesn't matter anymore

because the time has come to write, to speak in verse, Kaspar.

Please just speak and write.

•

Honestly, I'm too sad to write about all this shit.

God, daj daj daj daj daj. It means give.

Give give give give in my mother tongue. Sounds so much like fucking die die die die.

What are the odds—but once,

•

I drove a long, long way into an area called gray.
And these people in shades of fury had the nerve to tell me
that gray was not a color.

Gray matter in my brain tumor is. That's pretty damn real.

“What is that you see then.”

I asked these mad men.

“Well,

well,

well.

One or another. This

or that.” said they.

And I said believe your eyes,
believe what you touch.

So I drove into the gray, into the nothing and the everything. I drove into the tumors and the red parts and the blue parts and the dead parts of her brain. The pancreatic sections cut into pieces of yellow and really every color is ugly yet I still love grey because on an MRI grey means life.

•

Those last few nights
before September

starts, my thighs sticking together sitting on
the concrete slab, gluing lighting bugs to my forehead
with spit,

I’ve etched a memory of your scrawny self sitting
across from me fully clothed hiding all your cancer shit.

I’ll never forget when I put an X on my throat and you said don’t do that.
I’ll never forget telling on the nurse at school that the ones
around my hips were deeper than usual.

I’ll never forget how badly I wanted to murder him. Talk about sociopath.

But mainly I have Ludovico to thank. And Kaspar. and the Serbs. and my mom. and
every time cancer threatened to take all the most important things out of my life.

A big middle finger to you, my friend. A silent gesture from me to you.

Part VI: Exeunt on my Dead Pulse

A Country, Disappearing

What a self-proclaimed nationality has done is take
the notion of a town that should be my home
away from me. They took my family's last
five generations and shredded them
like legal *papir*. When my granny showed
up with the legal side of things to the courts
twenty some odd years time deep, my uncle had to slide
a 100
in a manila folder over to the judge.
This solidified my non-existence. This
created ex nihilo. I don't have a hometown
because where I was born no longer exists. It never did
it never was. I was created
out of a nothing. Because
you know—*what's a Bosnia?*
I swung in a nothing swing. I milked from a nothing cow. I picked from a nothing tree.

My child
hood
never
existed.

Places touched by me were washed away by orthodox blood.

When Caught Thinking mid Conversation

what people don't know
is that I didn't have it all
when I was two
or three
or whatever that blank time was
in my life
when I lived in a tent
when we stayed with dirty musicians
in cots
when my daddy made enough to get a hotel
and finally moved to Kladow with the other refugees
in Berlin
what people don't know is the lice I got and the scabs on my shoulders
from playing outside in the sun with steel scraps in the camp's yard

what people don't see is that I'm never Muslim enough
I'm never dark enough my hair isn't course enough
my accent isn't thick enough to be a foreigner
I am not fat enough to be anything but a god damn Nazi according to the Turks
I speak German too well and English too well and did
everything so well that I was never one of them but always
one of US yet never part of the U. S. because blood runs deep into the ottoman regime
its part of the reason half of us are here. You see,

what good is my body and limbs if my mind is not there
if melancholy grips my hand and commands me in and out of sleep
what good is my moving self and active mouth
if I keep beating my head and my ears
are bleeding out of the ear drum is so fragile
how do you tell someone you live in vertigo
allegedly poeticizing and line dropping
but I'm just clipping my hips and snapping my wrists
people try to feel what I feel while I try to write about what I feel
but what I feel is what the shrapnel in my uncles back did to me
what the rapist did to me
what me being born did to me
what Seroquel did to me and my dreams now fears so I stop
writing
and start thinking and start sleeping through meals
and start remembering
my burnt steel-shard licey Nazi Muslim white American Bosnian self existing

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