POWER SUIT AND STILETTOS: HOMEcomings

By November 1991, Vukovar was destroyed, atrocities committed, non-Serbian population for the most part kicked out and unwelcome, and the city became some weird neither-peace-nor-war zone. On November 12, 1995, the Erdut Accord was signed by a representative of Vukovar Serbs, a representative of the Republic of Croatia, the US Ambassador to Croatia, and a UN peacemaker, all in the interest of human rights. After the fall and before Erdut, Vukovar existed as a soulless little puppet city-state economically dependant on embargoed Milošević’s Serbia. Since Erdut, it’s been functioning as a soulless little city neglected by debt-ridden Croatia, but it’s peacetime again, and not only Serbs, but also Croats populate the city again. It’s a multiethnic little city again, but something is broken. My hometown has become an urban zombie. Are there any movies in which a zombie becomes a living being after some miracle? We need that miracle.

Now in its second decade of post-Erdut existence, the entire Vukovar area, including my neighborhood of Borovo Naselje, is a place where children have the right to attend ethnically segregated schools, from kindergarten through high school. Young people have the right to leave the city for an uncertain alternative anywhere in the wide world. Aging Vukovar natives, born in the decades between 1920 and 1980, have the right to daydream about the pre-war past that becomes increasingly idealistic as time wears on. And the more utopian the past looks, the more
unbearable the present is, which of course becomes a vicious circle. I left the city in 1991, and I’ve been back many times since; each time I check the pulse of the city and each time I’m happy to leave.

I passed my Belgrade University entrance exam in June of 1992 and soon thereafter went back home for the first time after the street fighting ceased, and Vukovar was under the auspices of the United Nations. I took a bus from Belgrade to the border, where dad picked me up. He had returned to the city a few months prior, ostensibly to help rebuild the infrastructure, but mainly because he was let go from his new job in Belgrade. As we drove to grandma’s apartment in Borovo Naselje, we couldn’t talk; the sun mercilessly exposed the post-war, post-air-raid wasteland of the city. It was a lot like the footage of the ruins I watched on TV every day, except it looked a lot worse in 3 D, but I didn’t want to start weeping in front of dad. Mainly in fear that he would then unravel as well, and then what?

As I write this, I’m close to my dad’s age that day in 1992 and very far from the eighteen-year old in the passenger seat. I don’t have kids of my own, but in a weird way, as I remember that scene now, I begin to see it more and more from my dad’s perspective. I drive, my daughter is in shock, so am I. I had nothing to do with the war, but there is also this vague, yet unshakable feeling that it’s my generation who fucked it up so badly, and that I let my children down. My generation: people with children around the same age as my daughter; people with aging parents, like my mother; some of them I knew and never suspected they could participate in a devastation like this. The world I inhabited for over forty years has been replaced with a nightmare. It’s a nightmare come true: about living in wartime, being followed by figures of evil both of the amorphous and very concrete varieties, not sure if this survival thing will succeed, and if it does, if it will suffice.

And here’s what happened to that eighteen-year-old me taking in the scenes of the devastated hometown: her brain began weaving an idealized, sentimental tapestry of Vukovar in the
summers of peace. It was an old city of bright yellow buildings; of tree-lined streets busy with cars, foot traffic, bicycles, skateboards, roller blades; a city of market places offering rows and rows of produce and folk arts and crafts; kiosks selling čevapi or ice cream late into the evening. It was a city of old men playing bocce or chess, of content people of all ages outdoors, talking, strolling up and down streets and across bridges over the Danube’s tributary Vuka, reading papers on park benches, fishing, and during festivals preparing fish paprikash right there on the street, in enamel pots hanging over small open fires. Vukovar people spent their summers lolling around on the Danube, in the city and outside it, and on the nearby island. Pre-war Vukovar, my patchwork of sensory memory and dreams.

In my dad’s car that June 1992, I was forced to learn to recognize the new face of my city. No more yellow, but blackened buildings in various stages of ruin. No more skateboards, but craters on the pavement, often with bomb fragments at the center. Many of the old trees gone, and those still standing offering no shade, nothing to veil the ugliness. The streets had already been cleared, and there were the UN blue helmets in their white trailers, but hardly any car or foot traffic. The initial shock gave way to grief, gave way to the dull realization that my town had become what Beirut was in the evening news my entire childhood. I felt as defeated as the city, dull gray, unable to cry or get angry. I spent that day at grandma’s apartment where my dad also lived now. Her building, while damaged, was at least livable once the windows had been repaired. There was nothing to do, no one to see outside the confines of grandma’s apartment. I’d go to the living room connected with the kitchen to eat or watch TV, then go back to the single bedroom to read or listen to music. Frequent detonations outside, sometimes close, sometimes far away, meant that experts were clearing the numerous minefields one by one, or so I liked to believe. I’d hear stories about kids playing in the rubble and about mines exploding.

I’d look at the ruins and fantasize: this is the result of a recent devastating earthquake, nothing else. The news about the earthquake has spread around the globe, and peoples of the world are united in their solidarity. The whole world is sending construction materials, equipment, and money. We’ll rebuild this, we’ll have our apartments back, and schools, factories, busines-
ses, and cultural institutions, we’ll be up and running again before you know it. You know things are bad when your fantasy involves not even an alternate history, but a natural catastrophe.

I certainly imagined alternate histories as well. I even wrote a sci-fi story in which, right before the war is about to begin in Yugoslavia, aliens with advanced science and technology show up due to a glitch in their spacecraft. They are so advanced, they can speak Serbo-Croatian to a bunch of teenagers in Borovo Naselje (the teenaged protagonist is based on the real-life me, of course). They tell the teenager that they have the power to go back in time and intervene in order to change the course of history, but that they never ever do that. The teenager is sad that they won’t use their power, but she’s glad that she at least got a chance to meet them. She parts ways with the aliens and goes home to sleep. When she wakes up, her brother is telling her to hurry up and get ready for school. As she’s walking to school, she realizes that everything is a little different. The street names don’t bear any names of fallen heroes from World War Two, and there’s no monument to the partisans on the main square. She spends the rest of the week brushing up on her modern history, and she basically has to relearn everything. She realizes that the aliens did in fact go back in time and they not only prevented this war, but even World War One and Two, and whichever domino it was that they intercepted, the result was global peace and economic welfare, a world in which teenagers were free to stay up late at night pursuing the arts. At the end of the week—the end of the story—she plays with her rock’n’roll band at the youth club by the Danube. When her set is done, she walks to the river bank, the same spot where she met her alien friends. She looks up at the Milky Way splitting the sky in half.

It took the bird populations years to return to the city: first the pigeons, nesting in shrapnel holes, and then finally schools of migratory birds put Borovo back on their map.

It took a few more visits from Belgrade to Borovo for me to be able to leisurely walk around my old hometown. Most of the lush city vegetation had survived and bloomed again. I would
walk to the Danube, the only thing that looked, felt, and smelled the same as before the war, deep, rolling on (to the Black Sea, hundreds of kilometers downstream), indifferent about our human stupidity and evil. The Danube, named by people, used by people, but coolly independent of them. Any time of the year I’d sit by the water just to inhale its smell deeply: animal and human life and death, everything that rains down into the river beginning with the melted snow in Germany, and all the way through Central Europe. Vague saltiness would tickle my nostrils as if to remind me that before the river, its valley, and its people, there used to be a sea, and maybe one day there will be one again.

In Chicago, in the radius encompassing UIC, a cadence of urban toponyms sounds like a familiar refrain: Little Italy, Pilsen, Chinatown, Greektown, Maxwell Street, South Loop, West Loop, and so on. I stubbornly call Pilsen home, as if it’s not temporary, as if I’m not a semi-intruder into its working-class, yuppie, native-born, and immigrant mosaic. Here graffiti appears in the morning and disappears overnight, and I imagine a cartoon in which the besuited, pot-bellied alderman chases young taggers who shave their heads, except for a patch in the back. A boy’s cred grows (again, I imagine) inch by inch along with the lock of hair down his neck.

I still sometimes fantasize about how my life would have turned out had there been peace in 1991 and beyond. I know that people who were not displaced due to war, but simply move from one place to another, out of their own will even more than necessity, also fantasize about their personal alternate histories. Here’s mine.

Let me assume for a second that Yugoslavia never broke apart and there was never a war in 1990s. I won’t go as far as in that old short story of mine and envision aliens creating utopia by preventing the rise of Napoleon or something. Let me just assume that the 1990s wars were successfully prevented and Yugoslavia never broke apart.

All the factories in my little home city of Vukovar/Borovo
Naselje kept on operating. In the alternate history, it doesn’t matter whether the economy is a socialist or a capitalist one, or whether it’s a blend of the two, or maybe it’s a whole new ism; all that matters is that things work simply and accurately as in Mr. Rogers’ neighborhood or in Branko Kockica’s kindergarten. All of us keep our jobs and pension plans, and the economic crisis is a thing of the past. I attend college from ‘92 to ‘96 at one of several universities in the country, majoring in literature, minor- ing in women’s studies, meanwhile mastering English and a few other foreign languages. Upon graduation, I return to Borovo where I get a job as a translator in the import-export department of the Borovo factory, the same factory that gave employment to my grandparents and my parents. Or, more likely, I get a job as a teacher at one of the schools in the area; with the population on the rise, new schools are built to accommodate all the children, and therefore more and more teachers are needed. I make regular payments on my car and my apartment. I meet a nice man. We date for a while. We take trips to the national parks that preserve pristine swampy grounds or cascading waterfalls in the continental areas, or to the secluded beaches on the Adriatic. Sometimes we travel abroad and we always come back with photos, videos, souvenirs, and other miniature foreign symbols. Of course, I write in my free time a lot, and publish when and where I can, and take an active role in organizing local cultural life and entertainment in Borovo Naselje, Vukovar, and the surrounding area. I have a small group of friends with similar interests as I, and a large network of acquaintances, neighbors, and family members. At some point my partner and I slow down a bit and begin raising our own family. Grandparents are there to help. That’s where my fantasy ends. I don’t actually grow old and die in my fantasy, I mean, whose alternate life history unfolds that far into the future?

I had a slightly different fantasy when I was nine, in the fall of 1983, roughly around the time when Michael Jackson debuted his moon walk and Spielberg’s E.T. played at the local theater (American movies premiered in Borovo Naselje typically about a year after, say, L.A.). I remember daydreaming at the dining table one afternoon, trying hard to imagine what the year 2000 would look like, and what I would be like in that big watershed of a year. I might have been prompted by a chapter in my 4th-
grade social studies textbook, a chapter that outlined and illustrated what everyday life would be like in the twenty-first century. The one prediction that caught my attention, so much so that I still remember it, was about the futuristic way of shopping. The illustration showed a woman at a keyboard and a monitor. The chapter said that early 21st-century people would be able to purchase anything they wanted from their homes, using their own home computers to shop. I couldn’t wrap my head around that concept, but I hoped it would come true as early as possible: my top most hated chore was going to the bakery or the corner store to fetch a thing or two, like milk, bread, cigarettes, or anything else my parents would need on any given day. For some baffling reason, I felt embarrassed in front of the sales ladies (and most of them were ladies; there were very few sales gentlemen).

“But what if I make a mistake, everyone will mock me,” I’d argue and plead, to everyone’s bafflement.

So futuristic shopping that didn’t involve human contact appealed to me as a kid, and it seemed so sci-fi that I had to wonder what else, more realistic, could be going on in the year 2000, the year I’m a fully grown woman, already in my twenty-sixth-year. It’s a bright spring day. I’m in the street with my two small children, one on my left, one on my right. I’m holding their little hands. We are in Borovo Naselje, but the neighborhood is now larger, with busy, broad streets with overpasses, underpasses, bridges, and tunnels. I’m a professional of some sort, dressed in a power suit and stilettos. I’m either an undercover detective à la Cagney or Lacy or a reporter à la Lois Lane; in my 9-year-old mind, there is no difference between the feminist detective duo and Superman’s sidekick. My kids (I didn’t see them clearly in my fantasy, I don’t even know what they are wearing or what their genders are) and I look up at the sky. We can see a spaceship being released from a local launching station. It’s the year 2000 after all, and Vukovar doesn’t just have freight ships and tourist boats in the harbor, it also has spaceships in the launching station.

Now back to reality.

In the year 2000, I was neither a mother of two nor a professional of any sort. Vukovar was not a healthy city, its buildings were not whole, my parents were not employed, Yugoslavia wasn’t existing, and space ships were not being launched much
anywhere. Yet I found myself, in a strange version of future-as-imagined, in Hannover, the host city of Expo 2000, the first World Fair of the new millennium. The theme was “Man, Nature, Technology.” Kraftwerk were commissioned to write and compose the song for the fair. And they did, titling it “Expo 2000,” which would have been a perfect title for one of their albums in the 1970s, and the song was great, but stuck in the past. “Man, Nature, Technology,” the vocoder voice chants, and “Mensch, Nature, Technik,” as the synthesizers spin their cold, digital web. Images of Western Europe at the turn of the millennium overlap with my memories of winter holidays spent watching science documentaries in the early 80s, which always seemed to have the Kraftwerk soundtrack.

The graduate program I attended in Hannover was conceived as a female-only scholarly counterpart to the World Fair. There were about 900 of us, mostly in Hannover, but also in Bremen and Hamburg. The program was titled “Technology and Culture” (sadly, not accompanied by a Kraftwerk tune), and I was a part of the 300-women-strong Project Area Body, and within it the 10-member art subgroup. My group had women from Germany, Bangladesh, Turkey, Papua New Guinea, Australia, Greece, Croatia, and South Africa, and all the other groups were thus constituted: a few Germans and a cross section of the First, Second, and Third World. This will never happen again in our lifetimes, and we kind of knew it even back then.

Within our group of ten artists, we formed even smaller groups in order to collaborate on specific projects, and mine was called Moist Verbs. A dancer from Australia, a singer/songwriter from Germany, and me, a poet from ex-Yugoslavia. We put on three shows in three months. In the first one, the dancer danced, the singer sang, and I did a comedy sketch, a parody of a feminist theory talk peppered with references to Derrida, Foucault, and Žižek, with a few charts and illustrations projected overhead. In the second Moist Verbs show, the dancer tapped, all three of us sang, and the singer and I played guitar. For the third and final performance, all bets were off. All three of us danced, nobody sang, and we each acted out scenes, pieces of monologues, and verse.

Every day we walked the streets of Hannover, and blew our stipends on food and wine. Hannover was a multiethnic town,
with Eastern Europeans, Turks, Middle-Easterners, Africans, and Asians making their home among the Germans. It was okay, but the police were known to harass those who couldn’t pass as white Germans upon cursory racial profiling. The city worked, but you could sense tensions. In my everyday interactions with Hannoverians, I often talked to the Turks who owned small businesses that I frequented, who either thought I was also Turkish, or definitely knew I wasn’t German. We talked in some kind of pidgin German that I can’t reproduce anymore if I tried, all of it is gone. Activists in Hannover organized an anti-racism march, which many of us students in the “Technology and Culture” program joined.

At some point, I decided to accept the invitation of some Danish friends and go and visit them in Denmark. I needed a visa in order to travel, but a Danish consulate was within walking distance from where I lived in Hannover, so I thought I’d give it a shot.

Hannover was one of the most bombed-out German cities in World War Two. There was a very small, painstakingly restored old heart of the city, and everything else was newly built after the war. They had revamped their public transportation for the Expo, so it was now based on the fast, comfortable, and efficient light rail system, and they built a brand new main railroad station. Some of the city parks were huge and close to the center, and I couldn’t help but think that those were once city blocks populated by people who ended up dying in some of the gruesome ways devised and executed during World War Two. But it had been five and a half decades since, and I’d lie if I said I actually felt a ghost-like presence. The time kept going forward.

The Danish consulate was in one of the centrally located office buildings. I followed the directions I had found online and walked over there and up the stairs to a glass door I needed. I peeked inside and saw a petite, official-looking, middle-aged lady sitting behind a desk, talking to a family of three: a wife, a husband, and a teenage daughter. I could hear the lady behind the desk telling the family:

“Sorry, we don’t issue visas in this consulate. You need to go to the one in Hamburg.”

Soon the family got out, looking exacerbated but also somehow resigned. I went inside and asked the official:
“Do you issue Danish visas here?”

The lady said yes.

Perhaps I misheard what she told the family, I thought to myself, and so I proceeded with the proceedings. I busied myself filling out the form, every once in a while asking for clarifications, and the lady readily provided them. She was very friendly, chatting with me while she was copying pages of my passport and my form. She told me to check back in two weeks, and I got a really good feeling about my future trip to Denmark.

I decided to buy some groceries on my way home. I was walking fast toward the supermarket when I realized I was unintentionally catching up with the family that was at the consulate right before me. I was still curious as to what had happened. Did I really hear correctly what the lady told them?

“Excuse me,” I said as I walked within their earshot, and they turned around and stopped. It was obvious they recognized me, so I let my nosey nature come out.

“Did you just try to apply for the Danish visa at the consulate?” I asked.

They confirmed that they did, but that the official told them they had to go to Hamburg for those. The husband said:

“But we just came back from Hamburg, and they told us that we had to go to Hannover instead.”

The father, who was white, explained that he was Swiss, so he didn’t need the Danish visa, but that his wife and daughter weren’t EU citizens, so they needed it. The wife and daughter didn’t specify where they were from, as if their East Asian looks explained everything.

“I overheard what the woman told you. But they do take visa applications there, I just turned mine in.”

Now I wasn’t just nosey, but convinced that the consulate woman turned them down because they were Asian. They explained that the girl was off to college in Sweden, and she and her mom had already obtained Swedish visas. They just needed the transit visas for Denmark, as the three of them were driving to Sweden with the girl’s stuff. We discussed the possibility that the bureaucracy was set up in a way that the consulate in Hamburg was issuing only transit visas, and its Hannover twin only tourist visas. But that didn’t make sense.
“Maybe you can complain to someone higher up, she probably did lie to you,” I said, and my paranoia found a welcome audience with this family. Soon they thanked me, and they went their way, and I went mine.

Two weeks later, I got the word. My visa application was denied. My Danish friends did attempt to reach higher ups to try to get the decision reversed. They made phone calls and complained, and demanded an explanation. One thing occurred to me: this was maybe the first time they didn’t get what they wanted from the state. Some officials higher up pulled some strings to get the bureaucracy to flip once more through the photocopied pages of my passport and the autobiographical form I filled, and the final decision was reached—definite denial. The explanation my Danish friends got was: “She moves around too much.”

If I moved around so much, what was the danger for Denmark, why was I so undesirable, a drifter who was going to move somewhere else after Denmark? Maybe it was the direction of my “moving around” that bothered them, as recorded in my passport: from Belgrade a bit north to Budapest, then a bit northwest to Prague, then quite a bit more northwest to Hannover. Maybe I was slowly and insidiously making my way to the Promised Land of Denmark all along.

From where I stood, it seemed that, as far as the Danish bureaucracy was concerned, there were several kinds of foreigners encroaching their borders. Asians? Just ping-pong them back and forth between Hamburg and Hannover until they give up. An Eastern European girl in cheap jeans and an ill-fitting sweater? Let her apply, take her fee, but ultimately reject her. Maybe it would have been different if I had come to the office wearing a power suit and stilettos, made up like a TV detective or Superman’s sidekick.

A foot of snow had accumulated in Borovo Naselje during Christmas Eve and Christmas Day of 2007, while I was visiting my hometown for the first time since my move to Chicago. In the deep quiet of the half-populated-half-ghost-town, the tract-
ion of my rubber soles against the squeaky snow was the loudest sound for blocks and blocks. After a clear day, the fog was settling, and the river and the air above it were metallic-purple in the dusk. I stepped on the embankment and stood perfectly still. I scanned the familiar panorama spread open before me. There are several different ways to get from and to the Danube, to and from any given point in Borovo Naselje. Certainly there are detours, but somehow it never takes more than a half an hour to get from any point A to any point B in the town. Standing on the embankment remembering what winters were like twenty and more years ago (ice-skating on frozen, but well-lit streets; sledging down a manmade hill; the smell of gloves drying on the radiator), all I could hear was the silence for a stretch of minutes, until it was interrupted by the faint voicing of the ducks in the marshes beyond the other bank. Up the river was Borovo Selo—the old village that had been standing since long before the shoe factory and the workers’ town appeared in 1930s and borrowed its name. Down the river, a little beyond the factory, I saw the familiar skyline of Vukovar: the harbor, the riverfront high-rises, the St. Phillip and Jacob parish church on one of the hills, the funnel-shaped Water Tower. Beyond the Water Tower were the vineyards and the Vučedol park nestled among them by the river, harboring its Neolithic archeology. The ancient city is where I was born, it’s where my high school was, as well as the theater where I even performed in drag (during my most boyish phase), more than once. So I claim Vukovar, almost equally as Borovo Naselje, to be my home, with its layers of prehistory, antiquity, middle ages, early modern, late modern, and postmodern times, apocalypse and post-apocalypse. But Borovo Naselje is special: it’s an experiment in modernity. Or it was. Now it’s a ticking, panting-breathing, forever “under-reconstruction” museum of modernity. They are rebuilding the residential areas, but the factory, the once-beating heart of the neighborhood, the city and the region, is barely operating, gaping empty, unusable in the murky waters of “transition,” the sketchy Eastern European sibling of the already shady neoliberalism ruling the globe.

And I am now a museum exhibit isolated from its context and therefore completely unrecognizable as such, but still I’m touring the world. Currently I’m on loan to the city of Chicago. I have lived in three East European metropolises, and visited doz-
ens of smaller or larger cities in the so-called old and new worlds. I don’t have a car and I never learned how to drive, so I still only experience urban landscapes via public transportation, or from the passenger seat or the back seat of other people’s cars, or on two wheels, or by foot. And everywhere, from Vancouver’s Granville Bridge to Utrecht’s canals, from St. Mark’s Place in New York, to Prague’s Staré Město, there are moments when my mind projects stills of pre-war Borovo onto the panorama surrounding me. It’s especially easy to do here in Chicago’s Pilsen, as I recognize the working-class people in this neighborhood—a lot of them foreigners like me—who go strolling outside with the first warm days and throw block parties until the cold snaps grow frequent and brutal. I see abuelitas monitoring the children who turn the streets into their playground, and all the generations inbetween are around as well. I see men drinking in the streets, wasted, but harmless, like the drunks across the street from our last pre-war apartment. I feel comfortable as I observe the old factories and warehouses from my seat on the bus. I detect layers of history on the buildings with older Czech inscriptions and newer Mexican murals I pass by on my bike. In some Spanish accents I hear the syncopation of the old Borovo Naselje inflection. I admit: I etch pieces of my town into my map of Chicago as I traipse this American city up and down. That’s my best shot at going back home, and moving on, and coming to always some different home.