

# VOJISLAV PEJOVIĆ

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## MANNHEIM

The Rhine is the color of chestnuts, the color of November. Mornings have been foggy for a while. Anja's living room is aglow with red emanating from the TV screen. A female voice proclaims that plastination will change forever the way anatomy is taught; it will transform our perception of the human body. It was about time, says Adam and pours us each one more shot of some Swedish liqueur, which tastes like bubble gum and smells like dentist offices. Somewhere with those last words – *unsere Wahrnehmung des menschlichen Körpers* – profesor von Hagens cloaks himself in a white lab coat, in a move sweeping and theatrical, as if fully aware that the director will pick that exact moment for a slow motion finale, zooming in on the professor's irrepressible gaze. In spite of the liqueur, it's clear that we're watching something out of the ordinary. The bodies – human, animal – are not cut into pieces and forced into glass jars, nor do they exude the grayness of formaldehyde preparations. Even through the filter of a TV screen one can appreciate their splendor, foreign even to a surgical table: longitudinal section through a woman in her third trimester, longitudinal section through her fetus; a pirouetting ballerina, with her leg muscles – *soleus, gastrocnemius, quadriceps femoris* – spread apart as if on an inverted double umbrella; a man's limp hide hanging over his outstretched arm, his thighs pressed against a horse frozen in a giddy half-motion. The exhibits are in Mannheim till the end of the month; there is a several-hour-long wait for the tickets.

Anja admits that her plan is imperfect, yet simple. Adam, in his Rhineland village, will get up soon after midnight and drive down to Mainz, where he'll pick us up and we'll all go to Mannheim. And what about Andreas, I ask, my tongue faltering, as I point at her swollen breasts. We'll need to take him with us, she says. Markus won't be back before the third, and I simply have to see this.

Anja and I are neighbors, which facilitates the logistics. I knock on her door with caution, but she flings it open in full gear, with an engorged bag over her shoulder, a folded stroller in one hand, and a car seat with a baby in it in another. At four in the morning, Adam's car is already blinking under the greenish, streetlight-tinted Gutenberg statue. The air, chilly and damp, washes any remaining drowsiness off our faces. Luckily, Andreas seems not to mind the cold, or the heat inside the miniature Opel, or Adam's many attempts to wrestle the stroller into the trunk. Finally we leave, munching on sandwiches from Anja's super-bag. *Komisch*, says Adam with his mouth full, but corpses actually scare me witless. A good enough reason, I say to myself, to invest practically my last pfennig in the ticket.

Adam insists that we converse; he's afraid that he might fall asleep, that we'll end up in ZDF's morning program. *Here, look!*, a purple-faced, matronly housewife would exclaim, pointing at the wet ground, traces of tires, and the car, stuck in between shattered metal arches, as if in the fractured rib cage of some fossilized monster. *The noise was horrible! Un-bear-able! Neighbors on the other side of the road woke up!*, she'd add, while her portly, unshaven husband would join in, struggling for words: *New... Brand new... greenhouse. Today's youth is so... irresponsible.* Anja giggles through a half-

whisper, says, C'mon guys, talk about something else – I may have to fall asleep if you continue like that. Adam then informs us that he purchased yet another history book, asks that I tell once more of the war back home. I, however, do not take the bait, and invoke instead my sun-blasted Balkan homeland, invoke the brilliant Chicago October, and let it be known for the thousandth time that – thank God – I won't be staying long. Oh, calm down, protests Adam, pointing at the frigid darkness. Just look at all these vineyards! They wouldn't be there without sunlight, would they? For about ten minutes there's no retreat or surrender (South against North; *vranac* versus *Dornfelder*), until Anja, her words disfigured by a yawn, pronounces that Adam and I are like an old couple, who, strangely, just met. Then we talk just about anything, slurp from our juice boxes, and stare at the void outside. It seems as if Anja falls asleep, too. You simply have no idea of the South, I start again, *sotto voce*. You haven't even been to Majorca – what kind of a German are you? Who in their right mind would go to Lapland for camping? Who nowadays has a herbarium? And with the Baltic seaweed, no less! Adam shrugs, plays his strongest card: *Aber Miloš, das Leben in Deutschland ist gut. Jungs*, says Anja from the depths of the back seat, please be quiet. You'll wake up Andreas. It's not even five o'clock yet.

The plateau in front of the museum is almost packed with cars; the ticket line snakes three times around the building and once more around the parking lot. The plan – to take a spot in the queue and change shifts every twenty minutes – becomes a barely tolerable endeavor: my German is rudimentary, the people around me don't feel like talking anyway, and the moist pre-dawn chill finds its way under my collar with unnerving ease. After the third shift, the

starless night starts fading into a diffuse, slippery morning. Adam duly shows up for his turn, but the reserves of enthusiasm have depleted. We get back to the car, exhausted, wet with droplets that seem not to have fallen so much as have chased each other erratically through a fog that looks as if it's been rising from the ground. In the back seat, a ruby-red-cheeked child is suckling in his meal; sweetish odors of a full diaper start permeating the air. No plastination, right?, says Anja, still under the cloud of slumber, surrendered to our response. We decide to find some nice place for breakfast.

You've got to admit, says Adam, chewing diligently, that over there, wherever you're from, fast food just isn't this tasty. I have nothing to counter with, finishing my second smoked salmon sandwich, reaching for the *calamari fritti* with my free hand – all that plus Coke for only twelve German marks. It hurts that the North has won this battle, that a chance to get immersed into preserved tissues and organs is gone forever, that Anja is disappointed (in me too, I know it), but the crowd was forbidding, and the hunger was real. Besides, the breakfast won't render me entirely penniless, which lifts my spirits a little. As if guessing my mood, the clouds above a small circular junction across the street open up a bit, and if not for the soggy carpet of wine-yellow leaves, one would think for a moment that the spring has arrived. Andreas is drooling, chasing a large pendant across Anja's warm, freckled bosom, while Adam attempts to figure out, out loud, who the oxidized mustachioed Herr might be, propped up stiff at the center of the roundabout. The dead are *in* these days in Mannheim, says Anja, pointing at a woman with a face lost in wrinkles. The woman slogs through the heaps of leaves and halts beneath the bust, as if in front of a long-

lost acquaintance. A pair of desiccated hands emerge out of her coat pockets; bread crumb flakes start snowing down from her imperfect, arthritic fists. In an instant, a sea of pigeons washes against the pedestal. What she's been collecting for weeks, the pigeons will shit out all over the monument in about an hour, says Anja, bursting with laughter; I burst, too, expressing a few droplets of Coke through my nostrils.

Adam fights with the stroller once again, not quite understanding how he managed to fit it in the first time. It doesn't matter, says Anja. Just put it in the front. Miloš can sit back here, with the two of us. Andreas is deep in his seat, hypnotized by the boob. The clouds seem to have retreated completely: one can make out the blue of the sky through the fog that still pushes down on the hills along the Rhine.

Our road feels improbably tortuous; the fog has condensed into a grayish milky vapor; it's almost impossible to see where we're headed. I hope it doesn't rain again, I say to myself, because a cluster of thunder claps seems to be drawing nearer. The noise, however, does not come from above: right by the car, a scarlet-red horse emerges out of an impenetrable background, and then another. An inky breath is gushing out of their rhomboid nostrils; their eyes are yellow, manes shaven off, bodies relieved of their skin. Their mighty hearts – as if visible: through the muscles, ribs, connective tissue – keep pumping the hot, viscous liquid into their massive flexing quarters; pounding hoofs shoot up handfuls of black, heavy earth. The car gains speed, and so do the horses. The road keeps winding through the hills wrapped in fog; it's a miracle we haven't crashed already. The windshield then ignites with a diffuse

reddish sheen, which swiftly solidifies into a sight of a dozen or so human bodies, lined up across the asphalt. A death row passes through my mind; prisoners, abandoned by their firing squad. The men and women stand radiant, motionless: their eyes lidless, their muscles, blood vessels thoroughly exposed. Right before running them over, full speed, I feel professor von Hagen's scalpel piercing my left palm; my left jugular, unprompted, starts leaking its content. The bones begin to snap, crushed by hoofs, tires.

The tires are rolling on the gravel. I hear Adam (*Verdammt! Verflucht!*), the squealing of the brakes. Seatbelts lock up, cutting short our forward motion; stroller wheels smash against the windshield. Andreas wakes up screaming. Slightly panicked – *Was ist los? Was ist los?* – Anja resurfaces from her sleep. Pressure marks from her nails are fading from my palm; on my neck, I sense the evanescent warmth of her drool.

Stranded in front of some barn (one can hear muffled mooing and bleating), we manage to reenter the fog before anyone notices our intrusion. Adam speaks first, admits not to remembering the last couple kilometers. We take a short break. Andreas is cooing, the stroller once more fits into the trunk. In a manner befitting a seasoned Lapland camper, Adam produces a map and a compass. We figure out that the main road can't be far away. We make it to Mainz within an hour or so; I can't recall anymore what we were talking about.

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Shortly after our trip to Mannheim, I'll board a plane home. In the beginning, we'll exchange emails almost daily, and then, with memories becoming increasingly demanding,

just a greeting here and there. For months to come, the cold will keep peeling sleepiness off my face and paralyze my fingertips; only occasionally, to trick the winter, I'll try to imagine the warmth of Anja's saliva on my neck. Inevitably, with the first nice days, I'll let myself be lured back to life by the treacherous, intoxicating spring, then plunge into the glorious Chicago summer. One weekend, I'll visit New Orleans and weep in shame in the back seat of a cab, with a driver from Bosnia recounting, in his back-broken English, how he narrowly escaped the slaughter in Žepa. I'll send Anja and Adam a postcard each: the Mississippi, the carnival, a never-ending bridge. The very same fall, I'll start taking German lessons, endure them for a full year and a half. Adam and Markus will send cautiously optimistic news, about Anja feeling better, about an imminent double mastectomy. At her specific request, I'll send her a DVD featuring professor von Hagens's Chicago exhibits; one Saturday afternoon I'll give her a call, tell tales of how I'm doing. Soon afterward Adam will show up for a conference. As we're getting ready for a night out, a message from Markus will ring in: *Anja ist tot*. That night, Adam and I will get wasted like never before. In the morning we'll take turns vomiting, I'll take him to the airport. I'll return after that to my somber abode, steeped in aromas of bubble gum and nausea. *Anja*, I'll say softly, or just think it, who knows. I'll sink into a heavy, featureless sleep.