

### Sasha Skenderija



Photo courtesy of the author

Born in Bosnia on July 4, 1968, Sasha Skenderija began publishing poetry, prose, and criticism in Yugoslav literary journals in the late 1980s. After surviving six months of the siege of Sarajevo, he fled to Prague in 1992. In 1999, with the help of translator and Cornell linguistics professor Wayles Browne, Skenderija arrived in Ithaca, NY. His poetry has been included in several Bosnian and Croatian anthologies and translated into Czech, English, and Slovenian. English translations of his poems have been included in *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* (Bloodaxe Books, 1998), *Balkan Visions* and *Silver Visions II* (VISIONS International, 1995 and 2005 respectively). His latest collection of selected poetry, *Zasto je patuljak morao biti ustrijeljen* (*Why the Dwarf Had to Be Shot*) was recently published in Bosnia (CKO Tesan, 2005). Read more at [www.skenderija.com](http://www.skenderija.com).

## Weirdos

Those that I love are mostly weirdos.

Deep and unreachable in their darknesses,  
capriciously childish and tender  
when we write to each other,  
while we talk about one of us  
who is not around.

I grew up with some of them,  
others, who I met as grown-up people,  
I could unerringly pick out in their photo albums  
on group pictures of their school classes.  
They've always been like that.

They remember every detail I've ever told them about myself,  
and even some I left untold.  
There's always one of them around to remind me  
of important things about myself  
when I sink or soar too high  
in my petty existential delirium.

Some of them had nearly given up on themselves  
and on me: they fell in and grew together with their own lunacies  
pulling me and lifting me up  
as a magnet picks up iron filings,  
or a comb torn bits of paper.

People  
that I love,  
scattered along the meridians  
and along their abysses:  
among monsters of normalcy.

March, 2009

*(Translated from Bosnian by author & Wayles Browne)*

Sasha Skenderija (1968)

## **SPASIĆ (MORE THAN A GAME)**

*To Adin*

While the country I was born in was approaching  
its forced landing  
our life and football appetites were soaring high.  
Deaf and blind to the questions  
that'd started exploding  
right in our faces,  
we contemplated a starry future  
for ourselves,  
for posterity,  
for our national football team.

Asked why he kept a player  
in the center of the defense  
who didn't belong there at all  
(with so many better players available)  
the national team manager  
(a man quite charming and wise)  
once replied:  
*This way, the other players on the pitch always know  
where the danger's coming from and so  
I get the maximum out of them.*

The coach liked to be on top  
of the weak spots of the team  
and would rather create them himself  
than discover them on the pitch  
in the middle of a crucial match:  
*Every real championship team has to have its own Spasić.*

I'm not sure  
if he said it exactly like that,  
but it's how my friends and I recalled it  
or embellished it,  
anyway.

When the country  
I was born in  
was forcibly landing us and dislanding,  
we were cheering each other up  
by contemplating  
the championship strategy -  
creating and cherishing our own *Spasićes*  
with the belief that this was the best way  
to get the maximum out of ourselves  
for the World Cup  
which was just  
(out of earshot of the guns)  
going on –  
without us.

We completely lost sight  
of our opponents,  
we neglected our own strengths  
squandering them on tedious B-league  
games of survival,  
or taking them for granted  
until we eventually atrophied  
from the endless waiting to take our part  
in the World Cup Finals.

We're still around.

If you take a closer look, you might still spot us  
hunched down on the second-string benches  
of other countries with championship aspirations  
standing by  
with eyes and ears wide open  
for the slightest hint of forced landings  
in a coach's wise and seductive words.

(March 2009)

Translation by Wayles Browne and Sasha Skenderija  
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# Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal  
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

## Awakening

• *To Milorad Pejić*

I get out of bed -  
the first step into a new day  
and the body is flooded with sorrow  
the very moment it touches the ground,  
it shakes and whimpers like a plane  
touching down on a sunny winter afternoon,  
when kissed by its own shadow.

*Translated from the Bosnian by Wayles Browne*  
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*Cape of Good Hope* (Tešanj, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Grafik-komerc Tešanj 2011)

# Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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## Contemporary American Poetry

I've been wondering  
how woefully few junkies and alcoholics there are  
amidst NPR's contemporary American poets,  
even how few just plain smokers, and how  
woefully many non-smokers, vegetarians,  
globetrotters, and environmental activists.

How many poetry magazine editors  
and non-profit publishers there are  
among all those award-winning authors  
of suburban and collegetown opuses,  
multiply divorced and remarried ex-hippies  
with paid-off mortgages and lawns,  
how many professors  
of literature and creative writing  
who every now and then discover,  
screw, and marry future NPR poets  
and poetesses  
from the ranks of their own students.

I wonder  
how woefully few junkies and alcoholics there are  
among future NPR American poets,  
how few just plain smokers, even.

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*Cape of Good Hope* (Tešanj, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Grafik-komerc Tešanj 2011)



## SASHA SKENDERIJA

### ***Why The Dwarf Had To Be Shot***

On June twenty eight, Nineteen hundred and ninety two,  
in the basement of the Sarajevo City Hospital we sat  
with professor Dževad Karahasan and his wife, who were serving  
as hospital volunteers, since the city had been massacred day after day.  
They were devastated by their family tragedy, her mother murdered  
in her apartment by a grenade, and we came to console them  
with conversation, with desperate hope  
that military intervention was on its way. But instead,  
along with pomp and unprecedented measures of security,  
Mitterand came, to give us and our slayers a lecture  
in morals and mutual understanding. Horrified starving old women  
sobbed beyond consolation, while confused passersby and children  
hurried toward international television cameras, behaving  
like pandas born by Caesarian section in a zoo  
in Indianapolis. The whole world applauded with praise the French  
love of justice, the French *courage*,  
French altruism —while Mitterand senilely  
smiled at the decor of a destroyed building which had been,  
in his honor, renamed *L' hospital France*. Murderers did not  
bombard us for a few hours, taking their time  
to shake his hand, and all went smoothly,  
almost like an ecumenical colloquium somewhere in Paris.

A local TV crew came to the basement asking  
for an interview with Dž. K. What did he think about the surprise  
visit of Mitterand, they asked. He said, "Disgusting filth."  
They asked him what he thought, in his opinion, ought  
to be done. He said, "to shoot the dwarf dead." They asked  
if he would do it. He said, "If I had a weapon at hand, for sure."  
TV crew: "Would you do it, professor, to go down in history?"  
Dž. K.: "What history, friend? I would do it in order to reach sense."

No weapons were at hand, and the interview, unfortunately, has not  
until now been published.





SASHA SKENDERIJA

### ***Family, Summertime***

We are fighting to extinction,  
to the last glass of brandy,  
my father and I.  
A warm night, a family picnic  
in the backyard of our summer home.

The futile effort  
to convince,  
to subordinate the other  
as always.  
And mom's resigned sadness.

(Before going off to bed, she clears away  
our meat-bones,  
empty glasses,  
an overfilled ashtray and the tablecloth, soiled.)

We are fighting to extinction  
leaning back in the yard chairs,  
numbed, each staring into his own half  
of the starry sky.

My father and I.

*This is the sound of mother sleeping, I utter,  
of muskmelons ripening in the dark. So the last word  
is mine.*

(1991)

Translated by Aaron Tate, Wayles Browne and Sasha Skenderija



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*I had always wondered how it would feel* ■

**I had always wondered how it would feel**

to survive an airplane crash: chosen  
by the mercy of a statistical paradox, *deus*  
*ex machina*, one of the thousands who still  
remain . . . Always the cases fascinated me  
of deserters and women who committed suicide,  
that sentimental belief in human dignity, in fate.  
Always I was a dog: I was afraid.  
I was not able to endure any longer  
and for that reason I survived. For days  
I cried like a dog,  
I howled at myself alone.  
I had no choice but to remove myself from that,  
to undertake something, to change.  
And so on the 23rd of November,  
Nineteen hundred and ninety two,  
I came to Prague.

(1993)

Translated by Aaron Tate



SASHA SKENDERIJA

**Unconditional childlike trust in the world**

as the train speeds into the haunted house. Or when appear  
the majestic zodiac figures in the dome of the planetarium,  
or the devotion I give to finding an escape  
from the labyrinth of mirrors. Cotton candy, popcorn, circus  
pleasures—enchanted moments of joy, rare, at ease.  
Another day bound by its own limits, seams.  
Exhausting confabulations: the transvestite in the telephone  
booth, twisting the ends of his platinum-blond hair, how he turns  
his body, holding in his hands a military magazine with images  
of the tanks of the world's armies. Or, say, an American student  
of creative writing, with his video camera on the monstrous  
communist city square: trying to record something, to embrace it,  
soon he withdraws, leaves—it is too difficult for him.

(In recent times I dream only commonplaces: I dream  
of childhood, sailing, how I fly, how I make love  
with the heroines of Krzysztof Kieslowski's movies.)

(1993)

Translated by Aaron Tate



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*When you leave, I go to the movies.* ■

For Zekida

**When you leave, I go to the movies.**

I drink down the mental content of the main character  
just like a can of beer. So here we go: there is the gloomy house  
with the cannibal tenants and two boys on the roof;  
the butcher and his daughter are also there. Something  
should happen soon. For it is too void when you leave.  
The shop assistant at the hair dresser's,  
she sweeps cut hair into ugly small piles  
with absent-minded broom swings.  
Some opposites are attracting each other  
in the incomprehensible analogy  
between cinema and hair salon.  
Actually, it is all about inertia:  
the hair that continues to grow after you leave;  
the nails, beard and mustaches — nothing else  
but a mere transcendence all the way from  
point (0,X) to point (0,Y). That's the time  
assigned to the main character to undertake something,  
to kill the cannibal-butcher and marry his daughter.  
And then the movie stops.  
The film runs out. Nothing more to be told.  
The corpse is being washed, shaved, and  
taken away from the home.  
The End.  
When you leave, I kick empty beer cans  
down the street. And it is so void.

Translated by Sasha Skenderija & Wayles Browne

Saša Skenderija

**PICTURE POSTCARD**

A nighttime panorama of Sarajevo caught  
by the light of shellfire, gunpowder flashbulbs,  
by the dance of silhouettes in which only the persistence of vision  
can make out the former shapes (calling up flickering  
skyline lights, orange neon canyons,  
evening crescendos of headlights  
tracing their fluorescent snakes on a time exposure).

But only this possible postcard  
can literally catch the passing of time, so the city seems to float  
in an intermezzo of decay,  
in the irreversible approach of things  
to their dark antitheses,  
my building seems to float,  
the City seems to float,  
we all seem to float,  
I seem, too

Translated by Wayles Browne  
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Saša Skenderija

**ON THE ONE-WAY STREET, GIRL WITH A DOG**

Asja P, the girl with a dog: sometimes I meet her  
walking her beautifully trained Irish  
setter. Her father was a philosopher, a well-known university  
professor, so I suppose he named his only daughter  
after Asja Lacis, who used to be the director  
of the theater in Riga. It was passionate love for  
Asja Lacis that made the Jewish mystic Walter Benjamin  
leave his wife and take an interest  
in the idea of radical communism. He dedicated to her  
his ONE-WAY STREET, a melancholy treatise  
about liberating life, discovering health and body,  
and finding peace with nature. Asja Lacis - a reference point  
in the sensibility of a whole generation, who  
set out along the one-way street in search of its  
lost youth. It set out, alas, went along  
*the street of no return*. The father of the girl with the dog,  
Professor K. P., was a prominent member of that  
generation, which makes my supposition  
quite possible. And shattering.

Asja P, we must mention, is very  
beautiful. The last time I saw her was at a stand  
with video games that her dog had taken her  
to. I felt a tenderness for her, so unready,  
so embarrassed, and wanted to write her a love letter,  
to test my hypothesis, but her friends wouldn't  
let me have her address. Stupid jerks.

Translated by Wayles Browne  
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Saša Skenderija

## **COMMON PLACES**

We've changed? Hardly, not  
significantly. The world has changed.

I've stayed the same: I live  
in constant change  
and I know all about you,  
all that can be known,  
all but your address, the city you live in,  
your children, the language you fill out forms in,  
where you go in the morning and who  
you come back to in the evening,  
that I don't know but I can guess  
(I can see it all  
with frightening clairvoyance).

You  
live unchanged,  
a witness to changes.  
And you know almost all about me,  
all that you need to know.

We have not changed.

And what about those of us who didn't make it?

But how can we talk at all  
about what they've changed into?  
It is the world that changed  
by their not being around,  
we have stayed the same.

Far from each other,  
obsessed with the same world.

Small as we are,  
insignificant.

Translated by Wayles Browne  
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Saša Skenderija

## **WINTERTIME SCENE**

It rained all night and the first snow  
showed up in the morning. But the café  
is cozy. You can sip hot coffee and  
look out the window at the street. The whiteness  
emphasizes shapes, movements, the day's subtle  
mechanics. Here on the terrace, last summer  
there was a huge video screen. Now it's just  
an empty steel square. Quite by chance  
it frames the winter: a cloud of steam  
from the hotel kitchen, a VW backs up  
its tailpipe scattering a flock of pigeons,  
an old woman with a red market bag  
slides along the sidewalk, streetcars cross  
paths before the army barracks, and over there  
in the corner, a lonely child.

The movie of the day winds on, all by itself,  
without apparent effort, affording you a chance  
to forget for a moment that your own eye's gravity  
and the empty steel frame  
are all that keeps your country in one piece.

Translated by Wayles Browne  
© 2008 Wayles Browne



From **NOTHING'S LIKE IN THE MOVIES** (*Prague, 1993*)

Translated by **Wayles Browne**

and the members of **OSIP** (*the Organization for the Singing of International Poetry*)

### **BLACKOUT**

We've doused all the lights, stuck  
three layers of wallpaper on the broken  
windows (last night a patrol came because  
the ON light on the VCR was showing).  
We're cut off from people, from neighbors  
hiding in the cellar, by fourteen storeys  
of fear. Cut off from the sons of bitches  
cannonading us from the hills  
by a sound-screen of Ramirez's Missa Criolla.  
It lends our love-making on top  
of the punctured skyscraper  
a note of the astral, of almost  
divine epiphany.

*Published in the **Bookpress** (Ithaca, NY, Vol. 4 No. 2, March 1994, p. 7)*

### **THE OCCUPATION IN TEN SCENES**

The birds are leaving us. They mass in flocks, upon  
the sound of sirens they fly—and disappear.  
Telephones keep ringing. When it hits,  
dogs and car alarms howl mounfully in answer.  
Kids pick up bits of shrapnel, housewives  
with makeup on drink coffee in the cellar;  
Boca, Kljuja, Franca and I play rummy.  
The elevator's stalled, the water tap stops running.  
The old deaf Spanish Civil War vet stands outside  
the house door, leaning on his cane, clothed in his best,  
surveying the horizon—no doubt seeing Spain.  
We huddle close around the radio news. We wait.  
They say it takes two sides to have a war.

*Published in the **Balkan Visions** (VISIONS International, Black Buzzard Press, Falls Church, Virginia. No. 48, 1995, p. 8)*

## **MASTER CRAFTSMEN**

(for S. Sontag)

The analogy of photography and dying,  
the death of the moment, or freezing it  
is all too obvious, even banal.  
A sniper and a photo reporter  
on the corner of Marshal Tito Street and Maxim Gorki  
in the same way make an abstraction  
of my fate, reduced to a dozen  
metres of street I must traverse.  
The craftsmen, skilled in their trades, are waiting.  
My hesitation fills them with  
a professional nervousness which,  
certainly in my favor, increases  
my chances. Here we are at the heart of the matter:  
murderers, like artists, are prone  
to romantic exaggeration,  
to mutual glorification, striving for effects.  
They shoot past the mark. The sniper and the photographer.  
The cross is the same in the center of their sights.

*Published in the **Balkan Visions** (VISIONS International, Black Buzzard Press, Virginia. No. 48, 1995, p. 8) as well as in the **Bookpress** (Ithaca, NY, Vol. 4 No. 2, March 1994, p. 7)*

## **SYMBIOSIS**

Last night the eight-story building across the street  
was hit by a shell. Blew the roof  
framing and the top floor right off.

Glance through the window this morning:  
between two burned-off beams  
somebody's hung out their fresh washing.

*(Unpublished)*

From **NOTHING'S LIKE IN THE MOVIES** (*Prague, 1993*)

*Translated by Francis R. Jones*

**Billie Holiday**

Nitrates poisoned the tenuous soul  
of my old love. Mia Z, jazz singer and first lady  
of the Maribor Spring, from 7 to 3 a worker  
in the local nitrate factory, loved my thin  
body, bathed it that summer in cold  
water from a broken boiler. On the photos that  
remain, her figure is unreal, floating  
on the sandalwood smoke of joss-sticks and gazing  
at the big black-and-white poster of Billie Holiday,  
as if acid has flowed over its contours.  
Something similar has happened to her voice  
on the cassettes, its going hoarse. The dull spleen  
of the double bass and the despair she bewitched me with,  
mezzo-soprano husky with nitrate fumes.  
In the autumn of our love, despairing at my  
youth, my leaving, she swallowed some pills,  
had an abortion... Loneliness. A bitch of an autumn,  
melancholy.

**Craftsmen**

(for Susan Sontag)

Photography and death—killing, freezing  
the instant—is too hackneyed an  
analogy, nothing short of a cliché.  
The sniper and the press photographer  
at the Tito-Gorky Street crossroads  
are making the same abstraction  
of my fate, condensed to the ten metres  
of street I have to sprint across.  
The artists, the master craftsmen, are waiting,  
my hesitation fills them with  
professional angst, which works  
in my favour, ups my chances.  
And that's just it, the root of the problem:  
murderers, like artists, tend to  
over-dramatise, go for mutual  
glorification, cheap effects.  
Firing at nothing. Sniper and photographer.  
The same cross-hairs centre their shots.

**Untitled** (*Midday Express*)

Landscape chained in the lenses of your  
sunglasses, thought given rhythm  
by the even rattle of the speeding train, your  
hand in my groin. This is a joy, sweetheart,  
this is my love, the best that's left  
of me. The outcome came out of the blue,  
where we last expected it. I no longer  
remember how, or why, just that you're here beside  
me. Emerging too slowly, the scent of your skin,  
factions of perception in the lenses of your  
sunglasses. Travelling. How can we keep  
our cool, sweetheart, how can we hold out?

*Published in **Scare on the stone: Contemporary poetry of Bosnia.** (Edited by Chris Agee) Bloodaxe  
Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 1998, p. 196-197)*

From PRAGUE FRACTALS (*Prague, 1996*)

Translated by **Wayles Browne** and the members of **OSIP**

\* \* \*

**My three-day friend from Slovenia**

is suddenly going to Berlin. He's leaving. We  
got drunk in some bar, confided some painful  
masculine things to each other. At 2 AM we're  
saying goodbye at the railway station, it lasts  
too long, we fall silent in the boundless intimacy  
of people who are sure they won't meet again.  
A bum comes up and asks: Yugoslavians? No,  
we answer in unison, Vietnamese. O.K., my  
Vietnamese brothers, how about a beer  
for me to say goodbye with?

\* \* \*

**A sign in the beer cellar that says PRICE CATEGORY**

THREE, my friend Mario, the last failed attempt  
to standardize the world, the only signpost  
you can still be sure to find me by. Prague's  
towers like broken high-tension lines  
(the last image I recall from my old home),  
revision of the streets, address books and phone directories,  
kaleidoscopic statelets, hours of curfew  
or months, or years... Lassie comes home. But  
screw a home that's no longer there. Lassie remarried,  
had pups, swapped passports and married  
once more. A total dog's life, my friend Mario, fits  
into a handful of human years.

\* \* \*

**The kind of unease that strikes you when you find in your pocket**

a left-over ticket from the horse track that you,  
keeping it from yourself, bet on a complete outsider:  
if you dared trust yourself entirely to the devastating  
feeling, you might, while there's still time, realize something of the final  
things. But daring comes when it's all too late. It's just that  
all this has lasted too long; I don't know how else to  
put it across. The smell of fruit trees flowering in the air,  
matchless moments when her breasts seem bigger than my  
horrors and it seems there may be some sense in surviving.  
A long street is in front of you, you come home from work in the  
crowd: to someone, to someplace.

As if nothing were happening.

As if nothing had happened.

(Unpublished)

## Why The Dwarf Had To Be Shot

On June twenty eight, Nineteen hundred and ninety two,  
in the basement of the Sarajevo City Hospital we sat  
with professor Dževad Karahasan and his wife, who were serving  
as hospital volunteers, since the city had been massacred day after day.  
They were devastated by their family tragedy, her mother murdered  
in her apartment by a grenade, and we came to console them  
with conversation, with desperate hope  
that military intervention was on its way. But instead,  
along with pomp and unprecedented measures of security,  
Mitterand came, to give us and our slayers a lecture  
in morals and mutual understanding. Horrified starving old women  
sobbed beyond consolation, while confused passersby and children  
hurried toward international television cameras, behaving,  
like pandas born by Caesarian section in a zoo  
in Indianapolis. The whole world applauded with praise the French  
love of justice, the French *courage*,  
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smiled at the decor of a destroyed building which had been,  
in his honor, renamed *L' hospital France*. Murderers did not  
bombard us for a few hours, taking their time  
to shake his hand, and all went smoothly,  
almost like an ecumenical colloquium somewhere in Paris.

A local TV crew came to the basement asking  
for an interview with Dž. K. What did he think about the surprise  
visit of Mitterand, they asked. He said, "Disgusting filth."  
They asked him what he thought, in his opinion, ought  
to be done. He said, "to shoot the dwarf dead." They asked  
if he would do it. He said, "If I had a weapon  
at hand, for sure."  
TV crew: "Would you do it, professor, to go down in history?"  
Dž. K: "What history, friend? I would do it in order to reach sense."

No weapons were at hand, and the interview, unfortunately,  
never saw the light of day till now.

(1992, edited 2004)

Translated 2004 by S. Skenderija & Aaron Tate

**I had always wondered how it would feel**  
to survive an airplane crash: chosen  
by the mercy of a statistical paradox, *deus*  
*ex machina*, one of the thousands who still  
remains . . . Always the cases fascinated me  
of deserters and women who committed suicide,  
that sentimental belief in human dignity, in fate.  
Always I was a dog: I was afraid.  
I was not able to endure any longer  
and for that reason I survived. For days  
I cried like a dog,  
I howled at myself alone.  
I had no choice but to remove myself from that,  
to undertake something, to change.  
And so on the 23rd of November,  
Nineteen hundred and ninety two,  
I came to Prague.

(1993, Transl. 2004 by Aaron Tate)

## Fourth of July

**I**  
Orange fire hydrant, iron dwarf, into which the police car crashes  
often in silent movies, turning  
the thing into a stunning water palm tree,  
and the housefront mailbox metal-flags  
whose sole meaning I have for a long time grasped  
(since the dwellers of Donald Duck City gave with them a sign  
that it is time, for the postman to retrieve)—in America,  
in state-subsidized housing, beneath my window  
turned to the warehouse of furniture, here  
is where the immigrant destiny came to an end,  
and the future began, dreams  
too too easy to achieve:

You need only move two blocks further  
and already you are eighty six payments closer  
to the cocksure neighborhood foyer,  
white-skinned purgatory of an American heaven.

In the American dream, in broad daylight,  
as if when water-calm comes, to lay—so easy it is,  
to remember everything that has happened,  
as when through sunglasses you look  
at the sun, it is that easy,  
so easy  
not to have desire.

**II**  
As I carry Mirna on my shoulders she asks, *Why*  
*are there fireworks, daddy?* "Because it is my birthday today."  
*And where do all the rockets fall?* "Nowhere, honey,  
they vanish, just burn away." And suddenly,  
finding its way, the song comes into my head,  
an old forgotten gem:

"When the cities will burn one day,  
the smoke will rise to heaven,  
a magnificent firework display,  
just as it once used to happen,  
on the good old First of May,  
when they would take us to the parade."

And I pause to consider, without horror, how the singer then  
could have known,  
how slight is the visible difference between  
a celebration ignited by matches  
and a capital city by grenade,  
and I wonder whether Mirna herself will ever have to discover  
such a completely unnecessary matter.  
—Daddy, she says, *is it that fireworks melt like ice cream in the sun?*  
—"Oh yes, my sweetheart, exactly. It is exactly like that."

(2000)

Translation 2004 by Aaron Tate

## CAPE OF GOOD HOPE

I promised Zekida  
To bring a poem  
From the edge of the world  
From the Cape of Good Hope  
Though she hadn't  
Asked me to

Unfortunately  
But when one's written  
A few poems  
Good poems  
He doesn't write poems just for nothing  
Or make promises

I was flying from Johannesburg  
To Cape Town  
A masculine-looking woman  
On the seat next to me  
Asked me  
What language that was  
That I was reading a book in  
I answered like a shot  
BOSNIAN  
Aha she said  
Uncomfortably

She said We have Bosnians here too  
In South Africa  
I know  
But tell me, how many kilometers is it  
From Johannesburg to Cape Town?  
About 1400  
Aha  
Like Atlanta to New York  
I said

The book I was reading  
Was by Amir B.  
The Bosnian  
The man who  
Unlike me stayed  
And put up by himself  
A grave marker to his father  
He wrote a poem about it  
What a poem!  
I had never met him  
But Adin  
An old buddy of mine  
Got him to write dedications in two books  
And send them  
With Fatima  
On to America  
One he signed *In friendship*  
And the other *With respect*

Reason enough  
To take his books  
With me to the edge of the world  
(I'd never had a better friend  
Than that old buddy Adin  
Other than Zekida  
And maybe  
Teno)

The plane landed in Cape Town  
At dusk  
The most dizzying sight  
I have ever yet seen  
I thought  
Maybe only the descent into Rio  
Is comparable with this  
Thanks to Cendrars  
But who knows  
Even Rio isn't out of the question  
Now that I have landed at the Edge

The hotel room was cramped  
In a one-time prison for one-time bank robbers  
But the furniture was OK  
A window part way open and a storm every little while  
Then calm again  
I left the TV on  
Since I was frightened alone at the edge of the world  
In the dark of the cell  
Soft-core porn on Channel 6

In the middle of the night I woke up and shut it off:  
*I went out into the world to rest a  
Body confused by the fear of disappearing  
But my courage left me in the first gloom -*  
And then I remembered  
That Semezdin hadn't gotten in touch  
Ever since I asked him  
To send me an invitation letter  
In the name of the Voice of America  
For Teno  
To get a visa  
What crap

It's strange

It seems to me that  
There's a certain point  
On the life map of each of us  
And when you reach it  
Every trip becomes a return  
And every mile takes you  
Further and further from your companions  
And closer and closer  
To those who stayed at home

In the morning  
In the coach  
The guide told us  
How the First Voyage  
In fact was a failure  
And how the Navigator returned broken and embittered  
To tell the King about the *Cape of Storms*  
At the edge of the world  
Beyond which nothing lies  
But the furious sea  
And the fatal shoals hidden in fog  
Sharper than Levantine sabers

Later the King changed a detail  
In the log of the voyage  
And rewarded the Navigator with riches and glory  
For  
The disheartened homeland was in need of  
Places of good hope  
New horizons  
Words of comfort  
And encouragement

(9/2003)  
Translation **Wayles Browne**

\* \* \*

## Unconditional childlike trust in the world

as the train speeds into the haunted house. Or when appear  
the majestic zodiac figures in the dome of the planetarium,  
or the devotion I give to finding an escape  
from the labyrinth of mirrors. Cotton candy, popcorn, circus  
pleasures—enchanted moments of joy, rare, at ease.  
Another day bound by its own limits, seams.  
Exhausting confabulations: the transvestite in the telephone  
booth, twisting the ends of his platinum-blond hair, how he turns  
his body, holding in his hands a military magazine with images  
of the tanks of the world's armies. Or, say, an American student  
of creative writing, with his video camera on the monstrous  
communist city square: trying to record something, to embrace it,  
soon he withdraws, leaves—it is too difficult for him.

(In recent times I dream only commonplaces: I dream  
of childhood, sailing, how I fly, how I make love  
with the heroines of Krzysztof Kieślowski's movies.)

(1993)  
Translation 2004 by **Aaron Tate**