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My Dear Zijo

Branko Ćopić

I know I am writing a letter that cannot reach its addressee, but my comfort is that it will be read by the one who loves us both.

It is very late at night and I don't feel like sleeping. In this time of night one can only talk to ghosts and memories, and I am thinking about the golden cobweb and the silvery mist of your stories, and about the horrible end that befell you in Jasenovac.

I am writing, my dear Zijo, and I am not sure that the similar end is not awaiting me too, in this world in which the plague with the scythe still roams.

In your nights full of moonlight, you foresaw the apocalyptic monster with the scythe and you talked about it through the mouth of your hero, Brko. One day you even saw it, real, thisworldly, your worst nightmare came true.

Back in those days, I accidentally avoided your destiny, but it has been some time now, at my desk, I have been having these bleak premonitions: I see a night, chilly, with stars of ice, they are taking me away, who knows where. Who are those dark executors in human form? Do they resemble those who took you away? Or are they the brothers of those before whom Goran departed? Are they not the dark murderers of Kikić?

How we used to lament in our boyish and lyrical zeal, a long time ago, together, the death of the poet Garcia Lorca and tried to picture the break of dawn when he was taken away, without return, down the deserted streets of Granada.

I was recently in Granada; I watched from the hilltop the sunny stony labyrinth of its streets and I wondered: which way was he taken? Then, you were once again by my side, quite close, and I cannot remember which one of us whispered the words full of shudder: "Black are their horses, black are their hoofs." Multiplying are the black horses and black horsemen, night- and day-time vampires, and I myself am sitting over my manuscripts telling the tale of the garden of mallow color, about good old men and enthusiastic boys. I dive into the smoke of war and I find the cruel warriors with pigeon's hearts. Before I am taken by them, I haste to tell a golden fable about people. Its seed was planted in my heart in my childhood, and it has been incessantly flowering and rejuvenating. Many horrors I have gone through scorched it, but the root remained, lifelike and indestructible, protruding its green sprout again, its

banner. The armor of the tanks tumbled down on it, but it was protected and saved by a friendly, bent human palm.

So, Zijo, this is what I would like to whisper and write about in my fable. You would be the one to know that I have not made up anything, and that in this line of work one cannot make things up, especially not good people and sacred warriors.

Sadly, I have not made up the others, somber murderers with human faces. Of them I cannot and I do not like to talk; I only feel how they multiply and plot in this crammed world. I can feel them by the cold chill, which precedes them, and any time now they will knock at my door.

Never mind, Zijo… Everybody defends themselves with their own weapons, but still they have not forged a saber that can cut down our moonlights, smiley dawns and moody twilights.

Good-bye, my dear. Maybe my old-fashioned robes are funny to some, my great-grandfathers' spear and wretched hack do not promise much of a race. Well, so be it.

This letter-dedication from The Garden of Mallow Colour is addressed to the author's friend, the Bosnian writer Zijo Dizdarević, who was killed in the concentration camp Jasenovac in 1942. Ćopić mentions the Croat poet Ivan Goran Kovačić as well, killed by Chetniks in 1943, and the Bosnian writer Hasan Kikić, who also lost his life in World War II. Branko Ćopić killed himself in 1983 in Belgrade.

Translated with commentary by Damjana Baškot-Finci – © 2006 Damjana Baškot-Finci

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