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Checkpoint

Mario Suško

at the checkpoint made of tree
trunks and barrels filled with sand,
a group of pale bus riders standing
in a meandering line depends
on one man whose belly will
soon have his blouse buttons burst.

am I a Jew: a Muslim: a Catholic:
which one does he want to hate more:
will my name on the soiled piece
of paper confuse him or make him
pull me out by my shirt sleeve
as if I were a disposable part

of the human race, deemed perhaps
to be worthy of living or dying,
as my uncle used to say, by the look
of my penis: am I saved or doomed
if he suddenly remembers, or I do,
that we went to the same high school:

as I try to keep my sternomastoids
from twitching, my mind from being forced
to accept that someone who has no power
over life is a bigger coward than someone
who does, he positions himself before me,
his sourish breath becoming my breath:

Do you know if Maria's still there:
his words burn on my face like ember:
there, meaning in the city: and I feel
cold sweat run down my spine: am I
done for if I say yes, or if I say no,
pretend I did or did not recognize him:

but he just grins and hands me

back my papers, moving to a young woman
next to me and motioning with his hand
for her to step out, still glancing at me,
while I rock back and forth, staring
past him, past my life, at the jagged line
of skeleton trees on the mountain ridge
where the dying daylight still lingers.

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