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Spasić (More Than a Game)

Saša Skenderija

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)

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