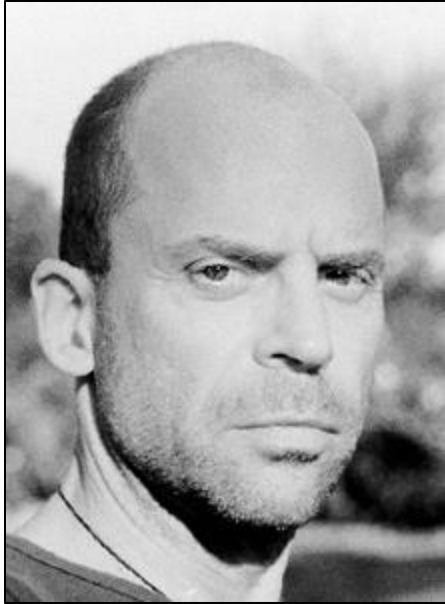




ZOLTÁN DANYI

DER
KADAVERRÄUMER

ROMAN SUHRKAMP



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Zoltán Danyi
The Carcass Remover
Novel

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»Even more than the story, what fascinated me was the hatred, the anger and the pain and how that fire can be transformed into sentences.«

They had heard about five dead foxes, lying in the road by the Hungarian-Serbian border. But when the men from the disposal unit arrive, there are dozens of carcasses, dogs and cats, too – shot, it seems, by border guards to pass the time. The war in the Balkans is long over, and yet incidents like these haul the narrator back into his past.

Sitting in the garden of a Berlin clinic where he is stuck until his terrible digestion issues are treated, he is overcome by the music of a Kusturica film and he starts to sob: »perhaps because it brought it all back to the surface, all he tried to run away from, those desolate years of hollowing-out, years that seemed without end, nor desirous of an end, and on they endured.«

Who is this narrator, who stumbles back and forth between the scenes of his life in a torrent of speech that threatens to sweep him away; part of a carcass-collecting unit that had once completed a rather different task? Is he a victim, a perpetrator? A survivor who is seeking a cure through speaking?

The war in Yugoslavia and its afterlife have never lessened their hold on Zoltán Danyi – for almost two decades he failed in his attempt to comprehend the monstrous reality that almost entirely devoured him. One day, the sound was there – a sound that makes for compelling reading. The writing shimmers like the surface of a contaminated body of water. Layer by layer it is laid bare. A book constructed like a complex musical composition whose beauty contains both distance and an intimate touch.

I. America (pp.18-30)

[...]

10

Then he started farting up the streets of Berlin, spending days walking around undeterred by the constant drizzle, and when a bus drove by he would really let one out because even if the buses in Berlin are quiet enough they still drown out sounds, so at the outset he would wait for one to pull up beside him and only then he'd set one or two free, dumbfounded at how so much air could accumulate inside of him, and his belly was so distended and he was feeling little jabs all over, he said, but maybe it was all because of the gasoline, yes, it was a sure thing that the gas smuggling had destroyed his belly, and how ridiculous it is, to begin with, that there are international borders, since what kind of nonsense it is that you just go and go and all of a sudden you get stopped and people poke through your bag and your underpants, something he could never get used to, despite crossing the Serbian-Hungarian border every single day, because his stomach would tighten up each time even if he was following every last regulation absolutely everywhere, but on the Serbian-Hungarian border they treat you like a bootlegger or cigarette smuggler and later, many years later in fact, by which point he was doing his traveling by train or hitchhiking and not black marketeering in fuel any more but only in blank notebooks, even then did his stomach tense up, so maybe it was the border and not the fuel after all that had ruined his belly so to hell with whoever invented borders, he said, then stared off into the distance for a second and went on to say he might just as well have bitten the dust, it was a wonder he got through it alive at all and only had to sacrifice his innards, albeit completely, the result being that he was constantly passing gas in Berlin, which led him to slowly understand the Serbs, who aren't fond of the Hungarians, though up to that point his digestion was quite normal, or almost, but it was the Serbs who realized long before that there was something wrong with him, because there must be something repulsive about Hungarians, Albanians, Bosnians, and Gypsies, he said, and now he realized that the Serbs had been right, that the Hungarians and Albanians really were more stinky than they are, though it was only in Berlin, farting an unbroken chain, that he realized this, indeed it occurred to him that there

might really be some sort of national issue here, where the Hungarians, at least the “over-the-border” kind, the so-called “Vojvodina Hungarians,” fart more than average, but who cares, all he really meant was that as far as he was concerned he was now full of understanding for the Serbs, he said, and after pausing for a moment, he went on to say that there was a constant drizzle in Berlin but that didn’t bother him and he walked the streets until late in the evening, stopping only at noon at the Turk for a kebab with rice, he told the nurse, who naturally understood not a word of what this loser was blathering about, and anyway he had stepped out long ago leaving him alone in the room, but he just kept talking about how he usually felt better after letting out a fart or too, albeit just for a couple of minutes, since his belly soon became distended again, tight, inflated, and whether he wanted to or not, he had to let another one go, which, if he managed to do it, was the best-case scenario since if the wind remained trapped inside him, sooner or later there would be a sharp pain in his belly that built up to the level of knives slowly twisted inside of him, by which time he had no choice but to return to the actress’ apartment, lie down on the floor, and squirm around on the bare wood, baffled how his intestines could hold so much air, and then he was past the point of wondering whether the earth had moved or not because his only thought was letting out the wind distending his innards, so he just wriggled around among the actress’ things scattered around the floor in an attempt to find relief, but his feet also hurt from all that walking, right there, he pointed, in the middle, in that arch between the big toe and the heel, maybe, he thought, he might have fallen arches or was on the way to flat feet, and maybe not just on the way, but a full-blown case of flat goddam feet, he said, so when he got home every evening he plopped down in front of the TV and squeezed and massaged his soles, though sleep soon came over him, in fact he fell headlong into sleep the way a felled tree crashes down, and only around dawn did he drag himself from the armchair to his bed, and in the morning, once he had managed to get up he stumbled into the kitchen and made himself a real coffee, not chicory, which brought him more or less to his senses, but by that point he was already getting dressed to set out as soon as he could, as if he had to start at a fixed time or cover a prescribed distance, and of course the coffee made him hungry so he picked up a ham croissant at the corner baker’s and scarfed it down on the go straight out of its wrapper, walking the streets without a stop as if he were in search of something or being paid for it, and not small change, he said, but his only thought now was the Luftbrücke plan, that maybe something might come of it after all, because it was conceivable the flight corridor might soon be reopened, making it easy for him to get to America, so nothing was lost in other

words, at least for the meantime, and everything was ordered in his head, with things working out practically on their own and it turned out it was much easier to get to Berlin than he had thought since he saw lots of Berlin plates on cars at the gas station every day with their big B on them, and had his travel bag full of underwear and undershirts with him every day, though he didn't want to rush but instead level-headedly waited for the right moment, like the gray hunter on the edge of the Serbian village, and naturally he would rather travel with Serbs than Turks, though not as if he had issues with the Turks, since he had none at all, it was only that there would be more room in the Serbs' car since the Turks crammed every single nook full of stuff, he said, but ultimately it turned out he went with a Turk, and as it happened one that was traveling alone in an old Mercedes, the same kind he himself drove when he was bootlegging gas, which he took as a good sign, so once he had tanked up he asked the Turk whether he had a spot for Berlin, but the Turk couldn't understand him at first, *Was?*, he asked, and he asked him again, just as flawlessly, *Ist das ein Platz für mich in Berlin*, meanwhile pointing at himself then the empty seat and back, and then the Turk finally got it, but he thought he was joking, and had a good laugh, but he remained serious and repeated *ein Platz* and *für mich* and *in Berlin*, then the Turk finally got that he wasn't joking and really did want to get to Berlin with him, so he nodded *ja, ja, kein Problem* maybe because he thought oh how nice I don't have to do it alone, and I'll have someone to talk to on the road, though he was quite mistaken because there ended up not being much talking at all, though naturally the Turk held up his end, and at the beginning he tried to pay attention but soon he realized it was enough just to slip in a *ja, ja* every once in a while and then the Turk would be happy to keep talking, so that's how the conversation went, with the Turk talking away, while he interjected the occasional approval, but the Turk must have had some strange speech impediment because his tongue, like some nimble little animal, shot in and out of his mouth, which was not charming in the least, so much that it occurred to him he might be a little light in the loafers, a Turkish back-door bandit who only picked him up for that reason, but who cares, he had no problem with pansies as long as they left him alone, he said, and they got over the Serbian-Hungarian border in just a couple of hours, and it didn't even take them that long to get all the way across Hungary, what an odd little country that you can cut across it in two hours by car, so by noon they were already somewhere in Slovakia, and when the Turk stopped to get gas and pee and he needed to himself, urgently in fact, and asked him whether he wanted to go to the rest room, but he actually answered *Nein, nein, not at all*, because the last thing he needed at that point was for the Turkish fag to try

something with him in the Slovak toilet, and he decided instead to hold it in, but naturally it didn't take long to see that he had totally misinterpreted the situation, and that the Turk just didn't want them to go at the same time and leave the car alone, it would be better for one of them to stay and keep an eye on it while the other one urinated, but by that point it was already too late to fix the situation and he had to hold it in at least for as long as it took to get across Slovakia, what an odd little country that you can cut across in one hour by car, so at this point they were somewhere in the Czech Republic when he felt that this time he really would pee himself if they didn't stop, and they had just passed Brno, bumping along the dilapidated Czech highway towards Prague, and they were bouncing so hard that he not only had to pee but also to pass some gas, but at that point he could just do it quietly into the seat, and once they stopped again for gas somewhere around Prague he didn't even wait for the Turk to ask but had already opened his door and tried to make a quick dash, but no use trying really, since the best he could do was waddle, and once he got to the port-a-potty a few drops had already trickled into his pants, but once inside the Johnny-on-the-spot, nothing wanted to come out for all the world, maybe because he had been holding it in for hours leaving him standing there in the stifling smell of urine, with drops of sweat rolling down his back, and the best he could do was squeeze out a little filament of stream and then he had no choice but to sit down on the filthy seat and finally let it out drip-drip-de-drip like a message in Morse code, but otherwise he had a fairly smooth trip with the Turk and never would have imagined the whole thing would be so easy, just getting into a car in the morning and getting out the same evening in Berlin, though admittedly some luck was involved, in that he managed to find a temporarily empty apartment but after all, things have a way of working out on their own sometimes, he said to the nurse who had just walked into his room and set a white mug down on his nightstand, then turned to leave but he went on talking about how those syrups were quite tasty but really he was getting hungry and could he get a salami sandwich next time he came, or even better would be a burek with cheese, since the last time he had eaten was yesterday or the day before when he bought that ham croissant at the corner baker's and ate it straight out of the wrapper as he went, just the way they eat burek back home in Serbia because that's really the only way to eat a burek, straight out of the wrapping paper, and even the Americans eat their hamburgers like that, he said, and paused for a bit at this point, then continued that this all started for him, not with the poster for *Manhattan*, but with the tennis t-shirt he got from someone who'd brought it from America, covered all over with heads of Lincoln, together with the American flag, printed all over

it every which way, with the head the size of a fist and the flag as huge as the ocean, and there was a half head and half a flag that extended onto each arm of the shirt, and on top of it all the shirt was speckled full of silvery stars, and what a shame that he hadn't thought of it before setting out because he could have brought it with him on his trip to America, but naturally who would have believed he would really ever get to Berlin, because previously the mere thought of Berlin or Vienna made him dizzy, he said, because Serbia had been all locked up like a bankrupt company, and he never really considered that he would ever get out of there, even though it turned out to be child's play, just step into a Turkish Mercedes in the morning, and hop out that evening on Martin Luther Strasse.

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He'd been hitchhiking to Budapest for a long time, he said, it was easy to get a ride at the gas station, while on the way back he took the shuttle to the Tesco out by the highway and always came across Serbian cars, all he had to do was wait for people to come out of the Tesco and even if the first car wouldn't take him, the second or third would for sure, since the Serbs had big hearts and would share their last morsel with you, he said, but that's not what he wanted to talk about now, instead he said he had spent lots of time in paper-goods stores in Budapest, sometimes hours in a place, on his search for a good notebook, which inspired him to perform a thorough inspection of those stores, including the pencils and erasers, but really it was just the notebooks that interested him, still, if one of them struck his fancy he wouldn't just buy it on the spot but would put it back on the shelf, leave the store, then take a walk up Andrassy Boulevard or around the Nyugati Station or along the Danube, then return to the store to have another look at the notebook, though he didn't want to rush things so he went around to the other supply stores too, for a look at their offerings, and from the outset nixed the lined ones but spent a while considering the checked ones because they had been candidates from the beginning except that he never managed to find one with a faint enough grid, he said, and ultimately only the blank ones were under consideration, so he gave considerable thought to which of the blank ones would suit him best, the small ones, the medium-sized ones, or the big ones, and he eliminated the small ones immediately but contemplated the medium-sized ones for a good long while, and ultimately slipped one of them under his arm in one of the stores and paced up and down the shelves with it as if browsing around, meanwhile he penciled thin lines on a sheet of paper and then erased them, all the while focusing on what it felt

like to have the notebook under his arm, this all went on for almost an hour in the store, and finally he put the notebook back on the shelf after realizing he didn't need the medium one but the large one, he said, so the next order of business was the color of the cover, which took a lot of thought, first he thought blue or black would be the best suited even though naturally burgundy was more appealing to him, oh yes, he was practically mesmerized by the burgundy ones but this was exactly why he thought black or blue would be better since he had lost all faith in fascinations, so in short when he took these little trips to Budapest he generally just bought notebooks and maybe some underpants, but only if they were on sale, and for some reason the blue ones were always on sale so his underwear supply soon changed to all blue, which was a pain because he couldn't wear a white undershirt with blue underpants, just imagine the sight, blue underwear and a white undershirt, or as they call it back home, a white majica, which would also have to be swapped out for a blue one except that those were never on sale so he had no luck trying to hunt them down, so after a while he had no choice but to buy them at full price, and then he was wanting to pitch his entire sock collection for blue ones, so the plan was first just notebooks, then notebooks and underwear and the majicas, then finally it was notebooks, underwear, socks and majicas that occasioned his trips to Budapest, and as he mentioned, he had no trouble finding a ride at a gas station, and for the ride home he would find someone in the Tesco parking lot, and as for the notebooks, he would just fill them halfway and then toss them, and sometimes he just wrote a line or two on the first page and threw it out, he said, and looked out the window, and then he remembered the lilac bushes, adding that they grew all over in the Serbian village where he delivered the goods, white ones and purple ones, and their fragrance was sheer intoxication, and also that they would siphon the gas out of the Mercedes into big plastic cans through a hose, then once he was paid he would turn right around for another run, and at least at first that's how it went but soon the gas mafia took him on, still, at the time in question, that particular 1st of May, when Senna had his accident, he wasn't working for the mafia and the clouds had the color of gizzards in soup, and as they bounced along the dirt road to the village the sun peeked out of the clouds above the horizon, while there by the side of the road stood the hunter just waiting who knows for what, and the deer hunter came to mind, or more precisely, Robert de Niro in one scene of *The Deer Hunter* where he had to take down the buck with one bullet, he said, then picked up the mug and raised it to his mouth but decided not to drink from it, just set it back on the cabinet, he didn't want any more of that dishwater, he said, have them bring me a burek with meat, or if they don't

have any, then at least a ham sandwich from the corner bakery, and the burek brought to mind a painter friend of his, maybe he had mentioned him before, who became a vegetarian during the war, and although he had been a thin, sticklike figure before that, once he went off meat he lost even more weight and his breakfast had become just a handful of linseeds, pumpkin seeds, and sunflower seeds, then a cheese or apple burek for lunch, and no dinner at all, just a cup of tea, so he gradually started looking more and more like a skeleton, but don't get me wrong, he was a painter, yes, but a house painter, not an artist, and when he decided to go vegetarian everyone thought he was a fool because people in Vojvodina even eat their corn flakes with bacon, and their bureks get fried in fat, not oil, and they smear their baking pans and even their dough in pork fat, which makes the freshly fried bureks shimmer so enticingly, but naturally the house painter had no idea of all this so he was eating bureks dripping with pork fat all through his vegetarian period, he told the nurse, who had stepped into the room again without bringing either a burek or a croissant, and not even so much as a fucking piece of bread with jelly, all he did was open the window and leave, but who cares, bureks often give him an upset stomach, and then he would chomp on a carrot, he said, then he reached for his mug and took a sip of syrup water, and went on to say that lately he had given up his whole operation, no more notebooks because he was up to here with the whole thing and now all he needed was a white notebook, unlined, a big one, but all you could get in Budapest were those tasteless photo albums with white covers, and recently when he was on the lookout for a Serbian car in the Tesco parking lot he thought about America, that is, if he really wanted a white notebook, in other words, if he wanted a white notebook there was nothing for it but to head off to America, which might at first seem ridiculous but just think of Robert de Niro, he said, and that you have to down a buck with one shot, because he had now realized, he said, lowering his voice, that Serbian relocation camps were the same way, you have to take them down with one sentence, one well aimed, short, simple sentence, right to the heart.

[...]

II. The Transporter (pp. 70-82)

[...]

4

Brazo is at the wheel of the cyan-blue van, with Od sitting to his right, and him in the middle, but they never arrive at the carcass deposit station. On the bridge they were notified that four or five foxes had been run over near the northern border and they should make their way up there at once for cleanup. Od mumbles something into his radio; Brazo turns around mid-bridge, and they retravel the old road to the end before turning onto the C21 at the three-way intersection. They bump along until the overpass, where they get on the E5. From there it's about an hour to the border, at least in this van. Cornfields give way to broad swathes of wheat, which thin out as they pass, becoming the meadows of the backlands and, in the distance, the forests that run along the riverbank. They are taking the deer with them on the E5, as if they want to show him where he lived, one last time, because they're such great guys, Brazo with his stubble, Od with his big belly, and him. They tear along at 40 mph, even 50, which is about all the van can handle, and in three-quarters of an hour you can already spot the guard station. In a few minutes the carcasses become visible along the roadside. The dispatcher had spoken of four or five foxes, but it takes just a second for them to realize the report had been inaccurate. The pile of corpses was pretty high, and they were dealing with a lot more than that. They step out of the van, Brazo hocks a loogie and spits. Od stands by the truck, peeing, while mumbling something to himself, or maybe just swearing. As for him, he watches the sky and lets out a fart or two. They are all hot and sweaty. He goes over to the pile, walks all the way around it, and tries to estimate how many foxes are piled up. Twenty or thirty, maybe even forty, and clearly this has nothing to do with any accident or roadkill. It was clear at a glance that these foxes were shot from a distance. Od fixes his zipper while swearing out loud now, Brazo is still hocking his throat and finally spits out an enormous load. Sometimes they just can't understand where he gets all that snot. They pull on their gloves and set to work, grabbing the foxes by the tails, one in each hand, and dragging them to the back of the van. They've been at it for several minutes, the sweat rolling down their skin, but the pile doesn't seem to be getting any smaller, and they are beginning to suspect that the dispatcher has just duped them into this. Forty or fifty carcasses, and not just foxes, either, but dogs and cats too, all jumbled together.

“What the hell? Did these assholes wipe out everything on four legs?”, fumed Od, then jumps up onto the van’s platform, shoves the deer out of the way as far as he can manage, then lays a few dirty plastic bags down on the floor. Brazo and he start tossing the bodies up onto the truck, taking hold of them wherever they can manage – by the tail, the neck, the ears – and are working hard now, the sweat trickling off them as they pant. The whole operation takes a while. They are just about done when a patrol car shows up on the road: two border patrolmen in a Niva jeep, both in old-fashioned mirror sunglasses. As they pass the van, they slow up to smirk at the men, then make a wide U-turn and peel off towards the border. Od swears, Brazo spits, and he waves at them with his gloved hands, and then they throw the remaining foxes and cats and dogs onto the truck bed. Once they are done, Brazo opens the rear hatch, Od slides the locking pin into place, and they file into the cabin; Od takes the wheel and they set off, not towards Novi Sad but to the border. Od floors it and they fly along at full throttle, the engine growling, but managing. The two border guards stand smoking, boredom on their faces, beside their Niva. Their cigarette hand stops halfway to their mouths as they turn to see what is coming. What the... – have those carcass movers gone completely mad? As it turns out, of course, the truth is different, and as they approach the Niva Od slows down and does a 180 in a tight ring, circling the border patrolmen to say hello and throwing up a horrific cloud of dust in the process, while he waves to them the whole time, swinging his hand and showing the face of innocence, while the border patrolmen give an involuntary nod, though it is clear from their expressions that they are baffled by the whole thing. At this point Brazo can’t take any more and quickly rolls down the window, putting his arm out as far as he can, which he does in his turn, only showing them his middle finger, which makes the whole situation very clear, and one of the poor suckers tosses down his cigarette while the other one stamps it out in his rage. Od just hits the gas and they’re off, tearing along the E5 back to Novi Sad with their full cargo of carcasses.

5

We did it because we could, and if that’s how it was, then that’s just how it had to be, and if that’s how it had to be, then it’s not our fault that we did it. We picked up the animals that had been plowed off the road together with the slush, the gray sky offering no consolation after days of snowfall, sometimes lighter, sometimes heavier, but constant and without interruption. There were places on the roads to the border where massive snowdrifts even prevented the border patrolmen

from getting through, though admittedly few others used that section of the E5. The snowplow led the way, and we followed in our faded blue truck, Brazo at the wheel with Od at his side. I sat next to Od, and behind us clattered the loggers' truck. Whenever the snowplow threw out a carcass, Od and I would jump out into the snow and toss it onto the platform, then we would all three rotate, putting me behind the wheel now, Brazo in the middle, and Od next to Brazo, and the next time around it was them jumping into the snow while I slid over one spot, to the middle, and Od would drive. This was our distribution of labor, in switch offs. Our boots and gloves at this point were thoroughly soaked, our pants legs drenched to the knee from the snow, but if we'd heated the cab, things would have been even worse, so we didn't have it on. – We followed the tank and fired without warning whenever we noticed movement by the roadside. We would shoot until it stopped. We combed through the occupied territories, securing the zone. This was our assignment. We were following orders. – Maybe it was the soaked boots and the landscape covered in slushy snow, or perhaps just the monotonous rumbling of the snowplow, our pickup and the big truck, I don't know, but I began to feel the same excitement as when we cleansed the little farms in the countryside. So we followed the snowplow in our van and whenever its broad blade shoved a sludge-covered animal off to the side, we stopped, jumped out, and tossed the remains, dripping with snow, into the truck, while the loggers who followed us would gesticulate, Yeah boys, that's the spirit, don't let up, and naturally we would signal back to them with our middle fingers, telling them what they could do with their mothers, but otherwise didn't pay them much heed and just did our job. They had less work to do just picking up the branches and stumps that were strewn all over the road, and we both followed the plow clearing the road of snow, carcasses, and debris. It was a mission of national security, or at least that's what the dispatcher called it. – If we passed a farm or settlement our tank swung its cannon towards the houses while we took cover behind the jeeps and approached on foot, training our gun sights on the doors and windows to ensure we fired first should we catch any kind of movement, but for the most part we spotted none, since the Tigers in front of us had pretty much taken care of these places wherever they could, and all that was left for us was the cleanup and it was rare that we ran into living people who had managed to take cover from the Tigers. But when it did happen, we really took them by surprise, as they hadn't counted on us and were late to spot our approach, generally too late, usually only when we were standing at the gate, at which point there was no escape for them. There was only one occasion when they opened fire on us from one of the farms, though we hadn't noticed anything suspicious,

so those people must have taken cover beforehand. Judging from the sound it must have been an M60 that had us under fire and they must have known we were coming and set the gun up in a covered position awaiting our approach. So I figured someone had tipped them off, we had a traitor among us. They took out Elim, the driver of the front jeep, at once; I was in the second one and so had a closeup view of Elim's head blown backwards by the strike, and then I saw the captain sitting beside him trying without success to shove his body out of the way to take the wheel. The jeep bounced hard over the uneven terrain, taking a wide turn to the left, impossible to direct, and all this time the bullets from the machine gun in hiding whizzed by, creating ever-greater confusion among us, and confusion is absolutely the worst thing that can happen in these situations. The only other thing I remember is how our tank launched several cannon rounds into the settlement, whose booming drowned out all other sounds, and finally I saw one wing of the building catch fire and the flames instantly shoot up high, and the snowy landscape behind us glow red, which I recall because I felt a powerful blow to my shoulder that told me at once that I'd been hit, but felt no pain, just a mounting burning sensation, and then I lost consciousness. The boys would later tell me that the pop of machine gun rounds and the hail of bullets stopped once the tank had taken out the roof of the building, and we managed to cleanse the settlement. Two others beside me had been injured, and we were taken in the back of the jeep to the camp infirmary together with the laid-out body of Elim. – A fallen tree lay blocking the road; the snowplow was getting nowhere with it, so the entire convoy stopped, and the loggers moved up front with axes, saws, and thick ropes. They then began to break up the detached branches, languidly, like people with lots of time on their hands. They did not hurry, which would have been very unlike them. The driver of the snowplow would occasionally rev the engine, not to irk them but just to keep it from stalling. But the loggers must have taken these repeated roars as urging, egging them on, since they would hop to it for a minute, only to settle back into their usual pace after that. Od remained in the pickup, and Brazo and I stood around next to the snowplow watching the loggers work. The driver rolled down his window and lit up a cigarette, then blew the smoke into the gray and foggy air and its lightly blowing tiny splinters of snow. Now and then he would flick the ash into the slush as the loggers cut their way through all the larger branches until only the trunk remained on the snow-covered street, lying there like some massive sea creature dragged to shore and mutilated, but then they would finish by cutting that to pieces with their chainsaws too, then pushing it off the road. – When a front moves through, or if I really focus on it, I can sometimes still feel the bullet. I spent two

weeks in the camp infirmary, where they said I was very lucky to make it through because the bullet just scraped the bone and they wouldn't need to cut my arm off. That was just to console me, but in my head I was thinking that my two comrades must have been much better off since they were sent home to rest after a few days while I was kept for two weeks, and every morning when they changed the dressing on my shoulder I would look at the wound with a hand mirror, but for a long time there was no change at all and I would just see the same egg-white ooze for many days. Then one day it started to heal and the pus clotted into a brown mass, while around the wound a pink ring began to emerge and a new layer of skin formed beneath the scab. It was a relief that I didn't really have to do anything since the wound was healing on its own; I was only upset that the injury kept me from taking part in the occupation of the farm, so I also missed out on what followed the firefight, since later the others described how, after the tank had taken out the machine-gun shooter my unit occupied the house and for the next half hour everything was allowed, from clearing out the pantry to doing that stuff with the women. They had found two women in the house, an older and a younger one, and the captain allowed them to do whatever they wanted with them, and in those situations you just want to do that thing more than anything else, nothing could be more natural. I had only taken part in all that once before, and once I was discharged from the infirmary my unit had to begin the pullback, leaving unfinished the task of combing through the occupied territories. I truly regretted that we neglected those farms, but I do remember that one occasion when I was fourth or fifth in line once we had occupied a house without any serious resistance, with only a screeching old man shaking a bent-shafted pitchfork at us, but Grb went over to him and, with a cackle, shot him in the forehead, at which the old fellow fell over like an ear of corn off its stalk. In the kitchen we came upon a woman in her forties, probably his daughter but who knows, though no one really cared, as the glasses and brandy were laid out on the table. We hadn't counted on such a reception; someone asked when the coffee would be ready, at which we all had a good laugh. The captain picked up the bottle and took a sniff, then swilled a few gulps from it, then stepped over to the woman, whom he also sniffed, then grabbed her chin and pulled her to his brandy-wet mouth, and the rest of us understood what was to come, offering no objections as we had gotten very excited by the woman's impassive facial expression. It must once have been a pretty face, but now her eyes had grown puffy; still, once we had yanked off her clothes, and her pinned-up hair fell free to cover her face, then her hips, breasts, and belly were like a sight from some sex magazine, and she endured our acts without a word,

offering no resistance while I, waiting my turn, felt my heart pounding between my legs. The whole wait was over very fast, anyway. Ten minutes and I was up, but just approaching her open thighs and seeing how she lay there, looking at her belly and breasts, her head turned off to the side, the straining muscles and veins of her neck – I had barely given four or five thrusts and I was done. On the way out I took a swig of brandy, then Grb gave me a nice hard slap on the back. *Whatsa matter, little buddy, had enough?*, he asked. He was next in line. – Near the northern border a German Shepherd came up to us, must have run off from somewhere, or gotten chased away. He looked pretty broken down, who knows how long he'd been wandering around in the snow, but he was pretty lucky to have survived the night and not having the border patrol shoot him just out of sheer boredom. He was ambling around between the snowplow and our faded blue truck, his tongue flapping. It was good to finally see a living animal after all the carcasses. Light bluish-purplish clouds floated across the low sky, and the whitened landscape now took on a grayish hue from the soot that blanketed the snow. We arrived at the rickety border station structure. Now the only thing that lay beyond it was a huge rust-pocked sign with the name of the country crossed out, as if signifying that this was the end, that this had been Serbia. Now the border patrol's jeep caught up to us – that old Niva – bringing the previous evening's shift, a little late since the snowdrifts had held them up until their convoy had cleared the road ahead of them, so their comrades stuck at the border had nothing better to do than shoot at the foxes and dogs all night with their scoped rifles, just out of tedium. – Grb was after me in line. The others watched how he did it, from beginning to end, but I went out in front of the house because my legs were trembling a little, which embarrassed me. Grb had a reputation for working over women for quite a while. One time the others told me what kind of things he did, but I wasn't much interested at this point, as I'd rather breathe some fresh air. Grb, true to form, took his time working on this woman as if he wanted to enjoy her to the last drop, but ended up losing his head, or maybe his pitiful brain was just unplugged for a second, and he pulled the trigger several times, even though two guys were still waiting their turn behind him and he left his pistol still inside the woman. – I got out of the truck and pet the German Shepherd since we had a few minutes before the last shift of the patrol set off, and regulations said we had to let them go before us, so we waited for the shift change to happen, amid copious cursing and spitting. Meanwhile I squatted down next to the dog and stroked his scrawny back. Finally the guards, with a twisted smile, waved to us, got in their white Niva, and tore off along the narrow lane now cleared of snow.