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PERSONAL HISTORY | **DECEMBER 5, 2011 ISSUE**

MAPPING HOME

Learning a new city, remembering the old.

BY ALEKSANDAR HEMON

I wanted from Chicago what I had got from Sarajevo: a geography of the soul.

ILLUSTRATION BY RICCARDO VECCHIO

In the spring of 1997, I flew from Chicago, where I was living, to Sarajevo, where I was born and grew up. This was my first return to Sarajevo since the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina had ended, a year and a half earlier. I'd left in 1992, a few months before the siege of the city began. I had no family there anymore (my parents and my sister now lived in Canada), except for Teta Jozefina, whom I considered to be my grandmother. When my parents had moved to Sarajevo after graduating from college in Belgrade, in 1963, they'd rented a room in an apartment that belonged to Jozefina and her husband, Martin, in the part of town called Marin Dvor. In that rented room I was conceived, and it was where I lived for the first two years of my life. Teta Jozefina and Čika Martin, who had two teen-age children at the time, treated me like their own grandchild—to this day, my mother believes that they spoiled me for life. For a couple of years after we moved out, to a different part of Sarajevo, I had to be taken back to Marin Dvor to visit them almost every day. And until the war shattered our common life we spent every Christmas at Teta Jozefina and Čika Martin's, following the same ritual: the same elaborately caloric dishes crowding the big table, the same tongue-burning Herzegovinian wine, the same people telling the same jokes and stories, including the one that featured the toddler me running buck naked up and down the hallway before my nightly bath.

Čika Martin died of a stroke toward the end of the siege, so when I went back in 1997 Teta Jozefina was living alone. I stayed with her, in the room (and, possibly, the very bed) where I had commenced my messy existence. Its walls had been pockmarked by shrapnel and bullets—the apartment had been directly

in the sight line of a Serb sniper across the river. Teta Jozefina was a devout Catholic, but she somehow managed to believe in essential human goodness, despite the abundant evidence to the contrary all around her. She felt that the sniper was essentially a good man, because during the siege, she said, he had often shot over her and her husband's heads to warn them that he was watching and that they shouldn't move so carelessly in their own apartment.

In my first few days back in Sarajevo, I did little but listen to my grandmother's harrowing and humbling stories of the siege, which included a detailed rendition of her husband's death (where he had sat, what he had said, how he had slumped), and wander around the city. I was trying to reconcile the new Sarajevo with the version I'd left behind in 1992. It was not easy for me to comprehend how the siege had transformed the city, because the transformation was not as simple as one thing becoming another. Everything was fantastically different from what I'd known and everything was fantastically the same as before. The buildings were in the same places; the bridges crossed the river at the same points; the streets followed the same obscure yet familiar logic; the layout of the city was unaltered. But the buildings had been mutilated by shells and shrapnel showers, or reduced to crumbling walls; some of the bridges had been destroyed and almost everything in their vicinity was levelled, because the river was the front line; the streets were pocked with mortar-shell marks—lines radiating from each little crater, which an art group had filled with a red substance and which the people of Sarajevo now, incredibly, called "roses." The map of the city that I carried in my head had to be fundamentally emended.

I revisited all my favorite spots in the city center, then roamed the narrow streets high up in the hills, beyond which lay a verdant world of unmapped minefields. I randomly entered building hallways and basements, just to smell them: in addition to the familiar scent of leather suitcases, old magazines, and damp coal dust, there was the odor of hard life and sewage—during the siege, people had often taken shelter from the shelling in their basements. I idled in coffee shops, drinking coffee that tasted like burned corn, instead of the foamy pungency I remembered from before the war. Everything around me was both familiar to the point of pain and entirely uncanny and distant.

One day I was strolling, aimlessly and anxiously, down the street whose prewar name had been Ulica J.N.A. (the Yugoslav People's Army Street) and now was Ulica Branilaca Sarajeva (the Defenders of Sarajevo Street). As I passed what had been called, in the times of socialism—which now seemed positively prehistoric—the Workers University, something made me turn and look over my shoulder into its cavernous entranceway. The turn was not of my own volition: it was my body that turned my head

back, while my mind continued forward for a few steps. Impeding impatient pedestrian traffic, I stood there puzzled until I realized what had made me look back: the Workers University used to house a movie theatre (it had shut down a couple of years before the war), and whenever I'd walked by in those days I'd stopped to look at the display cases where the movie posters and showtimes were exhibited. From the lightless shafts of corporal memory, my body had recalled the action of turning to see what was playing. It had been trained to seek out stimulation in the form of a new movie poster, and it still remembered, the fucker, the way it remembered how to swim when thrown into deep water. Following that involuntary turn, my mind was flooded with a Proustian, if banal, memory: once upon a time in Sarajevo, at the Workers University, I had watched Sergio Leone's "Once Upon a Time in America," and I recalled the acrid smell of the disinfectant that was used to clean the floors of the cinema; I recalled having to peel myself off the sticky fake-leather seats; I recalled the rattle of the parting curtain.

I had left Sarajevo on January 24, 1992. I was twenty-seven (and a half) and had never lived anywhere else, or had any desire to do so. I had spent the few years before that working as a journalist in what was known, in socialist, peacetime Yugoslavia, as "the youth press," which was generally less constrained than the established, mainstream press, reared in the pressure chamber of Tito's one-party state. Though most of my friends in the field were defiant muckrakers, my beat was what was endearingly called "culture." (Before the war, the domain of "culture" seemed to offer a haven from the increasingly hateful world of politics. Now, when I hear the word "culture," I pull out the quote usually attributed to Hermann Göring: "When I hear the word 'culture,' I reach for my revolver.")

In 1991, I worked at the biweekly *Naši Dani*, writing film reviews and a column called "Sarajevo Republika." I considered myself militantly urban, a fanatical Sarajevan. (The title of my column was an allusion to the Mediterranean Renaissance city-states—Dubrovnik and Venice—as well as to the slogan "Kosovo Republika," which had been sprayed on the walls of Kosovo by "the irredentists," who wanted Kosovo to be given the status of a sovereign republic in the Federal Yugoslavia, rather than being classified as an "autonomous province" of Serbia.) In my column, I set out to prove Sarajevo's uniqueness, the inherent sovereignty of its spirit, by reproducing and extolling its mythology in prose that was arrogantly thick with abstruse Sarajevo slang. The first column I ever published was about an *aščcinica*—a traditional Bosnian storefront restaurant that served prepared (as opposed to grilled) food—which had been run by a local family, the Hadžibajrićs, for a hundred and fifty years or so. One of the urban legends about Hadžibajrić's claimed that, back in the seventies, during the filming of the movie "The Battle of Sutjeska"—a state-produced Second World War spectacle, in which Richard Burton played Tito—a

Yugoslav People's Army helicopter was frequently deployed to transport Hadžibajrić's *buredžici* (meat pies in sour cream) to the set, deep in the mountains of eastern Bosnia, for Elizabeth Taylor's gastronomic enjoyment. To this day, many of us are still proud of the possibility that some of the fat in Purple Eyes' ass might have come from Sarajevo.

Other columns covered other subjects: the philosophy of Sarajevo's baroque slang; the myriad time-wasting strategies that I believed were essential for urban-mythology (re)production, and which I executed daily in innumerable *kafanas* (a *kafana* is a coffee shop, bar, restaurant, or any other place where you can spend a lot of time doing nothing, while consuming coffee or alcohol); and Sarajevo's bingo venues, which were frequented by habitual losers, bottom-feeders, and young urbanites in pursuit of coolness credentials. One of the columns was about Vase Miskina Street (now known as Ferhadija), the main pedestrian thoroughfare in the heart of the city, which stretched from downtown to the old town. I referred to it as the city's "artery," because, if you spent enough time drinking coffee at one of its many *kafanas*, the whole city would eventually circulate past you. In the early nineties, street peddlers stationed themselves along Vase Miskina, pushing the penny-cheap detritus of the wrecked workers' state: sewing-machine needles, screwdrivers, and Russian/Serbo-Croat dictionaries. (These days, it's all Third World-capitalism junk: made-in-China plastic toys, miraculous herbal remedies, pirated DVDs.)

Fancying myself a street-savvy columnist, I raked the city for material, absorbing impressions and details and generating ideas for my writing. I don't know if I would've used the word back then, but now I am prone to reimagining my younger self as one of Baudelaire's flâneurs, as someone who wanted to be everywhere and nowhere in particular, for whom wandering was the main means of communication with the city. Sarajevo was a small town, viscous with stories and history, brimming with people I knew and loved, all of whom I could monitor from a well-chosen *kafana* perch or while patrolling the streets. As I surveyed the estuaries of Vase Miskina or the obscure, narrow streets in the hills, complete paragraphs flooded my brain; not infrequently, and mysteriously, a simple lust would possess my body. The city laid itself down for me; wandering stimulated my body as well as my mind. It probably didn't hurt that my daily caffeine and nicotine intake bordered on stroke-inducing—what wine and opium must have been for Baudelaire, coffee and cigarettes were for me.

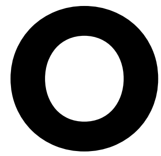
As I would when I came back in 1997, I entered buildings just to smell their hallways. I studied the edges of stone stairs rounded by the many soles that had rubbed against them in the past century or two. I spent gameless days at the Željo soccer stadium, eavesdropping on the pensioners—the retirees who were

lifelong season-ticket holders—as they strolled in circles within its walls, discussing the heartrending losses and unlikely victories of the past. I returned to places I had known my whole life in order to capture details that had been blurred by excessive familiarity. I collected sensations and faces, smells and sights, fully internalizing Sarajevo's architecture and its physiognomies. I gradually became aware that my interiority was inseparable from my exteriority, that the geography of my city was the geography of my soul. Physically and metaphysically, I was *placed*. If my friends spotted me on a side street looking up at the friezes typical of Austro-Hungarian architecture, or lingering on a lonely park bench, watching dogs fetch and couples make out—the kinds of behavior that might have seemed worrisome in someone else—they just assumed that I was working on a column. And I probably was.

Despite my grand plans, I ended up writing only six or seven "Sarajevo Republika" columns before *Naši Dani* ran out of money. The magazine's dissolution was inconspicuous within the ongoing dissolution of Yugoslavia. In the summer of 1991, incidents in neighboring Croatia developed into a full-fledged, fast-spreading war. There were persistent rumors that the Yugoslav People's Army, controlled by the Serbs and happily engaged in Croatia, was secretly transferring troops and weapons to the parts of Bosnia with a majority Serb population. Indeed, *Oslobodjenje*, the Sarajevo daily paper, got hold of a military plan outlining a troop redeployment in Bosnia and Herzegovina that clearly suggested the imminence of war, even though the Army firmly denied the plan.

The Army spokespeople weren't the only ones denying the blatant likelihood of war. The urbanites of Sarajevo were also intent on ignoring the obvious, if for different reasons. Thus the summer of 1991, the last one before the war in Bosnia, was for many of us a continuous festival of disaster euphoria: the streets were packed day and night; parties, sex, and drugs were abundant; the laughter was hysterical. In the seductive glow of inevitable catastrophe, the city appeared more beautiful than ever. By September, however, the complicated operations of denial were winding down. With troubling frequency, I found myself speculating about which of the buildings around me would provide good sniper positions. Yet, even as I envisioned myself and my fellow-citizens ducking under fire, I took those visions to be simply paranoid manifestations of the stress induced by the ubiquitous warmongering politics. I understand now that I was imagining *incidents*, as it was hard for me to imagine *war* in all its force, in much the same way that a young person can imagine the symptoms of an illness but finds it hard to imagine death: life seems so continuously, intensely present.

Nowadays in Sarajevo death is all too easy to imagine and is itself continuously, intensely present, but back then the city was fully alive, both inside me and outside me. Its indelible sensory dimensions, its concreteness, seemed to defy the abstractions of war. I have learned since then that war is the most concrete thing there is, a reality that swallows all, easily overriding any other mode of existence and levelling both interiority and exteriority into the flatness of a crushed soul.



ne day in the early summer of 1991, I went to the American Cultural Center in Sarajevo for an interview that was supposed to assess my suitability for the International Visitor Program, a cultural exchange program that was run by the now defunct United States Information Agency—which I hoped was a spy outfit, whose employees went undercover as culture lovers. I met the man in charge of the center, chatted a bit about this and that (mainly that), and then went home. I did not think that my visit to America would ever come to pass, nor had I noticed the man actually evaluating me. I didn't care all that much. Though I thought it might be fun to Kerouac about in America for a while, I loved my city; I intended to tell stories about it to my children and my grandchildren, to grow old and die there. Around that time, I was having a passionate on-and-off affair with a young woman who was planning to move abroad, because, she said, she felt that she did not belong in Sarajevo. "It is not about where you belong—it is about what belongs to you," I told her, possibly quoting from some movie. I was twenty-seven (and a half) and Sarajevo belonged to me.

I had pretty much forgotten about my summer chat at the American Cultural Center when, in the late fall, I received a call inviting me to visit the United States. I accepted the invitation. I planned to follow the U.S.I.A.'s monthlong itinerary, and then, before returning to Sarajevo, visit an old friend in Chicago. I landed at O'Hare on March 14, 1992. I remember that day as clear and sunny. On my way in from the airport, I saw for the first time Chicago's skyline—an enormous, distant, geometrical city, less emerald than dark against the blue firmament.

By this time, the Yugoslav People's Army was heavily deployed all over Bosnia, following the previously denied plan; Serbian paramilitaries were crazy busy slaughtering; there were random barricades and shootings on the streets of Sarajevo. In early April, a peaceful demonstration in front of the Bosnian Parliament Building was targeted by Serb snipers. In an ensuing series of incidents, two women were killed on the Vrbanja Bridge, a hundred yards or so from Teta Jozefina's apartment, quite conceivably by the same good sniper who later maculated the walls in the room of my conception. On the outskirts of the city and in the hills above, the war was already mature and raging, but in the heart of Sarajevo people

still seemed to think that it would somehow stop before it bit into their flesh. To my anxious inquiries from Chicago, my mother would respond, "There is already less shooting than yesterday"—as though war were a spring rain.

My father, however, advised me to stay away. Nothing good was going to happen at home, he said. I was supposed to fly back from Chicago on May 1st, and as things got progressively worse in Sarajevo I was kept awake by my fear for my parents' and friends' lives and by worries about my previously unimagined and currently unimaginable future in America. Daily, I wrangled with my conscience: if you were the author of a column titled "Sarajevo Republika," then wasn't it your duty to go back and defend your city and its spirit from annihilation?

"Well, not going to starve—now who's the crazy cat lady?"

Much of that wrangling I did while incessantly roaming the streets of Chicago, as though I could simply walk off my moral anxiety. I'd pick a movie that I wanted to see—both for distraction and out of my old habits as a film reviewer—then locate, with my friend's help, a theatre that was showing it. From Ukrainian Village, the neighborhood where I was staying, I'd take public transportation a couple of hours before the movie started, buy a ticket, and then wander in concentric circles around the movie theatre. My first journey was to the Esquire (now no longer a movie venue) on Oak Street, in the affluent Gold Coast neighborhood. The Esquire was my Plymouth Rock. The movie was Michael Apted's "Thunderheart," in which Val Kilmer played an F.B.I. agent of Native American background coming to terms with his past and his heritage. I remember the movie being as bad as it sounds, though I don't remember many details. Nor do I remember much of my first Gold Coast roam, because it has become indistinguishable from all the other ones, the way the first day of school is subsumed in the entirety of your educational experience.

I subsequently journeyed to movie theatres all over Chicago and walked in circles around all of them. I saw more bad movies, in so-called bad neighborhoods, where, the movies notwithstanding, nothing bad ever happened to me. There was always plenty of space for walking, as few cared to crowd the streets in those parts of Chicago. When I had no money for the movies—my main source of income was the card

game Preference, which I had taught my friend and his buddies to play—I would explore the areas of Wicker Park, Bucktown, and Humboldt Park (Saul Bellow's childhood neighborhood), which was adjacent to Ukrainian Village and, I was warned, gang-infested.

I could not quit. A tormented flâneur, I kept walking, my Achilles tendons sore, my head in the clouds of fear and longing for Sarajevo, until I finally reconciled myself to the idea of staying. On May 1st, I did not fly home. On May 2nd, all the exits out of the city were blocked; the longest siege in modern history began. In Chicago, I submitted my application for political asylum. The rest is the rest of my life.

In my ambulatory expeditions, I be came acquainted with Chicago, but I did not yet know the city. The need to know it in my body, to locate myself in the world, had not been satisfied. I did not know how to live in Chicago, how to communicate with it in the urban language I had acquired at home. The American city was organized in a fundamentally different way from Sarajevo. (A few years later, I would find a Bellow quotation that perfectly encapsulated my feeling about the city at the time: "Chicago was nowhere. It had no setting. It was something released into American space.")

In the Sarajevo I knew, you possessed a personal infrastructure: your *kafana*, your barber, your butcher; the landmarks of your life (the spot where you fell and broke your arm playing soccer, the corner where you waited to meet the first of the many loves of your life, the bench where you first kissed her); the streets where people would forever know and recognize you, the space that identified you. Because anonymity was well nigh impossible and privacy literally incomprehensible (there is no word for "privacy" in Bosnian), your fellow-Sarajevans knew you as well as you knew them. If you somehow vanished, your fellow-citizens could have reconstructed you from their collective memory and the gossip that had accrued over years. Your sense of who you were, your deepest identity, was determined by your position in a human network, whose physical corollary was the architecture of the city.

Chicago, on the other hand, was built not for people to come together but for them to be safely apart. Size, power, and the need for privacy seemed to be the dominant elements of its architecture. Vast as it was, Chicago ignored the distinctions between freedom and isolation, between independence and selfishness, between privacy and loneliness. In this city, I had no human network within which to place myself. My displacement was metaphysical to precisely the same extent to which it was physical. But I couldn't live nowhere. I wanted from Chicago what I had got from Sarajevo: a geography of the soul.

More walking was needed, as was, even more pressingly, reasonably gainful employment. After a few illegal, below-minimum-wage jobs, some of which required me to furnish someone else's Social Security number (fuck you, Arizona!), I took my first legal job, canvassing door to door for Greenpeace. When I first called to inquire about the job, I did not even know what it was, what the word "canvassing" meant. Naturally, I was terrified of talking to Americans on their doorsteps, what with my insufficient English, devoid of articles and contaminated with a thick foreign accent, but I craved the ambulatory freedom between the doors. So, in the early summer of 1992, I found myself canvassing in the proudly indistinguishable, dull western suburbs (Schaumburg, Naperville); in the wealthy North Shore ones (Wilmette, Winnetka, Lake Forest), with their hospital-size houses and herds of cars in palatial garages; and in the southern working-class ones (Blue Island, Park Forest), where people invited me into their homes and offered me stale Twinkies. But my favorite turf was, predictably, in the city: Pullman, Beverly, Lakeview, and then the Parks—Hyde, Lincoln, Rogers. Little by little, I began to sort out the geography of Chicagoland, assembling a street map in my mind, building by building, door by door. Occasionally, I slacked off before canvassing, in a local diner, struggling to enjoy the burned-corn taste of American coffee, monitoring the foot traffic, the corner drug trade, the friendly ladies. A few times, I skipped work entirely and just walked and walked in the neighborhood assigned to me. I became a low-wage, immigrant flâneur.

At the same time, I was obsessively following TV reports from the besieged Sarajevo, trying to assess from afar the extent of the devastation. Toward the end of May, I had watched the footage of a massacre on Vase Miskina, when a Serb shell hit a breadline, killing scores of Sarajevans. I'd attempted to identify the people on the screen—writhing in a puddle of rose-red blood, their legs torn off, their faces distorted with shock and pain—but I could not. I had a hard time recognizing the place as well. The street I'd thought I owned, and had frivolously dubbed the city artery, was now awash in the actual blood of those I'd left behind, and all I could do was watch the looping thirty-second stories on "Headline News."

Even from Chicago, I could guess at the magnitude of my home town's transformation. The street that connected my neighborhood (Socijalno) with downtown was rechristened Sniper Alley. The Željo stadium, where I had eavesdropped on the pensioners, was now controlled by the Serbs, its wooden stands burned down. The little bakery in Kovaci that produced the best *somun* (which is like leavened pita bread) in town, and therefore in the world, was also burned down. The Museum of the 1984 Winter Olympic

Games, housed in a beautiful Austro-Hungarian building of no strategic value whatsoever, was shelled (and is still a ruin). The pseudo-Moorish National Library was shelled; it burned, along with its hundreds of thousands of books (and is still a ruin).

In December of 1994, I briefly volunteered at the International Human Rights Law Institute of DePaul University's College of Law, where evidence of possible war crimes in Bosnia was being collected. By then, I had quit canvassing and enrolled in graduate school at Northwestern, and I desperately needed a job, so I showed up at the institute's downtown office, hoping that someone would give me one. There was no way for my prospective employers to know who I was or had been—I could easily have been a spy—so they offered me what they thought were simple volunteer tasks. At first, I input some data for the concentration-camp database, where every testimony about or mention of a camp or a site that had served as such was filed. But eventually I was given a stack of photographs of destroyed and damaged buildings in Sarajevo, as yet unidentified, and asked to note their locations. Many of the buildings were roofless or hole-ridden or burned, their windows blown out. There were few people in those pictures, but what I was doing felt very much like identifying corpses.

Now and then I could recall the street or even the exact address; sometimes the buildings were so familiar they seemed unreal. There was, for example, the building at the corner of Danijela Ozme and Kralja Tomislava, across from which I used to wait for Renata, my high-school girlfriend, to come down from Džidžikovac. Back then, there was a supermarket on the ground floor of the building, where I would buy candy or cigarettes when she was late, which was always. I'd known that building for years. It had stood in its place solid, indelible. I'd never devoted any thought to it until I saw its picture in Chicago. In the photograph, the building was hollow, disembowelled by a Serb shell, which had evidently fallen through the roof and dropped down a few floors. The supermarket now existed only in the flooded storage space of my memory.

There were also buildings that I recognized but could not exactly place. And then there were ones that were wholly unknown to me—I couldn't even figure out what part of town they might have been in. I have since learned that you don't need to know every part of a city to own the whole of it, but in that office in downtown Chicago it terrified me to think that there was some sector of Sarajevo that I did not know and probably never would, as it was now disintegrating like a cardboard stage set, in the downpour of Serb shells. The siege was making it impossible for me ever to return to the defined space of my

previous life. If my mind and my city were the same thing, then I was losing my mind. Converting Chicago into my mental space, developing a new personal urban infrastructure, became psychiatrically urgent, metaphysically essential.

In the spring of 1993, after a year or so of living in Ukrainian Village, I moved to a lakeside neighborhood called Edgewater, on Chicago's North Side. I rented a tiny studio in a building called the Artist in Residence, in which various lonely and not exactly successful artists resided. The AiR provided a loose sense of community within the city's anonymity; it offered a rehearsal space for musicians, dancers, and actors, as well as access to a computer for those of us who harbored writerly hopes. The building manager's implausibly appropriate name was Art.

Back then, Edgewater was where one went to acquire cheap—and bad—heroin. I had been warned that it was a rough neighborhood, but what I saw there were varieties of despair that seemed to match my own. One day I stood on Winthrop Avenue looking up at the top of a building on whose ledge a young woman sat deliberating whether to kill herself, while a couple of guys down on the street kept shouting "Jump!" They did so out of sheer asshole malice, of course, but at the time their suggestion seemed to me a reasonable resolution to the continuous problem we call life.

I was still working for Greenpeace at this point, walking different city neighborhoods and suburbs every day, but every night I came back to the Edgewater studio I could call my own. I was beginning to develop a set of ritualistic practices. Before sleep, I would listen to a demented monologue delivered by a chemically stimulated corner loiterer, and occasionally muffled by the soothing sound of trains clattering past on the El tracks. In the morning, drinking coffee, I would watch from my window the people waiting at the Granville El stop, recognizing the regulars. Sometimes I'd splurge on breakfast at a Shoney's on Broadway (now long gone) that offered a $2.99 all-you-can-eat deal to the likes of me and the residents of a nursing home on Winthrop, who would arrive en masse, holding hands like schoolchildren. At Gino's North, where there was only one beer on tap and where many an artist got shitfaced, I'd watch the victorious Bulls' games, high-fiving only the select few who were not too drunk to lift their elbows off the bar. I'd spend weekends playing chess at a Rogers Park coffee shop, next to a movie theatre. I often played with an old Assyrian named Peter, who owned a perfume shop and who, whenever he put me in an indefensible position and forced me to resign, would make the same joke: "Can I have that in writing?" But there was no writing coming from me. Deeply displaced, I could write neither in Bosnian nor in English.

Little by little, people in Edgewater began to recognize me; I started greeting them on the street. Over time, I acquired a barber and a butcher and a movie theatre and a coffee shop with a steady cast of colorful characters (the chess players). I discovered that in order to transform an American city into a personal space you had to start in a particular neighborhood. Soon, I began to claim Edgewater as mine; I became a local. It was there that I understood what Nelson Algren meant when he wrote that loving Chicago was like loving a woman with a broken nose: I fell in love with the broken noses of Edgewater. On the AiR's ancient communal Mac, I typed my first attempts at stories in English.

Therefore it was of the utmost significance that Edgewater turned out to be the neighborhood where shiploads of Bosnians escaping the war washed up in the spring of 1994. I experienced a shock of recognition one day, when I looked out my window and saw a family strolling down the street—where few ever walked, except in pursuit of heroin—in an unmistakably Bosnian formation: the eldest member leading the way at a slow, aimless pace, all of them slouching, hands on their butts, as though burdened by a weighty load of worries. Before long, Edgewater was dense with Bosnians: contrary to the local customs, they took evening walks, the anxiety of displacement clear in their gait; in large, silent groups, they drank coffee at a lakeside Turkish café (thereby converting it into a proper *kafana*), a dark cloud of war trauma and cigarette smoke hovering over them; their children played on the street, oblivious of the business conducted on the corner. It was as if they had come looking for me in Edgewater; my home had followed me to Chicago, just as I was turning Chicago into my home. The circle seemed to be serendipitously closing.

In February, 1997, a couple of months before my first return to Sarajevo, my best friend, Veba, came to Chicago for a visit. For the first few days, I listened to the stories of his life in Sarajevo during the siege, the stories of horrible transformation that the war had brought upon the besieged. I was still living at the AiR. Despite the February cold, Veba wanted to see where my life was taking place, so we wandered around Edgewater: to the Shoney's, the chess café, the *kafana* on the shore of the now iced-over lake. Veba got a haircut at my barber's; we bought meat at my butcher's. I told him my Edgewater stories: about the young woman on the ledge, about the Bosnian family in walking formation, about Peter the Assyrian.

Then we ventured out of Edgewater, to Ukrainian Village. I showed him where I'd lived in that neighborhood. I took him to the Burger King where I had fattened myself into American shape while listening to old Ukes discussing Ukrainian politics over sixty-nine-cent coffee—I used to call them the

Knights of the Burger King. We wandered around the Gold Coast, spotting a Matisse in some rich person's apartment, nicely positioned so that it could be seen from the street; we saw a movie at the Esquire. We visited the Water Tower, and I told Veba about the great Chicago fire. We had a drink at the Green Mill, where Al Capone used to imbibe Martinis, and where many giants of jazz history had performed. I showed him where the St. Valentine's Day Massacre had taken place: the garage was long gone, but urban myth had it that dogs still growled at the site, because they could smell the blood.

Showing Veba around, telling him the stories of Chicago and of my life in Edgewater, I realized that large parts of the city had entered me and settled there; I owned those parts now. They had been selected based on the criteria I had acquired at home. I saw my new city through the eyes of Sarajevo; Chicago's map had been superimposed on the map of my home town in my head. The two places had now combined to form a complicated internal landscape, a space where I could wander and feel at home, and in which stories could be generated. When I came back from my first visit to Sarajevo, in the spring of 1997, the Chicago I came back to belonged to me. Returning from home, I returned home. ♦

ALEKSANDAR HEMON