

LIVIO HORRAKH

DOVE MUORE L'ASTRAGALO

Translated by Eliza Jermyn

Tuesday, August 5th

There isn't a seat, on the train. I lay my bag on the ground and sit on top of it. The car is full of Slavs running from France; they're coming from Paris, Leon, Bordeaux. They want to see their country one more time, before they die. It's deathly hot, every day hotter than the one before. Luckily, I get off at Ljubljana. Mira is coming from Bordighera, and wants so badly to share her stories, but I am just watching for some sucker to get in line for the toilet so I can take his spot. Still three hours yet in the trip. A little station, someone wrote on the wall: "the Wind has reached Spain. WE'RE DAMNED." Hnan is from Sudan. He told me so. I get on in Ljubluana, too, with my friend. Maybe we'll hitchhike together until Belgrade. Detour then for Bulgaria. Mostly, we drink. Hot beer. Stan, born in Nice thirty-five years ago, now a world citizen, offers it. The bottles of French beer make the rounds quickly and then fly empty out the window. I think I'm a little drunk. Hnan is tired. Paris West-Trieste the whole journey on foot. He stands in the middle of the aisle. Nobody minds him. The Slav disappears in Borovnica. He gets off but leaves all his stuff on the train. It slowly departs.

At 23:45, we're in Ljubljana. I hope they give me somewhere to sleep, at the address that Giovanni pointed me to. Hnan and I decide to find each other the next day (it's already today) here, at the station, to go to Belgrade together. He will sleep on a pack wrapped in a waterproof towel. Now it's cold. Not even a dog on the way home. I quickly find the street and the house. I sleep poorly. I turn on the light and begin to read again, maybe for the hundredth time, "The Last Beach." I want to fill my eyes with the world, with what remains of it, and not think of anything else. Until I will have the time.

Wednesday, August 6th

We aren't waiting long. Close to 7:00 some Dutch guys picked us up in a yellow Zodiac. They lost everything. The Hague is turning into more of a sinkhole every day by a frothy and spiteful sea. I have a stomachache. I don't know if this is already the start. Spotted, skeletal cows, sunflower deserts. Zagreb. We'll buy some bread and cheese and two bottles of milk. We eat quickly because the others want to get going. Fields of corn and abandoned bicycles. We arrive in Belgrade in the evening. We find Frenchmen, Spaniards, Italians, Portuguese, Germans in a miraculously still-standing hotel. There's also an English girl that I think I saw on the way from Zagreb to Belgrade.

Her name is Annabel. Gregory is American. America doesn't exist anymore. Or rather, the people that lived there, the animals and the plants, they're all dead. He and his girlfriend, an insignificant blonde, found themselves in Europe when the war exploded. They're on the run, like everyone. To the East. They pull out a cheap bottle of whiskey. Hnan tells about what used to be his country. There are some young Czechoslovaks camping out with bags and things at the doors of the city. I decide that it's convenient for me to go on towards Free Greece, otherwise the trip would be too long. The visa for Bulgaria costs eight yuan. Sixteen, seventeen restful hours.

Thursday, August 7th

I'm unwell again. I can't tell if it's cold or hot. We're walking, down, to the old highway. We sit on the bare roadside. The sun is still low. The first breakfast consists of a couple sips of cold water from my canteen and two large slices of rice bread. Resigned faces pass in front of us. A young farm boy wants to sell us betel leaves. We try to tell him, with gestures, that we would prefer some cooked leaves, if they made that.

It's already ten in the morning. Only armored cars pass. 11:00. We're going to the station and asking if there's a bus for Sofia. They tell us that there's a car heading to Niš leaving in a bit, with some plasma. We quickly buy some fruit, two loaves of bread and a small piece of dog jerky. We refill our canteens with water and then we board. Everyone else on the bus is a soldier. They watch us with a curiosity. I pull out the map of Yugoslavia, unfold it on my knees and they all lean in a little. They ask us where we're going. They make big gestures with their hands when they hear that I'm going to Istanbul. They offer us something to smoke. Svilajnac. Paraćin.

Never-ending views of unharvested walnut trees, starting to rot. It's evening at this point. We arrive in Niš at eleven. We don't know if there are hotels or hostels, but even if there are, they're closed by now. We wander around for a little, until we find a farmer who is willing to let us sleep in a small room in his farmhouse for one yuan. The nightly price also includes a wake-up call in the morning, we make him understand. He brings us a pitcher of cold water and two slices of homemade bread. We ask him if he could sell us a bit of cheese and a bottle of slivovjtz. We get it with a half yuan. The beds stink of vomit. We stretch out on the ground cursing those who had been here before us.

*Friday,
August 8th*

We get on the road at a good time in the morning. A Dutch couple gives us a ride until Pirot.

We take a coach that goes until Sofia. It's about sixty-five miles. We arrive at the border around 9:45. The manifesto of Mao Zedong dominates, enormous, at customs. There's a freight train that goes from Sofia to Haskovo. It departs at 11:00 and arrives at 19:00. I believe I'll take that: in Bulgaria it's all but impossible to hitchhike. Chinese soldiers everywhere. There's a violent contrast between the Bulgarian landscape, which literally explodes in forests of flowers from astonishing mutations, and the people. So silent and sad. Factories, smokestacks, garages at a semi-artisanal level pop up here and there. Within two months, they won't stain this terse and discolored sky anymore. Free Greece. Eighteen miles of desolate and unrecognizable land. Bulgaria again. Sofia. Hnan goes away. Day by day, you find yourself always more alone.

A few people on the street. Dead cats and birds. A military march sounds from somewhere. Someone screams, from a house. Graffitied on an entryway, written in English: "I made love to Mary Jane for the last time here." At the station, I climb on a freight train, there's no one around. For three nights I only sleep a little or not at all. Bloodstains on the straw. A livestock wagon that doesn't have even one cow to transport. Puffs of steam. We're moving. Among mountain rubble the red train grinds along with difficulty. We're late. I vomit again. I am happy to be alive; it doesn't matter for how much longer. We arrive in Haskovo at 9:00.

I put the rucksack under my head and I fall asleep on a wooden bench at the station.

Saturday, August 9th

I know some Germans that are going until Çorlu, a hundred and five miles from Istanbul. I make the first complete lunch, if it can be called lunch, since the beginning of the trip. We leave at two. The Bulgarian countryside is brutal in its noxious beauty, that Turkish plain, an exasperating monotony. There's a troop train for Istanbul at 22:00. An hour and twenty-minute trip. Contaminated corn fields as far as the eye can see. Sudden gash of the Bosphorus Strait illuminated by hundreds and hundreds of lights from the boats that shuttle back and forth between Europe and Asia without any interruption. To run is useless. And yet, I still hope. Foolishly.

I finally arrived. For a moment, I forget everything, the tiredness, the melancholy, the discomforts of the trip. There's an entire city to discover, the temporary capital of the Popular Republic of the Middle East, Istanbul. I fall asleep in seconds, as soon as I get in the hotel room that I found a quarter mile from the station.

Sunday, August 10th

The sun is shining. I sleep until eleven in the morning. In the afternoon I set off again, in search of a hostel. To walk the streets of Istanbul, or Stambul as they call it here, gives you a sense of dizziness and confusion. People like ants. Twenty-two million people that are dying of hunger, more than three quarters of which are the remaining Americans and Europeans, concentrated in this marvelous ghetto. A beehive of emotions. I am tossed right and left in the vain search for a non-existent address. I finally get my thoughts straight. The hostel is in Florya, a neighborhood outside Stambul, forty-five miles from the city. I take a bus that brings me to the Black Sea beach, Florya exactly, at one time one of the most beautiful beaches in the world, they say.

The hostel opens at 18:00. I buy some Turkish yogurt, acidic and chilled, a paper cone of Jordan almonds and peppered peanuts, and a pack of loose Turkish tobacco for cigarettes, good stuff. A field of artichoke thistles in bloom is a taste of what will later be the hostel bed. The hostel is half-empty. There's a Pakistani, two Frenchmen leaving tomorrow. A Spaniard, too, named Domingo. "*The Last Beach.*"

Monday, August 11th

Wandering the bazaars. I buy an Indian flute. We're going to *Mısır Çarşısı*, the Spice Bazaar. Bewildered by all the kinds, for all tastes.

There's only one way to see the city from above: rock climb among the steel and cement ruins of the Hilton Hotel. Drowned by the sun, the three vast swarms of humans stretch out across the great, blue expanse, separated from each other by the Bosphoros and the Golden Horn. I press my gaze further out there: on the promontory between the Golden Horn and the Sea of Marmara lies Stambul, the oldest part of the city. To the East, on the other promontory between the Golden Horn and the Bosphoros, stretches Galata, with its bridge, sinking into the sea, to form Beyoğlu, the modern aggregate of Istanbul. I don't know for whom I'm even writing all this.

The Spaniard and I will leave the hostel tomorrow. It's too far from the city, from the heart of Stambul. We cross the Galata Bridge: the sliver of the bridge that emerges from the water. They fish for something to eat, hundreds of scoundrels tossed from the pedestals into oblivion.

Another mosque, the Mosque of the Roses, and it's already evening. The long minarets pop up from every Istanbul plaza, from every field where they are nestled. We join a company of colorful hippies, seating ourselves among them on the trodden cobblestones that surround the Eski Imaret Mosque. I play my harmonica the best I can. Accompanied by their guitars, they sing about impossible dreams.

Stambul is illuminated by the lights that escape the Bosphoros Strait. Shacks, anti-atomic refuges, marvelous villas, the ghetto, the most desperate poverty and the hunger crushing little by little, hour by hour, this last

stronghold of Western civilization. No one cries on the radioactive ashes. Tomorrow is in the hands of Allah.

We return to Florya on the back of a truck. Ravi, the Pakistani, will depart with us for New Baghdad Wednesday the 13th on the Eastern Train.

Tuesday, August 12th

We're leaving. Appointment with Ravi for Wednesday, at the east station, the one on the other side of the Bosphoros Strait. People are dying there, on the street. Indifference. We get a room in the vicinity of the Blue Mosque. We are literally taken by the incantation that emanates from this monument, testimony to a world that is slowly crumbling and that, of course, intermittently lights up in brilliant, herculean flashes. The six minarets neatly stand out in the clear sky above the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, the Blue Mosque. We go in. The partitions, covered in blue ceramic tiles, and the chapel, painted the same color, fill our eyes with boundless horizons. Domingo is crying. Men and babies sleep on the concrete floor. We get closer to the pulpit for the prayer and glimpse, in a white marble niche, a fragment of the black rock of Kaaba. We collapse onto the rose-colored tapestries, from the duration and the bitterness known to a traveler, and we meditate. On the fantastic, mysterious and arcane origin of that rock which comes from other spaces and other eons.

A Turk asks us if we pray to God in our churches. God died, we tell him, on June 3rd, 1978.

It's 13:00. Atrocious stomach fits. We file into a minuscule cafeteria, popular in the Sirkeci neighborhood. We are served more than an hour later. We recognize the 'paradise distributor' at the sound of a Kemeçe. This is now his official name, in Istanbul like everywhere else. We climb the precipitous stairs of a dormitory. In a small, simple room, he sells Allah's Heaven. We pay three Turkish yuan. The Angel of the Merciful will make me forget for a few moments the anathema that eats away at my insides. I discover later that the marijuana is of horrible quality and is already cut with tobacco. We split it.

We begin to wander around aimlessly again. The sun is getting low. Will this be it, the last time?

We take the ferry to cross the Bosphoros. It doesn't particularly affect me, the fact that I find myself in Asia. But what else should I do? This part of the city seems more hostile. They look at us with derision, with disdain. A bazaar. I sell my camera and pocket watch. We buy some provisions for our trip on the black market. It will be a long and exhausting journey, more than four days. Entirely on a freight train, probably.

We cross the Strait again. Sirens and lighthouses break up the vast, blue sea that crashes in violent waves against the sides of the ship. Soft and clear

like this radioactive sky that fades in the thousand nights of Ahmed the Magnificent.

Populated neighborhoods. Pock-marked men and children tormented by leprosy. Skinned cats are hung in shutters of houses for anyone who has enough yuan to buy them. The whole city is sick, infected. An enormous bazaar that wriggles in the grip of a slow agony.

Living is a profession now. I knew drug dealers, spell merchants, wandering fortune-tellers, pimps of young girls and gays, street corner scribes, producers of improvised, pornographic shows, people who killed themselves for money.

We eat quickly at the dining hall. It's about 22:00. We run into the hippies from the other day once again in the Haseki neighborhood. We wander around for a bit and by the light of the streetlamps, find our way to the Bayazit mosque garden. We sit on the grass to savor the night and the smell of the Sea of Marmara that reaches us by way of a sudden breeze, sweet and deadly.

Istanbul at night is different. Radioactive rain falls every night. Deserted streets. The few who are on the streets walk quickly, each wishing to return home, if they have a home.

The Golden Horn, irreparably broken. We buy some fried fish from a ship. It doesn't taste like fish, instead there's a strange flavor, that knows of far skies and unknown grasses. They fish for *balik* in the Strait, cook it in the same kayak, salt it and sell it to passers-by after having wiped it with a drug-soaked rag.

We return to our room. A little loft, hot and smelly. I take some deep, slow breaths. My lungs are beginning to burn. This, this is not my world.

Wednesday, August 13th

Once again, we cross the Bosphoros. But this time there's no going back. I feel a bit better today. Ravi met us at the station. The freight train goes until Nusaybin, at the border between Syria and Iraq.

From wagon to wagon in search of a little space. Arabs and Turks packed between mountains of bags and rucksacks. We find a spot for our stuff and get off. We buy some bread and water to fill our canteens. You can buy potable water, for now. Ravi needs to move his stuff to another car, one headed for Tabriz. Two Frenchmen get on. They're going until Basrah. Then Calcutta. We discover that we had lived in the same dump in Istanbul but never met. The train departs.

Uskudar. In Izmit after two hours of travel. An inferno catches in Bilecik. The people, terrorized, run towards the countryside. The freight stops in Eskisehir for forty-five minutes. We decide what we'll do once we arrive in Baghdad, if we ever do. Kabul is far. Maybe it doesn't even exist anymore.

Ankara is barely a village. There are a couple shacks planted on the southeast side of a large basin formed by a yellow, putrid river. The Sakarya runs towards a new thermonuclear estuary, filled with bloated animal carcasses.

Kayseri. Evening falls. The Milky Way is stunning. The sky bends, and the last stars seem like they're touching the ground. I am filled with nostalgia for undiscovered worlds, worlds that will never be seen. Cold. More painful stomach fits. I lay on the ground, like the others.

Thursday, August 14th

The sunrise vanishes across the Steppe, covered with cardoons, wormwood and locoweed. Occasionally roadsteads appear with forests of violet poplars, enormous willows, wild mulberries. Along the running water grow red, carnivorous flowers and as the train moves, flashes of verdant basins filled with blooming apricot trees. They crop up among monstrous rhododendrons, apples orchards and shallow vineyards.

Kirikkale suddenly appears. Tired faces, thin, red from hunger and desperation. Why prolong this agony? We buy four loaves of focaccia. The water in our canteens is already hot.

The first *cadir*. They're the rectangular Arabic-style tents that the nomads carry on horses and cows, escaping along a trail that goes from northeast to southeast. From here to the edges of the world, where the sun is put out in the Chinese Ocean, the dead City. Enormous cemeteries of steel and cement, tentacles of suburban developments, abandoned to the atomic rain, the wind, the desert. Man has left, forever. Only crazies, cockroaches, poets and government officials still live there. The others, the runaways, are going east, on wagons towed by animals and other people, stopping every now and then in villages of circular straw huts. Then they leave again. On the freight trains, on the trucks that transport medicines and the living, on foot. Another two months and then it will all be over.

I fall asleep with the sun in my eyes. 97 degrees. 104. One girl is mad I'm smiling. There's no more time to hate ourselves. We split our bread with the others. They try to understand. They show something with their hands. Two Chinese soldiers offer us something to smoke. They're farming on the land that's still fertile in the fields around Ankara and they're going by train from one commune to another.

Ulukisla. The Spaniard is ill. I can't help him. No one can help us.

It's already another evening. My home, my people, the dreams formed on summer nights are no longer more than an illusion. The only reality is the clanking of the freight as it heads towards nothing.

We arrive in Adana at three in the morning. I'm still awake.

Friday, August 15th

We skirt the coast of Syria for more than eight hundred miles. Kilis. Then Barak. The freight stops for an hour in Akcacale.

Karkamis. 14:00 soon. We're silent.

We cross the Euphrates. On the way, trucks run parallel to the train, overloaded with people and the contents of their homes.

At 20:00, we arrive in Nusaybin. A mile and a half until the border with Syria. We get off. You can't continue. It requires special permission. They'll give us the visa papers at the Syrian border control. But for where?

The universe is driving me mad; I am certain it has some control over the cesspool of this dying planet.

Then comes the desert. We'll have to cross two hundred and fifty miles of the Tall Kochak with some luck to reach Mosul. Otherwise we will be forced to return to the Nusaybin port and wait. To wait maybe until the end of the arrival of the next convoy to Al Mawsk.

They make us quickly unload our stuff in a frenzy. The heavy vehicle keeps moving.

It's night. Some abandoned houses. A fountain. A group of poplars. A mosque with its minaret. Seated in a semicircle on the steps, the final runaways sing a sad song to the distant galaxies.

Military buildings, vaulted chambers. Fortifications. Antiatomic refuges, antimissile posts. Only the wind responds to our footsteps. We head back. At the station we drop onto the wooden benches without giving it a thought. The rain falls. It sticks the sick Earth like the point of a needle, tons of grey needles, one next to the other. It comes straight down, dripping through the molding on the station ceiling, hammering the deformed, rusty metal fence.

Saturday, August 16th

A locomotive whistle wakes us up in the morning. Bags on our shoulders, we take the dusty road that bring us to border control. We arrive after an hour of walking. Seven, eight Friesian horses, a hut with a tiny office, a torn flag. The interior was painted the color of milky coffee. No shacks, no roads. Some bits of grass grow here and there. It's seven.

We get on a military truck that goes from parts of Mosul. After twenty minutes we arrive at the Iraqi border. We leave again.

It's the Tall Kochak desert. Two hundred and fifty miles of cast-off, radioactive land. Holes, sand, slopes and unexpected plains. Oppressive heat, a humidity that comes before a violent storm.

In the distance, some Chinese soldiers are raising a tent.

The desert unwinds zigzagging among the dunes carved by the wind. Further away we glimpse the first empty, ruined houses of Mosul.

It hot, so hot now. I vomit. Some skeletal dogs on the street. There's no one. We sit on the ground, in the shade of a large portico. Four tables, a cistern fountain. Vultures weaves complicated patterns in a useless, faded sky.

In a little abandoned shop, we find a little corn flour and oil. Who will ever use this? Only the marijuana smoked in the silence of the night succeeds in placating, for a moment, the never-ending sadness.

On the way to Ash Shura. Jean-Claude is sick. His face and entire body are covered in red splotches. He can't walk anymore. So then, it's really the end. Within a few days, it will begin for us, too. I am indifferent to the idea of dying. I will run once again along the paths of this earth until night no longer falls and the last birds have gone somewhere else.

We carry our friend in our arms. Two hours later, a truck picks us up. Ash Shura. A village. We get off. It's raining, and another person is dying. We dig a ditch at the edge of floral clearing, to the east, where the sun rises.

We walk under the whip of the wind. Fissures and gullies open up in the lowlands where Samarra once rose.

An unmoving freight train on rusty, serpentine train tracks. Arabs and Chinese. Some Europeans. Someone is crying. The old train clunks and clatters. We move towards Baghdad.

Sunday, August 17th

Stinking meadows make breathing difficult. Camel carcasses. At 10:00 we arrive at the New Baghdad railyard. 125 degrees in the shade. The streets are deserted. Shops ransacked or destroyed by the flooding Tigris. Filth and dead mice everywhere. We cross the bridge sticking out between the two riverbanks. We get off under the arcade where the pebbly riverbed is still dry. The Spaniard goes away. He escapes to some other dream.

With our bags over our shoulders, we walk on a straight, suburban street, burned by the silence and death. Empty chimneys tower like impressive cathedrals without foundation and the cement slowly crumbles.

We still have a bit of bread. We follow mule tracks that bring us to Al Mussayb. I vomit. We lie down in the shelter of a bus destroyed by some bombs.

Monday, August 18th

We start back on the road. It's dawn. We arrive in Babylonia at noon. Some Egyptians and a Syrian woman are cooking snakes. The sun relentlessly beats down on our heads. We walk on this scorched land, thousands of years old, without speaking a word. Hills and slopes. From the top of a hill we catch sight of a boundless stretch of ruins beneath us, of still-intact walls, of stones

that fall until they are touching the right bank of the Euphrates. Hot. We sit down to drink from the canteen.

My hands, my face, in flames. I can no longer stand. My companion carries me down a descent, to the feet of an immense and mysterious monument, erected in the name of an unknown god.

E-sag-ila, I don't...