

AMMIEL ALCALAY

# Reverse Migration

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

AS SOMEONE WHOSE RANGE OF WORK is hard to categorize both generically and geographically, I often find myself drawing on various aspects of my own experience in order to recalibrate the place from which I'm thinking and feel I need to write from. Given the paucity of useful critical exchange regarding so much writing in the United States, this is also a survival mechanism, a way of constantly upping the ante on the elements that go into the composition of a self, a historical moment, a stance *from* which to write in order to push my work further. These forays into auto-critique can be found embedded throughout my work in more conventional modes (reviews, prefaces, introductions, interviews, etc.), but are most evident in what has become a fairly large group of essays, often utilizing numbered sections that juxtapose quite disparate material, starting with an 1989 piece called "Understanding Revolution."

The essay that follows, originally written at the request of a former student, Vesna Vircburger, compiling a book of essays by writers from the former Yugoslavia to be published in Serbia, certainly falls into that category. However, given that I am *not* an ex-Yugoslav writer but a U.S. born writer and translator with family origins in ex-Yugoslavia, some further explanation, or entryway, was in order. This, in itself, had to become part of the essay, just as I felt that including the circumstances through which it was written also needed to be included. In this instance, rather than "comment" on my own role as a teacher, for example, adopting the conventions of personalized academic discourse, my method in these seemingly fragmented essays has been to enact moments that, in their juxtaposition, will reveal a confluence of interests, languages, allegiances, and possibilities not yet available, or not available outside of the particular combination presented. In other words, make the essay do the work of a poem. Just as in Vircburger's collection, in which the essays ended up not really being *about* the former Yugoslavia, the constant circling around the subject in "Reverse Migration" is about the making of a self in history, both personal and political, and, as such, germane or

applicable to so much of our collective migratory experience and our struggle to find form for what needs to be expressed without being simplified. The fact that this text was originally written for a collection in another language, and now must be re-contextualized in its original American English, adds yet another layer to the juxtaposition.

## I.

**P**ART OF THE PROBLEM of the personal cost of collateral damage from war or forced migration is that it can mask and actually exacerbate deeper problems that already exist: the narcissist who has gone through an actual or perceived political trauma is only that much more well armed to desiccate those she may be closest to. (Please note the politically correct pronoun usage in which the feminine stands in for what used to be the “normalized” masculine, trading one inaccuracy for another, even though “their” to denote a “collective singular” has been in English use since at least the seventeenth century.) In any case, at least from what I’ve been able to observe in about five generations of traumatized people that I’ve been very close to, physical maladies come, supposedly, out of nowhere: heart attacks, strokes, cancer of all sorts. I have a friend with untreatable bladder problems, the result of constant air raids during infancy in Beirut. These things taken on by the body seem more true, the actual result of specific events rather than some vague wave of inherited traits resulting in psychotic or abusive behavior. What I write here is only the minutest fragment of what I could force myself to remember, the proverbial “tip of the iceberg,” and it is highly directed, with extreme prejudice.

## 2.

A STUDENT INTERESTED in the program I teach in makes an appointment to see me, June 6, 2015, at my office at Queens College, in Flushing, New York, where I’ve been teaching since the Gulf War. She is from Belgrade. Several years later, in her thesis project, she would write:

A body has a voice, even when disappeared.

You were seven, living in your grandparents’ two-bedroom apartment, your mother and father already divorced for three years. Your aunt gave you a notebook and you wrote in it, you gained your voice. At twelve, the family story goes, you were told you

were too young for something, and you complained, yelling at the top of your lungs, that being already twelve years old entitled you to have a say in things. You still remember it because everyone roared with laughter. A month before your seventeenth birthday you demonstrated for the first time. You walked those streets for a while. Ten years, to be exact. . . .

So, was it all real? Did it happen to you, or did it happen to someone else? Your body knows. Your feet pounded asphalt; over and over again your fingers folded and pushed a ballot into a ballot box; you had enough breath to make a ten-year march seem like a breeze; you chanted; you frantically ran from the police equipped with full riot gear, you swallowed tear gas; every night, at the time of the evening news, your body would sync to the rhythm of other protesters when you opened the windows and banged at pots and pans to raise your voices to muffle the lies of the pro-regime media, to have your voices heard; to make your stolen voices count.

Did our voices count? I'm still not sure. If and when they did, it was already late. Too many voices were silenced in the meantime. Some were lost forever, some simply fell into silence, and all of us who ended up in exile, temporarily found ourselves without a voice.

No matter what I knew I needed to turn away from, no matter what it was imperative for my own survival to forget, no matter how shattered any idea of home, or family, or language had become, I also knew that I needed to hear this, that the only way I could come to terms with what I had gone through — in other languages, as other selves — would be to listen, to allow myself to feel something like what this person was describing. And then, before I knew it, as the weight of thinking back to that real and imagined Belgrade of family, of supposed familiarity, of apparent homecoming, became almost unbearable, another student showed up. Translating Borislav Pekić. So amongst some New Yorkers in class, and these two from Belgrade, we had two from Indiana, and two from Teheran. There would be a lot to go over.

### 3.

I WONDER ABOUT MY STUDENTS: certain things I've shut the door on get reopened because I can feel that what they want to find out, and who they happen to be at the moment, are necessary, and such moments allow me to be someone I once was unconsciously, driven by the pure mechanism of emotional coercion and the need to survive untenable situations. But now I can pause, I can be myself as I now am.

In a longer piece from 1995, almost twenty-five years ago—right as the wars of ex-Yugoslavia were ending—I wrote of my own “student” days of the mid-1970s:

They were cut off from everything else, my “studies”: the view across St. Nicholas Park, the old massive Gothic structures, the Vietnam vets I hung out with in the cafeteria who studied Ancient Greek. (The cafeteria almost like grade school, like the school lunches I never ate, preferring bread-and-butter sandwiches with a carton of milk at first and cold cuts later on.) That far uptown didn’t have much to do with downtown, and the life I was leading. The Latin class had become a tutorial, since there were only two of us, me and a girl whose name I don’t remember but who turned out to be Croatian and spoke a language as familiar and broken as my Serbian the few times we haltingly exchanged a few words as she rushed off to meet her boyfriend before asking me which lines of Virgil were due: we both bore a burden, and it seemed we were on the verge of becoming other people.

But before that, before embarking on what turned out to be a very long journey into some past that was supposed to be mine, I still had my ears open; I could still hear the sounds that had become my truest frame of reference, as in these “NOTES ON HEARING CECIL TAYLOR AT THE FIVE SPOT 5.1.75”:

. . . cinematically speaking, one is given an image in the sense of a more traditional mode of playing (i.e. melancholic, etc.), but here Cecil is on our inside looking out. Easily within us where images dissolve to sense, to state of mind, a total environment, so to speak. Where (as Duncan says), the discordant melodies also enter the field of composition, are what plays with us that in their perfect imperfection the sound which we have been led, or better yet, brought up, to think of hearing, of that which we are used to, becomes a search. That in the melody NOT being stated formally it becomes all the more apparent . . .

#### 4.

PARENTS FROM BELGRADE though father born in Paris. Refugees in Italy, some years in Rome. Rome to Boston. Spain long ago, maybe Iraq before that. Older brother born first spoke Serbian but second-born I resisted. Knew there was judgment. His merciless beatings, attempts at suffocation, parental neglect, survival of a very different kind than promoted by war-related propaganda: was it tied to some kind of envy, that I was the only one who felt native to the place I was born?

Was everything they said *actually* a part of our history and inheritance or simply meant to drown out anything I could possibly say, reduce it, diminish it, make it small? I always answered in American, even though I understood Serbian completely, intuitively. And later, when I actually did speak the language fluently, I wouldn't speak it to my immediate family, knowing I should give no ground, that it would be a mistake, perpetuating the collusion and shame. I had escaped. Or so I thought. No matter how hard they tried to pull me back, this was my place, and I went to great lengths to prove it, even changing my given first name. But what I thought I knew I forgot, or the pressure of keeping it up was too much in face of the unrelenting presentation of madness as sanity and I succumbed to wanting something, anything, that seemed familiar, all the while denying the gifts hardest won, of intimacy, of belonging. This forgetting lasted just an instant but remembering meant filling the absence of behaviors, the absence of a self that was just a collection of accumulated reactions, with the slow, painstaking work of retrospectively reconstructing my then selves through whom I presently thought myself to be, or which elements of myself took and have taken precedence, by sheer force of the clarity of incontrovertible evidence.

## 5.

WHY, FOR INSTANCE, did I spend just one night in Sarajevo after the ceasefire? Sidran had wanted to take me to the source of the river, and film an interview with me for television. The kids at Radio Zid wanted me to spend the whole night with them. Mirso wanted to show me what was left of the museum. Ivan didn't even know where to begin. I had driven with Zlatko and a friend of his who hadn't been out for the course of the whole siege, and Zlatko had taken him to Italy for a week, to learn how to breathe a little again. We stopped in Mostar, and other places along the way. I filmed everything, but I've never been able to find the film. Once I got to Zlatko's I called Sidran. During the war I always made sure that if I got paid for anything I translated, I would find a way to send the money to the writer, except for Sidran. For some reason, it was impossible for us to get in touch. He picked up the phone:

"Sidran here."

"This is Ammiel Alcalay."

“Alcalay?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you were dead.”

“I thought *you* were dead.”

“I thought you were some rabbi from the nineteenth century.”

“I couldn’t find you.”

“Where are you?”

“At Zlatko’s”

“Go outside and get a taxi, tell them to take you to Sidran’s. Everyone knows where I live.”

I followed his orders and soon found myself knocking at his door. As he opened the door, he was reciting a poem of mine that he’d translated years before, and that had appeared in a magazine published in Belgrade. We had a drink and then went out for a long walk through the town, so he could show me all the places etched in his being that I thought I had translated.

## 6.

I CAN’T REMEMBER exactly when but sometime in 1993 or ’94, I was home in Brooklyn when the phone rang:

“Salaam aleikum.”

“Aleikum as-salaam.”

“It’s the general here, with a message.” And I quickly understand that it was *the* general, General Jovan Divjak: “Ivan and Marko are coming to Washington, can you host them in New York for a few days?” Of course, I say.

## 7.

IVAN WAS ALERT, seemingly unfazed, eager to talk, see things. Marko, on the other hand, was quiet, almost depressed. Finally, I remembered his translations of Emily Dickinson and I went to my shelves to find Susan Howe’s book, *My Emily Dickinson*. I handed it to Marko and I could see him smile: he took the book and went to sit on the couch, immediately absorbed. After a driving tour of parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn, I took them for pizza at Patsy’s, right under the Brooklyn Bridge, not far from where Walt Whitman had once worked at the *Brooklyn Eagle*. As there was a line at the restaurant, we walked right down to the landing. Marko

just stared across the river over the clear sight lines to Lower Manhattan and whistled, saying: “Karadžić would just love this place.”

Later, when writing a new afterword in 2012 to *from the warring factions*, my book-length poem dedicated to Srebrenica, I quoted Marko’s lacerating lines about the silences political arrangements had imposed after the war: “My God, the speechlessness / all around me, harder to pierce than tank armor.” But this too was part of the unintended consequence of circumstance, of “having” this particular language, since I’d also been very familiar with forms of imposed speechlessness. After 9/11 and in the buildup to the war in Iraq, too many of my immediate contemporaries self-censored in order to keep publishing, but most of the places I used to write for simply wouldn’t have me anymore. And so began my truly “meteoric” rise as both domestic reporter and foreign correspondent, writing from home, invited to partake in the pages “there,” to write for publications in the newly formed states of ex-Yugoslavia. Once our stars had fallen and I emerged from that particular phase, print culture, as we and I once knew it, was over, and the disorientation had become extreme. I desperately needed to find the sources of sound again.

## 8.

IN 1990 I translated a poem from Arabic by Adonis with my friend Kamal Boullata, a Palestinian painter; it was called “The Other Body / The Other Home,” and ends like this:

This migration of mine is long in place, enduring even longer  
within me as if I do not know myself. . .

Once in flight I was intent to build a humble abode for the days  
of my past. . .

I sat myself down among them, I mean my days, that are scattered,  
gathered by force. And instead of staring at them and inquiring  
and scrutinizing them, they began looking at me and probing and  
searching and asking. As if they were waiting for something else,  
another person. Beginning then I started to understand my flight,  
and those roads no one takes lest they be tempted to track some  
shadow, some harvest. Roads that always retain ashes as if they were  
a fire just now dying out, as if the road were a body shattered in  
the scent of jasmine left over from childhood. There is a tangled  
binding between me and my flight.

I cannot presume that “return” itself would ever fully appreciate the damages.

I shall declare my life a home for my flight, and migration a home for my life.

I shall tell migration: You are my expanse—you are vast.

What, after all, had I been trying to do then? Upon return to the United States from six years out of the country, I saw friends that had been political prisoners suddenly appear on the nightly news. The revolution we had placed so much hope in was quickly being snuffed out and I understood that the knowledge and experience I had gained while away would make me suspect, in every way imaginable. But even though I was back, I was still a very long way from understanding how far from myself I still was, how long it would take me to reach back into those experiences and make them part of my whole life.

#### **CODA: BREAKTHROUGH ON THE MERRITT**

IN 2006, I MOVED back to New England, where I was born and raised, and began commuting to work in New York. Having once done a lot of different kinds of driving to make a living—taxis, limousines, delivery vans, interstate trucking—this commute puts me in a very familiar zone, and the highways and parkways I find myself on every week provide one of the few times my mind can wander freely. I wasn’t sure where this essay needed to go, and nothing was coming, even though I held out hope for, as I put it, some kind of “breakthrough on the Merritt,” Route 15, that is, which runs from Westchester, New York, to just outside of Hartford, Connecticut. Using this time to activate my mind has, of late, been closely associated with music, and for this foray of mentally “finishing” the essay, I’d chosen music by Horace Silver, Don Cherry, and Cecil Taylor, and my intention was to listen in a particular progression, to immerse myself first in the percussive movement of Horace Silver (remembering the wonderful remembrance by Ted Joans of going to hear him one night with Jack Kerouac), then move to Don Cherry and try to focus on an evening I’d spent with Cherry and his family in Long Island City sometime in the mid-70s, taken there by dear friends Brad Graves and Verna Gillis. And then I’d just let Cecil’s cascades of sound wash over



me. Archie Rand had recently sent me some photos he took of Cecil's piano the day Cecil died, some of the ivory simply worn off the keys, and those were clear in my mind. Listening to Don Cherry, of course, made me think of Ornette, and how, after Ornette passed in 2015, I'd taken my copy of the LP he'd once given me, *Friends and Neighbors*, and tacked it to the wall above the big table in the kitchen. That was signed, "To my friend Willy, Always, Ornette," using a variant of the name I'd given myself, in homage to my baseball hero Willie Mays. I remembered fragments of the lyrics from the vocal version, uproariously sung by a group in the loft at 131 Prince Street: "Friends and Neighbors, that's where it's at, Friends and Neighbors, that's where it's at, Friends and Neighbors, that's a fact—hand in hand, all the world..." And that seemed about right, despite what I had come to know about what neighbors can do to each other. There is, of course, so much more to say.

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