

ALBAHARI, David



David Albahari, born in 1948, has published seven collections of short stories and seven novels in Serbian. In 1982, his book *Description of Death* won the Ivo Andrić Award for the best collection of short stories in former Yugoslavia. In 1996, his novel *Bait* won the NIN Award for the best novel in the new Yugoslavia. His books have been translated into fourteen languages, while he himself has translated many British, American and Australian authors into Serbian. David Albahari participated in the International Writing Programme in Iowa (1986) and was International Writer-in-Residence at the University of Calgary, under the auspices of the Markin-Flanagan Distinguished Writers Programme (1994 – 95). He lives in Calgary, Canada.

David Albahari, rođen 1948. godine, objavio je sedam knjiga kratke proze i sedam romana na srpskom jeziku. 1982. godine je njegova knjiga *Opis smrti* dobila Nagradu Ivo Andrić za najbolju zbirku kratke proze u nekadašnjoj Jugoslaviji. 1996. je njegov roman *Mamac* dobio NIN-ovu nagradu za najbolji roman u novoj Jugoslaviji. Njegove knjige su prevedene na četrnaest jezika, a sam je na srpski jezik preveo mnoge engleske, američke i australijske autore. 1986. godine učestvovao je na međunarodnom programu pisaca u Iowi, a 1994/5. je bio Međunarodni kućni autor na univerzitetu u Calgaryju, u Kanadi, gdje sada živi.

DAVID ALBAHARI

An Indian in the Olympic Square

Early in the afternoon, in the centre of the town, I'm stopped by a drunken Indian. First he asks me for some change, and when I say no, he offers to sell me some marijuana. He opens his palm and shows a pitiful joint. Naturally, in broad daylight, it looks much bigger. I tell him, in a hushed voice, to put it away, and his face for a moment becomes sharp; then he shrugs and shoves the grass into his pocket, but keeps standing before me without the slightest intention of going away. And if I move, he will be faster than me, I know, I can feel that he's anticipating my next move with his entire being. And even if I give in he'll appear behind my back. As he asks me if I can after all give him some change, his face becomes softer. I tell him I don't have any change, but am willing to give him twenty dollars if he tells me a story he heard from his parents. It's a long sentence, but I say it out slowly, watching first doubt and then suspicion appear on his face. I suggest we go to the Olympic Square and sit on a bench, and I start right away, but he's hesitating and doesn't move; as I walk off I accidentally jab him with my elbow. You shoved me now, but don't you dare do it again, says the Indian, understand? I nod, but he demands I say the words out loud, and keeps repeating what he said until I say: Understand. OK, says the Indian, let's go to the Olympic Square now. We cross the street. I ask him about his name, imagining names like Eagle's Feather or Raging Bull. John, says the Indian. He doesn't ask me what my name is, but I tell him anyway: Ljubomir. What sort of name is that? asks the Indian. The one who loves peace, I answer. The Indian shakes his head. Nobody loves peace, he says, these are tales for little children. I shrug; some things aren't worth

arguing about. We're approaching the pawn-shop. Two Indians are standing at its door. John moves away from me and walks towards them in a gentle half-circle. I make three or four more steps and stop. The windows of the pawn-shop are protected by iron bars. I look at the objects displayed in the window: a leather armchair with an embroidered cushion resting on it, a table lamp, a bike, a baseball glove. When I turn round I see that all three Indians are watching me. John keeps talking, though I can't hear him, and the three of them start to laugh. I pretend I'm absorbed in the umbrellas in the window, but I can feel my cheeks burning. When I turn again, they're all gone. I turn to the other side, peek through the window into the shop, I even look up towards the sky. I walk on past the parking lot, overtake a woman pushing a pram, and there, in the meadow surrounding the square, I spot John. He's alone again. He's swaying a little, although he's standing with his legs parted, and is waving at me. Where have you been? he asks. I watch him intently trying to figure out if this isn't some kind of a trick, perhaps the man I see is his twin brother. Do Indians have twins at all? John, the one standing before me, has a large birthmark behind his right ear, and no matter how much I try I can't remember having seen the mark behind the other John's ear. Well, he was walking on my right, and if I looked at his ear at all it was the left one, but I'm pretty sure I didn't do it; I've always believed that staring at other people's ears is a rude, violent attack upon one's privacy. I managed to see the birthmark behind John's ear only because when I approached him he turned his back to me and said: Let's find a nice spot, and meanwhile, as he was standing in front of me, and I helplessly looked at his wide chest and strong neck, my eyes fell on the birthmark partly concealed by John's hair as black as zift. I have no idea what *zift* is, I must confess. It's summer and the Olympic Square is very bright. The fountain is spraying in the middle of a shallow man-made lake. People are lying everywhere, on the grass and on the stone blocks. John is leading me towards one of the benches by the lake. As we're sitting down I ask him how he managed to disappear from in front of the pawn-shop. I didn't disappear, says John, you got lost. I try to protest, but can't find the right words. It's nothing unusual, says John, most people get lost all the time, and many never find themselves again. He puts his palms on his knees. This world is a damn slippery place, says John, and if you're left with no support God knows where you may end up. Not everyone can be an eagle, right? I nod in agreement, although I haven't got a clue what he's talking about. Perhaps I should've given him some change in the first place and let him go where he pleased. Perhaps I could still do it, and then quickly walk across the square, past the town-hall and into the library? No, don't, says John, we have a different deal; do you know what happens to those who don't honour their deals? I stare at him in disbelief. He's once more on my right, so I can't check whether he's got a birthmark behind his right ear or not, but now I see three parallel surface scars, traces of some claws or a drunken fall onto a

barbed-wire fence, which – given that I didn't see them before – could mean that a third John is walking by my side now. Yes, says the Indian, every man exists in countless variations, but only few manage to keep them all aligned. Most walk chaotically around the world until they fall apart completely, until they fade out of existence like a reflection on an agitated water surface. And those who don't honour their deals, I ask, what happens to those? John turns round and watches me carefully. It's better you don't know, he says, much better you don't know. I shrug; some things aren't worth arguing about. Anyway, I'm here for a story, right? he says. In this case, I say, we can start. The Indian has closed his eyes in the meantime. He might be asleep, I think, but when I lean down to hear him breathe, he abruptly opens his eyes, springs up from the bench and screams. It's not a loud scream, but a few heads turn in our direction. What's up? I ask, and open my arms. You scared me, says John. He comes back to the bench and sits down. I hate, he says, to see any white face so close up. If I don't get out of this sun soon, I say, it'll get much darker. John starts laughing. He roars with laughter until he's out of breath and bent down in a violent coughing fit. Twenty dollars, he says, holding his face with his hands resting on his knees. What? We agreed on twenty dollars, right? Right, I answer, but only after I've heard the story. John straightens himself up, his eyes bloodshed and filled with tears, and says: There once lived a woman called Corn. Nobody knew why she was called that, because nobody had heard the word before. They didn't know where she'd come from, and when they asked her she just pointed her hand in a vague direction and said: From there. All right then, said the people, if it's so, let it be so. And she lived with them, and eventually gave birth to two sons. The sons were growing fast, mostly because the mother from somewhere was bringing them the yellowish grains to eat that nobody else had. One day the sons decided to secretly follow her and find out where she got the food from. They walked behind her, walked and walked, until they came deep into a forest, to the edge of a clearing. And while they peeked through the bushes, the mother took off all her clothes and started rubbing herself all over the body. Every time she rubbed herself, her palms filled up with golden grains which she put into her basket. The sons were shocked, especially as the mother was rubbing herself over the breasts and between the legs as well. While they were hurrying home, they decided to kill her. But she knew what they were up to, just as she knew that it had to be so and that nothing could change her fate. So, when she came home soon after them, she told them she knew what they planned to do, and she knew they were hiding knives behind their backs. She put the basket with the grains down by the fireplace, and asked the sons to follow her. She took them to a flat stretch of ground, and told them to dig out all roots and all plants they could find, and then, after they had killed her, to drag her bleeding body up and down along the cleared patch. The sons did as she told them. First they dug out the weeds and the roots, and then they attacked the mother with knives

and axes, killed her, tied her arms and legs, and dragged her body from one end of the clearing to the other. And behold – wherever the mother's blood soaked the soil, a blade grew out with long, narrow green leaves and cobs full of golden grains. While they were picking them, the leaves were rustling, and the sons thought they could hear their mother's voice. We'll call the plant corn, they said, and so we'll always know that it's in fact our mother's blood. End of story, says John. I wait a while, hoping he would go on and finally mention the father. A story without a father is like a sonnet without a rhyme, but I don't say it aloud. Some beliefs should be kept to oneself. It reminds me of Greek tragedies, I finally say. Are you from Greece? asks John. No, I answer, I'm from the land which no longer exists. The Indian slowly lifts his eyes towards me. That's why you get lost so easily, he says. I shrug; some things aren't worth arguing about. John shrugs too: Give me the twenty dollars then, he says, and I'll be on my way. I take the money out of my pocket and hand him two ten-dollar bills. You might want to buy some grass after all? asks John. In the Olympic Square? In broad daylight? Never. Please yourself, says John, gets up and walks away. I don't look after him; I know from previous experience that I won't see him where I expect him to be. And indeed, only a moment later I can see him on the opposite side, on the other shore of the lake: he's sitting with his bare feet dipped in water, and holds in his hand a brown paper bag with the neck of a bottle sticking out. Now it's my turn to close the eyes. Which I do. Under my lids bright with the afternoon sun, instead of the Olympic Square I can see a field in which stands the woman called Corn. She's waving at her sons, bidding them to attack her, and then, after the first blows, she points at some better spots on her body. The sons rush at her again, and the mother encourages them with carefully chosen words, seizing every opportunity to caress their muscles or run her fingers through their hair. The blood is oozing out of her body, out of the many wounds, and the sons brandish their knives again, with more and more strength, and the mother is laughing, tears of joy running from her eyes. I'm exaggerating with the tears, I know, but I'm sure John will understand. Then I open my eyes, get up and walk into the corn field which has covered the entire square.

Translated by Lili Potpara