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**Joanna Labon's *Balkan Blues*,
Dubravka Ugresic's *Have a Nice
Day***
Sandy Primm

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Joanna Labon, ed. *Balkan Blues: Writing Out of Yugoslavia*.
Northwestern University Press, 1995. 268 pp. \$15.95
Dubravka Ugresic. *Have a Nice Day*. Translated by Celia
Hawkesworth. Viking, 1995. 241 pp. \$21.95.

The only way you can describe war-if you can do that at
all-is to use fragments.

-Dubravka Ugresic

Are others attracted to prose poems because of war? That has been my strongest connection to short, dense, lyric writing. Writing them helped me deal with the Vietnam War. Some recent publications try to make sense of carnage in the Balkans by using prose poems, vignettes and related short forms.

I'm still haunted by vignettes describing World War I in Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Stephen Crane's dispatches, Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*, Max Jacob's late work and significant pieces by Bertolt Brecht all share political violence as stimulus.

The recent Balkans war has generated copious amounts of anguished short prose. Some of these are collected in *Balkan Blues*, first published in Great Britain by the journal *Storm* in 1994. Dubravka Ugresic's twenty short pieces, spanning thirty pages, begin this anthology.

As the dust jacket of her later collection *Have a Nice Day* notes, "This is not a novel, a travelogue; it is not a volume of short stories, a diary, or a war report. It is simply a remarkable book." Both the acclaim and the ambiguous classification of Ugresic's work is accurate for her work in *Balkan Blues* too. Both texts also shift between her native Croatia and landscapes infused with American popular culture, which she has experienced with wonder in recent years as a visiting professor in New England.

"Balkan Blues" (the title given to Ugresic's series as well as to the book) offers somewhat traditional prose poems in that they emulate Baudelaire's cynicism and his inspiration from things noted in passing on streets. "Tango," the second piece in the series, describes a pair of "modest Argentinean tango dancers" performing near a New York subway station "executing their dance as though it were the only thing they knew, they were laying out their only possession, performing the rhythm as their deepest, most intimate truth."

This experience unexpectedly moves the writer, giving occasion for the three paragraphs of the piece. The next prose poem in the

"Balkan Blues," "Rere," also describes Ugresic's emotions, but in a different way. This piece recounts the author's stop at a small restaurant in 1990 on her way from Split to Zagreb on a deserted highway:

I stepped into the inn first and stopped, poleaxed, in the doorway. There were about twenty men sitting in the thick smoke of the room. In complete silence. Twenty pairs of eyes were fixed on mine. Then one of them, the one sitting nearest to the door, feeling perhaps that he had the logical right to go first, slowly raised his beer bottle and took a swig. It lasted a long time, the sound of the beer pouring down his throat. The man set the bottle down just as slowly, without lowering his gaze. Then, as though the contact of the bottle with the table had struck a gong, he tightened the veins on his neck, sank his gaze still more deeply into mind and...began to sing. It was a strong, throaty voice which came from who knows where, and it was like a wolf howl. The howl was taken up by others as well, staring me straight in the eyes, just like their leader. Their looks expressed nothing, a dark, unblinking stare.

Deciding this was not a cozy, inviting spot, the author and her friend drive on, feeling madness in the landscape and a silence as "when everything stiffens in anticipation of the first shot." Later she realizes she has experienced the famous *rere*, a men's wordless intoning. This primitive form of folklore has survived in the Dalmatian hinterland. For Ugresic the incident marks the beginning of war in the Balkans: "the image soon cracked open, the madness boiled over, shattering into-sound and rhythm!"

The parallelism in spirit of these two prose poems echoes through the twenty-one pieces constituting this group, which begins with an epigraph from Pasternak: "What can bring us closer together than music?" The author undercuts this observation by showing how music and traditions of the past cause discord in the former Yugoslavia. While the subject of music unifies the series, the author fractures any sense of structure in the collection by employing many different styles. Her fascination with ritual and music suggests that one of the author's major inspirations is folklore, a motivation she denies in both the first and last piece here. This denial only underscores how much the author focuses on changing regional and national cultures. Traditions of all kinds abound in these short pieces. Most everything is in

constant flux in Ugresic's life. She writes not in a stream of consciousness but in shifting floods of inspiration and melancholy. The diversity of the author's interests compliment the huge range of forms-essay, epigraph, fable, personal letter, etc.-taken up in this series. Rather than arrive at unequivocal conclusions, the work seems to read as exhausted resolutions focused on the author's emotional needs. Clarity about her state of mind makes these completions compelling.

Other authors in Joanna Labon's collection offer various styles as well. Perhaps the most well-known author in the anthology is the late Danilo Kis, who is represented by his last completed work, a ten-page fantasy-biography broken into fifteen vignettes. Of the seven other contributors, Slobodan Blagojevic is also represented by prose poems as well as poetry. The collection closes with a play that carries the spirit of *Ubu Roi* to the battlefield, "Sarajevo (Tales from a City)," by Goran Stefanovski, which calls for nine actors to play multiple roles in its forty-three scenes.

Have a Nice Day contains thirty pieces which tend to be longer than those in "Balkan Blues," though just as difficult to pin down as to subject-matter and style. The war and Americans' inability to understand it run through most. Constantly shifting doses of wit, anger, loneliness, joy and helplessness unify them. Much as Evan S. Connell hooks readers into *Notes From a Bottle Found on a Beach Near Carmel*, the simple fascination of seeing what comes next attracts the reader.

One of Ugresic's constant burdens involves defining herself as a refugee and a writer now working in America. Neither description quite fits her various roles. One of the briefer pieces, "EEW," describes an editor saying "with a real regret in his voice, 'You write, how can I put it, "pure" literature. From a moral standpoint it would not be right to publish something like that, now that your country is at war.'" Thus her ordeal is to be branded one of the EEWs, "East European Writers, dragging their wretched homelands around with them as necessary baggage, never having been obligated to drag them around until they came here, of course."

Humor makes her situation bearable. She relishes irony, for "at the same time as I watch horrific American television pictures of the destruction of Sarajevo, my mother in Zagreb is watching 'Santa Barbara.'" Wit on many levels joins the fragments of *Have a Nice Day* into a compelling whole.

Her spirit shares much with another woman who chose to leave Croatia due to the triumph of chauvinistic nationalism, Slevenka Drakulic, who published *The Balkans Express: Fragments from the*

Other Side of the War in 1993 (Norton). As deeply felt as Ugresic's, these short pieces tend to be short personal essays inspired by an interest in ideology and political science. Ugresic seems more the poet, more a soul who must communicate not only horror at the stupidities she must experience daily thanks to the war, but also wonder that somehow music is still being played in the place once known as Yugoslavia.

Sandy Primm