

Erica Johnson Debeljak **The Stationary Exile**

1.

It takes so little, so infinitely little, for a person to cross the border beyond which everything loses meaning: love, convictions, faith, history. Human life – and herein lies the secret – takes place in the immediate proximity of that border, even in direct contact with it; it is not miles away, but a fraction of an inch away.

Milan Kundera

In Slovenia, the country where I have lived for the last ten years, every border seems to be only a fraction of an inch away. The villages and fields and barns, the houses and stone chimneys and narrow footpaths that occupy these fractions of inches, in Slovenia and elsewhere in Europe and the world, often strike outsiders as negligible and unimportant. They almost never possess the mighty eminence or cultural distinction of capital cities that are usually more centrally located. To passersby, border regions often appear shabby and unglamorous, as afterthoughts or accidents. They are viewed with the same mild disdain as almost any human settlement that, though not a destination point, happens to be situated alongside a thoroughfare. What a pity, a traveler might think speeding along the road toward one border or another, that they ran this highway right through the apple orchard below that lovely farmstead. But neither the thought nor the traveler will linger longer than a second or two.

The many who pass through the generally unremarkable areas straddling national borders rarely pause to consider how many ounces of blood have been absorbed by the unremarkable land, how many tears have been shed for every inch lost, every life laid down. For these fractions of inches are, in fact, far from negligible. They are immensely important for the simple reason that all borders are immensely important. As loath as we might be to admit it, borders place us and define who we are. They define our love and our convictions, our faith and our history. Borders may be real and geographical or exist only in our imagination; they may lie on the hard soil of the earth or in the soft folds of our minds. Some borders are easily transgressed with no identification papers at all. Others, though we possess a valid passport, make us tremble with the significance of the passing. For the ultimate border, we need not a passport but a death

certificate, though it has never been suggested that the guards on this last frontier are bureaucratic sticklers. Sooner or later, they let everyone through. People move across borders all the time. They do so more and more in this day and age, often with no intention of returning from whence they came.

It happens less frequently, but borders also move across people. Like great birds of prey, they glide silently over the landscape, momentarily blotting out the sun and casting the villages and fields and pathways below in shadow. Grasped in the hooked beaks of these mighty birds is not the limp and bleeding corpse of a small animal, but a slender dark thread: the ink-black line on a map. The flight plans of the birds are usually charted by dark-suited men with serious faces who sit around green felt tables in distant capital cities and negotiate the settlement of war and other territorial disputes. Mercifully, the birds' itineraries are generally quite abbreviated: a mile or two in one direction or another, a minor modification in the pastel shapes of nations, nothing more dramatic than a fraction of an inch here or there. But inevitably some people are left stranded on the wrong side of the shifting line, abandoned in the wrong pastel color.

It cannot be avoided, the dark-suited men grumble. Unlike the abstract beauty of the map, the situation on the ground is messy. During less violent and confusing times, people had intermingled with one another, had moved from one village to another in search of fertile land, a fertile wife, a bustling market square, crisp sea air. But at this specific instant in time, as their fates are being determined from afar, the people inhabiting the houses in the villages do not move; they cross no border. It instead crosses over them and one morning, they get out of bed, switch on the radio or read the newspaper and discover that they have woken up in the wrong place. They are speaking the wrong language across the breakfast table to one another. Their anxious words are now uttered in the language of the dispossessed, the minority. They have been cast off from their brethren and set adrift.

And so a wound is inflicted. Betrayal takes up residence in hitherto unsullied hearts. Resentment infects young minds, welcomed into the void left behind by the sudden departure of confidence in a justly ordered world. The dark-suited men around the distant tables had placed their hope and faith – insofar as notions such as hope and faith entered their bargains and calculations in the first place – in the fact that wounds do eventually heal and scars fade. Good sense and the rational pursuit of peaceful activities will ultimately triumph over bitter dreams of reconquest and revenge. And to be fair, there have been cases when such a wound in the land has been forgotten and the scar marking the villagers' hearts has become the subject of nostalgia rather than rage. Regrettably, however, it seems to be more often the case that both the memory of the original wound and the scar itself remain a vivid scarlet, diverting and inhibiting life's civilizing impulses. The new lines and colors on the map do not convince the villagers on the ground. Nor do they convince their children or their children's children. Such wounds, it seems, are not confined to the territory of mere skin, such scars not

limited to the borders of a single life.

For some time now, my thoughts have been returning – almost obsessively – to the story of a life that transpired in just such a region. For some reason, I am drawn to a place where that great bird of prey, black filament gripped in its beak, has been unusually restless. I am drawn to a destiny that has fallen under the bird's shadow not once but several times. Perhaps this obsession of mine is merely the most common form of tribute: attraction to the unknown. For the contours of my own life and land have been free from this particular form of darkness, the darkness of dispossession. In any case, the story has now come to assume a double life. It exists both in the realm of historical truth and in my own imagination. I find myself bumping up again and again against the same central scene. It attracts and repels me in equal measure. In the end, it seems that I am fascinated by precisely that which must remain forever foreign and unreachable to me. Like a border, the story is invitation and barrier. It lures me like a door left ajar, drawing me in from the safe convictions and history of the continent of my birth, which is America, and shedding a shaft of light on the more treacherous experience of the rest of the world. It lures me with the promise of understanding and empathy. Yet when I push open the door and enter the country behind it, the light goes out. I hit a wall. I can no longer see.

2.

Karst. This peculiar word gives its name to the border region that is the crucial backdrop to this story. The region, which today lies among and between Slovenia, Italy and Croatia, has over the years produced thousands and thousands of stationary exiles. Indeed for me, the harsh sounding word could almost function as a synonym for the paradoxical notion of migration without movement, of being displaced while remaining at home. One need only contemplate the destiny of an imaginary child born a hundred years ago in a stone cottage in a tiny Karst village. If that child were still alive today, if he were now a withered centenarian whiling away the hours sitting beneath a fig tree in a sunny garden, he could look back at a life, that though spent in one place – in this place, the Karst – had known the wrath of disintegrating empires, had experienced the chill caused by a great winged creature passing overhead. For without ever having left the haven of his garden, or for that matter of his mother's low-ceilinged kitchen, this man would have been the subject of one imperial monarchy, one fascist, one communist and one democratic government. He need only have stood at the threshold of the cottage where he was born and gazed out at the circumscribed world of his village, to have witnessed three wars. And if he had so much as stepped across that threshold into the lane outside, he probably would have fought, and perhaps even died, in one of them. This man, without having packed his bags for either the pleasures of travel or the uncertainties of exile, would have lived in four different countries during his lifetime.

As it happens, the Karst is neither a synonym for stationary exile or for exile of any kind, except perhaps for the banishment of humanity from the eternity of time and the infinite mystery of the planets. For beyond its role as a place name, the word has a very precise meaning, a meaning that remains utterly indifferent to the placement of human borders and the pain of human lives. The word Karst has come to describe not only the specific region extending from the Vipava River valley to the Bay of Trieste and southward into the Istrian peninsula, but also the particular geological terrain that typifies it. On the surface, it is an arid landscape of limestone plateaus, interspersed with forests and shallow depressions known as sinkholes or karstholes. The barren land supports only the most meager of agricultural activities: modest wine-producing vineyards, seasonal vegetable gardens, the odd olive grove calling out a silvery greeting to the Adriatic that lies just beyond the nearest horizon. But underneath the desolate landscape thrives a mineral wealth of immense fascination, though of absolutely no worldly value. Meandering beneath the depressions and the karstholes is a vast network of secret caves, of intermittent rivers that bubble and roar through underground gorges, of disappearing lakes that fill a cavern in the rainy season only to vanish into the porous darkness when a distant and unseen sun warms a distant and unseen meadow.

However bleak and almost lunar this description may seem, it is in no way meant to suggest that the place wants for beauty. The Karst contains its own harsh and peculiar beauty. It could even be said that this little known region shares many of the same alluring scorched-earth qualities of Tuscany. Low stone walls undulate along shallow slopes, leading the eye into enchanting vistas. Crumbling villas jut up from behind the jagged ruins of old city ramparts, pulling the gaze skyward. Tapered cypresses march in regal procession around graveyards, their somber presence drawing the heart down to some dark nether region. But though the Karst, on a bright spring morning, conjures some of the same aesthetic satisfaction as certain Tuscan districts, in the end it lacks the critical mass of monasteries, of stunning hillside settlements and voluptuous cathedrals built to celebrate the glory of god. When the cold *burja* blows, the Karst quickly reverts to its role as hinterland, rural backwater, disputed border region. Its red soil does not reek of centuries of culture. Its contours never graced the backgrounds of old master paintings. As the traveler passes through the Karst on his way to one border or another, he might look searchingly at the landscape in the same way that he would peer at a plaque beside a painting in a corridor of the Uffizi Gallery. When the name he finds there is not, alas, da Vinci or Raphael but some long forgotten artisan, the passerby might well shrug his shoulders and turn away from this less traveled landscape. Or he might be pleased to have discovered his own slightly flawed masterpiece. Either way, he fails to discern the true grandeur of the Karst, which lies hidden in pitch-black subterranean cathedrals filled with pearly stalagmites. These unseen basilicas, silent save for the chimes of water droplets bouncing off the stone floors, are a far greater tribute to the mystery of creation than any edifice built by man.

There is one Karst village in particular that plays a pivotal role in this story. It is a small village with a population of no more than several hundred, nowadays mostly weekend dwellers from Ljubljana, the centrally located capital of Slovenia. Yet despite its size, the village enjoys a certain prestige in the region. In part, this is due to its gratifying position perched above the plains, the slate roofs of its terraced houses cascading from the belfry of Saint Peter and Paul down to a broad green expanse of vineyard and meadow below. Not far from the settlement, one must pass by a renowned graffiti on the walls of one of the houses lining the main road flowing into the village. No tourist, however fast he may be rushing toward the nearest border, can miss the words: *"My soul rejoices as if drunk on teran"*. They celebrate the eccentric local red wine of the Karst – a wine so dark and so heavy that it provides the nourishment of solid food while temporarily blackening the teeth of revelers, a wine so firmly attached to place that it tastes best when swallowed with a bit of locally cured ham in the very cellars where it has been stored. Teran, blood of Karst vineyards, does not travel well.

But above all, the village is known as the spiritual home of one of Slovenia's most transcendent literary figures. This figure, who is the main human protagonist of the story, bears only the slightest resemblance to that withered centenarian I placed beneath a fig tree in a sunny Karst garden. The two share a few biographical data – their birth in the early years of the previous century, their attachment to this tiny Karst village – but not much else. For one thing, the old man exists only in my imagination while the other existed in the flesh. The life of the real man had a real beginning as lives do: March 18, 1904. Though no one around him knew it at the time, this date was perilously close to the end of the centuries long ascendancy of the Habsburg's Austro-Hungarian monarchy in Central Europe. To be precise in a way that only hindsight allows, the child was born during the 622nd year of the Habsburg's 636 year reign, a rule so long and so prosperous that only the staying power of the Karst caves comes close to dwarfing it. Unlike the imaginary old man, the real protagonist of the tale did not draw his first breath in this specific village, but in the regional hub of Sežana located some ten miles away and today marking one of the principal border crossings between Slovenia and Italy. Nor would the real man continue drawing breath for anywhere near a hundred years, but that is getting ahead of the story. The infant born on March 18, 1904 was the fifth and last child in a proud, cultured, close-knit family. In 1908, when the boy was four years old, his father left Sežana to take a position as headmaster in a village elementary school lying ten miles further inland. His duties there would include not only the cultivation of young minds but also of several acres of vineyard: no doubt a pleasing prospect for this Karst patriarch. With this move, the fate of the boy and the village became inextricably and forever linked.

The village is called Tomaj and the boy is Srečko Kosovel.

3.

I encountered the village of Tomaj and the legend of Srečko Kosovel in early 1994. The meeting occurred about six months after I had moved from New York to Ljubljana to marry a Slovenian writer with whom I had chanced to fall in love. This unlikely love affair – and my subsequent migration – disrupted an otherwise ordinary existence. I hasten to add that, in terms of pleasantness, love ranks fairly high on the list of motives for embarking on a life of exile. All the same, my destination seemed treacherous to those who knew where it was and absurd to those who did not. Slovenia had broken away from Yugoslavia three years earlier following the Ten Day War of independence that took place in the summer of 1991. By the time I got there, the former republic, ignoring the gruesome Yugoslav wars of secession continuing to the south of its new borders, was well on the way toward realizing the ideal of a rationally-ordered modern state. Portraits of Josip Broz Tito had been taken down from the walls and stored in musty closets for purely sentimental reasons. Balkan peasant types, with their headscarves and housecoats and swollen legs, were relegated to the quaint museum of the outdoor market, relics of a distant time. All eyes were turned westward, toward progress and prosperity and forward momentum. The only recalcitrant districts could be found in remote villages in the Karst and on the Adriatic coast. Inhabitants of these places, stubbornly stuck in history, continued to worship the memory of Tito because he had liberated them from German and Italian fascists at the end of the Second World War. In the wine cellars of these villages, images of the marshal still looked down at his subjects from the damp stonewalls, genially refuting the end of his era.

I first set eyes on Tomaj on March 18, 1994. It was winter and the Karst remained deep in the throes of one its emphatically non-Tuscan moments. Entering Tomaj, my new husband eagerly pointed out the famous Teran graffiti as we drove past it, but my soul refused to rejoice. Fittingly enough, I spent several hours of that wintry day in the local graveyard, the renowned north wind blowing so hard that I practically had to cling to the tombstones to keep myself earthbound. I found myself at the mercy of a schedule dictated by a handful of serious-minded literati who, indifferent to weather conditions, painstakingly read numerous poems in numerous languages none of which I understood. The poet in question was none other than Srečko Kosovel. A group of about thirty people had been invited to his family grave to celebrate the publication of a slim bilingual volume of verse on what would have been his 90th birthday. I spent much of the ceremony flipping through the brochures and booklets made available for the occasion and, despite my boredom and the bitter cold, I found myself riveted by a photograph of the young poet. The glorious ineffable youth of his face cast such a glow that, though standing in the cold windswept cemetery where had he long since been laid to rest, I felt momentarily warmed by it.

His eyes, precocious and intelligent, seemed to look right out of the photograph at me, making a connection that the incomprehensible recital of his poetry could not. His hair, thick and dark, is swept straight back from a wide and

thoughtful brow. His full lips occupy a field of smooth, unblemished, almost childlike, skin. The young man in the portrait wears a dark suit, a white collared shirt and cravat fixed with a tiepin. His pale hands – though only one is visible against the dark serge of his jacket – are crossed before him. The poet stares boldly, almost insolently, though the lenses of the wire-framed glasses that were ubiquitous in the Central Europe of his time, and which resurfaced as all the rage in the New York City of my university days. Perhaps it was those characteristic wire-rimmed spectacles or perhaps simply the exuberant self-awareness of his gaze but, looking at the picture, I was suddenly reminded of a certain type of university student I had known: the fierce idealist who throws himself into some arcane subject like ancient Latin or the history of philosophy, firmly believing that it truly matters – matters more perhaps than anything else; the kind of young man who has convinced himself – and, who knows, perhaps rightly so – that he has something unique and absolutely essential to contribute to humanity's tormented destiny. In short, the face in the photograph contains all the wondrous possibilities of the life and the century that extended before it. You cannot look at the face of the young Kosovel without liking it and you like it because it so perfectly captures the forward thrust of youth: Kosovel's youth and your own youth as it recedes into memory.

After the reading at the cemetery, a dinner was held at a local tavern. An odd cast of characters assembled around the table. There was Berta Bojetu, the beautiful red-haired *grande dame* of Slovenian letters. My husband and I had had the unusual pleasure of driving her earlier that day from Ljubljana to Tomaj. At one point during the short ride, she evinced a melancholy yearning for a cigarette. We stopped the car on the roadside and she got out and stood beside it. She exhaled regally into the empty plain, flicking her ashes into the tiny jeweled box she carried in her purse for just that purpose. Only a few years later she would be dead of lung cancer, but standing there on the edge of the lonely Karst, she was vibrant and alive and glistening with love for the tender face of a long dead poet. An avuncular Austrian-Slovenian named Lojze Wieser, the publisher of the volume, acted as our master of ceremonies throughout the meal. Like Kosovel himself, he was something of a stationary exile, though from another one of Slovenia's lost limbs: this one called Carinthia, a fraction of an inch sacrificed to Austria after the First World War and never regained. And finally there was the translator of the volume, Ludwig Hartinger, who ended up fascinating me precisely because of his absolute indifference to what might be called ordinary life. Here was a man who had spent years traveling up and down the Karst searching for the essence of Kosovel, a man so willing to face down cool eternity that it was rumored he had once slept on the poet's grave. During the course of the evening, he was kind enough to translate for me one of the verses featured in the book. He found it unbearable that I had understood nothing at the reading. It was an impressionist poem entitled *Karst Village* and it described a lost soul – the barely present poet who makes himself known only in the last line – returning to his lost home.

Alone
across the village.

In the darkness,
fence posts moan.
The north wind scales
the wall, raps at the
window: »Who's there?«

A window illuminates
the darkness.

And at the edge of the village
a pine tree sways –
it trembles,
when it recognizes me.

If the company at the dinner was unusual, the cuisine was even more so. A bear had been killed and we feasted for close to eight hours on every possible cut and preparation of the animal's carcass – carpaccio, pate, salami, boneless cutlets and great meaty joints – all of it washed down with goblets of teran. We raised glass after glass of the viscous stuff to our lips. Traditional folks songs were sung from throats quavering with emotion and with alcohol. The evening passed in a haze of smoke and blackened teeth and bear paws. By midnight, the surface of the long wooden table had grown a thick forest of glasses and bottles all stained with the blood red liquid of the wine. As I gazed around the illuminated dining room, the last light shining in the darkened village, memories of more refined cultural events in New York receded into an oddly artificial distance and I felt, at last, my soul rejoicing as if drunk on teran. Sleeping it off the next morning, I retained only indistinct images of the nearly medieval squalor that had ended the night. Yet for all the fuzziness of these impressions, I woke up with a few tantalizing fragments of Kosovel's biography floating on the surface of my consciousness and the haunting picture of his beautiful young face lodged firmly in my mind.

4.

To the outsider, it may be difficult at first to pinpoint the source of Kosovel's enormous appeal in Slovenia. Schools are named after him, his family home has become a shrine of sorts and his work remains an unshakable component of the Slovenian canon. Unlike the scorn often heaped on other traditional literary figures, there is hardly a Slovenian alive who would speak ill of Kosovel or dismiss him as irrelevant. An aura of near holiness surrounds him. Certainly it helps that he came from a magical place that has been further enhanced by the anguish and joy of having been lost and regained. It is also undeniable that a great deal of his work, like the poem interpreted to me by Ludwig the night before, not only has as its subject the symbolically-loaded Karst but is also packed with the kind of pathos that Slovenians require of their literary icons. The solitary village wrapped in a shroud of morning mist, a single light penetrating the darkness, swaying pine trees and juniper bushes and, above all, silence: these elements all feature regularly in his verses. Yet though the words are lovely, evocative both of a sense of loss and of a certain melancholy yearning – such as the one that Berta had expressed for a cigarette on the ride to Tomaj – the individual poems often lapse into sentimentality and simplistic rhyme schemes. In the end, it would be difficult to make the case that originality of style or content justified the poet's intense and enduring appeal.

Oddly enough, given all the devotion that he lavished on the Karst in his work and all the devotion that the Karst now lavishes on him, the poet spent less than a decade of his life there. Moreover, several of the years he spent in the village of Tomaj – the last ones coinciding with the onset of the First World War – could hardly be described as silent or idyllic. Like the imaginary centenarian I conjured on previous pages, the eleven-year-old Kosovel need only to have looked out of his mother's kitchen window to have witnessed a ghastly parade of dead and wounded soldiers being carried away from the battlefields located not far from the Karst. On these battlefields, memorable to Americans mostly because of Ernest Hemingway and his novels, soldiers loyal to Austro-Hungary fought against the armies of Italy, allied in the eleventh hour to those of France, England and Russia. In 1916, two years after the commencement of hostilities, Kosovel was sent off to the city of Ljubljana to continue his schooling. Despite his early interest in literature, he was enrolled in the technical high school rather than the more prestigious gymnasium. His family worried that their funds would not last for the extra year of gymnasium and his father nursed hopes that Kosovel would return to the Karst as an engineer and help to rebuild and reforest the barren land. In his own way, I suppose that that is exactly what he did do. All the same, apart from summers and holidays, Kosovel never again came back to live in the little Karst village at the edge of which a pine tree trembled when it recognized him. He did come back to die.

Like Kosovel's eager young visage, the hundreds and hundreds of letters he wrote – and these I came to many years after the bear dinner – arouse feelings

of connection and empathy in me. He wrote from Ljubljana to his family and friends back home and, during summers, from Tomaj to his new comrades in Ljubljana. As he swings back and forth between enthusiasm about some project – starting a new student publication or his plans to publish a collection of poetry – and despair about the meaning of life and the inevitability of death, we cannot help but be reminded of our own melodramatic young selves. Many of his letters begin with regrets for the quality of his penmanship, explained either by the poor paper or the poor light, or by his lamentable posture as he slouches in the bed of his rented room. In one letter, he describes Ljubljana as a city bursting with charm where young people walk through the streets embracing. In another, his homesickness is such that not only does he complain of Ljubljana's oppressive fog but goes on to personify the city as a killer of everyone and everything. He writes in lofty terms to a young woman named Fanica: *"I work: but my aspiration for harmony often dissolves into disharmony in and of itself. Only now do I realize: Chaos is within us and around us... Yet Chaos is life. It must be survived."* In another missive, a more ordinary boy writes to his mother: *"Dear Mama! I arrived safely in Ljubljana. With great surprise, I came to my new lodgings – an attic room! I shall report more later... Kisses to everyone, but most of all to you, Srečko."* What a contrast between the boy who writes such a sweet and simple note to his mother – as I might have done when I first entered my dormitory room in New York, as anyone might have done upon leaving their childhood home behind – and the boy who finds chaos within and without, the boy who must survive that chaos. It is this paradox that brings me, in a roundabout way, to the central scene of Kosovel's story; the scene that, like a border, acts as both invitation and barrier; the scene that opens a door to a strange country and then turns off the lights.

In this scene, I imagine Srečko Kosovel pacing the floor of his rented attic room in Ljubljana. I imagine him pulling his glasses down from his face and sitting at a worn brocade chair pushed up against the garret window. He has just received some news – perhaps via the post, perhaps from the daily papers. He places his glasses gently down on the sill, leans in toward the pane and stares naked-eyed in the direction of the Karst and Tomaj. It is November 12, 1920. The boy, in his last year of the technical high school, is sixteen years old. In the Italian coastal town of Rapallo, dark-suited men have been meeting around green felt tables and discussing the so-called Adriatic question: namely, the fate of the defeated Austro-Hungary's former Mediterranean possessions. These included the seaports of Trieste and Rijeka, the Istrian peninsula, the Kornati island chain, the Slovenian Karst and, most crucial to the boy at the window, Tomaj. He is not surprised by the news. If anything, he has been bracing himself for it for years. The agreement that resulted from the Rapallo meetings hardly came out of a clear blue sky. Two years earlier, in October 1918, the Habsburgs had capitulated and their empire had ceased to exist. The war over, Italian soldiers had crossed the demarcation line and occupied the Slovenian Karst. Public gatherings were made illegal, military tribunals were installed and press censorship established. The

omens were far from favorable. The summer before, the Slovenian National Home had been set afire by Italian fascists in Trieste. Those Slovenians who openly showed their opposition to the Italian occupation had left voluntarily or had been deported. Some had been interned. The Kosovel family, like countless others, had chosen to keep their mouths shut, remain in their homes and hope for the best.

The meeting at Rapallo, though not the first of such negotiations, was the last. So when the news arrived that three hundred thousand Slovenians had been left stranded in the wrong pastel color, had woken up that morning speaking the wrong language, it carried the dread stench of finality. The judge's gavel had fallen for the last time. It was all over. The attention of the world would soon move on to other more pressing matters. In truth, it already had. The principal victors of the war, meeting in London in 1918, had spurned the entreaties of the local Slav population, as had the League of Nations in Paris a year later and now, in Rapallo, the new Yugoslav state had let them go. They had been set adrift. The bird had flown and, in its wake, it let fall an arbitrary black line that now lay haphazardly across the earth. A border – as weightless as fog yet as solid as a brick wall – had been thrown up some twenty-five miles southwest of Ljubljana, leaving Srečko marooned on the island of his worn brocade chair.

The young poet looked out of the window and it seemed to him as if the air itself had mutated, had actually become a different, less breathable substance. Though everything appeared the same as before, his whole world – his love and convictions, his faith and his history – had been irreversibly and forever altered. A weak winter light entered the room. The boy did not move for several long minutes. He left his wire-framed glasses lying sightless on the windowsill. And although he too remained utterly stationary, he became an exile in those moments. In fact, he was exiled not once, but twice. Srečko Kosovel became a foreigner in the place where he found himself, in this rented attic room in Ljubljana – *what a surprise, mama, an attic room!* And, stranger still, he became a foreigner in that distant place toward which he gazed.

5.

Migration. Dispossession. Exile. What do these words really mean? What do they mean to me, a voluntary exile? And what do they mean to the Kosovels of the world, stationary exiles who gaze out their windows at a changing landscape, an altered map?

Here is one anecdote I cannot help but recall when pondering these questions. When I first come to Slovenia in 1993, my new husband ferried me around to a lot of social and cultural events such as the reading at Kosovel's graveside. Almost invariably, I was the only American present and, as a result, I would often get teased, questioned or challenged about various aspects of American life. I remember one seemingly banal conversation. A sports enthusiast regaled me about the two types of football – soccer (or what the rest of the world calls football) and American football. Gleefully, he propounded his theory to me on the two versions of the sport and what inferences might be drawn from them in

terms of politics and worldview. How appropriate he found it that the football played in Europe and the rest of the world was a game of fluid borders, the frontier between the two teams ceaselessly shifting throughout the match: up and down the field and up and down again. American football, on the other hand, was a game of plodding territorial advancement, the slow capture of fractions of inches.

Here is a second anecdote. During those first few months in my adopted home, my husband accompanied me not only to social events but back and forth, up and down the fields of his small country. During these pleasant drives, we talked like typical newlyweds of our love and our dreams for the future and many other things besides. Somewhat less typically, my new husband provided a running commentary on his country's history, its culture and accomplishments, its aspirations and fears. He told me, for example, how well the new Slovenian state treated its minority populations. He went on to elaborate about the Italians in the Karst and on the Adriatic coast and the Hungarians residing near Slovenia's eastern border, how these ethnic groups had their own representatives in the national government, had schools conducted in their own languages, had their own television channels and radio stations and print publications. I asked how long these communities had lived within Slovenian borders (that is, up until 1991 within the Yugoslav Republic of Slovenia and after that within the independent state of Slovenia). The response: since the end of World War One in the case of the Hungarian minority, and in the case of the Italian minority, since the end of World War Two, when Yugoslavia got a new answer to the Adriatic question and won back much of what was lost at Rapallo. In other words, the bird flew again and a different set of people found themselves stranded in the wrong pastel color, speaking the wrong language over their morning papers. The other side of the proverbial coin. All the same, I remember thinking at the time that these people have lived in Slovenia for decades. Their children and, in some cases, even their grandchildren had been born here. They should assimilate, shouldn't they? Of course, I realized that, like American football, this was a quintessentially American argument. Love being uppermost in my mind, I cautiously held my tongue.

It turns out that a concept as basic as movement underlies our interpretation of these words – migration, dispossession, exile. In my personal experience of migration, the earth remained fixed and my body moved – first from San Francisco to New York where I attended university and then from New York to Slovenia where I married. The wider American experience of migration is also of a stationary earth and moving bodies, though the direction tends to be the reverse of mine – namely, the ingress of bodies to America as opposed to their exodus away. It seems that movement, this most fundamental exercise of human will, carries with it some sort of implicit obligation on the part of the body that undertakes it. In the case of moving from one country to another, the obligation is to assimilate, to fit in, to learn the language and the ways of the land to which the body has moved. When, in contrast to my own privileged situation, the impulse

for migration is something extremely unpleasant – economic hardship, political oppression, ethnic cleansing – movement, even that of escape, is nevertheless an act of the determined human will and so that implicit obligation still hold. But what about cases when the body remains stationary and the earth moves? To be deprived of movement is to be stripped of will. It is, in some fundamental sense, to be powerless. Do the powerless, the stationary, also have an obligation to assimilate, to fit in?

The paradox between movement and its absence is what fascinates and frustrates me about the scene that I have somewhat arbitrarily defined as central to Kosovel's life. It is the reason that this particular moment in his life continues, like two opposing poles of a magnet, to both attract and repel me. I am drawn in by the universal aspects of Kosovel's figure and experience – his youth, the lovely forward-looking expression on his face, the backward-looking yearning in his poetry. Small details of his life story – though the whole of it differs so completely from mine – beckon like the delicate links of a chain bridge, inducing me to cross over link by link to an otherwise alien experience. We both went away to school at a young age. Though thousands of miles and many decades separated us from one another, we shared the same impulse when entering a small dingy room in a strange big city: the impulse to tell our mothers. I remember times during my university years when I found New York gray and oppressive – a killer of everyone and everything. I daydreamed about the warm blue skies above San Francisco, just as Kosovel had about those above his beloved Karst. But all the same, when home for summers, I chafed under the constraints of my childhood past, suddenly treasuring the unhindered freedom of the impersonal city left behind. Kosovel, who wrote so many sentimental tributes to the Karst, to Tomaj and to his mother, also wrote these acrid words one summer to his sister Karmela: *"I advise you from my heart: do not come home because you will be as disappointed as I am... All year a person lives among strangers – and now at home he would need a little consideration."* I know that feeling. I remember it. Perhaps we all do.

And yet I simply cannot share the experience of dispossession that occurred in Srečko Kosovel's life on November 12, 1920. I cannot smell it. I cannot feel it. I cannot conjure the emotions I might have felt gazing from the window of my dormitory room in New York City, gazing toward the west, toward home, my childhood past, toward people I loved, people who were mine. I cannot imagine what it would feel like if all of this were taken away from me, if I had to obtain a visa and cross a border in order to return to it. I simply do not know dispossession. I have no experience of it. I do not know the collective dispossession of losing land and, with it, love and history, faith and convictions. America does not know dispossession of this kind. The Slovenian sports enthusiast I spoke to at that party would have had to refine his metaphor for the sake of accuracy. Mainstream American experience is not only an American football game, the slow plodding acquisition of territory; it is a game we have almost exclusively won. We do not know what it means to lose a fraction of an inch, to look over an invisible yet solid border at our brethren set adrift. It is not

an experience written on our bones. It is not hidden in the folds of our brains. What is hidden in the folds of our brains is the immigrant experience: the movement of bodies. Americans know movement. We know it very well. But we do not know its antithesis. We do not know what it means to be stationary and powerless.

6.

Nearly a decade after I came to Slovenia, I caught a terrifying glimpse of what Kosovel might have felt on that day in November. This revelation came on a crisp September morning when America, for the first time in its remembered history, lost a fraction of an inch. True, the territory lost that early autumn day in New York could be characterized as virtual territory – two silvery prosthetic limbs stretching up to the sky – but the lives that were lost that day and the emotions that burst into tormented existence were plenty real enough. The perpetrators of the act did not possess sufficient might either to alter the balance of power in the world or to occupy the territory, let alone impose their language, culture and will upon it. They were just powerful enough to destroy it, murder its occupants and immolate themselves. In so doing, they delivered a certain unfamiliar sensation to Americans.

I used the phrase, *terrifying glimpse*, to describe what I saw or felt that day. I chose it in part to suggest that while Kosovel's condition of dispossession was more or less permanent, mine was fleeting: an impression of what it might feel like to be truly and collectively dispossessed. Yet the word *glimpse* fails completely to capture the sensation that overwhelmed me, and I presume many others that day. The sensation was anything but visual. It came not from outside but from deep within, like some long-suppressed primal fear. When years before I had first pictured Kosovel sitting at his garret window on November 12, 1920, I must have already intuited the terrible internal swell of these emotions for I always imagined him sightless, his glasses lying useless on the sill beside him. I always imagined him gazing, blind and naked-eyed, in the direction of his home. That day, as I gazed blindly in the direction of my home, I felt something ghastly rising in my gut. It filled my nostrils with the dread stench of finality, of irreversibility. It roared in my ears. It was the terrifying sound of the chaos that Kosovel detected within and around himself, the chaos that he must learn to survive. Americans, and I as one of them, have long taken it for granted that we dwell in a blessed place, distant from the insanity of war and powerlessness and dispossession. We reside at a safe remove from chaos. We would emphatically deny that we live only a fraction of an inch from a border beyond which everything – love, convictions, faith and history – loses meaning. We would insist that two great oceans separate us from that border. Or we would have before that September morning.

In the days that followed, I turned to Kosovel in hopes of finding some sort of consolation. I searched for an antidote to chaos in the work of a young poet

whose life had been engulfed by it. But I found neither comfort nor cure. Again and again, I stumbled upon lines that seemed to precisely anticipate the event itself. Verses, stanzas and entire poems pulled me down hard to the page. Two lines from one poem “*Our tears choking in smoke. Souls cursing in bitter despair,*” and one line from another, “*The people crowded together to avoid the buildings falling on them.*” And the whole of a poem entitled *Our Eyes*:

Our eyes were flooded

with burning lava.

And the gray dust

of cement towers

burnt our lips.

Like burning trees

we leaned

into a new day.

Only it wasn't a new day. It was an old day variations of which had been repeated over and over again throughout the course of human history. We wanted to think that our suffering was unique, but of course it was not. In the aftermath, some of us snatched at loose strands of hope. Contemporary Americans had finally been pulled kicking and screaming into history, into an experience so common to the rest of the world that one need only flip randomly through a collection of poetry by an obscure Slovenian poet to find several quite specific descriptions of it. We hoped that something good might come of this: increased compassion for the fate of distant others. But, sadly, the most natural reaction to the first roar of chaos in the ears, to the smell of that dreadful stench, to eyes flooded with burning lava is precisely the opposite. It is *not* to gather up all the world's Kosovels in our arms and whisper tender reassurances to them: *there, there, now that we understand this experience, we will never let anyone go through it again.* The most natural reaction is to turn away from the chaos and, if one has the power of determined human action – of movement –, to put as much distance between oneself and the chaos as possible. Close the frontiers, arm the soldiers, drop the bombs, if necessary, all the while repeating the mantra: we will not let the chaos inside ever again. We will not let it wash up on our shores. We will keep that border between sanity and madness far away: not a fraction of an inch away but miles and miles and miles.

7.

Some months after that September morning, I read the words of a diarist in the Slovenian Saturday supplement. I was slightly acquainted with the man who

wrote them, an eccentric comic performer. In response to the increasingly heated polemic about the extent of America's responsibility for the wider causes triggering the events of that September day and Europe's appropriate moral response to them, he wrote something to the effect that he, for one, simply could not feel compassion for the citizens of the most rich and powerful nation on earth. While the sentiment was repugnant to me – after all, a person faced with the choice of burning to death or leaping a hundred stories to the pavement below would seem to deserve compassion regardless of income or nationality – it revealed a rarely admitted truth. Compassion has a tendency to diminish when it crosses borders, and the most raw and inflamed border in the world today is the ever shifting one between those who possess power, movement and wealth and those who do not.

Yet to arrive at such a depressing conclusion to my musings about Kosovel strikes me as unbearable. In search of empathy, I found a mean-spirited alienation. In search of compassion, I found only the will for individual survival whatever the moral cost. In search of common ground, I found two eternally opposed camps: those in possession of movement and power and those not. Worse yet, Kosovel and I, because of the random accident of the time and place of our respective births, would always find ourselves in different camps, looking at each other from across that raw and inflamed border. Earlier on these pages, I confessed to not having the right constitution to face down the cool eternity of the Karst caves. I am too American perhaps, too optimistic. I fear death and chaos more than I like to admit. And so I shall indulge myself and persist a little longer in my quest for mining compassion and understanding – and, yes, even joy and hope – in Kosovel's story. I shall turn once again to the life of the stationary exile. Now more than ever, I need his recipe for surviving chaos. Reluctantly, I have learned that chaos cannot be kept forever at bay. I know now that it is always out there, hovering at the edge of even the quietest village, lurking in the most predictable routine.

Against all odds, Kosovel does not disappoint me. Like a solitary light in a window, he offers a glimmer of hope that illuminates an otherwise darkened landscape. It seems against all odds because the overwhelming tragedy of losing his village at the age of sixteen was followed by far greater tragedies. After the Rapallo agreement, the fascist government of Italy embarked upon a program of Italianizing the Karst and forcing assimilation on its Slav inhabitants. As a result, Kosovel's father as headmaster of a Slovenian elementary school lost both his livelihood and his residence on the school premises. And then in early 1926 came what must have been the greatest family tragedy of all. Srečko Kosovel fell ill in Ljubljana. It is widely believed that he caught cold waiting on a train platform on his way to a lecture on art and the proletariat for which he was slated to give the introduction. On March 24, when the worst seemed to be over, he wrote to his family: *"I spent my birthday in bed, though I did get up for a while when someone came – can you guess who? – Dr. Čibej from Munich with a package of greetings and letters from Karmela. If only you knew how happy I was...."*

Yesterday I went to the Italian consulate to get a visa for home; there were no difficulties... but next time I must provide proof that my parents really live there..." In the event, Kosovel did succeed, despite his lingering physical weakness and the bureaucratic demands of the Italian state, in getting home to Tomaj for the Easter holidays. But he failed to recover from his illness. He died of meningitis several months later, on May 27, 1926. The birthday he had celebrated in a rented room in Ljubljana with Dr. Čibej and a package of medicine and letters from his sister had been his twenty-second. It had also been his last.

Where, a reasonable person might ask, is the hope in such a short and sad existence? Where the joy? The hope, such as it is, can be located in the young man's transcendence of the very limitations that life imposed upon him. Like many university students then and now, Kosovel longed to travel, to broaden his horizons, to move his body across the stationary earth. He often expressed the yearning to join Karmela in Munich, to visit Paris and Vienna and other European capitals. But the farthest he ever made it from home was Belgrade. Time, however, proved to be far crueler than restrictions of distance and borders, war and poverty. Time – twenty-two years, two months and nine days of it – turned out to be the harshest master of all. And yet, because of the richness of his inward travels, the young poet defied time and space. It could even be claimed that he outsmarted death itself and became immortal. For in the last few years of his life, from the age of eighteen to twenty-two, Kosovel wrote more than a thousand poems. He also penned several hundred prose works – lyrical pieces, literary criticism, essays and sketches – and enough notes and letters and diary entries to fill several hefty volumes. In less than half a decade, he wrote in the three modernist idioms that would dominate the poetry of the whole of the twentieth century. He glorified the Karst in the subdued terms of the impressionist. He railed against the injustice of the post-war territorial settlements, the plight of the proletariat and the corruption of Europe in his expressionist poems. His futurist work, replete with mathematical symbols and various typefaces and no simplistic rhyme schemes, made him the posthumous literary sensation of the Slovenian neo-avant-garde in the late sixties. Quite a splash forty years after his death!

With his poetry, Kosovel pulled off a sleight of hand more than worthy of the twentieth century break with realistic representations of history and time. His written work, produced in a youthful heartbeat, became the life itself. Little of the work, not more than forty poems, was published while that young heart was still beating. The rest of it came out over the course of decades, decades that would have covered the natural creative life span of a more average artist. But rather than being dictated by a living breathing creator, the idiosyncratic rhythm of publication was determined by the various friends and editors who took up the task of sorting through the vast body of raw unordered pages. Oddly enough, this gradual accretion (a first collection in 1927, a second in 1931, the first collected works in 1946, the second in 1964, the futurist volume entitled *Integrali* in 1968, another volume of futurist poetry in 1974, the prose, letters and notes in 1977) comes far closer to a normal pattern of artistic creation – interrupted from time to

time by an extended bout of writer's block – than the prolific intensity of the four year period that preceded the author's sudden demise. The work itself seems to have metamorphosed into that withered old centenarian whiling away the hours beneath a fig tree in a sunny Karst garden, looking back with satisfaction over a century of historical and creative turmoil.

But I already hear a snort of derision from the realist gallery. The work, in truth, is not the life. It can never be the life. Srečko Kosovel died in 1926. Full stop. The poet may have outsmarted death but the man did not, and art can only comfort the living. Where then is the joy in that? The joy can be found, as it always must be, in the life – however abbreviated it may have been. Modern Slovenians, unlike their American counterparts, are endowed with constitutions that are inclined toward pessimism and the cool eternity of the caves. As a result, they prefer their poetic legends to be tragic and so have a tendency to view Kosovel's brief life as merely the necessary precursor to his early death. The most common adjective used to describe his work is *prophetic*, as if he knew what was coming and everything in his life spooled inevitably toward that defining moment. It is undeniable that Kosovel's poetry and letters are more than amply sprinkled with references to death. Sometimes these references are startling: for example, in a letter when he likens the charming feminine laughter of a friend to "*silver bells ringing beside the corpse of a young man*". Sometimes they are heartbreaking in their childlike directness: for example, in the poem *No, I Do Not Yet Want to Die*:

*No, I do not yet want to die,
while I have a father, a mother,
sisters and brothers,
a sweetheart and friends...*

*No, I do not yet want to die,
while the sun still shines golden
and youth walks by my side
and life's goals lay before me...*

No doubt, it is tempting to read these words as oracular, to interpret his early death as preordained. But it was not. Kosovel's life, like any life, was composed of a series of instants each of which contained, if not infinite, than a whole host of possibilities. It did not spool inevitably toward chaos and death any more than any of our lives do. For this reason, I am far more attracted to snippets of his writings that contain the youthful exuberance I so admired in his photograph than by those that wax lyrical about death. In the same letter as the one where he compares a young woman's laughter to funeral bells, he writes of an Italian girl he spotted while on vacation in the Karst. After all of Kosovel's bitter observations of Italian occupiers and bureaucrats, the loathsome *cenzuri* and the idiotic *carabinieri* aiming their guns from the belfry of Saint Peter and Paul church in Tomaj, one can only read with astonishment that the young girl was as

“beautiful as a sixteen year old Madonna”. Even more, he avers that if he were a romantic (rather than the impressionist/expressionist/futurist we now know him to have been), he would have kidnapped the girl and taken her away with him. That's how beautiful she was, the giddy love-struck boy writes, before concluding that Italians are not so bad after all.

Life is strange and remarkable and full of surprises – both joyful and dreadful ones. If Kosovel had skipped the lecture on art and the proletariat and had kidnapped the sixteen-year-old Madonna instead, he might not have died a virgin. He might have actually lived to have been that centenarian under the fig tree, smiling fondly as he recalled his morbid youthful obsession with death. He might have looked back on a century filled not only with historical and creative turmoil but with a brood of Slovenian-Italian children as well. Odd encounters such as Kosovel's with the young Italian beauty have the potential to divert the predictable course of life. In this, I speak from personal experience my own life having been so diverted.

Kosovel's life – and here perhaps lies the source of his undying appeal – offers us hope and a sort of miraculous joy precisely because of the absurd unraveling of his story and of history itself. How could the young Srečko, sitting marooned on his chair in a rented room in Ljubljana, have foreseen that that great bird of prey, slender dark thread gripped in its beak, would fly again and again over his homeland? That not only would Tomaj pass from fascist Italian to communist Yugoslav hands following yet another European war, but that it would one day, after a Yugoslav war, find itself in an independent Slovenian state? How could he have predicted his own death or imagined that forty years after it, the poetic jottings he scribbled down between classes would be celebrated by a crowd of wild-eyed dissidents in a downtown bar in Ljubljana? Dissidents who used their art to protest exactly the kind of proletarian government that Kosovel's art had so fervently envisioned? How could he have dreamed that his family name would one day be transformed into a word – kosovelness – that would be summoned to describe the barren beauty of the Karst? Impossible! Yet all true. And we, of course, are no less blind to the possibilities that lie before us. Like Kosovel's mother and father who had no idea that their last child was born in the 622nd year of the Habsburg's 636 year reign, we also cannot know where we are located in history. We cannot know for certain whether that September morning marked the end of one era or the beginning of another. As prophetic as certain events may seem, what the future holds remains inscrutable and in dark times there is a certain comfort in this.

In the end, movement – and the very deliberateness of movement – is overrated. It reduces history to mere trajectory. It reduces life to the inescapable arc from birth to death. Indeed, a great deal of movement and action and the will to power represents nothing more than futile efforts to push back the chaos, to run away from the cool eternity of the caves. But a steep price is paid for the certainty of movement. With movement, we sacrifice the nearly infinite possibilities embedded in each stationary moment. With action, we lose the rich and subtle

variety of emotions that accompany indecision and powerlessness: emotions such as ambivalence, desire, melancholy. It is rather like the difference between driving full speed past the words – "*My soul rejoices as if drunk on teran*" – and actually being drunk on teran, soul rejoicing, stars spinning in the night sky. Life can only be deeply felt in its stationary moments. Whether these moments string together the full life of a withered old man resting in a sunny Karst garden or the short one of a young man cut down in his prime is finally beside the point. For without these moments, all existence loses its meaning. Only sitting at a window and gazing blindly into space can one sense the terrible internal swell of melancholy and loss. Only in the contemplation of something fleeting and beautiful can the bitterness of enmity melt away in a marvelous dream of love. Only in the stillest of moments, pausing at the edge of a village to be greeted by a trembling pine tree, seeking out a solitary light in the blackness, can the exiled soul finally come home.