

eXchanges

Spring 2004
Sex & Death

Patriotism

Ana Popović and Mileta Prodanović

In long, wide curves, the railroad tracks negotiate the long descent. Around the hill crowned by the steeped rustic stone church surrounded by a rampart-like wall, the slow arthropodous train makes an almost full circle. A passenger on the train, tired of the stark landscape the train has been traveling by, tired of the monotonous karst fields with sparse grass, will suddenly catch sight of the sea from the edge of the high plateau. The glittering surface of the open sea. In the blue mist he will see the ships waiting for a berth in the port. And then he will see the town in the bay, the houses cascading down the hillside. The town has the shape of a giant, white shell. This is the place where Mitteleuropa dips her finger into the northernmost tip of the Adriatic Sea.

The brown "rapido" train continues: it slides between low houses whose backs are to the railroad. It leaves the dense urban fabric behind, leaves behind the small-time Yugoslav smugglers masquerading as ordinary passengers with their burden of bags, sacks, boxes, on the Trieste station platforms. The route then follows the shore: through the low bushes the passenger can catch a glimpse of a fairy-tale castle on the cliff. It is Miramare, that glorious specimen of Viennese fin-de-siecle kitsch. At the foot of the

Pariotizam

Mileta Prodanović

Savladujući visinsku razliku pruga pravi blage, široke krivine. Oko brda krunisanog surom crkvicom, crkvicom sa rusticnim tornjem i ogradom koja lici na fortifikaciju, tromi zglavkar voza napravi gotovo pun krug. Putnik, umoran od oskudnog pejzaža, od jednolicnih krecnjackih polja jedva obraslih travom, izbrazdanih škarpama i vrtacama, sa oboda platoa ugledace more. Pucinu koja se presijava. U izmaglici i brodove koji cekaju na vez. Tek nakon toga ukazace se grad u zalivu, zdanja kaskadno rasporedena na padini, videce se grad nalik na veliku školjku. To je mesto na kojem je Srednja Evropa zamocila prst u vrh Jadrana.

Mrki "rapido" nastavlja: klizi lagano između niskih kuća koje su okrenule leđa šinama. Ostavlja za sobom gusto tkivo grada, ostavlja brojne putnike natovarene vrećama, kutijama, zembiljima, one kojima je Trst odredište. Trasa pruge prati obalu: kroz šipražje videće se na tren hrid i na njoj beli dvorac, Miramare, blistavi specimen vijenskog kica. Katarke jahti usidrenih podno rta, raznobojne zastave koje se pokoravaju cudima vetra.

Tek kada se spusti blizu nivoa mora, nakon još jedne velike krivine, kompozicija će ubrzati.

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

cliff the masts of the anchored yachts are visible, their multicolored flags fluttering in the breeze.

Only when it has descended almost to sea level, after yet another long curve, will the train pick up speed. Free from the discomforts of the rough stretch, it rolls through the vast plain, heading westwards. The river where the torrents gather from the Alps changes here, on the low ground near the sea: it becomes calm and lazy and splits into a wide delta, depositing ever more material from the mountains on the slowly expanding mainland. The sea is now a mere line merged with the horizon. The metal bridges over the fingers of the delta go by, the concrete viaducts straddle the railroad tracks; in the distance, barely visible, loom large industrial plants, oil refineries, tall chimneys.

At first, the cigarette smoke it is a smoking compartment is sharply outlined. Arabesques, whorls and wavering coils soon vanish into the mist imprisoned in the box of the compartment.

"The Isonzo," says somebody in the window seat.

"The Isonzo..." says my grandmother. The tobacco smell suddenly becomes strong and aromatic. In the spacious kitchen-cum-living room of a Belgrade apartment in a converted attic, the old woman carefully uses tongs to remove metal rings from the top of a white enameled wood-

Oslobodena briga teške deonice, ona hita kroz nepreglednu ravnicu, prema zapadu. I reka koja sakuplja bujicne tokove Alpa ovde, na niskom priobalju, menja prirodu: postaje mirna, lenja i grana se u deltu pre no što ce u nisko tlo ugraditi još materijala donetog sa planina. More je sada samo linija izjednacena sa horizontom. Promicu mostovi preko rukavaca, betonski vijadukti prekoracuju prugu, u daljini naziru se industrijska postrojenja, rafinerije, visoki dimnjaci.

Dim cigarete - bio je to kupe za pušace - najpre je oštro ocrtan. Arabeske, volute, titravi nepravilni kolutovi ubrzo nestaju, pretvaraju se u izmaglicu.

- Soca - govori neko u kupeu.

- Soca... - govori moja baba. Duvanski dim najednom dobija oštar miris i pretvara se u aromaticnu izmaglicu. U prostranoj kuhinji jednog beogradskog stana, kuhinji koja je istovremeno i dnevna soba, na mansardi, starica pažljivo, mašicama, uklanja metalne prstenove sa platforme belog emajliranog šporeta na drva i u kružni otvor koji podseca na ulaz u pakao, otvor iz kojeg hitro proviruju razigrana vretena plamena, stavlja posudu slicnu tiganju. Prethodno je iz tegle, zahvatajući šakom, kroz zaslon na poklopcu, u posudu presula zelenkasta zrna sirove kafe.

- Soca i Pijava... - zamišljeno ponavlja moja

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

burning stove, revealing a circular hole that resembles the mouth of hell, with quick tongues of fire waiting to leap up. She places a covered pan over the opening, which she has filled with a handful of raw coffee beans from a rectangular tin can.

"Isonzo and Piave..." repeats my grandmother, lost in thought, turning the curved handle of the pan where she is roasting the coffee beans. "Oh, how many of our Bosnian countrymen lost their lives there... Boro, Djordjo... Then Radoje, Slavko, Krsto. Ostojica's two sons... I've forgotten their names... And poor Jovo, the one who was engaged to my sister Ljubica. She never married. And she died not long after the war... poor girl. And him, as handsome as they come, graduated from merchant school. And nothing... gone. I also remember Marko... I can still see him in my mind's eye: smallish, with lots of freckles... always making jokes. He had mischievous eyes, made us laugh all the time..."

"Why? Why did they fight in the war?"

"What a silly question! For the Emperor, of course."

"For the sake of a foreign country? For the country that was occupying yours? And for which Emperor... For the uncle of the Archduke you killed in Sarajevo," asks a stranger's voice, "or for his cousin?"

baba okrecuci izvijenu rucicu na napravi za prženje kafe - Koliko je samo naših Bosanaca tamo izginilo... Boro, Đordo... Onda Radoje, Slavko, Krsto. Ostojina dva sina... sad sam zaboravila kako su se zvali... Jadni Jovo, onaj što se bio verio sa mojom sestrom Ljubicom. Nikad se nije udala. I ona je brzo umrla, sirotica... A lijep je bio, kao slika štono kažu, trgovačku školu svršio. I ništa... Ode. Pa onda Marko... Marko. Bože blagi, kao da ga sad vidim: nekako positan, pirgav... stalno se šalio. Oci navr' glave... Sve nas je zasmijav'o.

- Zašto? Zašto su išli?

- Kako zašto? Za Cara.

- Za tuđu zemlju? Za kojeg Cara? Jel' za strica onog kojeg ste ubili u Sarajevu? - pita nepoznati glas - Ili za njegovog sinovca?

- 'Ajde šuti... Šuti, bolan. Moralo se ic'... Nije pitalo... Ne razumiješ ti to...

Zatim bi podigla posudu, vatra bi se ponovo promolila, kao da ispituje veliki, spoljni svet. Baba bi zatim provirivala kroz vizir na poklopcu, i kada bi se uverila da zrna još uvek nisu dobila željenu tamnu, mrku boju vraćala je garavu napravu u kružni otvor na platformi šporeta.

- Malo se nji' vratilo - nastavljala je - A i oni što su došli... eh... bolje bi bilo da su ostali. Znaš,

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

"Ah, you don't know how it was... They had to go. Nobody asked any questions... You don't understand..."

Then she lifts the pot by its large handle and the flames shoot out again from the uncovered hole, as if wishing to explore the big outer world. My grandmother then looks through the visor on the lid, and when she has made sure that the beans have not yet turned the desired dark brown, she replaces the sooty pot onto the round opening on the surface of the stove.

"Few of them returned to their families," she goes on, "and those who did come back... ah... they would have done better to have remained on the battlefield. You know, they did not perish from bullets, shrapnel... shells. It was the stone, some strange white rock, they said... And when the shells struck, the rocks would shatter like glass... It was these sharp splinters of stone that killed them. A lot of them were blinded. Our Veljko, our poor Veljko, my aunt's son. He came back mad as well as blind... When they brought him... when I saw him... I couldn't stop crying. He was the only one from his unit to survive. Just him... And before he left for the war... Oh, what beautiful handwriting he had! I still keep his Christmas cards somewhere. And he was a good student, very good... all the children in the family used to study from his notes, for years... You should see his notebooks, none of them

nisu oni stradavali od metaka, gelera... granata. Kamen je to, neki bijeli kamen, kako su govorili... i kad udari granata sve se raspe, kao staklo. Na sve strane. Taj je oštri kamen ubij'o... Mnogo ih je oslijepilo. Naš Veljko, siroti Veljko tetkin. On je i oslijepio i poludio. Kad su ga doveli... kad sam ga vidila... suze nisam mogla da zaustavim. On je jedini iz njegove cete preživio. Samo on... A prije no što je otiš'o... Kakav je samo krasan rukopis im'o. Još nede cuvam njegove karte što je kuci pis'o za Božic. I dobar dak... iz njegovih su teka sva djeca iskuce poslije ucila... Da vidiš te teke... bez ušiju, bez krmaca... I ništa... samo je poslije sjedio, im'o je bijeli štap i nosio je povazdan hoklicu isto bijelu, i tako sjedne u bašcu i sunca se, siroma'. Rijetko je govorio, al' sve nekako nepovezano. I nisu ga ljudi slušali. Poludio... kako se kaže... izgubio se. Stalno je pominj'o neku groficu iz Beca. Koja im je, valjda, dolazila tamo na front. Tako, nešto on uobrazio. Da obilazi ranjene... ako sam dobro razumijela... Tako, k'o da je on nešto, rek'o bi, sa tom groficom im'o... Rijetko sam ga poslije vidala, kad sam se udala i kad smo došli ovamo jedva da sam išla u Bosnu, jedared u tri godine... druga su bila vremena, teže se putovalo... Ali, rekla bi' da me se sjecao. Prepoznav'o me je po glasu. I uvijek je pocinjo da mi prica o toj grofici, te fantazije... njegove... Rek'o bi: "Nato, bona, saslušaj me bar ti...". Mor'o si ga slušat' neko vrijeme, red je, obolio covjek, invalid. A sve nešto nepovezano, da te Bog sacuva... Poludio covjek, pravo poludio...

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

dog-eared, no marks, all clean and neat. And... nothing... He would just sit there, he carried a white stick and he always carried a stool... the stool was white too, and he would sit outside in the garden in the sun, poor thing. He spoke very rarely. Almost never... and even when he said something it would all be so... disjointed. And nobody would listen to him. Went mad, lost his marbles, as they say... He kept mentioning a certain countess or baroness from Vienna. I guess she had visited them there at the front. Or he had just imagined it in his madness... She had visited the wounded soldiers there, if I understood him rightly. And he seemed to imply there had been something between him and the lady... Later on, I saw very little of him. I got married, came here to Belgrade, and went back to Bosnia only rarely, perhaps once every three years... The times were different then, it was not easy to get there...

"But I'd say he remembered me. He recognized me by my voice. And he would always tell the same story about that baroness, his fantasies... He would say: 'Maria, my dear, listen to me, you at least...'. And I had to listen to him for a while, just to be polite, after all he was a sick man, an invalid. And everything he said was muddled, it made no sense at all... He was mad, stark mad..."

Behind the broken-off sentences there was a story my grandmother's relatives would not have

Iza prekinutih recenica krila se prica u koju, cak i da su je saslušali, cak i da su je povezali, sasvim sigurno nikada ne bi poverovali. Krije se lik baronice Felicije-Pije Bruktenhaler, osobe koja je slavu u bečkim salonima gradila koliko na svojoj lepoti, osobitim umecima u prostranstvima svilenkaste posteljine, toliko i na vešto plasiranim glasinama o navodnom daljem srodstvu sa Marijom Vecerom.

Baronica je svoju nameru, svoj projekat, izložila jednom od ljubavnika, pomocnom biskupu Linca cum iure succesionis, veoma hladne novembarske veceri, nakon što je ovaj, kao clan episkopata, ucestvovao u sprovodu starog cara Franje. Od njega, kao klerika sa dobrim vezama kod samog kardinala, zatražila je pomoc u organizovanju "Sestara milosnica Marije Magdalene", neobicnog karitativnog reda koji bi se sastojao od nje i njenih nekoliko prijateljica, ne nužno plemickog porekla. I, naravno, ukoliko bi se ukazala potreba, ukoliko bi rat potrajao a broj zainteresovanih porastao, pretvorio u trajniju asocijaciju. Suština njihove misije bila je u odlazanju na front i nesebicnom davanju ljubavi vojnicima na prvim linijama. U onoj meri u kojoj je rat elementarna pojava u kojoj je covek sveden samo na jednu dimenziju - i ta ljubav bi bila elementarna.

- Sad, kada je naša domovina u opasnosti, možda najvećoj otkako mi znamo za sebe - rekla je - ljubav prema novom caru i, ako hoćeš, znak poštovanja prema dobrom caru Franji kojeg smo

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

believed, even if they had listened carefully, even if they had been willing and able to connect its scattered fragments. There was the figure of the baroness Felicia-Pia Bruktenhaller, who had built her fame in the salons of Vienna as much on her beauty and her unique skills in the perfumed expanses of silk sheets as on the carefully spread rumors that she was a distant relative of Maria Vetsera's.

The Baroness revealed her intentions, her scheme, to one of her lovers, the auxiliary bishop of Linz cum iure sucesionis, one cold November night after he, a member of the bishops' collegium, had attended the funeral of the deceased Emperor Franz Josef. It was he, a cleric with good connections at the cardinal's court, who the baroness asked for help in organizing a new lay order with a bizarre mission. The members of the order of "The Charitable Sisters of Saint Mary Magdalene" would be the Baroness and a few of her close friends, not necessarily blue-blooded. And, of course, if the war went on and the number of interested sisters increased, the order could become a permanent association. The essence of their mission would be to visit the battlefields at the front and to generously dispense love to soldiers on the front lines. And since war is an elemental phenomenon, a situation in which man is reduced to a single dimension that love would be elemental as well.

"Now that our homeland is under threat, probably

danas sahranili, jeste upravo i doslovno ljubav prema svim podanicima carevine. U ovom casu možda pre svega prema onima koji svoje živote, svoja tela, tako izdašno daruju prestolu... Teo, ti znaš da ja ne mogu da uzmem pušku i odem u Galiciju ili negde drugde, moja telesna žrtva mogla bi da bude upravo to. Svojim telom podici duh onih koji ce koliko sutra umreti. I nemoj mi reci da to nema spiritualnu dimenziju... evo, baš nedavno sam u Kunsthistorischesu slušala predavanje jednog berlinskog arheologa o sakralnoj prostituciji u starom Vavilonu. Teo, dušo, zar mi nismo neka vrsta novog Vavilona... Uzmi samo banknotu od sto kruna, pogledaj sve te jezike, taj galimatijas alfabeta i narecja...

Pomocni biskup je zamalo progutao prsten u nervozi skinut sa ruke. Disao je ubrzano, ne samo zbog onoga što se pod baldahinom postelje dešavalo desetak minuta ranije. Baronica je, mazno, nastavljala:

- Predložiceš, znam, da se prijavim u bolnicarke. Ali, to je tako stereotipno, banalno... Između ostalog, gadi mi se miris krvi, truljenja, sve te otkinute ruke i noge, razbijene glave... Moja misija mora da bude nešto drugo... nešto više. Nešto prilagođeno mojoj prirodi.

- To je blasfemija...

- Ne, Teo, to je patriotizam. Patriotizam. Ti momci ce ionako svi uskoro biti mrtvi, kao zemlja

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

the greatest threat in our lifetimes," she said, "we should show that the love we bear our new Keiser and Koenig, and, if you wish, the respect we feel for our good Emperor Franz Joseph whose body was laid to rest in the crypt of the Capuchins today, is precisely and literally love for all the subjects of the Empire. At this moment our attention should be directed above all to those who are so generously laying down their lives and sacrificing their bodies for the throne... Theo, you know that I cannot very well pick up a rifle and go to Galicia or some similar place, and so my physical sacrifice could be just that. I want to lay my body on the sacrificial altar and raise the spirits of those who are to die on the morrow. And, my love, don't tell me that my project lacks a spiritual dimension... Not long ago I attended a lecture at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, an old professor from Berlin was talking about sacral prostitution in ancient Babylonia. Theo, my love, is not our country some kind of new Babylon? Just look at the hundred crown bill, see all the languages on it, the confusion of alphabets and dialects..."

The auxiliary bishop almost swallowed the golden ring he had removed from his finger in his nervousness. He was breathing heavily, which was not the only consequence of what had taken place under the canopy of the soft bed some ten minutes before. The Baroness coquettishly continued:

otici ce zemlji, bice plen crva... Moj gest može da bude shvacen kao neka vrsta poslednje pricesti. Poslednje telesne pricesti...

- Ne huli, kceri - u Felicijinom ljubavniku najednom se prenuo pomocni biskup - Ovo je vec previše.

Želje izgovorene na jastuku obicno imaju moc zakona: Felicijin drugi ljubavnik, siva eminencija generalštaba, obezbedio joj je prijem kod komandanta Pete armije, feldmaršala Svetozara Borojevica fon Bojna. Potajno se nadala da ce Borojevic, kao Zerbe, uciniti sve da njegovi vojnici budu srećni i motivisani za borbu. I da ce, opet kao takav, možda zaobici formalnosti vojne birokratije i celu stvar prihvatiti bez mnogo papira i pecata. On je, medutim, imao malo vremena da je sasluša i kada je nazreo o cemu se zapravo radi, ne samo da ju je izbacio iz kabineta uz najstrašnije psovke koje se mogu cuti u vojnim akademijama i trupama imperije (uglavnom na nemackom i madarskom, a našla se tu i po koja na srpskom), vec je, u nameri da utvrdi kako je uopšte ta nesumnjivo luda žena došla do komandanta armije, pokrenuo istragu koja je kasnije na jedvite jade, preko poverljivih ljudi, ipak nekako zaustavljena.

Kod generala Konrada Kraftha fon Delmenzingena baronica je imala više sreće: nakon nekoliko susreta u njenom salonu i njegove konstatacije "ovakva koža i ove butine za obicnu stoku -

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

"I know that you will advise me to sign up as a nurse. But, my love, that is so ordinary, so banal... And, to be honest, I cannot bear the smell of blood, of rotting flesh... all those severed limbs, all those smashed skulls... My mission must be completely different... something much, much greater. Something in harmony with my nature."

"This is blasphemy..."

"No, no, Theo, it is patriotism. Patriotism. Those boys will be dead soon anyway, as dust they will turn to dust, they will turn to mud, their beautiful bodies will become food for worms... My gesture can be understood as being a kind of last rite. The last corporeal rite..."

"Do not blaspheme, my dear," the auxiliary bishop in Felicia's lover was suddenly aroused. "This is too much!"

Wishes uttered on a pillow usually have the power of a law: another of Felicia's lovers, the grey eminence of the army's supreme command, arranged audience for her with the commander of the Fifth Army, Feldmarschal Svetozar Borojević von Bojna. She secretly hoped that Borojević, as a Serb, would do everything to make his soldiers happy and motivated for battle. And that, for the same reason, he would understand and accept the project without insisting on bureaucratic formalities, avoiding all the paperwork and

prava šteta", general je sve prihvatio kao hir od kojeg će baronica nesumnjivo odustati. Osoba od poverenja, intendantski oficir na kojeg ju je uputio general Kraft smatrao je da zamisao u suštini nije loša. Jedino je bio za varijantu da spisak bude ograničen na oficire.

- Ne shvatate, gospodine - rekla je baronica - ovo nije priča o vojnickom kupleraju. Još manje o oficirskom... Nema nikakvih spiskova. To je duhovna stvar. Želim da budem upućena na mesto gde se trenutno vode najkrvavije bitke. Recimo prema Italiji... Na Socu, u Kaporeto. Oni koji će me imati bice u izvesnom smislu već mrtvi ljudi: pored sebe neće imati tela nego duše. Anđele, dragi moj gospodine, anđele. Postradale na putu Božje pravde, u odbrani našeg apostolskog carskog veličanstva.

Intendantski oficir nije razumeo. Vojska je, jasno, organizacija koja nije zasnovana na kategoriji razumevanja

- važno je bilo to što je nalog izvršen.

Ipak, prošla je nepuna godina do dana kada je deo posluge baronice Felicije-Pije Bruktenhaler, posluge naviknute na svakakva iznenađenja i ekstravagancije, sa voza je sišao u Tolminu. Za dalji transport pobrinuli su se trecepozivci. U jednu seosku školu prenet je deo nameštaja iz barončinog bečkog stana, doneti su kovcezi puni posteljine i kutije sa slatkišima i prezervativima. Becki hausmajstor nadzirao je radove na

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

official stamps. He, however, had little time for her explications, and when he grasped the nature of her project he instantly threw her out of his office, accompanying the action with an anthology of the most horrible curses and oaths acquired at the military academies and among the troops of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (mostly in German and Hungarian, with some additions in Serbian). And that was not all he proceeded to launch an investigation, firmly determined to find out who had allowed this undoubtedly mad lady to enter his office. The investigation was eventually dropped thanks to the tremendous efforts of the Baroness' intimate friends.

With General Konrad Kraft von Delmenzingen the Baroness had more luck: after a few meetings in her salon and his remark that "it is such a pity to offer this alabaster skin and this beautifully shaped body to those ragged brutes," the general took her idea to be a temporary caprice. He was sure that she would abandon the project very soon. Another confidante, a quartermaster officer recommended by general Kraft, found her idea basically interesting. The only correction, he suggested, would be to limit the very interesting project to the officer corps.

"You do not understand, Herr General," the baroness said. "This is not about a soldiers' bordello. Even less about an officers' club... No lists, you know... It is a purely spiritual matter.

prepravci pojedinih prostorija u kupatila. Njegovi pokušaji da bolnicu, smeštenu u drugom krilu školske zgrade premesti dalje, u ambar obližnjeg gazdinstva, ostali su bezuspešni i hauzmajstor, stari dobri Hugo, cekao je baronicu sa izvesnom strepnjom, sasvim uveren da se gospodici ovakav raspored nece svideti.

Po baronicu i njene tri prijateljice, jedine članice neformalne organizacije "Sestara milosnica Marije Magdalene", poslata je na železnicku stanicu kocija sa zatamnjenim oknima. U planinama nadnetim nad Jadran one su se pojavile sredinom oktobra, svega nekoliko dana pre pocetka velike i pažljivo pripremljene kontraofanzive. Mesec dana ranije, u jedanaestoj bici na Soci, druga italijanska armija, pod komandom generala Luidija Kapela, uspela je da prodre severno od Gorice i zauzme velike teritorije.

U vojsci je vladala posebna vrsta uzbuđenja svojstvena danima pred nagoveštene velike pokrete, ofanzive. Stizale su nove trupe, mahom regimente slovenskog sastava.

Kao i uvek kada su u pitanju zadovoljstva podoficiri i kaplari su išli pre redova. Oni su bili tu i da održavaju disciplinu u redu koji je formiran ispred škole. Zacudo, iako je onima koji su cekali bilo objašnjeno da su cetiri uvažene gospode iz prestonice došle da ih na poseban nacin ohrabre pre bitke, atmosfera u redu je bila skoro sasvim lišena lascivnih komentara i vulgarnih pošalica.

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

I want to be directed to the place where the fighting is heaviest at the moment. For instance, to the Italian front... To the Isonzo, in Caporetto. Those who possess me will, in a sense, be dead men. It is not bodies but souls that I will have in my bed. Angels, my dear sir, angels. Those who will perish on the path of the Lord's justice, in defense of our Apostolic Imperial Majesty."

The quartermaster officer did not understand. Fortunately, however, the army is not an institution based on the category of understanding what mattered was that the order be carried out.

Nevertheless, almost a full year elapsed before Felicia-Pia Bruktenhaller's Viennese house servants, accustomed to surprises and extravagances of all kinds, stepped onto the platform of the railroad station in Tolmin. The third call-ups were put in charge of further transportation. Part of the Baroness' sumptuous furniture had been brought from the capital, and now the village school was crammed with chests full of bedclothes and boxes of the finest chocolate pralines and condoms. Her Viennese superintendent, Hugo, oversaw the conversion of some of the rooms into bathrooms. His efforts to have the hospital, housed in the other wing of the village school, transferred to the barn of a nearby farm remained unsuccessful, and the faithful old Hugo awaited the Baroness' arrival with some trepidation, certain that the Baroness would be not be pleased with this arrangement.

Sa ramenima uvucenim od hladnoce, rukama u džepovima teških šinjela, premeštajući se sa noge na nogu, delovali su zbunjeno, čak i pomalo uplašeno.

Mladici, skoro decaci, među njima i oni kojima je susret sa regrutnom komisijom bio prvi dodir sa civilizacijom, ulazili su kada bi kaplar dao znak, najpre u svlačionicu i prostoriju sa tuševima, zatim bi iza improvizovanog paravana sredovečni i mrzovoljni vojni lekar kroz monokl pažljivo zagledao izvesne delove njihovog tela. Malo dalje stajao je kaplar koji je iz crvene kutije vadio mali upakovani predmet i bez reci ga pružao. Na znak drugog redara, postavljenog ispred kupatila, onog koji je imao pogled na hodnik, ulazili bi u jednu od četiri prostorije. U izvesnom smislu bilo je svejedno u koju bi ušli - sve četiri bile su istovetno opremljene: tavanice i zidovi bili su obloženi crnim tkaninama, nekom vrstom zavesa od lakog materijala sličnog onom od kojeg je bila posteljina. U uglu je stajao niski metalni stolic sa pozlacenim lavorom i bokalom. Sobom je, jasno, dominirala široka postelja slična kakvom žrtveniku.

Titrava i uzdržana svetlost poticala je iz tri grupe sveca na velikim mesinganim ciraćima. Atmosferu je bojio i miris ruža: iz Vijene su svakoga jutra stizali naramci belih i žutih ruža koje su Felicijine služavke vešto raspoređivale, kacile po crnim tkaninama. Za baronicu i njene prijateljice bile su napravljene posebne dijademe - na njima je

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

A luxurious carriage with darkened windows had been sent to the railroad station to collect the Baroness and her three friends, the only members of the informal organization called "The Charitable Sisters of Saint Mary Magdalene". They arrived in the mountains overlooking the Adriatic in mid-October, less than a week before the start of the great and carefully prepared counteroffensive. A month before, in the eleventh battle on the Isonzo, the Second Italian Army, under the command of general Luigi Capello, had managed to penetrate the north of the town Gorizia and to capture large territories.

Among the soldiers there was a special kind of stir characteristic of the days just before announced major moves or offensives. New troops continued to arrive, mainly regiments made up of Slavs.

As always where pleasure is concerned, the officers came before the privates. They stood outside the school to ensure order and discipline in the queue. Surprisingly, although the soldiers had been told that four distinguished ladies from Vienna had come to raise their spirits on the eve of battle in a special way, the conversation in the queue was almost totally free of lascivious comments and vulgar jokes. Their shoulders hunched in the cold weather, their hands in the pockets of their heavy overcoats, they looked confused, even a little frightened.

od lažnog dragog kamenja bio važniji veo od crne cipke koji je prekrivao lice. One su, dakle, mogle da vide fizionomije vojnika koji su ulazili, dok su lica koja su krunisala jedra tela cetiri beclijke ostajala vecna tajna za mladice koji su u ove odaje ulazili kao u kakvo predsoblje smrti.

Vec posle nekoliko dana popustio je patriotski zanos milosnih sestara: dve su se vratile za Bec, a samo je mlada udovica pukovnika Cermaka, poginulog na istocnom frontu, pod Pšemislom, ostala do kraja. A kraj je bio blizu: u drugom krilu školske zgrade vladala je sve veca užurbanost, culo se jecanje ranjenih presecano glasnim komandama sanitetskih oficira. Blizu šume formirano je groblje koje se iz dana u dan uvecavalo. Baronica i pukovnikovica stajale su pored prozora i pokušavale da iz daljine prepoznaju neke od teških ranjenika ili pak one koji su u pratnji mršavog vojnog sveštenika prema šumi bili nošeni na grubim, drvenim nosilima. Gotovo ravnodušno su konstatovale da ce ostati malo onih koji bi mogli da prošire legendu o tamnoj sobi sa svecama i bledim ružama, o sobi do koje je dopirala udaljena grmljavina artiljerije, sobi u kojoj je u šuštavoj posteljini, u sladostrasnim grcevima tela zapocinjala igra smrti, o mestu gde su se, kako je rekla baronica, na jedan gotovo mistican nacin, dodirnuli pocetak i kraj.

Kroz otvor na poklopcu posude za prženje sipila su zrna kafe i, udararajuci u dno široke tepsije, u kojoj ce se ohladiti, proizvodila hnskav šum.

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

Young men, hardly more than boys, some of whom had had their first contact with civilization in the form of the recruiting commission, went into the converted school building when the corporal had given the signal, first into the changing room, then into the shower room, and then behind a screen, where a sullen, middle-aged army doctor would carefully inspect certain parts of their bodies with a monocle. A couple of feet away stood another corporal who took tiny wrapped objects out of a red box and without a word handed them to the puzzled soldiers. An officer who stood outside the shower room and had a good view of the corridor would motion the young soldiers into one of the four rooms. In a sense, it made no difference which one they entered all four had been identically furnished and decorated. Covered with veils, all four ladies looked like sisters. The ceilings and the walls were hung with dark drapes. The curtains were made of a light fabric similar to the one used for the linens. In the corner of each room stood a low metal table with a gilded washbowl and a pitcher. Candles, numerous candles, and roses also helped turn the rooms into a kind of oasis. Every room was, of course, dominated by a large bed not unlike a sacrificial altar.

Every room was lit by three branching brass chandeliers, which gave off a dim, trembling light. The atmosphere was permeated by the scent of roses: armfuls of fresh roses, white and yellow, arrived from the capital every morning.

Nakon pauze dovoljne da u nju stane cela prica, nakon lakune u kojoj su svi nagoveštaji mogli da budu povezani, baba je dodavala:

- I znaš što je cudno... On nikada nije dozvoljav'o rec' da je oslijepio od metaka ili od tog rasutog kamenja. Govorio je da mu je vid ocinji izgorio od njene ljepote... Ljepote te njegove zamišljene grofice. Govorio je da ju je vidio, tako, sa visine, iza nje je bila ravnica, i u daljini Soca koja se uliva u more... a ona je, nekako lebdila iznad tih talijanskih rovova, skinila je veo, pogledala ga, i otkopcala neku dugmad i pokazala prsa. I eto, veli, to mu je spržilo pogled, ta bijela prsa, to je bilo posljednje što je vidio...

- Gde smo to stigli? - pitao je covek u uglu kupea dok je voz usporavao.

- Ne znam... - rekao je njegov prijatelj kršeci svetu regulu železnice o naginjanju kroz prozor
- ... ovde piše "Giornali".

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

Felicia's maids used the flowers to make wreaths and bouquets and hung them all over the black silk drapes which hid the walls. For the Baroness and her three friends special diadems had been made: the dark lace veils which covered their faces were more important than the imitation diamonds and rubies on the diadems' crown-like tops. Thus, the Viennese ladies could see the features of the soldiers who came in, but the faces that went with each of the four voluptuous bodies remained an everlasting secret for those who entered the rooms as one enters the antechamber of death.

After two or three days the patriotic enthusiasm of the charitable sisters diminished considerably: two of them returned to Vienna. Only the young widow of Colonel Äermak, killed in battle on the Eastern front, near Psemysl, stayed to the very end. And the end was very near: in the other wing of the school, the one that had been turned into a makeshift hospital, there was more and more rush. The moans and screams of the wounded mingled with the commands of the medical corps officers. Near the pine wood the army set up a cemetery, which expanded day by day. The Baroness and the colonel's widow stood by the window trying to recognize from afar some of the grievously wounded who were brought to the hospital, or those who were carried uphill on makeshift stretchers, followed by the thin army chaplain. Almost indifferently, they concluded that few of those who had visited the rooms with

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

the dark curtains and the pale roses would be left to spread the legend. And few people would hear about the school converted into a temple of pleasure, where, against the distant thunder of artillery, between rustling sheets, in convulsions of lust, the death game began. Who would survive to tell the tale of the place where, in the Baroness' own words, in an almost mystical way, the beginning and the end had touched?

Through the slit on the lid of the pan the dark beans pour, falling with a crunchy sound into the large shallow dish where they are supposed to cool. After a pause long enough to contain the whole story, after a hiatus in which all implications could be worked out, my grandmother adds:

"It's quite strange... He never allowed anybody to say that the bullets or splinters of rock had made him blind. He always said that her beauty had seared his eyes... The beauty of that imaginary baroness. He kept saying that he had seen her, somehow, from a height, with the vast, endless plain behind her, and, yes, the river, the Isonzo, flowing into the sea... and that, hovering in the air over the Italian trenches, she had removed her veil, looked at him, unbuttoned her gown and revealed her breasts. And that was, he used to repeat, what had burned his eyesight, those white breasts of hers, the last thing he had ever seen..."

"Where are we now?" asks the man in the corner

eXchanges

Spring 2004

Sex & Death

of the compartment while the train slows down.

"What's the name of this town?"

"I don't know..." says his companion, breaking the sacred rule of the railroad universe, the prohibition against leaning out the window. "...It only says 'Giornali'."