

Baby Six Billion
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(reprinted from the book, "Mille Fleurs" with the permission of Mr. Tharoor)
(performed on the occasion of UNESCO World Poetry Day)

I remember your city before you were born.
Winter nineteen ninety-one, the skies grey,
the air tense with rumours of war, the whiff
of cordite floating in from Croation battlefronts.
A brief ray of hope through the clouds, the
Sarajevo Accords of New Year's nineteen ninety-two,
sealing (ah, foolish hope) yet another peace
between Serbs and Croats. That hope shattered
in the gunfire of that cruellest April,
scattering the habitués of the sidewalk cafes
to the bleeding barricades, the dull thud
of artillery shells slamming into your city
from the ring of hills surrounding your parents.
Sarajevo, capital of Europe.

I remember your city before you were born.
The siege. The plangent whine
of the sniper's random bullet
penetrating the heart, the mind, of Sarajevo.
Shell-shock. Nineteen ninety-two and three, mobilization,
the tramp of mud-caked boots through the streets
of your Olympic city. January nineteen ninety-four,
the indelible screams of mothers at the marketplace,
dismembered limbs filling their shopping baskets
at Markale. Sarajevo, city of the exclusion zone,
filling with refugees, spies, advisers, smugglers,
United Nations peace-keepers
sent in to keep a peace no one could make,
Sarajevo, capital of Europe.

I remember your city before you were born.
The tunnel under the airport, fleeing women irradiated
by the searchlights as they tried to cross the runway,
blood irrigating the vegetable gardens of Dobrinje,
Sarajevo, a city pockmarked by hate, scarred
by the tracks of armored personnel carriers,
divided by barriers of blood. I remember
flying in over destroyed buildings, putting on my blue
helmet and ill-fitting Kevlar flak jacket,
stepping off the musty UNPROFOR Yak-40 and walking
across the tarmac, an armored firetruck driving slowly
between us and the silent snipers.
Your refugee parents knew no such security in Sarajevo.
Sarajevo, capital of Europe.

I remember your city before you were born.
Nineteen ninety-five, the smoke mushrooming over
the ammunition dump in Pale, the air carrying
haunting echoes of the massacres at Srebrenica,
another blot on the stained conscience
of what we naively called the international community.
The thumps of the guns
of the Rapid Reaction Force, reacting at last
to the shelling of Sarajevo. Thick clouds
of aircraft overhead, dropping destruction
on your besiegers. And with it, hope.
Till the air cleared, and peace came at last
to what would become your home.
Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia.

I remember your city before you were born.
Nineteen ninety-six, those first tentative steps of peace,
the buildings still shattered, people grappling
with pain and disbelief as they groped
to piece together the fragments of their fractured lives.
And now, nineteen ninety-nine, at the twilight
of a century marked twice by tragedy at Sarajevo,
I returned. As you grew large in your mother's womb,
my first glimpse from the air of reroofed homes,
buildings repainted in celebratory shades
of shocking pink and yellow, strolling couples,
children laughing as they ran across a park,
the bustle of a city at last at peace
with itself. Sarajevo, for a day, capital of the world.

I will always remember the day you were born.
At birth after so many deaths, the reassertion
of the miracle of life triumphing over the grave.
Flowers bloom in the cemetery. A bouquet is thrust
into your mother's hands, the traditional coin
of good fortune pressed into her palm, a United
Nations
medal of peace. We have made you a symbol, a
milestone,
a metaphor. But you are also a boy, Baby Six Billion.
And you will grow up, I pray, in a city
of healed wounds, bright lights, joyous music,
chattering friends who will not wear ethnic labels
on their belts. Let peace light the flame on the candles
of your birthday cake, Baby Six Billion.
In Sarajevo, city of hope.