

Bookforum

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WHEN IN ROAM

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Dubravka Ugresic is Walter Benjamin's Baudelaire, the poetic sojourner who finds himself at the whim of the crowd. She is the flaneur cast into the streets, nowhere at home. And like Baudelaire, Ugresic is a writer in full view of and at odds with the forces of commodity culture, a writer whose mission is to give form to modernity. But if Baudelaire's poetry is permeated by melancholic doom, Ugresic's diagnosis of life's illusory qualities is delightfully judgmental and cheerily pessimistic. Or as she tartly concludes in *Nobody's Home*, her new collection of essays, "this book breaks the rules of good behavior, because it bickers."

Compared with her previous nonfiction—focused explorations of Communist and post-Communist Yugoslav identity, American cultural life, and the publishing business—*Nobody's Home* is a rattle bag. The pieces form a kind of arc: Shorter theses occupy the beginning and end, with longer ones in between. The first third of the book is the most lucid and the most convincing. These "feuilletons" display Ugresic's talent for jumping into a particular subject by way of idiosyncratic, almost semiotically inclined anecdotes. (Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* comes readily to mind.) For instance, a birdhouse left long ago at a friend's New York apartment constitutes one of the tiny recognitions that make the whole world Ugresic's home, a "secret geography" of objects. Elsewhere, she uses onetime Yugoslav citizens' wide-ranging use of the word *shit* to explain how their reductive outlook renders all political, historical, and personal ills to a litany of defeats (in other words, a pile of shit). In "Gardening," Ugresic describes how a friend's Soviet-era garden grew in his Moscow apartment "until one day his whole 500 square foot jungle collapsed into the flat on the floor below." In this small disaster, the author discovers a predictive metaphor for global culture and politics: We all have a fantasy view of the

world that is unsupported by reality. “The garden is a relic of Arcadia for those of us who have been permanently expelled from paradise,” she offers. And the convenience of reducible constructs—of nationalities, identities, borders—is the thin rail we use to negotiate shifting sands.

One half of the title’s double entendre delineates a prevalent theme: No one is at home, even in the place that seems most familiar. (The other half entails the metaphysical notion that even God is away from home.) Tales of individuals in foreign lands frequent Ugresic’s literature, and many seem drawn from her own life. Born in Zagreb, Ugresic left her homeland in 1993 during the breakup of Yugoslavia. Tanja Lucić, the heroine of her 2005 novel, *The Ministry of Pain*, follows the author’s path, departing Zagreb with her husband, Goran, for Berlin. When he leaves her to seek better employment in Japan, Tanja moves to Amsterdam. She describes the city as a “snail, a shell, a spider’s web, a piece of fine lace, a novel with an unusually circular plot and hence no end.” This ouroboric trope is braided throughout the tale— exile is a mapless geography, an unreality.

Being at home in the world, as exile and citizen, likewise defined Russian émigré Nina Berberova: “I always sympathize with one who flees his nest, even if he flees into an anthill, where it may be crowded but one can find solitude . . . that precious and intense state of being conscious of the world and of oneself.” Ugresic might agree, as she allows *The Ministry of Pain* to end with a reprieve for Tanja. But what happens when borders and the identities they engender cease to have meaning or, in the case of Ugresic’s Yugoslavia, cease to exist? Ugresic cites the case of Ivo Andrić. Once considered a “Yugoslav writer,” Andrić was reclassified by a Croatian lexicon in the interest of tidying up the category of domestic literature: He was defined “by blood (as a Croatian writer), by residence (as a Serbian writer), and by themes (as a Bosnian writer).” The notion that a literary text must bear the burden of identification tags is, for Ugresic, an affront; it entails tacit approval of the idea that “the field of literature is nothing more than a realm of geopolitics.”

The longer essays engage a subject very much on the minds of many writers and readers these days—the future of serious literature in a fickle commercial environment. Yet here Ugresic’s rhythm lags, and her

wonderfully restless prose, so piquant and witty, frays. She is occasionally repetitive as she parses the threats that lie in wait for European writers in the global marketplace. Though her insights are frequently dead-on, readers can only circle the territory of “literary geopolitics” for so long before enthusiasm wanes. How and why we buy books and read them can never be as compelling as broodings on the texts themselves. Nevertheless, Ugresic can be counted on to reel her reader back in, if not with, say, her cynical observation that Communist citizens, “perfect hypocrites” though they may have been, were at least politically aware, then with a mischievous description of a semantically charged image, in which Putin shares a kiss with a fish: “The long, slippery sturgeon in his hands could be a penis, and Putin is kissing the organ at its sensitive tip.” Unfortunately, not even Ugresic’s clever wordsmithing can resolve our sense of dislocation, for a metaphor is simply an excuse, a bulwark, “our defense against nightmares.”