

Richard Eder

A Journal of Pain

For decades, to be a Yugoslav writer was to turn up at literary events in the West and have people struggle to place you. Nowadays they place you all too specifically and for a writer, that is perhaps worse. Are you Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian? The question is put hesitantly, as if inquiring into the nature of an illness; and the answer is routed to the corresponding slot under the headlines. What does this have to do with the pith of your style, your use of myth, your tutelary shades of Robert Musil, Italo Calvino or William Faulkner?

So for Dubravka Ugresic, a Croatian adrift in Western Europe and the United States, it was almost a pleasure when a shop assistant asked while spelling out her name: "Is it with those little guys above the letters?" At last, a literary question.

"Have a Nice Day" is a journal of pain, and in no way an evasion of the awfulness inside what were once the five republics of Yugoslavia. Or rather, Ugresic's book attempts in some way to be an evasion, and to the degree that it fails it is a searing success.

Knowing she was going to take up a teaching post at Wesleyan, in Connecticut, a Dutch editor-friend suggested that she send back a series of columns on life in the United States. Such a welcome task, so reassuring. She could reassemble her shattered bits into the traditional posture of a European intellectual making witty pronouncements about American ways. "At a time when all my words had scattered, that little column saved my life," she writes by way of introducing the pieces collected in this book.

The value of "Have a Nice Day" is not the saving but the losing. Ugresic does indeed perform the routine intellectual theatricalities. A Manhattan street vagrant flaps his arms at her and calls out "Good morning, America!" and she flaps her arms and calls back. She has great fun with the detailed instructions that come attached to everything she buys, with the readiness of female acquaintances to anatomize their emotional states, and with a psychiatrist who dismisses her agony over Yugoslavia and demands that she quit evading and discuss her real problems. "Every American has a shrink," she states. Every American also has a desk and clothes organizer; every American expects you to say "fine" when asking how you are.

There is quite a bit of this surface skating. It is roughly the counterpart to what a visitor to Eastern Europe 30 years ago might have written, had he or she--seizing the text, missing the ironic subtext--simply noted what was printed in the press, shown on television or spoken in public by casual acquaintances. And it is the kind of thing that must have prompted the wise compassion of her Dutch editor after receiving some of the columns:

"Your articles are very sad: They seem to be about someone who has stumbled into a completely empty house and is now furnishing it with things, slowly and rather absent-mindedly."

Ugresic's heart is not in furnishing a new house. It is in her displacement from the old one. And she goes from the surface to the depths once she finds the real use for her American observations: to make of them a resonating chamber for her loss.

The "fine" that "every American" replies, for example, comes at the end of a piece that skates until it plunges. At a hair salon it is bad form to answer "no" when the "maestro" asks if you are pleased. But: "I never go to the hairdresser in order to be pleased but so as to be displeased." Or: how is it that depression is considered a disease in America instead of--a glimpse of Zagreb--a natural state? And, noting that her new American friends assume that she will be staying, she lassos New World upbeat to Old World down with: "No. Thank you. I'm unhappy. I'm fine."

As we read, we realize bit by bit that when Ugresic seems to be jocosely overshooting her specifically American targets she is tragically hitting a target beyond. She writes about the cult of body parts in magazines and on TV: perfect teeth, breath, smell, legs, skin and so on. Nothing new here, until the last sentence: "I come from a country in which a body is just a cheap target." She writes of a trip with her American friend Norman (a too convenient straight man) to visit a couple in the country. The conversation is pleasant enough but it strikes her as superficial and pointless: no arguments, no emotional territory claimed or yielded.

"Norman seemed very pleased," she writes. "He had been with people and it had not hurt. That was the whole point. When I am with my people, in the end it always hurts."

She deals with the moral pastime of intellectuals in Western Europe and America: outrage called up in tranquillity. After a tragic phone call home, she comes upon a demonstration in Amsterdam whose signs read: "Stop fast food." She reads that Pavarotti is giving a benefit concert for Galapagos tortoises: "Please, Mr. Pavarotti, the Croats are tortoises from the Galapagos." She notes the open letters addressed by Yugoslav writers to Peter Handke, Milan Kundera and other celebrated colleagues in the West: "Open letters are a war genre, a genre of extreme despair. They are never read by those they are addressed to."

In "Yugo-Americana," perhaps the finest piece in her collection, Ugresic recalls how American movie and television images, along with a kind of American consumerism encouraged by Tito, began to permeate Yugoslavia in the 1960s. For years, she writes, it seemed as if there was a convergence. One writer even took a sleepy river town and wrote of it as if it were Mark Twain's Hannibal. Ugresic notes: "Today, Hannibal would be razed to the ground." The town, as it happened, was Vukovar, destroyed by Serbian shelling three years ago.

Ugresic goes on to observe that in today's Zagreb, the slang term for *knife* is *rambo*, Serbian militias are called Kninjas after the town of Knin, and Belgrade is called Arkansas after Arkan, the Serb paramilitary leader. Convergence recurs, this time in the imagination of the American reader and in drastically altered terms. It has an echo of the Icelandic tombstone inscription: "What you are, I was. What I am, you shall be."

