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"Sometimes People Can Become
Destroyed Cities to Each Other":
Miljenko Jergović's *Mama Leone*

Mama Leone, by Miljenko Jergović. Translated by David Williams.
Brooklyn, New York: Archipelago Books, 2012.

Toward the beginning of Miljenko Jergović's story collection *Mama Leone*, the book's acutely precocious child narrator learns a dubious lesson: "this world . . . was predicated on mistrust and the peculiar human tendency to think you a total idiot whenever you told the truth and take you seriously the second you started lying." *Mama Leone*—published in Croatia in 1999 and now available in English translation through Archipelago Books—possesses that child's dogged concern about the moral choices between honesty and deceit, forthrightness and deception, right and wrong. In navigating these conflicts, Jergović measures the confusion and disillusionment of pre- and post-independence Croatia, via the latitude and longitude of youth and war.

Mama Leone is split into two very distinct sections. The first, comprised of 21 interlocking stories set in pre-war Croatia, is entitled "When I Was Born a Dog Started Barking in the Hall of the Maternity Ward." These stories are told exclusively from the perspective of a young child growing up in the capitol Zagreb, as well as the surrounding countryside. From the beginning he is dealt the worst of hands: an immature mother, overbearing grandmother, haunted grandfather, and mostly absentee father. Taken together, these stories form a kind of *Künstlerroman*, charting the boy's coming-of-age as a writer. His family members, at their best, regard the child with a hesitant fascination; at their worst, they treat the boy as unbalanced and monstrous:

When they're there I'm not allowed to laugh because Mom will think I'm crazy, and Grandma that I'm malicious. Crazy-ness and malice are strictly forbidden in our house. Great unhappiness is born from malice; malicious children put their parents in old folks homes . . . Grandma and Mom were

scared of malice and craziness because they were born old and with fears I don't understand, but I knew that one day I'd have my turn . . . *When you grow up and have your own house and your own children, then you can do whatever you like. But in my house you won't.*

At an early age our young artist-to-be realizes that "[o]nly words cause no pain, in them there is no sorrow, they take nothing from us, and never leave us on our own in the darkness." Yet like most true artists, the boy finds that his sensitivity for language does not bind him closer to his social environment but only distances himself from all those who should be nearest. Like a preadolescent Holden Caulfield, he grates against the artifice and fakery of a world that lacks the *very imagination for beauty*: "Everything she said," he writes about his mother, "you had to be able to see, and she only believed in words when there was a picture to go with them. I didn't like that about her, but then I realized that everyone, really everyone was like Mom . . ."

What separates *Mama Leone* from other *Künstlerromans*, such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is the presence of past and future ghosts of war. Amidst all the self-discoveries ("when you're seven fifteen days seems like fifteen years"), seaside visits to Dubrovnik, and lessons gleaned along the way ("In Drvenik it's a disgrace Nikola's got tuberculosis, but in Sarajevo it's a disgrace when someone pees in the building hallway and they catch him")—amidst all of these things, secrecy sits atop the pages like a big brother. Family and country both are stricken with concealment and deception, which inexorably filters down to our child's-eye view: the obfuscated murder of World War Two Communist general Sava Kovačević, for instance, or the revelation that a long-dead uncle was forced to join the Nazis. The narrator is even kept in the dark about the exact nature of his parents' relationship, "two people at opposite ends of the earth who are completely different and total strangers to each other." He goes on to say that "their stars are so many light-years from each other that no one could even be bothered counting them." The characters in Jergović's world exist within a larger historical context of awful deeds committed in immoral times. Beyond these conflicts—armed and otherwise—future brutality looms.

"In war," our narrator observes, "people learn what its like to be dead and as long as they themselves don't die, death becomes normal to them."

The second half of *Mama Leone* focuses on the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, fluttering between the lives of various

exiles in the United States, Canada, Israel, and other parts of the world. Entitled "That Day a Childhood Story Ended," the stories in this section are scrubbed clean of the physical violence of the Wars, without a single mention of murder, rape camps, ethnic cleansing, or other horror of the times. Yet these are bleak stories about aimless people—"people who lived their whole lives in foreign languages"—trapped by the terror of the past and the uncertainty of the future. By uttering "foreign languages," Jergović evokes a deeper uncertainty—that of the book as a translated work. Jorge Luis Borges wrote, "The original is unfaithful to the translation." In a similar move, *Mama Leone* eschews authenticity for paradox. As a historical document, as a book of fiction, and fundamentally (here in its English-language incarnation) as a translated work, *Mama Leone* creates strangeness in the mind of the reader, forcing them to navigate through the lies of literature and language. Unspeakableness haunts these stories; the characters that inhabit them are paralyzed by memory and loss and regret, their lives reduced to waking dream loops, recalling our earlier boy narrator:

I dream of things I know nothing about, I dream of horrors and terrifying ghosts, of fears that will some day run me down. I dream everything I'll ever live to see. One day I'll see a man lose his head in the middle of the street and then I'll say, hey, I dreamed that . . ."

The exiles throughout this second section display all the outward signs of having moved on from the war and their forced migration—new lovers, new languages, new lives—yet they are still caged in by old lies from the past. The gravest of these self-deceptions is the thought that their displacement has not destroyed their innocence. "Every man and woman on earth can fall asleep like a child, but it's not easy for a whore, or a pimp, to every day become a child."

Mama Leone is a difficult book to judge. The first half is easily the more successful—and interesting—of the book's two sections. The **reoccurring** cast of characters, connected thematic arc, and more purposeful course of narrative all dovetail into a fulfilling reading experience. In **regards** to the second half, the jadedness of the characters, as well as their lack of forward momentum, means that the stories ultimately go nowhere. A haunted house with no exit. Perhaps this is intentional, Jergović drawing parallels between the forms of the stories and the lives of his characters. Perhaps he's evoking an earlier passage of his book, where he writes: "we're not daredevils, we're

people quietly and politely getting on with our lives, and we don't go looking for the real devil; he shows up on his own account."

Mama Leone can be thought of as a magic trick. Jergović uses the misdirection of childhood reminiscence to perform his sleight of hand. Our attention diverted, he conjures his trick, one more complicated than we initially thought possible—his magic plays with the very essence of memory. Take the titles of the individual stories in this collection. Each one is a small phrase lifted from its respective story, bestowed with names like "The sky is beautiful when you're upside down" and "It was then I longed for Babylonian women." These poetic fragments, chiseled from the marble of the larger narrative, mirror how we recount our own lives, how we constellate the moments that we have lived into tales that we can later tell ourselves—how we keep the ghosts alive and the sadness near:

She hasn't seen him since leaving Sarajevo, and at the time, He was her boyfriend. Today she doesn't know what He is to her, but they are in touch from time to time, presumably because they never said their goodbyes and so have endured like baffling chronic illnesses endure, the ones that don't kill you or cause pain but hang around until you're dead all the same. They could meet but probably won't—although they want to—they'll probably never see each other again. If they passed each other in the street they wouldn't recognize each other: Marina doesn't know why things are the way they are, perhaps because sometimes people can become destroyed cities to each other."