The Language of War

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A Reasonable Dictionary
Thoughts on Language and War

To release a word means to wake it up and make it mean
everything it dreamed of meaning. . . There is no greater horror for
the word than a reasonable dictionary.       Branka Arsić

Truth is not the first casualty of war, language is. Peter Handke

Language, most dangerous of possessions. Friedrich Hölderlin

We don’t speak language, language speaks us. Herder

What is needed for peace between peoples? And what is it that makes
peace unlikely? I’d like to talk this evening about language, about the language
that fanned the fires of war in the former Yugoslavia, about the language that
promotes and guides the current war in Iraq. And I’ll speak, finally, about
language that models possible structures of peace, language that solves problems
rather than creating them.

Part I: Yugoslavia

It’s not easy to begin a new story about the old land of the southern Slavs
(Yugo = south). After all, what do I know? A foreigner in the country for a few
days. A self-styled translator with little command of this language. A potential
verbal assassin. Let this passage from Ivo Andrić’s Nobel Prize winning The
Bridge Over the Drina serve as a warning to you about my inadequacies:

. . . in Shefko’s translation the old man’s words seemed suspicious, smelled of
politics and seditious intent. . . . Shefko, who was obviously putting the worst
possible construction on the old man’s exalted phrases, and who loved to stick his
nose into everything and carry tales even when there was nothing in them, and
was ever ready to give or to confirm an evil report.

Those of you who have fought in Iraq or Afghanistan or Vietnam, those of you
who are from Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia, or
Kosovo, those of you who know war personally, please forgive me for what I
don’t know. Forgive my mistranslations and my mispronunciations. Please judge
me against Andrić’s translator Shefko. Do my words smell of politics and
seditious intent? Am I putting the worst possible construction on events? Am I blinded by my Serbian and Croatian friends, by my left-leaning politics, by my disinclination toward religions? My aim is to tell a cautionary story about language as the first casualty of war. My hope is to produce language that is clear and straightforward, complicated and self-ironic, truthful and thus peaceful.

24 May 1998, Belgrade

Rain falls across the afternoon and onto the nighttime crowd that has gathered in the square, a thousand people perhaps, standing under umbrellas and yellow street lamps.

Students hand out color posters featuring a fist clenched around a microphone with middle finger raised and the words:

KOLIKO RADIO STANICA ČUJETE?
MISLITE O TOME.

I understand the photo perfectly, but to translate the words I bend over my little rečnik/dictionary: How much/how long the radio stopping place audible? Does it mean: How long will the radio station be audible? And then: Think about it.

Not likely.

Twenty people, most of them men, stand on a stage built up against an equestrian statue between the museum and the theater, lit by inconsistent spotlights. Students wave the opposition party’s green and yellow flags and one red, blue, and white Serbian flag.

The steady rain soaks a huge sound system.

Speakers, one after the other, take the microphone and work the crowd. The words are incomprehensible to me, but I understand the rhetorical devices: the repetitions, the pauses, the crescendos, the climaxes.

Žarko translates as much as he can. Every speaker, it seems, is denouncing as devils Milošević and Šešelj.

Shrill whistles from the crowd.

Milošević is a fox, one speaker shouts, a fox scheming with Richard Holbrooke to sell out Kosovo.

Isn’t this the liberal opposition? I ask Žarko.

He nods.

A speaker compares Milošević with Hitler.

Finally Djindjić takes the microphone. He led the street demonstrations just a year ago, hundreds of thousands of citizens marching and blowing
whistles and demanding that the results of the democratic elections be honored. They achieved their goal. Djindjić and friends took office. But here they are again, out of power, outside in the rain, speaking to a scant thousand demonstrators, participants in a revolution that is running out of steam.

Still, Djindjić is a consumate orator. We’ll go to the people, he says. We don’t need the media. We’ll simply walk with the people. . . . We will not stop until the Milošević government is toppled. . . . We will not allow him to cripple the education system. . . . And we will never allow him to give away the birthplace of Serbia. Kosovo is sacred ground!

That’s crazy, Žarko exclaims. “Sacred ground” means war.

We’ll continue the demonstration tomorrow morning at 10 o’clock, Djindjić says. See you there.

And that’s it. The demonstration is adjourned.

After a minute the sound system blares some sort of heroic, overwrought film music. I think of Woody Allen’s line: “Listening to Wagner makes me want to invade Poland.” How do you move the masses without playing to the mass instincts that are part of the problem?

We walk back toward my hotel. Around the corner stand eight vans full of policemen. One of them shouts insults at us as we pass. I don’t need a translator for this.

Radio Index posters adorn every wall, every column, every door. Someone has been busy. And brave.

In the hotel, a couple of men shake the rain out of their hair and off their coats and explain to the desk clerks: We went out to overthrow the government, and it rained.

Žarko says good night and walks on to his mother’s place.

I sit in my room and remember Djindjić’s broad, handsome smile in the spotlight. His practiced wave. His rhythmic sentences. His forceful repetitions.

I think of the sentences I translated in Peter Handke’s *A Journey to the Rivers*, of a very different rhetoric – a dialectical stammering, pragmatic detours, incessant questions:

And, in the Drina’s presence, I thought and think it now here too at my desk: didn’t my generation fail to grow up during the wars in Yugoslavia? Not grown up like the so numerous self-satisfied, complete, opinion-forging, somehow worldly and yet so small-minded members of the generation of our fathers and uncles, but grown up, in what way?
Perhaps this way: firm and yet open or permeable, or with that one word of Goethe’s: Aeducable.” And with this kind of maturity, I, the son of a German, thought – pull out of this history that repeats every century, out of this disastrous chain, pull out into another story.

The son of a German. The daughter of an Iraqi. The son of an American. The daughter of a Southern Slav. How does a German or Iraqi or American or any other child of a nation pull out into another story? Move from “crowds and power” to a self-conscious and skeptical democracy?

Education, perhaps? Supple and challenging books that teach a peaceful kind of thinking? Humble sermons? Self-effacing political leaders? . . . But then, in a crisis – usually an economic crises like that facing post-cold-war Yugoslavia – as people look for answers, for comfort, for enough calories – right-wing rhetoric and left-wing clichés blossom. The leader promises purity, points to unambiguous solutions, incites to absolutes, and starts wars.

I’ve read the theory. Tonight I saw theory in action.

Don’t get me wrong. I admire Djindjić. Leaders aren’t perfect. But I can wish for a different kind of people. And I’m not thinking of Yugoslavs.

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29 May, Višegrad, Republika Srpska
Was denkt in dir? Peter asks.
What? I ask, unable to hear him over the noise of Milka and her band.
What is thinking in you?
Sorrow, I answer.

For two months in 1992 there was intense fighting here. Marauding Muslims. Marauding Serbs.
And now the town is devoid of Muslims.
Since we crossed the border into the Republika Srpska, I have been imagining Muslims and Serbs lying in bed those 60 nights. Worrying, as they lay there, about possible futures. About a sudden end to possible futures.
Tonight we sit at a long linen-covered table in the dining room of a resort hotel tucked into the forested hills above the town. Guests of the Mayor of Višegrad.

... Of the 20,000 inhabitants of Višegrad, the mayor says, 2500 are refugees.
Yes, there is high unemployment. The town’s factories have shut down.
There are, of course, no tourists. The hotel has become a home to men convalescing from the war.
The mayor’s driver, a large and gentle man, is from Goražde, now a Muslim enclave. He left there in 1992, he says, and hasn’t been back, although it’s only 30 kilometers up the Drina. He admits to having left a girlfriend there. Peter asks if he wouldn’t like us to contact her when we drive through. No, he says, no thank you. It is impossible.

A young man limps painfully into the dining room, accompanied by two women, one his girlfriend perhaps, or sister, the other old enough to be his mother. They take a table. They talk. They drink a bottle of wine. They sit silently. The young man twirls his box of cigarettes between the table and his finger.

Milka, backed by an accordion, a keyboard, and drums (was there a drummer?), is a sultry lounge singer with a Serbian repertoire, traditional sad love songs sung in a middle-eastern quaver... .

The town, the mayor explains, was 2/3 Muslim before the war. In 1992 the Muslims chased the Serbs out of the city. The Serbs retook the city through the grace of the Muslim Murad Šabanović who captured the hydroelectric dam above the city and threatened to blow it up. The Muslim population fled the threat of flooding. The Yugoslav army arrived and dislodged the crazy terrorist. And the Serbs moved back in.

While the Mayor talks, a small man with a dark beard pushes past a concerned waiter to crutch his way toward our table. He breaks into the conversation and shakes each of our hands. He pulls two photographs out of a coat pocket.

The waiter signals to Milka. She skips toward our table, cordless microphone in hand, armed with a vigorous Serbian song.
The small man holds out two worn photos. The first is a glossy celebrity shot of Radovan Karadžić. The second is a snapshot the small man identifies as his brother, killed in the war: My brother, killed in the war. My brother.

Milka belts out the song “Oh Višegrad!” The waiter takes a hesitant step toward our table. The convalescing soldier puts away his photos and retreats slowly on his crutches. Milka hits three quick high notes, kicks up a shapely heel, and dances away.

Well after midnight we disperse to the rooms the Mayor has reserved for us in this hall of echoes.

The next morning we are met by the Mayor, none the worse, it seems, for the late night. He has some things he’d like us to see.

We drive to a construction site on a hill overlooking the Drina River. Three stories high, typical orange-brick construction. A line of women and men unload a truck, passing orange tiles from hand to hand in a long chain. On the high roof men are interlocking the tiles in undulating rows. . . .

These are refugees from Sarajevo, the Mayor says. They have formed an organization and with a government grant of land, tools, and materials are building 158 apartments here. He introduces us to the president of the refugee group, a thin man, maybe 70 years old, bright-eyed and erect, who speaks an eager English as he shows us around.

We meet the young architect. She and her husband, she says, have moved into an abandoned Muslim house. Through third parties they are trying to exchange their house in Sarajevo for the one in Višegrad.

TV cameras arrive and Peter joins the chain to pass a few roof tiles for Serbian television. Then it’s time for lunch.

31 May 1998, Foča
We spent the night in the Hotel Zelengora, a high-rise tourist hotel built by the Tito government, populated at the moment largely by refugees. Many of them are children.

A dark lobby, dark stairs and halls. . .
I’m glad to have a room. . .

Foća is an ugly town in a beautiful natural setting. . . In the morning sun we sit in front of a café for breakfast. Around us sit several dozen citizens of the town drinking Sunday-morning coffee. One table is occupied by four German soldiers. An SFOR jeep flying a French flag drives past. Two women in US uniforms stroll by. A couple of SFOR armored personnel carriers roll up the road.

After breakfast I climb steps to find the bricks of what was once a mosque, still topped by a copper-covered dome but with holes gaping where the large doors had hung. The ruin is choked with refuse and blackened by smoke.

I flee down a cobblestone street, past shops with clever wooden shelves that fold out from the outer walls for displays, past an open-air market doing a brisk business this morning. The sun is bright. I find a concrete bench. I sit.

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10 June 1998, Cologne, Germany

The German word for misery, “Elend,” means, in its root sense, “in a foreign country.”

Žarko and I walk through a park in Cologne. We see a handsome young couple standing in an embrace. A young man and a boy kick a soccer ball back and forth. Just past them, facing the street but nicely tucked back into the park, stands an apartment house with a discrete sign on the front: Halfway House for Asylum Seekers. At the moment, Germany is home for somewhere near 350,000 refugees from Bosnia, more than the number who have take refuge in all other countries combined.
I was walking past here one day, Žarko says, and a little boy asked me, in German, for a Mark. Why do you want a Mark? I asked him. To buy ice cream, he said. I thought he might be a Bosnian refugee, so I asked him in Serbo-Croatian where he was from. He was surprised, but then answered with the name of a Bosnian town. Where are you from? He asked in our language. From Serbia, I said. Then I don’t want your Mark, he said.

14 June 1998, Provo, Utah

Dear Žarko,

I taught Primary, or Sunday School today, the class you visited when you were here four years ago. Do you remember? The assigned lesson was about Joshua and the battle of Jericho. I remembered the story vaguely from my own childhood Sunday School, the part about the circling army and the shouts and the city’s wall that falls down. What I didn’t remember was God’s command that Joshua and his army fulfilled as “they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword. So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord said unto Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance unto Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. And the land rested from war.”

The lesson manual suggested that I emphasize how the Lord blesses those who follow his orders exactly.

After our trip, I could not teach that lesson. After our trip, many things will be different.

29 June 1998, Provo

Žarko. I just read the 27 June 1996 indictment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia against eight men from Foća charging gang rape, torture, and enslavement of Muslim women. Here some excerpts:

... The same night, after Janko Janjić returned the women to Partizan, Dragoljijb Kunarać(?) took the same three women to the Hotel Zelengora. [One woman] refused to go with him and he kicked her and dragged her out. At Hotel Zelengora, [this latter woman] was placed in a separate room and both Dragoljijb Kunarać and Zoran Vuković raped her. Both perpetrators told her that she would now give birth to Serb babies.

This 24-page document describes dozens of such incidents, several of them taking place in the very Hotel Zelengora where we spent the night.

I see only black.
13 January 1999, Provo
Žarko,

Proof today, again, of how the media pollutes our minds.
I have read and translated Peter’s meticulously dialectical work. I have read your fanciful and subversive texts in translation. I’m a professional literary critic. I have traveled in Yugoslavia. I know a few Serbs, a couple ofCroats. And yet, over the last few days, while Slobodon Milošević has continued his “provocations” and “games,” while he refuses to listen to “reason and truth,” while he won’t heel to NATO ultimatums, while NATO leaders make these points and threaten to bomb Yugoslavia, I have found myself drifting into thought patterns shared by most of my fellow Americans and Europeans, I have been swayed, sentence by sentence, story by story, by NATO press agents and by U.S. government officials, and suddenly, after days and weeks of tension in the HEADLINES, I shouted: Bomb the son-of-a-bitch!


22 March 1999, Provo

Headline in yesterday’s Salt Lake Tribune: “MURDEROUS SERBS DEFY U.S. ULTIMATUM.” The language of war, the language that causes war.

March 24, 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

At 3 a.m. this morning in Belgrade the radio station B92 was shut down by state “security forces.”

B-52’s have taken off from their bases in England and are approaching Yugoslavia, to start bombing as night falls.

The justification? Here are portions of Bill Clinton’s speech to the nation, his version of the history underlying and justifying NATO bombing:

*By acting now, we are upholding our values, protecting our interests, and advancing the cause of peace. Tonight I want to speak with you about the tragedy in Kosovo and why it matters to America that we work with our allies to end it.*

*The people of Kosovo are mostly ethnic Albanian and mostly Muslim.*

*In 1989 Serbia’s leader Slobodan Milosevic, the same leader who started the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, and moved against Slovenia in the last decade, stripped Kosovo of the constitutional autonomy its people enjoyed, thus denying them their right to speak their language, run their schools, shape their daily lives.*
For years, Kosovars struggled peacefully to get their rights back. When President Milosevic sent his troops and police to crush them, the struggle grew violent.

I’m beyond words, Žarko, I can’t catch my breath. Why can’t the president, and I voted for him, tell a more complicated, a more truthful story. How can this possible pass as a summary of what has happened? Slovenia declared its independence, for god’s sake, and after a brief skirmish Milosevic called off his troops. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund did more to start Yugoslavia’s civil wars than did Milosevic. Where, in Bill Clinton’s so-called history is the ethnic cleansing of Mostar by the Croats? Of Gorazde by Bosnian Muslims? Where the brutal provocation of Serbs in Kosovo by the KLA? Where the Serbian protestors against Milosevic on the streets of Belgrade?

If President Clinton tells a story I recognize as true, if he admits it’s a difficult decision, if he wrestles with something resembling the facts, I still may not agree with his judgment to go to war, but I could at least respect the fact that I’m not being manipulated.

When our President twists the facts of this war, he joins the three major participants in the Yugoslav war with their own nationalistic, simplistic, falsifying stories.

Let me give you just a taste of the nationalist rhetoric drawing on religious themes that finally led to the secession of Slovenia and Croatia from the Yugoslav Republic, fledgling countries recognized and supported immediately by the Vatican and Germany – diplomatic recognition from historically suspect sources that many have argued led to the wars.

Genocide is a natural phenomenon, in harmony with the societal and mythologically divine nature. Genocide is not only permitted, it is recommended, even commanded by the word of the Almighty, whenever it is useful for the survival or the restoration of the kingdom of the chosen nation, or for the preservation or spreading of its one and only correct faith.

There can be no peace or co-existence between Islamic faith and non-Islamic faith and institutions. . . . The Islamic movement must and can take power as soon as it is morally and numerically strong enough, not only to destroy the non-Islamic power, but to build up a new Islamic one. . . .
The first quotation is from Croatian President Franjo Tudjman’s *Wastelands of Historical Reality*, the second from Muslim Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic’s “Islamic Declaration.” Propagandists from opposing ethnic groups have repeated these statements insistently as proof that they have been the targets of intended genocide.

The two presidents indeed wrote these words, but the propagandists have distorted, somewhat, the meanings of the quotations in context.

In the “Islamic Declaration,” while heaping up metaphors of unity, purity, exclusivity, power, and violence, Izetbegovic also argued against the “use of violence in the creation of a Muslim state, because it defiles the beauty of the name of Islam.” Still, Croat and Serb nationalists who pounded away at Izetbegovic as an ideologue who wanted to create a Muslim state, were partially justified on the basis of metaphors that tend to reify themselves, if not on the basis of actual sentences. Why didn’t they simply, truthfully point out the metaphors rather than falsifying what Izetbegovic actually said? Because they were making arguments for war, not for peace.

In *Wastelands of Historical Reality*, Tudjman questioned the actual numbers involved in the Holocaust, and claimed that Jews, especially those in the Jesenovac concentration camp, brought on their own troubles. The quotation used so often by Serb and Muslim opponents of the new state of Croatia (a state whose constitution makes Serbs and Muslims into second-class citizens), Tudjman’s statement about God’s will requiring genocide, is part of a deprecating description of Jewish scripture and history. However reprehensible the context, it cannot be used directly to argue that Tudjman thinks genocide is God’s will.

But used it is, with a vengeance, to prove the perfidy of Roman Catholic Croats. And Croats use Izetbegovic’s text to frighten themselves into a need to cleanse Muslims from their country. And to justify their fears and actions,
Muslims point to Slobodan Milosevic’s call for Serbian unity in his 1989 address at the 600th anniversary of the Serb defeat at the field of blackbirds, Kososvo Polje.

These are not examples, one might argue, of “true religion.” But don’t holy texts of all three of the major religions implicated in the disintegration of Yugoslavia, as well as the scriptures of the religion that formed my early sense of the world, routinely separate God’s people from the enemy and justify violence against the Other?

“Onward, Christian soldiers! Marching as to war, With the cross of Jesus Going on before.”

March 29, 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

On U.S. TV today, when asked whether NATO could win a ground offensive against Yugoslavia, a former U.S. general said it would be easy: “We would simply attack across the northern plains with our tanks like the Nazis did.”

22 November 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

James Lyon, Director of the Crisis Intervention Center in Sarajevo, spoke today at Utah Valley State College. He emphasized the point in the Dayton Peace Accord requiring that all refugees be allowed to return home. I told him about the Serb refugees from Sarajevo who were building an apartment building in Višegrad on a hill overlooking the Drina River. It was a hopeful sight, I said, people moving on with their lives. I know that building, he said. It is built on the site of a razed 17th-century mosque.

Damit, Žarko, why can’t anything be what it seems?

Part II: Iraq

Why are you angry at me? Lyn asked one night about a year ago. I’m not angry at you, I said. I’m angry at myself. I’m angry to be an American. I’ve just read a New Yorker Story titled “A Deadly Interrogation: Can the C.I.A. legally kill
a prisoner?” In November 2003 Manadel al-Jamadi was killed by his interrogator at Abu Ghraib. No-one is accountable.

And there’s an article in the Washington Post that tells about a German citizen “rendered” from Macedonia to Afghanistan, systematically mistreated to make him confess and then, 5 months later, discovered to be innocent of his supposed crimes and dropped off on a dark road in Albania. The German government was asked to keep quiet about the mistake.

The Vice President of the United States wants an exemption to the Senate bill that prohibits torture: “the C.I.A. sometimes needs the ‘flexibility’ to treat detainees in the war on terrorism in ‘cruel, inhuman, and degrading’ ways,” he argues.

And then there are the reports that the U.S. is paying Iraqi newspapers to print propaganda, that there are secret CIA prisons in Europe, that our government lied to the Italians about a radical cleric they kidnapped in Rome, that Attorney General Gonzales finds the Geneva Convention “quaint” – it goes on and on.

I’m not angry at you, I told Lyn, I’m angry that these things have become justifiable, that we can use the word “render” as if kidnapping supposed terrorists and shipping them to Syria or Egypt where they can be tortured were a necessary and normal course of action. I’m angry that our leaders can state categorically that we don’t torture because they have a document that has thoroughly redefined torture.

This memo, signed for the Justice Department by BYU Law School graduate Jay Bybee, argues that torturing Al Qaeda captives "may be justified," that “certain acts may be cruel, inhuman, or degrading, but still not produce pain and suffering of the requisite intensity” may be legal according to US law, and that international laws against torture "may be
unconstitutional if applied to interrogations” conducted under President Bush. The first casualty of war is language.

Why can’t we tell new stories? Why isn’t torture torture, kidnapping kidnapping? Why do we let our representatives claim they are obeying international and domestic law when they are breaking it?

Part III: Poetry is Wanted Here

After Germany’s defeat in WWII, German writers had to face the problem of a language that had been used to devise and justify the “final solution,” that had defined Jews and homosexuals and gypsies and blacks as animals and their art as degenerate, that had separated “us” from “them,” that had claimed victory too soon and that obfuscated the reality of defeat, that had claimed the moral high ground and called for noble sacrifice while justifying torture and degradation and mass murder. Postwar writers’ first response to a human language that had been dehumanized was what they called a Kahlschlag – a clear cutting. They attempted to be brutally straightforward, to cut out the words and phrases with which Nazis had constructed their murderous world. They worked painstakingly to reestablish a credible language of substance and worth. One of the first poems written (contrary to Adorno’s contention that there could be no poetry after Auschwitz) simply listed the poet’s belongings:

Günter Eich - Inventur (1945)
Dies ist meine Mütze,
Dies ist mein Mantel,
Hier mein Rasierzeug
Im Beutel aus Leinen.

Konservenbüchse:
Mein Teller, mein Becher,
Ich hab in das Weißblech,
Den Namen geritzt.
Geritzt hier mit diesem
Kostbaren Nagel,
Den vor begehrlchen
Augen ich berge.

Im Brotbeutel sind
Ein Paar wollene Socken
Und einiges, was ich
Niemand verrate.

So dient es als Kissen
Nachts meinem Kopf.
Die Pappe hier liegt
Zwischen mir und der Erde.

Die Bleistiftmine
Lieb ich am meisten:
Tags schreibt sie mir Verse,
Die nachts ich erdacht.

Dies ist mein Notizbuch,
Dies ist meine Zeltbahn,
Dies ist mein Handtuch,
Dies ist mein Zwirn.

This is my cap,
This is my coat,
Here my shaving stuff
In a cloth bag.

Tin can:
My plate, my bowl,
I have scratched my name
Into the metal.

Scratched it here with this
Precious nail,
Which I hide
From covetous eyes.

In my bread sack are
A pair of wool socks
And some things I
Reveal to no one.

It serves my head
At night as a pillow.
The cardboard here lies
Between me and the ground.
I love the pencil stub
most of all:
During the day it writes verses
I thought up during the night.

This is my notebook,
This is my tent canvas,
This is my hand towel,
This is my yarn.

After lauding the investigative reporters who risked their lives to report the facts of the wars in Yugoslavia, the Austrian Peter Handke wrote the following, very much in the vein of Eich’s “Inventory,” and with an important addition:

My work is of a different sort. To record the evil facts, that’s good. But something else is needed for a peace, something not less important than the facts.

So, now it’s time for the poetic? Yes, if it is understood as exactly the opposite of the nebulous. . . . that which binds, that encompasses -- the impulse to a common remembering, as the possibility for reconciliation of individuals, for the second, the common childhood.

How then? What I have written here was meant for various German-speaking readers, and just as much for various readers in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, for experience tells me that that common recalling, that second, common childhood will arise exactly through the detour of recording certain trivialities, at least far more lastingly than by hammering in the main facts. At one place on the bridge there was, for years, a loose board.” -- AYes, did you notice that too? Or simply to divert from the shared captivity in the rhetoric of history and topicality into a
much more productive present: Look, now it is snowing. Look, children are playing there” (the art of diversion; art as the essential diversion). And thus I felt, there on the Drina, the need to dance a rock across the water toward the Bosnian shore (but then couldn’t find one).

How do we free ourselves from “captivity in the rhetoric of history and topicality”? How do we construct “a much more productive present”? How do we rediscover, reestablish commonality, a common childhood, a common humanity. Poetry is a good place to start. (Poetry, art, science, history all have a place here, but as we talk about language, poetry is especially pertinent).

It is difficult
To get the news from poems
   Yet men die miserably every day
       For lack
Of what is found there.
   --William Carlos Williams, “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”

What is found there? A common, shared humanity. The Serbian/American poet Charles Simic gets at this in two poems from his Hotel Insomnia:

Folk Songs
Sausage-makers of History,
The bloody kind,
You all hail from a village
Where the dog barking at the moon
Is the only poet.

War
The trembling finger of a woman
Goes down the list of casualties
On the evening of the first snow.

The house is cold and the list is long.

All our names are included.

Charles McGrath recently wrote about the Irish/American poet Paul Muldoon in the NYTimes

Just about everyone except Muldoon thinks his poetry is often difficult. When I suggested to him once that his work is sometimes hard to follow, he shook his head and seemed almost offended. . . . This is not an era in which clarity and directness, however much we hope for them, are entirely justifiable, because so much is unclear and indirect. . . . I’m just talking about a realization that very little is as it seems, that everything has within it massive complexities — maybe even the inappropriateness of being certain about things. A proper awareness that things are just not at all as they seem — one would wish for more of that, particularly on the political front. Wouldn’t you love to hear the president or someone say, ‘Well, you know, I’m not absolutely clear on that?’

My friend and colleague Alex Caldiero, after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, had similar thoughts, with which I’ll end:

POETRY IS WANTED HERE!

You don’t
soun’ so good.
Pleez
take care.

Most o’ this is mental.
That’s why it’s terrorism: it’s meant to
disconcert,
make you revert
to blind fear

Poetry is wanted here!

And to boot, our home-grown nuts are starting to take root.
Yet in most parts things are calm and generally subdued.
But there’ve been hoaxes and folks is getting anxious and ready to conclude that it’s hopeless and drear

Poetry would be helpful here!

So i’m gonna poetize to realize that you cannot hide when worlds collide, no going inside no taking a breather either;
It all comes in on you at once & you gotta have at least an ounce of hope and joy to deploy into the atmosphere of fear to implode the load of grief that’s drawing near

Poetry is desired here!

’Cause all peoples are just like you are and I are close or far are just people with nowhere to run: Let’s stick a flower into every gun like way back when, or was that a dream? Cant say now feeling so low
seeing so bleak
thinking so drear

Songs are needed here!
   Rhyming
   & timing,
   a rebirth of cheer

Poetry is wanted here!

   BAM!
   We are human
       after all.
America
   venerable
   yet
   vulnerable
   and
   human
       after all:
That’s our true strength
& the real meaning
   of this happenstance:
   That we can fall
   and scroll
   and rise
   and be surprised
and not take for granted
the morning sun so beautiful and dear

   Poetry would be good here!

Forgive me for ranting
   for panting
   for chanting
       out of tune:
   That’s the fool in me
   seeking a tune in me
   wanting
   to stay light and free
from what would oppress
   depress
   regress
   obsess
and in general make a mess
   o’ my soul;
   I wanna be whole
       in control
on a roll
without the slightest hint of fear

Poetry is needed here!

So my dear friend,
hang in
hang on
hang tight:
We gotta see this to the end;
We gotta be concern’d
and discern
the real enemy that we fight,
for the veil between truth and lie
is become so thin and sheer

Poetry is wanted here!