

Azra Cucak,
A third-grade student of the High school Obala in Sarajevo
The first prize on the competition of the Fund "Bošnjaci" Sarajevo

"Look at what you leave behind yourself." John showed by hand to the Golden Gate Bridge, and then aimed his forefinger toward Alcatraz Island.

"You've got here, really, everything that is unthinkable there... Everything you need", he continued with sad facial expression and to me, because of these words, in front of my eyes appeared figure of a plump black haired man, with hands raised in front of a microphone. Then, to that my hallucination joined a tone and a violin started to play, sadly, accompanied by the rhythmic drum stroke. That melody hurt me, took my breath away, I felt thirsty and a lump in the throat, as it is always when Safet Isović, on FTV Eid ul-Fitr program, sings by his strong, beautiful voice Just Bosnia is that I need...

I did not say anything, my hallucination fled away, and remained just a sigh taken out of the chest.

John naively thought that I sigh for that Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz, what I could only bitterly smile at.

"You will miss him, won't you?" he asked.

"No! I won't, I cannot miss something that wasn't mine ", I answered.

He took suitcases out of the taxi, lowered them on a perfectly clean sidewalk and headed toward Mission Creek in Valencia Street, where for months we have coffee.

"Describe me your Bosnia!", he asked. Later, bringing the cup to his lips, he looked at me, and again I just bitterly smiled and shook my head on these words.

"Come on, come on!", he asked stubbornly looking at my eyes.

"What can I tell you, my friend, so you can understand me? How to describe it to you?", I replied him, in English, which, no matter how fluently I spoke, sounded unnatural.

"Tell me something that will justify the fact that you are leaving San Francisco, that you go back, when you have much better opportunities here." He rolled his eyes in disbelief.

"You want me to tell you, John, you want me to describe my Bosnia? Is it possible at all? I'm afraid even to try", I stopped, looked down and again faced with John's eyes. He was waiting to hear something that might explain my decision, which he regarded as foolish.

I sighed and started:

"I'm afraid even to try to describe my country, I'm afraid to recall all those images and memories. I'm afraid, my heart will break, like a watermelon or pomegranate in the hot Mostar's afternoon. I'm afraid tears will flow, clear as a river that is called Drina, like that river which is always guilty and no one to the present day has not judged to it. Inside me will play discomfort, play by notes of a "sevdalinka" and in the rhythm of our folklore. I cannot bear when my heart leaps up, and prior to that all becomes quiet, as it is just before a Ramadan cannon shots over Sarajevo. When blood boils like a morning coffee

which my mother serves for my father and me. This coffee which we are having now doesn't have that bitterness and taste. It is not "Bosnian". The smell of real, Bosnian coffee, reminds me of my early childhood, my old grandmother and her coffee mill. I remember the sound of crashing beans in that mill on which, at the top, are engraved Quran Ayats and at the bottom is a figure of Sarajevo's Sebilj. Under the skillful moves of my grandmother beans became powder, dark brown, and of intensive scent. Now it seems to me that I'm that powder and that I'm losing myself with every move, more and more. Something that looks like a step forward is, actually, one part of me which disappears forever. Everything in me is bursting on all sides, like a waterfall in Jajce, everything is bursting and screaming for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Everything here is just salt on my wound, Tuzla's salt, everything burns like the Sun in Neum where long time ago I swam for the first time in my brother's arms followed by father's worried eyes.

I don't know whether I describe it well, you have seen those places many times, and heard my stories, but I cannot not conjure up symbolism that adorn them, and all the memories that bind me to them. Every my description is poor, thin as a string on a saz, that magical instrument which recalls "sevdah" and melancholy, because has anybody ever succeeded in naming of feelings, has anybody described them completely?

All words I told you can so easily soar into the sky, like Sarajevo's pigeons when a tram arrives or can fall into water like boys that we call Mostar's swallows. They proudly and fearlessly stand on the other side of the fence, on the top of the old bridge and in one moment, so graciously and lithe, soar in the air, soar into the abyss of the emerald river.

Whenever I see a rolling ball, from my lips starting to fly: We are sky that is blue... so I sing, with smile, imagining a few thousand voices together with mine.

You have seen my country on pictures, but you don't know either its real beauty or beauty of its people.

You see, in San Francisco, when I look at people, they all look same, tired and expressionless, while my countrymen are not like them. Bosniaks carry everything they need inside themselves. They carry view full of heaviness, ears full of sounds of shells and bullets, but their face is not bitter. Inside them is a tormented soul, and again, smile shines on their faces. They also challenge the life, because Bosnia is proud because of dream, if you'll pardon it.

For you, that is only one more black spot on a map, something in a shape of an inverted triangle, but with a little imagination that triangle is actually a heart. My heart!

Those green mountains can be my eyes, Bjelašnica my nose and wheat of Livanjsko and Popovo field is my hair.

Don't you see?

I am Bosnia. I am Bosnia and Herzegovina.

My lungs are forests of Perućica and Maglić, smile is a crystal-clear river Una. My soul smells like scent of bread, Bosnian lilies and smell of "čevapi" from Bašćaršija. I am a cheerful spirit, songful, and if you carefully listen to my song, you'll maybe recognize verses of Merlin, Bešlić or Hari.

It is in vain all widths and size of San Francisco, it is nothing comparing to Sarajevo that stretches from the mountains to the plain, while looking from Bistrik at all those lights that glow. Some time ago that Sarajevo was burning, and all my country, do you know that?

Everything was devastated and burnt, people got killed defending our country. So it is in Bosnia: Some disappear and others arise. How can I leave their white raised headstones, which are like pearls scattered all over our country, and how that, for those who have sacrificed themselves, not to pray and not to shed a tear?

It seems hypocritical to me when I pray for them from abroad, it seems like they will rise from their graves and tell me: "We were dying that you can stay, and where are you now?"

Deep down, where there is everywhere in the world the blackest soil, it is not in our country. Ours is bordeaux red, ours is from blood, and to it, my friend, only to it I can go back. Only there I'm in my own land and only there I want eternal rest.

Maybe I love so much my Bosnia because I was born in the worst time, instead of lullabies I listened to shells over my hometown and instead in parks, I played in ruins.

I remember how every building was restored, how every wound was stitched. The first days of freedom, recovery, restoring lives and collecting of pieces of a ruined puzzle.

Then, when it was the hardest, I was with my country, and I left when everything became better, I came here to improve myself.

I left, that's truth, one year ago, but you did not fully understand why. Not because I wanted to stay there, in San Francisco, in a foreign land, but to go back, to my real home, and continue road of recovery, so I could help completing the puzzle. The fact that I'm in your country, so far from mine, that is not privilege for me, but sacrifice. I came here so I can learn what you know about science, but I think that you should get in Bosnia to learn what we know about life. Bosniaks can: enjoy, and live, and survive. Everything if necessary. You know only for a golden mean, that is also your award and your damnation, but I'm not so accustomed.

You wanted, at the beginning, to describe my Bosnia. What a naive wish – I thought, but now I think that the simplest way is to say that it is me, what you see, actually Bosnia. That is something what is inside me, something that is overwhelming me by all of my being and while I'm so far from my country, far from myself. I'm not calm, and when you come to think about it, what all these business successes are worth for and all the wealth of this world without warmth and love. 'Much better possibilities', you say, but every better possibility is nothing against possibility to walk every morning through my "mahala" and say 'Merhaba, neighbor', and my neighbor returns a smile to me, no one can pay that smile and his, always same, spoken words: 'Merhaba son', even though that I'm a girl.

Do you understand, John?

Actually, I don't know why so many times I ask if you understand, because you don't understand. You, even, cannot understand." So I finished my conversation about Bosnia.

Suitcase wheels have stopped producing boring sound and we lined up in front of the door that led to the exit to the runway. I tightened a plane ticket in my hand, as the greatest treasure in the world, and smiled warmly to the man who was my sole support and sincere friend here in San Francisco.

He looked at me, with blurry eyes, I wanted to say that I hate goodbyes, but he hugged me tightly. Whether he was impressed by what I told him a little bit earlier or he hated goodbyes, I do not know, but I know that he tightened me so hard and kept so long in those thin arms, as if he wants to merge me with himself.

Then he stepped away, I read something similar to embarrassing or remorse in his, still blurry, eyes.

Does he regret that he's got no feelings towards his homeland like me?

Did he want with that hug to try to take a piece of Bosnia for himself and feel endless love that I feel toward my country?

Maybe, after all, he finally understood!

We did not talk, we just stood surrounded by suitcases staring at each other, saying good-bye silently, as it is usually when people who probably will never meet again have to say good-bye. He broke the silence by saying softly, stammering that no one hears it, surely he was not even aware that he pronounces something like that, and immediately after that hugged me again and kissed on the cheek.

Nevertheless, when I turned back, I felt pin pricking sensation around my heart. In my head was echoing, and like the old, corrupt tape repeated, that what he said, and I was proud and sad.

"I wish I were a Bosnian" - were John's words.