

# *Belgrade Baroque*

Marko Jobst

Introductory reading compiled by Naomi Stead

# Reading of Marko Jobst's Belgrade Baroque

Compiled by Naomi Stead

The opening line. It cuts open the story – where and how? This is a writer's question.

It is a provocation: 'The memory is that of an event never witnessed and the story should be cut open somewhere else, closer to that crucial moment a few years later when I enter her for the first time.'<sup>1</sup> We wonder immediately what 'enter' means here. In innocence (perhaps) it might mean 'enter her' as the writer enters the character, inhabiting it, entering as in *inspiring*, breathing into – entering into the world that the writer produces, like one might sink into a pool of water, like one might occupy with empathetic imagination. Or, of course, it could mean 'enter' in the other way . . . The physiological sense, the anatomical sense. There is of course the bigger question: How does one self enter another?

- 1 *From the workshop*: 'The memory is that of an event never witnessed and the story should be cut open somewhere else, closer to that

crucial moment a few years later when I enter him for the first time. Yet when the period is invoked, with its dissolution of forms that had seemed solid only months earlier, the first thing to surface is the severe haircut of his adolescence, framing the face dominated by a crudely sculpted nose. Jean d'Arc as a Yugoslav youth perhaps, even as the adjective was becoming meaningless by the minute, and had probably been so from the outset. He is auditioning for the choir and without its architectural setting – the low, peeling ceiling, the old concert piano in tired lacquer, the church next door, Baroque in style and incompatible with the dogmas of Orthodoxy corrected – none of this would have happened. No memory, no placement; just a collection of objects indifferently arranged. He is wearing the earrings his father had instructed him to wear. *So they know you're a boy*, he'd said before he'd closed the door on their low family house in the suburbs.'

Anyway, who is speaking? A collective memory, a building or the abyss of a daydream that draws the reader through layers of time, spaces, consciousness? None of that. It's a child. A Baroque child. Which is, it seems, at the same time the descendant of an architectural style, a young Serbian boy undergoing all sorts of cultural initiation rituals and a church novice entangled in the transgressions of religious practice. His own and the institutions'. Boy, child, style, they are one. Or at least, they are inseparable, as they slide inside out of each other in permanence.<sup>2</sup>

- 2 *From the workshop:* 'Here, the guide had said, the child was born. At that moment an ectoplasm utterly banal yet infinitely moving materialized before my eyes. This was the spot where something innocent was said to enter the world. This, the spot in which what is beyond gave to soil. My eyes, minor tributaries. So I escaped their performance to hide under the arches outside, or that is how the mind remembers. For the arch above my head might well be imagined, lifted from a painting of a virgin receiving divine word from an alien being only he can hear, Fra Angelico by way of El Greco. Who is the child the tears seek to comfort? The question, it strikes me years later, is not of whose innocence was at stake – own, or that of others – but whether it had been a boy in the

**first place, that fragile little body birthed in the spot the star indicates, or something more complex, deliberately made obscure over time, wilfully erased. A child that inspired wonder and awe. Strange child.'**

The 'person' in the text conveys a certain weakness. That is, the boundaries between expressions of the person are porous and meandering – 'I', 'we', 'you'. A fugitive sense of self, but yet a quite definitive grasp of memory, of the object (mastery over the object by the gaze, through the literary apprehension of the external world). The temporal shifts: a complex writing of history across the personal (moving across surfaces, through substances) and 'scholarly' or institutional registers, from the ancient to the immediate, and to intimations of futurology. The text is a form of parallel travelogue (through time and space); one desirous, embodied, immersed in the 'person'; the other analytic and reflexive, explanatory.

So: a text that is elusive and allusive, *evocative* – in the sense of evoking ghosts or shades, revivifying half-articulated feelings and ideas and memories, ambiguous, smoky or blurry or half-remembered images, obscure, semi-transparent, seen through a veil. The answer to confusion is to surrender to it, allow yourself to proceed in the dimness and half-light, light a candle and sit in the shadows.

Spatial descriptions, rituals, encounters, disruptions: the reader is witness to acts never witnessed, in a city never visited. Interiority is linked with spatial form; the church, its spire, as an index of first transgressions (the kiss).<sup>3</sup> This link also expressed through shapes: the spiral as 'a sense of self that returns, transformed'. This whole text is a spiral, tracing 'Invisible arcs of desire'.<sup>4</sup> Other shapes are invoked – the square, the passage. Links between history and biography through place, opening the question of how buildings carry memory (or erase it – a bookshop bearing the name of a Jewish merchant made to disappear). How space holds memory, and how memory holds space, and how space *erases* memory. Writing becomes an act of reclamation – marking hauntings and traces of what is left behind and what is not. The estranging sense of relocation.

3 *From the workshop*: 'More important is the kiss, and the walk that followed, our exit from a fleeting Eden. *Kalemegdan*: a field of battles, as the misconstrued translation maintains. Because that is when realisation arrives, as I passed St. Michael's Cathedral, the sense of a life being snuffed out, made to fit a mould imposed on it, as if it were clay. The image of the church will remain an architectural synonym of that claustrophobic moment, a dark blot in the sky above

Belgrade, folding and unfolding endlessly, assuming the cloak of a transgression that cannot be named, its very essence forbidden. That first kiss: it is the ornate Baroque spire of a church whose paradigm would never be repeated. It pierces the sky.'

4 *From the workshop*: 'This attic is where key intimacies would be exchanged, body upon body on the same mattress, a conjunction of limbs driven to awkward ensembles. Invisible arcs of desire, diagrams in the air. Gone, after all this time. Traceless.'

Built form is bodily: 'The skin of the building . . . has been scraped away.' And that body is itself the answer to uncertainties, to questioning: 'This body. My Body.' But yet it gives us up: 'I never expected tears from you.' These are emotional landscapes, the text traces a path along 'a route that is lost to me now' – not because the buildings themselves are lost, but rather forgotten. The 'real' architecture is affective: 'My eyes. Minor tributaries,' while the violence is both real and metaphoric: 'I was hit for being sloppy and inert.'

The city opens variously: the suburb, the room where the choir holds its auditions, the attic, the street, the church. At first, there is a church. A female freedom fighter and a stylistic portrait analysis; a juxtaposition of artefacts with memory

and discourse. Soon there is only a voice resounding through a church nave; air waves touching walls, ceilings and oil paint. The church, the inscriptions of gender, the violent production and reproduction of identities; the initiatory, ritualized tears; the ottoman empire and its multiple legacies; ethnic cleansing; Bethlehem.

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The title, 'Baroque Child', is also a provocation, an allusion, a doubling. It seems to open a parallel between architectural style and personal style – this seems to indicate a confluence between people and buildings that steps between anthropomorphization and personification. The Baroque, *the style that is at the core of what needs to be said.*<sup>5</sup> What would a Baroque child be? And by extension, who here is this Baroque child?

- 5 *From the workshop: 'St Michael's Cathedral. The Panonian exodus under Arsenije Čarnojević that precedes it by a century and a half. There is an image here that goes beyond the obvious, much as it encapsulates the second coming of Baroque, the style that is at the core of what needs to be said. The scale implied in invoking Vojvodina, linked to the narratives of Ottoman Serbs who became Austrian in the end, its status embodied in the very name used for the province from*

*1848 . . . just as the building of the cathedral was being erected. Rooted in what was given to Serbs once they'd escaped north, across the river. Because that is where Baroque would have come from, a tide to recede, and deposit its convoluted traditions onto those hills south of the Danube. A relic of an exodus. A self that returns, transformed.'*

Baroque buildings are sensual, dramatic, lavish, gilded; space and surface highly ornamented and rhetorical and overblown – playing between light and shadow, lit from above, fond of illusion and replete with painted illusion – populated by angels looking down from the heavens. Could these things also be adjectives to describe a *person* – Baroque in both sensibility and physical being, beautiful and decadent, a Caravaggio cupid, tousled and impish, melodramatic, pouting, passionate, desirable – and even more so could they be aspects of a Baroque *text* – is this a three-way parallel, between a style of architecture, of writing, and of human being? There is a crescendo in the text, in the line: *Baroque is the moment when the ceiling bursts, and the building opens straight onto the Heavens.* Baroque here is not (only) a style, it is an event.

But still, but still, the text is very much in the Apollonian mode: even at the moment of orgasm both the text and the authorial position continue to be

dispassionate. I wonder about desire: there is sex here yes, but there is no love, and a diffuse kind of desire, or perhaps a conflicted one, the desire for the building seems almost greater than the desire for the body or self of the other. Another line: 'There is no memory of the emotional landscape that this self, the self to which I cling despite its many discontinuities, could have been at that moment in time.'<sup>6</sup> This is a curiously cool memoir, for such a hot political and erotic climate.

- 6 *From the workshop:* 'I would have walked back in the direction of Kalemegdan after that first kiss, aiming for the fortress that dumbly occupies it still, along a route that is lost to me now. Not because the paths have been upturned, as many have, nor buildings torn down to give way for forms cheaper and more anonymous; but for the lack of recollection of what I might have considered once he'd left. There is no memory of the emotional landscape that this self, the self to which I cling despite its many discontinuities, could have been at that moment in time.'

It is also self-consciously *writerly*, or perhaps self-consciously literary in its obliqueness and its omissions, the work that it demands of the reader. This is not to say it is 'difficult' or not pleasurable, but it does draw attention to its

own style, its own mode of construction, its fabrication. Partly, of course, this is about transgression as the contravention of convention – and just as architecture history (styles, motifs) is so much about canons and norms, 'standard' academic writing is equally about patterns and their application: conformism, convention, propriety, discipline and disciplinarity. The Baroque bursts its bounds, exceeds them, 'explodes' – the text does the same.

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Consider then the significance of the *seminal* – the search for origins, essences, seeds, authors, and how this can be turned to various political and ideological and racist but also architectural ends: 'Beyond the question of my own genetic allegiances, beyond the relativity of inherited names, what riles is the insistence on the purity of the line with its dumb reproductive imperative at core.'<sup>7</sup>

- 7 *From the workshop:* 'But beyond the question of my own genetic allegiances, beyond the relativity of inherited names, what riles is the insistence on the purity of the line with its dumb reproductive imperative at core. What I see in the image are people he never knew. They could be my own ancestors: those Greeks who had escaped Asia Minor after a tip-off from a Turkish

police officer, a *filos* who, by doing so, had saved their throats the night before they were to be slit; or the Germans migrating south, hugging the shores of the Danube at a dictum of an Austrian empress, carrying among their few possessions a name that might have even been Dutch once. They were peasants, artisans, merchants all; hailing from somewhere where people built pitched roofs, just like the one in the image of ancestors he presents.’

But think also of the *seminary*, the sexuality hidden beneath the robes of religious men, of patriarchs, the secret sexuality of supposedly celibate places and people, the mattress in the attic.

But think also of *semen* – the smell and taste and fact of it, and its first appearance, the first time it emerges from the boy’s body, what provokes it, how there is no preamble and no warning, how this provocation is perhaps itself revealing: of predilections and orientations. But think also of the seminal as that which works to impregnate, collaborates in impregnation, but which is equally, between men, the symbol of *unprocreative* sexual pleasure, unproductive expenditure, congress without the chance or risk of issue.

A seminal image in the text: the naked man in the fencing club changing room. The contrast of that stiff white strange

uniform that covers both the face and the genitals in a mask both protective and disguising, and the sudden shocking unmasking of both face and genitals, the reveal.

Architecture isn’t only about buildings. There is an architecture of hair, an architecture of orgasm, an ejaculation of architecture. Your body is wrapped in architectural space, mutually animating and inhabiting each other, acquiring sense together. There is no romanticism to that discovery, but pain and enjoyment. Birth and death suspended between a debate on stylistic purity. Male and female being constructed and reconstructed and limbs and minds move inside out of orifices. Depicted and reified in art history. Lived underneath dirty sheets.

8 *From the workshop: ‘Illicit: the first glimpse of a naked body, sited in the changing rooms of a fencing club. I deposit it, in these pages, in a gesture of vengeful retaliation, inside the building of a priestly school that had stood opposite the church before the one that would replace it once the question of Byzantine traditions had been purified. Small and unremarkable but for the style of which a few remnants exist – Serbo-oriental as it was haplessly labelled – and said to had housed the severed head of Karadorde Petrović, Black George,*

awaiting its macabre transportation to Istanbul in Ottoman triumph. A symbolic beheading of the first of Serbian insurrections. Between limp clothes and rusted hooks, ciphers in black and brass with which I write the likes of us into history, a body emerged from the showers. The hand of a man lowered the fabric, to reveal a form of flesh incongruously large to the eyes of a child. The beheading, taking place.'



# Belgrade Baroque

Marko Jobst

*This is an excerpt from the first chapter of a manuscript provisionally titled Belgrade Baroque. Part memoir, part architectural reverie, it folds personal memories of the city's sites and histories – and vice versa. The text presented here offers two forms of endnote: textual illustrations that should be understood as their own simultaneous picture captions, and source references that aim to indicate the directions of further research the reader can pursue.*

The memory is that of an event never witnessed and the story should be cut open somewhere else, closer to that crucial moment a few years later when I enter her for the first time. Yet when the period is invoked, with its dissolution of forms that had seemed solid only months earlier, the first thing to surface is the severe haircut of her adolescence, framing the face dominated by a crudely sculpted nose. Joan of Arc as a Yugoslav maiden perhaps, even as the adjective was becoming more meaningless by the minute and had probably been so from the outset.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Dreyer's Jeanne d'Arc slips seamlessly into the image of a First World War Serbian soldier, as reported by the Western media. There were several of them, all referred to in that same way, reduced to a Western template: Milunka Savić, Jeanne d'Arc. Slavka Tomić, Jeanne d'Arc. Of the images I sift through, carried on the wave of associations and

tenuous links, only the dynamism of a late nineteenth-century painting by Eugene Romain Thirion – swirling forms converging on the fold of an ear, an impassive face and another one that whispers, a trumpet sounded sideways to summon others across the landscape – captures the underlying question, taking Joan's face all the way back to the ecstasies of Bernini, his Beata Ludovica, his Santa Teresa. It is in the emotions of Falconetti, in the artifice of her performance – the realism it announced – that the key to cuts across all categories lies and traverses them. The question of style.

She is auditioning for the choir and without its architectural setting – the low, peeling ceiling, the old concert piano in tired lacquer, the church next door Baroque in style and incompatible with the dogmas of Orthodoxy corrected<sup>2</sup> – none of this would have happened. No memory, no placement; just a collection of objects indifferently arranged. She is wearing the earrings her father had instructed her to wear. *So they know you're a girl*, he'd said before he'd closed the door on their low family house in the suburbs.

- 2 A. Ignjatović, *U srpsko-vizantijskom kaleidoskopu: Arhitektura, Nacionalizam i imperijalna imaginacija 1878-1941* (In the Serbo-Byzantine Kaleidoscope: Architecture, Nationalism and Imperial Imagination 1878-1941) (Beograd: Orion Art & Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2016).

The church stands on a hill sloping towards the Sava River, in what had emerged as the Serbian quarter during the centuries of Ottoman rule, a couple of blocks away from a route out of the Roman camp that had aimed southeast, like an arrow, two millennia earlier.<sup>3</sup>

- 3 Savamala, the Serbian quarter of the entrenched Ottoman city. Formed in the later stages of imperial rule and marked with its own Varoš Kapija, Town Gate – the adjective 'Serbian' implied in the phrase, taken for granted in the gendering of the noun – a name in memory

only, no trace of it left. Images of the area taken from old prints. From photographs taken later, capturing its absence. Here, it would have sprung. Where this concrete, where these traffic lights. Right there. I search in these images for a key that would bring the Baroque back, to be found in a book written by a Swedish Slavist, Belgrade depicted through the eyes of foreigners across several centuries. When did I become one? The mote that had come to define the city.

Its spire dominates the views onto Belgrade from across the rivers, tasked with representing the city's silhouette for ever. The church stands on the site of an older building, and another one before it:<sup>4</sup> sacred markers that lead the trail into the past, Christian as much as it was Slav, pagan as those tribes would have once been. But there are Roman remains here as well, which insist on underscoring everything, a necropolis sited around here precisely;<sup>5</sup> and before it, the peoples that had left no texts to be deciphered, just remnants of bodies and objects smashed together.

- 4 B. Vujović, *Saborna Crkva u Beogradu* (The Cathedral Church in Belgrade) (Beograd: Narodna Knjiga, 1996).
- 5 S. Pop-Lazić, *Nekropole rimskog Singidunuma* (The Necropoles of Roman Singidunum) (Beograd: Singidunum No. 3, 2002) 1-70.

She would relate the story with an expression of incredulity, amused even as she acknowledged its insult: this insistence on gender that should have been evident. And it is that exact expression that resurfaces in memory, of the way her eyes sketched humour to transmute pain. It is an image of an adolescent girl who looks like a boy for whatever conjunction of genes and rebellion, but from whose mouth a soprano would eventually emerge to assure the conductor that this was, indeed, a female body stood before the lacquered instrument,<sup>6</sup> arms limp by her sides. It's the voice that gives her away.

- 6 Invented around 1700, the piano was an answer to the problem of being able to play the dynamic range. Fortepiano, pianoforte. Piano: an instrument that knew how to be quiet. Unlike the harpsichord, it offered its strings to hammers for the striking. A metaphor, no doubt. For what, though? Most music forms specific to the piano were the result of the Baroque. But the Baroque is inseparable from castrati, themselves mere echoes of Byzantium's eunuchs. Anton Raphael Mengs portraying Domenico Annibali, the violence of castration on its way out by that point, the singer's hand hovering over a keyboard. The castrato looks elsewhere. A smile hovers on his lips.

The church was consecrated in 1840. The identity of the architect remained unknown until a century and a half later, when his German surname resurfaced and authorship was confirmed, more or less.<sup>7</sup>

- 7 Vujović, *Saborna Crkva u Beogradu*, op. cit. (note 4).

The journey the name had taken to the construction site on the slopes of the Sava could be traced back to the town of Zemun, that distinct sibling of Belgrade's, and further north across the Danube into the plains that had once been the bottom of the Panonian Sea, fertile with innumerable Pliocene deaths. It is the journey that would have brought the style this far south on the wave of nineteenth-century Europeanizations, itself the result of links forged in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century flights from Ottoman slaughter.<sup>8</sup>

- 8 The Panonian exodus under Arsenije Čarnojević: it precedes St Michael's Cathedral by a century and a half. There is an image here that moves beyond the obvious, much as it encapsulates the second coming of the Baroque to Belgrade, the style that is at the core of what needs to be said. The scale implied in invoking Vojvodina, linked to the narratives of Ottoman Serbs who had become Austrian in the end, its status

embodied in the very name used for the province from 1848, just as the cathedral was being erected. Rooted in what was given to the Serbs once they'd escaped north, across the Danube. Because that is where the Baroque would have come from, the receding Panonian tide depositing convoluted traditions onto the hills south of the river. A relic of an exodus, among other things; a self that returns transformed. That exodus of 1690 under a man who might have been a woman. For Arsenije Černojević was from Montenegro after all, where a female child could be elevated to the role of primary heir in the absence of male offspring. She would be made to become a man.

From one empire to another and then back, until the city itself had become a gateway.<sup>9</sup>

- 9 S. Velmar-Janković, *Kapija Balkana* (Gateway to the Balkans) (Beograd: Stubovi Kulture, 2011).

The image of her face is there to justify what came next, yet pales before guilt. There is no going back now, no erasing the trajectories our bodies were to follow; no chance to cast actions in a more favourable light, even as the mind seeks precisely that – absolution and peace. I should have known that it was a different form I had sought in those shoulders, been brave enough to accept the transgression it announced. There were others, after all, scattered throughout the city's interiors, its folds and recesses, who didn't recoil from recognizing desire for what it was.<sup>10</sup>

- 10 Bezistan. Another Turkic word introduced then imprinted. And off it, the single bar of its kind that the city knew, which I'd known of but never visited. The modernism of the passageway, despite its Ottoman name, linked to what would have been the square of Marx and Engels – named these days after a Serbian national figure – and Terazije, that site of weighing and taking measures, equally Turkic in sound. The Bezistan fountain and the figure that dwells there, inside modernism's faltering

illuminations of a culture's darker corners: Aleksandar Zarin, *Young Woman with Seashell*. The exoskeleton that folds space.

But on those days when slight turns vindictive, I maintain that it is she who should be held responsible: for the machinery set in motion as the curtain opened onto the 1990s, for her allegiance to that relentless collective imperative to perpetuate creation, in His name and the name of a pitiful pool of cultural code. It absolves of responsibility, this claim that there is only one tribe worth belonging to. Absolves and then imprints guilt once more, for the inability to forgive the rejection of the people she had, at that very moment, chosen to embrace.<sup>11</sup>

- 11 The Orthodox baptism described in detail, performed on an adult at that, lingers on the edge of the image. She was already 17 when she decided to submit to the water, like many born in the 1970s, unbaptized as we'd been by our minders. And the Baroque making itself known surreptitiously, in the context of Byzantine traditions deliberately forged in the late nineteenth century and cemented in the twentieth, before the Revolution, and after it again. It was that church precisely, which can't be read as Eastern Orthodox any more, with its peculiar detail and techniques soon abandoned. How to make wood look like silver, like gold, because Papal riches remained elsewhere.

The relations remain inscribed in the architecture of the church's form,<sup>12</sup> unremarkably only half a day's journey to the north or west, yet alien here; a space elongated and reminiscent in the form of its name, basilica, of Greek kings long dead, despite which it remained unlike anything properly Byzantine in lineage.

- 12 St Michael's layout, its unremarkable, mixed classicisms. The watered-down, minor Baroque its form suggests. This is the church inside which he would have been baptized, with the choir its integral part: The First

Belgrade Society of Singers, established in the nineteenth century with the building recently completed. It is via the choir that he is brought into the church.

It is an anomaly, confirmed by a spire that remains dark, despite all the gold that glints ominously across the landscapes of childhood. A perverse lighthouse intent on absorbing light, not illuminating passage. It is this building that allows space to be approached as it once was, if the mind's eye would only slow down sufficiently to accept what had survived. It is the architecture of a community she had decided to embrace at a time when such tribal allegiances were forged relevant again, half a century of alternative narratives rendered trivial, obsolete. Yet it remains anomalous, just like the irregular pearl<sup>13</sup> that might have given it its name.

13 P. Davidson, *The Universal Baroque* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

Perhaps. The building initiates the convoluted journey to retrace desire that had recognized itself only once another's body had fit these limbs without friction. The guilt is hers, for perpetuating forms of repression and violence. But it is mine as well: for being a coward.

The second scene, re-enacted as a ritual every time memory fishes her face up from murky depths, is the collection of acts tasked with stitching together genetic lines, by force. There are several memories here, conflated no doubt, yet some remain particular to that first time, the crucial event. They remind of the way she clenched her muscles in discomfort, of the words that had come out of my mouth for reasons I cannot comprehend today, as it was unclear which one of us I'd referred to since we had both, until that moment, been pure in the eyes of the dogma she'd decided to embrace. They remind of the way her body stiffened when I made my tongue meet its slipperiness, wondering if it would taste the same in someone else.<sup>14</sup>

- 14 Courbet's *Origin of the World*, commissioned by Khalil Bay, an Ottoman diplomat. A woman's face was possibly taken out of the frame afterwards, to protect her identity, but in the process the body had become faceless, and abstract. Origin, as origin absolute. It's the nineteenth century, the painting was executed in 1866: the year Serbia and Montenegro signed a pact against Ottoman rule, the last two Yugoslav provinces to part ways eventually. But is the framing of that sort, a fragmentary, dynamic intervention, a Baroque heritage? Velasquez's child who stares right back.

I can't recall that particular flavour anymore; it's been erased by decades of secretions from where nothing Edenic is said to dwell. If dogma is to be swallowed whole.

But before any of the mutual scarring takes place, we are inside Belgrade's National Museum, drifting through empty spaces before one of our concerts. I walk into an empty room to discover that a figure awaits me. And as I turn to meet the gaze of desire I felt so clearly land on my shoulders, it is marble that I find in the perfect silence of the room, nothing more: the polished form of Antinous, Emperor Hadrian's lover.<sup>15</sup>

- 15 The statues of Antinous, with which Emperor Hadrian revived Greek forms on purpose. The boy's curls form part of an iconography of folds to ensue. 'Antinous has attracted attention from the gay subculture since the eighteenth century, the most illustrious examples for this being Prince Eugène of Savoy and Frederick the Great of Prussia.' Sarah Waters, 'The Most Famous Fairy in History', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 6 (1995), no. 2, 92.

That teenage suicide. The body that had seemed alive seconds earlier, brimming with the need to be acknowledged, is beyond flesh, long dead. While earlier that day, on one of Kalemegdan's winding paths, she had



walked behind me in the blinding sun, past the crumbling fortifications demolished and resurrected from one century to the next,<sup>16</sup> shouting in the wind: *You have the legs of a girl!* The only way I'd known to respond was to walk faster.

16 *Barokni Beograd* (Baroque Belgrade) (Beograd: Arheološki Institut Beograd & Muzej Grada Beograda, 2019).

How does it work, this ever-changing diagram of shifting frames of reference when I stop her in the street a few months later and ask for a kiss, as if requiring permission to draft a contract, rather than pursuing desire on impulse? I can still see the place where we stood, at the end of a street where the city's first official school had been erected in the nineteenth century, that site of childhood abuses.<sup>17</sup>

17 Braća Ribar, the name of revolutionary brothers who'd given the school its name to be replaced by the name of a king. Varoš Kapija, the spot where this happens, the entrance to the Serbian city . . . except not quite there. It is the area that inherits the name, a shop or two left to denote it. And it is there, just further to one side and up the street, that the only surviving Baroque building from eighteenth-century Austrian rule remains. It is, most probably, the key image. Yet no one can confirm that it really had been built then.

I was inert, too much the opposite of male. We were taught to be dominant. We were all men.<sup>18</sup>

18 There is a figure here, the liberator of Belgrade from Ottoman oppression, for a moment at least. Eugene of Savoy, that mastermind general, whose sexual practices were described as filth. A gate with his name remains inside Kalemegdan today, and the tower that marks it. It should be his body, his face, that remains as the final cipher. His wig: into which the folds of history disappear.