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A Valediction

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A VALEDICTION

There was a moment, as the little beaten cab took another tight turn too quickly, when all at once to our left we could see the three hills of Veliko Turnovo, the houses of the old town clinging to their terraces, the river Yantra snaking its way beneath. I remembered seeing it in precisely this way a year before, the only other time I had visited this north central region of Bulgaria, and I had precisely the same response now, a sharp intake of breath at the wonder of it, a sound echoed by R. sitting beside me in the backseat of the cab. It was as a consequence of that sound, or of the wonder that provoked it, that his fingers found mine as I reached for him across the seat, and we continued looking with our hands linked low, beneath the driver's notice, free at a stroke from the weight of uncertainty or sorrow we had carried with us on the train, a pressure that could almost seem caused by the trees crowding the tracks, their long branches brushing the clouded glass of our wagon. It was nearly the end of summer, at the beginning of which R. had come to live with me in Sofia, where he had spent six months the year before as an exchange student. It was during this earlier visit that we had met, and after finishing his degree in Portugal, he had returned permanently, as we thought, moving in with me to continue a relationship we had stumbled into only accidentally. Our first encounters had been entirely ludic and unserious, but even then they possessed, for me, a promise of deep nourishment, a promise his return had been intended to confirm. It was a sacrifice for him to exchange his sun-stroked Lisbon, with its river and tiles, its avenues and vertical expanse, its luxuriant color, for a city that even in high summer held on to its grayness, like an animal somehow doubtful of the season, unwilling to shed its winter coat. And it was a risk for him to leave so much that he knew for so much that was unknown, both in the city and in our feeling; yet he was so much younger than I—there were eleven years between us—and to gamble with a year or two at his age seemed almost virtuous, proof of vivacity or charm, an endearing recklessness. Besides, we were in love, which bestows its own virtue on recklessness and makes any too fine a calculation of costs seem a degrading meanness. Yet however broad the compass of our affection, R. realized almost immediately how little there was beyond it for him in Sofia, where he had no friends or relations, and where, lacking the

language, he found no prospect of a job; and what we had taken to thinking of as a start to real life had become instead an extended vacation, culminating in this holiday through the country, a final trip together before his return to Lisbon.

The road curved now toward the town, following the river, and both of us looked down at it as we rode. We had just come from Rousse, a city three hours to the north, where I had finally seen the Danube, the first river I had encountered in Europe on the scale of those I had grown up beside. There had been little riverfront to speak of, just a desolate greenness like a stain seeping from the city's largest building, a huge Soviet hotel standing monolithic and surely empty guard. The river wasn't especially lovely, but it was large, swollen with summer rains, and we had stood watching the huge weight of it slide silently past, watching too the swallows twisting above it in the darkening air; and then it was something we felt more than saw, in the darkness indistinguishable from the woods on the Romanian bank. There was nothing very impressive about the Yantra, a narrow river so shallow in places it seemed barely to cover its bed; but there was a kind of drama in the shape it cut through the land, winding crazily, at one point almost looping back upon itself, creating in its folds the hills that gave the city both its character and its purpose. The largest of those hills still showed the ruins of Tsaravets, Turnovo's main attraction, a medieval fortress whose fall began five centuries' subjugation and which has remained, in the imaginations of so many here, the symbol of a past greatness that is at once a source of pride and a shadow cast over the diminished present. It was a view of Tsaravets, and of the rest of the town from a neighboring hill, that recommended the hotel we had reserved. Like all of the hotels on this valedictory tour, it was more expensive than I usually would have allowed, and yet its luxury was more idea than achievement, like a grand gesture embarrassedly abandoned, the large room with its gorgeous view filled with furniture and linens in various stages of disrepair. Even so, we felt a little flare of novelty and happiness on entering it, our new domestic space, and R. dropped his bags and clambered onto the bed, where he hopped two or three times in exuberance. Almost always in his company, the difference of age between us dissolved, subsumed in mutual absorption, in the equality of recent love; only at moments did it reassert itself, usually delightfully, and I found myself laughing, oddly effervescent, surprised again by my own fondness, in the old sense of the word—and sensing too, just past the edges of what I felt, a kind

of deferred dread at what now I knew I could lose. Despite my best efforts to forestall it, I could feel this doubt of the future threatening to contaminate my feeling, a projected end threatening to rob the present moment of its value, as though this value could only be sustained in the illusion of eternity. But the illusion is unsustainable, as I knew, and knew too how often, at the first hint of transience promising abandonment, I had abandoned the things I loved. But then R. stopped jumping and stood motionless at the foot of the bed, throwing wide his arms, and I stepped toward him for the second half of our ritual of homecoming in these temporary homes, forgetting my fear as I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my face to his chest, feeling an odd slackening and relief as I breathed in the scent of him, the release of something increasingly tightly wound.

It was only after some moments of this that we felt able to leave the room, our bags still unpacked, and explore the little town. There was something appealingly artistic about Veliko Turnovo: in the tourist shops one could find, among the mass-produced souvenirs, authentic local crafts; and in the old town, its vertiginous streets lined with National Revival houses, at first newly renovated but growing more decrepit as one climbed, there were artisans' shops from which men and women looked up hopefully from their work, calling *zapovyadaite*, welcome, come in, to everyone who passed. When I had been in Veliko Turnovo before, a year earlier, it had seemed crowded with tourists, their buses nosing through the tiny streets and their bags piled high in lobbies; but now there were few visitors, perhaps because it was later in the season and the seaside had drawn them away. Whatever the reason, as we climbed the nearly vertical paths, the cobblestones shifting beneath us, we found ourselves wandering for stretches at a time undisturbed. Perhaps it was this lack of trade that drew one of the artists out of her shop into the street just in front of it, where, when I glanced her way, she welcomed us inside with a fervency it would have been difficult to refuse. Though she addressed us in English at first, when I responded in Bulgarian she visibly relaxed. My husband speaks perfect English, she said, but he's gone with my son to Sofia for the day, they've left me here alone, and while I understood her well enough, I couldn't read the tone of her last statement, whether it was spoken matter-of-factly or as a complaint. It was a lovely building we stepped into, a two-story house of which the first floor had been made a gallery, the walls covered somewhat frantically with paintings that climbed almost to the ceiling, while others, unhung, were piled leaning in their frames against

the walls. For a moment they were overwhelming in their profusion, and I felt unsure of where to direct my gaze. Please, the woman said, look around, there are more in the other rooms, and I saw that there was an open doorway to my right, through which I could see more walls similarly covered. All of them were done by us, she said, we're all three painters, and then, at my little murmur of interest, she went on: We graduated from the Fine Arts Academy in Plovdiv, my husband and I, and now our son studies art in Sofia, at the best school. She was proud of this, one could see, with its proof of progress through the generations.

R. had stepped away slightly as she spoke, turning his attention to the walls. She addressed him now, speaking about the paintings and clearly glad to have an audience, pausing between sentences for me to translate, though I couldn't always follow her as she spoke about technique or intention, each painting a distinct story, her love for each (it was clear) an extension of her love for the hand that had made it. Those different hands were quickly visible, the three distinct styles evident as we scanned the walls, her own paintings swirling pale abstractions, her son's a kind of glossy eroticism of female forms, both of them almost entirely without interest for me. But pride of place was given to her husband's work, which was larger and more striking than the rest, with the angular stylization of so much socialist art. What murals there were in Sofia were almost all in this style, which was novel to me and appealing, representational but to the side of realism, and free, for me, of the history that tainted it for my friends, who pursed their lips at my admiration; *mnogo sots*, they would say, very socialist, the truncation of the word a kind of audible disgust, dismissing at a stroke whole generations of talent and work that were stained by a history against which they could mount no defense.

We moved slowly through each of the rooms, even descending to a lower level of naked bulbs and unpainted walls, where the woman had directed us, though she couldn't follow; the stairs were too steep for her, she said. The walls were crammed even more tightly here, paintings mounted haphazardly, wherever there was room, with no thought for complement or coherence. This sense of things was heightened when we saw, at the end of a corridor, a heap of canvasses stacked one on top of another, several columns of them piled almost to the ceiling. There was a kind of desperation to it, and I felt something near desperation myself, confronted with so compelling an argument for art as a mere byproduct of human life, a kind of excretion or

waste, something made not to bear value adamant against time but to be cleared away to make room for more, this making and clearing seeming at once something like the truth of our existence, the purpose or goal of it, and an activity so automatic as to be devoid of meaning, almost biological, like consumption and evacuation. And I thought of my own labor and the traces it leaves, the pages numbered and stacked like these paintings, the things I have made, how arduous and ardent the effort, I thought, struck as I had been before by the false similarity of the words, ardor and arduous, and I repeated them to myself in that curious abstraction that sometimes comes over me, ardor and arduous, rolling them around as one does, without intention, it hardly counts as thought, until as if by their own generative agency there appeared among or against them a new word, ordure, the three words now tumbling in strange relation, cause and consequence, until R. placed his hand on my neck and pulled my face toward his own, pulling me too from these thoughts.

I was eager to leave then, feeling a need to escape from this house and from the weight, so palpable somehow, of what filled it, those mounds of labor mocking any thought of excavation, and mocking too my own dreams of accomplishment. When we climbed from the basement, we found the woman waiting for us in the main room, standing hopefully at the glass table that served for a counter. There was a slight wilting in her frame when she saw we were empty-handed, something like a wave receding, though her smile did not falter as she asked me whether we had enjoyed what we had seen. Oh yes, I said, very much, so many wonderful things, feeling some guilt at my subterranean thoughts and perhaps trying now to make amends. It felt wrong to leave so quickly, having stayed so long, and struck suddenly by inspiration I asked if she had a card, saying we would love to see her studio in Sofia. She took one from a drawer, and on the back of it she wrote in beautiful Cyrillic an address we promised to waste no time in seeking out, though as she handed it to me, still smiling, she had already slipped from us into an abstraction that seemed expressive of her doubt.

On the street again, I tried to explain to R. what I had felt and why I had needed to leave so suddenly, the sense of futility that had come over me as I gazed at those paintings. But, as often happens, what I had felt so urgently had already faded; it seemed incommunicable now, ridiculous even to myself. The day was well advanced, though it had been early when we arrived, and we angled our way downward back to the busier part of town. We didn't

have any plans for the evening, and as we walked I kept an eye on the walls, which as we descended were increasingly crowded with posters for concerts and exhibitions and plays, a surprising number for such a small town, I thought, posters mounted over other posters, jostling for space and thickening like plaster on the walls. Most of these were for small venues, jazz clubs and cafés, but there was also a series of performances held within the walls of the ruined fortress itself, the stage of ages, they called it, symphony and opera and ballet. We had been saving Tsaravets for the evening anyway; it would be brutal in the day, exposed and with almost no shade to be found, the southern sun sharpened to its point, and I saw that there was a concert that night, members of the Sofia Opera and Ballet, the sign said, performing *Lakmé*, the opera by Delibes. I had stopped for a moment to read this, and I called out excitedly to R., who had walked on ahead. I had never seen it live, I told him, but it was the first opera I had owned on CD, two discs I had played again and again. It was like a door opening onto my adolescence, a chance to share it with him, and suddenly I felt I needed to go, please, I said, can we go, please, surprising both of us with the intensity of my feeling. He was willing, though he had never been to an opera before; it would be a new experience, he said, he was eager for new experiences.

It seemed suddenly late, given these plans, and after eating hurriedly in a smoky restaurant we began making our way to the fortress. Tsaravets occupies the entirety of one of Veliko Turnovo's hills, and approaching it one has the sense of centuries peeling back, revealing a medieval world, the brutality of which is manifest in the stone raised up to resist it. It's difficult to imagine, from the country that exists, the country capable of making this, R. said as we bought our tickets and began walking the long strip of stone leading to the fortress, pausing to marvel at the huge frame for gates that once might have barred our way. It could bar nothing now, of course, our wars had outstripped all defenses, but even to contemporary eyes, there was nothing at all quaint about the walls beyond which we passed; it was terrifying, the thought of life led behind them, their proof of successive invasions, the violent migrations of men we had staved off now for a little time, in a little part of the world, and imagined ourselves done with altogether. We weren't alone on the path up the hill; there were others walking with us, couples mostly, some of them in attire that suggested we were underdressed, the women picking their way gingerly over the stony ground in heels. It was a long walk, unmarked, and it was only by following these others that we had any idea

where to go. Apart from the occasional sign and a few wooden staircases granting access to the ruins, there was little to distract us as we walked the uneven ground, making our way around boulders and interior walls.

It was behind one of these walls that we surprised three men chatting, dressed in costume, two half-naked and muscular in leather tunics and a third in peasant cloth. They snatched the cigarettes from their mouths and stood up for a moment, one of the larger men unfurling his whip; and then, seeing our lack of interest, they leaned back against the stone, entirely contemporary in their strange garments. At first I thought they might be members of the chorus waiting for their call, but their costume wasn't right, and I realized they must have been actors in some historical reenactment, Ottoman soldiers and an unarmed Bulgarian aggrieved. At least they resembled the images in the books from which I had taken whatever sense of the history of the place I had, a set of slim illustrated volumes, comic books almost, a children's history of Bulgaria filled with cartoonish barbaric invaders and mothers weeping over their sons, a version of history construed as victimhood and pathos. In another version of that history, I knew, the Bulgarians were valiant, crafty and cruel, holding out for months against superior forces, ceding an inch of ground at a time. It was hard to get to the truth of such things, I thought, they were so far in the past; yet they impressed themselves so volubly on the present, Bulgarians speaking of the fall of Tsaravets in 1393 as of a personal grief. I hate the Turks, the woman who cuts my hair finds an occasion to say every time I sit in her chair; I'm sorry, but I can never forgive them, they are a terrible people.

Finally we reached the top of the hill, where the medieval atmosphere was decisively broken, and the incongruous evening dress of our neighbors faded into its proper habitat. What seemed incongruous now were the two large trucks parked at angles to the ruins, each of them marked *Sofiska Natsionalna Opera i Balet* in the block Cyrillic of government pronouncements. They were functional and inelegant and at odds with the white tents set up to sell wine and refreshments, as with the genteel white chairs unfolded on wooden platforms before the largest section of ruins, over which had been laid the evening's stage, where men in costumes, doubling as stagehands, arranged scenery and props. The stage was at once elaborate and bare, a few potted plants and a painted backdrop sketching an idea of the colonial subcontinent, while a complicated wooden scaffolding scaled the rear wall of the ruins, their most substantial remainder, creating an upper level, where a

large statue of Ganesh had been placed. It was an oddly layered scene, with the ruins, the socialist-era trucks, the European refinement of the audience and tents, the nineteenth-century sets, the ancient god serenely gazing; it was like a palimpsest with no original text, I thought, only endless layers peeling away, and for a moment I felt a quick shudder of vertigo, as though the ground on which I stood might at any moment swing open.

I was surprised by how large an audience there was for a summer opera in this little town, and for a piece not quite in the standard repertoire. R. didn't know it at all, and as we waited for the performance to start, listening to the clatterings of the invisible orchestra settling, the occasional brass instrument clearing its throat, I gave him the briefest account of the opera's story, the forbidden love between Gérald, a British officer, and Lakmé, a young virgin sworn to the gods and the daughter of a local priest plotting against the colonial forces. Lakmé betrays her father, only to be betrayed in turn when Gérald is recalled to his duty and leaves her, truer to country and honor than to love. Abandoned, having sacrificed her own honor, Lakmé kills herself in the sacred grove where she and Gérald had hidden. Well, that sounds awful, R. said, and I had to admit that it did, full of absurdity and cliché. It's really not the best choice for a first opera, I said, insecure suddenly and wanting to lower his expectations, feeling protective now of the experience I had been so eager to share. But I loved it when I was young, I said, and it has some beautiful music; though even the music, I feared, might seem less grand than I remembered, a sense of that diminishment perhaps the reason I hadn't listened to it for so long.

It's a little embarrassing, music that is so eager to please, like a man whose desire for fellowship makes him forget his pride. And little of this opera has traveled well, I found as night fell around us, neither its oriental fantasy of a plot nor its sentimental music, especially in a performance that, as was apparent once the overture began, would inflict its own embarrassments. From the first notes it was clear the company had outlived its glory, when Bulgaria had produced so many of the singers that would populate my recordings; musicians too had fled westward, I thought, now that they had the chance and were no longer held in place by a world divided, restricted to the less expansive regime of the Cold War; and they had left behind those whose talents weren't robust enough to purchase a ticket out. This cruel thought was unavoidable as I found myself fairly writhing in my seat at the poorly tuned strings and the splattered brass, the wooden movements of

chorus and dancers. Of the singers, most were past whatever prime they had had, which seemed to have been most considerable in those who had left it furthest behind, an old bass and a mezzo whose voices, however they wobbled or frayed, possessed still some ambered texture of accomplishment. It was unlikely there were recordings to refer to, I supposed; I could only guess, from the moments of resonance, the few ringing tones, the mastery they had once with such effort achieved. They must grow less and less by the day, I thought, those beautiful tones; it must be terrible to feel them go. But it was Lakmé herself who mattered most, having almost the only music in the piece worth hearing: the flower duet, which everyone knows and which has gone nearly dull with re-hearing, and the bell song, where she is forced to sing nearly to the point of collapse, the music reaching a frenzy that requires the peculiar mixture of athleticism and suffering that audiences have always demanded of their heroines. The soprano in the role was alone among the leads in being very young, in her twenties, I thought, a Bulgarian girl just making her career; and if one couldn't imagine it taking her very far from home, she was still a pleasure to watch, lovely and thin and with an appealing voice sometimes affectingly pure, too untested for the role, perhaps, so that one felt real concern for her in the final bars of her big scene.

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But really none of these particulars mattered, and even as one part of me winced and catalogued faults, another found itself engrossed in the music, which I hadn't listened to for so many years and every note of which, I was amazed to find, I remembered with absolute vividness. I must have been fourteen when I bought the CD, a London double set I picked out because of a single name, a singer I knew my teacher, whom I wanted to imitate in all things, adored. As I listened to it in my room, I felt it granted me access to some region in which what had seemed like loneliness became privacy, rich with promise, and the cultivation of the talents I was only just discovering took on urgency and heroism, like a narrative of escape. I remember falling asleep to *Gérald's* arias as sung by a tenor whose voice, which I've never found on another recording, was beautiful and light-bodied and pure, seeming to embody my every ambition; as I listened to him I imagined the life my own voice would lead me to, glamorous and scrubbed of shame. I saw nothing ironic in seeking my future in an outdated and perennially dying art, as I would again, years later, when I abandoned singing for the greater privacy of poems, frustrated by an instrument that refused to accommodate my ambitions and frustrated too by the quickness with which they

passed, those moments when hours of practice and strain dissolved to joy, the moments for which I sang; they slipped away past seizing, so that even if they were recorded I would listen and fail to find them, finding instead in my voice a frail, faulted thing entirely alien to me. I turned to poetry as to a more certain vehicle, but I have found this to be true of my pages as well, which are their own struggle, their own discipline and strain enlivened by moments of quick brightness like nothing so much as love, the world laid bare to its secret significance. I write to catch such moments, I think, to suspend them outside of time; and yet when I look for them later I find they have slipped free somehow, so that there is no sign of them where I last saw them; at best there remains some echo or remnant, a richness faded almost beyond perceiving.

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However absorbed I was in these thoughts, I was aware of R., too, feeling anxiety about his pleasure; and I felt a great upwelling of tenderness at his good-natured engagement, his willingness to enjoy the strange scurrying on the stage. With each new singer, he leaned to me and whispered, Is she good?, wanting to know, I suppose, what he should feel, and whatever I thought I said she was, wanting him to enjoy himself, to take whatever pleasure he could. Repeatedly I felt myself overcome by feeling for him, as happened so often and for no reason; it was only vaguely tied to the music, if at all, and it was painful for me not to touch him, even to reach my hand to his. But caution had become an instinct, and even here, in this atmosphere of culture, if there was not actual danger there was certainly indiscretion, and I could imagine the discomfort and disapproval any display of affection would arouse. Besides, we already had our repertoire of covert gestures, the brushed elbow or knee, the slight pressure of a foot, which could replace, when we needed them to, more public displays; and we made use of them more often as the night deepened and the air chilled and the ruins, the evening's only sublimity, stood out more eerily in the lights, with their promise if not of permanence then of a slower, a more defiant giving-way. The noise and traffic of the other hills were muted, as if held at a remove, and it was easy to feel the ancientness of the place, the presences layering it palpable even to me, for whom they had so little meaning. We were sitting on a battlefield, I thought to myself suddenly, feeling it with a force beyond the figures of my children's history, beyond any history at all; real passion had been felt here and real blood spilled, where now their approximations were manufactured for us on stage.

At the end of it, when the scattered bodies had risen for their applause, R. seemed less moved than bemused, looking at me as if to say, Is that all? After the ovations, which were longer and more generous than I had expected, especially for the young Lakmé, who left the stage half-interred by flowers, an announcement was made that in twenty minutes (as I translated for R.), the *spektakul zvuk i svetlina*, the sound and light show over Tsaravets, would begin. This was famous enough in Bulgaria that R. had heard of it during his time here, and he was eager to go, despite the chill that had deepened through the performance and our general fatigue. I had already seen it and been disappointed by it, and the thought of sitting through it again held little appeal for me; but it was brief, fifteen minutes or so, nothing compared to the hours we had just spent, and so I resigned myself to it as we began to move with a good part of the crowd down the hill. This was a difficult business, as there were no lights to guide us, save the beams of one or two flashlights some members of the audience had known to bring. There was stumbling and cursing, but also a kind of festivity, people laughing and chatting, and in the dark, under the cover of hazard, I slipped my arm through R.'s, pressing it to me with a firmness I didn't quite understand as I watched for the white of stone against the ground. I hadn't felt yet what I wanted, that opening up between us I had hoped the music would trigger, some shared transcendence, and I felt a vague disappointment or guilt, a sense that in some way I didn't quite understand I had failed. A group of young people nudged us aside as they passed, raucous, singing melodies from the opera and swinging two-liter plastic bottles of beer: music students from the university, I supposed, who seemed to know their way well enough in the dark. Something about them deepened or darkened my feeling, their brashness and disregard as they claimed their passage sounding a note of bile in me, a bitterness at their confidence, not just of the path but of their promise, that claim upon the future that locked the rest of us so entirely out.

I let go of R.'s arm as we reached the bottom of the hill, where lights met us again along the stone road, from which it was a five or ten minute walk to the observatory where we would watch the show. Few of the other operagoers joined us there; they had seen it too often before, I supposed, and dispersed to their cars or their homes. But the benches at the spot, which formed the point of a triangle made by converging roads, were still full, an odd mixture of the old and the very young, as though everyone of vital age had been called away. We stood in a little space behind these benches,

watching the last well-dressed couples stoop into their cars and slide away, until the speakers behind us popped awake and the lights in our little square went out. R. made a soft humming noise of anticipation, and the bodies on the benches stiffened suddenly with attention, greeting the spectacle with open arms, as it were, already having decided to give way to it. And yet, as the music started, a bizarre mix of folk instruments and Slavic chorus and horribly dated, synthesized space-age sounds, as different quadrants of the hill and its ancient walls were illuminated, now in red, now blue and green, I found myself receding from the square, from the light and sound, the ridiculous music, receding from everything except R. beside me, toward whom I turned my thoughts. For hours I had managed not to dwell on the state of things between us, on his return to Lisbon and our uncertain future, but now these thoughts flooded back, along with a strange, formless guilt that returned to me no matter how often I dismissed it. Almost from the beginning, once we had caught a glimpse of the seriousness toward which our feelings aimed, though neither of us had intended it and though nearly everything in our situation discouraged it, almost from the beginning we had slipped easily into a rhetoric of permanence, that lover's myth of endless duration that I had grown skeptical of even as I longed for it. I had come to take for granted a wandering cast in my own affections, as in the affections of others, an assumption confirmed in my various experiments in love, nearly all of which had been short and of which all had ended with a sudden shifting of ground that had seemed stable, so that on one or another side, feelings that had seemed just a moment before so intense dissolved without warning, leaving little trace. But my feelings for R. had made those earlier adventures, however rich I had thought them, seem meager, and what I had at first entered into as a kind of subjunctive mood, speaking as if it were possible for our feeling to acknowledge no mutability or horizon, had become, I realized, not quite a belief but a need. I couldn't bear the thought of it, the end that I feared, with its revelation of a kind of bad faith on one or both of our parts; I felt desperate at the thought of losing him, and my desperation seemed somehow proof he would be lost.

The increasing urgency of these thoughts, and their downward curve, had something to do with the spectacle I was only half watching, which was enacting some rising action, it was impossible to say precisely what. The hill, which had at first been illuminated quadrant by quadrant, was now swept by red and blue lights, first in one direction and then the other. I supposed this was

the clashing of armies, though which were the virtuous Bulgarian forces and which the victorious Turks was lost on me, despite the narration of two children who had stood up on the rearmost bench, whispering excitedly to each other *Turtsite! Turtsite!* at each sweep of the lights. Whatever was happening, a climax was approaching, clear in the martial lament of the music and also in the lights, which were mounting ever higher, toward the citadel itself and its reconstructed tower, though the dramatic effect of this was dampened somewhat by an anachronistic line of vehicles, the opera trucks at the fore, making its way down the hill. Then, in a moment I remembered and that struck me again as ridiculous, there shot out suddenly from the tower a powerful beam of light, laser-thin, first in one direction, then in the other, then in both directions at once. What a peculiar gesture, I thought to myself, what could it possibly mean, and I looked to the little crowd of observers as if for an answer. It was clear that they had accessed something, my fellow watchers; even the children were rapt, moved by this display that left me cold, or by what it represented. They had found their way to what I had been seeking; they sat transfigured by something, sacredness or sorrow, in either case larger than themselves. At the far end of one of the benches, I saw an old man who had bent his head and covered his face with his hands, and whose shoulders were shaking as he wept. Then the hill went dark, and the speakers behind us silent, and from in front of us, from the hill itself, there rolled the slow sound, ample and unamplified, of bells, of many bells, from what seemed like multiple towers. They rang for some seconds in the darkness, their unsynchronized tolling producing a sound layered and fluid and thick, the most affecting music of the evening, I thought, plangent and bare. And then, as they continued to ring, the hill was suddenly ablaze with light, not the colored floods of the warring sides but a white light, unsparing, so that every tree stood out in it and every stone was exposed, the ineffective walls, the whole much-repaired skeleton of it laid out at once grievous and proud. I heard R. make a little gasping sound beside me of marvel or dismay, and suddenly I felt myself inside it, the wonder of the place; I slid into it gratefully, though I knew it would pass, as I knew, though I wanted to refuse it, that whatever the love I felt for him R. and I would pass, that neither of us could manage or will that seizing that might stay us beside one another. Then the hill went dark again, and silent, and, in the pause before anyone spoke or moved to leave, I leaned toward R., wanting to feel the sweetness of him beside me, and he pressed himself warm to me for a moment in the dark.