

Two books by Semezdin Mehmedinović :

Sarajevo Blues, translated by Ammiel Alcaly (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1998)

My Heart, translated by Celia Hawkesworth (Catapult Books, New York, 2021)

If you visit Sarajevo and go on one of the local walking tours, your guide will take you to the corner of streets Ferhadija and Vladislava Skarića. She will point out the catholic Sacred Heart Cathedral fifty yards to the west, and just south of that the orthodox Cathedral Church of the Nativity of the Theotokos. To the east you will see the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque, with its square and covered fountain, which is just a short distance from the oldest synagogue in Sarajevo which is now a museum of Jewish history. This small area, she will tell you, represents the history, tradition and culture of the city which were broken apart during the war in Bosnia and the siege of Sarajevo which ended just twenty-five years ago.

Semezdin Mehmedinović wrote *Sarajevo Blues* while he lived in the city with his family through the whole period of the siege. As their communities and homes were bombed and shattered, the book was written as a series of fragments - in poems, essays and notes. One of the longest sections, *Stocking hat*, describes the beginning of the war:

“The war started on Sunday. I know this because we always played soccer at Skenderija on Sunday. A guy from my team didn’t show up that night, but no one paid much attention to it...”

The guy in question appears later the same day among a gang of armed men threatening a bus full of people, including his former teammates, with Kalashnikovs. That’s how close the war was to Mehmedinović and everyone he knew. It gets closer in many incidents described later: conversations punctuated by falling shells; running across intersections to avoid snipers’ bullets; his son called in from play because it's "grenading" outside. At one point he finds himself smoking a cigarette wrapped in someone’s death certificate because there are no cigarette papers left anywhere, and he writes “I must admit there isn’t much left that can shock me”.

At times the harshness of what Mehmedinović describes is almost unbearable, and it’s the truth of it that makes it so. Here is the poem *Corpse*:

We slowed down at the bridge
to watch some dogs tear a
corpse apart by the river
and then went on

nothing in me has changed

I heard the crunch of snow under tyres
like teeth biting into an apple
and felt the wild desire to laugh
at you
because you call this place hell
and you flee from here convinced
that death outside Sarajevo does not exist

Many of the images and impressions in *Sarajevo Blues* have the clarity and immediacy of photographs. Mehmedinović writes in the short section *Photographers*:

“The photographers of Sarajevo - as opposed to their colleagues who come from abroad to collect their fees from dailies, weeklies and art magazines by trading on death - are the only chroniclers of war in this city; they run out of film and supplies and get no compensation for their work ... their engagement is marked by an intellectual morality, something so rare in our parts both before and during the war.”

I think this gets to the heart of the book, and its power. Mehmedinović doesn't generalise or theorise. He doesn't moralise, but his writing has a profound intellectual morality. You don't take a photograph about something, but a photograph of something; *Sarajevo Blues* is not a book about the war, but a book of the war and when you read it you cannot allow yourself to look away.

Mehmedinović left Sarajevo at the end of the war with his wife and son, and wrote *My Heart* in the USA after he had lived there for twenty years. The book is in three parts: *Me'med*, *Red Bandana* and *Snowflake*. In the first he describes his experience of having a heart attack at the age of fifty; the second is the story of a road trip he took with his son into the deserts of Arizona, Utah and Nevada. In the final part, the longest, he writes about his wife's illness and partial recovery after she has a stroke, and how the experience affects her and their relationship.

In each of these three sections Sarajevo and the war are never far away. One of the pervasive themes of the book is memory and forgetting, and many of the incidents he describes prompt thoughts of Sarajevo and their experiences there. Passing a desert airstrip with his son, he is reminded of a restaurant near the airport in Sarajevo:

“My acquaintance and colleague the poet Radovan Karadžić turned the restaurant into a concentration camp. Many of my friends were among the prisoners there. On the whole good people. In the world there is a rule that great suffering happens to the good people.

Then, during the siege, I left the city several times through a tunnel under the runway, and came back, and in the end I left, crossing that same runway, perhaps forever.”

Essentially *My Heart* is a story of exile, a state of being in which memory provides both identity and solace. It is in the final section of the book that the theme of memory becomes most urgent and poignant. When Mehmedinović’s wife, Sanja, experiences a stroke she loses both her short term memory and long periods of her past. As he nurses her, he reminds her daily of where they are, how long they have lived there, and all that has happened between. The storytelling becomes an aid to recovery and rehabilitation, and in itself an act of love:

“She’s well aware that she doesn’t remember, and asks questions that are crucial to her, she turns to me out of her forgetfulness with full emotional participation. This is one question that she repeats every day: “How’s your mother?”

“She died in December, four months ago,” I say.

She starts to cry. “I didn’t know ... I’m sorry.”

And she repeats the question “How’s your mother?” every day. And every day she experiences with the same intensity the news she has forgotten, always hearing it for the first time.”

My Heart is not a sentimental book. Its narrative and reflections are sometimes cold, even harsh at times. They are often hard memories and hard stories, but never told with bitterness. The poignancy comes from the honesty and the clarity of the telling. It’s a story told with great stylistic and linguistic purity, and the translator, Celia Hawkesworth, has rendered it exceptionally well.

The puzzle of the book that I can’t resolve for myself is that it describes itself as a novel, not as a memoir. I think all of it is true, but I can’t be sure. I don’t really think I want to know. On the final page Mehmedinović describes himself and his wife walking along a street in Alexandria, Virginia, when they are passed by a Google car photographing the area for Street View. I’ve walked up and down that street online several times and I can’t see them. But I can’t and don’t want to believe that they are not really there.

Wayne Connolly
5 April 2021