

### Sasha Skenderija




Born in Bosnia on July 4, 1968, Sasha Skenderija began publishing poetry, prose, and criticism in Yugoslav literary journals in the late 1980s. After surviving six months of the siege of Sarajevo, he fled to Prague in 1992. In 1999, with the help of translator and Cornell linguistics professor Wayles Browne, Skenderija arrived in Ithaca, NY. His poetry has been included in several Bosnian and Croatian anthologies and translated into Czech, English, and Slovenian. English translations of his poems have been included in *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* (Bloodaxe Books, 1998), *Balkan Visions* and *Silver Visions II* (VISIONS International, 1995 and 2005 respectively). His latest collection of selected poetry, *Zasto je patuljak morao biti ustrijeljen* (*Why the Dwarf Had to Be Shot*) was recently published in Bosnia (CKO Tesan, 2005). Read more at [www.skenderija.com](http://www.skenderija.com).


  


## SASHA SKENDERIJA

### ***Why The Dwarf Had To Be Shot***



On June twenty eight, Nineteen hundred and ninety two,  
in the basement of the Sarajevo City Hospital we sat  
with professor Dževad Karahasan and his wife, who were serving  
as hospital volunteers, since the city had been massacred day after day.  
They were devastated by their family tragedy, her mother murdered  
in her apartment by a grenade, and we came to console them  
with conversation, with desperate hope  
that military intervention was on its way. But instead,  
along with pomp and unprecedented measures of security,  
Mitterand came, to give us and our slayers a lecture  
in morals and mutual understanding. Horrified starving old women  
sobbed beyond consolation, while confused passersby and children  
hurried toward international television cameras, behaving  
like pandas born by Caesarian section in a zoo  
in Indianapolis. The whole world applauded with praise the French  
love of justice, the French *courage*,  
French altruism —while Mitterand senilely  
smiled at the decor of a destroyed building which had been,  
in his honor, renamed *L' hospital France*. Murderers did not  
bombard us for a few hours, taking their time  
to shake his hand, and all went smoothly,  
almost like an ecumenical colloquium somewhere in Paris.



A local TV crew came to the basement asking  
for an interview with Dž. K. What did he think about the surprise  
visit of Mitterand, they asked. He said, "Disgusting filth."  
They asked him what he thought, in his opinion, ought  
to be done. He said, "to shoot the dwarf dead." They asked  
if he would do it. He said, "If I had a weapon at hand, for sure."  
TV crew: "Would you do it, professor, to go down in history?"  
Dž. K.: "What history, friend? I would do it in order to reach sense."

No weapons were at hand, and the interview, unfortunately, has not  
until now been published.



▲ SASHA SKENDERIJA

***Family, Summertime***

We are fighting to extinction,  
to the last glass of brandy,  
my father and I.  
A warm night, a family picnic  
in the backyard of our summer home.

The futile effort  
to convince,  
to subordinate the other  
as always.  
And mom's resigned sadness.

(Before going off to bed, she clears away  
our meat-bones,  
empty glasses,  
an overfilled ashtray and the tablecloth, soiled.)

We are fighting to extinction  
leaning back in the yard chairs,  
numbed, each staring into his own half  
of the starry sky.

My father and I.

*This is the sound of mother sleeping, I utter,  
of muskmelons ripening in the dark. So the last word  
is mine.*

(1991)

Translated by Aaron Tate, Wayles Browne and Sasha Skenderija

● 10



*I had always wondered how it would feel* ■

**I had always wondered how it would feel**

to survive an airplane crash: chosen  
by the mercy of a statistical paradox, *deus  
ex machina*, one of the thousands who still  
remain . . . Always the cases fascinated me  
of deserters and women who committed suicide,  
that sentimental belief in human dignity, in fate.  
Always I was a dog: I was afraid.  
I was not able to endure any longer  
and for that reason I survived. For days  
I cried like a dog,  
I howled at myself alone.  
I had no choice but to remove myself from that,  
to undertake something, to change.  
And so on the 23rd of November,  
Nineteen hundred and ninety two,  
I came to Prague.

(1993)

Translated by Aaron Tate



▲ SASHA SKENDERIJA

**Unconditional childlike trust in the world**

as the train speeds into the haunted house. Or when appear  
the majestic zodiac figures in the dome of the planetarium,  
or the devotion I give to finding an escape  
from the labyrinth of mirrors. Cotton candy, popcorn, circus  
pleasures—enchanted moments of joy, rare, at ease.  
Another day bound by its own limits, seams.  
Exhausting confabulations: the transvestite in the telephone  
booth, twisting the ends of his platinum-blond hair, how he turns  
his body, holding in his hands a military magazine with images  
of the tanks of the world's armies. Or, say, an American student  
of creative writing, with his video camera on the monstrous  
communist city square: trying to record something, to embrace it,  
soon he withdraws, leaves—it is too difficult for him.

(In recent times I dream only commonplaces: I dream  
of childhood, sailing, how I fly, how I make love  
with the heroines of Krzysztof Kieslowski's movies.)

(1993)

Translated by Aaron Tate

● 12

*When you leave, I go to the movies.* ■

For Zelkida

**When you leave, I go to the movies.**

I drink down the mental content of the main character  
just like a can of beer. So here we go: there is the gloomy house  
with the cannibal tenants and two boys on the roof;  
the butcher and his daughter are also there. Something  
should happen soon. For it is too void when you leave.  
The shop assistant at the hair dresser's,  
she sweeps cut hair into ugly small piles  
with absent-minded broom swings.  
Some opposites are attracting each other  
in the incomprehensible analogy  
between cinema and hair salon.  
Actually, it is all about inertia:  
the hair that continues to grow after you leave;  
the nails, beard and mustaches — nothing else  
but a mere transcendence all the way from  
point (0,X) to point (0,Y). That's the time  
assigned to the main character to undertake something,  
to kill the cannibal-butcher and marry his daughter.  
And then the movie stops.  
The film runs out. Nothing more to be told.  
The corpse is being washed, shaved, and  
taken away from the home.  
The End.  
When you leave, I kick empty beer cans  
down the street. And it is so void.

Translated by Sasha Skenderija & Wayles Browne