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A Native Music

Writing the City in Sofia, Bulgaria

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ALREADY IT'S NEARLY DARK, the mid-February afternoon fading aggressively to night. My twice-daily walk, the two kilometers of Alexander Malinov Boulevard separating home from work, extends a straight shot before me, the gray of the pavement indistinguishable from the worn snow I remember pristine this morning. On either side of the boulevard stand lines of gray *blokove*, the huge, Soviet-constructed concrete apartment complexes heart-crushing in their ugliness. Traffic sits tangled at the Saharov intersection, waiting to turn down the broad boulevard leading downtown; as I pass bus after bus—some dating from before 1989, that year of changes, others bright and European—occasionally I lock eyes with a rider leaning his head in boredom against the glass. Stray dogs glance up at me hopefully at each corner, spotting an easy mark; they tail me a few steps before returning to their stations.

Since August, when I arrived to take up a new job teaching in Sofia, Bulgaria, this has been my daily

landscape. Sometimes it's a dispiriting one, especially in February, and especially on the walk home, when beautiful Mount Vitosha and all its promises of spaciousness are at my back. Here, on the edges of the city, there's little to distract from the evidence of the country's troubles, the huge disparity between the few rich and the many poor, the crumbling infrastructure, the slight or nonexistent public services. Graffiti everywhere signals the wild swings between chauvinism and shame characteristic of national feeling. And yet today, for all this, I'm not dispirited. I feel the usual weight of student work in the bag on my back, work I'm eager, for once, to read: thirty-five stories, each of them set on these streets, in the forbidding *blokove*, on the mountain behind me, in the beautiful run-down center seven kilometers north. Sofians' stories, we've called them, modeling them after Joyce.

In my twelfth-grade literature class we've been talking a great deal about place. We spent four weeks with Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, a love song to American boundlessness I was afraid my Bulgarian students would connect to only with difficulty, if at all. But what could be closer to them than that book's fascination with Central Europe, the stories it tells of an old country remembered more fondly for having been left? After that, three weeks reading Elizabeth Bishop, another great American intelligence for whom

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description is so intensely revealing of the self that it becomes a kind of nudity: landscape as psychology, attention as moral discipline. My favorite recent poet, I told them, though I know several of them have struggled with the ruminative slowness she demands. But nothing happens, some of them have said. Read it again, I've answered.

And now we're ending the semester with Joyce. I've never taught *Dubliners* before, and I'm not sure how to proceed. For years, these stories have been private pleasures, intimacies I've cherished, and now I'm torn between eagerness to share them and trepidation at their exposure. Again and again this year, my first teaching abroad, I've been surprised by my students' responses to our texts. Repeatedly I've realized that we are reading different books, resonating at different frequencies, our expectations and pleasures radically skewed by the contexts in which they were formed. That my students seem in so many ways like teenagers anywhere only makes more uncanny those moments when our strangeness to each other comes clear.

Imagine a small country, I tell them. A country on the edge of Europe, decidedly to the side of the world's attention, torn between a modest future and a glorious, half-mythical past. Imagine that it's emerging, after centuries of foreign occupation, into a sense of itself as an uneasily sovereign power. Imagine a city in that country: beautiful, poor, falling into disrepair, full of narrow, dark streets unaccommodating of significance. Imagine the people in this city, dreaming of elsewhere as they lead lives unremarkable by worldly measures. Surely, I tell them, this is the last place one would look for literature. Novels and poems happen elsewhere, in places accustomed to glory: New York, Paris, Los Angeles, London, the kinds of places they all hope to go for university.

They see my point: this is a book about a place perhaps more familiar to them than Cather's Nebraska or Bishop's Brazil. But I have some questions. What does it mean for a novel or a poem to "happen"? What makes a place literary: a quality of the streets or of the intelligence that walks them? What would it mean to be a young writer in this small country I've invented, to be entranced by a tradition that excludes, or seems to exclude, one's experience? What would it take to create a space in literature for the expression of that experience? How might one write one's city, one's nation, into that tradition, forcing a place for it where none seems ready-made?

I want them to see that this is precisely what Joyce does in *Dubliners*, turning away from the idealizing of the Irish Revival to present streets unwashed by myth. Joyce left Ireland to live in those more "significant" places where meaning lives, but his imagination remained always on Dublin's streets, among the people he knew as a young man, with whom or against whom he came into his sense

of himself as an artist. He unearthed poetry in his city as it was, with all its poverty and dirt and drunkenness, and in doing so he created a new center of gravity, shifting the world's attention a few degrees; he made literariness where it hadn't existed before. Now, I tell my students, readers of Joyce make pilgrimages to Dublin to walk the streets they know from his books. They laugh a little at the thought.

When I tell them that they won't have to write an analytical essay on Joyce, the room erupts in cheers. "Settle down," I say, "this doesn't mean you're getting off easy." Instead of an essay, they're to write their own stories of place, Sofians' stories, and there are requirements I've designed to make sure that the assignment involves a meaningful engagement with Joyce and some analysis of his style. Like Joyce, they must create

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in their story a character who serves as its psychological center, using, as Joyce often does, free indirect discourse to bring us into greater intimacy. As in Joyce's stories, this character must come into some new knowledge about him- or herself. Their stories must be structured, as his are, around some set of oppositions, though they aren't limited to the pairs (action/paralysis, home/away, bondage/freedom, etc.) Joyce uses in his own work. Finally, most importantly, their story must present Sofia as a real place: every street, every building must actually exist, and when characters move in the city the author must be explicit about how they do so, telling us which corners they turn, which tram lines they take. When my students hand in their final draft, they must include a map that shows every location their story takes place in, the routes between them clearly marked.

The bell rings, but I keep them a moment longer. "Look," I say, "I don't know all that much about Bulgarian literature, but the writers I've met here say that Sofia doesn't have its great novel yet; according to you no one has yet written the city into literature as Joyce did for Dublin, Mahfouz for Cairo, Pamuk for Istanbul. If they give me enough time," I swagger to their smiles, "I'll be the one to write that book—but it would make me happier for one of you to get there first. Take this story seriously," I tell them, returning to seriousness myself: "This place is full of poetry; your job is to knock yourself somehow out of your habits of seeing, to look at things afresh, to dig up the poetry here. Make me see it."

After I let them go, I notice that one of my best students, Mariya, has hung back. A thoughtful, intelligent student, she's a talented writer and a devoted

reader, and I'm confident she will have her pick of the American colleges she has applied to for the fall. Already this semester she's followed my suggestions and devoured Woolf and Durrell and Winterson, writers who all engage in the modernist project of deranging genres, writing books that are as much poems as novels, each of them aiming for the kind of transcription of consciousness that seems to fascinate this student. I've been struck all term, as she has brought me drafts of her stories, by how interior they are, how fully they eschew the usual pleasures of fic-

tion. One of my hopes has been that reading these modernists will show her a way to make use of more of the elements of fiction without sacrificing the interiority and lyricism of her prose. In none of her stories I've seen is there any sense of place; locked in the minds of their protagonists, they could happen anywhere.

She's sitting on the edge of a table, clearly troubled. I take a perch across from her, ask her what's up. "Do you really think," she asks doubtfully, "somebody could write great

literature about Sofia?" I answer unequivocally: absolutely, I have no doubt, great literature is everywhere. "I don't know," she says, standing up to head to her next class. "I don't see it."

At the American College, I've been told again and again this year, we teach the best students in Bulgaria. Founded by missionaries in 1860, it lays disputed claim to being the oldest American school outside of America. There's a stateliness to its six large buildings on a wooded campus at the edge of Mladost, the residential district that defines the southern boundary of the city; one could almost be at a small

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New England college just slightly going to seed. Each of these buildings has been recovered at great cost, and most of them are still in various stages of renovation, signs of the institution's difficult history in the twentieth century. In 1942, the Nazi command in Sofia demanded that the few American teachers still lingering leave the country. They had forty-eight hours to do so, and, according to the story the College tells, their night train to Istanbul was serenaded at its departure by dozens of students singing the school's anthem. After the war, in 1947, the grounds and buildings were confiscated, becoming the headquarters of the state police. The school was only reopened in 1992, three years after the fall of Communism, when teachers were grudgingly allowed a single building. To award the hundred seats—fifty boys and fifty girls—that the building could accommodate, the school held an entrance exam, as it still does every spring. For that first *priemen izpit*, three thousand Bulgarian children signed up.

Even today, the College occupies its six buildings only by lease, and half of the campus is still held by the police force. Yellow barricades turn the long entrance drive into an obstacle course, and everyone entering the campus has to pass through a police checkpoint, though the guards take their duties with varying seriousness. Some mornings every student and teacher is forced to show an entry pass; more often, when I pass at seven, two men are napping inside. Sometime in the last weeks they've imported a television, and now their

avid faces are lit often as not in the blue light of video games. They're no older than my seniors.

My classroom is on the second floor of Ostrander, the largest of the buildings on campus. I climb up the stairs in the dark. I like to say that I discovered mornings only after becoming a high school teacher, when I quickly learned that it was only before 7:45 or so that I could count on being undisturbed in my classroom. I like the silence of my room before anyone else is here;

I like looking from my window, still standing in the dark, past the building's august columns to the field just across the little street, sporadically laced with trees, their winter forms clear against a sky just starting to take on color. A few times a quarter, my classes are interrupted by the sound of gunfire, always a little carnival for the students: police cadets training in this field. Elsewhere on campus there's an abandoned building that has never been returned to the college; policemen sporadically rappel down it, training for hostage rescues.

The first students arrive around 8:00; class

starts fifteen minutes later. Most of the students are from Sofia, but others come from all over the country. A small dorm on campus houses a few of these students, but more live with relatives in the city; a few rent small apartments and live on their own. Many are among the country's elite, delivered to the school by drivers and wearing the latest designer clothes, while others are able to attend only with scholarships and sacrifice. These divisions are clear and uncomfortable. Almost all of them are well-traveled—far more so



Ostrander Hall, 1940.
Photo courtesy of the American College of Sofia Archive.

than I—and many of them speak three or more languages with proficiency. In May, if all goes well, they'll receive both American and Bulgarian diplomas, having satisfied the requirements of both nations; to accomplish this, they take as many as fourteen subjects in a year. This can create an atmosphere of desperation among all but the most scholastically gifted students, and the College loses a number of students every year to its stringent policies of academic achievement. Those who have made it this far are, in general, academically very strong. They're also exhausted.

Now, just three months from graduation, they're turning their attention abroad. Almost all of them will attend schools outside of Bulgaria, elsewhere in Europe or in the United States. Some of them plan to return after getting their degrees, determined to help their country overcome its various troubles; most, though, won't come back. Bulgaria is almost unique among its Balkan neighbors in having escaped the ethnic violence that has torn apart the region, causing mass displacements; even so, people here speak of a Bulgarian diaspora, the dispersal of talent to places of seemingly greater promise. All year, in conversations with students, I've heard their reasons for leaving: the lack of opportunity here, the rampant corruption, the desire for a kind of success that doesn't seem possible for them in Sofia. Most of these students, among the first seniors at the College to be born after the fall of Communism, have been oriented toward the West their whole lives.

This eagerness for elsewhere has made reading *Dubliners* with them unexpectedly moving. It's hard not to see versions of my students' lives in Joyce's characters, versions of their city in his, resemblances they

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see as well. Our first day reading the stories we discuss "Eveline," starting by analyzing, in small groups, the first two paragraphs. They're quick to note how mood is established (the evening "invade[s] the avenue"), and how that odd English construction "used to" chimes with awkward regularity, establishing forcefully the presence of the past. They see the appearance of national tensions when, in Eveline's account of her neighborhood's history, she speaks of "a man from Belfast" who turned her childhood playground into a row of "bright brick houses" clearly out of the eco-

nomic reach of families like Eveline's and her neighbors'. They note the intimation of her father's alcoholism ("Her father was not so bad then") and the overbearing presence of the dead. These details tell us everything we need to know about Eveline's present misery, and the passage also introduces her hope for the future. "Everything changes," the second paragraph ends. "Now she was going to go away like the others, to leave her home."

"Eveline" is the only story in *Dubliners* that shows us a character in arm's reach of escape from the prison of her circumstances. Eveline is loved; a man named Frank has offered her what she calls "another life" in "Buenos Ayres"; she's to meet him that night at the docks, running away from her home and its stifling demands. Several of my students are quick to point out that the future may not be as rosy as it appears: Frank is a sailor, an occupation that carries with it a certain reputation for inconstancy, and Eveline will have no money, no job, no friends, and no way to communicate in her new city. But these are possibilities the story leaves unstated; the third-person narrative voice is firmly rooted in Eveline's perspective. As she remem-

bers her mother, who died in mental collapse, she sees a vision of her own future, brutally summarized: “that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness.” “She stood up in a final impulse of terror,” the story continues. “Escape! She must escape!”

But Eveline doesn’t escape. At the last moment, in a shift daringly unexplained, she is unable to join Frank as he boards the ship, desperately calling out to her. Suddenly, and again without real explanation, she sees her savior as a threat: “All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her.” I’m pleased that my seniors immediately note the radical shift in tone, the suddenly grand diction (“All the seas of the world”), the elaborate imagery. I’m curious to know how they explain Eveline’s sudden change of heart, her decision to stay in Dublin. Several of them seem furious with her: how could she throw away such a chance? How could she choose to turn back to her father’s threatened violence, her loveless life of drudgery? Nadya, always one of my best readers, cuts in: are we sure she’s actually made a choice?

Not all of us understand the question. “When does she choose?” Nadya asks. “Where do we see it?” The students have already read “Two Sisters,” though we won’t discuss it together in class; they know that paralysis is one of Joyce’s recurrent themes. In staying in Dublin, is Eveline exercising some faculty of will, or is she simply unable to shift from an accustomed place?

Several students point to the sentence following Eveline’s expression of sudden fear: “She gripped with both hands at the iron railing.” Surely this is a clear indication of agency. Kameliya, a quietly assertive student, reminds us that Eveline has been thinking of the promise she made her mother, her pledge “to keep the home together as long as she could.” In gripping the

railing, Kameliya argues, we see her choose to keep that promise. But Nadya remains unconvinced, and points us to Joyce’s last sentences: “She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition.” The text seems explicit here: staying isn’t a human choice, but an animal response; Eveline may be gripping the iron railing, but she also seems gripped by something herself, passive and prone.

The discussion continues among the students. Listening to them, I remember a conversation I had with one of the college counselors one morning when our paths intersected, as they occasionally do, at the bus stop nearest the school. It was a month or so

before, just as the dust was settling from the main charge of the application season, and he was talking to me about his exhaustion. The really annoying thing, he said in his thick Scottish accent, is that after all this labor—on the part of the student, on the part of the school—to get into a good school in America or Europe, every year one or two students at the last minute decide to turn down their offers and stay

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in Bulgaria. This is an impulse I don’t find difficult to understand. I suspect that some of my students will charge ahead full throttle to their new worlds, never looking back; but others, I know, already feel the pain of leaving their homes, their families, the city that, for all their frequent abuse of it, is inextricably bound up with their sense of themselves. It’s no surprise, then, as I read their stories, to find characters confronting, again and again, irrevocable choices which, even when they seem the right ones, are full of sacrifice and regret.

Graf Ignatiev Street, running at a slant from north to south, is one of the main thoroughfares in the center of Sofia. At its lower end it reaches almost to

the Vasil Levski Stadium and its Metro station; at its upper it leads into the heart of downtown, ending near the beautiful National Theater, with its gorgeous fountain and park. To walk up it, passing the long rows of fruit and vegetable vendors, the stands selling *dyuner* and *falafel*, the huge open-air book market at Slaveykov Square, is to move toward greater and greater prosperity. At the upper end of Ignatief, Alabin leads a block west to Vitosha Boulevard, the city's center of luxury shopping. Almost all of the students' stories take place, or at least pass through, these two streets, and the writers make pointed use of the juxtapositions they afford. Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU, and even my wealthiest students have grown up in close proximity to poverty. They also know, thanks to the crash that sent Bulgaria's economy plummeting in the 1990s, how quickly affluence can be lost. (In one of the few recent novels by a Bulgarian available in English, Georgi Gospodinov's *Natural Novel*, I read about the crisis, which almost shut down the just reopened American College. "More and more well-dressed people overcame their shame," Gospodinov remembers, "and reached into the garbage cans.")

It shouldn't be surprising, then, how often my students choose for their central characters people like those they pass on the street every day: an old pensioner walking his dogs; a man selling potatoes on the hood of his car; again and again, the beggars one meets at every street corner. My student Gabriela powerfully captures the obscenity of poverty here when she shows us an old beggar woman shaking her cup outside one of Vitosha's designer salons, her shriveled face juxtaposed against the pampered indifference of storefront mannequins. With a hint of Eastern European absurdism unavailable to Joyce, several students have staged encounters between rich and poor, encounters that avoid dissolving wholly into allegory thanks to the richly particular histories their characters are given. In one of these, Rumen's "A Glass of Wine," a homeless man is invited for a drink by a rich man who accidentally knocks over the old beggar's



Graf Ignatiev Street. Photograph by Garth Greenwell.

cup, spilling its few coins. The story's most beautiful moments imagine this impoverished man's history: "He missed the dilapidated wooden desk where he could sit translating for hours," Rumen writes, "dipping into the odor of old dictionaries." As he listens to the rich man tell his story, this former philologist "tried to rationalize and arrange the information in his mind just like all the words are systemized properly in a dictionary." All year I have stressed to my students the importance of the literary imagination as a tool of moral inquiry and moral action, and I'm moved to see how many of them—almost all of them, to varying

degrees, economically privileged—bestow upon lives unlike their own richness of affect and a full measure of dignity.

If poverty figures in many of these stories, so does success, but success figured as complicated, partial, unsatisfying. My students here have a sharper sense than my American students of the mysterious ways victory can turn to ashes, of the sacrifices made for achievement. Aleksander, a tall, lanky boy whose English is among the poorest in his class, writes of a soccer player returning to the neighborhood he left to make it big. He plays a pick-up game there, thrilling his old neighbors, the kids who have long heard stories of this local hero, a man who still plays well, despite his graying hair. Aleks beautifully captures the man's longing for what he has forsaken when, the next day, a woman briefly visits the store where he works in his retirement. She runs off before he can see her clearly, but leaves her hat behind. "When Stenli saw her hair he knew it was Sonia. He took the hat and smelled. It was her perfume. The same old smell that stopped Stenli's breath for a second and made him believe that he could do anything." Stenli reconciles with the woman he sacrificed for his career, and Aleks' story offers one of the very few happy endings I'll find in our Sofians project.

Much more often, my students imagine the past as beyond retrieval. Several stories feature characters who return to Sofia after long absences hoping to recover something that has eluded them abroad. Perhaps the most powerful story of return is by Mariya, the student who wondered if Sofia could be the setting for great writing. In her story, a character we know only as "the tall guy" returns from an extended period in the States, reuniting with a high school

friend who works now as a bartender. The narrative is a crescendo of drunken reminiscence, and Mariya delicately holds us suspended: we can see the shape of their shared experience, but the details are never clear. Something is revealed about a woman they both loved; the revelation is shocking for both of them, and devastating for our protagonist. He leaves, and in an act of shocking savagery, repeatedly rams his head into a wall in the Metro station at Sofia University, increasingly enraged that "he doesn't feel a thing." He wants to rid himself of his memories, both the unpleasant ones and those he has cherished: "also all those good times that

would never come back and made him paralyzed had to be erased, those times when he was special . . . because now he knew he had never been special."

I find these lines genuinely heartbreaking, terribly aware in their perception that the dreams my students hold of a life abroad may be empty ones. For many of them, hope is cautious; there's much less entitlement about them than I remember in my American students; they seem to realize, concretely in their lived experi-

ence, that granting them happiness is not among the world's obligations. It seems at once a wise perception and a tragic one. Mariya's story vividly embodies a sense of the world stated plainly and strikingly by Gabriela in her own story, where she calls it "One of the most common dilemmas in Bulgarian society": "Do you make your own life or does it come to you and you can't change it?"

When I return the Sofians' stories, I tell the students that I've never enjoyed reading an assignment more, that these pages represent the best work they've done all year. They're visibly pleased, unaccus-

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Alexander Nevski Cathedral. Photograph by Garth Greenwell.

tomed to such praise in my classroom. Even the weakest responses to the assignment represent serious work; the best exceed any expectations I could have articulated. Most of the students, even my most guarded, have let themselves feel something in these stories; there's a vulnerability about them, a defenselessness manifested not least in a willingness to reveal their own very intimate views of their city, their most cherished places. My students have never shied away from detailing their city's faults. More revealing, and I suspect more difficult, are the moments when they allow themselves to praise: when a character is struck by the beauty of the Doctor's Garden, or a glint of sunlight from the gold dome of Nevski Cathedral, the site every evening of a stunning concert of bells. Even the smallest things can take on unsuspected weight; one student, Simona Petrova, writes beautifully of the solace a character takes in walking to work through my own neighborhood, Mladost, having found a bucolic path among the *blokove* that reminds him of his childhood in the countryside.

I suspect that my students will miss the strange,

sudden, inconvenient beauties of Sofia in the more glamorous cities where they will be studying for the next years, among the more obvious loveliness of London, Amsterdam, San Francisco. The bizarre contradictions of this place seem inexhaustible: Simona's woodland path among Soviet apartment buildings, or, even more shocking, the old, almost subterranean, still functioning monastery I stumbled upon in Mladost 2, just a short walk from the College. To walk anywhere here is to see evidence of one empire sliding into the next: Roman ruins tumbling into a Metro station downtown, elegant European cafes tucked into crumbling Communist behemoths. The place suggests its own aesthetic, one of radical juxtaposition, of deprivation and excess, starkness and beauty: something I haven't seen yet in the literature I know. I don't doubt that among my students is a writer capable of catching that aesthetic as a native music. I imagine her, like Joyce, hearing it through the strain of homesickness in a distant city, where, setting pen to paper, she discovers in herself the genius of the place. ☺