

the witness | in contempt

*Reflections on Overfamiliarity,
Pain and Desecration*

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Not long ago my place shared a wall with the home of a young couple. As teenagers, both the young man and his girlfriend had spent some time in various psychiatric institutions, admitted, so they were told, for acute 'suicidal tendencies'. Swamped by psychiatrists and social workers, the boy and the girl, who did not know each other at the time, developed a virtually identical game of trickery and mind-bending. The objective of the game, which, as time went by, was also to become a question of honour, was to ensure that no therapist left their ward dry-eyed and unflustered. To that end, those in the helping profession were treated to displays of purposeful lunacy, grotesque and unsettling accounts of contrived personal experience, as well as all manner of uncontrollable 'acting out'.

The game—fun and reasonably effortless—was, only to a small degree, a revenge of the powerless and the institutionalised against their remunerated captors. The game's objective, after all, was not so much to undermine the hospitals' structure of authority, but to shatter the moral and professional foundations of the mental health profession and its assumptions about itself. What was at stake was the overfamiliarity psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists of all kinds claimed with the experiences and emotions of their patients. They *knew* how you felt and how it felt to feel what you were feeling. They *knew* what it was like to be driven to despair, to be lost amidst pain and self-loathing, to dread waking up in the morning. They *knew* what you should aim to be feeling instead—hope, determination to survive, acceptance of the past—and how to get there. If only, the young man and woman told me, they'd ever turned to us and said, 'We do not know how it feels. We have no idea what it's like.' *Everything could have been so different.*

Generally unimpressed by accounts of people being tormented or mocked, no matter how noble the purpose, I derived deep, unambiguous pleasure from the stories my neighbours told me, from all the tricks, ploys and contrasting mental showers they subjected their earnest victims to. (Like drawing a big smiley face at an art therapy sessions after months of producing pictures of mutilation and graphic violence—the therapist put up the picture on the wall of her cabinet as a sign of momentous breakthrough.) There are many opportunities for lying and cheating in engaging with, what Susan Sontag called, ‘the pain of others’.¹ One of them is the gradual emergence of the feeling that you know what happened, what it was like to go through it. Yet overfamiliarity can, at times, injure more than contempt or blatant disregard. With so many recent tragedies, the experts *who know how it feels and what it’s like*, send tropical medications to war-torn continental countries, offer free art therapy classes in place of bread and water, write reports about the ‘atmosphere of fear and uncertainty’ that can neither produce the most negligible of changes nor console even the most naive of souls. It’s possible to counter contempt and indifference with knowledge, laughter and moral courage, but what is the defence against the thick web of assumptions?

It is this web of assumptions and the violent manner in which it diminishes and obscures people’s histories and lives that I increasingly think about when I hear the word ‘desecration’. Lately, as this word pops up into my mind, often enough for me to take note, I don’t think of mosques, churches and synagogues going up in flames or of graves and cemeteries deliberately violated. Nor do I think of books and libraries being burnt, a sight as common now as death and taxes. In the end, if it were my child starving or freezing to death, I’d be the first to burn Kafka or Auden or pull apart an altar to put wood under the stove. That is to say that lately my opinions on barbarism have been muted. More and more I see desecration not as a defacement of objects and rituals invested with the divine presence, but as a violation of people’s inner worlds, the corruption of histories and legacies forged by their lives.

... Fuck, the minute I even think that in some book of world history some asshole is going to write about this war as a conflict of national and religious interests between ethnic groups located in the perpetually unstable region of the Balkans, which lasted from 1991 to whenever, I could just blow this whole planet to bits so that not a particle of it remains.²

Elma Softic wrote this from Sarajevo in December of 1993, a year and a half into the siege of her city. A decade later, the assholes who keep writing about Bosnia’s age-old ethnic hatreds and the balkanisation of Europe more generally are only very slightly outnumbered by other kinds of assholes who have forgotten Elma’s city altogether—after all, it has not been in the news for what seems like an eternity. Talking about the thick web of assumptions, you may be surprised to learn that Elma is Jewish. Just like a number of other Sarajevo Jews,

including some Holocaust survivors, she refused to leave Sarajevo, even when a special convoy was organised to take Sarajevo's Jewish population to Israel. Remember Israel in the beginning of the 1990s seemed like a safe haven, at least, compared to Bosnia. Despite having an option to get out, there were Jews in Sarajevo, and not an insignificant number at that, who chose to stay. Right through the siege the unmistakably Jewish jokes floated through the city, the kind Elma found a distinct pleasure in retelling.

Q: What's the difference between Auschwitz and Sarajevo?

A: In Auschwitz they at least had gas.³

But let me go back for a moment. In April of 1992, while Elma taught philosophy in a Sarajevo college, the newly formed republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence and was recognised by the USA and the European Union. Within days, the Bosnian Serb forces supported by the Yugoslavian National Army surrounded Bosnia's capital, heralding the beginning of the longest siege in modern history. For 1395 days, the world watched as Sarajevo and Sarajevans were systematically destroyed by shelling, snipers, fear, hunger, cold and despair. Amidst these omnipresent images of death and destruction, who will make an effort to see Elma for what she was, so very clearly, at the time? Not a hapless victim trapped in the besieged city, but an agent of her own fate, a thirty year old with a brain larger than a universe.

On some level, I find it easy to recognise who Elma is. As I write this, I am the same age she was when the siege of Sarajevo began. Like her, I am a secular Jew born in the Eastern Bloc, at the time when the Soviet Union seemed indestructible. It is by miracle that what happened in Bosnia did not get replicated in Ukraine, where I spent my childhood and teenage years. It's not that Elma is my alter ego, but I suspect that if we were to meet each other, it hardly matters where, we would not have walked away without becoming friends. Or maybe it's much simpler than that. When Elma speaks, I feel compelled to sit up and listen. As she writes, her voice invariably gets harder, almost livid at any mention of the deliberate blindness of the international community, masquerading as empathy and expertise. If this suffering and loss I see all around me, Elma says, will one day be explained away as a dark and dirty civil war, I will blow up this world, this whole planet to bits. I think I may have an inkling of what she means. In the end, you can counter destruction and death with faith, defiance and humour, the blacker the better, but what is the defence against an army of experts taking over your history of loss and survival?

I think it's important to take the fury and disgust in Elma's words personally. I for one take it personally, having, as I do, one foot in academia and counting as colleagues, at least nominally, people who tell Elma, in countless books and conference papers, what the destruction of her city was really all about. As I listen to her, I wonder to what extent the academics

in the West, all of us exemplary defenders of civilisation and human dignity, are implicated in acts of desecration through the appropriation and violation of other people's pain. When it comes to Sarajevo, I have found only a handful of essays written by Western academics that struck me as honest and good (there have probably been thousands written and published by now).⁴ One of the handful is Jim Hicks's "What's It Like There?: Desultory Notes on the Representation of Sarajevo".⁵ Hicks, currently an academic at the University of Massachusetts, was a Fulbright scholar in the English department at the University of Sarajevo in 1999 and 2000 and he had a deep ongoing connection with the city and its people. Hicks is also a great writer—liberated and liberating, but that's not the point. The point is that till the present day, he, the esteemed Jim Hicks, the Fulbright scholar, a lecturer in English and Comparative Literature at Smith College, USA, has no idea whatsoever how to answer the question posed in his own essay's title—*what's it like there, in Sarajevo?*

Having been asked that question just about a million times, Hicks has come to develop a strategy of circumventing the answer. This strategy involves, amongst other things, telling jokes about the besieged Sarajevo told by Sarajevans themselves—the kind Elma recorded in her diary and in her letters to friends outside of Bosnia. This is not accidental. Part of the impact of jokes, writes Hicks, 'no doubt, comes from the particular ways in which they violate our conventions and expectations'.⁶ The violation of expectations is integral to any possible answer to the question of what it's like there, in Sarajevo, or anywhere else in the thick and thin of other people's suffering and pain. On special occasions, the retelling of jokes is followed by a visual presentation. Let me show you a photograph from Sarajevo, Hicks says, with all the destruction we have come to expect. What changes if I tell you that the damage to this building in the picture has been largely unrelated to war? What about a photo of children playing in the park right in the heart of the siege, as opposed to lying lifeless on the road in the pool of their blood? Does it make you uncomfortable? But why? Aren't you happy to see these children festive and alive?

What are the injuries inflicted by the millions of eyes expecting, year after year, to see your city in ruins? This is not a rhetorical question. It is a question of responsibility for a myriad of ways in which we, routinely and self-importantly, diminish other people's humanity. Especially the humanity of people in pain.

Recently I received a phone call from a friend of mine, a Russian photographer based in Moscow. He told me that a few days after the Beslan school tragedy, he got an urgent email from an international press agency he had been affiliated with for a while. A client in London wanted photos of a devastated North Ossetian family mourning the loss of their kids. The client, the email was at pains to stress, wanted 'top pictures, very emotional'. What emotions would the client like, my friend replied. Hatred? Rage? Suicidal despair? And which family did the client want me to pick out of all the countless families in North Ossetia affected by

the hostage-taking? When my friend told me the story, jokingly now because he did not have the energy to stay mad, for a moment I stopped breathing with anger. To me this was a form of irreconcilable desecration, not the defaced temples and smoldering libraries, but this entrenched, glorified blindness to people's experiences of pain and loss. Jim Hicks called it 'Live Puppet Ventriloquism'⁷—you get other people, often the ones hardest hit by a tragedy, to deliver the speech you yourself have scripted. So that they, the other people, become, in the words of Hicks, simply receptacles for our own interpreting sensibilities.⁸ Put in the mouth of an Afghani or Iraqi civilian a plea for democracy. Get a North Ossetian family flattened by grief to voice our shock over children becoming the collateral damage of politics and wars (we just have not quite noticed this before).

I wonder to what extent 'Live Puppet Ventriloquism' is one of the dominant modes of dealing with people's experiences of suffering and survival in academia. Am I doing it myself with Elma? Getting her to say for me what I haven't got the guts or authority to say myself? I also wonder to what extent 'Live Puppet Ventriloquism' is an idiom on which most of the world operates—United Nations, NGOs, media, universities, the forever ungraspable people on the street.

I am angry and it shows. Yet I most sincerely hope it is clear that I am not advocating self-censorship or a blanket of feeble silence, when it comes to tragedies happening across the world. I have never believed that only the people who have survived traumatic events have a right of voice, while the others, soon a minority I suspect, should sit grateful and ashamed they are not covered in blood from head to toe. On the contrary, I think people, all kinds of people—survivors, families, bystanders, intellectuals, anti-intellectuals—should talk more, talk as if there is no tomorrow. Talk as in converse, listen, ask questions, open themselves up, learn. Because there is a great deal to learn—not from experts, but from each other. 'This war is beginning to sit well with me',⁹ Elma wrote about six months into the siege,

here I'm close to the depths, and hey, I may as well stop lying to myself, the depths fascinate me tremendously, I want to reach them—that's the experience I've been missing. [...] I'm convinced that only now am I actually learning something ...¹⁰

What have you learned, Elma? Is this not the world's most natural question? The beginning of a conversation? I mean what else is there? *Poor Elma? Elma—the survivor? Elma rebuilding her life from the rubble?* In his commencement address delivered to the students of Williams College in 1984, the late Russian poet and Nobel Prize laureate Joseph Brodsky noted that evil was ubiquitous not because our world was getting increasingly dark and violent, but because, more often than not, evil tended to appear in the guise of good.¹¹ As a way of countering this tendency of evil, Brodsky thought that all of us might be well served to go through the entire wardrobe of our beliefs and convictions. As we do, he continued, we may

be surprised to find just how many clothes we thought were tailor-made for good only, could fit as easily, without much adjustment, its very opposite. Both Elma's and Jim Hicks's writing as well as my neighbours' stories of life after institutionalisation flung doors of my wardrobe wide open. What followed is, I suspect, more than clear from this essay—clouds of dust, piles of clothes on the floor, big black garbage bags ... 'Familiarity doesn't breed contempt', wrote American author Florence King, 'it is contempt'.¹² It is contempt, because now, especially now, familiarity can so easily amplify people's suffering by depriving of meaning the histories of their loss and the sanctity of their survival.

MARIA TUMARKIN'S book *Traumascapes* will be out with Melbourne University Publishing in July 2005. The book looks at the fate and cultural power of sites in Australia, Europe, the USA and Asia marked by histories of violence and loss.

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1. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2003.
 2. Elma Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, trans. Nada Conic, Key Porter Books, Toronto, 1996, p. 114.
 3. Softic, *Sarajevo Days*, p. 94.
 4. Beyond Sarajevo, there has been a number of honest and good essays written about the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, including Peter Read, 'A Day in the Country with Dr. Death: Touring a Croatian War Zone', in *Arena Magazine*.
 5. Jim Hicks, '“What's it Like There”': Desultory Notes on the Representation of Sarajevo', in *Postmodern Culture*, no. 2, vol. 12.
 6. Hicks, '“What's it Like There”', p. 2.
 7. Hicks, '“What's it Like There”', p. 8.
 8. Hicks, '“What's it Like There”', footnote 16, p. 17.
 9. Softic, *Sarajevo Days*, p. 82.
 10. Softic, *Sarajevo Days*, p. 82.
 11. Joseph Brodsky, 'A Commencement Address', in Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1986.
 12. Florence King, *The Florence King Reader*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1995.