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ROBERT
PROSSER

P H A N T O M E

ROMAN

PHANTOMS *PHANTOME*

BY ROBERT PROSSER

EXCERPT TRANSLATED BY DANIEL BOWLES

Robert Prosser's *Phantoms* (2017) reaches across time and space from the Bosnian War to the present day, from Sarajevo to Vienna. In the 90s, the sudden arrival of war interrupts Anisa and Jovan's youthful romance. Jovan is drafted and Anisa flees to Vienna, never to see her father again. Both experience the chaos and boredom of war, from a Vienna refugee camp to the muddy fields of the Bosnian countryside. Years later, Anisa's daughter travels to Bosnia-Herzegovina with her boyfriend, in search of her mother's history. They find a land of contradictions, leaning giddily towards the future, yet ever mired in the past.

Engrossing the reader in military life, refugee monotony, and the contemporary Balkan party scene, *Phantoms* weaves a cross-generational narrative of displacement and survival. Prosser sketches a present haunted by the past, anchoring today's most urgent debates firmly in history.

Excerpt from pages 11-15 and 89-97.

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As for resistance: I was only ever at a riot once. In Tuzla, Bosnia. Sara's idea. Let's go there, I haven't been there in ages, she suggested when we were talking about plans for the semester break. We left Vienna-Erdberg at 6 p.m. One bus among many heading off every day at six sharp, taking various routes to Sarajevo or Zvornik or Mostar. A good eight hours on nighttime highways; we saw nothing of Slovenia and Croatia except noise barriers and fog. We stayed with Vehid and Refika, her mother's cousin, and Sara was all shocked at how Ismet, their son, had changed: a little older than us, late twenties and a baby face, but ripped from kick-boxing, good lord. Username: Tiger, is how he introduced himself.

When we arrived I had an uneasy feeling in my gut, as if I were unconsciously picking up some scent. We got out of the bus, rubbing our stiff necks. Strapped on our backpacks and went out to the parking lot where Tiger was waiting for us, and I felt like we were walking through an electromagnetic field. The sunbeams sliced through the cold air, sirens blaring off in the distance. It wasn't me who was nervous; it was the city this tension was emanating from.

There've been protests against the government since yesterday, Tiger explained to us, pointing toward a tall gray building. That's where the action is, you'll have to check it out if you have time. He typically wore sweatpants and a tank top, like the stronger, slimmer version of his father, just as sullen, too, and yet inordinately animated when the opportunity presented itself to do anything, even something like fishing in a nearby lake, which Refika cautioned against because factories dump runoff, but it was of no use; pieces of bread for bait were packed, and we were already sitting in the car.

Tiger took us along to parties, on the roof of an apartment building, for example. That's where they counted on three fingers what made Tuzla so special: it was the city that successfully defended itself, even against the Serbian army, in the war twenty years earlier; the city whose Muslim, Croatian, and Serbian residents fought side by side; and the city that's been celebrating rap and graffiti for decades now.

During one of the parties, Sara put her arms around my shoulders, inhaled the smell of weed, and said from within the skunky cloud: You feel right at home here, don't you? And she was correct. I liked the shaky videos played on smartphones at the parties, the ones shot in backyards with the whole crew, the gritty language, the badass flow, as if rap had taken a leap back to Brooklyn at the beginning of the nineties to start all over again, and this time to do it, if not right, then differently, and I liked the countless tags on street walls and roofs.

Turbofolk blasted out over the rooftop to spite the miserable February chill. They laughed at how Sara and I ate the cevapi with knife and fork instead of scooping it into our mouth with pieces of bread. Girls raised glasses and screamed we are crazy, we like to party, and after finishing their lines of speed the boys shot their noses up in the air like alarmed meerkats. Tiger told me about a cousin from Prijedor, in the North of Bosnia, a long-haired hero for the city's youth because of his talent as a guitarist. The fingers of his right hand danced over the strings, regardless of whether a schmaltzy tune was in order for Grandma's birthday, with everyone before the laid table in the afternoon, or whether it was for Roma rhythms for the later hours, when Grandma was fast asleep. For four years, Tiger said, his cousin had practiced every day until the plectrum picked each guitar string separately. That was his mastery; a pick between his fingers struck with a precision to the millimeter, millimeters that made all the difference in the sound and set the strings vibrating differently. On his visits, Tiger listened raptly when his cousin talked about creating a spherical space with music that would calm everyone who surrendered themselves to his funk or blues. People act as resonant bodies; their bones, skin, hair, their eyelashes, nails, lips, every cell absorbs vibrations and reacts to them, he believed. In the early part of 1992, his cousin was led off, an interrogation, nothing more, we'll bring him back in two hours, the men in uniforms claimed. He did not return home that night, nor on the following days, and when the family could no longer put off fleeing abroad, his mother took his guitar along because she

was convinced that her son was in prison on account of some bureaucratic error and would soon join them, after the misunderstanding had been cleared up.

The guitar is now certainly collecting dust in some attic in Sweden, Tiger said.

One guy pushed up against me, you are from Austria, he slurred, poking me in the chest with his finger, I like you Nazis, and I utilized the little Bosnian I'd picked up, said *jebem ti*, and pushed him away, snidely and arrogantly; that there's no escaping that Nazi shit I just don't get. He, totally confused, started laughing hoarsely, his face red.

In Vienna, on my way to Sara's place, I came past an advertising pillar at the Praterstern, an installation for the remembrance of Jews persecuted after 1938. On it were photographs of jeering crowds encircling two people on their knees in the street. The newspaper article copied there reported that an old Jewish couple, the two right there, had been forced to scrub political slogans from the asphalt at the foot of the Tegetthoff Memorial.

An older woman looking at the photographs wanted to know if I was from Vienna. She had, she said in English, just been standing at a locked gate to a park, peeking through iron bars at pruned trees, at a meadow, and, far off, two dark, massive structures that her travel guide indicated to her were flak towers. She'd stayed a while and looked without knowing the point of examining structures that had the same vaguely threatening effect on her as the smokestack fuming in the distance.

The garbage incineration plant presumably, I interjected.

Later, she'd ended up here at the Praterstern where the advertising column with the black-and-white photographs had caught her eye. Could it be a coincidence, she asked, to stumble on this of all things on her walk? Her father, the youngest of a Jewish family from Vienna's second municipal district, escaped in 1938 at age eleven, thanks to a Kindertransport to London. He never spoke much of Vienna; she herself was in the city for the first time, she said, and was walking from one memorial stone embedded into the pavement to another, in the vague hope of discovering among the names of Jewish expellees and murder victims immortalized in that dark gold those of her aunts and uncles, of finding the building from which her relatives had been deported, of catching hold of a history that her father had

experienced and understood as an eleven-year-old, but scarcely comprehended.

She followed my finger as I pointed out the general location of the former Nordbahnhof, the place where the trains had departed for the extermination camps. As if hanging in the air, she herself had ended up in between eras, having become a black-and-white photo in which a woman can be seen dressed in the fashion of the twenty-first century, wandering through Vienna of the year 1938, and reflected in her eyes were the ruins of two flak towers.

The First Foe

Aside from this step and the next, not much matters: in the train station concourse, past the smoke shop and the florist, up the matte-white tiles of the stairs. Zurich Bucharest Berlin reads the large display board. With a rattling that reminds Anisa of chattering teeth, the letters and numbers dissolve into a white haze of signs, aligning into new places and times. She walks out to the platforms, into the shimmering, oppressive summer heat, and can't hold back a grin—the city where the refugee camp is located and Bécs, familiar from history class, are one and the same. While looking at an advertising poster beside the ticket counter, she suddenly becomes aware of that fact: so this is Vienna.

Outside, humming lines of tram cars ready to depart, foreign languages, waves of goodbye. Beneath a bench she spots a nail file. Anisa kneels down, quickly slipping it into her pocket. Stretched out on upholstered seats behind train car windows, passengers open beer cans or water bottles. A conductor compares the time on his wrist with that of the round clock overhead. Anisa saunters out to the end of the platform, leaning on the sign that warns against going any farther. In the distance, the outlines of buildings, of lampposts. Crisscrossed tracks. The rear lights of a departing train glow red, blending into the dots of signal lights in the track yard. The shrill braking of shunted freight cars can be heard: a sound that until recently, on a walk through Sarajevo, would have evoked something in her. A sense of wanting to go on, somewhere else. Whenever work in the café was not the first thing on her mind, when the day was instead filled with anticipation, a desire for travel, for adventure. Moments, their calm and boring succession now, in hindsight, a kind of happiness. A ride on a streetcar, for instance. The sluggish clattering, the snippets of conversation and the jerking approach to stops, the opened sliding doors and shouts, laughter. Jovan's hand on her thigh. They both looked out through the rear pane onto the boulevard they'd traversed. The lane of tracks a dark-green flickering tunnel of foliage; the sky in the windows of nearby buildings, shards of cloud and blue.

The fascination lay in admitting that thinking you know the other person is an illusion. In Sarajevo they took the streetcar to the zoo, and while strolling from exhibit to exhibit, from apes to lions, from llamas to bears to the aviary, Jovan became at once more comprehensible and more enigmatic.

During work breaks she enjoyed sitting on the plaza in front of the orthodox church and watching the old men there playing chess; she liked the idea that her relationship with Jovan resembled an empty chessboard for which she'd be given one chess piece for each observation. An excursion to the zoo, for example, could earn her a rook, and she'd receive a knight for visits to the cinema when Jovan's face glimmered in the light of the projections. She liked watching how many facets he split into during movie showings; his suppressed giggling or astonished shakes of the head proved to her that there were hidden parts to him that she wanted to grasp, as it were. At the zoo, she gazed in amazement at the otherness of Jovan's being while he lost himself in marveling at exotic animals. In a cage, a snow leopard lolled on a felled tree trunk that cut across the enclosure. The animal looked up as Jovan came closer and stuck his hand through the bars. Anisa stood to the side, curious, as if having arranged with the snow leopard to set a trap for her boyfriend. Swinging its long tail through the air, the big cat tensed its body and sprang at the barrier, which quaked from the impact; yellowish fangs and strands of saliva in the animal's gaping maw, its left paw raised to claw at Jovan's face, who retreated in a mixture of screaming and laughter, thrilled at having managed to provoke this snow leopard.

A whistle brings her back. She turns around, glimpsing next to a luggage cart a gaunt figure waving to her; shading her eyes, she recognizes Emir. Apparently, he's found the woman who sells Memphis cigarettes at the station out of a suitcase, the cheapest ones in Vienna, so goes the rumor in the camp.

Jovan would like to curse the summer and fling the shovel away; he wants out of this mosquito-infested, sticky-humid stretch of land in the North of Bosnia. Behind him, though, he hears the crunching steps of the corporal and does the same thing as always: presses his lips together tightly and swallows his anger. He thrusts the shovel into the grass, stabbing into the soil. The shovels next to him also ram deeper, hitting rocks, roots. With his foot, he gives his shovel an extra push, jerking and jiggling its handle. Sweat burns his eyes. Ten men were drafted to excavate a trench. The rhythmic strikes of shovel blades combined with their dull scratching and the trickling dirt has a soporific effect. Better not to think too much, not to care about the sunburn. Ten loads of soil, clanking into the wheelbarrows.

The corporal paces back and forth along the soldiers sunk to their waists in the field, twirling the ends of his walrus mustache. Mixed in with the hypnotizing sound are muffled curses and that chirping emanating from the woods. Elderberry bushes, leafy trees, down to the banks of the Sava. From there it's not far, Jovan knows, not from Croatia, nor from the soldiers on other side of the river. Is it worth another attempt to slip a letter to the truck driver headed southeast? One more envelope that might make it to Anisa, or at least to her village, or to one nearby and the next messenger there.

In the gymnasium that has been converted to a camp, Anisa weasels out of the cleaning detachment. She eats the readymade meals three times a day in Group One, which comprises women and children. Three times a day she walks out to the white construction trailer, receives her tray, returns to her bed or crouches against the wall, pulls off the foil from the plastic container, and pokes at the noodles or rice.

The refugees organize their day-to-day routines largely themselves: a student of German from Sarajevo has planned a language course for the following week that is open to anyone interested regardless of age. Paints and brushes are to be paid for from the camp's till to decorate a bit of the outer wall with the kids; Ariel the Mermaid and Mickey Mouse are very near the top of the list of requests. The till draws from various sources; one company in the neighborhood, for example, ordered a dozen kilos of čevapi for a work party and donated some kitchen utensils along with it. The shelter may be left at any time of day or night; whoever wants to enter must flash the pink ID from the immigration authorities to the guard at the gate. There are two soccer teams; games are held outside in the parking lot, at the edge of which, in the early morning hours, Austrians wait in search of day laborers: women for the cleaning companies, men for construction, and everyone for the vineyards on the outskirts of Vienna.

Mostly, the days start the same way. Anisa does an inventory of her possessions: toothbrush, toothpaste, Nivea cream. Blue t-shirt, a red parka. Jeans, purchased at the beginning of the year in Sarajevo. Sneakers with Velcro fasteners, which looks stupid, but whatever: new shoes; taken from a Catholic Charities bag along with that blouse with the purple-flower print and the black sweatpants. A notebook, a ball-point pen, a pencil. Underwear. The small pink ID card she received

from the immigration police. A map of the city taken from a rack of informational material at the Westbahnhof. The hairband, a gift from a social worker. You'll need it soon enough, she said, running her hand over Anisa's black stubble, which had begun to grow back on her shaved head. A plastic bag containing a pocket mirror, postcards, matches, and, her newest find, the nail file. Time and again Anisa sorts through her belongings, arranging and counting them. Unfolding the city map, running her fingertip along the lines of the streets.

She avoids the right wall of the gymnasium. Pants and skirts hung over the monkey bars smell of hay, as if their owners had been forced to flee while working in the fields, an odor that conjures up in Anisa, if she has to walk past, the meadow behind her parents' home.

On her left, Azra is sleeping, on her right Rahim, Azra's seven-year-old son. Anisa fled to Vienna with these two. Azra throws herself into the new tasks awaiting her in the gymnasium; right now she's trying to get a functional communal kitchen up and running. Anisa admires the diminutive woman's pep, her face distorted into a conspicuous severity whenever she speaks of her husband Mahir who's still stuck in Bosnia, or of Nenad, her oldest son, who serves in the Yugoslavian army and of whom there's been no trace since war broke out. It's a welcome distraction for Anisa to watch how Azra and Rahim are unable to live without each other and at every opportunity end up quarreling with one another. Azra scolds her boy not to spend so much time in the shower: your pimples will go away on their own, don't wash so often, it'll chap your skin. Rahim rolls his eyes, demonstratively produces a chocolate bar, and Azra jumps on that immediately: How do you ever expect to lose weight, boy, how, if you're always eating sweets?

The bed to Anisa's right belongs to nineteen-year-old Jasmin, who was driven out of a village near the Drina, along with her parents and siblings, a family of eight in total. In the row in front of them, Emir sits on his mattress. He stares at the Walkman in his hands; Anisa attempts to divine which songs he's singing along with, sometimes loudly, sometimes softly, in broken English. He often splays out the fingers of his right hand and fiddles with his wedding ring until a medic comes by for his morning rounds to examine the wide bandage around Emir's abdomen. He removes his headphones, stands before his bed with upraised arms, and to the young man dressed in white spouts forth Serbo-Croatian obscenities the latter doesn't understand.

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Finally, the ditch has been dug. They take up their positions, kill mosquitos, and wait. A haze of gray and damp rises up from the river, leaving the woods merely black streaks. Jovan shares his post with Pavel, a skinny guy, nearly bald, and the only one in the troupe who already saw combat in Croatia last year. I never saw an enemy, he recounts, the bullets came, and I shot back, in whichever direction. Through the rainy mist, the cowering outlines of the two nearest soldiers are visible.

Jovan crouches in the trench, his uniform shirt slung around the Kalashnikov to protect it from moisture, and waits. Not for an attack, god forbid, but for this spitting rain to end. Pavel clicks his tongue. A hot piece, he says, looking at the photo of Anisa shielded from the rain by one hand with a regard that nauseates Jovan. His face flushes red, Pavel laughs: What's wrong? he asks, she's not your first, is she? Jovan puts the photograph into his pants pocket without a word. He watches the clouds floating across the sky, he looks at his watch, again, stares toward the woods, into the fog the Croats are coming out of, could come out of, hears a snap from the underbrush, and flinches. Even Pavel gives a start, just a deer or a fox, he whispers to Jovan, the animals are all still here, it's not that bad with all the battles. Quiet reigns once more, almost unendurable; they're eight-hour shifts Jovan has serve, eight hours of listening and being on guard until he's relieved and may return to the shed at the foot of the hill.

Up until now he's witnessed nothing of the war besides this waiting, which has hardly been papered over by brainless activities like cleaning his rifle and boots. He thinks of Anisa, of the Sarajevo he's left behind, and curses silently that right when he's drafted, a war breaks out. Shit, he squeezes out behind his teeth, I got the shit end of the stick. Efforts to learn what happened in Anisa's village lead to contradictory assertions, which could mean anything or nothing, and this uncertainty wears him out. Once he spoke to his parents on the phone. In mid-May they were allowed to leave occupied Sarajevo after having handed over their apartment to a militia leader in exchange for safe passage; now they're stuck in a Belgrade refugee camp.

Uncertainty has become the definitive feature of the present. First they were saying the People's Army had to defend Yugoslavia's future against separatists who would destroy the country's unity, but for some time now there haven't been any more soldiers from Croatian or Muslim families. However he spins the news, it just doesn't make any sense. Why is the army, which he has to serve, surrounding

and laying siege to Sarajevo? Where do the Muslim extremists come from, against whom, according to reports, they're successfully fighting in the eastern part of Bosnia where Anisa's village is? He doesn't know how Anisa is doing; the fear that something has happened to her tortures him. He squats in the mud and curses at the ever-present fear for his girlfriend and at the situation he's gotten into, and immediately knows that all that cursing is not enough by half. He's had enough, he has to get out of this trench, or he won't be able to think clearly. He bolts upright and climbs out. Pavel hisses, agitated, under his breath: *Are you insane?*

Jovan creeps over the grass to the woods, pushes branches aside, presses through bushes and underbrush, the smell of wet wood stronger with each step. He comes upon a clearing, at the opposite edge of which the ruins of a stable show through the fog. No door, the floor made of tamped-down soil: Jovan gropes along the wall and crouches down cross-legged beneath a window opening. With the Kalashnikov across his knees, he considers what to do about the blisters on his hands, he curses the shoveling, but he's finally away from the trench and the stench of Pavel who's been belching from dinner. Finally he's by himself. In the dark of the stable he removes his helmet, running his hands through his sweat-matted hair.

robert prosser



Robert Prosser, born 1983, lives in Tirol and Vienna. After studying comparative studies and cultural and social anthropology, he spent a considerable amount of time in Asia, England, and the Arab world. Prosser is the Austrian curator of Babelsprech, an organization that funds young German poets and supports the development of their poetry. Prosser has received many prizes and stipends including the “Grenzgänger-Stipendium” of the Robert-Bosch-Stiftung in 2014 and the “Aufenthaltsstipendium am Literarischen Colloquium Berlin” 2014. His debut novel *Geister und Tatoos* was released in 2013.

daniel bowles



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