

Mapping the Boundaries of my Existence

by Ivana Rjnak

1

Someone I know told me to avoid
writing suburban angst,
but it's kind of hard to,
this far out
on the lonely stretch.

South Western

Another school attacked, four steps forward towards the mother country, blindly leading one another to the promised land of cheap coffee and fast money, picking through the filth to take out the weak ones, another boy dead in the bushes, bloodied and gagged like the dreams of seventy-one students locked in their classrooms crying for the green school-gate safety of rich parents and private school uniforms in a suburb by the sea, their screams fading into the concrete like their futures – a construction site, an abusive marriage and a bad memory, another migrant shipped to Villawood, a never-ending story.

The Grass is Always Greener

All the men in suits and beat-up leather shoes that once cost a lot of money, who go home to neat wives in neat power-suits and neat strings of pearl, want to spend nights with the short-skirted girls in ripped stockings and big, ugly combat boots, who spent days in year nine skipping classes to smoke Benson and Hedges in trees, and wore knee-high socks with the most appropriate touch of irony. All the short-skirted girls in ripped stockings and big, ugly combat boots, who go home to loud-voiced fathers preaching cash and Jesus from behind a glass of red wine, want to spend days in beds of tall grass with daisies and long-haired boys, who hide scars behind ripped fabric bracelets and tattoos and yell politics and anger when they would rather be writing poems for tiny-waisted boys. The grass is always greener.

Survival of the Fittest

This kid Zoki says he needs to borrow two-sixty to get started. He's barely seventeen, a real bony fucker with burn scars all over his arms and a bad smoking habit. I think maybe I should reconsider but he says something about real good clean shit and I'm pulling notes out of my wallet. I get to two-hundred when I stop and say, "You're quite the entrepreneur." Zoki looks at me, confused, too busy hungrily staring at the cash to comprehend the meaning of the word. I stare at him for a couple of minutes as he shuffles nervously from foot to foot, smoking with quick, short drags. For a minute I think he's nervous because the

word 'entrepreneur' is completely new to him and he's struggling with its meaning and how it applies to him. Then I think he's probably just worried about not getting the cash. There are a limited number of people he can ask; I'm probably his final option. I decide this is the right train of thought and without feeling the need to explain the meaning of entrepreneurship, I continue counting the notes.

I'm helping a kid become a dealer. I'm giving him money I earned working late nights with drunken bums and sweating backpackers. This is money he will use to buy and sell cheap thrills to kids younger than him. I'm sure there are moral issues involved here. I'm sure I'll come to regret this eventually. In fact, I'm certain this is not a wise choice. But he looks so fucking desperate and I realise this may be his only chance to accomplish something in life. Once I've dealt with this pang of sympathy for Zoki, followed by profound thoughts on the decaying state of affairs in Liverpool and its neighbouring suburbs, I hand over the cash. He says "thanks man" in one breath and finishes his coffee in a gulp. He offers to pay, pockets the notes and leaves within five minutes.

Two months later, Zoki still hasn't paid me back my two-sixty with interest and I've yet to sample the product. He's a good kid, really, and a cousin of this girl I used to know, so I'm patient with him. He comes to see me every day when I'm having a smoke by the Greek Church, offering cigarettes and excuses. I tell him to keep his cheap I'm-too-fucking-broke-to-actually-enjoy-smoking cigarettes away from me. I yell to make him pay attention. Then I talk. I start with the basics: "Do not use up your supply, you little shit." He tries to describe his sale repertoire but it fails to move beyond two to a friend, at half price. Now all he has is fifteen dollars, three months' worth of bliss in a zip-lock bag in his jacket and a lifetime of debt, monetary and otherwise. I want to explain the basics of business to him but he's twitching and scratching his skin, so I decide on a better idea. I take one of his cheap cigarettes and explain my take on the Survival of the Fittest Theory. I know he doesn't understand, and in a state much better and more aware than his present one, he still wouldn't have the slightest idea, but it keeps him still. After I've explained Part 2, Subsection B, 'Life beyond Liverpool Boys High School', he begins nodding in agreement. I stop to ask him for an opinion but he just keeps nodding.

"This song man, you've gotta hear it, it's fucking amazing," he says, laughing with his eyes closed.

"What song man?"

"*This* one."

Subsection B deals with the ongoing problem of drop-outs as well as graduates of Liverpool Boys High School unable to make sense of the world around them. After an extended period in an environment of conflict and paranoia, they cannot find their place in a world that needs to be dealt with on a practical, logical level, without pocket

knives and shattered glass. Political correctness, good manners and common sense are to be exercised, skills foreign to these boys. They excel in finding their way out of tough situations, suppressing everyday emotions and using their fists. They are nurtured in war, then thrown into stalemate.

I don't know why I expected an understanding of this idea from someone who didn't know the meaning of the word 'entrepreneur'.

After a punch to the ribs and a knife to his neck, Zoki promises to scrape three-hundred for me by the next day.

2

I know people here and there,
 but it's a lonely stretch,
 with four million faces,
 visible in the sunlight.
 I prefer the dark anyway.

Balkanisation

Matija said he knew this land better than anyone. See these lines, he'd say, pointing to the purple stains on his coffee-coloured arms, they are the roads you are walking on. You are swimming in my veins.

Fault line

Aleksa had a habit of dissolving pills in his drinks and rolling at school. It was always during second period, Science. Before midday and barely awake as they took notes on the human respiratory system, the class of twenty-seven boys in grey pants and blue shirts would listen to Aleksa prophesising about apocalypses and how Serbia is the only pure land, maybe Russia, Belarus has a chance and there are good, pure Orthodox people in Ethiopia. He'd sway in his chair in the last row, talking with one hand in the air. The teacher would look at him in a bored manner. Most days a good long glance from the front of the room and a nudge from Gabriel would silence him. Some days he would rile himself up and vomit in the sink by the Bunsen burners, then continue preaching to the school nurse. Teachers claimed he had potential and counsellors insisted on scratching the surface. Apparently he was gifted. It was collectively agreed upon that expulsion was a diversion, not a solution.

Aleksa said that God was a fault line through Eastern Europe and Hell was the dark soil beneath the continental plate of North America. Every time an earthquake occurred that was a warning and every time you tripped over your own feet, that was God fucking around. Aleksa smoked Camels with no filters which he scored for no charge from the Macedonian tobacconist who firmly believed in Brotherhood and Unity. Aleksa would give them to anyone that asked and, as a token of appreciation, everyone who'd bummed a smoke would hang around

to listen to his stories about the impending apocalypse. Occasionally he would point at someone, having eyed them for a while, and tell them they knew the truth and would be saved. No one really believed Aleksa's predictions but his persistent stare and calm voice were temporarily convincing. He was never without an audience at lunch time.

Aleksa was a prophet but no one knew. Unable to return to the Holy Land, he lost sight of the future in a cold gutter and his name was quickly forgotten.

A Love Story for the Twenty-First Century

1. That night I unbuttoned Asher's pants without realising what I was doing, like an involuntary action. He stopped me and said, "This is flattering but perhaps not here." I had a look around and realised we were in someone's flowerbed and reconsidered my actions.

2. I bit Asher's neck at midnight. We were in an alley and I thought, how romantic. It was an inappropriate time to hear about his ex-girlfriend but he persisted and with his hands up my dress, told me how she talked about Kurt Cobain and drank green tea with three sugars every morning, followed by a cigarette. He said she only smoked Dunhill and Marlboro Red as a second choice. I thought this was all quite inappropriate. Asher bit my neck; it was twelve-fifteen.

3. Asher has an appetite for irony.

4. That night I burned Asher's hand with his own cigarette. It was dark inside and loud and my hands were shaking. People still smoked indoors then. The new law had just come into force and no one thought it would stick. I smoked three that night; two were his and one was after. That was the last of it. Afterwards, there was less foreshadowing.

5. Bricks and alleys, teeth and tongues. This story has no ending.

6. That night I was sober and I thought about the feeling of Asher's hair on my cheek as he kissed my neck. It would feel like a scratch and I would shiver. As he sat beside me, focused forward, I kept my hands between my knees.

7. I have an appetite for contradictions.

The Consistency of Gunfire and Life

In the Second World War, Dimitri Nazarov fought for Mother Russia. He watched hundreds die and heard of millions more disappearing. He won no medals but he picked up a discarded photograph on the bloodied, eroded ground and took it as his badge of honour. He felt heroic making up new lives for the faded faces of Olya and Oleg in which they were the family of tsars and lived separated from the bloodshed and screams of the world around them, wearing flowing dresses and golden armour in palaces filled with shadows and violins.

When the war ended, he had nowhere to go. Europe was left in pieces and Mother Russia held too many bad memories which seeped onto the good and made them inseparable. He boarded a ship, alone, with a change of clothing, a bit of money, a crucifix on a silver chain and Olya and Oleg and he crossed the oceans towards Australia, to forget twenty-three years of European life – first thirteen years in Mother Russia, then five years of firsts in France and an education in English literature at Oxford, where he wrote a novel about the pointless, mundane existence of humanity and upon reading it in its entirety for the first time, returning to his homeland to find meaning in a gun and soon after, his memories blurring as he lay flat on his stomach on moist soil knowing nothing but the sound and the smell of constant gunfire.

On the ship, single men looked for married women travelling the oceans to their waiting husbands. They taught them to dance without music and eat with their fingers, and their lips bled night after night as the waters lapped below them. On arrival in Australia, Dimitri stepped onto land with his arm around a sixteen-year-old Greek girl who spoke no language Dimitri spoke, but his weight had left a mark on her waist and she gave birth to his first child. The girl never became his wife and she disappeared with their son soon after. Dimitri felt nothing and the day he could no longer recall her name, he changed his to James Alexander and moved across the land to Sydney.

Forgetting his prestigious upbringing and his patriotic rite of passage, James Alexander became a construction worker who enjoyed cricket on Saturdays and discussing politics on dusty Sunday afternoons over a beer and mild humour. With an effort to forget his literary and philosophical achievements, he drank regularly and heavily, the bitter taste of beer creating a cool wall of detachment. He lived humbly, alone, with a television and a healthy diet of Australian customs.

When Mother Russia warred again, Dimitri Nazarov stirred in his sleep. James Alexander went about his business with a faint smile.

Divide and Conquer

He understood that to be real he had to attach his existence to a country mapped by centuries of wars and oppression and a flag painted with the blood of so-called patriots (brainwashed, poverty-stricken and desperate, clinging to God and their swords in hopes of a meal for every limb they lose). He knew that memorising an anthem written by a politicised poet who sold his soul for a pay-cheque and a hero's medal, would give his existence meaning. He was well aware that he would understand life by decorating his chest with borders drawn and redrawn in red ink by old men in suits carefully ironed by underpaid women (men who never saw the bloodshot eyes of hunger and bloodied knuckles but claimed to make pacts and sign treaties for

them) (pacts and treaties agreed upon in language those bloodshot eyes could never decipher having missed out on basic education to look for God and food in cheap rooms of sleazy hotels). He had come to these realisations whilst pushing someone's face into a river for being of a different skin colour, holding the neck tight, knowing that to exist meant to conquer.

Dostoevsky

My friend speaks of dead Russian writers with such ease,
a familiarity like he's shared bottles of vodka with these names,
discussed politics and literature and
the taste of coffee according to country,
And held hands secretly,
rushed to dark corners,
smoking cheap heroin, saying
"You can't get addicted this way"

It's just him and a collection of books,
well-thumbed.

But I ended up alone

The highlight of the week is
not remembering the week at all
And at midnight,
in a suburban bedroom,
listening to Neil Young,
rolling four joints,
discussing the future and
Not seeing past morning

St Johns Road

The twelve-thirteen bus never arrives –
the dull grey stretch of
a million promised futures with
nowhere to go, is dusty
with sunlight and sweat;
I can't walk down for fear of
being seen smoking

One Pill Makes You Larger

Sebastian is convinced life is a hallucination. All life – from our humble presence on Planet Earth to the supposed existence of a Solar System to the incomprehensible idea of a universe so vast it cannot be

thought of in its entirety as it requires a cognitive capacity far beyond our capabilities.

“What else can it be, other than imagined?”

He says that all these things we consider a given are so magical, they must be the product of some sort of chemical imbalance on a large scale.

All life is just someone's bad trip.

An ode

To all the heavy breaths resting on my neck late nights on trains –

Do you not have daughters?

Do you not have mothers?

Do you not have wives?

Have you never known women you've protected from the same heavy breath you leave on my neck now, alone on these late night trains, trying to write my poems which you taint with your long-day-cheap-beer-unanswered-wanting breath, but –

I chose to wear the short skirt.

I chose to put on black eyeliner.

I chose to look sad and thoughtful and maybe just a little –

Eager.

So you, who could have been my father in another dimension, who should have considered the meaning of your actions and their impact on me, who should have kept hands to self and thoughts censored,

Now leave unwanted traces on my neck that I can't wash off,

That can be smelt on me,

That leave a rough feeling on my skin,

That will make me –

Question myself tomorrow.

Never a frown

Luka said he's got this new method of getting through life. You buy it raw and mix it yourself. All you need is water and a syringe and a tourniquet. It opens up your mind to the details you missed in the rush of things. He has written an anthology of poetry on the patterns of his living room carpet and is thinking of cashing out and buying a new one for inspiration. He says everything is slow and poetic; life lingers as if on the edge of the death but never falls. He can sit and watch everything

come crashing down – rocks hitting the surface of water, birds losing their ability to fly, people crying in raspy, gasping tones and bombs dropping with such meticulous precision, it's almost beautiful. Everything is beautiful to him now; everything is glazed in the lightest shade of pink and the clouds have dropped so low he can touch them, but they do not mean a thing. He marvels at the squares on his living room carpet, five centimetres apart horizontally and seven vertically, every third one changing slightly in shade. He prefers the details of human existence nowadays.

3

It's a lonely stretch, this city
Ten years without leaving except
Up and down the coast
And once further east,
But never outside these borders
That map my new identity.