

"FARAWAY, SO UGLY" FROM THE WALL IN MY HEAD

BY DOROTA MASŁOWSKA (TRANSLATION BY BENJAMIN PALOFF)

A year before I was born my folks got a place in a high-rise by the woods. Since then I've been abroad about a thousand times and given about as many interviews, and it always pops up, the same question, cleverly calculated from my date of birth, about Communism, whether I remember the food lines, the vinegar on store shelves, the fall of the Wall and all the other bloodcurdling stuff they didn't have over on its other side. Of course I do, I say with a mix of triumph and pain, as if I were just then supposed to pull up my sleeve to reveal something like scars from the kiddie internment camp or the marks from when the police beat me during an interrogation and wave them before the eyes of my interlocutor like a wad of photos from some exotic trip. Yes, my dears, I was there, back when you had no idea about anything: while you were scarfing down those dainties in little tissue-paper cups, I was fighting on the front lines of childhood! Here are my scars from drinking vinegar straight from the shelf! Say what you want, you may have every other kind of scar there is, but you don't have these.

Do I remember Communism? But I have to remember something, right? Drag some nugget out of the swirling muck of memory, strip it of superfluous detail, snap a shot of the heroes' faces and let them march across the table, funny or forlorn, in rain slickers and stupid old boots that say "Relax" on their tags, with mesh shopping bags hanging low from the greenish, budding potatoes rumbling around inside. So this is the country they call Poland, these boxy buildings scattered by the woods are a small town, those two little people trudging through the snow over there are my grandma and me, and that dark spot up there—that's daybreak. That thing inching along the street, bloated and undulating, tightly linked, no gaps, that's a line for hot dogs, and that thing inching along even less mercifully is time. The little bundle in wet, white paper is a couple of hot dogs—one for me, one for my brother. After many hours of standing I am so hungry that I scarf down both on the way home. Yes, that steely winter morning and the absolute futility of human endeavors—which from that moment on I have tasted as the flavor of that cold, pale hot dog, which I didn't even taste out of hunger—will draw forth dread and disbelief on the face of the Western reader. And we all know that this image of those years is multidimensional with that same special tourist's multidimensionality as the Arafat rag on the teenager's pimple-bespattered neck, carton-pasteurized country-style milk, as well as lacquered Dutch clogs with paintings of windmills and little houses. A manufactured postcard believed by neither the sender, nor the recipient, but which is nevertheless nice to give and no less interesting to receive.

(Recently I had this conversation when I went out to smoke a cigarette in front of a London hotel and was

approached by the hotel gardener. He was slim, older, and had black fingernails and clear eyes, like someone who had only just recently been born. "Where are you from?" "Poland." "What's Poland like?" "Pretty ugly. Everything was destroyed during the war, and then the Communists destroyed everything else." "That's awful," he said, deeply moved, shaking his head with sympathy and disbelief. "That's really terrible." "Yeah." Speaking in languages you don't know is a godsend. Everything is suddenly so incredibly simple!

In fact, I don't remember anything in particular from that time, barely any event at all, barely any feeling, just this sort of grayness and nausea raised to the highest degree, such that it was almost the idea of grayness. I was about five years old, I knew a few indispensable numbers, a couple of basic letters, my Catholicism was enjoying its heyday, after which one could speak of it only in terms of regression. Yes, I think that my perception of the reality of those years was in some sense perfect! Grayness. Nausea. Water from the tap. In this, as in some brownish galantine or rolls of recycled toilet paper, linger those knickknacks that bring tears to the eye: Donald Duck bubble gum, cans left over from Coke and deodorant lined up like trophies on a shelf, pseudo-chocolate: a sort of brownish, semisweet plastic in tablet form. That's all that is definite. As though time flowed within objects, as though they themselves were a unit of time. The clothes I wore, the peeling wallpaper and the furniture losing its luster, the food and the dishes we ate it on, buildings, shoes, sidewalks. Memory is slush, a muddy puddle in which the little ships of things now sink, now surface triumphantly. I remember Communism exclusively as a style and an aesthetic category.

So then there was this apartment high-rise. It stood not far from several others, similar, sticking straight up out of the bald, brownish sand. How many times I stared upward at the clouds gliding along the industrial tape of the sky, and the high-rise started to sway, to break apart, and any moment it would come crashing down like a ton of bricks.

Everywhere else was the plump forest, a kind of world unto itself. Only we stuck out in the air, in some absurd wilderness paved over here and there. Among its paving stones, carelessly scattered over the surface, some preposterous mutant nature sprouted: dande-

lions, grass, thistles. There were black puddles in the potholes with a delicate, rainbow-colored film of gasoline. The basements were seething with cats. Always that stink of urine by the stairs, nervous little eyes glaring from behind the banister and the dirty, shattered panes of glass. And then there were the ants. Which was good for the kids, kids need something to torture, to watch die, or at least to look at when already dead, to learn that horror, that life depends on blood flowing forward, and that death starts to spread out to the sides and then all over along the sidewalk. ||



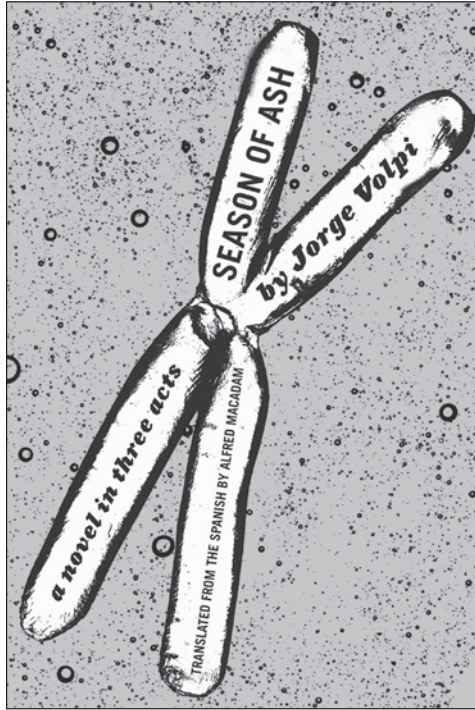
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SEASON OF ASH

JORGE VOLPI

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY ALFRED MACADAM

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Jorge Volpi is a doctor in law and a teacher of Mexican literature at the UNAM (Autonomous University of Mexico), as well as a PhD in Hispanic Philology by the University of Salamanca. The author of nine novels, including *In Search of Klingsor*, for which he won the Spanish Premio Biblioteca Breve prize and the French Deux-Océans-Grizane-Cavour Prize, Volpi is one of the founders of the "Crack" group—a Mexican literary movement that seeks to move beyond magical realism and mimics the ideals of the 1968 Latin American literary Boom. He has received grants from the John S. Guggenheim Foundation and is presently a member of National System of Creators in Mexico.

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