wanted to be part of it. The feet, the nails, the hands. I knew all of that belonged to me, that it was me, but my perception of my own body was no longer the same. On my wrists and on the insides of my arms there was a bluish mesh of veins. It occurred to me that my skin was so thin as to be almost nonexistent. When finally I reached out for the towel, it felt like an alien body moving mechanically, no longer in my control. No, it was not fear of death, I would have easily recognized that. I was familiar with the sudden wild pulse booming in my head and the anguished cramp in the pit of my stomach that would spread through my body till I was petrified. Here, in the bathroom, I felt my own terrible fragility and impotence. I was overwhelmed by a frantic urge to escape from this strange and unreliable body. Something in me rebelled at the thought that this form could be me, this vessel, the other with which I had just lost contact.

It must have been a momentary death of sorts, a revulsion, a recoiling from the body I could no longer feel as mine. Under my hard stare the vessel was torn apart from its contents and if someone had hit me at that moment I am sure I would have felt no pain. I squeezed the cut on my finger as if trying to prove to myself I was still alive. A drop of blood fell on my knee. I smeared it on my skin, making a hole-shaped stain. This body was no longer mine. It had been taken over by something else, taken over by the war. I had thought that the death of the body was the worst thing that could happen in war; I didn't know that worse was the separation of self from the body, the numbness of the inner being, extinction before death, pain before pain. Instinctively I licked the wound on my finger. But it didn't help, the blood continued to ooze.

ZAGREB
DECEMBER 1991

Drakulić, Slavenka, 1993

8

OVERCOME BY NATIONHOOD

It was usually on 29 November, Republic Day, or some other national holiday. I remember that as a child I was standing in a long row of Tito's Pioneers. Dressed in blue caps decorated with red stars and with red kerchiefs around our necks, we dutifully waved paper Communist Party flags, chanting 'Long live Comrade Tito! Tito! The party!' – while black limousines drove by. There was another slogan that we used to shout on such occasions, glancing at our teacher, who would give us a sign to start. 'Bro-ther-hood! U-ni-ty! Bro-ther-hood! U-ni-ty!' we yelled with all our might, as if we were casting a spell. These words were like a puzzle to me. What was more natural than to wish a long life to Tito, when not only streets, schools and hospitals but also towns were named after 'the greatest son of our nation'? But slogans about brotherhood and unity sounded a little too abstract. Little did I know about the hate, rivalry and bloodshed that divided people in the Balkans throughout history. Little did I know about history at all. How could I know, when, according to our textbooks, history began in 1941 anyway.

The problem was that we – all the people, not just the

Pioneers – were told to shout slogans and clap our hands but never to question what those words meant. And when I did, it was too late. Brothers started to kill one another, and unity fell apart, as if Yugoslavia were only part of a communist fairy tale. Perhaps it was. Nationalism as we are witnessing it now in the former USSR, former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia is a legacy of that fairy tale. And it is so for at least three reasons: the communist state never allowed development of a civil society; it oppressed ethnic, national and religious beliefs, permitting only class identification; and in the end, communist leaders manipulated these beliefs, playing one nationality against another to keep themselves in power for as long as they could. Even if the price was war.

I have to admit that for me, as for many of my friends born after World War II, being Croat has no special meaning. Not only was I educated to believe that the whole territory of ex-Yugoslavia was my homeland, but because we could travel freely abroad (while people of the Eastern-bloc countries couldn't), I almost believed that borders, as well as nationalities, existed only in people's heads. Moreover, the youth culture of 1968 brought us even closer to the world through rock music, demonstrations, movies, books and the English language. We had so much in common with the West that in fact we mentally belonged there.

Some of my foreign friends from that time cannot understand that they and I have less and less in common now. I am living in a country that has had six bloody months of war, and it is hard for them to understand that being Croat has become my destiny. How can I explain to them that in this war I am defined by my nationality, and by it alone? There is another thing that is even harder to explain – the way the

awareness of my nationality, because of my past, came to me in a negative way. I had fought against treating nationality as a main criterion by which to judge human beings; I tried to see the people behind the label; I kept open the possibility of dialogue with my friends and colleagues in Serbia even after all telephone lines and roads had been cut off and one-third of Croatia had been occupied and bombed. I resisted coming to terms with the fact that in Croatia it is difficult to be the kind of person who says, 'Yes, I am Croat, but . . .'

In the end, none of that helped me. Along with millions of other Croats, I was pinned to the wall of nationhood – not only by outside pressure from Serbia and the Federal Army but by national homogenization within Croatia itself. That is what the war is doing to us, reducing us to one dimension: the Nation. The trouble with this nationhood, however, is that whereas before, I was defined by my education, my job, my ideas, my character – and, yes, my nationality too – now I feel stripped of all that. I am nobody because I am not a person any more. I am one of 4.5 million Croats.

I can only regret that awareness of my nationhood came to me in the form of punishment of the nation I belong to, in the form of death, destruction, suffering and – worst – fear of dying. I feel as an orphan does, the war having robbed me of the only real possession I had acquired in my life, my individuality.

But I am not in a position to choose any longer. Nor, I think, is anyone else. Just as in the days of brotherhood-unity, there is now another ideology holding people together, the ideology of nationhood. It doesn't matter if it is Croatian, Serbian, Czech, Slovak, Georgian or Azerbaijani nationhood. What has happened is that something people cherished as a part of their cultural identity – an alternative to the all-embracing

communism, a means to survive – has become their political identity and turned into something like an ill-fitting shirt. You may feel the sleeves are too short, the collar too tight. You might not like the colour, and the cloth might itch. But there is no escape; there is nothing else to wear. One doesn't have to succumb voluntarily to this ideology of the nation – one is sucked into it.

So right now, in the new state of Croatia, no one is allowed not to be a Croat. And even if this is not what one would really call freedom, perhaps it would be morally unjust to tear off the shirt of the suffering nation – with tens of thousands of people being shot, slaughtered and burned just because of their nationality. It wouldn't be right because of Vukovar, the town that was erased from the face of the earth. Because of the attacks on Dubrovnik.

Before this war started, there was perhaps a chance for Croats to become persons and citizens first, then afterwards Croats. But the dramatic events of the last twelve months have taken away that possibility. Once the war is over – and I hope the end is near now – all the human victims will be in vain if the newly emergent independent countries do not restore to us a sense that we are before all else individuals as well as citizens.

ZAGREB
JANUARY 1992

9

THE SMELL OF INDEPENDENCE

I was sitting in a car and through a windshield, down the road, I could see a roadblock with a yellow sign DOUANE and a policeman looking at someone's passport, then waving them on. On the right side of the road there was a white metal house, like a trailer – a police and customs station – and on a high mast beside it fluttered the new Slovenian flag. It looked like an improvised check-point in some remote province, except that it was supposed to be a main check-point between Slovenia and Croatia and I was crossing it for the first time. The border was brand new too; the Croats hadn't even had time to post a guard on their side. I got out of the car. Standing on a piece of asphalt in Bregana, bathed in a weak winter sun, I slowly reached for my passport and handed it to a Slovenian policeman, a young man who approached me, smiling, as if proud of what he was doing. I looked at my passport in his hands. It was the old red Yugoslav passport, of course. All of a sudden I became aware of the absurdity of our situation: I knew that, while he inspected my Yugoslav passport, he must still carry the very same one. There we were, citizens of one country falling apart and two countries-to-be, in front of a