

# A War Mythography

## Writing "Exercises"

by *Christiana Lambrinidis*

*Cet article relate la visite de l'auteure dans un camp de réfugié(e)s à Tuzla. L'auteure a encouragé les femmes et les filles qui vivent dans ce camp à écrire leurs expériences de la guerre.*

On the wall hangs a doll, the noose or the conviction was never articulated. The ward is a classroom, transliterated. Dialects unknown to me. The non-refugee, the non-persecuted, the "invador."

*Se ha dechecho la patria  
se ha podrido  
nos revolcamos en su podredumbre  
y la guete se aparta*

(our country has fallen apart/it has gone bad/we roll in its filth/people avoid us)

*Sorrow: poem in six parts  
by Alegria Claribel, El Salvador.*

"They took the girl, they cut...her no she was not mine, she was Fatima's, not ere, in concentration camp" ... "You see her happy, she suites, she laughs, she is leaving for Germany, for her son."

Yes, the old toothless woman was smiling—with a scarf around the head, knitted slippers in hand (the women knit/ Oxfam: 3 sweaters, one yours). She left the ward only to return in a print polyester dress and a long lavender woven vest. *OSNOVNA SKOLA "PAZAR"*: red building—deep as the women's pain, as the raped women who hid not to be seen, as the women hope to return...

I expected human rags, tattered scavengers (in the streets), gaping holes and horror, much horror. I saw people in Tuzla, well-dressed: not even a run in the stockings the women wore, not one head dishevelled. Only their steps were quick, very quick. To

be ahead of the shelling, to cut the wood, to climb up stories (6-20), to lug water and firewood—"from" hungry bodies.

Yet, the theatre has four stages: two operating. In the main stage, war is stuck on the ceiling. There were two performances that first week in November (a Requiem and a monologue of a man about his escape from a concentration camp) and the house was full. (If life cannot afford to be represented, it can be re-enacted). But in the city where garbage is burning in its metal bins: at festers-crematoria, the artistic director left our appointment in his car.

*Is Europe Possible Without Multiculture?* was the title of the political conference which invited me to Tuzla, organized by the Verona Forum for the Reconciliation and Peace of Former Yugoslavia (European Parliament). Because of the upcoming local elections, multicultural. As a concept and belief needed much support. Of course, women were "barred"—no time, the "officials" said: Yet Tuzla was women: interpreters in international humanitarian organizations, they negotiate annihilation or a carton of cigarettes—"since the war began, we smoke"—chaffing nicotine, counsellors and nurses in treatment centres for raped women and their children, doctors in hospitals... "I am happy in Bosnia," said Suada. "When we have water. I am happy, when we have electricity I am happy...but [she enunciated the 't'] I am a sad woman, because my children have no future. When I was their age I went to Sarajevo or to Beograd with my specialization, now nothing"... Suada's daughter, Dina, plays the flute to pierce the smothering toxic cloud of garbage that envelops the city... "Suada, my sister Mirsada and I founded Citizens Forum of Tuzla, women are smart, they survive war."

We are all together at Bristol, a hotel UN uses as headquarters, around an enormously long table surrounded by mirrors. Thursday night. A Bible's last supper or Judy Chicago's. Aisha is a warrior: at the front line—after her four brothers were killed she took up arms, to save her daughter, to save her voice which sings passionately to Lieve, a Belgian woman—warrior, of a different kind. Unexpected the music, it allowed for female connections to occur—Loud, very loud—muffled was the shelling.

At the refugee camp, there was no song. Together with the women from the camp, Aida, a muslim woman married to a Catholic Serb—not a refugee, arranged for a writing ward. (There was no balance to endure, even slightest of creaks). It was a corner room, full of light, enveloped by beds. Against the longest wall, firewood was neatly placed, a small bookcase contained pots and pans in stacks. On the glass doors a small square photograph of Homeini articulated possibly "resistance," possibly a horrific fundamentalism emerging strong.

In the beginning four women agreed to writing, young secular. The others refused. But the ward filled with women. The few men stayed outside with the children. Next to me, Tanya, 17 years old—my interpreter: "I want to leave, I cannot stand being here," Aida, Raja with neat handwriting in a hurry to tell, Samela, 14, with her name thrown on top of the page in time, to also write Zuhra's words whose grief "suffocated her eyes," Ramiwa who left the room with paper in hand only to return with seven and a half lines of text, Safira, new at camp, two month refugee, wrote decisively on her short tight skirt... (possessive pronouns bear another kind of responsibility here): *Cuentene lo gue vio le dice et periodista. "Yo esture muclro rato en el chorro del*

rio." Tell me what you saw the reporter says. "I was hiding in the river for a long time" (Claribel Alegria, end of poem, *La mujer del Rio Sumpul*).

As time went on the writing possibilities multiplied. "You are not victims," I told them. "You are power, you survived." Narrate your survival. In a language, I didn't speak the women filled the pages. They overcrowded the ward: to tell, to testify, to be recorded. Then, they asked for pictures. Forty in each ward three in each picture. Also a testimony. To receive back, to prevent falsification, to continue the fight.

At the borderlands  
you are the battled round  
where enemies are kin to each  
other  
you are at home, a stranger  
the border disputes have been  
settled  
the volley of shots have shattered  
the  
truce  
you are wounded, lost in action  
dead, fighting back  
Gloria Anjaldua  
*Borderlands*

As I was leaving, Hava, dressmaker in her early 30s, Samela's mother, beautiful woman, with strong hands and fearless sight, brought me a polaroid photograph: her sister and she with their children in a highway, travelling. Before the war. With pride and all the dignity of joy she kept only this "artifact" from her private geography. The other she said, the real, away from the camp. Her hospitality however re-enacted her topos as she overturned a bucket a table between us. I drank her coffee and was defeated. Even though I hadn't realized I was fighting. At the borderlands.

"You are a battleground... you are at home, a stranger."

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## PATIENCE WHEATLEY

### Our Mother Playing the Piano

Smell of citronella on the sheets. Screech owls calling in the woods behind the house. A full moon whitening the walls of our bedroom.

The piano's rippling notes are like a cool stream, then like a river pouring out the open windows into the garden where American Pillar roses sway on trellises.

Red-tufted caterpillars have made chrysalises on the flat single roses. All afternoon we've pulled their papery coverings open to release crumpled moths with black red-spotted wings.

Christine stands by my bed: "Let's go closer."

We huddle at the top of the stairs. I imagine our mother at the piano in a blue-mist dress, her beaky nose lifted, her foot in a cuban-heeled sandal, deliberately pressing the pedal as her hands leap over the keys like waves. Up down. Up down.

She's making mistakes. Her hands crash anywhere. Discord, then silence. She's put her head down on the keys. Our father has just shouted, "Why must you be so dramatic?"

The music starts again, changes. I have to go down to her. Our father hears a noise and finds me outside the open sitting room door. He carries me back upstairs. Christine lies there in bed as if she'd never left. "It's just the music," our father says, "She gets too dramatic!" He goes downstairs. We hear his stern voice scolding our mother.

That wasn't what we meant to happen at all.

Outside, the flutter of moths' new wings.

*(from the long poem The Astrologer's Daughter).*

*Patience Wheatley's poetry has been published previously in cws/ cf, and other sections from The Astrologer's Daughter appeared in the Space 1 issue of Descant. She has also had two poetry collections published by Goose Lane Editions: A Hinge of Spring and Good-bye to the Sugar Refinery.*