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Letter to Sarajevo

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LETTER TO SARAJEVO

Christine Stephens

You smoked my cigarettes down to the knuckle,
your mother frowning her way to bed.
Mock philosophical questions lodged in your throat:
"Tell me..." then English failed you,
passion swimming like salmon in your Slavic blood.
If I said I understand hate—knowing
you must dig up soccer fields for graves
and mark the hand-lashed crosses with chalk—
would you smile as if I were a child?
I might tell you I scan newsreels for your face
or anyplace we may have walked. I want to point
and say, "I was there," but I recognize
none of that bullet speckled cement.

My photo albums of your city have become story books,
each frame telling its "Once upon a time"
in the clouded pall of fantasy. So tell me—
did sheep mow the lawn along the river
where we used to walk? Was that us singing drinking songs
while we smashed brown bottles along the rocks?
And tell me, did you lift me from my feet in a kiss
that set the entire city still and listening?
My memory has frayed the edges of your face.
I don't even know if you're alive,
if you still carry your long body
up the slopes of the Muslim slums,
the cemetery's white pillars our playground,
the wide stone arches our shade.