

MARGARET ZAMOS-MONTEITH

Borders

FICTION FOR DRIVING
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Evan tells Ada to pick a fortune. They’ve been arguing about politics and picking at an unfamiliar version of sweet-and-sour pork. Muted light emanates from red tasseled lanterns, adding to the gloom of rain pounding the streets outside. Her raised voice causes the other patrons to look uncomfortably toward the American tempest in their circumspect midst. Ada doesn’t feel a need to stop her conversation before Evan changes the topic: she assumes everyone cares about her government.

“Be realistic,” she tells Evan, “Idealism is lovely, but these are black-and-white times.” She sips green tea, which has been quietly refilled as they debate. Instead of answering, he slips the bill off the tray and extends the cookies as a peace offering, then reaches into his pocket for pastel-colored money, which he drops on the table. They’ve been traveling through so many places over the past month that the accumulating varieties of paper have lost currency with Ada, have severed any connection with meaning.

She breaks apart a cookie, tells Evan, “You know, these are originally from Kyoto.” She is distracted by the fact that they are sitting in Prague, where a Vietnamese waiter offers something that feels American (a fortune cookie at a Chinese restaurant) but is of Japanese origin as it turns out. “They were made sweeter to appeal to American tastes,” Ada explains. “Someone wrote a doctoral thesis on it.” Their disagreements often peter out this way. They let it slide; change the subject instead of admitting defeat. She regards her fortune, written in Czech, and passes it to Evan to interpret.

“A tree never reaches the sky, German proverb,” he shakes his head. “What does yours say?” she asks.

He cracks his open and reads, translates awkwardly, “Everything’s going to be all right.”

“Is that a Jamaican proverb?” Ada smiles but looks down, trying not to feel disappointed in her limited fortune. She hums a few bars of the Bob Marley tune then sighs. “Shit,” she says. “What kind of fortune cookie says you can’t reach the sky?”

“Oh, adorable-Ada,” Evan shrugs. “It’s a realist’s proverb.” He reaches over to brush a strand of hair from her face. “It’s just a silly thing, a tiny slip of nothing.”

She nods, but feels tired suddenly. “Maybe German ideas don’t translate right in Czech. Maybe, because the sky is limitless, a tree can go on forever then?”

“Maybe you aren’t such a cynic,” Evan teases.

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Two hours later, they are parked at the chipped Formica table in Milos’s apartment, drinking Becherovka, an herbal liquor that Evan claims to hate and Milos drinks to be ironic. Milos and Evan grew up together in Great Barrington, but Milos arrived in Prague with a Generation X flood of expats to study film at FAMU and never left. His old classmate, a Swiss German named Gerhard, sniffs distastefully at his glass then swallows quickly. Ada secretly likes Becher: it is the best stomach remedy around and makes her feel balmy, helps her forget the heavy Chinese food.

“What you Americans don’t seem to understand,” Gerhard begins, as he licks a milky cigarette paper in a deliberate gesture, “is that nationalism is dead. In my country, we understand this concept.” Gerhard flattens the edges shut, wispy hairs of tobacco splaying out at thin ends, crinkling as he holds a match close. He shuts his eyes and inhales, waves the cigarette like a small wand for emphasis, and burning pointed finger. “Your country

must end this idea that you are always right, must learn to ask, *Why did this happen?*”

Milos’s kitchen is big and bright, but dishes pile up in the sink and a forlorn Christmas tree, bought but never decorated, leans into the corner with a pile of needles beneath it, the branches still bound tight by white plastic netting. Milos has invited Evan over to meet Gerhard, who has just arrived with one backpack and a crate. Gerhard doesn’t need much in the way of clothes, but the crate has Swiss coffee, chocolate, and cheese he cannot live without and will happily share. He knows something about identity struggle, he tells Ada, because he has struggled his whole life as a Swiss German in the French Alps.

Gerhard reaches for a glass, a dish, something to act as an ashtray. He taps against a small porcelain cup branded by an Austrian coffee company and lifted from the corner café by Milos. He opens his eyes accusingly and continues his rant, the word *country* repeating as his chorus against nationalism. “In my country,” he says looking directly at Ada, “we educate our children that nationalism is wrong. Your *country* must educate its children.” He closes his eyes, takes another deep drag on his cigarette. His legs are bent beneath him like a pretzel, a guru, and his head bobs knowingly.

“Our children get an education,” Ada begins, prepared to talk about her brilliant young charges, the unique opportunities afforded a Boston private-school student such as she herself was, such as her students are, but Gerhard is off again. Milos and Evan wander out of the kitchen and Ada grimaces at Evan’s back, irritated that he is abandoning the conversation. She will put up a fight about it later, insist it was not okay to leave her alone with Gerhard. Evan will say, “Gerhard’s loquacious, but he’s all right. He didn’t mind that I wanted to talk with Milos.”

“We had a chance to make him see,” Ada will counter. “To correct his false image of America.”

“Why,” Evan will ask, “does his view need correcting? He has a right to his opinions.”

“Oh, because,” she will pout, turn toward the wall, curve into her pillow, and try to sleep despite the noise and light flooding through the worn

curtains of their cheap pension room, which abuts a busy intersection. She will squirm and reflect back on Gerhard, to the way he drums the table with his copy of *A World Apart*, a critical piece of theory written decades ago and the purpose of their rendezvous in Milos’s apartment. Both Milos and Gerhard studied with the author, but Gerhard was also his teaching assistant for two years. At Milos’s request, Gerhard has set up the all-important appointment they will have the next day. If the legendary theorist agrees to write an introduction to Evan’s book, it will have a better chance at getting noticed, reviewed. But really, the most basic reason is this: Ada and Evan are interested in meeting this famous man, who wrote an influential book that hipsters of a certain liberal bent refer to, whether they have read it or not, because much of the critical theory they embrace quotes from it.

When they part ways at the end of the evening, Gerhard confirms the meeting address, scribbles a phone number, and proclaims it was nothing at all, absolutely nothing to set it up. He annoys Ada, but she thanks him earnestly nonetheless. After a night of fitful sleep, Ada and Evan head toward the car that has taken them through five countries in four weeks. She spies Gerhard walking down the street and wants to run into a café to avoid him, but Evan holds out a hand.

“What chance,” Gerhard proclaims happily. “I feel like a bird has sheet on me, running into you in this way.” Evan smiles and agrees to an espresso before the road. Afterward, Gerhard wishes them bon voyage, good luck, and kisses their cheeks. Ada grimaces at the brush with his pale and hairy face, the smell of him too close for her. Gerhard smiles unaware, his water-colored eyes wide as he reminds Evan to give his regards to The Professor. Says he hopes they can all break bread together soon.

— 3 —

In a midsize Czech town edged with smokestacks, The Professor sits across from Ada and Evan, speaking as though to a class, a position Ada is not used to as a middle-school civics teacher. He treats them like students, and despite his fame, his stature among

She can swear in several languages, a by-product and souvenir of her travels. As she regards the men at the table, she imagines their main occupation is lamenting the way immigrants have siphoned their jobs; the way women jacked their lives; the way life’s burdens have nicked their manhood.

intellectuals, Ada takes umbrage at his clear delineation of rank.

After lunch, The Professor leads Ada and Evan to the working-class neighborhood that is the backbone of his writings. It is a place known abroad because of him, and he makes fervent observations about behemoth factories, street signs, and graffiti. Ada is amazed by how he speaks, his phrases and turns of expression as quaint to her as Gerhard’s. She makes mental notes to remember everything he says, views him like a performing monkey discussing the town’s smoldering prejudice against the Romany.

They turn into the courtyard behind an apartment house to find a ground-floor bar, hidden from nosy onlookers who might drop in from the street on a whim. Ada feels like an interloper at a private gathering, and profit is clearly not the incentive to the strange backyard enterprise. There is a long wooden picnic table filled with sweaty, weary men, a mish-mash of ages but a common posture set against a jagged black cross, encircled in awkward paint, a symbol of white supremacy sprayed onto the wall. Their faces and voices are monotonous as they drink beer after beer at three in the afternoon. Ada doesn’t wonder why they are not at jobs; the factories nearby have slowed or ceased production. She has driven through enough towns like this one over the past few weeks, trespassed through tangled fields so Evan could photograph abandoned Soviet bases, seen the quiet atmosphere of the morning line at the dole office in contrast to the jumping town squares that fill up at night with garrulous inhabitants. They’ve heard hollow fights at three AM, incoherent voices echoing off stone buildings and rushing through the open windows of \$10 pensions before an old woman finally shouts out and a siren approaches. When a word or two

becomes suddenly recognizable, Ada feels proud that she is not an ordinary, banal tourist. She can swear in several languages, a by-product and souvenir of her travels. As she regards the men at the table, she imagines their main occupation is lamenting the way immigrants have siphoned their jobs; the way women jacked their lives; the way life’s burdens have nicked their manhood.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” The Professor asks. “These men. They are the breath of D.H. Lawrence. Have you read him?”

“Mmm, yes. *Sons and Lovers*,” Ada says, betting the oldest man is telling the younger men around him how much better it was for him, or how much worse. These guys emit a palpable camaraderie, full gray manes mixing in equal number with angry shaved heads and Ada realizes that what binds them is not gender or nationality, but class experience. She is inherently disdainful of them, finds their manners to be boorish compared to her own, but still she thinks The Professor is being paternalistic toward them in the same way the hedge-fund-manager and corporate-lawyer parents tell her, “I wish I were a teacher, really. I wish I could say I made a difference.” She is not making such a dent in the world by teaching children who pay \$30,000 a year in tuition about the Constitution or the Monroe Doctrine, about the ways in which America is a superior country unlike any other.

The men acknowledge their intrusion by way of lowered voices and sly glances, never looking directly at them. The price of having trespassed is tallied in the impossibly long wait for the waitress to come leisurely take their order, her even slower pace in delivering beer. The patio ends just short of where their round plastic table sits unevenly on the grass, a small vegetable garden forming rows neatly behind

them. A bent umbrella advertises an aperitif not consumed at this bar.

The morning encounter with Gerhard seems to have occurred last week. Ada enjoys the knowledge that Boston is across an ocean so wide it may as well not even exist. Time is slower here, expansive. Day melts into night slowly so the contrast is not felt. The air is warm and tan, old and comfortable. Words drop out of The Professor's mouth like heavy pits and his hands flutter up, creating a swirl of cigarette smoke that surrounds his balding head like a powdered wig. He plays the role of professor and theorist so completely that Ada conjures his wife, or the grocer, or a neighbor on the stairs being met with an expression of *Yes, yes, this is what we mean, what we are looking for when we buy a peach. It is not merely the flesh we are seeking but the seed, the inner sanctum, the very being of the fruit itself that is essential.*

The Professor looks at Ada, expects an answer to a question she has missed. She turns to Evan and his face softens into a subtle smile as he waits patiently for her to respond: he knows Ada's habits and is kinder with her flaws than she is with his. Evan's ability to switch directions with disconcerting fluidity, the way he tunes out everything for a picture, feels to her like a spotlight has snapped away and it piques her. His use of uncommon language to set himself apart as an artist photographer, the way he insists on *making* a picture versus taking it, the way Ada now says *make* instead of *take*, seems overcomplicated when Ada wants the world to be classified via lesson plans, delineated with clear answers comprised of the right word choices. She draws her words out slowly for The Professor, "Yes. This neighborhood. America. The comparison."

The Professor is off again, no indication of his awareness that she hasn't given an answer to the question, right or wrong. He expounds on the virtues of the lowly, the sweat of the working man, the beauty of the immigrant, the sensual splendor of the poor mother striving, her son sinking into a rap of despair, the streets themselves a song put down in rhyme to accompany the beat of the assembly line. Ada wonders about this man's success, senses there must be something she is missing in his

"Here," he gestures, "there is something real. Look around this neighborhood. See its ugliness, but also its raw splendor. These men have not been bleached through the machine that is the university or the corporation. They remain true to their class, radiate sincerity and life. Why not try to understand them instead of sweeping them under a rug?"

dialogue, in the book of his she gave up reading after only 20 pages.

As they wait for a second round of beer, The Professor says that he knows America because he taught there almost 30 years ago, under Reagan, and God's watchful eye. "Who really won this Cold War, eh? What does the Western man know about armistice? The Western man knows expansion, not restraint." His cigarette quivers with each syllable. "That is why I came back and it made them suspicious. Why didn't I stay in the land of plenty? No university would hire me. Not even the gymnasium would. My books were banned and I was labeled dangerous. I worked in the factories until '93, until my book was finally published here too."

He looks beyond them to the men seated at the wooden table. "And why did I come back? Because three cars in your driveway is not plenty. Department stores? They are all the same. Highways? You must obey the rules and regulations constantly being revised in the delusion that you are a true democracy with equal prospects for all. But the quest for objects is not a true grail. You must embark on a quest for the whole picture," he insists, waving his arm like a metronome and Ada decides he wants to be right in the same way she thinks Gerhard does,

that he says *quest* when what he really means is proof to questions whose answers he has already decreed. But he softens; his arm falls to the table. "Here," he gestures, "there is something real. Look around this neighborhood. See its ugliness, but also its raw splendor. These men have not been bleached through the machine that is the university or the corporation. They remain true to their class, radiate sincerity and life. Why not try to understand them instead of sweeping them under a rug?"

The men wear their status proudly on their sleeves and Ada is startled by their satisfaction, knows she would find such a position to be embarrassing and suddenly understands that it is she who is being condescending, not The Professor. The men aren't deluded that power lies elsewhere, though they call it immigration or the Romany or entrepreneurs arriving in business suits to take advantage of their cheap labor.

"In America," The Professor raps his fingers against his glass, "the devil is unknown and unacknowledged. But here? We look at the wild beast and challenge her, turn her over and dissect her. Look at what the Soviets did in Bohemia, shifting entire towns to dig for coal, inhumane policies in pursuit of empire. Look at what these emerging capitalists do today as they streamline businesses, fund box stores that shut out the little shopkeeper, make centralized corporate decisions no different from the Politburo deciding which kind of cheese we can eat, the kind of apartments we should live in. This chimera, that riches for the very few trickle down for the common good, is imploding as we speak! Until we see people as people, not demographics or or spreadsheets of profit and loss, as long as we judge them by their manners and accents and dress, we deny, and therefore nurture, the devil. The Soviets said an individual's property was expendable next to the needs of the whole; you Americans see Iraq as expendable compared with your interests. This idea of exponential growth, profits, is it not like cancer, taking over and then killing off organs of the body? Now we can say the Inquisition was wrong, the Soviets barbaric, but what will we say when we look back on today? That the very idea of one

nation-state's needs having dominion over everything else is outdated. That equal access to opportunity is in every nation's interest."

As The Professor continues, a bright blond girl, curls dancing down her back, runs barefoot to the picnic table where she glides in, twirling her lips into a coquettish smile. A cheer of welcome rises from the men. A Coca-Cola is delivered in an instant from the formerly sluggish waitress. The girl is about ten but could be 30 from the look on her face, the way the dynamic of the entire table swings to her femininity. The men ply her with tastes of beer, which she sips but contorts her face to imply disgust. She turns to her cola, a plaything of bubbles and straw, then is absorbed, forgotten as the men slide back to their grievances. Ada feels a certain sadness: seeing the girl reminds her of the women, barely teenagers, lining the highway from Decin to Dresden and shivering in short skirts as cars with German plates stop, windows roll down, the girls bend forward to discuss. Now that the men have exhausted their desire to be entertained by her, the girl is no longer a draw.

Her brother has followed her, but he has no interest in the men or the beer. He chases a plastic ball through the garden and stays far enough away to avoid attention, but close enough to watch his sister's antics. He is maybe two years younger and wears a vivid Hawaiian shirt with surfer-style swim trunks.

"Do you see this boy?" The Professor proclaims. "The colors of his shirt! How it contrasts with the dreary plaster of the crumbling apartment, a metaphor for the failure of the society he resists. This little prince is what Saint-Exupéry is talking about: he is why we survive. He has arrived from another planet to save us."

Ada regards the boy. Twenty years before, when she spent a semester in Florence during the waning Cold War, she would automatically, habitually decipher the nationality of people passing her on the street by clothing, shoes. Now, it is hard for her to do. All over Europe, kids wear fashion sneakers and parkas and vintage styled T-shirts with California-inspired brand names underneath hoodies. Like some American suburb, the

outskirts of towns are cut and step-farmed for housing tracts. The new Cineplexes might as well be in New Jersey, and this boy could be on a beach in Florida. *Perhaps The Professor and Gerhard are right about nationalism being dead*, Ada considers, *replaced by autoroutes and stadium-sized hypermarches trafficking the same flip-flops at the Interspar on the road to Jicin as the Tesco in Banska Bystrica or the Géant in Warsaw.*

The men at the table are now singing, their arms around each other. The Professor raises his drink to them, a salute. He swallows the last of his beer and suggests they continue walking through the neighborhood. They leave money underneath their empty glasses and head back to the street, the chorus of male voices evaporating. The boy in the shirt watches, pounding his ball, *thud, thud, thud*, along with their departing steps.

The street is in shadow and the buildings are blackish with pollution. The exteriors are still solid except for intermittent broken windows, but the structures are disintegrating from the inside with piles of floor and fragments of stair in the middle. Three boys approach, a swagger in their hips. Next to the entrance of a beat-looking market, two girls primp a younger boy, tweaking his pants lower and tugging at his shirt. From a window above, a girl with long hair and wide black eyes cups her chin in her hands and watches the strutting boys advance. She pulls one hand up in an aloof greeting and the middle boy, unshaven, draws his fist from the pocket of a shiny, electric-blue track suit to wave a cell phone at her. He shouts loudly at Ada and Evan.

"Ah! He sings of youth, the lullaby of lament, the chanson of magnificence in despair. He shares his experience with us," The Professor says grandly and then stops, closes his eyes and breathes in. He moves his head as though listening to a concerto.

Ada and Evan move forward. "That kid was telling us to get the hell out of his neighborhood and fuck off, wasn't he?" Ada whispers and Evan answers, "Probably." A boy, caught on the border between teen years and adulthood, brushes past Ada with a razor-thin edge of distance meant to inform her that she doesn't exist in this universe. Ada thinks back to her

studies in Florence, to the art history teacher who led her class around the city. A handsome, self-confessed Communist Catholic with a ring bearing his noble family's crest on his finely sculpted hand. The girls on Ada's program whispered and sighed about him, but Ada found his handsomeness, his loose blond mane, and expensive cashmere blazers to be excessive. He took them to visit modernist housing projects by Italian architects that Ada had never heard of where her classmates (ten enthusiastic young ladies from various women's colleges like her own, plus two earnest and resolute boys on a gap year) took copious notes in journals covered in Venetian paper. They had walked through the architecture as if the people living in the buildings were a lab experiment, the grandmothers poking heads out windows like exotic specimens they could snap pictures of. No one emerged to question why a group of 12 Americans and a well-dressed instructor wandered freely through the property. Ada had felt a flush of shame realizing that the Communist noble felt superior by virtue of his ability to usher his students through the space of others, though he would never exhibit his own home, his cache of inherited paintings, to the class, because he did not view himself as a spectacle. Ada returns to the present, to The Professor a few paces behind her. He now walks slowly, his hands out as though he were wading into the ocean, feeling low waves. *This man is part of these people, this neighborhood*, she thinks. Though the boys hoot while they move like unwanted ghosts through these streets, they are not trespassing, by virtue of their association with The Professor, as a consequence of his love for their humanity. Ada has almost always felt invited, felt enlightened by train treks across Europe, through markets in Indonesia, or up mountains in Kenya, but how false she suddenly feels to have felt welcome by virtue of her ability to purchase a ticket.

Ada watches Evan pull out his camera to photograph a quilt of posters for a local politician. He then points the camera back toward The Professor, who bends to a barking schnauzer alongside three elderly woman wearing dresses from another era and practical shoes. They are planted by a window

box of cheerful geraniums providing a rare glimpse of color, a fuchsia contrast to the gray street where grocery bags wait by their feet. Each woman holds a small yapping dog in her arms and the schnauzer ducks his head down, raises his wagging tail as The Professor scratches him, greets the women, then pats the dog good-bye and walks effusively over to Ada.

“Regard them,” he instructs gently. “How the dog holds its chin and mirrors the *niveau* of the women. How immutable these grandmothers are in the wake of change. This essence is what I attempt to unveil. Do you see?” Ada looks to Evan, thinks it is the perfect time to ask, while The Professor is so happy, but Evan is quiet. They keep moving, toward the end of the street, where it meets a small square. The square was once grand, but the buildings have been worn down to a dowdy monochrome and the architectural details feel bland without the contrast of color. On one side stands a subway marker in the style of Hector Guimard’s Parisian Metro signs, but the steps have been filled in and the entrance leads nowhere because the station is no longer in use. “May I make a portrait of you here?” Evan asks The Professor.

“Yes, yes! I am so glad that you chose this place. Over there, that bar. You must know how much of my youth was spent there? It used to be full of young rebels searching for distinction outside the factories through literature and whiskey.” Evan shakes his head *no* as he pulls out his camera and tripod. The Professor beams.

Children emerge from the edge of the square to watch, as children do wherever Evan sets up. The large-format camera seems strange and the children act as though a film were being made. Boys hoot; vamp for the camera; run away. Ada looks up toward the reflection of a woman in a window, but she darts back when she realizes Ada can see her. A girl skips off, calling loudly, and returns with her resistant father. He asks Evan, in halting English, “Why shoot useless Metro stop?” Another man calls out to Evan, “It’s all the same. Why not photograph the garbage!” A bored acceptance replaces interest. The light shifts and the onlookers head home or to the bar or just away.

As Evan makes the portrait, The Professor relaxes and reminisces dreamily about his own attempts with black-and-white photography. He tells a story about his wife, recounts a recent camping trip with his daughter, then asks Evan about his childhood, his studies, his path to art. After the picture, after the tripod is back in the bag and the camera is tucked away, they walk to the car and say good-bye. The Professor has agreed to write the introduction to the book, though Ada missed the transaction: she was busy watching patterns of movement across the cobblestones, the sun moving behind the western end of the square. Now she leans out from the car window and waves good-bye one more time as Evan says, “Thanks so much. I’ll be in touch again soon.” The Professor adds that he looks forward to seeing Evan’s work, that he sees in Evan something of his own youth.

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Evan navigates the highway out of town, two lanes of wavy asphalt without a shoulder, as Ada bends on her knees to face backward, watch the factories recede. “That’s not safe,” Evan says, so she turns around, pulls on the cranky seat belt that refuses to release. She eases it back and forth until it reaches far enough to buckle, then looks forward out the windows. They drive past an endless stream of crops mixing with cows, alongside trucks interspersed with the occasional tractor, a random cart being pulled by a horse, a pile of hay flowing over, an old man precariously perched on top of the pile, slowly smoking a cigarette without thought to the consequences of a spark touching dry grass. Evan is quiet, deftly passing old Skodas and Trabants and Ladas, ribbons of exhaust streaming from dragging tailpipes. Ada can see that he is pleased with the day, but he also seems distant, concentrating.

She tries to draw him out now that she can talk openly, have a wrap-up of important elements from the day. “Almost as soon as you began making the picture, I began forgetting and I don’t want to forget,” Ada informs Evan. “I wonder if he talked that way when he worked in the factory?”

Evan says probably.

“I hope the other factory workers were patient with him, saw the risks he took in talking about banned literature,” she adds, but she knows Evan has stopped listening and is watching instead. He turns off the highway into the driveway of an apartment complex, perhaps 40 or 50 years old. It is a model of socialist architecture sprung up amid farmland. Comprised of tall rectangles with exterior panels of primary colors, it reminds Ada of the Partridge Family bus. Laundry dangles from precipitous, cracked balconies. Dirt is swallowing the parking lot asphalt. Two toddlers engage in a form of exchange involving chips of cement at the feet of a few hard mothers who sit on the entrance steps gossiping, ignoring the toddlers and the children who play on rusty bars nearby.

Having lost Evan to the pursuit of a picture, Ada feels the car slow to a stop. “One day we will go on vacation without a single camera, ha!” she keeps telling Evan, believing she is clever to point out that everyone, even a photographer, needs a break. “All work and no play,” she likes to add.

A small boy, his eyes a bottomless blue, runs up to the car. His shirt does not touch his filthy shorts. He puts his hand in the passenger window and says words that are unintelligible to Ada. “*Dobry den*,” she says, uncertain if she is correctly saying *hello*. The boy’s smile is enormous; his hair flies in different directions around his face and she wants to scoop him up, cover him with kisses, tickle his exposed belly. He chatters away, touching the rearview mirror, the glove compartment, anything he can reach. Evan gets out to make his picture.

Ada doesn’t have anything to give to the boy. There is an unopened, melted chocolate bar in the glove compartment, but she doesn’t want to be a stranger with candy. She holds up a hand to ask “Four?” or “Five?” He holds up five fingers, then pushes his thumb to his chest proudly.

She gestures toward the building, waves her hand to indicate the place and then points to him, says the name of the region. She indicates herself and says, “America. Boston.” He looks at her curiously, without comprehending. He repeats the name of his own town, touches his heart, then aims at Ada, and puts his hands up to

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solicit an answer. “America. Boston,” she repeats and realizes he has never heard of it. It gives her pause. She is used to the volumes of meaning attached to the United States, to her hometown, her center of the universe being confirmed as the actual center of the universe, the image of a pilgrim so ubiquitous in her childhood it even dots the Massachusetts Turnpike. She is secretly proud to be a ninth-generation resident of Boston, instinctually praises her forebears for being smart enough to come early and stay, but then this boy might very well go back an infinite number of generations in his town, his country, and she feels ashamed of her assumption that God somehow shines differently on America than He does on the rest of the world.

Older boys emerge from the building and call out to the boy who smiles his enormous smile then runs off like a sprite in their direction. They head to the edge of the highway where Ada watches them chuck objects onto the road and then wait for a truck to speed by and flatten the pieces. They send the boy into the traffic to retrieve them. She wants to grab him, protect him, bring him back to the safety of the car, and regards the mothers sitting on the steps with censure: one is nursing a baby, but the others are too immersed in half-hearted conversation to pay attention to the roadside game. The two toddlers chirping with a logic known only to toddlers continue exchanging bits of cement while the children on the rusty bars join the roadside crew, take up sticks to cheer. Ada wonders if the toddlers or the nursing baby will one day take the boy’s place running after objects so he can join the older children on the sidelines.

Her attention is drawn away from the game by a man with a tattoo of a Celtic cross down his forearm. He strides briskly along the edge of the

building, past a jagged spray-painted gallows Ada failed to notice before: a hanging Star of David is caught in the noose. The man cuts across the parking area, as if everything, Ada, the mothers, the children, were invisible. No one acknowledges Evan, his camera aimed at the apartments. A girl emerges on a balcony six floors up to hang her laundry out to dry. As she retreats from the balcony, the wind picks up and pieces of newspaper flutter off another balcony, dance to the ground. Another girl chases the paper, kicks a piece in the air, then runs off. Evan puts away his camera, gets in the car, and steers toward Prague, with the boy fading and then disappearing into the distance.

The awkward hangman’s noose, the Star of David suspended, haunts Ada. She wonders if whoever painted it has ever met a single Jew, the scapegoat they blame when they are really angry about the ways their own government and the larger economy have failed them. “Did you see that graffiti?” Ada asks Evan and brings up The Professor again. “And that blue-eyed boy back there? He is, as The Professor said, from another planet, descending onto the desert. Everything about that place spelled misery and boredom. He looked unkempt and dirty and no one cares that he plays on the highway. I wanted to kidnap him and take him to a place with opportunity and love. He felt like something that could grow infinitely in the right place.” Ada pauses, considers the boy, his radiant face, his eyes. “Do you remember my geranium plants?” she asks Evan and he nods. “There was that one that flowered so wildly, grew so extraordinarily in the front window, I moved it to the back to make space, but as soon as I did, it stopped flourishing. And as soon as I returned it to the front window, it produced three flowers in two days.” She had thought it was the hardy quality of the plant itself that mattered,

instead of recognizing the variables of effort mixed with access.

Evan looks forward, at the road. “That boy isn’t like your geranium in some dark corner. Those boys came out as soon as they saw him talking to a stranger. Just because they didn’t acknowledge us doesn’t mean they weren’t aware. Just because you don’t approve of their game, as ridiculous and dangerous as it seems to us, doesn’t mean they’re deprived. You don’t know the ways he may be supported. The graffiti is awful and disturbing, but that kind of racial hatred exists in the States too.”

Ada ponders her desire to take this prancing boy away from poverty and a world she can’t comprehend, to nestle him in her own bright window, mold him with her version of privilege. It is her first ever maternal instinct, and even as it surfaces, she realizes it is absurd to think she could be better for him than his own mother. Evan wants children, but Ada tells him that she gets enough time with children as a teacher, that it would be cruel to introduce innocent life to a world of war and inequity. Being parents would make them corruptors of a soul, she insists; Evan claims it is an act of hope to raise a child. “You’re right,” Ada tells Evan. “Children might be an act of hope. Maybe I need to be more hopeful.” She thinks of the Professor wandering through a field of adolescents, his eagle-eyed view of his surroundings. “The Professor came back when others would have stayed away. He saw possibility where others saw limits and limitations where others saw material success.”

Evan looks at Ada quickly, then faces the road again. “See! It wasn’t so bad spending the day with The Professor after all. We wouldn’t have seen the boy without him,” he says.

“I’m not always right,” Ada tells Evan, looking down and digging at her cuticles.

“No one is,” he laughs.

“No, seriously, Evan. I’ve been thinking about my stubborn certainty. I can’t understand how that boy is happy in a place I presume to be terrible. I mean, I always believed those who hadn’t figured out a way to come to my school on scholarship didn’t work hard enough to be there, when I hadn’t worked hard myself to get there. I teach at the very same school I attended and think because I travel around the world every summer that I’m some how more enlightened, but really I’m looking to be entertained, not changed. I wish I could start this day over, visit with The Professor again, hear what he was saying instead of how he was saying it. I always start with the presumption that I’m right when I should start with the idea that I don’t know. That things aren’t always clear.”

“I thought you said we were in black-and-white times,” Evan reminds her.

“Maybe the times are more gray than I thought,” Ada admits.

The road is bumpy with them. Every so often, they turn a curve to

see old women or young children on the edge of the road selling berries. They stop and negotiate a jarful and Ada eats them unwashed, without her usual concern for bacteria and pesticide or germs, lets her hands and mouth be stained purple. Within a few kilometers, the landscape changes and as the late-summer light fades in the last hours of the day, they return to the city, to crowds on the street and red taillights. The fields, scattered with smokestacks and cows, old men and women gardening in their undergarments to keep cool in the July heat, seem further away from Milos’s apartment than Boston. The boy and his apartment complex are lost on another page, the day dissecting into a triptych of morning, afternoon, night.

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Seated around the kitchen table once more, Evan recounts the day to Milos, tells him of his success with The Professor. Gerhard breaks off, then offers up, bits of Swiss chocolate to go with Milos’s Becherovka. Ada thanks him and takes a bite, asks where he

works in Geneva. As Gerhard waxes enthusiastically about his students, Ada suddenly sees something of herself in him. “Maybe,” she asks Gerhard, “we could visit you sometime? You could show us around and then you could come be our guest in Boston?” Gerhard smiles happily at this idea, says, yes, yes, next spring perhaps, and runs his hands through his hair with excitement. Ada feels pleased though also tired by her day. She reaches into her pocket for the barrette she keeps on hand to tie back her hair and feels a small slip of paper. Evan’s fortune, placed there at a moment she failed to notice. “*Vse vule vypracovat dobre,*” she reads haltingly, mispronouncing the words. “Every little thing’s gonna be all right?” she looks over at Evan, who smiles, winks back at her.

“The growth of trees is infinite,” Evan says and slips his hand across the table to meet hers.

Margaret Zamos-Monteith is the recipient of an NEH stipend. Her short stories have appeared in or are forthcoming in Fugue, Gargoyle, and Burner Magazine.

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(B/W OR COLOR)

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