

**Ben Sonnenberg**  
**Jean Stein**

---

Fording the Stream of Consciousness  
Author(s): Dubravka Ugrešić and Michael Henry Heim  
Source: *Grand Street*, No. 39 (1991), pp. 10-25  
Published by: Jean Stein  
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25007474>  
Accessed: 01-12-2015 17:50 UTC

---

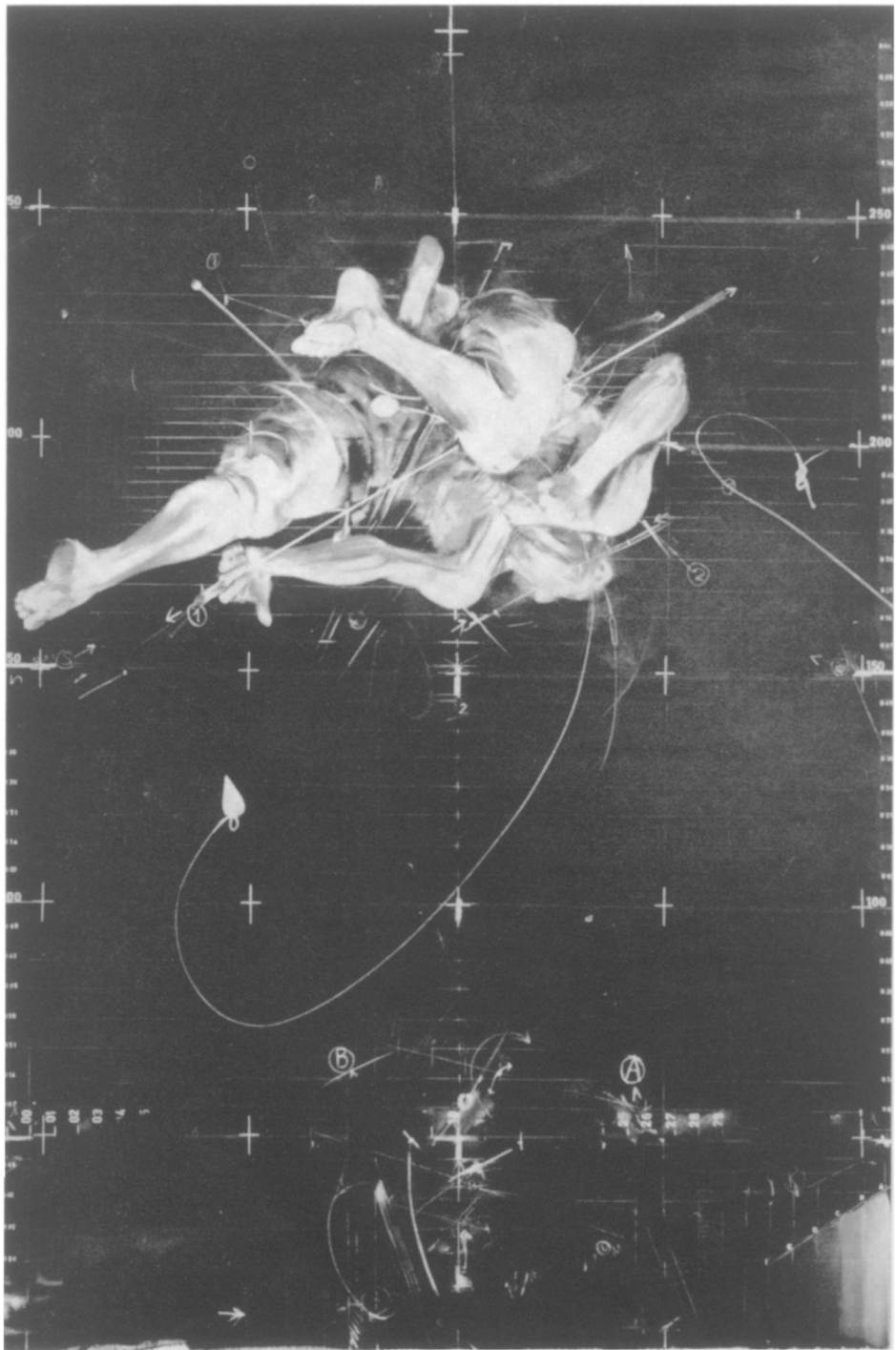
Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Ben Sonnenberg and Jean Stein* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Grand Street*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



## Fording the Stream of Consciousness

**J**osé Ramón Espeso arrived at the Zagreb Intercontinental at approximately 6 A.M. The first thing he did in his room was to open the curtains. A gray morning light crept in. Then he went back to his bag to unpack. He hung his suit carefully on a hanger. The click of the hanger against the rod in the closet broke the morning silence. He laid out his neatly folded tie and white shirt on the bed—he was planning to wear them to the meeting—and fifteen copies of his paper, “Poetry and the Censor,” on the desk. Then he went into the bathroom, put down his toilet bag, and took out a toothbrush and toothpaste. He removed the paper cover from the toilet seat and tossed it into the wastepaper basket. He did the same with the cellophane on the tumblers, placing the toothbrush and toothpaste in one of them. José Ramón enjoyed mastering things and space in a hotel room.

Then he returned to the desk and tested the lamp, turning it on and off. He took several picture postcards of Zagreb out of his pocket—he had bought them just after leaving the station—and addressed one of them immediately. He had written a short poem on the train and decided to copy it onto the postcard and send it to his mother, Luisa.

It was just seven when he finished. He checked the program:

*Lundi, le 5 mai, 10 heures: Inauguration solennelle du Colloque et Exposé d'introduction.* The opening ceremonies weren't until ten. He looked around the room, his glance resting on the neatly folded shirt. The gray light had crept under the collar and cast a stingy, barely noticeable shadow. José Ramón decided to go down and have breakfast.

For breakfast he ordered two soft-boiled eggs and tea. He stroked one egg with the ball of his index finger and tapped the top with his spoon. He liked the sound and the ritual of it. He then made a round opening in the shell and carefully extracted the soft contents. When the waiter brought a bowl with curlicues of butter, José Ramón allowed himself a thin slice of thinly buttered bread. He ran his index finger along the edge of the starched white napkin, then along the edge of the teacup, and after taking a sip of tea, he counted the number of prongs on the idle fork. If by some chance these objects—the napkin, the cup, the fork—were to vanish, an observer might conclude that José Ramón was drawing magic lines in the air. In fact, however, José Ramón was reviewing lines of the new poem, and the progress of his unconscious index finger along the edge of the starched white napkin more likely than not corresponded to the length of a line, its progress along the edge of the teacup the length of another . . .

As a result of his communist sympathies José Ramón Espeso had served several prison sentences during the Franco regime. And although he still considered himself a communist, neither he nor those around him thought it particularly important anymore. Surrounded by the walls of the Carabanchelo, he often imagined the rows of bricks beneath the plaster—their shape, their size, their number. It helped him to structure his inner world and curb his fear. When José Ramón wrote poetry, he perceived words as he did the bricks. He could feel their roughness or smoothness, their porosity or solidity, their edges, as if he were holding them in his hand, weighing them, and he fitted them together in his poems as if he were laying bricks, building solid walls of words. He became particularly adept at finding a single brick to serve as a key to the whole wall and open it up, yet it was elusive, requiring a long, arduous search, tapping, feeling, listening attentively. José Ramón began walling up in his

poems the sort of brick-word that, once found, would shift, alter, reverse, or expand the poem's meaning, shed a new light on it, through a crack, from behind. Sometimes there was more than one such word, there were whole lines of them, and sometimes he himself discovered the new meaning only after the fact: it had come about without his help.

At first he did it to evade the censors—he enjoyed the secret, private game of hide-and-seek involved; later he did it for its own sake. The only thing that annoyed him was that critics were lazy and incapable of decoding the word-ciphers. They read the poems as if staring at a wall without the slightest notion that one of the bricks in it might be deceiving them. José Ramón had gone so far as to write commentaries on several poems and store them in his mother's flat.

It was still only half past seven when he finished breakfast. Strolling through the nearly empty entrance hall, he stopped at the reception desk to find out where the Crystal Conference Hall was and learned quite by accident from the amiable man on duty that the hotel had a pool and a sauna.

The sudden possibility of having a swim before the meeting began appealed greatly to José Ramón, and when the young woman at the entrance to the pool told him he could rent a bathing suit, bathing cap, and towel, he decided to take immediate advantage of it.

“You have also music, no?” he asked in his broken English, as if he considered a pool without an audio system a rarity.

“Um . . . yes, we have,” the woman said, surprised she had admitted it. The pool was empty, and the only time they turned on the music was when there was a crowd—in other words, almost never. (She may also have been nonplussed by José Ramón's unusual appearance. The old man had put on the transparent nylon bathing cap and his bald pate shone through it like a fantastic onion dome. In fact, everything about him described a sort of good-natured circle: the nose, the cheeks, the salt-and-pepper beard, the glasses, the paunch . . . The paunch and the onion dome perching on a pair of skinny legs reminded the woman of a picture-book illustration of a less than successful sorcerer.)

The man smiled and said, “*Gracias, señorita,*” and waddled

off in the direction of the pool. The woman smiled too, then shrugged and put on a cassette that had been given to her the year before by another early swimmer, an American.

José Ramón had three loves: his mother, his poetry, and opera. They were quite enough for one life. And when the room suddenly filled with the strains of *Carmen*, he was in seventh heaven. He dived into the water as if diving into the music, just as he dived into music as if diving into water. Floating on his back, he could see the blue sky through the glass roof and count the treetops along the other side of the street, and the clouds and green poplars swam with him, and when Maria Callas's voice flew up to the treetops and rustled them like a breeze, they turned first silver, then dark, and when it flew back down like a shooting star through the glass and the water, José Ramón dived under to catch it.

A few minutes later the young woman peeked out of her booth to see what the unusual guest was up to; she saw him waving his arms, kicking his legs, spouting spray, ducking under, popping up for air, snorting, floating, splashing, then slowly sinking again, leaving only the cap to glide along the surface. He looked like a fat, old, uncommonly happy seal; in fact, the young woman had rarely seen a person so perfectly happy.

After a long float on his back he glanced at his watch, flipped onto his stomach, and paddled over to the steps. Watching him emerge, the young woman thought she saw a smile on his face. But just then, as if feeling her eyes on him, he twisted away with a jerk and, in so doing, slipped and fell backward. Trying to regain his balance, he flung out his arms, but his head came down hard on the edge of the pool. The woman ran up to him with her arms stretched out helplessly, then ran back to the telephone and dialed First Aid with a trembling finger.

“. . . It's an emergency!" she cried into the phone.

"Would you turn down that music, for Christ's sake!" the voice on the other end cried back.

José Ramón's mother, Luisa, who liked exciting, emotion-packed scenes, would have enjoyed this one immensely—had anyone but her son been the protagonist.

José Ramón's personal effects were listed and packed during a routine search of his room in the presence of the young Spanish

consul. Noticing the postcard on the desk, the consul picked it up, read it—he was the only person in the room capable of doing so—and placed it in his pocket, which was not altogether in keeping with the rules. He had decided to send it personally to Señora Luisa and enclose his condolences: the consul, like all Spaniards in this world, had a mother.

. . .

**W**hat do you say to another round, baby?” Vanda moaned coyly, tickling the Minister just below his belly button.

Baby stroked his worried brow with one hand and patted Vanda’s behind with the other.

“No go, baby. I’m late for work as it is.”

The Minister reluctantly crawled out of bed and started gathering his clothes from various parts of the room.

“Then I’ll go and make some coffee, ok baby?” Vanda said obligingly, winding her plump charms in a Chinese housecoat the Minister had bought for her in London and sidling off to the kitchen.

“I really love you, baby.”

“I love you toooooo,” he heard Vanda’s voice sailing out of the kitchen on the toot of the espresso maker. Italian. Bought in Trieste the year before.

Oh, that hat! She’d bought a sex manual not too long ago—*The First Hundred Positions* or something like that—and picked the ten best suited to them. Then she’d copied them out on slips of paper and put them in a little hat she’d crocheted especially for the purpose. And these last few months they’d had their own little erotic lottery. First the Minister would draw—with his eyes closed, of course—then Vanda. Vanda would always squeal with joy, as if she’d won a million dinars instead of a copulation. Today they’d drawn the missionary position, which, if the truth be known, the Minister found most to his liking—or should we say loving. You had to hand it to her. She was terrific in bed. She had a heart of gold, too. A few months ago they’d taken the upright position out of the hat because it gave the Minister a sciatica attack. Vanda had torn up the paper and tossed it in the



wastepaper basket, and that was the end of that nasty position.

It was nine by the time the Minister had tied his tie and combed his thinning hair.

“Coffee, baby,” he heard Vanda’s voice calling from the kitchen just as the telephone began to ring. He gave a start when she handed him the receiver. It had to be Prša. He was the only one who knew about him and Vanda.

“Listen, can you get down here right away?” asked the receiver in Prša’s most anxious tones. “There’s been a rather unpleasant accident . . . No, no, nothing like that, don’t worry. It’s just that I think . . . Yes, I’m at the hotel . . . Right . . .”

Getting into his overcoat, which the solicitous Vanda, his mistress and secretary, had readied for him, the Minister said, “They need me down at the Intercontinental. See you later.” And so saying, he gave her a peck on the lips.

. . .

**T**o tell the truth, the Minister didn’t really feel like a minister. How can you be a minister if anyone at all can nag you about anything at all? No, he was a politician, that’s all, part of the “machine.” They’d kicked him upstairs before pensioning him off, and what had they given him? The lowest of the low. Writers. The only good part about it was Vanda, it had brought him Vanda. And Vanda was the best thing that had happened to him in his whole life. During the war and just after it, everything had been clear and simple, everything had been—human. Later it all clouded over, and once you were in you couldn’t get out, you were a cog in the wheel. He had just finished his apprenticeship at the local butcher’s when the war came along and pushed him into the partisans. After the war he actually did a stint as a butcher, but when things started being nationalized he was given special training, first in administration, then in education. That’s how it was in those days. Then radio, newspapers, television—he had a biography richer than Jack London’s! And today’s crop—what did they know? Nothing. They had nothing to offer, not even a trade, while he could still make blood sausage with the best of them. And why were those damn writers always after him



to be tolerant and accept other people's views? He was their political representative, not their maître d'! Of course, they had nothing to do but grind out their completely and utterly useless drivel. Oh, and moan and groan and run down one another and the system, beating their chests and raising their voices against every piddling "miscarriage of justice." Now *he'd* put himself on the line for his beliefs; he could have ended up in jail, he could have been killed in the war. These young people wanted no-risk beliefs. The freedom to say anything they pleased—against the system, of course—and the right to system-generated status, unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, subsidized housing, trips abroad, high pay—you name it. And what did they give in exchange? A thin volume of poems that they and one or two critics pronounced "brilliant" because it represented "culture," and where would we be without culture? Well, the hell with culture. First show me you're a Shakespeare, then talk culture. Where else did they pay you like we do? No country I know. Try starving a little. Weren't artists supposed to starve? Not only did we pay them, we gave them perks like this colloquium. Colloquium! A four-day spree for them and their foreign cronies. Not that our ignorant bastards knew enough of their languages to say two words to them. And what about the foreigners? Who were they, anyway? The ones from the Eastern bloc came to buy their wives bras and panties, and the ones from the West to wash down their *čevapči ći* with plenty of *šljivovica*. Two years ago a self-styled Slavist from Stockholm had kept tugging at my sleeve, asking me about "the eye." "What eye?" I finally asked, and he said, "I hear you eat sheep eye. Big Yugoslav delicacy." So we found him one. Someone said he was a member of the Nobel Prize committee. Big deal. Cultural exchange! Our writers foisting their books off on foreigners who regularly left them behind for the chambermaids. At least the chambermaids knew the language. All they really wanted was to force their latest masterpiece on us. And we, fools that we are, we go and publish them. Wouldn't want to miss anything, would we? Got to keep up with the world. But did the world keep up with us? The world didn't give a fuck about us. All right, calm down. Think of your pension. Vanda and the pension. When you retire you'll move in with Vanda and leave the flat and the car and the house by the sea

to the snake. The other house, too. Everything. To her and that dimwit, that thirty-year-old rock 'n' roller who couldn't get into the army, not to mention the university, the slouch, the sluggard, the good-for-nothing deadbeat. Why didn't I smack him around while there was still time? It was all those damn "pedagogical values" he now so prized. Open-mindedness, democracy, all that shit . . .

"Oh, Minister!" he suddenly heard as he entered the Intercontinental. It was Prša, waving his arms like a madman.

"Well, out with it."

"It's catastrophic! We'll have to rewrite your opening remarks. Or at least call for a minute of silence at the end. One of the guests, a Spaniard, he slipped in the pool and cracked his head open."

"Oh God," said the Minister. "How old was he?" he added, as if the man had died of an illness rather than an accident.

. . .

**A**s Pipo Fink of the bouncy walk approached the Crystal Conference Hall, he was welcomed by a loud babble and a large crowd. Some people were standing, others sitting, yet others milling or making their way to the table where they could pick up programs, copies of the talks, and headsets for simultaneous translation. Pipo peeked into the hall and gave it one of his pan shots. At the other end he could see Prša trotting around, talking, waving his arms and scowling, the way people in charge tend to wave their arms and scowl. One man had taken a seat in the front row and was fiddling with his headset, trying to make out whether things had started yet. A man who trusts his ears more than his eyes, Pipo thought. Prša stopped a gliding waiter and said something with a wave of the arms and a contraction of the brows; the waiter's face remained perfectly aloof. They were used to it; there were functions here every week: a congress of sociologists, a symposium of cardiologists, a convention of Kremlinologists, a seminar of archaeologists, elections for the most valuable athlete of the year, gastronomical extravaganzas . . . There is no difference between a writer, a cyclist, and a sociologist. Not from a waiter's perspective, at least.

Back in the foyer, Pipo surveyed the terrain for the safest spot. He stationed himself next to a well-developed ficus. Then he switched back to his camera mode, focusing on three tiny, shriveled old women with thin, gray hair, lackluster eyes, and bobbling heads. Under closer scrutiny they turned into sweet little hens with shiny black feathers and white spots. Children's-book writers. Periodically hatching lyrical, gaily painted eggs. All my love, chickadees! he called out to them silently, deeply moved, and one of them, as if she had heard him, turned and gave him a blissful smile of nonrecognition.

Suddenly a mass of muscles blocked Pipo's lens. It was dominated by a protuberant chest and jutting jaw of such inexorable, relentless determination that it took the cameraman's breath away. Ivan Ljuština, the critic, was on the move. Pipo unconsciously clutched at a leaf of the ficus. But just as Ljustina was about to plow into him, he swerved his authoritative body with great dignity. Ox, boar, or yak? Pipo wondered, stroking the smooth surface of the leaf with a compassionate thumb. Having reached the opposite wall, the critic turned and started making his way in Pipo's direction again, but Pipo unconsciously took a step to the side, thereby placing himself out of range.

Pipo's internal camera now turned to a small group listening to the famous novelist Mraz. Mraz reminded Pipo of a walrus. He huffed and puffed, twisted his head this way and that (Pipo zoomed in on the tough wrinkled hide at the back of his neck and counted three fatty folds), waved his flippers, wiggled his fleshy bottom, snorted and honked. For a moment Pipo thought he saw a cloud of steam over his head. His strategic position in the middle of the room and his nonchalant, walrusy good nature combined to give the impression to all and sundry that the real reason they were there was to celebrate his birthday. Or something of the sort. Soon he'll be handing out his latest book to the foreigners, thought Pipo maliciously.

The next group caught by Pipo's kino-eye was a trio of poets whispering confidentially under the cover of a coquettish potted plant. Why do all our poets have greasy hair that hangs in noodles over their necks and cheeks, a sickly, gray, and, yes, oily complexion, bent backs, and tiny, beady, squinty, perfidious eyes? Pipo wondered. The novelists were a healthier lot

somehow. The mouselike glint in the poets' eyes made Pipó decide that when he finally got down to writing his *Animal Kingdom* he'd put the poets in the "Vermin" chapter. Meanwhile, a fourth poet had joined the group: a small man in a neat suit and tie. Pipó zoomed in on his sleeves, which were a bit too long, though not so long as to hide a pair of chubby little hands. What was this teddy bear doing among the grizzlies? Pipó thought, and capriciously crossed him off the list of writers, beasts, and beings.

Women were in the minority, and most of those present were young and good-looking, language students from the university brought in to serve as interpreters. They're much too smooth and shiny to be animals, Pipó concluded, too sleek, too aerodynamic. (Look at her, will you? a friend of Pipó's had said the other day, commenting on a girl in the street. A sight for sore eyes! A regular DC-10!)

Panning again, Pipó registered noisy packs of badgers, crocodiles, monkeys, bears, and a lone gray eagle. Prša went too far when he said a writer was a wolf to other writers; no, a writer might be a mouse or, say, a rat, but not a wolf. Besides, writers made you think of people, and people always made you think of animals, and with that conciliatory thought Pipó stopped his camera long enough to have a good look at the long shot in front of him. In the background he noticed two or three middle-aged women, each seriously leafing through the typed versions of the talks. Foreigners. Translators. Translators were: 1. plain women past their prime (who else would devote so much energy to translating the writers of a "minor" literature?); 2. pale and shopworn (from spending all their time indoors translating); 3. less than stylishly dressed (because their pay is so low); and 4. modest (because of the very nature of their undertaking). How did they get caught in such a useless and out-of-the-way literature? Pipó wondered. Maybe in their youth they'd had a fling with one or another local writer and, seduced and abandoned, they'd kept translating out of loyalty to the fling and because, having learned an otherwise worthless language, they might as well do what little they could with it.

"Look who's here!" Pipó heard a voice call out. It was Ena, a.k.a. the Bell Tower, a journalist and friend from his student

days. Ena was tall, almost as tall as Pipo, and was known for her tragicomical ungainliness, which showed more in the way she moved than in the way she was put together. She seemed so surprised at being able to walk that she periodically forgot how to go about it, and her nickname, acquired early in her studies, derived not so much from her height as from her long neck, her small head, and her outlandishly large feet. The Bell Tower had penetrating dark eyes and an unbearably sad expression; she wore her despair—and had worn it as long as anyone could remember—like an old-fashioned brooch. She was a mythical beast—half ostrich, half giraffe. Pipo caught a brief view of Ena’s profile. What could a person do with that silhouette, that soul, and those feet? Pipo thought, and suddenly remembered that he and the Bell Tower had in the distant past . . . once or twice only, three times at the most. There were times Pipo thought she was in love with him, the times she snuggled up and wouldn’t speak. A kind of adhesive tape.

“What’s up?” said Pipo nonchalantly.

“Nothing,” said the giraffe, the ostrich, and the Bell Tower, heading toward the conference hall. “Aren’t you going in?”

“Not just yet,” said Pipo, starting the camera up again. His new perspective—he had a bird’s-eye view this time—revealed considerable movement on the right, and he took pleasure in registering the funnel effect of a mass of people flowing out of the frame.

No, this was neither his time nor his place. He just happened to have been born here, to have gotten stuck here. He wasn’t even a member of the animal kingdom. He lacked the greasy hair, the beady eyes. In his dreams he had other plans, he was different. I’m different! he called out mentally to the last human figure to enter the conference hall, after which he switched off his internal camera and went into the hall himself, picking up a headset on the way. The minute he sat down—in the last row, as near to the door as possible—he set the dial to *English*, superimposed the female English-speaking voice onto Prša’s face as he ran through the organizational details, and pushed off on his own.

Pipo was wakened by a light touch on the shoulder. He turned to see a BERKELEY T-shirt.

“Hi!” said the T-shirt in English. “Mind if I join you?”

Pipo moved over and the young man sat down. Pipo noticed he was wearing a headset and an almost happy smile. Stupid Yank, thought Pipo. Ready to beam at the most inane introductory remarks. When the young man realized that Pipo was looking at him, his smile broadened. He took off his headset, gave Pipo another nudge, and offered it to him. This guy’s crazy, Pipo thought, but took off his earphones and put on the American’s. Suddenly his head exploded with the Talking Heads’ latest hit.

Meanwhile the rest of the writers heard:

Comrades, Fellow Writers!

It is a great pleasure and a great honor for me to open this year’s Zagreb Literary Colloquium, which will be devoted to the theme of “Contemporary Literature: Its Trends and Tendencies in the Dialectics of World Events.” Our city, well known for its hospitality, takes particular pride in playing annual host to this gathering of national and international literary celebrities. All of you—poets, novelists, artists—contribute freely of your labors to the cause of peace, breaking down geographic, political, and ideological borders to form a neutral ground of the written word where you can wield that proverbial pen which is stronger than the sword . . .

. . .

**T**hings picked up considerably after the opening ceremonies. The participants were more at ease in the lobby and started circulating, peering at the name tags on one another’s lapels, making friends, forming groups. One of the locals, Ranko Leš, who considered eccentricity a poet’s prime responsibility, had pinned the badge to his trousers, just to the left of the crotch.

The French representative, Jean-Paul Flagus, an elderly gentleman with watery blue goggle-eyes, thick, wet lips, and a slightly protruding neck that gave him the look of a turtle, had gathered a group of French-speaking writers around him and was talking animatedly, puffing occasional smoke rings from his thick cigar.

“Much as I mourn our colleague José Ramón Espeso, we all know that bizarre deaths are far from exceptional in the artistic world.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cecilia Sørensen, the Danish representative.

“Death by water, for example. Let me pass over water’s symbolic nature, interesting as it is, and concentrate on concrete instances. The first that comes to my mind—and doubtless yours—is that of the Chinese poet Li Po, an inveterate tippler, who fell from a boat in his cups and drowned while trying to embrace the reflection of the moon in the water. Or Menander, who, stricken with a cramp while swimming off Piraeus one day, descended to a watery grave. Or Shelley . . . ”

“Or Virginia Woolf,” Cecilia interjected.

“Evelyn Waugh had apparently *meant* to die by water,” Jean-Paul Flagus continued, peacefully puffing on his cigar, “but the school of jellyfish he fell upon kept him from going under. If one can believe W. H. Auden, that is . . . ”

“Aristotle is said to have drowned,” the toy poet piped up. “But then,” he piped down, “maybe he didn’t.”

“Drowning doesn’t strike me as particularly bizarre,” said Ranko Leš.

Monsieur Flagus turned and stared at him with a puff and a smile and said, “Then here is something much more bizarre and something you must have heard of. The Greek poet Terpander choked and died while giving a recitation, because a fig that a member of the audience threw at him flew straight into his mouth and lodged in his windpipe.”

“Pushkin and Lermontov both died in duels,” the toy poet tried again, softly. “That’s no ordinary death.” But as he spoke, he heard how banal it sounded and added, “And Gorky was poisoned!”

“Right you are,” said Monsieur Flagus, “but let’s take a happier example. Sir Thomas Urquhart is said to have died laughing when he learned that Charles II had been removed from the throne.”

The writers were a bit nonplussed, uncertain whether to take his words as the truth or a joke. Moreover, no one but Thomas Kiely could quite place Sir Thomas Urquhart.



“Well, our poet Miklós Zrínyi was killed by a wild boar,” said Ilona Kovács, the Hungarian representative. “But that was back in the seventeenth century,” she added, as if it could only have happened then, the seventeenth century being known for its poets and boars.

“You mean *our* poet Nikola Zrinski,” said the poet Ranko Leš, cocking his nose at her as if it were a dangerous beak.

“That’s a matter of opinion,” said the poet Ilona Kovács, sighing coquettishly and giving Leš a quick but open once-over.

“Very interesting,” said Jean-Paul Flagus benignly, “and of course you know that the famous William Thackeray died of gluttony.”

“Francis Thompson committed suicide because he was visited by Thomas Chatterton, who had killed himself two centuries earlier and ordered him to follow suit,” said Thomas Kiely the Irishman.

“What’s so bizarre about suicide?” said Ranko Leš, ever protesting. “You might at least have mentioned Marlowe, who was stabbed to death in a tavern.”

“For not paying his bill!” cried a voice behind his back. Everyone laughed.

“Lionel Johnson,” said the Irishman serenely, “died from injuries sustained when he fell off a bar stool . . .”—again the writers burst out laughing—“and James Agee and Robert Lowell died in a taxi.”

“Nothing unusual in that,” Leš interposed again.

“As unusual as dying in a hotel pool,” said the Irishman.

“Another interesting case,” Monsieur Flagus continued, calm and collected, “is that of Sholom Aleichem, who was so deathly afraid of the number thirteen that none of his manuscripts had a page with that number. He died on 13 May 1916, but the date engraved on his tombstone is 12-a.”

The writers felt somehow personally involved in the fate of Sholom Aleichem, and their buzzing died down.

“There are any number of such instances,” Monsieur Flagus went on. “William Cullen Bryant died in June, as he foresaw in his poem ‘June.’ Nathaniel Hawthorne claimed the number sixty-four played a mystical role in his life; he died in 1864 . . .”

“That’s not an unusual death; that’s a coincidence,” said

Cecilia Sørensen coldly, implying either that she was tired of all this talk about death or that she felt it had gone too far.

“All right, then,” said Monsieur Flagus. “How about Sherwood Anderson, who died of intestinal complications after swallowing a toothpick at a cocktail party? And now, how about calling it a day, because here comes a waiter with drinks.” And in fact a waiter was pushing a cart laden with drinks in the direction of the group. The writers suddenly came to life. When each had a drink in hand, Monsieur Flagus said with dignity and natural elegance, “I propose a toast to the late José Ramón Espeso.”

The writers drained their glasses. Noticing that Cecilia Sørensen was drinking mineral water, Monsieur Flagus added with a diabolical grin, “Oh, by the way, did you know that Arnold Bennett died in Paris of typhoid fever from drinking a glass of water? He wanted to prove the water was untainted.”

Once more the writers laughed, and Cecilia Sørensen, clutching her glass of mineral water, withdrew.

*Translated by Michael Henry Heim*