



One Thing Leads to Another

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FROM THE WARRING FACTIONS

Ammiel Alcalay

Beyond Baroque Books
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Ammiel Alcalay's *from the warring factions*, a wide-ranging work in three movements, opens with an identically titled long poem that finds its center of gravity in the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia. The poem is followed by a "Discussion" on poetics and cultural perspective with poet Benjamin Hollander and, finally, by "A Note on Materials & Processes," in which Alcalay explains his historical and textual approach and lists the many and various sources for his poem. The poet assumes here the role of cultural transmitter and translator, one who juxtaposes documentary evidence with individual experience and emotion, not so much for aesthetic effect, but out of necessity: "It seemed to me that Shelley needed to meet these European Muslims whose remains were strewn across a small plot of land in Southern Europe, near a town that had once been a Roman silver mine." Alcalay "pillages" even his own earlier writing, acknowledging that the global mix includes his personal history and artistic production: "I felt that it was important not to jettison parts of other, older selves, but to bring them along for the ride into this new world I now inhabited." Rather than remaining passively filed away in libraries and archives, the past continues to interact dynamically with our present circumstances and concerns.

Alcalay has his muses, and chief among them are the forensic anthropologist William Haglund and the poet Jerry Estrin, whom one might call a cultural anthropologist. In his "Notes," Alcalay explains that "no place / not rome," the second section in the poem "from the warring factions," is a "meditation" on Estrin's poem on the Gulf War,

"Rome, A Mobile Home," and that if "from the warring factions" is an epic, then William Haglund is its hero. The careers of both Haglund and Estrin have involved digging into the ruins. In such good company, Alcalay embarks on his own salvage operation, his own project of reconstruction.

Miró is in The Museum of Modern Art.

Miró is in Sarajevo.

A famous playwright is on stage at Symphony Space and over the air on NPR.

The announcer calls me twice during a break to find out how to pronounce the name Izeta.

Izeta is Miró's wife.

They have a dog.

It is December 1st, 1993.

At the beginning of "Old Bridge," the first section of the poem, we find ourselves in a fluid space, simultaneously in New York City and Sarajevo, a geographic shiftiness that Alcalay anchors to the bottom of the page with a specific date, as if he were shooting a documentary film. As the poem continues, heretofore overlooked relationships begin to seem inevitable, and we suspect that we will be remiss if we fail to notice the connections. We learn how essential it is to pay attention to details, such as the critical importance of an accent mark.

And so our research project gets under way, with *from the warring factions* as our roadmap for finding out, our reading list that bleeds out into the world in a myriad of directions. A reading strategy that focuses only on the text at hand will not suffice here, because Alcalay's poem is made both from what lies outside of it and from all that is

pulled in. Without some familiarization with what's outside, it becomes difficult to read the poem. Putting a new spin on didactic literature, Alcalay drops names of people, places, and events that *must* be investigated. He asks us to consider both the proximity and the distance between Miró the Spanish painter and Miro the director of the Obala Theater in Sarajevo. The first Miró's name has much cul-

Alcalay's vital book works against monolingualism and cultural chauvinism, against a blindfolded view of history, and towards global literacy.

tural currency. It is one that many Americans will recognize. The second Miro's name, assuming that the reader realizes that the differently placed accent mark is not a typo, does not have the same resonance, but perhaps should. After the Obala



