Translator’s Preface

Michele Simeon

Miljenko Jergović, originally from Bosnia and currently residing in Croatia, is a renowned and popular cultural figure throughout the former Yugoslavia. A prolific poetry and prose writer, his work has been translated into many languages, though only one volume of his short stories (Sarajevo Marlboro) has so far appeared in English. A second collection, Mama Leone, is currently being translated for future publication in English.

“Tramp” is part of Jergović’s 2004 collection of short stories, Inšallah, Madonna, Intallah, which the author describes as ‘remixes’ of the traditional Bosniak lyric song, the sevdaitka. The text presents particular challenges for the translator because of its archaic expressions and many Turkish and Arabic loanwords. Words from these languages, for example ‘jahornaut’, the Islamic term for hell, were only translated (rather than simply transliterated) if this aided reader comprehension and the fluidity of the text. More commonly understood words, such as ‘aga’, an Ottoman civil or military officer, were retained. To avoid losing the distinct Islamic allusions imparted by such language, the word ‘God’ was usually translated as ‘Allah’ which is both comprehensible to an English-speaking audience and immediately recognizable in its direct reference to Islam.

The title of the story, “Gurbet,” is an Arabism referring to a wanderer, vagabond, migrant worker, or tramp. Presently the term is not in wide use and would not be understood by many native Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian speakers although in modern Bosnian usage gurbet is sometimes used to indicate an extremely ugly person. I believe that the English word ‘tramp’ most accurately captures the original meaning of a restless outsider whilst maintaining its pejorative modern significance. Jergović notes that, “Older people would say [gurbet] if they want to say that someone is peculiar because he has some sort of flaw.”
“Tramp” by Miljenko Jergović

Translated by Michele Simeon

My name is Mustafa. I’m one of those who it’s better not to look at. And if among them there is a worst, then that’s me. In Tešanj when a woman is with child, she’s forbidden to pass by my house. If she were to look at me, they say, the child would be uglier than any of its family. That is the custom of women, the Turkish ones and others too. When I was a little boy, just knee-high, my mother would stroke my head and say: My Mustafa, good Allah created you out of jealousy, so that he would be the only one who could look at you without feeling sick. And then she would say how this was a lucky sign, because Allah always hides his best creations from the human eye. But how being ugly was good, well, mother didn’t know what to say about that. There are always things that the whole world knows, and only mothers don’t know. If they knew, the human race couldn’t carry on. But that isn’t for me to say. It’s better if I tell more about myself and less about others. My name is Mustafa. But that’s not what I answer to. When I want to say my own name, I whisper “Tramp.”

My father was Mustafa too. When I was born they asked him what he’d call the little one. He will be named after his creator. People looked at each other in surprise, as if Mustafa had gone insane or really thought too well of his high position if he intended to name the child Allah. But my father wasn’t thinking of that Creator, he had himself in mind. The good Allah will punish you for it, his brothers said; grandmother was astonished, and grandfather sat on the floor puffing his pipe and letting all the good and evil of the world pass him by. That’s how it was when I was born. And then they named me Mustafa. They were happy that my father hadn’t thought of anything worse. Because if he had, that’s what he would have named me. It was that time in Bosnia when the poor were rising up and even a hundred viziers couldn’t do anything to an aga.1

People are born faceless. It’s all the same if it’s a boy or a girl when a baby is six months old. You can’t even tell if it looks like the father or the mother. After a year something was visible. And when he saw it, my father put his hands together like Christians fold theirs in church, but he didn’t say anything. Only his gaze as he walked down the street was a little lower, and he didn’t look towards the heavens like before and wait for the commoners to run to him, moving aside anything in his way; instead he lowered his eyes to the roofs of the tallest houses. As time passed, and it was easier to see what I was like, his eyes fell lower still, until they found their gaze caught between the gaps of the cobblestone road. Bey? Mustafa, he would hear from inside a shop, how is your little one growing? And when he’d turn around to see who it was, there would be no one. Or the one who asked after me was hiding, or my father was hearing voices that weren’t there.

I was seven when he left home. I’m not a bey; my possessions aren’t those of a bey; neither is my wife and neither is my child. No one belongs to me. Upstream, far from town, he made a den of willow branches. He went to the villages from house to house, begging for alms. Each time mother would go after him, telling him to return, pleading with all her heart, but he didn’t want to come back. She said to him: Return, you’ll never have to see your son. And he said that he didn’t have a son and that any father who didn’t want to see his own son would end up in hell. She ran away crying, but she returned to him. And everything started from the beginning. She loved him in the way that a woman loves her own husband, never thinking ill of him and never damning him when the worst came, instead damning her own father for the husband he had found her. As autumn becomes winter and as the early summer heat dries every well so that there’s no water to drink, well that’s how my mother Sena would go to bring father back home. Once she said to him: He is not what you think he is, he’s a child like every other. But he only looked at her, somehow sad, like a puppy looking at a leg dismembered by a fox, and didn’t say a thing. He didn’t tell her that he didn’t have a son and that any father who turned away from his own child would end up in hell.

1 “Vizier” refers to a high official in a Muslim government. In the Ottoman Empire, viziers often served as counselors to the sultan.
2 “Aga” is the title for a civil or military leader.
3 “Bey” originally denoted a Turkish tribal leader, but over the course of the Ottoman Empire its meaning gradually evolved into an honorific similar to the English “sir”.

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It was in August, on the Day of Prophet Ilyas, when two men brought my father home and laid him on the floor so that his head was facing east. I was twelve years old, and I sat down beside him. He was peaceful, the fingers of his left hand were stiff like a sparrowhawk’s talons before it grabs a rabbit. I tried to straighten them, but it would have been easier to break the bough of an oak than bend the fingers of the corpse. I thought of my father on the burial plank with those hands, how with loving hands he would be lowered into the pit, how he would appear before the eyes of Allah with hands that lament.

Later they pushed me aside. The dead should be prepared for the funeral. As they removed his rags, vermin crawled from his long, dirty hair and beard. Black lice, dozens of them, roamed the wooden floor. They didn’t know where to go, refugees lost in a strange world. The lice that were born in his hair and beard, the lice that hatched from the eggs they laid, and those lice that were older still, these were the only living things that lost something because of the death of my father Mustafa. And I killed him because of the way I am, even less than vermin.

My name is Mustafa, but I’ve been Tramp since the time we buried my father. I no longer leave the house so I won’t cast a spell on the child who looks at me. But I stand in the window, and people should be careful not to allow their children on Tramp’s street.

When I’m bored of watching the world that doesn’t pass by, I stand before the garden behind the house and wait in the place where the roses will bloom. I plant them with my own hands, every year two or three. Plants that refuse to grow in the gardens of others thrive in my care, boasted my mother to the neighbors. They didn’t believe her, and when they came into the garden for the first time it was as if their eyes, wide with shock, were alight: two hundred roses inflamed, like a fire enveloping the cobblestones, refusing to be extinguished. And that was before the time when the wind would blow and push the petals across the town. Then people would say: Here comes autumn, Tramp’s cannon has fired. That’s when mothers would start knitting the winter sweaters for their children. So there was some use even for me.

At the bottom of the garden is a fresh water well which even the worst drought hasn’t dried up. When the grandfather of my grandfather Bey Selim Pašalić built the house, they told him that it would be a sin to build his own private well. And he told them that this was his water and that it would stay in his garden, and if ever such a great thirst took over the town that water remained only in his well, then that would be a sign that he was wrong and that water is everyone’s and God’s. Then anyone could drink from his well, and he would go to hell because he had taken what wasn’t his. That sort of drought never came, and as to whether or not Selim did end up in hell, that isn’t for me to guess.

But it was from that water that Tramp’s roses reddened so, and from that water that just before autumn the petals flushed all of Tesanj. God gave me a face that no one can stand to look at, but he gave me water that no one else has. That’s why I say that my gain is greater than my loss. When she hears me talk like that, my mother knows to say that it’s enough for me to get up on my tip toes and my head will already reach heaven. I don’t know what she means by this, if this is just something she heard and that I didn’t, maybe those words have been repeated for hundreds of years, but all the same it’s dear to me. She never speaks of hell.

Ten days ago our neighbour Mensur Abaza died. He wasn’t yet fifty and I myself know that he always sat on his stool hunched over a pot between his legs. He was poor and he worked for those in still greater poverty mending their pots. He worked so much that he never managed to look anyone in the eye. They’d say that only when he was dead would you be able to tell the color of his eyes. We got along well. I would run down the street to his shop, and he would always receive me kindly. And because he never saw my face I wasn’t bothered there. Mensur Abaza never looked anyone in the eye.

He was survived by his crippled wife. While she was giving birth she stiffened and lost feeling in her arms and legs. She had been like that for twenty odd years. He had turned and changed her, fed and cared for her, only so that Zumra didn’t have to. And to that day I had never seen Zumra. Nor had she seen me. Such was the understanding between her father and me. I don’t remember when we agreed it, but I know that neither of us uttered a single word. It was understood that he had promised me that Zumra would never go down to the shop while I was there, and that she would never pass by my window as I stood before it. She would go fetch water every morning at eight, and I would appear in
the window fifteen minutes later. I stayed exactly fifteen minutes, because after twenty Zumra would return home. And so it was, until that day.

After Mensur's funeral, she came and said to my mother: Father, God rest his soul, had to depart and the two of us don't know how and with what we will manage. It is a sin to ask for alms, and we wouldn't accept any. But there is something that would help us greatly. The town well is far for me, Aunty Sena, now that father is no longer with us... She said that and burst into tears. Mother comforted her, and said that as long as Zumra and her mother were near us, they wouldn't go hungry, and offered her one or two ducats. And she didn't think that that was alms, but said that she made this gesture because we would end up in hell if our closest neighbors went hungry living beside such wealth.

I listened behind the door and I knew that it wasn't good because mother had spoken of hell. It was the first time that word passed through her lips. And the person who utters that word in this house, whether because of weakness or arrogance or because of pride like my father Mustafa, God rest his soul, invites great misfortune. And that person will soon fall among the lowest of the low. But none of that made my mother Sena speak of hell. She was ready to offer anything except that which she couldn't give. The water from our well. If they took that from him, what would Tramp have left of his life?

Zumra left, without getting what she asked for and without accepting what was offered her. I was quiet and acted as if I didn't hear a thing. I waited to hear what my mother would say. But I could have waited like that until the end of the world and she would have stayed quiet and carried her sin with her. Then I told her not to worry, that I could allow what she couldn't. Let Zumra come to my well for water. Neither would the roses suffer, nor would the crown fall from my head if I were away from them for half an hour.

There would have been a happy ending if I had stayed in my place. And if I had given more importance to a promise between two people even after one of them had moved to the grave. And I had promised Mensur Abaza, God rest his soul, and he had promised me that Zumra and I would never see each other. They say that there was never such a beauty in Tešanj, that the tinker's daughter was prettier than any girl a hundred times over. But it's all for nothing, because she bears the mark of her mother who was paralyzed during her birth. Every young man fears that warning, even though the Qur'an doesn't say anything about such signs, and even though the town is full of young men who couldn't care less about the Book. If her own mother was paralyzed as she brought her into this world, what would happen to the one who kissed Zumra? But none of that was important to the promise which we, Mensur and I, gave one another. He knew I didn't want Zumra's beauty to hurt me, and he didn't want Zumra to measure her own misfortune with mine.

That's why we never saw each other. It would have stayed this way if the roses hadn't interfered.

The first time that Zumra needed to come to my place for water, I couldn't wait to find out if she would breathe in their scent and what she would say about them. I imagined that she'd go from one to the next, taking each in her palm, admiring them and breathing them in. Just like that to all of those two hundred roses. But I didn't peek into the garden.

That's why that same night I dreamed of Zumra among my flowers. I saw her clearly. She was just as pretty as they said, and she played among the roses with the water jug on her head, and then the jug... Well, it's better that I don't speak of this, because dreams tell something even if it's only to ourselves, and a man can make a fool of himself. In dreams the world isn't how it really is, but at least it's easier to cope with. What's hard to bear is that in dreams even Mustafa is no longer Tramp.

The following morning I knew when Zumra came down to my garden. I saw as she tied her scarf in front of the mirror. I saw as she stepped into her wooden slippers, went up to mother in her room and said that she would return shortly. I saw her, I tell you, and I saw nothing. And it would have been better if it had stayed that way. I sat on the settee, legs folded under me, and placed the Qur'an on my lap, satisfying all my wants, so that I would have hated to stand up. When I sit like that with the Book, I always call mother to bring me some water if I get thirsty. But as my finger traced His words from right to left, I saw Zumra going down to the garden, closed the Book rudely as if it were a blacksmith's bellows, jumped from the settee, and ran to the window.

If the eye is a sea, then I allowed myself just one drop. But that was one drop too many. Zumra passed through the roses, their heads turning towards her, without brushing against a single one. Like the wind would
gently part the flowers, that's how she slipped through them. The quickest escape at the greatest speed. Just so that their petals wouldn't be wounded. Was it because of their beauty or because I didn't forbid her to come to my well, I will never know. But I hope it's because of the second. Maybe then I would be less afraid.

My name is Mustafa. I'm one of those who it's better not to look at. If I want to say my name, I say Tramp. That's the name that those who never see me know me by. That name was my position. Neither that of a bey, nor given by God, nor created out of the fears of others. I was Tramp and I wasn't upset about it. Until the day when I took just one tiny glance into the garden as Zumra was approaching the well. After that both my seas spilled over, and Tramp was no longer my name, but the name of my misfortune. And that is the truth.

I see her now as she is by the well and I ask good Allah to make her turn and look at me. I don't care what she will see, because she must see me looking at her. But she can't see me as I am to other people. I ask God for her to turn around and perform this sin. But to ask for someone else to sin is worse, surely, than all other sins. Worse than when a father won't look at his own son. I know that's the way it is, but I can't help it.

I stand in the window and whisper: My Zumra! But she passes the roses and I know she won't turn around. Even if I did call to her aloud, even if I did start to sing, she would go to the well without looking at me. My name is Mustafa, I am known as Tramp in the place where I was born. I planted roses, and when the town was covered with their petals, mothers would start knitting the winter sweaters for their children. This is what I would have been remembered for if I hadn't become so arrogant; if I hadn't needed to know if Zumra loved my roses. Now I ask God to trample the word that was never voiced between me and her father, God rest his soul. But I know that he won't and that I will never change while water still flows in my well and while there is thirst in the house of Mensur Abaza, God rest his soul.