

I got this idea when I was on a solo trip in Malaga. I went to Centre Pompidou one evening and, among other things, saw two physical models made in a rough, architecture- student style. One was called White City, the other one Black City, and they were made out of single foam blocks, all white, all black. I will research later what the concept is, who the artists are (I believe it's either a collective or a moniker of a person from Hungary); what matters to me now is that they reminded me so much of Belgrade (literally translated as "white city" from Serbian). The association has to do with the first title, of course, but with the second one as well. The concept of black and white, the inversion of the original city, the binary view of the world, the good and the bad, they all fit; it all fits. Some months ago, a friend of mine was trying to explain to another friend what Belgrade is like. She said: it feels like Belgrade died, and now it's living its afterlife. I couldn't think of a better description. I want to, or rather, I *have* to, ²redefine what it means to be a zombie – cause I am one. I'm living that afterlife.

I come from a neighborhood on the outskirts, but my father grew up in the center, and my parents lived in the metropolitan area back in the 80s before they got me. I adopted this sense of nostalgia for the inner city from them, having met the first ghost of my life at the age of whenever my first memory was. I was in love with Belgrade, with the same passion and delusion that I loved Kurt Cobain, or former Yugoslavian rock-bands, the ones whose main members were dead. Throughout my life, all up to my late 20s, I had always felt like my hometown was something to be proud of. Nobody understood how amazing Belgrade was, nobody, except us – who were from it. I hated when they called it the Berlin of the Balkans; I couldn't stand the comparison to Budapest. Belgrade is Belgrade, there is nothing like it and it looks like no other; I would, however, see it in other places, in the streets of Milan

when I'd spot tall European trees in the middle, in Athens when people spoke to me in a way that's familiar, in New York when the air felt the same.

It took some time for me to realize that, when people nodded politely, or even agreed with me that "Belgrade was great" but without feeling, it wasn't that they didn't get it. We were the ones who didn't get the reality of our situation: Belgrade is a disjointed, provincial, corrupt, dirty, neglected, wasted and dangerous place. We had to go through a great deal of collective and individual trauma to see that, and I won't list any of it here because that is not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about the inversion of Belgrade. What if our city does, in fact, have an after-life, the upside-down, the reverse contour in the image of a high-contrast vector, like the Mary J Blige figure we all saw in the Paris Olympic Games logo; and what if we're all living it here, smiling and laughing with friends who come to see us from abroad, like Mexicans speak to their ancestors during Dia de los Muertos, barely understanding the problems people have in other places in Serbia, complaining about the heat and the traffic and the snow, the government and the dirt, the trash bins that don't open, the gentrification of places we forget existed until they get rebuilt? I hesitate to think that any of that is special. That has always been part of the curse of being born right then and there. I felt special in my thinking that I am from where I am, my knowledge and identity were formed by a turbo-improvised revision of a failed communist regime. We knew nothing real about anything, as kids, we just knew that there was war, and we remember that we were bombed by some countries completely unrelated to ours (in our view back then), abbreviated locally as "America". We all spoke pretty decent American English. And we really prided on our friendliness, our warm approach and kindness, our nightlife.

At night, the city becomes the devil.

When I say this, I recall the image of a girl I saw on the trolleybus almost two decades ago, when I was going home from school. The sun had just set at the moment when she bowed her head down to her book and took a line of heroin from it. I have learned that I should write about what I know, and I don't know drugs of that sort, I have never been that person. But I will say that I have some respect for people who choose to do drugs as resistance, as a valid tool to refuse participation in what is happening in the world. That's why whenever I think of this moment, I feel a wave of empathy washing over me, combined with fear, a bitter-sweet taste of the privileged life I lead. That fear is not the anxiety of what might happen to me if I ever "slipped" down the tunnel of narcotic abuse, but rather the understanding that, for her, we were all irrelevant on that bus. She was riding her own bus, and we were all just ghosts on it. The girl on the bus enters her own reality as the day gives its space to the night. I think of all the nights I loved back when I was still really going out. I was so happy to think that nobody has as much fun as I do, as we do, as we know how to do it "in this city". I almost couldn't wait for someone to come and realize that Belgrade has a better clubbing scene than the place they came from. I had never been to Berghain (I don't wait in lines), but I was sure that it had nothing on anything happening here, regardless of its size, the music, the drugs, the gays, whatever. We were just, simply, more natural at all of it, nothing was an effort, anything was possible. True as that may have been, because fun has always been our brand, it was side to side with despair. I always saw a glimpse of cynicism in the eyes of people who were my current age back then, whenever a foreigner would say how much they loved how vibrant and potent the city was, with such "unique potential". A pulse, they'd call it; a pulse is something you talk about when someone is dying.

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