

WASP

by Michel Bozikovic

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

You stay lying on the mountain half the night, in between, when you come to for brief moments, you walk ahead, not knowing if it was the right decision not to shoot yourself, and you're at odds with yourself, at odds all night long, whenever you regain consciousness, a sweeping curve from left to right and back and round and round in a circle for ever, life, death, what the hell's the difference? It's perfectly obvious, you have to live as long as you can and the moon and the island don't give you a chance, the view's too stark, eternity down to the bone.

So you lie down again, the gun on your heart and your mind on your family, your parents, your brothers, sometimes on your girlfriend who you think you love, but it's the visions that grind you down, the visions of your parents standing at your own grave and looking down at you, broken, your brothers pale, and at some point the light changes, the moon stops shining, battling desperately against the sun, which sends ahead a pink to break your heart, and you know again that you want to live and even if it's only to experience a moment like this again, and then you hear a jingling, the quiet jingling of little bells, and it's gone again in an instant and you think you're hallucinating, which wouldn't be surprising after three days with no sleep, after a night in which you've lain awake like a medicine man in a trance, a suicidal shaman without the knowledge of his forefathers, and you wish you had their resources, you'd have flown and not felt the pain, perhaps you'd have jumped and woken up again in bed, a thousand miles to the northwest, a Castaneda of Dalmatia, but then you might not have seen it, the little wasp coming flying towards you in a zigzag; what the devil is that doing here, you ask yourself; there's nothing to eat here for you!

You silly wasp, you'd like to call out, and tears prick your eyes at the thought of the tiny creature, how delicate she is, and yet she lives her life without complaint, with no ifs and buts, and she alights on the tip of your right boot after flying one or two rounds; it feels as though she could tell what a terrible state

you're in, you'd like to hug her for her presence, this tiny thing, and you start talking to her, Franz of fucking Assisi, for God's sake. No, it's a life worth living, and even if only to kill others like the wasp – that tiny, brutal murderess.

Your girlfriend cried in the night, in the pictures you saw in your mind's eye, she cried and you were certain she had the same dream, and your parents too, for they must have found the note by now and spent the night in fear, and you hate yourself for it, how could you have done that to them, your mother's tears, your father's concern, all for nothing, but could you have told them you wanted to join the war, to die for a fatherland that you've never lived in, that never called for you itself, to defend, protect – well whom, an idea, an ideal? And you think of Franco, that wanker, and all the young men and women from across Europe and the whole world who came to defend people who'd deserved better, and where are they now, the men and women from across Europe and the whole world, what happened to their help, you'd have said to your parents, and they might have seen your point, but you didn't do it, and they'd never have let you have the car anyway, no way.

The wasp smells the tears, feels the pain, still there on your boot, and when you ask her to come closer, you won't squash her, she flatters her wings, ascends slowly like a tiny helicopter, inclines her wings forwards and approaches you in no rush, and you don't know whether you ought to reach out a hand or whether that would frighten her, but she's not scared, not a bit, she comes closer, smells at the barrel of the gun, she likes the sulphur, the little she-devil, and you see her pincers, knowing she kills other creatures with them, slicing them in half, and it's as if she were examining the gun to see if your weapon is worthy of hers.

She alights on your left arm, on the soft leather, which is gradually warming up in the morning sun submerging everything in red, the leather shining almost orange, and she looks at you through a thousand eyes, as if she wanted to tell you it was the right decision to carry on living, because living is her destiny too, and you never know when the bird will come along and eat her up or when an enemy will shoot you, just keep going, she seems to be saying, eat, kill and die when your time comes.

The sun wins the battle once again, taking over from the moon, and you can make out the chain of islands in the distance, the way they're dunked in rays, and the red gets more intense, and there it emerges, ascending like the most normal thing in the world, the red line stretching across the islands, and look, it's the sun, says the wasp and looks at you, eyeing the red face glowing with tears, watching the red fireball in your watery eyes, and you both know that you'll fight, that you'll both fight, until the big bird comes along.

The jingling again, and you're not sure whether it's your overstretched senses playing a bad joke or there really are bells ringing. The wasp takes off, very slowly and calmly, flying a circle around you with her eyes fixed on you, as if she wanted to give you her blessing, and buzzes away, away from the creature whose life she may have saved, and the jingling gets louder and louder, and you can pinpoint it, it's coming from behind you, somewhere behind the next hill is a jingling, telling you it's time to come to, to pull yourself together and get up, to hurl a forceful 'Hello, here I am!' at the new day and to affirm the decision to stay alive by carrying out one first deed, and it has to be an irrevocable deed, one that's ineluctable anyway: you have to go down to the car, because it'll be found. And when the soldiers who'll come turn up you mustn't insult them any further by playing games, you'll tell them you wanted to kill yourself because you couldn't see any point any more, and then a dog barks and you turn around and in front of you is a huge beast with sharp eyes and long teeth, looking at you, fixing you with a motionless threat, until its owner comes, a shepherd boy crossing this stony desert with his herd. The boy raises his stick and drops it with a quiet, but clearly defined clack on a stone, whereupon the dog turns around and runs back to him, leaning against his leg for a moment and then taking care of his goats straight away: it conducts them away from the figure that doesn't fit the picture and ought not to be in its world, away from another one infected with the virus of insanity.

The boy says nothing, making no attempt to greet you, and you realize what kind of impression you must make on someone who comes wandering over the hill with his goats at the crack of dawn and suddenly sees this figure in black, holding a huge gun in his hand, and you think, my God, the boy's actually incredibly relaxed considering the situation and the sight you're offering him.

You put the gun away, deliberately slowly, perfectly casually, then you wave over at him with your right hand, now free, and the shepherd boy nods, turns away and walks off to the left, vanishing behind the hill from where he emerged, and now you're sitting there and you know the boy will come across people before you if you don't get a move on, and he'll tell someone or other there's a crazy guy in black sitting on the hill with a gun in his hand, and you hope it's civilians or perhaps soldiers that he tells, as long as it's not the police or even worse that one from last night, so you set off.

Your footsteps are shaky, but you make it without stumbling or falling arse over tit; either your feet remember the way or it's the tiredness and your light head, and who needs boiled chicken feet with peyote and coca juice when there's the island and the moon and the sun and the sea and the mountain and the pointlessness and wasps sent by God and the big bird with its tanks and grenades and bullets.

The car's locked so you'll have to wait, and so you sit down beside it, dangling your legs over the edge of the road where the sea washes in thirty metres below, still quiet, barely moving, like in a bathtub, almost viscous. The waves won't come till later, along with the wind. And then you hear an engine from a long way off, and as it comes closer and closer you hear its howling, reflected off the cliffs, followed by a screeching of tyres which, locked, seem to drag forever along the asphalt, dying out into a knocking hum: they've come to get you.

The lightness you felt only moments ago drops away, as if slapped out of you by a hefty clip round the ear, and the tiredness smacks abruptly down on you; you could tip right over and you would as well if you closed your eyes, the tiniest movement and it would be done. But there's no bird in sight, so you get up, groaning like an old man. You see them getting out of their police car, one in civilian clothing and the other in uniform, instantly reaching for his gun but not pulling it out of its holster, which surprises you, presumably because of all the Hollywood movies and the peyote.

They must be looking for you, you say, and the plainclothes man answers 'Yes!' and asks how you are and you say, could be better, you've had a couple of tough nights, and he just nods. 'The gun,' says the uniformed man to the other one, and he ignores him and says there's no need to worry, everything's fine,

which you confirm with a nod and say: ‘Sure, everything’s fine.’ But you know that’s not true and you cast a glance at the island, which now seems further away than at dawn, and you realize with the shocking clarity that must take hold when you walk to the gallows that you’re up to your neck in trouble and nothing at all is fine: you’re going straight to jail, perhaps not for ever but certainly for a good long while, because there’s a war on and judges presumably have slightly skewed principles when there’s a war on and more skewed moods than in peacetime and you wonder how you’re ever going to get out of this situation without seriously injuring anyone. You’ve only got one bullet left, but the police don’t know that.

The plainclothes man approaches at a slow stride, while the uniformed man stays close to the car, his hand unmoving on his gun, and you tell the one in plain clothes that you threw the gun in the sea, down there, and you point over the cliffs – you can’t come up with anything better at the moment. But he just nods, again.

‘Everything’s fine, no problem, we’ll talk it over later on,’ he says, and you walk towards him, approaching him and stopping two metres away, still strictly ignoring the uniformed man.

‘What now?’ you ask and he says you’ll all go to the police station together, to Senj, where you’ll talk everything over and see how best to deal with the situation as quickly as possible. You give a slow nod and say, ‘OK, let’s go!’ And the plainclothes man makes the all-purpose ‘after you’ gesture and you walk past him towards the police Fiat and the uniformed man, constantly expecting him to launch himself on you from behind and try to wrestle you to the ground, but he keeps his distance and you know the handcuffs are up next, but then everything happens very fast.

Later you ask yourself how long it will take for them to catch you. You can’t possibly knock out two police officers and handcuff them to their car without them coming round, and anyway: it’s not possible that it worked so perfectly!

On the other hand you first practiced that backward kick when you were eight years old, and you’ve repeated it a thousand times since then. The trick is not to turn your head or your shoulders, but to kick out backwards straight from the

groin like a horse, hitting your opponent in the solar plexus with your heel – and he’s guaranteed to collapse like a house of cards.

It takes longer to get the uniformed one down on the ground, but with him it’s the strength of a desperate man that drives you on and that’s enough in the end to kick him in the balls and then ram your elbow so hard in his neck that his lights go out as well; you’re on a high and it’s kind of fun, and when the plainclothes policeman pulls himself together and tries to reach for his gun you’re faster, and there’s a boot to his head, which is thrown back and carries his body with it: the man’s on the ground now and he won’t come round all too soon.

You pick up all three guns – the plainclothes man’s wearing a small revolver on one calf – and you grab the spare cartridges as well, stuffing everything in your jacket and your waistband, dragging the terribly heavy bodies to the car doors, opening them and closing the handcuffs around the handles. You search both men for papers and keys and only take the money – you never know.

There’s nothing else in the police car, so you break the large radio to pieces, grab the uniformed man’s small walkie-talkie, run to your parents’ car, smash the back window on the passenger side, squeeze yourself through and grab the ignition keys. Barely landed on the driver’s seat, you’ve started the engine, and before you know it you’ve put your foot right down on the gas pedal; it’ll take a little while for the two of them to come round. Then they’ll notice they’ve got no radio and no keys, neither for the car nor for the handcuffs, and seeing as it’s fairly certain neither of them is a Houdini, at least half or three quarters of an hour will go by until anyone misses them, and by that time you’ll be scrambling around at least fifty kilometres away, but then, oh boy, then there’ll be trouble. They’ll look for you, with dogs and all the rest, and it’s not looking good for you. But by the time they’ve organized all that and found the car you’ll be literally over the hills and far away, you’ll climb and run until your lungs burst, but now it’s time to put your foot down and drive like hell.

You’ve got nothing to lose, you think as you drift around the curves, perhaps a few kicks during your arrest, that is if you don’t get blown away on the spot, which wouldn’t be all that bad either because the coins for the ferryman are lying ready on the tray, so who gives a shit?

Ten minutes and one thousand eight hundred heartbeats later, the car clock says

eight. You decide you're definitely going to abandon the car by nine at the latest. By then you have to find a place, a rock you can hide the car behind and then head off uphill, head out of there like Spiderman, when you realize you haven't got any water to drink, and you take a curve even more sharply, rage, hate, then panic, no, no, don't even think about it, don't panic; you'll find something all right, you've always found something if you had to.

And so you drive on, with the thought constantly on your mind that you're being watched, by your own people or by the enemy, sitting up there on the mountains and aiming at you, your own people perhaps with sniper rifles, the enemy presumably with larger calibres, but you'll just have to get used to the thought of mines, grenades and bullets for better or worse, and up to now you've just had good luck, incredibly good luck in fact, and who knows, perhaps the policemen have managed to inform their colleagues after all. But there's no forest in sight, not a tree, not a bush, not a shrub.

Nine, you said, and nine it has to be, not a minute longer, at nine you have to get off the road, out of the car, nervous, very nervous, afraid of the coast road, of people who might shoot at you. Who cares, to hell with it all: you put your foot down, the tyres grip, screeching around curve after curve, the car swings off, steer the other way, nobody, not a soul for miles around, nothing comes towards you, neither on two nor on four wheels, five to nine, says the digital clock on the dashboard – how far can you get in five minutes if you drive a hundred? – eight and a bit kilometres, that's your rough calculation, that's a long way, long enough to reach one of the lay-bys, one of those spots for enjoying the panoramic view and taking a pee beside the asphalt. The clock sets the speed, which climbs until you touch a crash barrier, only lightly with the rear plastic bumper, but it's a good enough sign to slow down, only a little, and your heart's hammering as fast as the engine pistons and pulsing against your eyeballs and there's green, further on, now you see it, now you don't, a curve to the left, a curve to the right, it's not far now, that's where the car needs to be, the little, white, loyal car, it's a gravel parking spot, trees, brake, spin, brief fear (stop, will you, for fuck's sake!) and the tree gets a kiss, nice and soft, from the car's plastic lip, and you turn it off, the good old engine, and give the steering wheel a grateful pat.

The note's lying on the floor in front of the passenger seat, the message to the finder with the owners' number, and you pick it up and lay it lovingly on the seat, you get out, dear old car, good old car, and now the definite final stroke: knob down, door handle up and slam the door locked despite the broken rear window, keys under the front seat. Do the insurance people pay up when it's your own son who stole the car? Never mind.

A glance across the roof to the sea, a glance at the mountain, then it's off across the road and wild leaps over hedge and ditch, a billy goat, a ram, up onto the mountain.

You've still got a couple of cigarettes, so after a good hour of uninterrupted scrambling, slipping, cursing, grazing of knees and begging for mercy you sit down with trembling hands and twitching legs. Fumble out your lighter, spark up a cigarette – a difficult task, then a drag, oh, how wonderful, oh, how light your soul, look how beautiful the sea! Wait – sea? Islands? Coast road? Pursuers...

Where's the rubber-soaked, slippery, snaking line of asphalt they call a main road, on which they'll come? You get up, shielding your eyes with one hand, and there it is, the road, a long way to the right and even further to the left, a few metres between white cliffs with a yellow line along the middle, no overtaking. You gaze alternately to the left and the right, staring at the sections of road and smoking and gradually getting your breath back. Where on earth have those policemen got to? They ought to have been back in Senj long ago and back on your tail with reinforcements.

Are they letting you go? No. They can't be. You've humiliated them far too much, they'll be organizing a special unit to kill the thief, thug and potential traitor, the spy; after what you've just done no one will doubt that the policeman who called you an enemy of the fatherland last night was right, now that you've resisted the state authorities and have four guns and about a hundred bullets shoved in your jacket and trousers, not to mention the radio for your frequencies... radio?! You've never used one, let alone owned one, you look at it like a three-year-old would at a Bang & Olufsen stereo, and like a three-year-old you start haphazardly pressing buttons and turning knobs; on and off is easy enough, but how does the rest work? 'Threshold', it says unclearly, rubbed away

by hundreds of fingers, turned up and down and there's a sudden hiss of white noise, the digital display says 10 – which frequency do the police...?

Not good. Not good at all. They can locate it, they must be able to! Off! Switched off, dropped like a hot potato and then the heel of your boot and knelt down to be on the safe side and a stone on top, until tiny bits of black and green plastic, coloured wires and the bisected rubber aerial are spread across half a square meter: 'Get up, turn around and keep climbing!' it says, it shouts, so you do that and at some point as you're climbing your brain switches off, cells and synapses spread across square miles, vegetative climbing and running, an unstrained constant pace, your field of vision thirty degrees at the most, hours pass, no thirst, no pain, no tiredness, trance.

The stones have changed colour, white becoming orange-white, red-white becoming grey-white, dark red, why, you wonder, it's the same mountain, your brain paths and synapses reactivating and telling you that the sun's going down now, you could stop, turn around, lean your torso forwards, rest your hands on your thighs and raise your head, and there it is, the sea, the sun, submerging in its own liquid gold, a quarter of an hour to go before it gets dark. Not good either.

You look around, stones, rocks, pointed and sharp, not half a metre of smooth ground where you could squat down and spend the night, your mouth, your tongue reminds you, your stomach, scream your guts, your knee, your arsehole, says your left meniscus and your head says with surprising calm: sit down, relax, have a think, and your muscles let go before you've given permission and your backside and coccyx bear the brunt, falling on the sharp stones, but the rest of your body doesn't care – a clear majority decision.

It takes a while but you do come to. And it's not looking good – only a few minutes before it's pitch black; wasn't there a full moon yesterday? You search the sky and there it is after all, still weak like a light bulb at half a watt, but you know it anyway, and you know your sun, it'll send the moon its power and it'll shine for you like it's always done: Thank you, old boy, thanks a lot. You'll be able to keep going without breaking your neck.

The rebooted brain produces faces, voices, places and feelings, instead of a trance now an ongoing dream, you don't understand anything, hardly recognize

anything, lurching through the storm until you make out one voice in the chaos of tones, sounds and voices, and it's your mother's, and her face instantly appears before a mosaic of other faces, then your father's face, and they're sad, and Mother's voice trembles, and although you don't understand her you know what she's saying, and your heart clenches up and sucks the blood from your veins and you beg of her not to worry, everything's fine and you're alive, you say and you even try to explain where you are and why, but you don't manage it because the faces of Mother and Father vanish in the maelstrom of dream images while you're still looking for the right words, and you send them a greeting and call into the chaos that you love them; at that there's a flash through the maelstrom of images, a smile, two smiles, your parents, who've heard you, and you know how much they love you – you take good care of them, dear God, you think, take care of my parents and my brothers, and as you're thinking it they dissolve and you're standing in front of a stone mountainside in the dusk and trying to remember when it was and where, it must have been in your childhood at some point, and you look around and feel a sharp pain in the back of your head and you hear a voice shouting *Idiot*, then two more shouting, *Watch out, for God's sake*, and it's your hands and your left knee (its voice a little louder than that of the right knee since you ruined your meniscus playing football), they're cursing all together and suddenly the mountainside's very close up.

‘Time for a break,’ you think and you wonder how long it will be before you collapse, fall over dehydrated, overstrained and emaciated and hit open your head, only to stay down forever – stay calm, don't worry, my dear friend; look how far down the sea is, look how even the slope you're walking on is, there, just look, there are tufts of grass growing through the cracks in the stone, go on, take off your glove and touch them, feel them, see, there you go, just a little bit further and you'll be walking on moss, and there's water there somewhere and you'll lie down beneath a spring and drink as much as you like, keep going, come on, keep going!

‘Keep going!’ your heart exults in the moonlit night and pumps and pumps and pumps blood, and you're pretty far up now and not even a hundred metres further along it stops going uphill and starts sloping gently downwards, you're at the top, on top of the ridge – wait; where was the frontline again, what was it

they said, those soldiers, as they got ready for their night patrol? – and then, at exactly that moment, as if the question itself had pressed the war button to let all hell loose, there's a roll of thunder, staccato whipping, the dark sky in the distance pierced by green, yellow and red arrows, the shrill barking of machine guns, blaring explosions, ear-splitting whistling in your ears, and your body responds before your mind and throws itself down, your arms folded over your head, and it dawns, it stutters: 'War!!!!'

And you're in the middle of it.