

**Strung**

*'My weapon was my cello' Vedran Smajlović (1956 - ) during the Siege of Sarajevo (1992-1996)*

Neck & belly, ribs, waist & tailpiece,  
the cello's body is a swoon in timber.  
The bridge transporting, the spike stabilising.  
How varied the ends these shapes serve.  
Four strings only, once made of gut.

War used to need the slim connection of strings.  
Dipped cotton thread of the first fuses  
slowing down the blast of gunpowder –  
naive, basic, effective. Now spikes detonate,  
or the mere pressure of a hand.

Incas recorded their stories in string,  
knots in them a language only the trained could interpret.  
Twisted fibres connected correctly created boats,  
bridges over ravines leading to safety, survival.  
Threads drew maps through religion, land, community.

Lines are curious things. Drawn across a face,  
along a road, through a history.  
It took me days, but I found you, everywhere,  
not just at one time in one place, but at fuse-points, pinpoints,  
tracing a map through Sarajevo's agony for two years.

Orange plastic chair or burnt stool, you appear at burned-out trains,  
on railway tracks, the bombed station, half-husk of the National Library,  
the pavement before a flower-bed of tributes. You had played sixteen years  
for the Sarajevo Opera, Theatre, Philharmonic – now for two years  
a solo every day, one mellow moment in war's percussive madness.

You never grow used to neck, ribs, waist, strung across the road,  
bodies blown apart, twenty-two of your neighbours queuing for bread,  
children in the school, the marketplace, playing ball,  
a scattering of gut, the strings of tendon & nerve splayed. Your fingers  
bind those left together in grief, in the fragile beauty of music.

In Lion Cemetery where twenty-one people were killed &  
seventy wounded during funerals – easy pickings in daylight –  
you balance on uneven ground between piles of dirt.

Robyn Rowland. 'Strung'.  
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Impeccable in evening dress, white shirt, bow-tie, walrus moustache,  
crimson cello rests along the contours of your body, becoming thinner.

Igor Malsević, eight, beside you, Svetko Mandić, seventy-two,  
born the same year as my father, Zoran Kozomara, nineteen,  
near the age of my son, names freshly carved into grave-markers,  
their final year the same – 1992. And later, you play in the dark, in  
newer graveyards – the whole soccer stadium & every park in the city full.

In the National Library ruins, posing for the Winter Festival poster, 1993  
your hand hides your eyes from a world too ignorant, too preoccupied,  
strings weeping the Adagio of sadness.  
Yet no-one comes to lift the siege. Joan Baez stands beside you.  
Nearly two years & still no-one comes.

Annie Leibovitz sees a mortar rip out the back of a teenage boy  
on a bicycle. Rushing to the hospital, he dies on the way.  
Her photograph, *Bloody Bicycle*, is shocking in black & white,  
its skid of blood a question mark in Vanity Fair. Still. No-one comes.  
Susan Sontag spends six months directing *Waiting for Godot*. Waiting.

How often do you play Albinoni in C minor? Soulful strings  
strike deep, entering the heart slowly, in the piece Giazotto  
built out of fine black ink-lines, their knotted heads crying out  
from a burned fragment left behind in bomb-soaked Dresden.  
War the link, loss the connection.

In *Sniper alley*, men in the hills make civilian death random.  
Seated in this major thoroughfare turned shooting-gallery, bee-yellow  
the blasted Holiday Inn behind you is refuge to world media  
in the basement. The body of the cello curves into your arms.  
Four strings & your crimson cello weeping. You play on.

From *Sharp Vigilance* to *Deliberate Force*<sup>\*</sup> – two years more  
before help comes. By then, 10,000 dead in this city of Winter Olympics  
& you, far away on a border between past and present, play chess  
not cello, watching the rippling waters of Carlingford Lough in Ireland  
free at last from the daily grind of courage.

***Robyn Rowland***

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<sup>\*</sup> NATO: *Operation Sharp Vigilance* ( 1992) to *Operation Deliberate Force* (August/September 1995)