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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Virgin of Pain

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Chair

This project is an arts-based examination of a series of Virgin Mary apparitions that occurred in Bol, Croatia, from June 25, 1946, until the end of September that year. The narrative focuses on two perspectives: that of Božidar Jakšić, a resident of Bol in 1946 who was imprisoned by the Yugoslavian government under the charge of conspiracy and perpetuating propaganda, and that of the artist-author, a first-generation queer American whose family comes from Bol. Based on Božidar’s journal, the artist-author uses various narrative devices and performances to reconstruct the events that occurred.
The dissertation of Anthony Bodlović is approved.

Donald J. Cosentino
Barbara Drucker
Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2016
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Anthony Bodlović is a Los Angeles–based performance artist and practicing art therapist. A hybrid of personal therapy and ethnography, his work focuses on cultural narratives and how they endure around, in, and through the body. He has participated in group shows in Los Angeles and Berlin and had his first solo performance at Human Resources, Los Angeles, in 2014.

He is currently an Assistant Clinical Professor at Loyola Marymount University in the Department of Marital and Family Therapy/Art Therapy and works as an art therapist at Los Angeles City College.
INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I spent my summers in Bol, Croatia— the birthplace of my great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents. On the bus to Bol during one such summer, I discovered a moment in the town’s history that had, until then, eluded me: In 1946, from July 25 to the end of September, the Virgin Mary appeared to a series of residents in a small hillside cave, right above the town of Bol, which is on the island of Brač. During my investigation of these visions, I located the journal of Božidar Jakšić. A resident of Bol, Božidar was home visiting his family while on college leave in the summer of 1946. When he found out about the visions, Božidar began visiting the cave daily to document the event. Though he never saw any manifestations himself, he became a firm believer of the visions, which were mostly revealed to him through the children who experienced them. In 1946, Croatia was not yet independent and was under the rule of the communist government of Yugoslavia. which, like many communist nations, considered religious sentiment a threat. When the government heard about the visions, they banned pilgrims from visiting the site and made arrests. Božidar was accused and found guilty of anti-government propaganda for staging and perpetuating belief in these visions, for which he spent four years in prison. After his release, he wrote about his prison experiences in his journal and didn’t speak openly about the visions in the cave until the dismantling of Yugoslavia and the fall of Communism. In 1994, Božidar held a small presentation in Bol’s movie theater about the visions, after which he officiated a small ceremony where he unveiled a plaque to honor the destroyed site where the Virgin had appeared—now a two-lane highway. It was this plaque that caught my eye on that bus ride in 2011.

As I began to learn more about Božidar from his journal and from those who knew him (he passed away in 2006), I began to feel connected to him and the site. From speaking to
people in town, I learned he was an outlier. He was most often described as a sensitive man focused on his studies, unlike the more familiar models of masculinity that are still present in the town, such as the fisherman or mechanic. As a queer, first-generation American artist, I also often feel like an outlier in Croatian culture. When people in Bol noticed my interest in the events of 1946, many even claimed I resemble Božidar in looks and demeanor. I later discovered from my mother he was actually my fourth cousin on my father’s side, though she could not quite trace those branches of the family tree. Many townspeople I spoke to did not know about the visions. Others knew about them but dismissed them as fantasy, while some were unsure and very few believed. However, no one who had a memory of that time would speak to me about what had happened. To understand the events of 1946, I have had to rely on primary written accounts, mainly the writings of Božidar. In addition to primary sources, I used my creative performance work as another way to understand Božidar and reconstruct the events that transpired in Bol.

Amanda Kemp (1998) has stated that performance can be used both as “a way of knowing and as a way of showing” (p. 116). When I entered the profession of art therapy, I saw how the process of art making can construct knowledge and make meaning for my clients. This realization, a result of my clinical work, affected my personal art practice, and I have begun to explore improvisational performances as a form of investigation and research. Conquergood (2002) asserts that performance studies has the ability to collapse the binary between theory and practice by valuing the critical-intellectual component of artistic work and other ways of knowing, which can radically reorganize how knowledge is perceived in academia. The research presented here is an attempt to use performance ethnography both as a way to “know” and a way to “show.” Performance ethnography as a research modality is utilized as an attempt to lessen the
perceived and actualized gap between the self and the other (Alexander, 2008) through an engagement with one’s own and another’s aesthetic communication (Conquergood, 1986). I used my performance work during both the data collection and analysis to lessen the gap between Božidar, the events of 1946, and myself.

My primary source of data is the 300-page journal of Božidar Jakšić, which he began writing in 1946 and then edited and augmented until the summer of 1996. In art therapy, the clinician’s ability to stay present and alert helps to create an alliance. The therapeutic alliance is contingent on an interpersonal connection with the client, often referred to as attunement (Kossak, 2009). In order to be present, the therapist must deal with his or her own feelings and reactions, or counter-transference, toward the client, which can be explored by the therapist engaging in personal reflective art making (Moon, 1999; Deavers & McAuliffe, 2009). I approached the process of translating Božidar’s journal from the original Croatian through this psychological lens and attempted to attune with him by engaging in a performance. While translating his work, I dressed as Božidar and sat at a small writing desk, rewriting his prose before translating the words into English. During this personal performance, I vocalized and enacted his writings. After this process, I recorded any questions or thoughts that arose, as I would after a session with a client. Two of these questions related to my counter-transference and became the basis for two performance pieces: *An Apology* and *The Wait*.

The first performance, *An Apology*, occurred early in the translation process. Because he did not fit the traditional model of a Croatian male that I was taught growing up, I began to strongly identify with Božidar. Though he was married and had two children, I began to wonder about his sexuality, knowing that had I stayed in Croatia, I might have stayed closeted due to social pressures. My preoccupation with his sexuality made me recognize my own identity as a
queer male to be an important topic of exploration during this process. I began to identify internalized homophobia and traced it to perceived cultural messages from my Croatian community as well as the Catholic Church. I began to question whether or not as a queer man I should be investigating the events of 1946. The performance piece, *An Apology*, was a way to seek clarity on the counter-transference I was bringing to the project in regards to my sexuality.

The next performance arose because of my growing need to determine the veracity of the visions. I found myself enacting Božidar as a madman, frantically scrawling in his journal. I was raised Catholic, but my parents never fully participated in the rituals of the faith. Currently (and at the time of the exploration), I identify as agnostic. The concept of faith in a religious context is unfamiliar to me, and I wondered how Božidar kept his faith, never having seen visions himself. If *An Apology* resulted from what might have been overidentification, *The Wait* grew out of disconnection. I became critical of Božidar’s faith in the visions, especially as they became more numerous, including saints and demons, not just the Virgin Mary. While everyone involved with the events surrounding the visions renounced their belief in them to win favor with the government, Božidar was steadfast until his death. As I tried to find common ground to re-attune with Božidar, I realized that his devotion to the church was echoed in my devotion to others. I find myself drawn to careers and experiences in which I can be of service, and in extremes my relationships can be categorized as co-dependent, my needs becoming displaced in favor of the needs of others. *The Wait* explores my relationship dynamics as an attempt to understand my own relationship to faith and an attempt to better understand Božidar’s experience.

When I finished gathering my research and completed the two performances described above, I held a 21-hour performance on March 28–29, 2013, at the Human Resources,
Los Angeles, gallery, called *The Cave—live on stage*. In the gallery, I replicated the dimensions of the cave where the visions had taken place using tape on the floor and set the parameter that I would not leave the delineated space until 21 hours had passed. I decided the duration of the performance based on the number of hours it typically takes me to travel to Bol from Los Angeles. The audience was greeted by a projection of cars zooming by the site where Božidar placed his plaque. For the duration of the performance, I engaged in various improvised and structured activities. I engaged the audience in broader topics of faith, gender, and the unknown, as well as specific conversations and re-enactments of what occurred in the cave. Sometimes there were dozens of people in attendance, sometimes only a few, and often I was alone. During my time alone, I would read Božidar’s journal, about his time in prison, where he was often left in solitary confinement. An analysis of that performance led to the creation of the structure of this document.

This document is divided thematically into six chapters, each consisting of three parts. The first part, or act, is written in the form of a script, which re-narrates events that occurred in the cave. These scripts were performed and refined during *The Cave—live on stage*. They are written in script format to engage the readers in a more active participation of the events that occurred, allowing them to read through the perspectives of Božidar, the visionaries, the saints, and the devils. The second act of each chapter is written from the perspective of Božidar. This writing I have reconstructed by translating his text through my performance of re-enacting. I chose sections that resonated with me and that came up most often during *The Cave—live on stage* performance. The last act of each chapter is written from my perspective, as I investigated the events of 1946 and the personal ramifications and revelations of the process. The second and third acts of each chapter show the parallel process of Božidar’s investigation of the
cave and my own. Following the second and fourth chapters are detailed descriptions of the performances *An Apology* and *The Wait*. This document, which was constructed out of a performance, I see as a performance itself. I constructed it as I would an artwork, hoping to guide the viewer through my process of discovery as well as Božidar’s.

*Figure 1. Božidar Jakšić, 1946.*  
*Figure 2. Author as Božidar Jakšić, 2012.*
CHAPTER 1:

VISIONS OF THE VIRGIN
ACT ONE:

EXT. A DIRT ROAD - LATE AFTERNOON

The year is 1946, June 25. Five children are returning from pasture, their goats walking slowly in front of them. Among them is LUKA, a boy not yet 10 years old, and his friend BOČINETO, same age.

In a moment, at a bend in the road, appears a yellow bird, larger than a sparrow, between them and the goats. They do not see the bird fly toward them, and it couldn’t have been on the road before because the goats would have run it over or at least chased it from the road. But the children do not think of this.

BOČINETO
(Pointing toward the bird)
Hey, look!

LUKA, wasting no time, picks up a rock from the road. He swings his arm to strike the bird with the rock. The rest of the children stay deathly still so as not to scare the creature. Before LUKA can release the rock, the bird jumps off the road and out of sight.

LUKA signals with his hand for the children to be quiet and not to move. He skulks on his tiptoes slowly and quietly like a cat, assured the bird is done for. LUKA takes one step off the road, carefully searching in front of him. With the same caution, the other children follow him, waiting for the outcome, while their goats continue down the road on their own.

LUKA sees the bird slip through an opening in the rocks and peers inside. LUKA suddenly freezes and stares fixedly at something, and the others stare at him just as intensely.

They stay like this for a while, looking and waiting, and then LUKA turns toward them, takes one step, except this time backwards, and finds himself between them and the road. Without preamble, LUKA yells to the children:

LUKA
A statue of the Virgin Mary!
THE CHILDREN
A statue of the Virgin Mary?!

THE CHILDREN shake their heads, shrug their shoulders, and move toward their goats.

LUKA stands transfixed for a moment, then runs to catch up with the rest of the group.

In the cave, we see a plaster statue, less than a meter tall, of the BLESSED VIRGIN MARY.

EXT. LUKA’S HOUSE – LATER THAT DAY

LUKA arrives home. His MOTHER is sitting in front of the konoba, the ground floor basement. Luka gives his goat to his mother, who gives it water and pens it up in its little house. Then she leads LUKA inside.

INT. LUKA’S HOUSE

LUKA is sitting at a table eating his lunch. His mother sits across from him, watching him, peeling potatoes she will boil and salt for dinner later.

MOTHER
(Looking at the potato she is peeling, asking out of habit)
How was your walk?

LUKA
(Face close to his soup, matter-of-factly)
Fine ... I saw a big yellow bird and a statue of the Virgin Mary.

His MOTHER stops peeling and looks at LUKA, who is still eating his soup.

MOTHER
What? What statue?

LUKA
When I went to catch the bird, it went into a cave, and inside I could see a statue
MOTHER
How big was this statue?

LUKA
Not too big. It’s like the one we have above the fireplace.

MOTHER
When you go back that way tomorrow, bring the statue home. It belongs in the church.

She continues peeling potatoes.

EXT. THE CAVE - THE NEXT DAY

LUKA is in front of the cave, with the same children watching. Their goats graze randomly. LUKA enters the cave.

INT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

The statue is as it was before. He bends over and with his right hand reaches for the statue. He tries to grab the statue, but he doesn’t find it in his hand but next to it. He reaches out again. The statue has again moved away from his hand. He keeps trying to catch it, but it flees. He begins to understand that the Virgin statue is alive and that it does not want to be caught. He becomes frightened. He runs out of the cave.

EXT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

LUKA stands among the children, distraught.

LUKA
The Virgin statue is alive!

Everyone becomes quiet. They stare off into space as if contemplating … and then they go home.

INT. LUKA’S HOUSE - LATER THAT DAY

LUKA is sitting at a table eating his lunch. His mother sits across from him, watching him, again peeling potatoes.
MOTHER
(Looking at the potato she is peeling)
You never brought the statue home.

LUKA
(Face close to his soup, matter-of-factly)
I tried, but she kept moving. I think she might be alive.

His mother stops peeling and looks at him confused.

EXT. THE CAVE - THE NEXT DAY
LUKA is back in front of the cave, with the same children watching. Their goats graze randomly. LUKA enters the cave.

INT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS
The statue is no longer there. In its place stands a woman, tall and radiant. LUKA is afraid, but her soft smile entices him, and he recognizes the smile as the same one the statue wore. He realizes he is looking at the BLESSED VIRGIN MARY.

FADE TO BLACK
In the middle of July of 1946, I, Božidar, went home to Bol from Zagreb. I completed a few exams in college and, with my older brother Nikica, concluded that we should go home, rest, eat, and swim, and save an exam for the Fall term. I left Zagreb and college relaxed because there was no concern about admission for the third semester. Zagreb would stay as it was before. I’d soon go back to staying in my brother’s room, eating a cheap meal of beans when I couldn’t coax an extra lunch ticket from classmates. And I’d have the summer to earn some dinars from Uncle Pjero by casting fishing nets.

The steamship, as always, stopped at the Veli Most. I rushed home, along the way greeting familiar faces: friends, fishermen, and especially Uncle Pjero and his crew, who always sat on the benches in front of the government offices. When I reached the house, I greeted my father in his workshop, and then I took the stairs to our attic kitchen, with plans to greet my brothers and sisters on the way. The greetings in our house, in my town, on my island were always short, clear, informal, and familiar.

“Jerk!” I shouted.

From somewhere, I heard, “How are you, brother?” and so I climbed on.

“Zvonko!”

No answer—he was not at home.

“Božena.”

She wasn’t either.

In the kitchen, Aunt Lukra was at the fireplace, as always, preparing dinner, as always.

“How are you, Auntie?”

“How are you? Are you hungry?”
“Yes!”

She didn’t speak much, or more precisely, she didn’t speak at all while I ate. She was happy because I was there, because I was alive and not in some jail somewhere. I was there in the kitchen and not in front of an Italian firing squad or in front of the grim stare of a partisan or with the Croatian liberation fighters, the Ustaše, in Zagreb. I didn’t say anything to her because she was not waiting for me to say anything. She looked through the window at the hill, at something very far away and yet very close.

I got up from the table, went to the little window, and followed her look. I saw nothing, so I left the window and continued eating.

“There, in a cave, the Virgin Mary is appearing,” said Auntie Lukra, extending her arm to the direction of the cave and keeping her gaze fixed on the hill.

“My Blessed Mary!” she exhaled and continued with her kitchen duties. I stopped eating because I no longer felt hungry.

*The Virgin is appearing?* I said nothing to my aunt.

*The Virgin is appearing?* Was that just a claim? A wish? A prayer? Or was it all the same? We were quiet and buried ourselves in thought.

The rest of the household arrived and repeated the chatter of the cave and Our Lady. I couldn’t make sense of anything. I couldn’t even figure out if they believed in the visions, and I especially couldn’t figure out what the truth was. None of them had been to the cave, but somehow my Aunt Lukra, who never left the fireplace, not even for church, knew the most. She told us how a little girl had seen a shining star, and then another girl, Marica, saw it, too. Luka was the first to see a little Virgin Mary, followed by a tall Virgin Mary. The Virgin said that little Fanika would find the rosary that she had lost, and Fanika found it the next day, near the cave,
hanging on a rock. And little Enica was told by the Virgin that the wounds on her knees, from when she was jumping on the large rocks near the shore, would heal. What was this? What was happening? The Virgin was appearing?

“My Blessed Virgin!”

In the evening, walking on the waterfront, I heard from some girls many unbelievable things. People were saying that the Virgin told little Luka that Ivo Filip would recover from his illness. Ivo himself had a vision: he and Florio had smelled roses inside the cave.

The visionaries, mostly children, had also seen in the cave Christ as the Good Shepherd with sheep out to pasture. They had seen St. Rocco, St. Elizabeth with St. Anne, St. Teresa, St. Bernadette, and St. Michael as he slew the serpent Satan.

Marica had seen the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. St. Joseph and the Virgin were in the cave, preparing a bed for Baby Jesus inside a simple wooden box. As she turned to the others waiting outside the narrow cave to explain what she was seeing, the baby was born.

The visionaries saw shepherds, the Three Kings, the Passion of the Christ (more than once), the Last Supper, and Judas, who’d betrayed Christ.

They saw the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, the apple and the snake that turned into the Devil.

Angels were almost always in the cave but so were devils. They were grotesque, threatening, but they never did anything to anyone. One day, Satan harassed Marica, chasing her from the cave, but Marica’s guardian angel, protecting her, forced the Devil to flee. When they weren’t afraid, the visionaries harassed the devils:

“Go back to Hell!”
And when the devils harassed them, they ran from the cave and prayed to the Virgin, the saints, and angels for help.

They asked the Virgin about the living and the dead. The Virgin said that Vinko Marinković “Jaje,” missing since the war, was “dead and resides in Heaven.”

And they, children and adults, asked everything of the Virgin and the saints: Will he recover? Will her cold pass? Will she appear to her and to her?

The next day, around five o’clock in the afternoon, I joined the townspeople visiting the cave. One child described the star he was seeing, shining and brilliant. Another saw stairs, then another an angel, then Luka saw … and Marica saw. The next day, I went again to the cave … and again, Luka saw … Marica saw. The next day there were more visions. The visions became longer, more substantial. Talk of the cave was taking place all over the town. Some believed and some brushed the visions aside. Others even protested or mocked; there was some verbal harassment.

Every day, I went to the cave and didn’t know what to make of it. I asked questions, looked for evidence, I prayed—I prayed for a vision or at least a sign.
In the summer of August 2011, I, Anthony, took my usual trip to Bol, Croatia. Because I was far away from my obligations in Los Angeles, my summer months in Bol were carefree. Like a reverse Persephone, I went to Croatia while the figs were ripe but left before I could taste the pomegranates. It was always this way. As a child, I spent months climbing the boulders on the shoreline, hiding behind pine trees, and walking the pebbled shore. I roamed freely through the town, my mother knowing there were hundreds of eyes on me at all times. Honorary aunts, fourth cousins, and other tangential relations would see me and whisper to whomever was around, “There’s the little American.” The journey to Bol was always exhausting: a flight to London, then to the capital city of Zagreb, then to the port town of Split. If it was arranged just right, I could catch a catamaran to Bol, unloading at the Veli Most, the stone pier that peeks out from the small harbor where my grandfather used to dock his small motorboat. Mostly, though, I would have to take a ferry from Split to Supetar, and then a bus across the island to Bol. That year I missed the catamaran. On the bus, as I did every time, I eagerly looked up from my book and out the window for the familiar marker of Zlatni Rat, The Golden Cape, jutting out into the Adriatic Sea—a sign that my destination was approaching. But instead of catching sight of Bol’s famous beach, I saw a stone plaque nestled into a cliff. As we barreled past, I turned my head to get a better look, but we had rounded a corner, and the plaque went out of sight. I settled back into my seat, assuming that what I had seen was a marker commemorating someone who had lost their life on the winding road that connected the northern and southern sides of the island of Brač. Over the steep precipice that paralleled the road were many rusted and mangled vehicles that had careened off the path. Guardrails lined the highway, but only in haphazard zones,
resembling memorials of sorts, though unintentional. Zlatni Rat soon appeared around the next bend, and I was again lost in familiar anticipation.

I arrived at Bol’s only bus station, which was managed, as it always seemed to be, by a 14-year-old boy. I had with me one small carry-on, just enough to hold a swimsuit and some T-shirts. I spent most of my time in Bol in the water, and since most people were never more than a quarter of a mile from the shore, beachwear was appropriate attire in most places. It was not uncommon to wait in line at the bank behind three men all sporting Speedos and fanny packs.

Getting off the bus, I wondered who I would run into on the way to Kitana’s house. Kitana was my mother’s childhood friend and my summer surrogate mother. I had not announced my arrival to the townspeople, and usually, when they stumbled into me, or I into them, the same thing happened: they did a short hand sign of the cross, made a face of disbelief, shook my hand, and kissed my cheeks. “When did you get in, little American?” they said. Still little. Still American.

This time, I ran into Kitana’s daughter Diana and Diana’s son, Jakov, called Aki because of his inability to pronounce his own name. Diana, my summer sister, was in her forties and a single parent to Aki, who had just turned seven years old. They were sitting on the small beach next to the bus stop, which was mostly used by locals to take a quick dip and cool off.

“You made it—I was just telling Aki that maybe you were lost.”

“Yes, I’m here! Hello, Aki.”

He hid behind his mother. He usually did not speak much when I first arrived. It would take him a few days to speak at all, at least to me, and then we would become the best of friends. Diana, Aki, and I walked along the canal that had been built in the ’60s to prevent flash flooding in the winters, but in the summers it was a favorite haunt of stray cats. We were going to her
mother’s house. Kitana lived in a two-story house with her husband, Jakov, and her daughter Sanja, who was a few years older than me. Diana was her eldest daughter and lived in Split but came to Bol for the summer. This year their middle sister, Rozita, would also be coming. It would be a full house, and I felt bad that my presence meant they would have to share beds and sleep on blow-up mattresses. But I was happy to be with them, and I knew they were happy to have me there.

Kitana’s house, like many homes in Bol, had been converted into apartments for summer tourists. In the winter, the family lived on the second floor, which had a kitchen, a living room, three bedrooms, and a bath. In the summer, they moved downstairs, where there were three rooms, a bath, and a summer kitchen, separated from the rooms to avoid overheating the house. I unpacked my things on one of two twin beds, in the room that I would be sharing, and went out to the front yard, where we would spend most of the summer sitting under the shade of grapevines. Kitana had prepared a meal for me, mostly cheeses and meat.

“I noticed something on my bus ride here, a stone plaque in the cliff.”

Sanja asked me to describe what I had seen and said:

“Oh, that’s where the Virgin Mary appeared.”

Where the Virgin Mary appeared? I had many questions: “When did this happen? What happened? Why haven’t I ever heard of this?”

There was something so predictable about Bol, a place that still connects me to my youth in a way no other place can. The house I grew up in, in Los Angeles, had been under construction for ten years because my father had insisted on doing the work himself. When I visit, the house seems unfamiliar—the metal scaffolding, the tarpaper façade, the smell of exposed wood from my childhood are missing. But when I breathe in the smell of Kitana’s
kitchen, I am two again, and twelve, and thirty-one. Every summer under those grapevines, we told the same stories, littered with the year’s new gossip, but we never forgot the old tales. How could I, then, have never heard of the Virgin Mary appearing in Bol?

A few nights later, Sanja took me for a walk to the plaque. Aki, now accustomed to me again, came with us. She explained that in 1946 some children had seen a yellow bird fly into the cave, and then the Virgin appeared to them. She said the plaque was put up in the 1990s after the revolution had destroyed communist Yugoslavia and birthed democratic Croatia. She said a man named Božidar Jakšić had had the plaque made. We walked up the highway, precariously close to the edge, avoiding the cars filled with island day-trippers. I listened to Sanja and nervously watched Aki skip a few feet ahead of us, grabbing wildflowers and talking to himself in a sing-song manner. He was dressed in island attire: a bathing suit and a tank top. She explained that the cave where the children had seen the Virgin was destroyed to expand the road in the 1970s. She was part of a church group that visited the site occasionally, in the winters. She told me there was a sense of peace around the plaque.

I listened to the cicadas as we walked in silence, in anticipation of what I was about to see and experience. A few times Sanja second-guessed herself, stopped, and determined we needed to keep going. We finally reached the spot on the road where I had seen the stone marker. It was behind a guardrail on the other side of the road. Aki ran across to see it up close, and I yelled for him to look in both directions. I studied the plaque from across the way, trying to take in the whole scene. The plaque was 18 in. (46 cm) by 24 in. (61 cm)—there was a cross in the upper center, filled with Celtic knot work. The dates read 1946–1996. Inscribed in Croatian, the plaque said “PRAY FOR US, OUR LADY.” I joined Aki on the guardrail, now a makeshift pew.
I closed my eyes as cars zoomed by, cicadas chirped, and Aki sang under his breath. I felt nothing.

That was the first time I saw the plaque. When I returned the following year, I went to visit the site and saw that Sanja’s church group had added some things to the plaque. With each new statue or plant, this spot on the road became more like an altar. That year since I also left the site without feeling anything extraordinary, but I knew I would return to try again.

Figure 3. Aki in front of the site, 2013.
CHAPTER 2:
COUNTING SHEEP
ACT ONE:

EXT. THE HOLY CAVE – EARLY AFTERNOON

A crowd of people are gathered outside of the cave. BOŽIDAR Jakšić is among them. He, a young man of 23, is tall and thin and bespectacled. In his hands he holds a notebook. He slowly enters the cave’s narrow entry and sees MARICA, a young girl of 8, inside.

MARICA
(Hand extended toward the top of the cave)
Look! Do you see, three stars have appeared?

BOŽIDAR looks to where her outstretched hand is pointing and sees nothing.

BOŽIDAR
What else do you see?

MARICA
Now there are two stars! No! They are two angels! So beautiful …

BOŽIDAR scrawls in his notepad.

MARICA (CONT.)
Wait! Oh no! There is a snake!

BOŽIDAR
What does this snake look like?

MARICA
It’s horrible … two meters long … oh thank goodness, it’s gone. Now the stars are back … and the angels … they are singing … they are singing “Hail Mary!”

A MAN peers into the cave.

MAN
What are they singing?
BOŽIDAR
(Turning to him)
Hail Mary.

MAN
(Turning to the people outside, shouting)
Hail Mary!

The PEOPLE outside the cave hear this proclamation. They begin to sing "Hail Mary" as well.

MARICA
The snake is back! And with it are three devils!

BOŽIDAR
Devils!

MARICA
Oh! I’m afraid! Wait, they cannot come near me. There is a large rope tied around their waists. (To the devils) Stick out your tongues and curse me all you’d like, you can do nothing to me!

BOŽIDAR
What do these devils look like?

MARICA
They are black and ugly with long, thick, four-forked tongues … now St. Nicholas is here, with Krampus! He is giving out toys to children. He just emptied one basket of toys, and he is going for the other. That’s right, Nicholas, shoo Krampus away!

BOŽIDAR
(Skeptical)
You see all this?

MARICA
Yes … Oh, and now I see a woman, a saint.
She is dressed in a long black dress with a white collar around her neck.

BOŽIDAR
(Obviously testing her)
White, you say? Are you sure? It looks pink to me.

MARICA
Oh no, it’s white.

BOŽIDAR
Look harder. It appears a little bit rosy, don’t you think?

MARICA
Oh no, it is not pink in the slightest but pure white, white like snow.

BOŽIDAR
(In a whisper)
Could it be she really sees these visions?

MARICA
Now I see Jesus. He’s at a large table with twelve men ...

FADE TO BLACK
In trying to separate the lies from the truth that were circulating in the town about the cave, I, Božidar, was convinced of one thing: Luka and Marica did not invent their visions. I watched them for a long time, every day, closely. I held them in my arms when they were afraid, and I encouraged them to stay in the cave when they wanted to flee from fear or excitement.

During one of those days, I was sitting on the floor of the cave, while in front of me sat Luka. There was a crevice in the cave’s most eastern, inner part, and you could not sit any other way than in front of one another. The boy said he saw Jesus as a shepherd, dressed in a long white tunic, with his flock. In his hand he had a big long staff. When I asked what color the sheep were, he said the sheep were the color of sheep. Evidently they were not exactly white and were likely somewhat grayish, and he did not know how to quite describe them. I asked him how many sheep he saw. He counted out loud: one, two, three ... seven, eight, following each sheep with his eyes and head. And he, being a lively, playful, somewhat impatient child, became audibly upset when a sheep would move about the grass, making it harder to count. When he reported there were eight, I started counting the sheep as well (although I did not see anything), just as he’d counted them, moving my eyes and head, and I said I counted nine. I, of course, said so to check how sure he was of what he’d said, and more importantly, what he’d seen. Luka was too young to see through my intentions and, thinking he had counted the sheep incorrectly, began counting again, but now even more carefully, this time using his hands to point. He counted eight again and, proud to have counted properly, said, “If you cannot count to eight, go back to elementary school.”

I, however, persisted and continued checking. Pointing, I said, “Well, look harder, the ninth sheep is behind that stone.”
And I watched as he turned his head toward the stone where the alleged ninth sheep was located. I assumed that Jesus was with the sheep in the rocky terrain of Bol or Palestine and that stones were a likely part of the vision. Luka fumed. “What rock? What ninth sheep? It’s not my fault you are blind and can’t count to eight?”

The sheep were, in fact, grazing in a large meadow where there were no rocks, let alone a large stone behind which a sheep could hide. Luka became upset, and I tried to hold him still as he tried to leave. He ripped himself out of my grip and pushed me, forcing me to let him go and make his way out of the cave.

I urged him to stay. I told him that I just wanted to make sure he really saw what he said he did. This only annoyed him more, especially since he knew, rather than thought, that there was in front of him one big meadow with sheep grazing and Jesus watching over them. He saw it all clearly, there in front of him, alive, moving, in three dimensions. In fact, for the longest time, the children especially could not understand, nor were able to be convinced, that the rest of us could see nothing. But I could not stop Luka—he fled. I wanted to beg his pardon. I wanted to hug him. He had freed me; he took the millstone from my neck that had constantly weighed on me—a stone of doubt that prevented me from breathing normally. What was happening, here in this cave, My Lady? Regardless, I had resolved one suspicion: Luka had definitely had a vision.
ACT THREE – 2003:

The reason I kept hoping I, Anthony, would feel a presence at the site had to do with an event that had occurred in 2003. The summer after I finished my last year of college, I moved back home, feeling lost. While figuring out my next move, I looked for work and took drugs. My friend Alex found a dealer who sold hallucinogenic mushrooms, and we each purchased three ounces. He stored his in a filing cabinet along with his liquor and marijuana—I stored mine in a small closet in my bedroom along with my homework from kindergarten, unlabeled videotapes, and mementos. A few months later, I started working at a clothing store, hired on as a temporary holiday employee, but the job allowed me to supplement the zero income I was making working as a producer’s assistant. That year, my parents decided not to have a Christmas tree, probably to make the house less hospitable, lest I get too comfortable. So, I bought a seven-foot-tall pine tree and put it in the corner of my bedroom. My mom would poke her head in my room and admire it, saying we should move it upstairs to the living room. I refused, wanting her to learn from her Scrooge-like mistake.

One day, I was sitting on my bed, watching the *Twilight Zone*, thinking it was a good time to take mushrooms. With each dose, the acrid taste became more and more intolerable, my body reminding me that I was eating poison, but my mind pushed me past the thought. I lay back on the bed and noticed that the lights on the tree were humming and the faces of the actors on my screen were contorting in spiral patterns. “God, Gregory Peck looks old.” I decided I should call my friend Brooke, who was also Alex’s sister. I started to tell her about my co-workers, making fun of Julia for using the non-word “worser.” As part of me was telling the story, another part of me left my body and looked at myself. Here I was, living at home, with a Christmas tree in my room, on drugs. I started to cry. Brooke asked for more context.
“Here I am, making fun of this girl who is trying to better herself by going to community college, who grew up without much, and here I am with a degree, judging her while we are both folding the same pair of low-rise bootleg jeans. I’m the one who’s worser.”

* * *

New Year’s came and went, but not much changed. I continued to work retail but quit working for the producer to take on more hours. Then Valentine’s Day arrived, and since Alex and I had both broken up with our girlfriends, we chose to spend the day together. My parents were out of town, and we decided to finish off the mushrooms from summer and have one last drug trip. We goofed around and drew pictures. I tried to explain to him my theory that airports should be built on mountains instead of in valleys. We made fun of his sister, Brooke.

As the effects of the hallucinogen were wearing down, Alex thought it would be a good idea to watch a horror movie. He had spent most of the last few months watching movies from the video store where he worked, writing film reviews about how pleasurable they were to watch while high—he had become the Roger Ebert of the drug world. He lay on my bed engaged in the film while I stared off into space. I started to feel bad. The kind of bad I did not like to think about. The kind of bad that made me feel like no one knew who I was. The kind of bad that made me wonder if I was attracted to men. I looked at all the objects I had collected in my room. I could feel the history and emotional weight of each knickknack and bobble. The VHS copy of The Flamingo Kid my mom had bought for me when I was 14 as a stocking stuffer. I did not like that movie. I had never even seen it before. I imagined her walking in the grocery store and seeing it in a bin and thinking I might like it, then me opening it and not liking it—but faking that I did, so she would be happy. I started feeling bad that I was not a son who liked The Flamingo Kid, while also feeling bad that she was a mother who did not know that. The voices of
the objects mocked me all at once. I felt like a fraud, and the weight of the façade made me realize I would probably never be happy. I decided I would kill myself that night.

I began to think of a plan that I would implement as soon as Alex fell asleep. He continued to watch the movie unaware of the plot being hatched next to him. I was thinking about the possibility of suffocation when the lights on the ceiling fan began to brighten. Simultaneously, I felt a warmth move through me and a comforting voice soothed me without using any words. I had never felt so much love, compassion, and happiness. I was like a balloon filling with air, thinking I would pop if I allowed in any more joy. I was somehow being shown the potential I had to feel happiness. The moment of ecstasy held its breath, then the light from the fan dimmed, the voice disappeared, as did the feeling. Though it was gone, it left a watermark, a reminder that renewed my sense of hope. I woke up the next morning, immediately drove to the mall, and quit my job. After that night, I decided I would have to make changes, removing the narratives that were blocking the energy that emanated from my light fixture. Though it had no clear form or voice, I had recognized the intercessor working through my ceiling fan—it was none other than the Holy Virgin Mary.
AN APOLOGY
The artist lies naked, covered in lubricant, eyes closed. The candlelit room illuminates his motionless body. One at a time, people enter the room and cover him with the sheet placed near his feet. These individuals are friends and strangers. One by one, they press their hands over the sheet, making an impression. His body is left marked by the participants as they exit. Another participant in the ritual, the Psychopomp, removes the sheet between participants and prepares him for the next individual. She repeatedly witnesses his birth, death, and rebirth while the artist lies under the sheet in a liminal state. Each person’s prints are unique, depending on where they touch, how hard they touch.

* * *

He pushed me against the counter and continued to kiss me. As I struggled to stay in the moment, I became aware of the undraped window behind us. My thoughts left my body and moved to the other side of the window. Looking in, I saw my male body entwined with someone else’s. I leapt back into my corporeal self and said, “We’re going to give the neighbors a show,” hoping my subtle hint would cause him to move the phalanx of limbs we had become into the bedroom, safe from view. In between his kisses, he said, “No one is looking. If they are, they are perverted.” I was terrified, caught between his judgment and the judgment of the imagined crowd gathered outside my kitchen window. Had I been with a woman, I imagine my neighbors would have watched voyeuristically, making jokes to cover up their titillation. But this scene was playing out between two men, and I could feel my neighbors’ disgust and revulsion: the encroaching faggot onslaught had found a way to their doors. I wanted to look behind me and mouth, “I’m sorry.”

As I thought about this need to apologize, I looked around my apartment. Everything was in its place. No dishes were in the sink, no indentations on the couch, no crumbs on the counters.
Every day, I did my best to wipe away the residue of my existence. My home looked as though someone could comfortably live in it, a model home waiting to be inhabited. I looked over to the bedroom, the neatly-made bed visible through the open doorway. The other day I was changing the sheets and noticed a lubricant stain from a tryst the day before. The stain would not come out; like animal fat on a fast-food wrapper, it left an oily mark that disgusted me. I went out and bought new sheets that day. As my body was still being seduced, my mind wandered through my apartment, realizing that what I had once labeled modesty was really an apology: “I’m sorry you have to see me, I’m sorry I disgust you, I’m sorry I exist. I’m sorry.”

* * *

After learning that the Virgin Mary may have appeared in Bol in 1946, I felt compelled to investigate further. I suppose a part of me was hoping to find proof that something existed beyond what we could see to quell the existential angst that kept me up some nights. A part of me also wanted to rediscover the sense of joy from the night the Virgin appeared to me in my ceiling fan, back when I was still closeted and on drugs.

Sanja told me Božidar Jakšić put up a stone marker in 1996 to commemorate the events of 1946. I learned he had been imprisoned after he was accused of being a ringleader, responsible for faking the visions. The people who would speak to me were mostly part of Sanja’s rosary circle. The children who had seen the visions had passed away. Little Luka’s widow refused to talk about them. Kitana told me that on his deathbed, Luka’s wife asked him if what he had seen was true. “Everything,” was his reply. With the help of the rosary circle, I was able to track down notes written by Božidar—a typed copy of his handwritten notes in edited form were kept at the monastery in Bol, and Božidar’s nephew Šime had the unedited copy. Šime was excited that someone was interested in the notes, local media having turned down his requests to run
something about the story for years. When we met, he, like the many others before him, remarked on how much I looked like Božidar. He was glad something was going to be done with the story—a story that had kept Božidar in prison for four years, kept him living in silence and fear until the 1990 democratic revolution. During the so-called Homeland War, symbolic attacks on holy sites coupled with years of religious oppression under communism returned religion to the Balkans and, with it, a reunified sense of nationalism. Božidar was finally free to talk about the events of 1946, but it seemed no one cared to listen.

When handing me the notes, Šime said, “It is time to bring God back to us. When you turn on the TV, all you see are whores and fags.” Little did he know he was handing the notes to a “fag.” I felt guilty taking the notes. Though I am out as queer to my immediate family in the United States, my sexuality has not been discussed with my so-called summer relatives. From my Croatian and Catholic family members, I often hear narratives that don’t align with my liberal ideals and concepts of faith. Even though I identify as agnostic, in certain moments of fear, when I close my eyes, I still see the face of Christ. When I was younger, I tried to suppress my sexuality, but that only resulted in a disconnection from my body.

Growing up, I believed I would marry and have two children, who I would see get married and have children of their own. When I started to notice my same-sex attraction in elementary school, I did my best to suppress those feelings. But I was not so skilled as to only suppress my sexuality: my other body functions became numbed as well. I rarely paid attention to my hunger and needed prompting to use the restroom. I adopted a Catholic concept of asceticism, founded in the belief that purity of the body leads to purity of the soul. Mary’s virginity provided proof of her purity and evidence of Christ’s divinity. The idea of cleanliness was further supported by my mother’s obsessive tendencies to clean, erasing all evidence of our
unclean lives. This suppression was enforced by my family’s tendency to not speak of shameful things but to keep them hidden and away. Perfection became my model. My body housed an immortal and pure soul—there was no room for blood, excrement, urine, or semen. These were base, animal-like reminders of man’s fall from Grace. These were the curses of Eve, which I tried to wash away.

In Catholicism, the body is often venerated and its residual parts are proclaimed as Holy relics. Transubstantiation is the most striking example, where Catholics believe the Eucharist is transformed into the Body of Christ. Early cults were created around the body parts of saints and martyrs. The power of these relics was often evidenced by their inability to decay; though their souls moved on to Heaven, their bodies were spared the final humiliation of decomposition. The Virgin was spared this fate as well, as her body was taken to Heaven along with her soul, leaving nothing to rot. The lack of a body forced her cult to focus on liquids, such as breast milk, tears, and other residues of her Divine Motherhood. The residue of Christ was also left on the Shroud of Turin, a dubious relic believed to be the impression of Christ’s body imprinted on a shroud in which he was swaddled after being taken from the cross. The association of decay with sin is prevalent in Catholic dogma. Death breaks down the body, forcing us to see, as with sex, our biological natures, our animal selves.

In Bol, death was not as foreign to me as it was in Los Angeles. In Bol, when a person dies, the body stays with the family until it is buried. There is no preservation, no embalming, to spare everyone from witnessing the decay, no false impressions that we are empty vessels. When Kitana’s mother passed away, her body stayed in the house for a week because her son was delayed in his travels home. One of her mother’s last requests was to be buried wearing her favorite pink lipstick from America. As Diana attempted to apply lipstick to her grandmother
before burial, her lips dissolved under the weight of the fatty cosmetic. Her corpse had bloated from the gases released by the breakdown of bacteria in her gut, exaggerating her already ample figure. Because of her distention, Diana could not close the coffin. She asked a cousin to help her and they sat on the coffin, jumping up and down, as if trying to close an overstuffed suitcase. Pushing in pieces of flesh, they managed to latch the lid. This macabre dance seems to horrify people when I tell the story, but to me it is a beautiful story.

I started with the intention of making prints of my body out of lubricant, and I devised a plan to create the prints myself. I soon realized that I was missing the point of the exercise and was trying to illustrate something in the art and ignoring the process of the art making. Looking back at my older artworks, I realized that they were products of my defenses. They were perfectly preserved, embalmed objects whose perfection prevented anyone from seeing into the parts I did not want to show. They were taxidermy creations not given the chance to live or decay; they were relics of my sainthood. When I became an art therapist, my relationship to art changed, as the focus turned to the process not the product. So I designed this performance as an intervention where I would invite people to make prints of me, while I lay naked on a bed, covered in lubricant, eyes closed. The imagery drew from both sex and death—referencing the relics of the saints, especially the Shroud of Turin. One at a time, participants entered the room and covered me. Through the sheet, they lay their hands on my body, and as my skin touched the sheet, the residue of the lubricant would remain. The candlelit room brought up feelings of a wake, accentuated by my motionless body. Like all rituals of rebirth, there must be a death. My body was left covered by the participant, and then another person, the Psychopomp, would come and uncover me. The word “Psychopomp” is of Greek origin, meaning “guider of souls.” She acted as my guide, repeatedly witnessing my birth, death, and rebirth. While I lay under the
sheet, I was stuck in a liminal state, not quite dead, not quite born. With each rebirth I hoped to embrace my body, relax in the process, and confront the uncomfortable.

*The Object*

The first person who entered the room was a man. His hands were methodical, firm, and deliberate. I felt more like an object, not a body. He started with my feet, and as he worked up my legs I wondered when he would stop. His hands moved over my thighs and groin with no hesitancy. I surrendered into the feeling that I was an object, a statue that was being molded. When he left, I lay there feeling like an object, allowing my body to separate from my psyche.

*The Eunuch*

The next person was a woman, and when she covered me with the sheet, I was surprised with how careful her touch was. She started with my head and face, which immediately humanized me, and the object I was became a living being once again. She continued to push on the sheet with delicate reverence, making me feel that there was something precious underneath the white cotton. She did not, however, touch the area near my genitals. My genitals became a nerve-racking focal point in this exercise since they are the most private, the most sexual, and the most intimate part of my body. When she left, I felt human again but neutered.

*The Whole*

Not as hesitant as the woman’s touch, not as firm as the man’s, the next participant’s touch made me feel like a living being but not delicate or fragile. He started with my feet like the other male
participant, working his way up with long strokes, covering my entire body. When he left, I felt human and whole, beginning to feel unashamed.

_The Child_

The next woman, like the first, started with my face and moved down in long strokes, almost massaging my body. I began to feel not just respected but nurtured. I felt like I was being swaddled in comfortable blankets as she moved over my body with care. She did not flinch as she touched more intimate areas. When she left, I felt like I was in a womb, taken back to the paradise before the Fall, before shame befell the human form.

_The Transfer_

After the last participant left, the Psychopomp entered to make the final print. By this point, I felt comfortable in my skin, but I could tell she was not. She avoided going anywhere near my groin, leaving a large barren radius around my genitals. When she lifted the sheet, she looked at me apologetically and said, “I’m sorry,” apologizing for her own discomfort in the process.

* * *

The piece started with an apology and ended with one. The ritual helped me accept my body, changing something that I saw as profane into something sacred. The process also helped me accept myself as an artist and reminded me of art’s power to know and alter. I was no longer using art as a defense but engaging in the process of discovery and the fear that follows. I decided I would surrender to the Virgin, hoping that even if Christ judged me, she could sneak me into Heaven under her robes.
An Apology was a ritual created to understand and accept how my sexuality and gender identity were formulated through Catholic conceptions of masculinity and femininity. It was the Virgin who saved my life that night in 2003. Her visage conjures in me compassion, while the face of Christ makes me feel ashamed. The same iconography that I felt had damned me saved me. Perhaps this is why many gay icons are strong women who have triumphed over tragedy. As queer men, we are often kicked out of the male clubhouse and therefore have needed to find strength in femininity.
Figure 4. An Apology 1.

Figure 5. An Apology 2.
CHAPTER 3:

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION
ACT ONE:

INT. THE HOLY CAVE

MINA, a young woman of 20 is sitting barefoot, gazing at the dark walls of the cave. BOŽIDAR is also there, as usual, notepad in hand, wearing boots.

BOŽIDAR
Why are you all barefoot?

MINA
A girl from Dol said the Virgin asked us to remove our shoes around the cave.

BOŽIDAR
Who said this? When? (Flipping through his book) I don’t recall ...

Suddenly the Virgin Mary appears to MINA.

MINA
Look, she has appeared! Dear Mary! What is it you want from us? Why do you appear here?

VIRGIN MARY
Pray for the sinners to repent. Tell the whole world to repent, and once they have sought the proper penance, Christ will forgive them.

MINA
We are praying!

VIRGIN MARY
You are not practicing your faith as I would like.

MINA
If we are not practicing our faith as you like, tell us what we can do ...
BOŽIDAR
What does she say?!

MINA
She is gone. She said we are not practicing faith the way she would like us to.

BOŽIDAR walks out of the cave, past the throng of people. They ask him questions, but he ignores them.

BOŽIDAR
Why do those words seem like they were meant for me, dear Lady? Why do they fall so heavy on my heart? Was it me you were speaking to, me who looks for evidence, who tries to analyze what is going on here, who prays to you a hundred times for signs? I see now what you ask of me, to have true faith. Yes, one must question and be cautious, but you have proven your glory many times, and yet still I ask for proof. “You do not practice your faith like I would like you to.” I see now what I must do.

A man’s voice beckons BOŽIDAR from off-screen.

MAN (O.S.)
The visions are starting again. Marica started having visions and says she sees a tablet!

BOŽIDAR heads back toward the cave, nudging people aside, until he is near the MAN whose head is in the cave’s opening.

BOŽIDAR
What’s on the tablet?

MAN
(Head in cave, shouting out)
‘Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory Be for the conversion of sinners …’
BOŽIDAR
Yes, yes …

MAN
(Head still in cave, shouting again)
‘People listen: do not enter this cave
…’(Long pause)

BOŽIDAR
Yes?!

MAN
(Head in cave, now turning to the people)
‘Do not enter this cave before 5 a.m. You
may enter from 5 a.m. to 12 p.m., but
please stay away from 12 p.m. to 2 p.m.,
then you may return from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m.
After 7 p.m., please, no more visitors.’

FADE TO BLACK
ACT TWO – 1996:

The cave was located right next to public road D 115, about 3 km (1.86 mi.) away from the center of town, right above Bol. It was demolished in the name of progress, taken advantage of during a time of expansion and the paving of roads in 1976. The area near the road where the cave was located was blown away with dynamite and removed. “Where is Our Lady now?” the carriers of progress mocked, insulting the Holy site.

The cave was at the end of a narrow passageway in the rocks, which was about 0.80 m wide (2.5 ft.) and 5–6m (16–20 ft.) long. At the end of the passageway, just before the entrance to the cave, which in height reached only to my chest, the gap narrowed to about 30 cm (1 ft.). Once inside, the cave was wider, less than 2 m (6.5 ft.), and in my memory, nearly as deep.

Was this, my Lady, a new gate to a “New Jerusalem”? And like the gate of Jerusalem through which a camel laden with goods was able to pass only on its knees, the cave’s opening was sized so only children could pass freely. We adults could pass, but we needed to stop, think of the transition, change the position of the body, turn sideways, modify our stance!

Lady, was this all for our forgiveness, forgiveness for those that came here to this cave, for whom you kneel before the Heavenly Father and pray for mercy because many have sinned? We have formed camps to act as factories of death; we killed His creations at the breasts of their mothers; His beautiful earth and our ugly anti-tank trenches we have filled with the unsanctified bodies of brothers; we kill His creations before they are able to gaze upon the magnificent light of His sun, with drugs we kill ourselves and others!

Did you come among us, Mary, to this chasm in Bol, barefoot on the rugged karst of Mt. Križevac in Medjugorje, to bring us the last of His warnings: “[A]nd as the tops of the ears of
corn they shall be broke.” Did you come to help us, to beg for our mercy, You, our Mother and our Queen? You, Too Good and Too Beautiful! You, Small and Great.
ACT THREE – 2012:
The winters in Bol are very different from the summers. The teeming, bikinied tourists are gone, even the cats move on to more lively quarters—left are the 2,000 residents and, this year, me. In the winter, the days revolve around meals. I wake up and head upstairs for breakfast and then wait for lunch, which is the marker that it is almost time for dinner. The gossiping still happens, but no longer under the shade of wild grapevines but in a kitchen filled with cigarette smoke, illuminated by the flickering images of telenovelas—that year it was *Esmerelda*. Walks also help pass the time. Bundled-up walks to Zlatni Rat or to one of the many small chapels littered about the town for St. Lucy, St. Anthony, St. Michael. The stone plaque that commemorates the Virgin Mary’s visit was also a destination for me that winter. Sanja’s prayer group had added a few statues near the plaque and planted a pink bougainvillea. The guardrail, built to keep rocks from falling on the highway, acted as protection for the pilgrims (in total, perhaps six) and the cars, as well as a convenient place to lean against in prayer.

The slow pace of winter inspired lethargy, and I barely had the motivation to complete the trip to Medjugorje. Medjugorje is a town located near the border of Croatia in Herzegovina (of Bosnia and Herzegovina). Primarily filled with Catholic Croats, since 1981 it had been a destination for pilgrims, when six local children claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary. These children, now adults still see the Virgin, though some more often than others. I was told by a friend of mine who worked for the Catholic Church that the Church would not approve of these visions as true as long as the visionaries kept delivering messages from the Virgin. The concern being that once the Church gave the site a “constat de supernaturalitate,” declaring it supernatural and divine, the Virgin might go “off message” and challenge Church doctrines, distribute condoms, and officiate gay marriages. I wanted to go to Medjugorje to see what a more
successful vision site looked like. The Virgin of Bol had attempted a revolution, and though her cult grew each year by one or two, the dozens of people who made their way to her site were an afterthought compared to the millions who went to Herzegovina.

Diana and Aki decided to come along with me, and I was grateful for the companionship. They had never been to Herzegovina, and I think Diana was looking to get away from the family, now confined to a small kitchen. We woke up early and took the catamaran to Split. I moved in and out of sleep as we bounced on the waves, and within a few hours, we were on the mainland. We found a rental car agency, and though the sign outside said it was in operation, it hadn’t opened yet, so we waited in a café across the way. The agency finally opened 25 minutes behind schedule, and after collecting a few signatures, they pulled up a two-door red sedan. I drove it through the streets of Split, which were more suited for foot traffic or perhaps a horse-drawn carriage. Driving to another country seemed like it would be a journey, but the distance between mainland Croatia and Herzegovina was less than the distance between Los Angeles and San Diego. We decided to go off the highway and drive through the small towns, with their handful of residents and cinderblock abodes. The drive was lovely, mostly uneventful, except that we had to pull over once because Aki had to use the restroom.

We arrived in Medjugorje in the early afternoon. The main street was lined with shops selling Virgin Mary souvenirs. We parked our car and exchanged our Kuna for Dinars. The visions had taken place in various spots in the town: St. James Parish Church, Cross Mountain, and Apparition Hill. In addition to the active sites, there were a number of prayer spots and a line of confessional booths. The booths reminded me of the rows of showers at health spas, for cleaning yourself off before entering the hot tub. The place was buzzing with people speaking
many languages, most prominently Italian and Spanish. I went inside an information center, which shared a building with a gift shop, and was given directions to Apparition Hill.

To get to Apparition Hill, we had to walk through a residential section of Medjugorje. The two-story boxed houses were painted in bright colors. The closer we got to the hill, the more frequently we found people selling goods in front of these houses—not just images of the Virgin, but lacework and jams. As we weaved through this catacomb, we moved into a more expansive agricultural space that ran right up to the pathway of Apparition Hill. Aki was already tired from walking past the houses, so we were not sure how he would deal with the two- or three-hour walk ahead of us.

We started up the steep hill in silence. There were clusters of tour groups, its members wearing similar T-shirts, flocked around a person holding a baton. Rust-colored rocks were densely strewn about the path like spilled produce. Many people were making the trek barefoot. I was in my recently acquired deerskin boots. My feet trembled on the jagged rocks, slipped into sharp cervices, and glided over the small, slippery pebbles. The leather of my shoes was being scratched, lashed, and torn. The believers seemed to walk on in peace, carefully placing one foot in front of the other. Was I a non-believer? I was not sure, but my boots sure seemed to be. Along the way, we passed bronze reliefs depicting the mysteries of the rosaries, the Passion of the Christ through the Virgin’s eyes. Groups paused and prayed at the markers, murmuring the familiar melodic hum of “Our Father” in a multitude of languages. A chain of pilgrims with eyes closed, though not so tight that a tear could not fall, clasped each other’s hands, bodies teetering on the sloped road as their outstretched arms searched for balance and grace.

“Jesus Christ! When are we going to get there?!”
The serenity was interrupted by Aki. His mother shushed him, but this was probably the worst thing to do. Aki almost unfailingly did the opposite of what you wanted from him.

“I’m not going any further!”

We did keep going, but every few paces, he would have another outburst: “No!”

Diana pulled him aside and whispered sternly, holding him in place with a firm grip. Aki and Diana went to church every Sunday. After a horrific marriage with a man who was sent to jail for war crimes, she had an affair with a married man and became pregnant with Aki. She found her faith during that time of tumult. Aki knew the mythology of the Catcoholic Church and would often blaspheme as a way to get a rise out of his mother and his very religious aunt Sanja. “Whore! I’m walking with a bunch of whores!” he’d once screamed when he was unable to get his way on the beach. Sanja told him to behave, said that he was not using proper language, and reminded him God was watching.

“I don’t care about God! I hope the archangel Michael comes down to earth so I can chop his head off with his sword and toss it into the sea!”

Needless to say, he had some emotional problems that he and his therapist were working through. I quickened my pace, angry that Aki was ruining this serene moment for me and worried he would soon start questioning the Virgin’s purity.

Once I had distanced myself enough, I returned to the silence of murmured prayers and sliding feet. I felt the most at peace when I found a vacant pocket on the road, a clearing without any pilgrims. When I was younger, I had a recurring dream of a world that only I could access, usually through a closet door or a secret passage. This world was abandoned, and I could explore it freely without consequence of being reprimanded. I would go to this place often, until I was eleven years old, when one day, walking through the usually empty streets, I spotted three other
tourists, pointing in amazement at the sites that were once only mine. I never went back to that
dream place. I carried the sentiment into my waking life, often looking around and saying to
myself, “This would be so much better if all these people weren’t here.”

I rounded a bend, my legs sore from the lunges required to make it up the steep hillside,
and now the path was descending. Just then, a life-size statue of the Virgin Mary came into view,
er her right hand placed over her heart, the left bent at the elbow, outstretched. Her pedestal was a
cement garden box shaped like a six-pointed star, protected by a fence of the same shape. On the
cement base and covering the growing plants were pieces of paper, rosaries, flowers, and objects.
These were offerings and wishes for the sick to be healed and faith to be restored. People were
praying, weeping, sitting, and recording. I found a place to sit, a little farther from the statue.
Because I was not sure where my faith fell, I did not want to take up prime real estate from
someone who deserved a front row seat. I tried to close my eyes and find a sense of peace. There
were moments I felt something, but when I tried to chase them, they would disappear. Aki and
Diana rounded the bend, holding hands. He ran right to the fence and stared up at the Virgin,
who looked off into the distance.

I realized that the Virgin had picked a great location. The walk itself felt like a
pilgrimage, the rocks like tiny penances strewn about. And when you got to the top, the view was
beautiful. There was more space in Medjugorje than in the tiny town of Bol to build the
infrastructure a vision site needed. The Virgin revitalized the economy of Medjugorje in the
1980s, but she could not overcome the communists in Bol in the 1940s or compete with Zlatni
Rat and windsurfing today.

The walk back was harder for Aki. He paused frequently, sitting down and not moving.
Instead of looping back, the path continued past more bronze reliefs, and I realized we were
basically exiting through a gift shop—a street lined with businesses, mostly souvenir shops and a restaurant. We grabbed a bite to eat there, while Diana enticed Aki to continue with the promise of a souvenir. We walked back to the souvenir shop connected to the information center, and I picked up a few items while Aki debated between a bracelet and a rosary. Since he was told he could only have one, of course he wanted both, and his temper tantrum continued until he left the shop with a large gold rosary around his neck and a more modest leather one on his wrist. He was tired, we were tired, so we took the highway to ensure we would get to the car rental shop before it closed.

The ride back was harder on Aki, who started to turn pale, then green. On the highway, there was no good place to stop, so I drove faster. We had entered Split when he finally threw up. Kindly, he vomited mostly on his own clothing, leaving the upholstery untouched. We pulled over and he continued to vomit. I placed my hand on his back, and Diana scrambled to clean up the aftermath. He looked calm, no longer possessed with that cold stare and obstinate nature. I could not help but wonder if this was an act of the Virgin, an attempt at cleansing his soul. As he continued to vomit, I looked down at my new boots, now scuffed and tattered, and sighed.
CHAPTER 4:

DEVILS AND GODS
ACT ONE:

INT. THE HOLY CAVE - BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 2 P.M. AND 7 P.M.

BOŽIDAR, MARICA, MINA, and LUKA are in the cave. LUKA and MARICA are staring into the darkness, having visions. BOŽIDAR, MINA, and the rest are watching. A DEVIL appears to MARICA, only she can see and hear him, so she repeats his words to the others.

MARICA
I see a devil! He is sticking his tongue out at me. Let us pray! (Bows her head in prayer)

DEVIL
(MARICA mouths along)
I pray to God each night!

LUKA
What lies!

DEVIL
(MARICA mouths along)
I do not lie! I pray to God each night!

BOŽIDAR
Why do you pray?

DEVIL
(MARICA mouths along)
To save you from all these saints.

BOŽIDAR
What do you want from us?

DEVIL
(MARICA mouths along)
To take you to my Heaven. Come down below with me, where you are free to swear and curse the Blessed Mother and God.

LUKA
We must pray!
DEVIL
(MARICA mouths along)
You think prayer will help you? Pray, pray
all you want, but you will all pay.

LUKA starts to attention. JESUS has appeared!

LUKA
I see Jesus, Jesus and his flock of sheep!

The DEVIL fades until all that is left is a single menacing black
cat-like claw, until that too fades.

MINA
Jesus, are we your sheep?

JESUS
(LUKA mouths along)
Yes ...

MARICA starts to attention. The VIRGIN has appeared in her guise
as Our Lady of the Rosary.

MARICA
It’s our Lady of the Rosary!

LUKA
When will you make a miracle for us?!

VIRGIN
(MARICA mouths along)
Those who do not believe what is occurring
here will go to Hell.

A PILGRIMS’s voice is heard from outside.

PILGRIM (O.S.)
What is that? What is happening?
(Turning to the cave opening, shouting)
The devil left, Jesus said we are his sheep, and the Virgin said we will go to Hell if we don’t believe …

PILGRIM (O.S.)
Got it!

MARICA starts to attention again. A MAN IN SUIT has appeared. Again, only she can hear and see him. The others depend on her to know what he is saying.

MARICA
I see a man. I don’t know who he is. He’s wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, tie ... well-groomed, tall …

BOŽIDAR
Dear saint, who are you?

MAN IN SUIT
(MARICA mouths along)
I am not a saint. I am an angel.

BOŽIDAR
In what land did you live?

MAN IN SUIT
(MARICA mouths along)
I have never lived on this earth.

BOŽIDAR
We do not recognize you. How are you called?

MAN IN SUIT
(MARICA mouths along)
I am Lucifer Kaferio.

BOŽIDAR
Lucifer! What right does he have to say anything here?!
MAN IN SUIT
(MARICA mouths along)
That which you believe is Heaven is really Hell, and that which you believe is Hell is really Heaven. The priests have taught you wrong.

LUKA
More lies!

MAN IN SUIT
(MARICA mouths along)
We were all angels and all the same. Until one of us, he wanted to be above us all, he wanted to be in charge, to establish an autocracy. I fought against him, and with the help of my angels, I won. We left him there and went to establish our own Heaven ... the priests have taught you wrong ...

FADE TO BLACK
“Get up! Get dressed. Hurry!”

It was early morning. I woke up to the unfamiliar and commanding voice of a man standing over my head, who obviously did not have good intentions. There was another unfamiliar man near my writing desk, looking for something.

By the time I dressed, the man had found what he was looking for. The other one made a new command: “You’re coming with us! Quickly!” They did not even give me a chance to say goodbye to my loved ones or allow me to take anything. My family was gathered on the stairwell near my room. I was not able to say a word to them, only exchange a look with my father. That would be our last goodbye. When I was released from prison four years later, first and foremost I wanted to see my father. My brother told me that for three years now, my father had not been among the living. “We didn’t tell you because …” I understand, my brother. My father died, and I can only imagine how painfully he wished to have seen his imprisoned son.

Before I returned to my family and learned the news of my father, though, I constantly had men at my head ordering me around with commanding tones: “Get up! Get dressed! Hurry!” That was how it began, that morning, that day, August 25, 1946. From that day on for the next four years, it would continue.

I was first detained in a room at the high school. In the evening, I was taken from Bol, accompanied by the men who had arrested me and a gauntlet of townspeople who followed in protest, loudly singing, “We Want God for Our Father. We want God for our King.” While I was walking the steps to the waterfront, they were still reciting the hymn: “And those enemies of Christ, on the battle lines, like idols will fall into flames.” The State Security Administration of communist Yugoslavia knew who the song was about, but they did not react. That in itself was
like a loud scream, like the scream of those devils in the cave under the leadership of Lucifer:

“We renounce God! We have our own God who commands us!”

I spent a night in Supetar, then the next day we found ourselves in a “villa” on the hilltop known as the Katalinića Brig Prison, overlooking the port of Split. I was placed in a room I quickly learned was solitary. When night fell and I started to doze off, one of the masters of this lamentable place came to visit, then a second came, then a third, and so on. They entered as if they were the owners of the room, loud, commanding, gleeful. After much rattling, they would open the door. More accurately, they would open one lock, then another, then a third—the source of all the rattling. Then, they would lock one, then open it again, cursing the locks (perhaps because there were so many). Then they would curse at me (perhaps because I needed so much securing).

When the first one opened the door (he seemed surprised to have opened it), he shouted, “Are you Petar Petrović?”

“No,” I said. “I’m Božidar Jakšić.”

Then he proceeded to yell at me because I was not Petar Petrović, and he left and proceeded to attempt to lock the latch with more locks than the Pleiades has stars.

When I was next about to fall asleep, another visitor came, following the same pattern: one latch, then the other, then the third, again the first and third, then the second, forward and backward. Then he entered, seeming as surprised as the previous visitor.

“Are you Božidar Jakšić?”

“I am,” I said.

And then the yelling began. This time he yelled at me for being Božidar Jakšić and not Petar Petrović. It went on like that for a while until I heard the command: “Come with me!” It
was either late at night or early in the morning of my first day in the care of the State Security Administration, whose motto was: "For the safety and security of every individual member of our nation, large is the territory of our national government." That was a new lesson, a new phrase, learned at my new university.

"Who organized the ‘miracles’? How were those images transmitted? Why weren’t you collecting money?!”

It went on like this in a similar fashion, without meaning and without logic. It was like this day and night, without bread and without water, and I was constantly on my feet. It was enough to drive you mad. Excuse me, without water is not accurate. One of the guards did bring a flask of water and slowly poured it out on the floor in front of me. Until then, I thought that water was without color, smell, and flavor. There I discovered water is the color of splendor, has the scent of a bloom, and the taste of sweet wine!

After a few days of this interrogation, I was moved to a completely empty room without a bed, or any other objects to inventory—even without interrogators. I was alone. I knew nothing else. It came to a point where I no longer thought about how alone I was or how it was that someone could endure being so alone. I could not even entertain the idea of suicide. I could not feel fear or even desire. Then, one day, someone appeared behind my back, out of nowhere. Oh, no, there was no one there. That was just an illusion, but I felt on my forehead someone’s hand. I felt the fingers of that hand, three fingers starting with the forefinger, and on each of those three fingers, three finger pads. The finger pads were full, soft, and voluminous. From them emanated into me some warm grace. I felt as though I was being birthed. I was emerging anew, not like a small child but like a grown man with already developed thoughts.
This was a divine birth, majestic! I wanted it to last as long as possible. I was reborn. I became aware that I was I, with a first name and a last, that I was alive, that I could think, that I was! I felt an extreme thankfulness toward this hand, toward whoever was behind me. I turned around to greet him. I was aware there was no one behind me, but I turned anyway. I thanked the Heavenly Father and my Mother from the Holy Cave in Bol for this rebirth.
ACT THREE – 2013:

During Christmas in Bol, there were many visitors. St. Nicholas arrived on the night of December 5th, and to mark the occasion, the Dominican monastery in Bol opened its doors and offered the town cakes and Turkish coffee. To scare the young children, young monks dressed as Krampus, St. Nicholas’s demon companion, and jumped up and down on tables, rattling chains. At least, this was the practice in my mother’s youth. Now a town member might dress like Krampus and walk on the waterfront, but the hairy beast was mainly used as a threat akin to, “Wait until your father gets home.” St. Lucy also visited, leaving presents of chocolate and oranges in shoes on December 13th. This was followed by a procession to her chapel located on the hill overlooking the town. Djed Mraz, or Grandfather Frost, came on the 25th—he was a communist Santa Claus who took over gift-giving duties from Baby Jesus. After the Yugoslavian civil war, there was an attempt to revamp Djed Mraz as Djed Bozicnak, or Grandfather Christmas, but the names became interchangeable. These visitors, the religious St. Nicholas, the Austro-Hungarian Krampus, the Italian St. Lucy, the communist Frost, and the democratic Christmas, were all vestiges of the region’s various occupations, patronages, and influencers.

The landscape of Brač was littered with these reminders. In the forest on the way to Zlatni Rat, there was a Roman stone trough from when Brač was used as a pasture. The land bore the marks and vestiges of being caught between the east and the west. In the hills were monasteries built strategically to make them difficult for Turkish invaders and pirates to attack. Also in this hill was a cave. Not the Holy Cave in which the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared, but a still existing and more famous cave. The Zmajeva Špilja, or Dragon’s Cave, was located above the nearby town of Murvica. Murvica’s population of 22 residents drove or walked the 6 km (3.7 mi.) to Bol for food and services. Until 2012 this road was unpaved and rocky, but the path had since been smoothed over with asphalt. I had heard of this cave, but every time I would think of
going there in the summers, I was dissuaded by Kitana, who warned me about the heat, the venomous snakes, and my insensible shoes. I decided since it was winter, and the weather was cold, the snakes hibernating, and my shoes now fully sensible, I would make the trip and see if this cave could give me any insights to the other.

Diana and Aki also wanted to join, and since they had been my fellow pilgrims in Medjugorje (for better or worse) we decided to go together. To visit the site, we had to make arrangements with a tour guide, a resident of Murvica, who had been guiding tours since the late 1990s. Before then, the cave was closed to visitors because the carvings were under threat from curious residents whose hands harbored bacteria that threatened to corrode the reliefs inside. This was the cave Kitana remembered, the unguarded and unkempt site she visited as a child on days when there was nothing to do. Though she and my mother were childhood friends, my grandmother would never have approved of my mother running off into the hills. Now in her sixties, Kitana decided the hike would be too strenuous for her, but she told us her recollections as only she could, full of hand gestures and wonder. She told us of “the beautiful carvings, the most exquisite being a giant dragon—it was truly a sight to be seen.” For preservation, they gated the entrance in the late 1980s and eventually gave the key to Zoran, who, as was known to happen in this town, was my cousin—the nephew of my aunt through marriage, on my father’s side.

Zoran arrived to pick us up from Kitana’s house in a blue van. Learning that we were family, Zoran chatted with me about relatives we might both know and took us to his home to meet his wife and show off recent home renovations. We then picked up another group, a trio of Eastern Europeans, whom Zoran described as neo-pagans who journeyed to the cave often for ceremonial purposes.
Zoran had become an expert of sorts on Murvica and the Dragon’s Cave, and he began his tour in front of one of the oldest houses in town. I have been on his tour once more since then, when I visited in the summer of 2014, and can attest his daily trips to the sites are a well-rehearsed and well-informed experience.

He stood in front of the oldest house in Murvica, a house that looked like a model for all of the houses I had seen in Bol. The first floor was called the konoba—it was built into the rocks, therefore only three walls needed to be constructed. This was used as a wine cellar, above which were the living quarters and a terrace. The roofs of the houses were made of thin layers of limestone. The reason houses were built on the hard karst was because all fertile land was reserved for vineyards. As we walked by the house to continue our trek up the side of Brač, I thought about the geography of Croatia and the Croatian language itself. Limestone is so plentiful on the island that the Dalmatians, Croatians from the islands and coastline, said limestone “grows,” and when they took it from the ground they said they had “picked it.” As I felt the hard stones under my boots (I had switched out my deerskins for sturdier hiking boots), I thought about Croatian’s hard consonants, which often rubbed up against one another without the lubrication of vowels. I thought of the konoba built into the hard karst, and how growing up in Los Angeles I wanted a house with a basement, an American basement like on TV. I wanted an American basement with slumber parties and board games. Where teenagers played Spin the Bottle and Seven Minutes in Heaven—all things I never did. I wanted a basement, not a konoba, cold and dark. In my grandmother’s house, the konoba was musty, filled with fishing nets, knickknacks, and unwanted things. Back home in Los Angeles, when my father remodeled the basement-less house, he added an American konoba, a cellar, dark and damp, but buried in soft American vowels and prone to flooding.
We finally arrived at the ruins of a small monastery, our last stop on the way to the cave. After we explored the ruins, we were asked to gather around and hear a little more about the cave we were about to see. The cave was thought to have been used as a hermitage, a sort of little monastery during the 15th and 16th centuries, populated by Glagolic monks. The Glagolic monks, long before the Protestant reforms of Luther, were able to use the Croatian language instead of Latin in religious services and writing, which was unheard of at the time. The first documented inhabitant of the cave was the monk Juraj Dubravić, who Ante Škobalj (1999), a Croatian historian, claims created the carvings in the 15th century—though he thinks it might have been used as a Slavic temple before then. If this was true, the cave’s name could predate the dragon figure carved on the wall. The Slavic name, Zmaja, had only been in use for the last few hundred years, coming from the word for snake, which in Slavic mythology was the same beast as a dragon. The cave was previously referred to as Dračavo or Dragonia Špilja, the Latin-based word for Dragon. This implied that the cave was already named before the Slavs arrived in the 9th century, as they tended to name places in their own tongue. If the dragon carving was from the 15th century, then the cave could not have gotten its name from the figure. Zoran thinks the cave was named by the Romans and then adopted by the Slavs to fit into their mythology. The world in Slavic mythology revolved around a tree of life, on whose highest branch, which was made of gold, sat Perun, the god of lightning. The roots of this tree were in the water, where lived his rival, Veles, who was often associated with a snake or dragon. The two fought for control and balance by fighting over the goddess Mokoš. The landscape continued to echo these characters, Perun, Mokoš, Veles, in the names of places.

Croatian linguist Radoslav Katičić (1993) looked at the geography and names of places in Croatia to search for their Slavic roots. Slavs lived for three-and-a-half centuries as pagans, until
converted to Catholicism in the 10th and 11th centuries. Katičić posited that Slavs built temples on high ground or named places after Perun as a symbol of protection. There were towns near Split and in Istira named Perun, but the chapels of St. George the Dragon Slayer and St. Vitus, Protector from Lightning, were also usually located on hilltops and might have been Christian attempts at covering up or re-appropriating pagan places of importance. The name of Veles was found in a town in Macedonia and also in Slovenia, as Mt. Velež. Mokoš was harder to find, one example being the district of Mokošica in Dubrovnik. Between Bol and Murvica, two of the three essential characters could be found. According to Katičić’s theories, Vidova Gora (Mt. of St. Vitus), the highest peak of Brač, had a chapel dedicated to the saint built in 12th century that he believed covered up an earlier site dedicated to Perun. Veles was represented on Brač by the Dragon’s Cave, but Mokoš, however, was absent.

We continued on our way up a very steep goat trail, slick with pine needles and gravel. I watched Aki carefully, as his mother slowly trailed behind us. Zoran unlocked a gate that was placed over the opening of the cave, which was accessed by a narrow staircase built next to the rock wall. We slowly ascended the staircase and walked into the cave. It was tall and vast, with two cisterns and filled with carvings. There was also an altar, a triptych, whose last enclave had the inverted face of what seemed to be a man carved in Byzantine style. The relief was perhaps meant to be the face of Christ, which, when lit from below, seemed to follow the viewer. To the right was a shrine dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. The vaginal shape of the cave, according to Zoran, perhaps hinted at an earlier pagan use in fertility rituals. His theory was that places like these changed their iconography but not their purpose.

The main relief of the cave, located on the opposing wall, has been interpreted as the Book of Revelations. In this relief, there was carved a head of a long-bearded man, typical
iconography of a hermit, who lay with his head slanted: perhaps he was St. John, seeing a vision. Next to him was a crescent moon, inside which was the profile of a woman, interpreted as the pregnant woman with the twelve-star diadem. To the right was the dragon, an often-used symbol to depict the beast from Revelations. The six round balls coming from its mouth might symbolize its other heads. It seemed ready to consume the forthcoming baby, and a womb-like cradle waited empty near its mouth. Above the dragon was the lion, which held the horn of the beast, breaking it. This iconography, familiar since the 11th and 12th centuries, could also be found in the bestiary of Notre Dame de Paris.

Zoran told us an archeologist who visited the cave seemed to think the carvings had to be done by more than just one hand, based on a few observations: 1) There seemed to be two distinct carving styles. The left and right side had lines created by the byproduct of carving, while the carvings in the center portion were smooth; 2) The iconography on the left was unique, but the middle displayed common motifs; 3) The middle relief was further recessed in the rock. There would be no reason to carve so deep, unless the middle relief was covering up another work; 4) Holes carved in the rock seemed important, though their purpose was only speculative. They were everywhere except on the middle relief. The holes seemed to be a signature of the artist. It could be the carvings were done by a pagan Slav, and then portions were covered up to align with more Christian ideology.

We looked around the cave, listened to Zoran’s thoughtful descriptions, and then it was time to leave. We continued on without the neo-pagans, who stayed outside the locked cave to complete some unknown ritual. They believed in the theory that this was an old Slavic place of worship, its energy potent and untapped. The earliest written description of the cave came from Bishop Valier, who visited the coast of Brač in 1580 on behest of Pope Grigor XV. He traveled
for two years from Venice to make sure the religious orders followed Christian codes of conduct. He described the cave but neglected to describe the figures. This was an odd omission, since it was believed that in 1460, Jurij Dubrović carved all the walls himself. The theory, supported by Zoran and the unnamed archeologist, was that Valier saw the cave, was displeased by the pagan markings, and covered up portions of the relief with another. The dragon in the cave was no longer Veles but the beast from Revelations, Satan.

As we walked down the slopes, we could hear the chants of the neo-pagans fading as we got closer to the shore. I thought about the missing Mokoš and about the Holy Cave. The Holy Cave was positioned right between Vidova Gore and the Dragonia Špilja, the homes of Perun and Veles. Perhaps that Holy Cave represented the missing feminine: Mokoš in her guise as the Virgin, come to challenge the patriarchy of the communist regime. We slipped and tripped our way back down to the van while I kept wondering if the neo-pagans had tapped into something unknown.
Figure 6. Dragon’s Cave relief.
THE WAIT
In an average lifetime we have 657,000 hours to use. During a portion of that time, you have shared at least a few of those hours with Ante Bodlović. As a gift to you, from June 7th – 18th, you have been invited to utilize some of his hours. By following the instructions below, Ante will show up at the location(s) you choose and be available to you for up to 12 hours.

**What you get:**
- Full Name: Anthony Bodlović
- Sex: Male
- Height: 1.85 m / 6'1"
- Weight: 78.5 kg / 173 lbs

**Ante will show up with:**
- $20 bill
- a passport
- valid driver license
- truck with a full tank of gas

**Directions:**

Click the link below to sign up for a 12 hour block.

The 12 hours are your gift to use as you choose. You do not need to use the entire 12 hours, the hours used do not have to be contiguous, nor do you need to be present while he is gifting the time– the hours used just have to fall within your selected 12 hour block.

If you need him to arrive in specific attire or have any other requests, you can communicate that to him when you receive a confirmation e-mail.

**Example:**

You select 9am - 9pm, you can then indicate you would like him to arrive at 10am and leave at 11am, then instruct him to come back from 6pm - 9pm. Regardless of requested hours, he will remain available the entire 12 hour block.

**CLICK HERE TO BEGIN**

**Disclaimers:**

Quantities are limited, one 12 hour block per person, first come first serve.

Ante will be wearing a contact microphone meant to record his utterances, however, your voice may incidentally be recorded.

In addition, you may be contacted for a follow up interview – participation in which is voluntary.
The artist puts a call out, offering himself to be borrowed for 12 hours by 12 people for 12 days. The people solicited are not strangers, but people whose e-mail addresses he has acquired, a mix of good friends, casual acquaintances, strangers that never became friends, and friends that became strangers. He shows up wearing a jumpsuit, with $20, a passport, a driver’s license, and a truck full of gas. He does only what is asked of him. He does not eat, use the restroom, or speak unless instructed. If the entire 12 hours are not utilized, he goes to his studio and thinks about the person who has borrowed him. He is devoted to the participant for those hours. He is documenting these experiences through a lapel microphone feeding a tape recorder in his pocket. The participants can at anytime ask him to stop recording. They can ask him at anytime to do anything.

* * *

In attempting to understand what occurred in Bol in 1946, my main source of information was Božidar’s notes. I also found an article in the newspaper Slobodna Dalmatia from 1946 describing the event as a hoax, as well as photocopies of the diary of Mina, a schoolteacher. But Božidar had included her notes in his work whenever there was a contradiction, or when there were lapses in his own records. He had been accused, along with a few others, of being the main perpetrator of this conspiracy. While all others disavowed the events to avoid jail or scrutiny, his devotion to the Virgin, to the belief in the events, lasted until his death. When the revolution came, he finally felt he could speak about the visions. In 1996, he held a presentation at the small theatre on the island and placed a commemorative plaque in the place where the apparitions occurred. None of the original participants who were alive at the time came to the event. Little Luka, who had convinced Božidar of the veracity of the visions by counting sheep, disavowed what had happened as an adult. However, according to his widow—who rarely ever spoke about
the event—when she asked him at his death bed the truth about those events, he said, “Yes, it was all true.” Most people in the town were not aware of the visions or chalked them up to mass hysteria. The local church and Sanja’s rosary group of six women believed fully and continued to upkeep the site. I did not know what I believed, and this was where Božidar and I did not see eye to eye. I found myself relating to Božidar’s writing about his time in solitary confinement when he began to lose sense of who he was. Sitting on my bed in 2001, suppressing my sexuality, I had felt just as alone figuratively as he was literally. And both of us, in our deepest despair, were visited by unknown forces and rebirthed.

I wanted to re-attune with Božidar to get to a place where I could understand his devotion, even if I did not share it. Not having a deity I could turn my attention to, I realized that the closest thing I had to unconditional devotion was in my relationships with others. I had my tendency to put others before me. When I suppressed my body, I suppressed my emotional needs as well. I created the performance The Wait in an attempt to understand Božidar’s devotion to his faith, which kept him sane through his trial and imprisonment. By examining my devotion to others and pushing it to an extreme, I hoped to see the nuances that lie underneath the exaggeration. As the 12 days went on, it became easier. I could feel my ego shrink and an ease come over me; a burden lifted. I no longer had to think or question, only trust and believe. The days blurred as I got up, put on my costume, met with the participant for the promised 12 hours, went home, ate, and did it again. So much happened in those moments. A few of my notes are listed below, they have been redacted to remove portions that were off the record.
Day One: Max

I meet with Max. A photographer who wanted me to go with him to the beach to take some photos. At first I was awkward, but I soon slipped into a comfortable place of compliance.

I stripped topless and posed for some pictures in the surf. Max lingered behind his 4x5 camera. There was a commotion: a swimmer was being pulled from the surf. He was being resuscitated. I could see the fear in Max’s eyes, the shaky hands of everyone around me. I felt nothing. A boy, a young teenager, might be dying in front of me—but I felt nothing. When the boy let out a gasp, the tension eased, but I could feel the adrenaline vibrating in everyone.

As we drove home, Max asked if he could put on his German audio lessons. He normally listened to these while home alone, in the morning. He wanted to attend graduate school for art in Berlin. I drove as he spoke German back to the prerecorded voices. I could feel tears well up—I felt special, chosen. This was an act no one else got to see. A private lesson he would have at his breakfast table, but now I got to see it. Tears slowly dripped down my face. How lucky I was.
Day 2: Brooke

Brooke needed help cleaning her house. I spent hours with her as she debated every object, asking for suggestions. Progress was slow, and I was taken back to the day the Virgin appeared to me in a drug-induced vision, when the emotional weight of my objects dragged me down into depression. I could feel the weight in Brooke’s house, her knickknacks and keepsakes broken and dusty from neglect. I could feel the past. I tried to take myself back into the moment, to conjure up how lucky I was to be helping Brooke. How Brooke knew what was good for me. She sent me home for an hour to shower and then wanted to go to an AA meeting. I went with her and listened to the stories of unmanageable lives, trying not to think of anything but Brooke. After the meeting, she sent me home and she and a group of friends went to go get frozen yogurt. “Go home and pray for me.” So I did, and as I repeated a prayer, it formed into Brooke’s prayer:
After the alarm went off and my 12 hours were up, I went into the shower again and cried.

_Day 3: Felix_

Felix was a recent ex-boyfriend. We stopped seeing each other because of philosophical differences. He was Puerto Rican and a follower of Paramahansa Yogananda. He prayed for Israel each night. His apartment was filled with thick incense and intense stares from framed portraits of yogis. He didn’t understand why I wanted to watch a Charles Manson documentary. For him, spiritual enlightenment was an upward motion; we must leave our body and our spirit will move through the ether. I was not going to apologize anymore for having a body, and for having needs. He took me to Forest Lawn cemetery and made me slowly walk along a maze inscribed in the ground. He then took me to a Sikh temple, and we
prayed and chanted.  He told me to come back at 6 p.m. and to meet him at the Self-Realization Center. He told me to buy him frozen mangoes and yogurt with my $20 and then give the change to a homeless man named “Lyle” on the corner of Sunset and Vermont. I did all those things and waited in my studio, thinking of Felix for two hours. I got to the Center and gave him his mangoes and yogurt, and he told me to sit for a three-hour meditation and left me. I sat there as my body began to ache and pinch and grumble. I sat through the discomfort. I tried to push away the kindling of anger that would start to flare up at being left—of having to buy the mangoes and yogurt. But I had to remind myself Felix had a plan for me…

Day 4: Brianne

Brianne is the girlfriend of a friend of a friend. She wanted help to shoot a video for a show in Berlin. She wanted me to play the part of a casting director. We did this for hours.
She asked me to use the $20 to buy the ingredients to make an Old Fashioned.

She took me to Native Foods and asked me to dance in the restaurant. Acrobatic leaps and modern shakes.

*Day 5: E.J.*

E.J. Hill is a performance artist. He asked me to meet him at his studio.

We stared at each other for forty minutes.

We bought sandwiches and ate them in a park. A woman came by with a flyer looking for her father; he had dementia and had run away.

E.J. sent me home. He said he couldn’t handle the
responsibility. He asked me to behave “like myself.” I didn’t know what he meant. I asked him if he meant the “myself” he sees at parties, who tries to be funny? The “myself” who tries to be smart? The “myself” who is afraid he will be seen as an imposter? “Tell me which ‘myself’ you’d like me to do.” He didn’t seem to understand that, stripped of all the social scripts, I was being the real me: “Tell me what you want me to do, I don’t care. I don’t care where we eat, what we do, just accept me.” Was this me? Had I found myself? He sent me to my studio. I sat there for six hours. I cried after hour two and did not stop. I was crying for me. I was crying for E.J. I was feeling the weight of God pushing my tears. “Please, just make it stop.” I didn’t know what I meant; I just needed it to stop. I actually felt in that moment God was listening but choosing to remain silent.

Day 6: Kristen

Kristen had me meet her at work and return some clothes at a Marshalls. She had me go back to tell the clerk to have a nice day because she had forgotten. I wasn’t thinking too much anymore, I just did. She asked me to go home and watch the film Rushmore in my underwear and eat popcorn. She wanted me to memorize the lyrics to a song on the soundtrack. She wanted me to call a friend. I was allergic to popcorn.
Day 7: Jessica

I cleaned her house. I cleaned behind her couch. Cobwebs and dust. I washed down the windows. No one was home. I cleaned and felt a joyful nothing. I went to my studio and cried some more. I saw Božidar’s face.

Day 8: Rich

I met Rich at a field and he wanted me to run a few laps with him. Then he wanted me to time his progress; I hit the stopwatch every time his footfall passed the yellow line. All I focused on was the yellow line. We went to the gym and he practiced shooting basketballs. I ran after them.

Day 9: Matt

Matt and I used to date. I broke up with him three times. A psychic told me he had bad sex karma. We played tennis. It was Father’s Day. He told me to call my father and tell him I loved him while he went to Starbucks and picked up a cappuccino. I had never told my father I loved him. The comfort of the days faded. My faith was being tested. Was this the moment I turned my
back on my faith and went against the word of Matt? I made the call, and we chatted for a moment. I said I love you and hung up before I could hear a response. Matt called me a robot. He made me write a story about something he’d never known about me. He has me bury the story in my backyard, right next to the statue of the Virgin Mary.

Day 10: Alex

More manual labor. Alex was moving. I helped him move. I shifted back into a place of compliance. I lifted. I packed. I was at peace.

Day 11: Michael

Michael wanted to work on a project together. He was an artist. The project was about memory. I did research on the Internet and shared my findings.
Day 12: Angel

Angel needed her garden tended while she was out of town. I watered her plants. I trimmed some hedges. I sat on her porch and enjoyed the view as she had instructed. I went to the studio and sat for six hours. After three hours I cried joyful tears.

* * *

Afterward, I understood for the first time the peace one gets when they have a set of clear rules to live by. I also saw how my perspective could turn the participants into my captors or my liberators. Božidar was ordered around in solitary and nearly went mad. I felt similarly when I felt the participants did not have my best interest in mind, especially when I was left alone. As soon as I reminded myself that they knew what was best for me, the oppression turned into joy.

Eventually, as I sat in my studio space, I began to prescribe an intelligence to the world, I began to create a God, God as he worked through Matt and Jessica and Angel. I can understand how Božidar might have felt, and why he would have gone to prison to hold on to the comfort of knowing the Virgin had come to earth. It was proof manifest of a world that was orderly.
Evidence that all the war, all the pain was for something. For some, religion was an oppressor, but looked at another way it was a comfort. Especially a comfort for those who felt alone in the world, for those searching for purpose. After three hours of sitting in my space on the final day, I started to weep. This time a joyful weep, and Božidar came to weep with me.
CHAPTER 5:

CODE RED
ACT ONE:

INT. THE HOLY CAVE

LUKA and MARICA are in the cave.

MARICA
Oh Virgin, please help us. Four have been arrested, and there is a warship watching us from the sea. Many have left and are too scared to come.

VIRGIN MARY
I have told you difficult trials are heading your way soon, my children. Take care of yourselves, and do not let yourselves be confounded.

LUKA
Help us, please. They are saying this is all a hoax. The State Security Commission has arrested many!

VIRGIN MARY
In your political lessons, it is about time there was more talk of God, faith, and miracles. But fear not. Listen to me, children. Partisans can go to Purgatory or Hell, and the Ustaše also have a place in Heaven ...

MARICA
What will become of those arrested?

VIRGIN MARY
They will all return alive and well in your homes: Toni on Wednesday, Franko soon after him, Dinko right after Franko, and Božidar a little past Dinko.

The VIRGIN MARY disappears.

FADE TO BLACK
When I was in the detention prison, I was housed near Zdenka. The State Security Administration (SSA) did not place her and me together but placed us near enough to each other that we could exchange words. Because of this proximity, I found out that I was not the only one from Bol who had been arrested. The SSA was afraid, evidently, to place us eye to eye, so that we would not influence each other in ways they did not want. I also became aware of how Zdenka, once a believer, was now debunking these visions, blaming me for her arrest: “You, Božidar, are to blame for all of this!”

On this occasion, I also became convinced that just as biological creatures evolve, so do the statements overseen by the SSA. So, I was forced to be very cautious, thanks to Zdenka. For example, her first claim, that I had told her she would see the Virgin “the following day after lunch,” evolved into “the next day early in the morning.” This evolution occurred when we were housed in earshot, after I had easily disputed her claim of our walk after lunch because it had been over 100 degrees. Ironically, the Virgin had, through her, a few days before the alleged walk, announced: “Difficult trials are heading your way soon, my children. Take care of yourselves, and do not let yourselves be confounded.”

The SSA on the Katalinića Brig had one humane practice: it allowed outsiders to bring food to the prisoners. This had multiple warming effects: a warm feeling waiting to see if you might receive something from someone who was thinking of you, and the food itself offered a warm comfort since the SSA did not feed us so well. This all occurred after my time in the solitary room and after the brutal interrogations. In a group cell, there were three to five of us. There we waited for the end of our separate investigations, separated from the world, separated from our loved ones. We were all waiting for food deliveries from home, and I received food
many times. I ate what was received with much respect and divided the lot with my fellow sufferers in the cell. And I felt the warmth and the concern and connection to the world and to others. More times than not I received a pastry called rafola. They were exquisite, the best sweets I had ever eaten, and to this day I love that pastry: simple, pathetic, the cake of the poor. So, one time, I bit into one of these rafola and, under my teeth, I felt something that was neither dough nor filling. Of course, I did not make an issue of this. I did not sound the alarms, but I was quiet and waited patiently. In the rafola, on a paper carefully rolled into a scroll, spread with the jam, was written: “You will all return alive and well in your homes: Toni on Wednesday, Franko soon after him, Dinko right after Franko, and Božidar a little past Dinko.” So spoke Our Lady! My Blessed Virgin Mary. I hid under the bed covering. I warmed myself with the rafola, quenched my thirst with it. From it radiated love and hope! What would I have done if another cellmate had bit into the note? I pondered it and waited for a new day and a new message, a new greeting from the Virgin! She continued to speak! She had not abandoned us! We were not alone! She had not abandoned us!

Who was Toni? This meant they had arrested Franko, and he must be housed in a cell somewhere here. Was he near where I was? And which Dinko? Dinko Polac? What did he have to do with the cave? Handicapped like he was, he never even came near the cave, let alone entered! Božidar, that I understood. Someone had to be blamed.

Another note arrived. It said: “Around Christmas, there will be darkness, there will be no lights, and we must prepare our blessed candles.” A small slip of paper, a small bit of news, a short note too unclear. But why would it have to be clearer, when from this it was obvious that the Virgin was still in her Holy Cave?
From Katalinića Brig, I was transferred to a District Court prison in Split. Leaving the brig, I wondered, and still wonder, what had happened to my cellmates. Where was the homeland officer who could no longer take the striking of the SSA military boot, who invented crimes so he could quickly be shot? He told them he was planning the assassination of Tito with a stone from the wall of his rocky Dalmatia. He figured there could be no greater crime so that would ensure an unqualified execution. They just beat him up for lying about the Marshal of Yugoslavia, liberator of the people, Tito. And what happened to that poor Hungarian who left his country, land, and riches to look for freedom and managed to arrive in Split? And when in Split, with his limited English (he didn’t know more than ten words), begged the first military officer he saw on the waterfront: “Where can I find an American army base?” The officer grabbed him by the arm, told him he was taking him to the American base, and brought him directly to Katalinića Brig.

After a shorter stay at the District Court prison, I received my indictment. I knew what was coming. From the indictment I knew who was accused and who was first charged. A truth was made clear after Tito’s speech in Split regarding what awaited the “mouthpieces” of the Virgin in Bol: “Enemies of our nation should not think there will be any hesitation to strike against those who interfere with the progress of our nation and our people.” This was the message Tito sent to those who were beginning to align themselves with a miracle.

I was aware I was to find myself in an atheist and Godless court on behalf of Heaven, arguing and proving its existence. It was evident how this national court would rule. Charged was Heaven and the Virgin, and because you couldn’t place them under arrest, they needed to find a surrogate. Since they were not able to arrest the Church, there was no other option than to charge Božidar, Dinko, Franko, and Zdenka—the “visionaries” of the Virgin. Charged they must
be because that is what the Party wanted. Judge Comrade Mariani didn’t have any other choice but to resort to legal acrobatics in order to prove the falsity of the miraculous presence of the Virgin Mary and saints in the Holy Cave of Bol. They charged us with staging the “miracles.” That we manifested Our Lady and the saints to toy with peoples’ religious feeling, so we needed to be deservedly punished for the hoax and interfering with the people of the nation. Comrade Mariani accused us of teaming up to spread lies about the miracles in Bol, naming us enemies of the state who were “looking for a way to destroy the unity of the nation, undermine the trust in the government’s authority, and shake the people’s faith in a better future.” He determined that our “criminal” dealings were a continuation of our prior dealings and that we used the “miracles” for nothing more than to destroy “our progressive social order.”

About me he specifically said, “Božidar Jakšić, in Bol in 1941, became a corporal of the Ustaše youth, and he continued his anti-establishment work in times of peace. He has given our nation’s youth political lectures.” What was this anti-establishment work?

“And the appearances of the Virgin in Bol are lies,” confirmed Archbishop Franić of Split, and this too, “was confirmed in the notes of the accused Božidar Jakšić, which show how Heaven and Our Lady winked and sweetly chuckled at Hell and its devils like good old acquaintances and friends.” Comrade Mariani waved the papers and, in a festive tone (without irony), read, “The Virgin above, the Devil below, looking at one another laughing.” I did not agree with my defense attorney, who said nothing, but neither did I react, the reason being I didn’t know who he was to have the right to speak for me, having never even spoken to me. The first time I had seen him was at the hearing.

Zdenka, a charged visionary, was bold and charged me by saying, “He organized all of this.” But she was not a member of this group of accused because she didn’t “agree with our
politics.” She said she did not lie, that she saw the Virgin, angels, saints, devils, but she didn’t know how she saw those things or heard those things.

“Who was holding the light?” Likely, the judge meant the light by which the images were created and transmitted. Zdenka could not answer the judge’s latest questions because she did not know, because there was no film apparatus, nor could there have been, nor was there room in the cave for a screen, nor did anyone see anything like this near the cave, and there were hundreds of people there every day—there were members of the Communist Youth League, party members, and spies, all there.

The charge was finally read: “Guilty of organizing and spreading the lies about the ‘miracles’ in Bol.”

Božidar: Four years detention with forced labor, and two years the loss of all political and civil rights.

Dinko: One year detained with forced labor.

Franko: Two years deprived of freedom with forced labor and the loss of all political and civil rights, for two years.

Zdenka: Six months detention with forced labor.

“The people gathered in the courtroom enthusiastically welcomed the judgment and sentence,” claimed the national press release.
ACT THREE – 2013:

Even though I was determined to be housebound, the world seemed to come to me. I had scheduled my written exams for the week of Thanksgiving. That way, I wouldn’t be burdened by work and would have a good excuse to avoid my family. I heedfully waited for my exam questions to be e-mailed, refreshing my inbox every few seconds. When the questions arrived, I began furiously plotting, charting, highlighting, and flipping through texts. I was preparing for a marathon, with success hinging on being alone and having a stocked pantry. Late at night, to expel energy, I often found myself using the push mower while half-smoking a cigarette which hung on to my dry lips. There was something about mowing the lawn that neutralized my fear of the negative side effects of smoking (a habit I generally never indulged in). I suppose smoking could be seen as a type of rebellion or, actually more accurately, a prop, one that denoted a more confident and unworried person. The lawn was no bigger than a large Persian rug, so I usually didn’t make it through one-third of the Nat Sherman. Around the grass there were usually three lawn ornaments: a rabbit, an owl, and a two-foot-tall Virgin Mary statue. When I bought her, she was made to look like stone—at least, the speckled gray plastic that had come to symbolize stone. I originally needed the figurine for a New Genres project during my undergrad. I rigged the figure to bleed copious amounts of blood out of her eyes, placed her on the tampon dispenser in the women’s restroom, and played my favorite ’70s-era sex-education tape in the adjacent stall. Not my most subtle work. I later used her to create a mold that allowed me to fabricate many Virgin Mary statues, many of which I used to create a walk-in altar in the ceramic lab’s kitchen, and I even made a Blessed Virgin piggy bank. After, I painted the original in teal, gold, and cream and took her with me from apartment to apartment. She blessed many succulent-filled garden balconies, spider-infested garage art studios, and now a small backyard with a well-
tended lawn. Originally, I tucked her in a corner of the yard because I was afraid of offending my neighbors. A week after I moved in, she herself moved to the front and center of the small floor bed that lay between the lawn and the back wall. I thought my overly solicitous German landlady had moved her, but she said she hadn’t touched her. She assumed it was the gardener. So there the Virgin settled in, hands extended, cobwebs anchoring her to the large, flowing shrub I still didn’t know the name of. I enjoyed spying on her through my kitchen window, and she often acted as a mascot, silently cheering me on as I worked on my dissertation. I hadn’t realized how much comfort she provided until a week before my exams she disappeared—no explanation, no note. I looked out the window while doing dishes and she wasn’t there. I figured some thief had taken her, and I prayed for his swift punishment between washing and drying.

Surprisingly, there were a lot of comings and goings the first few days of my exams. It was as if my stillness attracted karmic bounty hunters tracking me down to confront me with unpaid emotional debts. Old friends and exes called from the ether. In between writing, I would answer their calls. However, whenever I engaged in long bouts of writing, my mind wandered into romantic landscapes and deep philosophical rabbit holes—journeys on which I took along the unwitting phone callers. These were conversations that needed to be had while lying on the floor, while playing with the tassels of my bed covering, while sipping on tea. They always ended the same—with a sense they should have never started. When the phone rang on the third day, I wondered who else from the past needed to speak to me. I didn’t recognize the number. It was the son of a family friend I used to babysit. He called because he couldn’t get a hold of anyone in my family. He wanted to know if Michael was okay.

This was the first I had heard of my cousin being in the hospital. I hung up the phone and called my mother, who filled me in on the details. Michael, 14, was skateboarding down a steep
street when he fell and hit his head. He was now in a coma at a county hospital. I looked at the amount of work I had left to do but knew I had no real choice. Croatians were individual collectivists—a social construction perhaps passed on from the concept of *zadruga*. The term can be translated as “for the other,” a system of organization in which family groups form a larger group. This organization was meant to form a community, to offer support. But when the bread ran out—you knew to whom you really belonged. For years, this pattern repeated itself, and Croatians became a part of and apart from other nations: Rome, Austria-Hungary, Yugoslavia. But as easily as Croatians could fracture, in times of collective crisis we could also un-balkanize.

Some of my favorite memories with my family took place in the hospital. My dad was often in and out, having bypasses and arterial cleanings to manage his arteriolosclerosis. We would sit in the same waiting room every time at Torrance Memorial. My mother would give me money to buy food from the cafeteria and we would tell stories to take our minds off the surgery that was taking place. Then the doctor would come out and tell us everything was fine, and we went our separate ways. The county hospital was not like Torrance Memorial. I wasn’t greeted by elderly volunteers but by security guards and a metal detector. The waiting room was filled, uncomfortable, and it seemed doctors were coming in and saying things weren’t fine. Our *zadruga* took up so much space, they had opened up an extra room just for us, a windowless, painted, cinder-block box. Micheal’s father, Zlatan, was Croatian; his mother, Luz, was Mexican. The Croatians stayed on one side, the Mexicans on the other. It was striking to see the difference in faith these two Catholic nations represented, as evidenced in their response to grief. Luz’s relatives prayed over her, asking Jesus, Mary, and a variety of saints to intercede to help Michael. They prayed loudly, with eyes closed, hands on her body. The Croatians sat with their hands on their lap. When they were finished praying out loud, one of the Croatian women said,
“Blessed are those with faith.” It was not that she didn’t have faith, or that the other Croats sitting in the room did not either. They believed in God as a concept but not as an intercessor. She did accept that perhaps Jesus was born for our sins, but now we were on our own. Sure, my mother prayed to St. Anthony when she lost her jewelry or keys, but when it came to the bigger things, there was a sense that it was not up to us. This was the brand of Catholicism I was raised with, perhaps a vestige, a Catholicism that had to live under a Croatian semi-iron curtain. This concept was even reflected in my conception of the Croatian word for hope, nada. Growing up, I always thought that word translated to “doubt.”

“Is Dad coming to the recital?”

“Nadam se,” my mother would say, which I thought meant, “I doubt it.” But she meant it as, “I hope so,” or more precisely, “All I’ve got left to believe that this might happen is my hope.” Hope was definitely the last thing left in the jar.

Instead of praying to God that day, the Croatians did what we always did when in crisis: we told stories. We told stories to make us laugh, family narratives we brought out and polished for such occasions. But as Michael lay in his coma, hope, even Croatian hope, was beginning to fade and the stories became dimmer.

A member of our makeshift zadruga, Mina, had been in a coma when she was in her twenties. Her boyfriend at the time had been driving under the influence and took a turn too quickly, causing the car to plummet down a cliff of karst. He was killed and Mina, the only passenger, was in a coma for weeks. In the waiting room that day, her mother, who was sitting next to Mina, described the experience of waiting for her daughter to wake up, and after she woke up, teaching her how to walk and eat all over again. Mina’s mother looked at the ceiling as
she told the story, while Mina looked to the wall, telling her own tale in the pauses and spaces between. They braided the narrative together, never getting in each other’s way.

“After Mina woke up, she kept asking for this nurse…”

“She had beautiful hands, it’s all I could remember about her.”

“But which nurse? She couldn’t remember her name.”

“She was so comforting and kind.”

“So all the nurses came in throughout the day.”

“She whispered to me, ‘It’s all going to be okay.’”

“But she insisted it wasn’t any of them…”

“And I believed her.”

“We never found out who she was talking about.”

“I believed her.”

The air became thick with such narratives as each person shared their tale. I sat in silence, overwhelmed and humbled. My mother’s turn came, and I wasn’t prepared. She’d lost a child, Tony, born between my sister and me. I was a replacement of sorts or, at least, would often feel that way. I was even named after him, which is why my family doesn’t call me Tony but uses my Croatian diminutive, Ante. Pictures or stories of him were hard to come by. He was only two when he died, the details of which are still fuzzy. I remember once finding a photo of him when I was a child, and I knew it was him. He had my father’s face, just like I had my mother’s. I wondered if we somehow had both been born half-formed, like we should have come into the world together. My father thought the best way to deal with this was to forget he existed. My mother’s grief was not tolerated. Luz’s hope that her son would open his eyes opened this trauma for my mother. Through tears, she told us of her pain, and how the last word he’d said before he
died in her arms was “Mama.” He looked up to her for comfort, for help, and said “Mama.” The weight of that memory, which she’d shared with us, was often too heavy for me to carry, so I could only imagine what it was like for her. How often his voice echoed in her mind. How often she saw his face.

Michael passed away a few days later. Zlatan and Luz did not have the money to pay for the funeral. My father paid. He didn’t tell anyone but my mother, who, of course, told many people. I sat in the front row of the church next to my mother and father and watched him cry. I thought about them as parents and about their faiths. My mother always said she couldn’t wait to die, because she believed a person was just a body in a box, and when she died, she could finally rest. I wondered if that was where she thought Tony was. She went to his grave on his birthday every year. I wonder if she wondered if there was something more. My father’s only piece of spiritual advice was, “You have to believe in something.” As he got older, he also seemed to wonder. During his last surgery, my mom walked into the hospital room to find he was taking Communion from a priest. This startled us all. My relationship with God had always been a troubled one. I, like my mother, thought that we just rotted in the ground, but I also thought, like my father, you had to believe in something.

After the funeral, I went home and decided to mow the lawn. I went outside and lit a cigarette. On my way to the shed to get the push mower, I was taken aback—in her floral grotto, standing tall as always, was the Blessed Virgin Mary, come back home.
CHAPTER 6:
RE-VISIONING
ACT ONE:

EXT. A PAVED ROAD - LATE AFTERNOON

The year is 2012, July 25. A bus is moving down a winding road on mountainous terrain. The sea glistens in the near distance.

INT. THE BUS

Inside the bus is ANTE. He is a young man of 32, tall and thin and bespectacled. In his hands he holds a book. He looks up from the pages, blinking as if to refocus. He looks outside the bus window. As the bus zooms down the side of the cliff, he sees a stone plaque. He cranes his neck to look behind him. Unable to see anything else, he returns to his book.

END

INT. A SMALL BEDROOM IN KITANA’S HOUSE

ANTE is unpacking his suitcase in a white plaster room. In the room are two twin beds, a dresser, and a desk. He hears from outside ...

KITANA (O.S.)
Come and eat something, hurry!

EXT. KITANA’S YARD

KITANA, a jovial woman in her sixties, blonde and rotund, is placing a tray of meat and cheeses in front of him. He eats.

CUT TO:

EXT. KITANA’S YARD — LATER

ANTE walks over to a table where KITANA, her daughter, and her husband are sitting: SANJA, small and rotund, like her mother. JAKOV, tall and lanky, silently smoking.

KITANA
(To ANTE)
Sit! We have so much to talk about.

SANJA
How was the trip?
ANTE
Exhausting as usual. I tried to catch the catamaran but missed it by five minutes. So I took the ferry over and caught the bus ... speaking of which, while I was on the bus, I saw some sort of tablet on the side of the cliff ...

SANJA
What sort of tablet?

ANTE
I couldn't see it well, but it was made of stone...

KITANA
(To SANJA)
Do you know what he’s talking about?

SANJA
He must be talking about Božidar’s plaque—it’s the only thing up there.

KITANA
Oh yes ... (Lights a cigarette and stares off into the direction of the stone plaque)

ANTE
What is it?

SANJA
It’s to commemorate the spot where the Virgin Mary appeared over 50 year ago.

ANTE
What? The Virgin Mary appeared in Bol? What are you talking about? I never heard this before.

SANJA
It happened in 1946...
FADE TO BLACK
ACT TWO – 1995:

There was a little cave—a Holy Cave as Our Lady proclaimed it. In that Holy Cave, from the 25th of June until the end of September in 1946, Heaven descended onto Earth: the Heavenly expanse and its inhabitants, Hell and its Hellions, Purgatory and its dwellers. All this was seen by and proclaimed to the visionaries directly and to all of us: to those who made the pilgrimage to this Holy Cave, to those few who still make the journey, to all those future pilgrims, and to all those who cannot come but want to make the pilgrimage to Our Lady at her home in Bol. The claim was clear and simple, about those hitherto unheard of and unwritten events but hard to grasp. “It will be hard, Božidar, to prove,” told me His Eminence, Cardinal Franjo Kuharić. “But … Thy will be done!”

Were, Our Lady, all your prayers and calls to pray, the manifestations of Heaven and Hell, rebuke for all that we have done in 1941 and 1945, 1991 and 1995—and before … and after? And did you, Our Lady, come then for the future: when we will live carefree with joyful music and bountiful feasts in gardens full of luscious fruits, when advanced medicine will guarantee health and steel machines will work and think for us, when we will easily forget the simple but essential truth—where we came from and what our ultimate goal is? Did you come to offer guidance on this narrow, steep, rocky road that is not a smooth modern highway? Pray for us, Mary! We beg you!
ACT THREE – 2015:

Bol during the summer brings a comforting warm wind and a flux of people, myself included. Each year I go back and stare out the window of the bus, no longer looking for the familiar marker of Zlatni Rat but for Božidar’s plaque. And every summer, like Božidar, I look for a sign. But I wonder what sign would be enough for me to truly believe? Božidar felt he had confirmation from Luka and Marica, but his faith was renewed in solitary confinement, where he felt reborn by an invisible touch. I felt that same touch in 2001, when my ceiling fan saved my life. In that moment, much like Božidar described, I realized I had a name and that I was not alone—but I was also on drugs.

When I first started inquiring about the Virgin, there was a mini resurgence in the town: Sanja’s group grew by three. They planted bougainvillea and advocated to have a large statue erected in the spot. Now, however, that resurgence seems to have died down. The treacherous road just could not sustain such pilgrimages. The roads were widened to bring in tourists who made up the small town’s economy. As much as many of the townspeople believed in the Virgin, it seemed the residents of Bol chose to honor the day-tripping beach tourists over the small group of potential pilgrims who would clog up the road. Not to mention, with Medjugorje so close and the visions of 1946 so far, who would come? I could imagine the Virgin of Bol sticking out her thumb, holding a sign that read, “Medjugorje or Bust.”

I have also had no luck talking to anyone else who had been around in 1946 about the appearance of the Virgin. All of the visionaries had died. The only person who seemed to know about the appearance of the Virgin was Božidar’s nephew, but all he knew was what Božidar had written down. Božidar’s two children didn’t want to speak to me either. The only people in town keeping the memory alive were the rosary circle, who had attempted to add to the mythos by
claiming tiny miracles such as the bougainvillea that bloomed in the winter and cured headaches. The group was mainly made up of older widows, and no one in town paid them much attention. One night after dinner, following a round of choral singing, Kitana explained the town’s silence by telling me that the events of 1946 brought everyone pain. At first I misunderstood her because the Croatian word for pain is bol, the same as the town’s name. It was the first time I had put that together. I asked her about the etymology of the town’s name, and she said that in the 17th century other towns would send patients suffering from tuberculosis to the area now known as Bol to avoid spreading the illness because the area was so isolated. I could not confirm that with written sources, only with the word of other townspeople. She said the name was still fitting, and I understood what she meant. The narratives of suffering are common in the town. When you ask how someone is doing, they rarely say, “Good.” More commonly, they sigh and say, “What can I tell you?” I asked Kitana why she thought the Virgin had appeared, and she said, “To remind us of who we are.”

Today approximately 87.8% of Croatians identify as Roman Catholic, and though it is not the official religion of the country, all public holidays adhere to the Catholic calendar and it is the only religion allowed to officiate marriage ceremonies. During the time of Yugoslavia, Communism and Catholicism co-existed in a silent truce. Schools and public offices remained open during religious holidays, but people went home and quietly celebrated and attended Mass. Being a Catholic was always a marker of difference for Croatians compared to the other southern Slavs in Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia’s creation myth could be said to begin with the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo by a Bosnian Serb rebel. After, war broke out between Austria-Hungary and Serbia in 1914. This started a chain reaction that led to World War I. As the war continued to
create hardship in the Balkans, the idea of a unified Yugoslavian (Southern Slavic) nation became more palatable. In 1918, the Croatian Sabor, or Parliament, declared a unified Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slavonia, and along with the southern states, became known as the Kingdoms of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In 1929, as the situation in the new state became more chaotic, a dictatorship was established by the Serbian King Alexander I, and the country was named Yugoslavia.

In a climate where Serbs were placed in higher positions of power, Croatian nationalism continued to grow. Ante Pavelić, founder of the Ustaše, the Croatian liberation movement, sought to create a free Croatian state. The Ustaše, along with Macedonian rebels, assassinated King Alexander I in 1934. The new ruler, the King’s cousin, Prince Paul, agreed to allow Croatia to have a self-governing province within Yugoslavia. Before the effects of this could be felt, World War II broke out.

In 1941, Germany declared war on Yugoslavia, and the Ustaše took advantage of the chaos and allied with the German occupiers to create the Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, or Independent State of Croatia. Led by Pavelić, the nation was independent in name only and was really a puppet of the Nazi State with Italy controlling the coast and Germany the mainland. With the help of the resistance movement known as the Partisans, led by Jospi Broz, better known as Tito, the Ustaše fell with help from the Soviet Red Army.

After the war, Yugoslavia became the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, with Tito as its premier. Tito rewarded the mostly Serbian Partisans with important political positions that led to a less than equitable treatment of Croats. Tito broke from the Soviet Union in 1945 and instilled more market-oriented economic policies and more contact with the Western hemisphere. It was
during this time that the Virgin of Bol appeared and was accused of being a puppet of the Ustaše who still longed for an independent state.

It was after the Homeland War of the 1990s that Catholicism became an even more vital and integral force in Croatian identity. Religious sites became symbolic targets of attack by the mostly Orthodox Serbs, and this difference of religion became one other reason to justify the brutality of civil war. Though it was a war for independence and liberty, it could also be seen as a Holy War, a war to remind us of who we were. After, when Croatia became a democracy, Božidar gathered his writings, added his reflections, and placed a plaque on the side of the hill. There it stood for decades, visited by only a few.

I walked up the road again toward the plaque, talking to Božidar in my head. I was trying to imagine what the road would have looked like when it was still unpaved, back when Glagolitic Monks hid in the karst caves or when pagan Slavs worshipped Mokoš. Božidar thought the Virgin came to offer warnings about the brutal times ahead and to affirm the faith of the Croatian people. The rosary circle agreed, seeing capitalism like communism, an enemy of religion. They went and prayed while the majority of the townspeople scoffed at the idea of placing a statue on a road that brought in income. In Medjugorje, capitalism and the Virgin had made quite an arrangement. The small Herzegovinan town was never a tourist destination and struggled economically before the visions began. Now it was the Vegas of Virgin visions, and the Virgin still continued her long-standing residency. If Medjugorje was Vegas, what was the Virgin of Bol? Perhaps she was more of a private concert, one of many that may have occurred throughout Croatia during the time of communism to remind the people of who they were. Perhaps she came just for Božidar; perhaps now for me?
Each year I make my own pilgrimage to the site, the bougainvillea always in bloom. I sit on the guardrail and feel the rush of the cars behind me. Each year I sit in silence, and each year I feel nothing, yet still I go.
EPILOGUE:

THE CAVE—LIVE ON STAGE
For The Cave—live on stage, the artist remains in a gallery for 21 hours behind a taped-off rectangle of 2.5 m x 10 m, the dimensions of the Holy Cave of Bol. Within this area are a bed, a dollhouse, a table, and various boxes filled with props. Surrounding the squared-off area are dozens of white pillows and comforters and six-inch plaster statues of the Virgin Mary. Strewn around are various books of fiction and religious studies with white covers, white notepads, and white pens. On a wall there is a projection of the video showing a plaque on the side of the highway, dedicated to the Virgin Mary’s appearance in Bol, Croatia, in 1946. Cars zoom by a makeshift shrine as a nine-year-old boy looks at the religious marker. People move in and out of the gallery, interacting with the artist as he leads them through the story of the Virgin of Bol, using storytelling, metaphors, and experientials. The participants are encouraged to take notes, placing them in the role of Božidar and other observers. There is minimal visual and audio documentation; only the notes form a record. Sometimes the gallery is full, and other times the artist is alone in the space, which he is unable to leave for any reason. The piece was performed on March 28–29, 2013, at Human Resources, Los Angeles.
REFERENCES

The following are references that have been cited or have acted as inspiration for this document.


Books.


