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## Faruk Šehić – Bosnia-Herzegovina

### *Knjiga o Uni (2011)*

The Book of Una

Publishing House **Buybook d.o.o.**

#### Biography

Faruk Šehić was born in 1970 in Bihac. He grew up in Bosanska Krupa. Until the outbreak of war in 1992, Šehić studied veterinary medicine in Zagreb. However, the then 22-year-old voluntarily joined the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which he led a unit of 130 men as a lieutenant. After the war he studied literature and, since 1998, has created his own literary works. Literary critics regard him as one of the most gifted young writers in the former Yugoslavia, a shining light of the so-called “knocked-over generation”.

The collection of short stories *Pod pritiskom (Under Pressure, 2004)* was awarded the Zoro Verlag Prize. His debut novel *Knjiga o Uni (The Book of Una, 2011)* was awarded the Meša Selimović Prize for the best novel published in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia in 2011. Šehić, who lives in Sarajevo, is a member of the Writers’ Association and the PEN Centre of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and he works for the magazine *BH Dani* as a columnist and journalist.

#### Synopsis

*The Book of Una* is about a man trying to overcome the personal trauma caused by the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995. It is also a novel about childhood on a beautiful river; about fishes, plants, swimming, diving and enjoying life in a small Bosnian city. The book covers three time periods, taking in childhood before the war, the battle lines during the war, and attempts to continue with normal life in a destroyed city and country after the war.

*The Book of Una* attempts to reconstruct the life of the main character who, like the text in the book, is rather bipolar in nature: he’s both a veteran and a poet. At times, he manages to pick up the pieces of his life, but at other times it escapes him. His memories of the recent war and the killings are “dirty and disgusting”, while he views his present as humdrum and his identity feels incomplete. With the help of his memories, he uses his mind and strength to look for a way out of the maze in which he is confined.

In parallel to this story, the book’s passages on the city next to the river Una take on mythical and dreamlike dimensions. Here, the novel expands into a poetic description of nature, seasons, flora and fauna, as well as childhood memories not yet tainted by all that will happen after 1992.

## *Knjiga o Uni*

**Faruk Šehić**

### NOĆNO PUTOVANJE

Ako kiša zapada uoči petka onda će padati sedam dana, tako nam je majka stalno govorila. I dažd je prekrrio naše nebo snagom ajetâ sure Al-Qari'a / Smak svijeta.

Kada nas je voda okružila sa svih strana, majkina kuća je krenula na svoju prvu plovidbu. Prije nego smo postali unoplovci začuo se jak prasak, jer se kuća odvojila od svojih zemaljskih korijena. I tako olakšana, bez temelja u koje su ugrađeni oklopi i stabilizatori eksplodiranih avio-bombi iz Drugog svjetskog rata, bez kamenja stare kuće koja je izgorjela za savezničkog bombardovanja grada, i riječne sedre u fundamentu, kuća se spremala da izdrži ono najgore: put u nepoznato.

Oni hitronogi koje voda nije iznenadila kao nas, takvi su se uspeli na Ravnik, na sami vrh Huma odakle su se nadali da će sunce konačno probiti oblake i zaustaviti potop. Mi koji nismo imali puno izbora, i koji nismo htjeli da vremenski hir odlučuje umjesto naše volje, sami smo uzeli sudbinu u svoje ruke.

Nekim čudom podrum se uvukao u kuću postavši naša mašinska paluba, jer su dole bili crveni tlakomjeri sa malenim okruglim upravljačima za kormilarenje nabujalim i nesigurnim vodama. Poklopci na njima su se povremeno dizali ispuštajući ljutitu paru, ako bi se motori nehotice pregrijali. Vinova loza se odmotala sa majkine kuće i pretvorila

u olistalo jedro, za svaki slučaj, kao rezervni pogon. Sišao sam u podrum nakon što smo rukama i pajserom rastavili brodski pod, i prihvatio sam se metalnih kolutova za kormilarenje. Majka je stajala u kuhinji na prozoru zajedno sa stricem Šetom koji je služio vojsku u Jugoslavenskoj ratnoj mornarici. Ona je upravljala kućom koja je postala plovni objekat, držeći tespih obješen o dlan. Kuglice njenog jantarnog tespiha su kružile svojim nečujnim univerzumom. Šeta je držao ostve na gotovs, ako slučajno ugleda leđa velike štuke. Voda nas je prskala po licima želeći uskočiti u majkinu kuhinju, ali to nije smanjivalo našu mornarsku odlučnost.

Spuštali smo se niz Unadžik ravno prema Pilanici pa sve tamo do sastavaka na čijim je pjeskarima uvijek bilo mrenova i škobalja. Na sastavcima se Unadžik ulijevao u Krušnicu. Tu su se miješale dvije vode. Krušnica se zadržavala na dijelu rijeke prema desnoj obali, gdje je voda bila hladnija, dok je Una zauzela područje lijeve strane zbratimljenih tekućica. Sredinom toka, za ljetnog vodostaja, plutali bi kosmati šaševi s cvjetovima nalik na oči plašljivih hidro-pigmejskih bića. Ja sam, kroz podrumski prozor nastojao zabacivati mesingani blinker, jer je on predviđen za mutnu vodu, pažljivo prateći manometre s crvenim strelicama, i slušajući majkine upute. Vješto smo izbjegavali sedre preko kojih se voda prelijevala u debelim neprovidnim slojevima.

„Lijevo, punom snagom lijevo!”, vikala je majka, i ja bih dohvatio kormilo okrećući ga dok je kuća odgovarala željenim manevrom.

Ništa nas nije ugrožavalo, naša plovidba je bila sigurna. Čak ni džinovski talasi što su se međusobno sudarali praveći zastrašujuće vodene divove. Sjetio sam se Nostradamusovih stihova o propasti svijeta:

*Na četrdeset osam stepeni more se pjeni,  
a ribe se kuhaju.*

Već smo odavno izgubili iz vidokruga priobalne kuće u Pazardžiku i spuštali smo se niz bregove pilaničkih slapova u novostvoreno jezero, koje se protezalo sve tamo do škole Đuro Pucar Stari, prijeteći da dohvati prve kuće izgrađene na travnatim padinama Zahuma. Svakako je bilo vrijeme poplava, ali ovakva još nije bila viđena, barem ne za majkinog životnog vijeka. I tako smo počeli kliziti krakom Une i glavnim tokom Krušnice, što su zajedničkim snagama potopile kilometarski duge ade i sve što je bilo na njima. Prečke na fudbalskim stadionima Meteora i njegovog nižerazrednog brata Željezničara virile su iz jezera, naslonjene na nekih pola metra stativa. Na zapadnoj tribini većeg stadiona sjedila je nijema i prljava voda. U mreži gola zaustavio se nadut leš nečije krave. Na tri sata od nas voda je pokušavala smanjiti Točile penjući se preko krošanja nemoćnog drveća. Posvuda su tonula ptičija gnijezda. Iz dubine su izranjale ribe nikad viđene na dnevnom svjetlu, nezgrapnih tijela sa glavama toliko nalik ljudskim da su neke od njih mogle i pričati.

Jedna s kositrenim krljuštima mi je dobacila, začuđeno gledajući preko majkine kuće kako oblaci plove iznad Točila: „I prvi anđeo zatrubi, et facta est grando et ignis...”, brzo sam je prekinuo odgovarajući joj kroz prozorčić svoje mašinske kabine: „...mista in sanguine, et missum est in terram, et tertia pars terrae combusta est, i trećina drveća izgorje, i sva zelena trava izgorje.” Našto se povukla natrag u muljevitu dubinu udarajući teškim repom po vodenoj površini. Riblji pogled je bio strašan, stariji od vremena. Učinilo mi se da sam krajičkom oka spazio Čudovište iz Sokione kako plovi u džinovskoj unskoj školjci pomno zapisujući sve što se

dešavalo. Umor je uzimao maha i bilo je nemoguće otjerati turobne misli.

*Na četrdeset osam stepeni more se pjeni,  
a ribe se kuhaju.*

Na ovom mjestu snoviđenje se prekida kao rezom Solingen noža i ja se budim zadihan u majkinoj gostinskoj sobi pokriven masivnim jorganom. Negdje na zidu iznad mene takt satnog mehanizma daje gotsku notu uspavanom mraku. Kuća je još na suhom, a Unadžik je u svom odijelu, koje mu nije postalo pretijesno. Voda je zadovoljna i neumorno se spušta prema sastavcima miješajući se sa hladnim krušničkim fluidom. Kad ustanem otići ću u podrum i provjeriti crvene kazaljke na dva metalna vodomjera. Njihovu poziciju i broj što pokazuje utrošak vode koju napravi majkina kuća.

U praskozorje sam napustio krevet i ušao u hodnik. Lijevo prema ulaznim vratima niz ogledalo vješalice za odjeću slijevale su se svježje kapi vode, tepih u hodniku je bio namočen vodom. Debeli nanosi bijele boje na zidovima su mjestimično ispucali kao da je kuću pogodio zemljotres. Sada je to skroz jasno, majkina kuća se noću tajno kreće na vodeni pogon. Hoda krišom uz pomoć vodenastih trepetljika, i njeno noćno napredovanje je, zasad, izraženo u pedljima. Trepetljike su mali vodeni bičevi, zamjena za noge kod nekih vrsta vodenih organizama i mikroba. Kuća hoće da se pomjeri sa mjesta, hoće da ode u neki drugi, postojaniji, kvart, daleko od divlje rijeke iz snova, van domašaja poplava i nepogoda, gdje bi mogla doživjeti sretnu starost. U neki grad gdje žive bolji stanovnici: Petar Pan, Ivica & Marica. Kuća je naivna baš kao i oni čije ruke su je izgradile. U proljeće 1992. kuća je mislila da će nju poštediti, jer nikad nikom nije zlo učinila. Oko nje sve druge kuće su bile žute buktinje sa dječijih crteža.

Pravila se da je toliko blještavilo posvuda zato što su zvijezde rano izašle na nebu. I da druge kuće nisu ognjena sunca što se urušavaju u središte svoga pakla. Njena svijest se povukla ispod samog krovnog vrha, šćućurila se drhteći kao smrznuta sova.

Noć je mirnodopska, jedna od mnogih. Jedino što ima na raspolaganju su vodenaste trepetljike i rijeku koja njen bijeg prikriva svojim šumom. Vrijeme curi neumoljivo, i nije na njenoj strani. Kuća se priprema da iznevjeri svoju sudbinu koja se ponavlja sa užasavajućom preciznošću svakih pedeset godina. Da se pretvori u prah i pepeo. Je li potrebno napisati kako njen bijeg nikad ne uspijeva.

# *The Book of Una*

**Faruk Šehić**

*Translated from the Bosnian by Zvonimir Radeljković*

## **NIGHT JOURNEY**

If it starts to rain the evening before Friday it's gonna rain for seven days, so our granny always told us. And the heavy rain overspread our heaven with the force of a miraculous verse of Al-Qaria surah in the Koran – the one about the end of the world.

When the water surrounded us from all sides, granny's house started on its first voyage. Before we became Unafarers we heard a strong crash, as the house tore loose from its earthly roots. Thus lightened, without the foundation in which casings and stabilizers of exploded aerial bombs from the Second World War were imbedded, without the stones from the old house which had burned down during the Allied bombing of the town, and the underlining bed of alluvial tufa, the house was making ready to endure the worst: a journey into the unknown.

The fleet of foot – those who had not been surprised, like us, by the water – climbed up Ravnik, to the very summit of Hum, where they hoped the sun would finally penetrate the clouds and stop the deluge. We, who didn't have much choice and who wouldn't have wanted the whim of the weather, rather than the force of our own will, to decide the outcome, we took our fate in our own hands.

By some miracle the basement drew up into the house becoming our engine deck, since down there were red pressure gauges with little round wheels for navigating those swollen and dangerous waters. The valves on the gauges occasionally flipped up to release hot and angry steam if the engines should accidentally overheat. The grape vines unfurled from granny's house and became a leafy sail, just in case, as back-up propulsion. I went down into the basement after we had torn open the deck with a crowbar, and got hold of little metal navigation wheels. Granny stood at the kitchen window with uncle Šeta who did his military service in the navy. She was navigating the house holding prayer beads hanging from her palm. The little marbles of her amber prayer beads cruised through their silent universe. Šeta held a trident ready in case he caught a glimpse of the giant pike's back. Water was splashing our faces, wishing to jump into granny's kitchen, but this did not diminish our seamanlike determination.

We went down the Unadžik straight towards Pilanica and then to the confluence where there were always some barbels and sneeps at the sandy places. At the confluence the Unadžik joined the Krušnica. Two waters mixed there. The Krušnica waters tended to linger in the part of the river near the right bank where the water was colder, while the Una occupied the area of the left side of the brotherly flowing waters. In the middle of the current, when the water sank to its summer level, floated hairy bulrushes with flowers like the eyes of timid aqua-pygmean creatures. I repeatedly tried to pitch the brass fishing lure, which was especially designed for muddy water, monitoring carefully the pressure gauges with red arrows, and listening to granny's instructions. We skillfully avoided the tufa deposits over which the water spilled in thick opaque layers.



“To the left, full power to the left!”, granny would shout, and I would grab the helm, turning it, while the house responded with the proper maneuver.

Nothing posed a threat to us, our voyage was safe. Not even the monstrous colliding waves which looked like frightening water giants. I remembered Nostradamus verses about the end of the world:

*At forty eight degrees the sea foams,  
And the fish are being stewed.*

Long ago we had lost sight of the riverside houses in Pazardžik and we were going down the hills of Pilanica cascades into the newly formed lake which extended all the way to the Đuro Pucar Stari school, threatening to reach the first houses built on the grassy slopes of Zahum. It was indeed the season of floods, but a flood like this had never been seen before, at least not during granny’s lifetime. And so we started gliding down the branch of the Una and the main flow of the Krušnica, which had joined forces to flood river islands kilometers long and everything on them. The crossbars at the soccer stadium of Meteor and its lower ranked brother Željezničar stuck up above the lake atop some half-meter goalposts. At the western grandstand of the larger stadium sat mute and dirty water. The goal net caught the bloated corpse of somebody’s cow. Three hours away from us the water was trying to reduce Točile, climbing over the canopies of helpless trees. Everywhere the birds’ nests were sinking. Fish never before seen in the light of day rose from the deep, ungainly bodies with heads so similar to humans that some of them could even talk.

One with tin scales, watching with amazement how clouds were sailing over Točilo above granny’s house, curiously remarked to me: “And the first angel blew his trumpet, *et*

*facta est grando et ignis...*”, and I interrupted it quickly, answering through the small window of my machine cabin: “... *mista in sanguine, et missum est in terram, et tertia pars terrae combusta est*, and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up. “Upon that it withdrew back to the silty deep, slapping the water surface with its heavy tail. The gaze of that fish was horrible, older than time. It seemed to me that I saw, out of the corner of my eye, the Monster of Sokiona sailing in a giant Una shell, making notes of all that was going on. Fatigue was getting stronger and it was impossible to chase away gloomy thoughts.

*At forty eight degrees the sea foams,  
And the fish are being stewed.*

At this point the dream vision breaks off, as if cut with a Solingen knife and I wake up panting in granny’s guest room, covered by a heavy quilt. Somewhere on the wall above me the clockwork’s rhythm gives a Gothic touch to the slumbering darkness. The house is still on firm ground, and the Unadžik is in its suit of clothes which have not yet become tight. The water is coming down tirelessly to the confluence mixing there with the cold Krušnica waters. When I get up I’ll go down to the basement and check the red hands on two metal water meters: their position and the numbers showing the consumption of water in granny’s house.

At early dawn I left my bed and entered the corridor. To the left of the entrance, fresh drops of water poured down the mirror on the coat rack, and the rug in the corridor was saturated with water. The thick layers of white color on the walls were cracked in places as if the house had been hit by an earthquake. Now everything is completely clear: granny’s house secretly moves at night using water propulsion.

It walks furtively, with the help of watery tentacles, and its nightly progression can be expressed, for now, only in inches. Tentacles are small water whips, used instead of legs by some water organisms and microbes. The house wants to move away, wants to go to a safer quarter, far from the wild river from dreams, out of the reach to floods and disasters, where it could live to a happy old age. To some town where nicer people live: like Peter Pan, Hänschen & Gretel. The house is naïve, just like those whose hands built it. In the spring of 1992 the house thought that it would be spared, because it never did any harm to anyone. All other houses around it were just yellow torches from children's drawings. It pretended that everything was blazing everywhere just because the stars had come out early in the sky. And that other houses were not fiery suns, each imploding in the middle of its hell. Its consciousness withdrew just under the rooftop, cowering and trembling like a freezing owl.

The night is as in peacetime, one of many. The only things the house can count on are its watery tentacles and the river, whose woods could cover an escape. Time leaks relentlessly, and Time is not on the house's side. The house is preparing to betray its fate which repeats with horrible precision every fifty years. To be transformed into dust and ashes. Need one add, the flight never succeeds?



EUROPEAN UNION  
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

2013

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*Knjiga o Uni*

The Book of Una

223 pp, 2011

**Translations:** The book has not been translated yet.  
*(Last Update – September 2013)*

Publishing House **Buybook d.o.o**

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ISBN: 978-9958-30-155-1

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