childlike charm, unlike the more subtle appeal of the middle son, Nuzi, or of the tender, tortured Artani.) Jeta's face could switch from horror-witch to grumpy bear in a second, alternately for the control and comfort of her grandchildren. Either way, no one, not even I, could mistake her meaning.

The Romani language has a small basic vocabulary—a limitation which forces the speaker to be resourceful. And so, for example, they say "ears" for "gills"; an earthquake is just described: I phyg khelidus—The earth danced. As in Turkish, there is one verb—pay—for both smoking and drinking (two crucially contiguous occupations); chorro stands for both "poor"—indigent—and "bad." There are no words for "danger" or "quiet" (though some Romani speakers use stižno and mirmino respectively—recent borrowings from Slavic languages).

Donald Kenrick, a British linguist and Gipsyologist, took up the challenge of translating Romeo and Juliet into Romani for Pralipe, a Rom theater group from Skopje. In London he showed me some of his solutions for the balcony scene.

Romeo But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon.
Who is already sick and pale with grief
That thou her maid art far more fair than she.
Be not her maid, since she is envious.
Her vestal livery is but sick and green.
And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off.

Romeo Aha! Sava dug si andi kaja filisbon!
O oriente si that Juliet si o khama.
USTI lacho kham kai muktrel o chomnt.
nasul aki parno si o chomnt that ra mangel ke tu—lakh kandem—a po lako laker.
Lasko uikit si eten noh masokoh
sala o divle varan pas andre. chide le .

This we retranslated as follows:

Romeo Oh! what light is in that window
It is the east and Juliet is the sun.

Arise, good [or nice] sun and kill the moon
Sick and white is the moon which doesn't want you
Its servant is more beautiful than it.

(Donald couldn't find a word for "envious," so in the Romani version neither the moon nor the maid was going to be envious.)

Its clothing is green [or blue] and sick
Only fools dress themselves like that, throw them out.

Things got trickier. Farther into Romeo's speech we got to:

I am too bold; 'tis not to me she speaks.
Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
Having some business, do entreat her eyes
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.

Kenrick had come up with:

Na tronan. Na kate lama duna.
Dul iache cerhada ando bodiper
si len buti averchane—mangen lahe jakha
si dudaren ando lero than
si hia amen pafalas.

We ran this back into English:

I do not dare. She is not speaking to me.
Two good [or nice] stars in cloudy place [the cloudiness]
They have work [or jobs] elsewhere—they want her eyes
To give light In their place
Until they come back.

Apparently the production was a great success and, last I heard, Pralipe had taken it on tour in Germany.

All languages are expanded and invigorated by loan words, but perhaps none so markedly as Romani. This is because its speakers have frequently crossed borders, and because a common language has not yet
been fixed in writing. A store of mainly “domestic” words—those relating to home and hearth and mostly of Indian origin—has been retained over the centuries, and it is this which is shared by the speakers of the many dialects of Romani (there are around sixty in Europe alone), their notionally common language. More pervasive is the spirit of the language or that which it seems especially well suited to express—hyperbolic, gregarious, typically expressive of extreme emotion. Vivid usage is of paramount importance and original images are prized. The tale is never as important as the telling, and great storytellers are highly revered members of the community, tending to specialize in ghost stories, fairy tales, shaggy-dog yarns, or riddles.

With the simple addition of the ancient Indic suffix per, like “hood” or “ness,” one can create abstract nouns, such as Rom, gypsy, Gypsiness; or else such words may be borrowed from another language. But among Romani speakers these big-concept, encompassing words are not much needed. Without these generalities, the language flows like a good poem, rich in detail, in concrete images, and in fresh, inventive use of simple words. So, for “I love you,” you got (as in Spanish) “I want you,” but just as often “I eat you,” or even “I eat your eyes.” “I want to eat your face” (or “I want to eat your mouth”: the word for both “face” and “mouth” is maj) is a request for a kiss.

The highly aspirated, raucously gutural vernacular is unusually expressive, especially when produced by an old, deep, and tobacco-stained voice. Although a new “political” language is emerging, Romani is generally phatic—that is to say, its function is to express sociability rather than to exchange ideas (which are likely to be shared already).

Jeta’s style was typical. She was rude and funny, applying unexpected images to unlikely targets, and often conveying terror and irony at the same time. “Why can’t a gadj make a good bore?” Jeta put the question seriously, following the jokey proposal in the courtyard that while they considered prospective brides for the ten-year-old Djivan, why not consider me? Because “A gadj wouldn’t know how to take out her own eyes.” Jeta’s reply conveyed the primary meaning that, compared with a proper Gypsy girl, a gadj would lack the necessary training and sensibility for her role. But she also managed to convey that such a wife would be no fun, for the taking out of one’s eyes was also a Romany expression for orgasm.

Considering how priggish Gypsies could be about sex and about the female body in any context, Jeta—with the license granted to a grandmother or, rather, to a woman past menstruating—was excep-

itionally ribald: “The salted ones, into the mud” was her kind of remark about women she didn’t approve of. On the other hand, if a place was nice—say, the new coffee bar in town—she might say, “O manasha khaterr tut”—“The people make you dance.” She would call out after the children, if they walked in front of her while she was talking to someone, interrupting her flow: “May I see on your eyes?” or “Are your guts falling out?” (So that you didn’t have time to go around?) Or, if she was really pressed, she might say: “Te bisterdon tumam anawal”—“May your names be forgotten!” Her style was one of mock fierceness, and everyone loved it.

I never met a Gypsy who didn’t have a sweet tooth. Although salt, pepper, vinegar, and pickled foods are considered bazale, lucky, they like things hot guli, very sweet, and were alarmed and revolted by my preference for the salty, or bushalo (sour). Sugar was a luxury in Albania, and Jeta may have thought my demurral was self-sacrificing, which she could not tolerate in a guest. Fed up one morning, she dumped a heap of sugar into the plain yogurt I was settling down to eat, shaking her head as if to say, Where did she grow up? What she actually said was: “If you put that sugar up, a pig’s ass it would fly away.” It was that sour.

She was also in the habit of adding the exclamation Ma-sha-lla! or “As God wills!” after everything. Jeta explained: “It is to let whoever you are talking to know that when you say that your newborn baby is such a darling cupcake you aren’t really deep down in your heart saying may his brain dry up.” It was also a useful precaution. “If you do not show that your heart is pure it is your own fault if something terrible happens.” Ribald, rude, and, for ballast, unshakably superstitious.

It was the province of Kino women. The male idiom more often involved the ponderous intoning of statements of fact (or of ludicrous nonsense) to convey ancestral heft and the wisdom of proverbs. Kako, Jeta’s boarse old uncle, was a tireless intoner, always using this two-part formula: “just as the mare beats the road, so the young wife wants the penis.” And of course there would follow a sagacious nod.

The renowned linguistic aptitude of Gypsies the world over was not always apparent in Kinostudio. For an unlucky start, my name presented a difficulty. The problem was that I in Romani is the feminine article, as in i daj, “the mother,” and it is much used, even with proper nouns, as is the masculine (O Kako). “Isabel” thus sounded to them like “the zavel,” and so I became Zabella, Zabade, then Zane, and finally just Za.
The days and weeks seemed to roll into one another—perhaps because I was never told words for the days of the week or for the months; and any inquiries I made were regarded as trick questions. If pressed, the children, and even the borta, had a lot of trouble, especially with the months. Seasons were easy. There were only two: summer and winter, the hot and the cold. No day was different from any other (and not because it was summer: only ten-year-old Djivan would be going back to school). None of the children knew how to tell the time: no one wore a watch (no one except Nuzi, who were mine and took an unusual interest in time, which he was biding). The older adults did not know how to read, and the younger ones mouched each syllable like children; nobody wrote with any confidence.

I received a letter from the Dukas a year after I had been to stay with them. It was a piece of card covered with their autographs, which were elderly and tremulous, or else childishly deliberate. Below, there were a few lines which were not in any language at all, but which gave the graphic sense of a letter, and that was the point.

There were no newspapers, no radio, and of course no books; the television was usually on, but was hardly ever watched; images flickered by like scenery out of a car window. Appropriately so; in outer Tirana you could only get lurid dramas from Sicily and crassly proselytizing soap operas sponsored by American church groups. Unlike most of the Albanians among whom they lived, the Gypsies knew nothing about what was going on in the world, and (again with the exception of Nuzi) showed no curiosity.

Sometimes, though, their restraint was due not to lack of curiosity but to tact. They were interested in family life; they asked after my brothers and sisters and parents and cousins as if they had actually met them. When there were no men around, we talked about childbearing and wifing...I turned thirty while I was with the Dukas. I had not been looking forward to that especially, but what for me amounted to a single sigh was for them a seriously sad, even a grave matter. When (on my first day) they discovered that at the age of twenty-nine I still hadn’t had even one, the parti daj—herself a mother of ten—patted my wrist sympathetically: clearly I was barren. This explained why I had no husband either and, worst of all, why I was condemned to wander the world, to go to Albania, for Christ’s sake, far from family and friends, to stay with complete strangers. It was hard to tell which part, from their point of view, was the greater trial. My presence among them could have no other explanation, it seemed, for everywhere Gypsies I met assumed this version of events and, not wishing to put me through a painful experience, gave me no chance to elaborate or explain. My life was a tragedy, they saw that, but it was one they could warm to, and they let me know it: after all, hadn’t they in the past been “condemned” to wander the world? Hadn’t they too been condemned to Albania? (Their weary objectivity about Albania was impressive, given that they had lived there all their lives. Not Albanians in their own minds, they were refreshingly free from the regional disease of ethnic patriotism.)

Drinta had no time for such reflections. She had other, more pressing concerns. Drinta was also the most difficult member of the family to communicate with, because her Kabudji dialect was more corrupted with Turkish words. And yet, with her unrivaled determination, she prevailed as a teacher. It was from her that I learned the language of vampa, or barter. The store of vocabulary included the words for blouse, skirt, comb, brush, lipstick, mascara, shoes, scarf, sponge, soap, ribbons, pins, hairband, and, learned up in self-defense, the words for ring, bracelet, earrings... Drinta claimed she wanted to learn English; this was vampa after all. an exchange. And so I began: "What is your
name? My name is Zabe," and so on. She just laughed and made mushy underwater word-noises. She sounded like my fourteen-month-old nephew mumbling adult speech into the telephone, which he used as a kind of mike.

Our lessons were difficult not only because we had no common linguistic ground but because much about me was plain alien to her: if you can’t understand actions, the chances are you won’t understand speech. I was continually shocked by the isolation my strangeness implied, and touched by the protective gestures it inspired. Once, I crouched at a boiling kettle, poised to pour water over a teabag. Drita lunged for it, yanking the rectangular pouch out by its tail. “It will get wet!” she scolded, patting the bag dry in the folds of her skirt. She had never seen a teabag and had kindly been trying to rescue something that she imagined was—what?—perhaps a perfuming sachet or bouquet garni (though it is hard to imagine such fragrant ephemera making their way to inner Albania). In a similar incident, O Babo, riding in the front seat of Gimi’s car, complained that it was horribly squallid, and that Gimi really should tidy it up. “What are all these ropes?” he asked irritably, attempting to tug the seatbelts from their sockets. Such safety devices were a novelty in Albania—like private cars themselves.

Nothing, however, produced so much bemused interest as the twice-daily ritual of Zabade brushing her teeth. This found obsessive and weird, and before they were smashed away by their mothers the boys would gingerly finger my toothbrush, touching the special baby tooth with the tentativeness they might have stroked a fledgling that had dropped out of its nest.

The toilet was a hole in a cupboard with a swinging door on crazy hinges; it banged but didn’t shut. For a basin they had a depressed drain at ground level, and on a ledge at waist height a can of water, constantly topped up by Liliana. And so the brushing of teeth was a public event. One of my nicknames was Dandi, from Nan; when the need made itself felt (about once a week), they brushed theirs with a finger, generously coated with thick salt, or lye. And they had such beautiful strong white teeth, as Gypsies, in sparkling contrast to the rest of the local population, very often do—when, that is, they are not obscured by decorative gold or silver or even two-tone caps.

O Babo’s toilette was more popular still. Every morning Bedhet stretched out his shaving ritual for as long as he could, as if hoping each day to add a few seconds, perhaps even a minute, to his personal best. For the children it was a great show. For O Babo it was a way of
Into Town

Jeta was bitter about her marriage, which, she once explained, came about only because her grandfather was dying. "I want to see my granddaughters married before I go," he'd said. Bexhet was available, if not ideal (having got through three wives by the age of twenty-one), and that was that. Jeta was seldom seen and never self-pitying—she didn't have time to be—but she had a strong and richly comic image of herself as one of the wronged. Still, Jeta believed in arranging the marriages of her own children: that wasn't the problem. The problem, she would tell you in loud whispers, was Bexhet. The real trouble, thought, was that Jeta was far too intelligent for the life she ended up with, and smart enough to see it.

It was rare to find a modern malaise in a Gypsy woman; experience was generally too circumscribed. But Jeta was exceptionally bright. Unlike the clickingly complacent Bexhet, she had been stirred; under Marcel's influence, to new considerations of the Roma struggle. Alone among her large family, she had inclinations, and they impinged her equilibrium, and her tolerance for life in Albania, let alone in Bexhet's courtyard.

One morning, when even I thought Bexhet's shaving routine was wearing a little thin, I took her off to go anda fora, into town. With no shopping mission, we walked and walked and she spoke about her life with a rare reflectiveness. For thirty years Jeta had carried out her daily chores with that same courtyard as her headquarters; she'd raised and married off her children. Even the marriages—normally a mother and grandmother's domain—had proved a disappointment and humiliation for Jeta; one son after another failed her elaborate and expensive arrangements with a suitable girl's parents by eloping with or impregnating the bride of his own choice. She had never taken a vacation; she had never been away from Kinostudio for more than a day or two, and then only in service of her children—on a (futile) trip to the south, for instance, to audition a prospective wife.

We paused in front of a shop called fikret. What's a fikret? I asked, unable to guess from the bare storefront, through which one could see a leatherette dentist's chair and an old stuffed armchair raised on cinder blocks and facing the same wall. On the counter stood a rusted appliance, perhaps from the 1940s. It looked like an early-model blender: chrome and bullet-shaped and standing at about a foot and a half in height. But the odd machine sprouted a headful of cracked rubber-tube tentacles, each with a clip attachment at the end. A beauty parlor?

I dragged Jeta inside. Two tidy beauticians in white smocks stood beside their deep sink, their hands demurely crossed in front of them. They shrugged their shoulders apologetically. A handwritten sign on the wall advertised a nutalet Compleet—manicure, pedicure, and make-over, for the equivalent of thirty cents—but unfortunately they had no tools: no nail files, no makeup. Sorry. The old appliance on the counter that we had spied through the window turned out to be a steam-powered curler-heating device, confirmed by the few lead curlers with wire fasteners that lay around like spent ammunition. It hadn't worked in years. They did have a bit of shampoo, though, or some green detergent in an unmarked plastic bottle, and so I went in for a wash. I had been hoping to pamper Jeta at the fikret. It wasn't much, but I was thrilled when she consented to have her hair washed—by a gadjji, no less. Jeta was more relaxed than I had ever seen her, sitting in the dentist's chair and humming to herself, flicking disdainfully through Soviet beauty magazines from the early 1980s, while the two young beauticians rubbed our wet heads. Dinner would be late because of our escapade, and Jeta would have a screaming match with Bexhet, but she didn't care. I still have a lead hair-grip from the fikret. It is oxidized and encrusted with mineral accretions as if it had been at the bottom of the sea for a hundred years; you can hardly guess its function.

Refreshed, we began to make our way home. We passed dozens of caved-in, burnt-out, ransacked, and abandoned ex-shops, right in the middle of Tirana. And then we arrived at the state maternity hospital. Jeta paused outside the gloomy, totalitarian-era edifice, and then took my hand and pulled me inside: never mind that we were late; this, clearly, was something I had to see. She charged past the desk and no one stopped to ask questions: Jeta moved like she owned the place. We walked down the long, dimly lit halls in silence.

The yellow-tiled walls, the ancient steel-tube beds, the unmuffled moans and vintage stench: this place had the feel of a nineteenth-century mental institution, with women wandering around in shreds, browned gowns, waiting in the halls, squatting on the floor. There were not enough beds. Only people about to give birth or undergoing some kind of operation were in bed—six in a row, twelve to a room. Births, abortions, every screaming thing, hap-
happened just behind a screen from the other patients, and just yards away from the terrified women waiting their turn in the hall. At least the wards were not segregated, as they were in Slovakia: one room for Gypsy women, another for goda.

We spoke to the resident obstetrician. Sometimes there was penicillin, sometimes not. There hadn't been any anesthetic for several months. Sonographs were unknown here, and there were only two incubators left—a third had been stolen the week before, along with all the hospital's refrigerators and the drugs they contained. The Ministry of Health itself had been gutted: they even took the staircases.

From a medical point of view, things were worse than they had ever been before, according to Dr. Vioica Tarcu, who had been working these halls for eighteen years. Still, she was optimistic. Under Hoxha (whose pride was Albania's health care), contraceptives were illegal, and so were abortions: women therefore routinely performed their own, and then sought medical treatment. One in 978 died this way, at least of those who actually made it to the hospital. The majority had permanent pain and recurring infections, and many had such mangled wounds that they would never again be able to conceive.

Now doctors were allowed to perform the operation. However, as with nearly all the new freedoms of Eastern Europe (publishing, for example), what had once been prohibited by law was now rendered impossible through lack of equipment or supplies. So contraceptives were allowed but there weren't any; and though hospital abortions certainly were now safer, they weren't much less distressing.

On our way out we poked our heads into the laundry. In a tall vaulted room, lit only by the rays filtered through high, small-paned industrial windows, five women were bent in a row over low sinks, scrubbing sheets on washboards, just like the boria back home. In the middle of the room was an enormous cauldron over a ring of blue gas flames. They were cooking sheets. After a good scrub, a woman would hold the sheet up with both hands for inspection, and then she'd toss it back into the pot with a sly wooden pole she'd catch and pull up another one. There was blood everywhere. Not just the splashed-on bright blood of wounds and cuts, but female blood: dark, gelatious, clothed. Those gouts of maroon were not going to wash out. Only a week before, there had been a shipment of new linen, a gift from the Swiss government, but it had been stolen within hours of its arrival.

Walking home, Jeta told me that she had had twenty-eight abortions (she used the third person: "Jeta had twenty-eight abortions").
The Zoo

The framed wedding portrait is a feature of almost every East or Central European household—rich or poor, Gypsy or gadje. The faces of the newly joined, just smaller than life-size, stare straight and solemnly out of the frame. The black-and-white busts (they are just heads and chests, never bodies) are usually rouged and browned by hand, and they seem always to be hung strangely high up, a foot below the ceiling and leaning out from the wall, as if the couple is not there to be seen but rather to observe, as if the only guardian over a couple, now a family, is its hopeful first idea of itself.

Jeta kept her wedding portrait on the wall, but she covered it over completely with snapshots of her children, of their children, of animals, and even just nature shots—trees, a river view. It was him she couldn’t bear to see, handsome Bedhet, lording it over her.

Because modern photographic technology has not yet reached the East, these wedding portraits all look like turn-of-the-century frontier pictures (and in the case of many Gypsy portraits, like turn-of-the-century American Indians). You can see evidence of the long string in the stiff necks. There is nothing of the disposable Western snapshot—nothing “candid.” But maybe the formal slow shot reveals more than the snap. Anyway it was impossible to take candid photographs of the Duka family—whenever they saw the black snout of my camera they immediately dropped what they were doing, held their arms stiffly at their sides and froze in unsniling wedding-portrait poses. Like Gypsy children everywhere, the little Dukas and their friends would rush to form a short-lived lineup, which collapsed into a scrum of pushy stalkers, each shoving and trampling over the littlest kids to get into the picture. Even if they looked through the viewfinder, they could not grasp that the camera’s view was wider than the actual two inches of its “eye.”

Nuzzi and Violica’s picture hung over the doorway of the tiny builtin room they shared with their son, Walther. Violica at thirteen looked like Violica now; at eighteen: huge green eyes that were more cross than quizzical, hard-set into the middle of her square face; her painted lips seemed thin and black in the photograph. Nuzzi was captured in a moment of swollen adolescent beauty that was now fairly well decompressed. The mouth was full and pouty; the raised right eyebrow was there but not yet fully or archly hoisted. A pretty-boy, a pinup; except for his vanity, in that portrait there was little of Nuzzi now—Nuzzi, the anxious dreamer.

All summer he wore the same pair of perfectly faded jeans—whitening evenly over the thighs and bleached at the crotch—and he rotated his shirts, careful always to fold back the cuffs to the same tautness on the forearm. Nuzzi looked athletic, but in fact he never lifted a finger except to bring a cigarette to his sulking lips. He smoked and he hardly ate—not, one sensed, for lack of appetite, but because he was watching that perfect blue-jean fit. And he walked. Nuzzi walked every day, for hours and hours, into town and around it, up and down and all through the sloping neglect of Hoxha Park. This wasn’t for exercise either; it was for survival.
Alone among the Dukas, he was permanently restless. "Nuzi was my great escape from the courtyard at Kinostudio; with him I covered the town. He wanted to make sure I understood him; he had a lot to get across. And so we developed a system. Shnet pach! is the Albanian equivalent of "Bless you!" said after a sneeze. "Shnet?" Nuzi would inquire, and, if I had understood, I’d reply with a triumphant "Pach!"

On a day of constant drizzle, we walked away from Tirana's Skanderbeg Square along the Boulevard of Martyrs and up towards Hoxha Park (which all the Dukas affectionately called Enver Park). Along the way we passed one of the capital's two hotels, the Dajti, with its out-of-scale columns looming in the best Stalinist style. Outside the hotel, on either side of the broad steps, two Gypsy boys in matching Michael Jackson T-shirts were vogueing atop two vast white plinths, which had supported a bronze Lenin and a bronze Stalin until they were evicted the year before. Such blank spaces—great marble question marks—exist in every town square in Albania. Only one rider still rears above his pedestal. He is Albania's national hero, on Albania's national hero's horse: it is Gjergj Kastrioti, known to all as Skanderbeg. In the fifteenth century Skanderbeg briefly liberated parts of his homeland from Ottoman control. His small victories have earned him the lasting reverence of an unlucky populace, though they were succeeded by a further 450 years of the Turk.

Certain heroes from Latin America turn up in unlikely places, distributed abroad by their small countries' governments at a rate of about one statue for every ten citizens (the smaller the country, it seems, the more eager the gift). Bolivar, of course, but also Uruguay's Artigas, both of whom can be found, for example, in puny Emil Markov Park on the outskirts of Sofia, in Bulgaria. In Albania there is no such competition, no national-hero theme park. One has the impression that every Albanian cooperative, or block association (if there were such things), is the proud possessor of a Skanderbeg. In this avenue, the Boulevard of Martyrs, replicas of the rearing hero appear so frequently that they give the illusion of a military parade or gymnkhana. There is only one marty. And now more than ever his statues seem an appropriate symbol of his nation's paralyzed aspirations: mid-gallop, rearing to go, forever riveted to the plinth.

The rain was coming down hard. Perhaps it was the combined talk of Skanderbeg and his horse that imbued Nuzi with the self-sacrificing determination to show me the Tirana zoo.

"Zooos," said Nuzi. "Shnet?"

"Pach: zoo," I replied, and we pulled up our jackets into hoods over our wet heads and climbed the nestled path in Hoxha Park. Like all parks this one had benches, and, despite the rain, these benches were occupied by variously bedraggled or determinedly ponchoed couples who had come to the zoo grounds for petting. Nuzi remarked admiringly that I would find no Roma among these neckers. Like Artani on an earlier walk, he was continually generalizing about and defending Romany practices, mainly by way of favorable comparison with "Albanians." Artani had pointed scornfully to a "disko," as the sign said over the door of a stick-shaped sixties building that once housed the Hoxha Museum. "You would find not one Rom there," he sneered. "Why not?" I asked, thinking it might be fun to go with the brothers to Albania's first-ever discotheque. "A disco is for developed people," he said with finality, using some of the little Italian we shared to make sure I understood. I think he meant overdeveloped people—that is, rotten, faded, and loose. So, no disco.

If the disco represented some circle of hell for the Duka boys, to my eye (and to my nostrils) the zoo was its molten heart. The disgraceful pavilion was death row for wildlife. Standing before it, collar firmly over nose, one could only wonder why all the animals hadn't been killed, as all Albanian laboratory animals had been by now. One researcher told me, for lack of food. He hadn't meant food to feed the rats and rabbits: the pink-eyed specimens had all been stolen and sold as food. The newspapers printed warnings about the rare cancers and viruses that these black-market Rodentia carried. Luckily I was stuck with the sheep.

Still, stunned curiosity impelled us forward. There was a bear-dog, and a lion-dog with enough remaining fur-patches between them to quilt a chihuahua. The smallest hairless animals—and it was unclear what they were, or had once been—looked like large baby hamsters: pink tubes. A pair of eczema-stricken pigeons were probably pummas when they first arrived in Hoxha Park. An X-ray tiger lay head-down and ill in one cage; next along was an ex-chimp, morosely bathing in a manky puddle below his little section of tree. There was a dead tortoise and something that looked like a hunk of pressed pear: was it an iguana? No, it was another dead tortoise, a naked one. Perhaps the keeper had made off with its valuable shell.

The birds didn't look as though they could fly; or walk, or even step out of the congealing egg-dropp soup they all stood in and tried to pull loose from—the liquid was like chewing gum on your shoe sole. In contrast to their neighbors, the birds at least resembled some light...
weight version of themselves. In the last cage there was an eagle, its
Turkish trainers now several sizes too big, and the beak bunched
and ruffled into accordion ridges from some kind of beakly osteoporosis,
so that it looked as though it had been punched, hard.

"The eagle," Nuzi told me, with unnecessary irony, "is our national
bird."

On the way back to town, we ducked out of the now sluicing rain
into the vast park café. All over Central Europe enormous eateries with
uniformly slow and surly service are a reminder of the old regimes' grand
temptor for overheads and profits. . . . It was empty except for
me and Nuzi, a soaked pair of defeated pettyers, and a cluster of
unchaperoned Gypsy children bobbing about a distant table. They had
been dashing in and out of the rain through a broken plate-glass
window, as a dare, it seemed: who could go through and not get cut?
Though barely dressed, they seemed indifferent to the cold rain which
streamed down their legs.

"They are not Roma," Nuzi asserted, pre-empting any insolent sug-
gestion from me. Well then, who, or what, were these water babies?

"They are levgs," Nuzi explained in his most professorial tone,
"and we call them sir. Sir is Romani for garlic. And no, in no way were
the levgs related to the Roma—shame!" he added, displeased with my
skeptical expression.

The levgs were originally Egyptian slaves in the Turkish army; I read
later, with special responsibility for the care of horses—a detail which
suggests they might indeed have been Gypsies. As for the Egyptian tag,
this seemed a standard way of disowning other tribes, for hadn't the
Gypsies themselves been called Egyptians (thereby gaining the name
Gypsy)? Some levgs were now keen to promote the Egyptian theory,
just as Europe's earliest Gypsy visitors had found it useful to do. In
1990, a group of levgs in Macedonia consecrated a mosque of their
own on Lake Ohrid; they invited the Egyptian ambassador and [to his
embarrassed bewilderment] publicly proclaimed themselves a lost
tribe of Egypt.

From the Dukas' point of view, all that mattered was that these gut-
tersnipes—and they seemed mainly to be children, though even the
adults one sometimes saw were small enough to qualify—were not
Roma. The "proof" of this was that they did not speak Romani; and
speaking Romani was the kernel of Gypsy identity.

Marcel, who was very knowledgeable not just about Balkan lan-
guages but about its ethnographies, later confirmed that the levgs
probably were Gypsies, belonging to a group thought to have appeared
in the region long before the Dukas' ancestors. Like other groups (the
Ashkali and Mango in Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia), they
were Gypsies who had lost their language. Lack of documents about
such fringe folk makes them vulnerable to anyone's version of history;
and so while Gypsy activists may wish to recuperate these deracinated
elements to bulk up the tribe, or as proof of the assimilationist crimes
against their people, those who live on the same patch of ground are
free to disown them. Like half-breeds, such groups are sometimes
rejected with more hostility than are gadje, the primary "other" in the
Rom imagination. All sentimentality among the Gypsies is reserved for
song.
To Mbrostar

A whole week had passed since I visited the maternity hospital and the fletor with Jeta, but O Babo’s anger over our lassiness still smoldered. He had forbidden her from accompanying Marcel, Gimi, and me on a day trip to visit some rural Gypsy communities, and relented only on the condition that he come along and that we “stop off” in the town of Mbrostar, hours away from where we were going, to pay a visit to his brother.

We set off with a packed lunch early the next morning and made a long climb through the calcite-white Dajti Mountains, passing under Skanderbeg’s crumbling castle before arriving in Fushë-Krujë, where the poorest Gypsies I had ever seen were living in mud huts and twig shacks, some no bigger than appliance carons. One or two houses at the front of the settlement were more substantial: lime-slaked, thick-walled, adobe-style structures, with the lumpy appearance of hand-molded clay. At the farthest end of the camp from the road there were families living in plastic bags. (Gypsy settlements often evolve in this way: the most presentable parlors make an impression at the front and conceal the real slums—subsections, with names like No-man’s-land—at the rear.) Most of the people living in Fushë-Krujë had been laborers on a nearby farm. We could just make out the skeleton of its blown-out buildings—roofbeams against a cloudless sky.

Within a few minutes the whole population, some three hundred people, were pressing in around us, small children filling in the spaces between grown-ups’ legs and under their arms. Just as there were always ravaged, beaten-down older people, and a couple of kids with minor disabilities like crossed eyes, there always seemed to be one outrageously beautiful: an angel who would have been forced into indentured topmodeldom had she been found on a Paris bus; or a wavy-lipped, chisel-chinned, almond-eyed boy-warior out of the fluid, as beautiful as humans come.

The crowd quickly became oppressive. In rural settlements when the whole joint pressed up against you, you could become truly claustrophobic, trapped and crushing in the airless center. "Ou pila is?" Marcel asked, meaning “Is it okay?” (literally, “Is there heart here?”). An ancient toothless man in a grimy felt fez crawled out of his hutch—a twig cocoon with an artfully woven roof—to say that, yes, there was, except in winter when they had to “feed the rats.” He laughed heartily at his joke, his Adam’s apple bobbing hysterically and twanging the thick cords of his turkey neck. The oldest person on the site (though he had no idea how old), he told us that before they had come to work at the farm some thirty years before, his people had been traveling basket-weavers. And certainly a trace of the craft could be seen in his pitiful house, even though it was not tall enough for him to stand in or deep enough to lie down in without his feet sticking out. When he’d had enough of us he inched inside on the backs of his fists and we said goodbye to his feet.

Gimi—Palumb Furtuna—was normally tolerant and sensitive, but he had refused to enter the settlement, as had O Babo. From his car seat he told me that these Gypsies were in fact much richer than those in Kino Studio, but that they “didn’t know how to live.” It was a common—and in this case obviously false—view, but one normally held by struggling gje which believed that all Gypsies hid sacks of gold coins in the folds of their filthy skirts.

We stopped at another village—Yzberish—which was poor but markedly less desolate. Here the Gypsies, who belonged to a group called the Chergari, carefully (and untypically) maintained fences of tethered branches; unlike most Roma, who greet intruders with deep suspicion or open hostility, they were friendly and relaxed, and they did not press in on us with complaints that they hoped we might pass on to “the government.” Exceptionally elegant people, these Chergari were tall and dark as bitter chocolate, with long, thin faces and features and straight hair. And as in Fushë-Krujë they had no idea of the wider world of Gypsies, even of other groups in Albania (they were stunned when short, buterscotch-brown Jeta spoke to them in Romani. And she in turn was astonished that they understood). The Chergari had equally little grasp of their own history, about which they could tell us nothing (their name means “tent-dwellers,” though they were tent-dwellers no longer). As for the present, there was little to be said: there was no work, and they lived on the eggs of their ducks and their chickens, supplemented by the sunflowers and apricots that grew everywhere around.

As we left Yzberish, an old woman, so thin that her cheekbones seemed to be pointing out of her face, hung on to my sleeve. She wanted to show me something. She reached into her apron pocket and produced a fuzzy scrap of white paper, no bigger than a gum wrapper, folded down to the size of a thumbnail. The others were already in the car, but I waited while she shakily unwrapped it. She held it up close to
my eyes, and I saw nothing—maybe a slight smudge of dirt. I took it from her, and checked the other side. Nothing. Apart from the grubby crease marks it was blank. Disappointed, she retrieved quickly and refolded the slip and smuggled it back into her deep front pocket.

What had I failed to see? Written on that piece of paper, she claimed, was the telephone number of her son, a refugee in Italy. It probably had been once, written in pencil that had long since worn away. If she was illiterate, which seemed likely, and had never been able to read the characters, what she had seen there was already an abstraction. Anyway, I am sure that she did see and continued to see that telephone number. “Te axha te hija,” the old woman called after me as I climbed into the car: May I eat at your wedding.

I felt close to tears as we left and wished we could go back to Tirana. But we drove on, making our long way to Mbrostar. The land was empty. In the middle of nowhere we passed a new sign written in an old tongue. “Democracy is a struggle for progress,” it read, “not a force of destabilization and destruction.”

Albanians live with the abandoned: abandoned farms, forgotten fields, sagging sheds with blank windows; ghost towns. Miles on miles of sunflowers wilt and weep while everyone rushes to the city to buy the Italian government’s sunflower oil that has ended up on Tirana’s black market. In the open country there were goats but no people, as if the whole place had been evacuated—a notion given eerie plausibility by the spread of bunkers across the land.

Since the end of communism it is not just the repatriation of would-be refugees that confirms Albanians in their belief that the outside world is essentially inimical. The cluttering thousands of conrete domes that decorate the entire Albanian landscape serve as ungainly reminders. These curious igloos, found not only along the coast and on main roads but also, inexplicably, in remote fields, were the idea of Enver Hoxha. Hoxha distracted Albanians from tribal hatreds by uniting them in hatred of foreigners: all of them potential invaders. The bunkers certainly look ridiculous, but the slaughter of Muslims in nearby Bosnia (which Albanians, who are predominantly Muslim, showed little interest in) give them a certain point. By typical Albanian jest, however, the domes are so tiny that only toy—or boy—soldiers could use them for shelter. The bunkers in towns were used as toilets; here under the midsummer sun perhaps they supplied humanitarian shade.

Bexhet’s urgent desire to see this “brother” was puzzling. In my first few days with the Dukas, O Babo had told me how he had had a

brother who died—a story that he had repeated many times. Baby Bexhet had been persistently ill while his hija, or twin, had flourished and fattened and grown. One day his mother had to go into town and, not wanting to leave either one, took both babies with her. On the road she encountered a peasant woman who had no children. Seeing that his mother had two, the peasant woman demanded one, the healthy one. His mother of course told her to go to hell and so the peasant woman “gave the eye” to his baby twin. Two days later he was dead.

But to remind Bexhet of this tale now was to reduce him to histrionic tears for the continuing curse on his family. Although he told it wearily as a kind of fable, Bexhet seemed really to believe it. What gave the story its force was a truth about the way his people regarded their peasant neighbors. The story duplicated the typical gajdo myth about Gypsies and curses, and in both versions the iron proof of evil was the desire of the other to steal one’s children.

Sure enough, Aziz Ćići (pronounced “chee chee”), whom we were to visit in Mbrostar, was not a brother but a cousin. Bexhet had used the term as a gesture of solidarity. That gesture, and even the tale of the sunpered twins, became clear when the reason for our visit was revealed: Aziz Ćići had murdered a gajdo and next week would be going on trial.

What we’d already seen that day had the sadness to commit the most hardened social worker to silence: it was the anonymous misery of the whole impoverished world—a world which is always populated mainly by children. The tragedy at Mbrostar had a further, racial dimension: a crime had been distorted and deepened by the tension between the group and the surrounding, and larger, white community. It also showed the genuine inability of the Gypsies to avoid being, in gajdo terms, their own worst enemy.

We crossed Albania’s biggest bridge, the suspension bridge whose image graces the ten-lek note. Not far off we found the house of Aziz Ćići, a white three-room structure perched over a railroad track. It was empty. The sunny rooms were bare, with only a few broken chairs to suggest any human occupation. A few broken chairs and a mournful female voice: in a back room, facing an open window with her back to us, an elderly woman knelt swaying in a trancelike movement that was the bodily expression of her plangent, somehow disembodied, dirge. It was a song to the mujo, the spirit of the dead. Had we come too late?

From next door a Romany family who knew Bexhet greeted us with relief and urged us inside. It was easy to overestimate the number of
people crammed into that little house—with the usual gallery of children's faces pressed against the window, and the awkward custom of our hosts, who shook hands outside the house and then again when we were inside. “God bless your legs,” the husband said to me, raising my hand as if to kiss it. I smiled weakly and stole a glance at Marcel; when we sat down (all five of us in a row on a cot) Marcel expanded: “God bless your legs for bringing you here.”

The dead man, Fatos Gremi, was a well-known thief and widely despised drunk; nevertheless, since the incident three months before, the once well-integrated community had irreparably split in two. The entire Rom population had been ostracized. No one could buy food at the local shop; they were afraid to go out after dark. The suffering roomful of the desperate Aziz's friends, describing these events, all agreed so far. But this extended family of Mechkari didn't need to be outcast in order to feel in the immediate family of Aziz, and to a lesser extent the wider circle of family and close community, shared his shame. They too were considered mahreme. Aziz's sister, for example, was in the village but she did not join in this recapitulation and Bechet didn't think of going to see her; she was also his cousin but for the time being she was as contaminated as her brother.

What actually happened on the day was the subject of the upcoming trial, and in that room a matter of confused and surprisingly indifferent debate. The drunken Gremi had supposedly tossed rocks at Aziz's window late one night (one said 7 p.m., another insisted on midnight, a third suggested the hour before dawn). Terrified, Aziz had then rushed to the door (in that crowded room one friend obliged us with a sadly hampered panormime) and fired a shot into the dark—perhaps not so uncommon in Albania these days. But the bullet struck and killed Fatos Gremi. Still more terrified, Aziz dragged the body into the house.

Then he panicked. That night (the next morning / days later) he and his wife sewed Gremi into a burlap sack, lugged him to the car, drove to the ten-lek bridge, squeezed rocks in to fill the bag and rolled him off the edge. But the river was low and the next morning Fatos Gremi was an outcrop and Aziz Cici was an outlaw.

None of those gathered there attempted to deny the crime in Aziz's behalf, or to question the implications of his subsequent actions (he had immediately decamped to the town of Pluku). Instead, they offered competing versions of the timing and sequence, spiritedly interrupting and attempting to outdo each other as if to say, “Wait up, how about this?”

They are all lying, I thought early on in our summit. And they’re doing it just for fun. Then I began to understand. They had no sense of time (and were unbothered by such details as the impossibility of stealing off in the dark at five o'clock on a summer evening). But above all they did not regard the reconstruction of events as a project of memory. Instead, they told the story as they felt it to be at the moment of the recounting. In front of our eyes, as if for the first time, they were immersing themselves in the drama, conjuring up after the feelings that would fit such a terrible deed. The truest version for them—the winning version—was merely the most convincing or the most vivid. The heroic present was where they lived.

This impression was confirmed when Marcel attempted to explain to them what an appeal was, and how it might be possible to have sympathetic international observers at the trial (which was only a week away). In the middle of his unusually lucid explication, a chicken appeared in the narrow strip between our toes and those of the relatives in the chairs opposite. All of the Gypsies wriggled and giggled like children, as if someone had farted during a particularly portentous church sermon. And then with great and loud seriousness they all started talking about the chicken: where had it come from, who was its owner, whether they shouldn't just stick it in the pot before someone claimed it, whether those spots on its beak weren't evidence of a disease whose ravages someone began now flamboyantly to describe, another explaining with the flat precision of a tour guide that “the chicken plague” had been visiting various towns and villages in the region before making its way to Mbrosstar. The conversation never returned to poor Aziz.

Fractured communication and a spontaneously theatrical approach to indisputably grave stuff was the norm among Gypsies everywhere; it was the spirit that made them attractive, but it was also what made them difficult neighbors. Marcel said they were incapable of establishing priorities. In fact their priorities were simply different priorities: value was assigned to all events equally but serially; what was going on at the moment—Aziz's trial, a stray chicken—had top billing. Neither event would have a lasting hold on them. Special fondness was attached to those incidents and persons with the greatest dramatic possibilities—that is, with a continuing, endlessly repeatable and improbable life in the imagination: memory of a kind.
Exhausted and anxious to be gone, we were nevertheless persuaded that it was too late to drive through the black countryside and the unlit, unfenced mountain roads to Tirana. And so we stayed, had a delicious chicken dinner, and passed a fitful night on mats laid out in the house of the condemned man. Beshet, though, slept outside, so unwilling was he to linger in that unlucky place. It turned out that his anxiety was not to do with Aziz’s mother, but with the old woman, Aziz’s mother, whom we had first seen, from behind, as she intoned her wailing dirge. The oldest woman in the family and in the Mbrostar Roma community, she had a great deal of power. In matters of death and spirits she had more authority than her even more ancient husband.

The Mbrostar Gypsies, like most Gypsies, believe in and fear the male. Though men appear to have all the authority, and do indeed wield it in secular life (deciding punishments for wayward members of the group, or dealing with gasjic officials), it is the women who possess the darkest and most forbidding powers. Their legitimacy resides in knowledge of spirits and medicinal cures, and ultimately in their ability to pollute men. Death, the final authority, is a man (Anne Sutherland noted), but only a woman can frighten him off.

It is not just the spirits who need worry, however. A woman can “pollute” a man just by throwing her skirts over his head, or even by threatening to do so—and thereby make him ritually unclean and in need of purification before other Gypsies can again associate with him. The woman has the power because she herself is innately unclean—if she is married, which is to say sexually active. She must take elaborate precautions not to expose others to her “uncleaness.” These well-defined codes of purity and contamination are the real universal language of Gypsies, understood if not always rigorously upheld in every district and dialect.

Old women have perhaps the best deal in Gypsy society. As women, they are invested with mystical powers. But because they are old women their sexuality is not a threat, and they cease having to observe many of the cleanliness rituals, eating and smoking as they do with the men. In direct contrast to Western women, who may feel great depression during menopause as their biological allure looks waning, Gypsy women of a certain age gain status. By becoming physically more like men, they overcome the social inferiority of their sex. Old people are generally revered among Gypsies, and, for their deeper knowledge and experience, old Gypsy women, from Albania to the Americas, often have a lot of say in secular affairs as well.

It was unclear to me why Aziz’s mother was singing these songs for the dead (she was not as well as she was the night of the Padov Gremi). Perhaps it was because of the fear among Gypsies that people who were deprived of the respect that comes only with old age—either by death or by disgrace such as Aziz’s—were likely to become malevolent spirits. Perhaps, as Aziz said, she was trying to make a deal for her son. Beshet, in any case, was staying well clear of the puri dag, the old mother of Aziz.

Jeta had hardly ever been away from Kinostudio so long, and was anxious to make an early start. It was still dark when we left, and the journey was a dream of chalky mountains and vertiginous passes better left unobserved. I slept, and then feigned sleep, for the privacy it offered. The tarmac of the main road out of Tirana comes to an end at the entrance to Kinostudio; the familiar bumpy trail beneath the car told me we were home. As the car fell forward, lurching in and out of pot-holes like a wagon, all five of us inside bounced joylessly on the sticky seats. Then suddenly we stopped, the car’s nose rubbing in the dust. We were stuck at a thirty-degree angle, in hundred-degree heat and a traffic jam.

As the dust settled, a pharaonic scene came into focus: a dozen bare-chested men, heaving the arm-thick twisted cable of a great pulley. Hanging from the inverted question mark of the cast-iron hook was the carcass of a dead horse, slung over a wide leather swing. The horse slid down, its legs still hooked over the leather strap, fetlocks frozen in a ghastly pose of prayer. And then it fell to the ground, its catarrach-clouded, fishy blue eyes still open, heavier and more earth-bound than it could ever have been in life.

The horse still glistened from sweat but not yet dried; patches of fur stood up dully against the silty coat like back-brushed velvet. Hundreds of flies buzzed and tentatively dipped. There was a dark patch of ground and a shallow pit, dug by the horse. I guessed, in its last struggle for life.

Some of the men stood aside, cooling their cable-burned palms. A new shift had arrived itself on either side of the unwieldy animal; half of them, pushed its bony haunches, while the other half pulled the stiff, spidery legs. Though I saw no wound, their hands and chests were smeared with black blood. Children ran up the dirt track from the neighborhood, dragging or pushing a range of other tools—planks and shovels and a wheelbarrow. Finally the pulley was winched and
cranked and hoisted up as high as it could go, and the great fly-splattered beast was dumped into a waiting cart. From where I stood I couldn’t see the men in the cart, just a row of clenched fists dug into the matted mane from the other side, tugging.

That evening and in the days that followed, the horse was never mentioned. In a protective gesture of unspoken but unmistakable admonition, Jeta silenced my inquiry—not, I inferred, because the animal had died gruesomely, but because of residual respect for an honored beast.

A few days before I left the Dukas and Albania, Nicu and Dritta and their boys moved out of Jeta’s courtyard; their new apartment was ready. Over an afternoon a buoyant Dritta directed all the children and brothers back and forth in a two-way convoy, unpacking boxes in transit if they grew too heavy for the little body struggling beneath. Nicu and Nuzi shouldered the Polish couches. Liliana carried the painted table. Dritta beamed for onlookers. A place of their own; this was the biggest event of their lives. And of course Dritta was no longer a bori—she had properly become a roman, a wife. Normally this would come only when she had a bori of her own—that is, in a few years, when Dijivan married the little girl from Berat. But Dritta had seized her chance; it was time to go.

Back home, the remaining boris feigned indifference and quietly got on with their chores. Dritta was gone, and Violica and Nuzi, next in line, would soon move into their considerably bigger quarters. But even they were subdued: the courtyard was going to be a much quieter place. Bechet was withdrawn as well, polishing his sparkling bicycle. And Jeta, unable to settle into her usual routine, set off on various invented errands. It wasn’t her job to fetch water from the communal well, but that is where I saw her, perched on its ledge, a hand over one eye and the other tracking Dritta and Nicu as they made their last trip around that familiar corner, carrying between them a Stanbuli oven with Dritta’s prized Day-Clo plastic orange tree potted in it. Jeta returned home with wet eyes and an empty bucket, yelling nash!—git!—at one of the hens that loitered in the courtyard gate.