

# **BALKAN TATTOO**

BY: EDIN VISO

Viso, Edin

BALKAN TATTOO

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Published by: REC. FACTORY

Art on front cover by: Edwin Tuts

ISBN 978-1-897544-61-7

PUBLICATION ASSISTANCE AND DIGITAL PRINTING IN CANADA BY



[WWW.PAGEMASTER.CA](http://WWW.PAGEMASTER.CA)

## **FOR TOBY**

*Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world,  
to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.*

*-1 Peter 2: 11*

## FOREWORD

Edin Viso is a man at home in exile. At home in the alternating chaos and confusion, warmth and beauty of the inner city; and at home with the oscillations of his own heart.

The route to his homecoming is not one he chose. He saw his beloved Yugoslavia shredded by ethnic violence and lived through some of the worst of the Balkan war of the 1990's. He survived by using his wits and by running drugs; he endured the routine horrors of shattered skulls and burning flesh by numbing his mind with cocaine and booze.

He ran: and while in Germany on route to Canada, he wept through a news clip that showed all the old Yugoslavian books being burned. His own novels burning too.

His escape didn't fix his soul or solve his dependency, and after a few years knocking around the northern parts of Canada he came to the end of himself and limped through the doors of Edmonton's Hope Mission.

Throwing off nightmares, addiction, mistrust, self-destructive thoughts, is never a one shot deal. By his own admission he'll always be in recovery. But his is a recovery that's guided by deep faith, a tough and loving community, and a return to writing.

Writing now in his adopted country, and in his adopted language, he has gained the distance to map out the ruptures of old emotions; and he's found the delicate proximity to apply pigment and colour to the cuts and punctures of a life lost and a life gained. But a whole life—all of it finally embraced—forming something like a startling and beautiful tattoo.

Certainly there is catharsis in this work; catharsis in the original Aristotelian sense of release through the drama of poetics. Edin's poetry and prose bear the obvious marks of dark drama—of a soul variously splayed apart and cinched back together. He has poured out ink and has let it seek out the dimmer gorges of his heart. And he has thrown ropes of words, high up over the peaks of hope.

This is a book of psalms—at once craggy and rough as the Balkan landscape, and sublime as sunrise on the Aegean Sea. There are calluses on the palms, dried blood on the knuckles, and dirt under the fingernails of these pieces. And there is grace. There are poems that veer close to the edge of despair, then without warning shoot skyward in sudden delight.

And there is gratitude and humour. A reader will find herself unexpectedly smiling at the comic shadow of a jester, and then reclining beside a grand and open heart that still anticipates discoveries on an unfinished journey.

Edin's is now a Christian journey, but a journey unclouded by Christian platitude; one that skewers absolutism; that stakes everything on love; and prefers the company of vagrant souls who entertain possibility and wring cheer from graffiti on bus seats and truth from brown leaves in gutters.

Edin is a poet who knows the value of a blanket, a single orange, a moment shared—this moment. He is a man who is unafraid, and who does, in the pages before you, “take off his skin and dance in his bones.”

Stephen T. Berg  
September, 2011

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Section 1 – ‘Hope’</i> .....	9
<i>Section 2 – ‘Toby’</i> .....	99
<i>Section 3 – ‘God’</i> .....	143

## SECTION 1

# ‘HOPE’

*I had become addicted to Hope Mission... In the way that addiction is the hall work of every infatuation-based life story. I saw the Hope almost as a sanatorium, a hospice clinic for my own recovery.*

*Hope Mission is the best place to take your dreams, put into the actions with someone who believes in your dream. Dream-plan-track is one ongoing process where, together, you and Hope Mission will define your dream, develop your plan and track your progress; making sure yours dreams and your plans are one and the same. Amen!*

## TATTOO

Your touchings  
Has tattooED my skin  
My skin  
Has tattooed my blood  
Who was just passing through IN.

My blood has  
Tattooed my heart.

My heart  
Sent it into my skin  
From where has gone,  
Leaving  
The other side of skin  
To be wiped  
By other touchings.



# BALKAN

I am a person who needs to trust words  
Desire that I'm only able to admit.  
The we is she and me  
Before the risk of God.  
That place in time  
Where expectation still exists.  
Getting to Balkan means everything.  
Because now that my family is dead  
Bosnia declares itself a country again.  
I never was able to believe  
Two different things at once.  
Loss = Zero  
Win = One  
The rules of chess are to practice all the time  
The rules of chess force the player  
To make it or quit  
The rules of chess say once a player  
Always a player:  
Recovering Balkan's war's addicts.  
(We relapsed approximately every 50 years)  
You play games created out of rules  
You don't mind invisible or patient  
You.  
X means takes means multiply  
= means draw means position equal  
– means a dash means motion towards  
Means take away from.  
I sit cross legged  
And we play speed chess.  
Push.  
Push.  
And then take, you say.  
Not even the sun.

## EXILE

Exile is in our time like blood  
You are beautiful: it hurts me.  
All knowledge of you is pain  
And after that knowledge is nothing.  
I know you  
You take me and I change.  
I break from your body  
Make with our lonely bodies one flesh, love  
And that enough alone.

I fill up my days with you  
My nights are filled up  
Something I am grows emptier  
Something I am holds on and will not let go.

Time passes, only just.  
You are more and more beautiful; it hurts.  
Each time I reach for you something is lost;  
Something is born again  
Over and over.

+ + +

In the east  
It is completely night  
In the water  
The moon has two reflections.

A meteor slices across the sky.

It was time to pay a visit  
It is time to visit.

Searching for the dog  
I lost  
Many years ago  
When he was a puppy.

*I try to restore the spirit of God in all living things.*

*It doesn't matter if you know me a little or a lot, it's actually pretty funny to see the responses.*

*I'm stark naked in the middle of all the elements with no one to blame myself. Being in the center of not blaming myself is the best place to be.*

*We are all naked in our own way. Clothes are just a building over your temple. If naked vulnerability worries you, doesn't matter, by the way worrying is a waste of energy... You are what you think.*

*I have learned that we need to be vulnerable to grow. This is the best way to be. It allows the love to flow (the highest frequency in the universe). Being open to other people gives you a strength that will make you feel like superman.*

*I show up. I exercise to stay in shape. I drink plenty of power mocha frappuccinos. I try to stay out of the way... It's about attraction, not promotion.*

*It is like the Bermuda Triangle. Nobody ever reports back from here. Something is unfolding. It is both mystical and practical. It requires that we show up, do our exercise and get out of the way. Recovery is done. In order for the human race to continue, recovery addicts must be safe and empowered. It's an obvious idea, but like a recovery addict, it needs great attention and love in order to be revealed.*

*Sometimes you have to let go of people you care about in order to do what is right for yourself. From a standpoint that we are both recovery addicts in the way of love, I prefer working together toward a common good, but that doesn't mean we can't have fun at the same time.*

*In order to survive, you begin to pretend there is something between your legs... Btw, you are so beautiful, you are so elegant, and deep and innocent and wild... I saw that down there, and more, more, much more. I find myself repulsed and a little jealous.*

*Oh jeez, oh my gosh, I guess I have to be an adult now.*

*Life is full of wonderful surprises... The Herb is a great example of what's possible for men in shelters- and for human beings in general.*

*Working here, I'm not thinking in terms of financial benefits... But it's been such an exciting "trip" that I feel so energized. So excited and so forward thinking. So much more so than I've ever felt in my life... A lot of self-reflection. Now I share my story to encourage men to believe they can change their lives: "it helps to know that you can go through this and still come out of it..." I just know that is here is where I wanted to be. I don't think I could have worked anywhere else. No matter what, you have to encourage people to make decisions that they are comfortable with. It's just human to want to give a relationship one more try.*

*I'm very adventurous and always look for fun and something new. I keep everyone's secrets, but I like to share my own to everyone. I'm here and now. I'm quite content with what I have and what I do. I don't really want much change and I'm concerned for the present, not to the past, not to the future. I belong in the present day.*

*Ok, I love to be out in the cool of the night and sleep in the shadows at day.*

*I'm not careful enough with what I say and do, and just sometimes think ahead. I'm more spontaneous.*

*The spirit of the living God has put a new spirit within me. He has given me a heart sensitive and responsive to Him... Hmm, a moment time.*

*I believe it is important to have a thankful heart and to live today. The past is unchangeable and the future is uncertain. The future is a hope, but today is certain.*

*I've realized what is most important in life... Relationship with God, self and others... the rest can be delegated.*

*By filling your mind with words of hope, you become hopeful... By filling your mind with words of kindness, you become kind. By filling your mind with thoughts of courage, you become courageous. Words have power.*

*I'm on a roll. So don't stop me now. We have the capacity to be more than a prisoner of your past. To do this, you must become the master of your will.*

*It's a very practical concept. The bottom line is to start using your own willpower on a regular basis. Push yourself. Small victories lead to large victories. We must build, on the small, we have set a goal and we have realized it... This feels good.*

*Here, we have time. It is our most important commodity. Positive thinking, goal-setting and self-master are nothing without time. Time must be in order to survive, time mastery allows you more time to do things you love to do. Run your own race. Have the discipline to focus your time around your priorities.*

*So life is like a fat strip of bacon. You have to separate the meat from the fat in order to be the master of your time. You must be ruthless with your time.*

*Learn to say no. Having the courage to say no to the little things in life will give you the power to say yes to the big things... I must stop acting like I have 500 years to live. I missed the best time to plant a tree 30 years ago.*

*The second best time is today. Never be a prisoner of your past. Become the architect of your future. You will never be the same.*

*And now I understand my role in the universe. I see what I am. I'm no longer in the world. The world is in me... And I will come to see clearly who I am and the ultimate purpose of my life... to serve.*

*The meaning is clear... When you work to improve the lives of others, you indirectly elevate your own life in the process. When you practice kindness daily, your own life becomes far richer and more meaningful... I adopt a new paradigm of my role on this planet.*

*Here, in The Herb, I stopped seeing myself purely as an individual and start seeing myself as part of the collective and should become kinder and gentler. Compassion and daily acts of kindness make life far richer.*

*We are brothers and sisters without a difference in colors, no difference in souls... We are brothers and sisters coming from the same earth... We are Arabs and Occidentals and Americans, and Africans and Indians and all the different people we can be, with the*

*same God and different names... We are living in the same world... Who you think you are doesn't make a difference to anybody.*

*God made many puzzle pieces, but only those two "cut out" for each other can fit together to create a perfect and beautiful picture.*

*In my real dream, I call my community a school of the Lord's service. That makes me think that I was put on this earth for a reason.*

*I'm trying to ignore the fact that I was an alcoholic for over 30 years.*

*My work life and my home life are very closed. I make balance. It's about quality of life and more flex time. Perfection is possible, has always been an unwritten goal in business. It has also become a part of my personal mission statement in life.*

*I have lived in four different countries, I have learned how to fool a polygraph (lie detector) test, I met my favorite musicians; Larry Norman and Leonard Cohen, I have held a seven-hundred-year-old book ("Dictionarium Etymologicum"), I've been interrogated by the military, I've held human body parts, I've consumed enough cicutoxin and cianide to kill a guy (and lived), I had 17 police cars come after me and two of my friends with guns drawn, I marched 21 km with a broken foot.*

*I broke my left foot five times and my right foot twice, so far...*

*I've loved somebody so much that, with fear and trepidation, I risked, as I perceived everything, including freedom and health, just to protect her.*

*I've jumped from a moving vehicle. I still have the scar on my left hip... I was offered a job as an Intelligence Officer by the Canadian Military - just two years ago.*

*Aha moment... You do not need to be loved, not at the cost of yourself. The single relationship that is truly central and crucial in a life is the relationship to the self of all the people you will know in a lifetime. You are the only one you will never lose.*

*In everything you do, you should do it with all your heart, as though you are doing it for God and not for man. When you do this, everything you do becomes an act of worship unto God.*

*When I think about my personal reasons and motives, I have to think about God. God must be the very centre of my personal motives in all that I do.*

*When I lived in the world I was led astray by other gods. Drugs, alcohol and sex were my gods. They provided temporary and short-lived pleasures. What these gods offered me was fleeting and hollow, but now I've come to know that the real God offers purpose and substance in this world and the next... But where my old gods offered me pleasure now and pain later, the real God offers hardship now and freedom later.*

*Every person has a role to play in God's perfect plan. But God doesn't always reveal to us what these roles are.*

*In everything that I do, I do so unto God. That means that every decision I make has to be given to God first. I don't want to be anything that God doesn't want me to be.*

*So, I ask God what He wants me to do and He says two things to me: "Religion that God; our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after widows and orphans in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world," and "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."*

*The hardships that have been allotted to me is this: to love. And this love is not to be a surface love, a face I put on in the morning after I brush my teeth. It's to be a sacrifice of love unto God through every person He leads to me. My role in God's perfect plan is to love with no discrimination and no hesitation. And that love is to come from God, because He is love, and without Him, there is no love.*

*I know that my God's plan is perfect in every way. But I'm not. God has not downloaded into my mind every answer to every problem that will arise. I will make mistakes.*

*My first duty is to the well-being of the people. This being said, we work hard to help those who seek to overcome their present predicaments. Our intention is to help people, not simply give them a bed and a meal. But to empower them to help themselves, to attract them to the Rehab Program.*



*Homelessness, in this society, is a direct result of addiction. Preventing homelessness will not fix the addiction problem. Helping them deal with their addiction will eliminate the homeless problem*

*Our vision for the Hope Mission is to work it out of a job. When all of the clients have dealt with their addictions, unemployment and disabilities, there will be no need for a homeless shelter or a Rehab.*

*I really, sincerely love and respect this house. I consider it as my own home.*

*It's all about the value proposition, and the rest will be personal history.*

*Let me tell you the first thing you need to know. Plan is: "There is no plan." I don't know what the hell it means, but I think it's brilliant. What it means is that you can't sit there at age 50 and map it all out. You might think that x will lead to y, and y will lead to z... But it never works that way, cause life isn't an algebra problem... Well actually, it's like an algebra problem painted by Salvador Daly. X might lead to W and W might lead to the Color Blue... and the Color Blue might lead to a chicken quesadilla... hehe, you think I'm nuts? ... I sound like a nut...*

*It's nice to believe that you can map out every step ahead of time and end up where you want. You might fall in love and move to Tahiti. But that is fantasy (not about love, about Tahiti), because we will stay here... And if you try to stick to the plan, even though you've realized that it's dumb, you will end up there.*

*You need to make smart choices, but you can make decisions for two different types of reasons. You can do something for instrumental reasons; because you think it's going to lead to something else, regardless of whether you enjoy it or if it's worthwhile... or you can do something for fundamental reasons, because you think it's inherently valuable, regardless of what it may or may not lead to.*

*The dirty little secret is that instrumental reasons usually don't work. Things are too complicated, too unpredictable. You never know what's going to happen. So you end up stuck. The most successful people (not all of the time, but most of the time...) make decisions for fundamental reasons.*

*Look, I found a bunch of “fundamentals of finance, leadership finance and narcissism...” but if you want to succeed, you need to focus where you are weak, and make sure your weaknesses don't hold you back. The key to success is to steer around your weaknesses and focus on your strengths. Successful people don't try too hard to improve what they're bad at. They capitalize on what they're good at.*

*... I'm really into trying to understand where other people are coming from. Sometimes it's almost as if I can read little bubbles over people's heads that show their thoughts. You won't accomplish anything until you stop worrying about your weaknesses and start using your strengths.*

*From here, I feel that our whole life will be justified, our sins forgiven, and that love is still our strongest force, one that can transform us forever... But at the same time, we feel afraid. Surrendering completely to love, be it human or divine, means giving up everything, including our own well-being or our ability to make decisions. It means loving in the deepest sense of the world.*

*The truth is that we don't want to be only saved in the way God has chosen, we want to keep absolute control over our every step, to be fully conscious of our decisions, to be capable of choosing the object of our devotion.*

*It isn't like that with love - it arrives, moves in, and starts directing everything. Only very strong souls allow themselves to be swept along; so strong that we can spend rest of life in deep contemplation.*

*No one is secure on this earth.*

*I'm so happy when I think that God exists and is listening to me, but it isn't enough to go on living when nothing seems to make sense. If I don't feel life growing inside of me, I'll never be able to accept life outside of me.*

*Everything moves, and everything moves to a rhythm. And everything that moves to a rhythm creates a sound. At this moment, the same thing is happening here and everywhere else in the world. All we have to do is understand that we're all here for a reason and to commit ourselves to that.*

*Then we can laugh at our sufferings, large and small, and walk fearlessly, aware that each step has meaning. That causes you to lose your identity and your relationship with space and time, and you will begin to see a light that comes from within, a light that answers your questions and develops your hidden powers.*

*Everything, absolutely everything on this earth makes sense, and even the smallest things are worthy of our consideration.*

*If your soul could communicate with your brain, you would be able to change even more things.*

*For years, I felt that this was true and now I'm being forced to do the most difficult thing in the world - slow down.*

*Why is patience so important? Because it makes us pay attention.*

*The words had been created by God, but I can write about obeying only my soul, which forces me to concentrate on something greater than myself and bring me into contact with God.*

*Reading and writing have already helped me to change many things in my life, including my present and future... Isn't the soul more important?*

*God is a gentleman; elegant God. Elegance isn't a superficial thing, it's the way mankind has found to honour life and work. That way, when you feel uncomfortable in that position, you mustn't think that it's false or artificial... It's real and true precisely because it's difficult.*

*Elegance is the correct posture if the writing is to be perfect. It's the same with life; when all superfluous things have been discarded, we discover simplicity and concentration.*

*I can combine two things: movement and stillness, joy and concentration.*

*The effort is to sit in the correct position, to quiet your soul, and respect each letter of each word. Meanwhile, keep practicing. After a great deal of practice, we no longer think about all the necessary movements we must take, they become part of our existence. Before reaching that stage, however, you must practice and repeat.*

*And if that is not enough, you must practice and repeat some more.*

*You have understood what all great painters understand, in order to forget the rules, you must know them and respect them.*

*At such moments when the body sets the soul free, the soul either rises up to heaven or descends into hell, depending on the person's state of mind. At that moment, your brain stops reacting. Your spirit leaves you and travels down to hell to meet the demons from your past.*

*I speak in the present because for us time does not exist, only space... Believe me, we have all the time in the world.*

*I came here because there was something missing in my life. I needed to fill up my blank spaces, and I thought just seeing God's face would be enough.*

*But it wasn't. I also needed to understand that.*

*I don't want the same thing to happen to me. But I need change, and change fast. Everything is at once so simple and so complicated. It's simple because all it takes is a change of attitude. From now on, I'm independent. I see life through my eyes and not through other people's. I'm going in search of the adventure of being alive. And it's complicated, because real love is composed of ecstasy and agony.*

*We are surrounded by universal desire. It's not happiness, it's desire. And desires are never satisfied, because once they are, they cease to be desires.*

*Ehhhh, a single rose can be my garden, a single friend, my world.*

*Mental fitness... Exercise is a dirty word... Every time I hear it, I wash my mouth out with chocolate.*

*And sometimes I pretend to be normal. But it gets boring... So I go back to being me.*

*Be true to yourself. Nobody can go back and make a new ending, but anyone can start today and make a new beginning.*

*Being happy is not necessarily to have the best of everything, but to make the best of everything we have... Yes, aha moment, it's a must be, to know how to love and how to be loved.*

*You can think, you can feel, you can solve your problems. Let go of the pain. Open your heart to love. You are lovable... You are loved.*

*My feel in the early morning at 6:30 is not so much different at 9:30... just added feel in the same way.*

*To be perfect in the eyes of God is to be exactly where he wants you to be right now; and success in life is to be where God wants you to be today, so that tomorrow you can be where God wants you to be tomorrow.*

*Planning is trying to discover how to accomplish our goals. Planning is moving from the "now" to the "then"; from the way things are to the way we want them to be. Like goals, plans are statement of faith. It is a way of thinking about the future before the future happens. Or, it's a way of communicating our intentions to ourselves and to others. Planning is just like problem solving... We still live in the world where superstition and barbarism are still dominant. In our time when civilization almost collapsed, people easy relapsed... We are all lucky to have each other. And whatsoever you do in word your deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him.*

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