



Eminem

“Brain Damage”

The Slim Shady LP

02/1999

Aftermath

Brain Damage

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The apartment building across from mine has been vandalized. The city doesn't have projects, not quite, but this is the closest it can get. A black-and-white graffiti takes up half facade. In inelegant letters, someone has drafted a hymn to the country's greatest poet, whereas hymn and poet's name coincide. EMINESCU. I'm seven and barely know how to spell *stanza*. I'm not one for words or patriotism: the graffiti is an eyesore, the poems even more so. Only a few years back a revolution was built upon starvation and misinformation, the shadow of communism overthrown. Now capitalist miscellanea crosses the border in every number and shape. Soon the graffiti has a twin. EMINEM. In my naivety, I take it for an abbreviation on the poet's name, how he preferred his friends refer to him? Perhaps a homonymous—I was taught only recently what the word means after a second Elena moved to the neighborhood. Incidentally, the original Elena is my best friend and she's now pitying me for my lack of pop culture awareness. She exposes me to a bootleg. I listen to a random track on her walkman, the sound coming out of a pristine headset that's been handled with such care, it being a commodity, that's squeezing my ears. I doubt I know more than a thousand words in my own mother tongue, let aside speak English. Elena, she's like me, and so are the other kids in the neighborhood. Nobody understands what Eminem is saying, he might as well be an extraterrestrial positing about far away societies. Yet he's revered here. The voice of the New, of Hope, of the We Too Can Be Like The Big America. The Hasselhoff to this East Germany. "What do you think?" Elena asks me after the sample. I'm not disliking it; I'm not enticed, either. "Sounds angry," the only compliment I can come up with. "He does, he does," she says in joyous agreement. A few weeks later I tire Mom down with my pleas and have her buy me a tee—an off-brand introduced via Turkey with the caption GENSTA superimposed over the chest area, black on white, not dissimilar from the graffiti. I have Mom wrap it inside economic gift paper, no ribbon. A note saying *To my lovely Elena* is Sellotaped on it. I buy a rose, too. The following morning I go to her apartment, ring the bell, ask her father if she's in—he nods, his face halfway between amusement and pity—and wait for her to come to the door with both arms overstretched, package and rose ready for the offering. She sniffs out my intentions before her eyes can communicated to her brain what she's seeing. Her eyebrows arch from perplexity. Then crumble down. A sigh. Her trembling voice interrogating me will echo through the decades to come, through the relationships to be had and wrecked. "Why are you doing this to me?" To which I, wide asinine grin and cold sweat, I say, "It's Eminescu!" She shuts the door on my skinny fingers. *These are the results of a thousand electric volts / A neck with bolts (Nurse, we're losin' him, check the pulse!)*. Ten years later I listen to the full album, *The Slim Shady LP*, now able to understand what thoughts went into making it, what messages he was trying to convey. The nostalgia for those infancy years overflows potent. My first exposure to the Western music industry. My first unreciprocated crush. I can't say I've been a fan of Eminem's. I can't say I'm unable to relate to some of his lyrics. *A corny-lookin' white boy, scrawny and always ornery*. I can't say I don't still dream about that apartment building—just the facade, like ripped out of reality, floating in oneiric space, all gray and poorly-designed and in shambles, and that double graffiti, E & E, a forced double identity that never came, a desperate attempt at connecting sparse romantic lines about fallen angels to a global machine feeding on cash. And Elena, I still check on her from time to time: on social media, in memories of events that never were, through lyrics of a rap aesthetic she seems to have abandoned as adulthood stepped in, yet which still ring true to my ears, *They say I never knew which way I was goin' / But everywhere I go they keep playin' my song*