

#3

Milan Milešić  
1941-1991

Stans

**TREACHEROUSLY, FROM BEHIND** 5

Mainly, I sized her up  
Treacherously, from behind  
Her step and shape, her limbs on wire  
I committed an offense of desire  
Yet without desire  
She would want me grinded  
A crime of passion crossed my mind  
Yet without passion  
There was no way of salvation  
Neither could she have had the choice  
She walked on, sighing without a voice.



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DOBROVNIK

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KIL  
△

6 **THERE IS STILL HOUSEWORK  
TO BE DONE**

You opened the fridge. The winter arrived.  
You turned back. Your turned your back.  
The phone stopped ringing. Your hands were wet.  
The neighbour borrowed a bunch of lovage.  
You pulled your hair out. It was inextricably entangled.  
You remembered a little song. But it was not the one.  
It was uncertain which wind was to blow.  
The weather was impending. You looked through the window.  
The window was dirty. You looked through the door.  
There was me approaching with a wry face.  
You got married in your mother's shoes. In one.  
You threw the flowers up.  
You tightened the strap in the flesh.  
You shooed the Gypsy woman off the threshold.  
You felt inflow of new strength.

**AFTER THE WINTER**

7

After the winter matter takes over  
The undergrowth —  
Workers dressed in blue take the walls  
Away, then sit on them and chew.  
Traffic lights bright up in the blackberry bushes  
The controls fall trough.

Guests at the table, on the terrace  
In affected delight  
Meant, could be, for the future —  
A mouth says: God is not wasted in suspicion  
But in an overwhelming belief.

These are the days when the sun trickles with rice  
And produces an incessant murmur  
I go out as soon as lunch is over  
And choose the uphill path  
For the sake of company; on the slope  
A man is so alone —  
I wanted to discard my coat  
And then I realized that my soul got entangled  
In the lining  
In the very place where it was torn.

They say God allows even for such incidents:  
Out of the earth come ten thousand snakes  
That have hibernated throughout the winter  
And of which only one is female  
Outside the sun shines as on the site in front of a bolt factory  
And they all think they are in heaven.

In the room it is night  
And it is day outside

The three tumble outside  
And the table sniffles inside

Something new is going on outside  
In the room, only partially

There is no window in the room  
That can be seen from the street.

Translated by Maja Herman

The last time I visited Milan in Dubrovnik, I promised him I would write an introduction for an edition of his poems and his friend Lukša Peko's prints. The last time Milan visited me in Zagreb (and the last time we saw each other) he proudly showed me a portfolio with superb prints and his poems translated into English. Upon returning from the States, he was full of new experiences and plans, but also filled with foreboding about the menace that seemed to loom on the horizon and was indeed soon to come true. His friends and colleagues across the ocean had tried to persuade him to stay there, warning him of what was then only a possibility of war in Yugoslavia, but he could not give up Dubrovnik and he came back — driven not by heroic ambitions and foolish defiance, but by a natural human solidarity — to share with the City its days of anguish, certainly the most difficult and most painful period of its recent history.

Milan's death on 5 October 1991 was one of the first consequences of the chetnik-bolshevik aggression on Dubrovnik and a tragic event pregnant with symbolism. He was killed in his own apartment by a shell of the Yugo-Army artillery. Much as he was an accidental victim, he was also a target deliberately aimed at and shot: no. 7 Župska street was one of the centres of the City's awareness and dignity, the hotbed of non-conformism and liberal tradition. Milan Milišić had never bowed to restrictions imposed on him and on several occasions he directly challenged the law. His concept of civil and artistic freedom was opposed

to any totalitarianism, particularly the voluntarist revision of history by the new dictators and the stupid obstruction of time by the self-styled self-managers. Although they had him tried and persecuted, had his job and his passport taken away, he neither bent nor broke down, but proudly answered with new verses, stories, essays, travelogues, translations of poetry, with his journalistic and theatre work. And it is as if his death was the final validation of the suspended sentence passed by the Yugo-regime.

Milan's violent death, however, was symbolic not only as the death of a genuine dissident who never ceased to challenge the illegitimate regime, but also as the death of a man of Serbian descent and Orthodox faith, yet deeply rooted in the tradition of Croatian and (predominantly) Catholic Dubrovnik. There have been foul attempts to claim he was a victim of a nationalist revenge of the genocide Croatian Ustashas, but his wife, painter Jelena Trpković, resolutely denied it. As a witness of his agony, she could testify that the poet had died of the shell fired by the Yugo Army in a savage artillery attack on the helpless, innocent people of the unarmed city defended only by its medieval walls.

It cannot be denied that Milan Milišić has marked and influenced Serbian culture and literature. Moreover, during the important (formative) years, and through his friendships, stylistic orientation and publications, he also became part of the Belgrade cultural scene. The significance of his family tradition and the natural pride of an artist who strives for the different, the exceptional, the unique, cannot be denied, either. But there is no doubt that he is above all a Dubrovnik poet and a poet of Dubrovnik, one of the most authentic in the entire history. On the one hand inspired by the urban Mediterranean elements and the centuries-old tradition, he also exalted the luxuriant natural environment and highly cultivated landscape, the belt of civiliza-

tion from Konavle to Pelješac, from Koločep to Šipan (and farther, over Hvar and Korčula to Lošinj and Istria). But it never occurred to him (as it did to some troublemakers in other fields) to deny Dubrovnik its place in Croatian culture, and even less to distance himself from his Croatian fellow artists (writers and directors, sculptors and painters) when they sought to affirm their national rights. Not only a loyal member of the Croatian Writers Association and the Croatian PEN Centre, but also an associate of the Matica Hrvatska and its magazine *Dubrovnik* (and the Marin Držić Theatre), Milišić voiced his distinct individuality by creative means, through the force of his expression and his specific literary outlook. When he edited the final version of his first collection of poems (replacing the Serbian forms with Croatian standards), it was to attain a coherence of his own poetic work rather than to fit into the Croatian language tradition, but it nevertheless made it easier to incorporate his output into the body of Croatian poetry. His compelling imagery and vibrant language, expressive idiom and magnetic rhythm have earned him a prominent place in his own (or the immediately preceding) generation, within the coordinates set by Dragojević and Slamnig, Marović and Mrkonjić. As he is singled out by the evocative force of his verse and his unflinching moral position, it remains an obligation of Croatian literary criticism and history to continue to study and interpret his work.

This tribute to my friend (born on 6 July 1941) should not be cluttered with bibliographical data or anecdotal memories. The former would be too scholarly, the latter too private. His tragic fate and this solemn occasion require only a few basic facts. And instead of the introduction to a portfolio promised long ago, with these words I invite you to read the texts published in the volume (another portfolio) which the poet himself proudly showed me after returning from the States. Indeed, so unmistakably a

20 product of his native environment and permeated with the regional values of the highest civilizational level, Milan Milišić can be recognized and appreciated even in the most universal and cosmopolitan categories. I am convinced that the English translation does justice to the poet's modern and contemporary quality, his empirical foundations and imaginative unconventionality, social dimension and demiurgic autonomy, and by the same token, to the fact that ancient and eternal Dubrovnik continues to bear live and relevant fruit — even in these trouble-wrought times.

Tonko Maroević

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