

I think I'm smiling



Boris Maruna

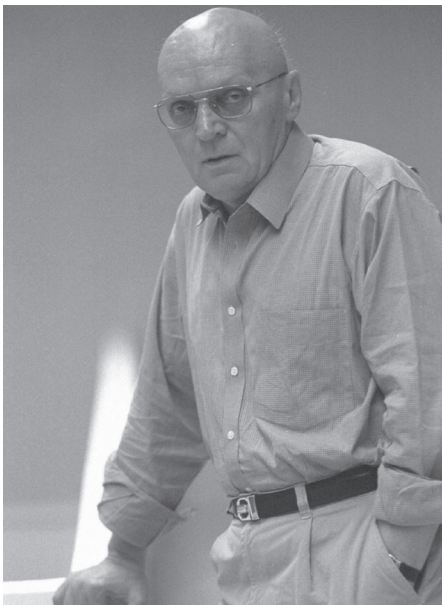
**I Think I'm smiling**

(Selected poems)

selected and translated

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## About Truths

This much is true:  
The Sun has its time  
Then it's November again  
In small American towns  
Leaves fall  
The days grow shorter  
Whole families of farmers  
Head for Las Vegas  
For the weekend  
Or else they're  
Marrying off their daughters in Oregon

But this is true as well:  
Sherwood Anderson and me  
Walk down the alley with our hands  
In our pockets  
As we can't make

Use of them  
We rely on one of our more sinewy movements  
To maintain  
Stillness while standing

This and that may be true  
Many things actually  
Stand for truth

In autumn  
When fruits hang heavy  
And everything seems clear in itself  
Once again  
There is no trace  
Of eternity anywhere

Truths are always at work  
They mostly resemble  
Seeds  
You can find them in old cars  
In the heads of great statesmen

In garbage cans  
At the bottom of the sea  
As well as in my room:  
You can see their fraternal gatherings everywhere  
Yet they die apart

But because they're a part of life  
They soon return to fulfil all vacant  
Slots.

## Pilgrimage

Finally, we saw the thick murals  
chicken coops and heaps of garbage, a valid sign  
that we've been following the right  
path the whole time and needless to say the city  
welcomed us  
with open arms and the embrace lasted for a while  
until we made some sense of the neatly tiled and  
wide streets  
merchants priests and citizens were  
in every respect well behaved one bearded man sold  
cheap plastic pictures of various saints  
claiming that the new humanism is pointless  
as such for as he put it our civilisation  
has already come full circle a fact that I would  
fully take into account years later in the evening  
the streets swarming with shiny cars American



tourists and other patriots while on the corners  
stood refined looking girls who spoke  
several foreign languages conversing in perfect  
Italian and then I turned to my older brother  
saying man this is so symptomatic  
just like Augustus' legions the whores will follow us  
all the way to our graves imagine that he replied  
absent-mindedly  
like someone not fully grasping the seriousness of  
our situation  
those ancient Romans had perfect brains  
all that sense of order not to mention the intricate  
sewage system you are right I said giving  
up on the subject and just around the next corner  
I made my first deal I can tell you she had  
incredible boobs so all those miraculous things  
began shimmering under the Eternal City's  
moonlight  
exuding their own inner light but the elements  
inside of me had already been stirred up

preventing me from ever finding happiness or  
satisfaction  
nonetheless providing me with this massive  
knowledge  
so even today years later something Croatian  
bubbles up inside of me perhaps some old sense  
of beauty  
of honour and honesty still refusing to give up.

## Being There

First general Kỳ\* enters  
somewhere from the right (his suit is so  
immaculate  
that it seems he himself does not exist outside  
of his own portrait in  
*Time* magazine) stating  
that we still do believe in democracy  
and its sense of fair play Then two  
astronauts come floating by

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\* Nguyễn Cao Kỳ (1930–2011) was a Vietnamese military officer and politician who served as the chief of the Republic of Vietnam Air Force in the 1960s, before leading the nation as the prime minister of South Vietnam in a military junta from 1965 to 1967. Then, until his retirement from politics in 1971, he served as vice president to his bitter rival General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

from around the corner  
the first holding a hammer and a goose feather  
in his hands only to drop them  
just to prove beyond any reasonable doubt  
that Galileo mostly knew what he was doing  
Soon after them some  
cowboy comes riding into town  
and like some reckless Billy the Kid  
shoots the local sheriff  
right between the eyes: the local sheriff  
has hardly any time to say anything then  
the cowboy blows the smoke off the top  
of his gun and having gallantly bowed  
to the ladies in presence  
rides off in the blink of an eye  
the same way he entered but the Mayor  
immediately organises a posse  
as the banker comforts the widow  
and writes out a wanted sign: Dead or Alive!  
But alas, that clever cowboy

has already managed to land on his feet  
having made some money in the meantime  
selling stolen goods and cattle  
down in lower Texas  
and now he's already ensconced in some remote  
place  
up north watching television  
in his hotel room  
smoking good cigars  
sipping *Black & White*  
slapping his former fiancée  
not giving (generally speaking)  
a damn.

*The moral of the story:* We should be pitying  
Americans  
like we pity ourselves. They are no different from us  
except that they're bursting with spinach and force  
so when they really want something  
in the manner of their President

they go ahead and get it.

That's how it works.

Though sometimes it doesn't.

## A Treatise on Pop Music

*in memory of T. Dreiser*

They're talking about who started it first,  
who was

The first one

To come up with the idea: I try to concentrate

In vain. The question is posed: did

Elvis Presley already in 1955 clearly predict

What the world was going to look like at this  
moment? (12 October 1969,

23:55 hrs).

They discuss melodies and lyrics: is Bob Dylan

More accomplished in that respect or the Beatles,  
or is it

The other way around? A digression: the visit of  
Paul Whiteman\*

And his crew to Europe following the First  
World War

Had a positive effect on the development of  
European

Taste.

Then – a pause.

Through the clouds of smoke the  
charming

*Shadow of Your Smile* pours out of the jukebox...

Everybody's swaying first to the left then to the  
right,

to the right

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\* Paul Whiteman (1890–1967) was the leader of one of the most popular dance bands in the United States during the 1920s and early 1930s.



Then to the left again, and the question is posed  
again:

Who are the Monkees: geniuses or just skilful  
Imitators?

I'm haunted by this uneasy feeling  
That something escapes me in this life, that the  
ice in my Scotch  
Has melted and that my coffee has grown cold

I get up, pay and wave good night. I'm not  
Capable to add  
Anything  
To their  
Conversation.

I'm tone deaf  
And as such I can't distinguish the third  
Trumpet from a cello, Louis Armstrong from  
Maria  
Callas. Moreover, all my knowledge about music  
Is composed of several prejudices.

Deep down

I believe: that music is a form of noise,  
That Beethoven is (to a certain extent) a type of  
saxophone,  
That Nietzsche was right when he disagreed  
With Wagner, that some people ought to be  
Punished for using their head as a drum,  
That negroes are excellent singers, but black  
women  
Are better than black men, just as English  
women are better  
Than Englishmen, and that only death on the  
electric chair  
Plays perfect electric guitar.

## I See Them All

I'm surrounded by drivers  
I see them drive  
down Wilshire Boulevard  
making turns when they need to  
I wave at them  
yelling: You lucky bastards,  
you know exactly how to live;  
you work eight hours a day,  
then you watch television.  
You Motherfuckers,  
how come that doesn't work for me?

They just keep on driving somewhere

I see them all  
I watch the football players  
and clerks: they go to the movies

to see the latest porn film  
or else they go to Sunset  
to see some pretty babe stripping  
in a live show  
blinking short-sightedly  
under the blinding light  
In her place I would be doing the same  
I see them all and They just keep on  
going somewhere  
That's obvious

I turn around and watch  
the man dying on the third floor  
of the military hospital There's no hope  
for him they shaved his head  
He's dying  
but nonetheless  
it seems that he understands things  
I look at the Japanese roses  
in gardens  
They grow

Around the fountain and in front of the library  
at the University of California  
girls are sitting  
truly handsome girls  
Chewing on their sandwiches and listening to  
music  
on the transistor radios  
They also look as if they know what they want  
while I don't want anything  
I just keep on looking at them  
My head is brimming  
with Marcuse's philosophy  
standard deviations  
plus our national problems  
I'm 29 years old  
I will never again have time for certain things

I down my drink  
and (now I'm facing north  
by northwest) I'm looking at  
the skew-eyed mafia boss

with the face of a primary school  
teacher  
He walks straight ahead somewhere  
I see the man with suicidal intentions  
thinking how he should be stopped  
then again I'm thinking: What for?  
He's just trying hard at his job  
I look at the Ford stopping  
at the corner the driver asking the policemen  
for the shortest way home  
I see the movie star taking a walk  
as her gay looking driver  
waits in the limo  
smiling at the young men  
in basketball uniforms  
I see them all  
They all enter briefly into  
my field of vision then disappear  
in the direction of their own death  
They all drive  
They all hurry, searching and heading somewhere

They all want something  
They all pretend as if they know  
what's going on  
As for me  
I know only this:  
THIS CAN'T GO ON  
ANYMORE!

There  
must be some better,  
more appropriate way  
to annihilate us  
all at once.

## The World I Know?

Is it really possible that  
the world is in decline? The reality  
I belong to and serve with these fingers?  
Is it true? The seas and countries I have  
seen? All my beautiful  
white female cousins? The women  
from the streets and beds as well as some  
of those in my head?

Is it all really collapsing  
heading straight  
to Hell? Our entire  
civilisation: Euphrates Tigris  
the Renaissance October Revolution  
welfare system Rockefeller  
Centre  $E = mc^2$  the Eiffel Tower  
all that scholasticism and  
Yugoslavia?



Can  
it be true? This world  
so self-sufficient? This world  
that feeds on itself? The world  
I've known?  
The world I know?

Let it end!

## In Honour of Mt Velebit

Let nobody mention Mt Velebit  
Let nobody claim it  
Velebit is not an unfinished dream of some God  
It's not me or you  
It's not New York  
Or Rome  
It's not Barcelona  
Or Buenos Aires  
It's not Brundo the Bear  
Or San Diego Freeway  
It's not London  
Or Babina Greda  
And it's certainly not the Pacific  
Velebit is a mountain  
A house-massif  
A stone in the sky  
A bird in my brain spreading its wings

From the North down to the South  
From the East to the West  
Anyway you look at it  
Horizontally or vertically  
Bottom up  
It's there  
Standing upright on its feet

In its rectitude, my friends,  
It will outlive us all.

## A Dream of Light

*for Vlado Gotovac*

Our country is a remote spot, a gloomy landscape  
nothing big  
grows there for very long it does not give man  
any satisfaction  
nothing is comfortable  
there one always struggled with hunger, torture  
killing oneself with work  
and by other means too  
though sometimes  
you may think it wasn't always that bad  
in our country one always lived in the dark  
our fathers and their fathers lived like that  
in darkness: surviving from day to day  
so we inherited their way of life:  
we're dreaming  
for in our country one always lived  
on dreams

dreaming of light of course  
generation after generation knowledge was  
gathered  
expanded and guarded, our women tell our kids  
about it singing folk songs about it our most  
learned men  
in those thick books debate about it  
that dream of light  
infuses our lives with meaning: it's the only  
sovereign  
we serve in our great moments and someone says:  
somewhere  
at the far end of the century someone once saw  
the light  
the circumstances have been forgotten (so much  
has been forgotten about our past) but that light  
even today is considered  
sacred  
for it marked the point of no return although the  
way things were  
back then

just as they are now  
was not good  
our country is in need of a fundamental change  
so I have said it not once: may it be damned  
that dream of light  
that keeps swallowing our best men  
on the other hand can we today (after all)  
reconcile with the fact  
that we will go on dying in darkness  
forever?

## A Note on Ban Jelačić\*

*Z. T.*

He knew that life was like a dung repository  
Wherein people enter out of various interests  
Performing various roles  
Unless they're able to bypass them

He knew exactly the shortest route  
To the madhouse  
He knew how kingdoms decline  
He knew how to lay country girls  
He also knew that all revolutions are essentially  
Short-term projects

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\* Count Josip Jelačić von Bužim (1801–1859) was a Croatian lieutenant field marshal in the Habsburg Imperial Army and also a politician, the Ban of Croatia between (1848–1859). As an army general he is best remembered for his military campaigns during the Revolutions of 1848 and for his abolition of serfdom in Croatia.

He was a picture-perfect man:  
Seemingly gentle  
With thin elongated fingers  
But I nevertheless think  
That even today he could split open  
The skull of any idiot on St Mark's Square  
With a single punch of his fist

I can picture him on his horse  
With that handlebar moustache of his  
Raising arms against the Hungarians  
Or riding some fair-eyed  
Lady: he could always get worked up  
Over some issue of national interest  
Or just as well over nothing at all

He had his own opinion  
Of serfs and could easily see  
All the way to the end of the Century  
In the history of my people he is dead  
And now the bastards can say



Anything they want about him  
They can destroy his monument  
They can neglect his grave  
Finding an excuse in young Marx  
It's none of my business  
For I'm always ready  
To spit in their eye and say: *Gentlemen,*  
*He is my horse in the race.*

## A Poem Encouraging Systematic Study into Western Philosophy

You may start with early Greeks or with some  
    general  
Introduction just to ease your way in  
Naturally, don't forget about the symbiosis  
Of the Classics and Jewish tradition: that's how  
You will from the very outset  
Remain under the impression  
That it's your own head that's at stake there  
Try to skip all the unnecessary bits  
Such as: the Sun circles around the Earth  
So you can really delve deep into the paradox  
That everything is subject to change, know thyself  
And for that purpose ignore  
What you don't understand  
And sink your teeth into the rest  
Failing that  
Try to study German by reading Kant

Fichte and Hegel will then come to you naturally  
Remember from time to time how much the West  
Owes to the Arabs and don't ever think  
It was easy to contemplate all those things  
While living in a desert  
The maxim: *cogito, ergo sum*  
You should know by heart  
Read simultaneously St Augustine, Voltaire  
Pascal's *Pensées* and Marx  
Pay due respect to Spinoza  
And Schopenhauer  
Love thy neighbour  
But when you encounter Nietzsche  
Push some wimp under the tram  
In chronological order  
You will eventually reach your own epoch  
And when you hear me saying  
I AM THE PATH OF TRUTH  
You will know you are on the right track:  
If you live in one of the bigger cities  
Where the main streets are well-lit

You will plainly see that you're heading  
somewhere  
And that some questions will remain eternally  
unresolved.

## Once There Were Better Times

Once there were better times  
I used to get up around 11:00 AM  
I would prepare breakfast and then  
Smoked my pipe in the garden reading Montaigne  
And Dostoevsky  
I was full of brilliant ideas  
And ready-made plans for

transporting  
San Francisco  
to England  
cleaning La Plata  
from the estuary  
all the way to the source  
opening skiing terrains  
in the Sahara.

But the world kept on deteriorating year after year  
Going from bad to worse. However, I never lost hope.

Shuttling between continents I dispensed  
Unforgettable advice everywhere. I believed  
I would be taken into account.

I advised:

Big fish not to swallow the little ones  
The Black man not to upset the white man  
The white man to accomodate the Black people  
The Serbs to retreat to the other side of the Drina  
River

My girlfriend to stick to the pill  
Europe to start manufacturing their own IBM  
machines

The Russians to watch out for the Chinese  
The Chinese not to joke with the Russians  
Naples not to forget about the Vesuvius  
My old man not to catch a cold

But nobody  
Listened  
To me.

So, fare thee well! I rest my case.

## New Humanism

Yesterday the Moon was blue  
today the southern wind blows nothing  
is certain anymore  
    one of the Sinatras  
is being chased by the police across three federal  
    states  
generally speaking  
there's too much light in the cities, too much  
noise and glittering roads  
    too many  
soft drinks and red-haired girls  
among the autumn leaves and in the sports  
cars  
    generally speaking  
    too much progressive  
thinking and good  
life

behind  
thick glasses  
it's late: I'm going  
to bed aware of the seriousness of the hour  
at the same time other responsible citizens  
are travelling to Illinois or trying  
to come up with a contraption  
that will enable them  
to trim this world  
meanwhile I live in the post-Hollywood years  
of exact social sciences  
great  
statesmen, Black Panthers  
and objectively speaking unresolvable personal  
problems  
my fetish is the mailbox  
on the other side  
of the street:  
before I fall asleep  
I receive two letters from Tibet  
brotherly greetings



from Croatia

sincere best wishes and a straw  
hat: ex love from Panama I'll spend  
the morning in the ZOO  
and have my breakfast

at 10:00 AM

sharp: 3 eggs

sunny side up, fried bacon, pancakes  
and black coffee

around noon Miss Cawthorne  
will come to lay down with me then I will  
read Bakunin's pamphlet

*God and the State*

and write a poem about her  
who arrived around noon

to lay down with me  
at the same time some other responsible citizens  
will be playing golf  
living in Pasadena listening to Bach  
getting out of the church lying down  
conceiving

or aborting babies or perhaps also  
writing poems  
    from my point of view  
it's all accurate  
now that nothing is certain anymore  
so either out of Hollywood or from the Cape of  
    Good Hope  
my message is the same: MAN (AFTER ALL)  
MUST EAT  
    time is slipping away from all of us.

## Dog Races (a Study on Legs)

I lived on three continents  
In London and in basements and I knew  
That it would rain on funerals the way it rains  
In the novels of F. S. Fitzgerald  
But I was young and not fond of  
Spengler and successful metaphors  
I went out only at dusk  
Drinking cheap beer and betting on expensive  
    dogs  
Always cheering for numbers 3 and 5  
Expecting some miracle to happen  
An earthquake or something else  
Even more importantly  
Hoping for the Sun to rise at 02:00 AM  
For the Vikings to invade us or for the Russians  
To drop the Bomb that would illuminate us  
Once and for all

You could have bumped into me in Stamford  
Or Wimbledon  
Always in great spirits  
Always a bit detached from it all  
Always surrounded by women  
Who exploited me  
Those women of mine!  
But that's another problem altogether  
They usually had great legs  
I've always been into legs  
I'm in fact an interesting case:  
Americans would for instance give anything  
For a pair of good tits whereas I would give  
    anything  
For a pair of legs, their length and their ability  
To really express  
So even to this day I think that  
The sacrament of marriage  
Depends in many ways on female legs  
As does human happiness  
Of course, I was young back then

And still had some fair chances  
Laying my hopes on the world's progress  
Striving to create a better future:  
Even my dogs were winning sometimes  
But nonetheless those thick worms of doubt,  
The idea that it would rain on funerals  
And above all: having been the son of a small  
Nation (periods of liberation and development  
exchanging in quick succession) often unable  
To pay the rent to the Polish veteran from the

Second

World War coming thus in touch with increasing  
Frequency with the society as such  
Something inside was persistently telling me  
That I won't be able to endure for long like that

Today

I live in Los Angeles in time  
Of great natural disasters  
And President Nixon and occasionally I still  
Nostalgically howl after women  
However my interest in the destiny of this world

Has slackened considerably  
I get up early, I exercise sacrificially  
My running has improved considerably  
Once a year at the university clinic  
I check my brain my heart my lungs my kidneys  
and  
My behind recently I've acquired  
An inconsumable plastic bone  
So in my free time I'm having a lot of fun gnawing  
at it  
With a single thought on my mind –  
How to outlive  
All of my supporters.

## At the Edge of America

This needs to be said first: the weather reports were right again Green and foaming with dubious intentions the waves are trashing the spiritless sand Furthermore if all experts mutually agree one needs not to doubt that come evening light rain would fall The air will smell like fresh puddles of oil while the Pacific would look like a meadow with detached leaves of grass of a genuine brotherhood that is being renewed every morning However, if we return to the sand, we will see that some people had passed this way wanting something All roads all caravans end at this place Thus it breeds the most beautiful

virgins, empty beer bottles, new  
Fords, old ladies, big boobs  
of the Mediterranean and the ripe kinkiness of  
    Danish women  
Here Death Valley comes dangerously close  
to the prairies of the sea bottom  
This is the edge of America There is no invention  
or cunningness that would resist this  
shore Those who'd been coming here with their  
    high hopes  
realized that one way or another  
so they built villas strategically perched on hills  
only to later add gas stations  
libraries, universities, law and order  
Watts and other practical neighbourhoods  
where today I'm eating hamburger and fries  
nervously glancing around, ready to apologize  
at any moment to Walt Whitman for accepting  
things for what they are and  
never renouncing the mainland.



## Ars Poetica

When it's autumn outside and it's humid and  
there's mist  
on the sea and an occasional leaf  
lands on my window's net  
while the girls step out of the school walking  
through the early dusk as their bouncing  
young asses wink at you like blinking  
neon signs while people hurry down the street  
going somewhere dragging their bellies  
and transistor-radios, their cars and women  
behind them or buying vinyl records  
I sit alone in my room  
among the useless books refusing to get out  
not wanting to go anywhere and thinking  
how there's nobody who could tell me  
that all of this was not in vain  
for I don't know how long I'm going to last

without my guilt or permission  
or even clear knowledge of what  
poetry is after all  
except something  
that sprouts  
and works  
of its own will  
and then I feel it's here again  
observing me from every angle  
with its canine eyes leaving  
everywhere its miserable  
saliva

It's then that I get up  
and go out to get another bottle.

## Franz Kafka

After we did it smoothly on the kitchen floor  
And anywhere we happened to find ourselves  
I'm sleeping  
And he comes to me in a dream, coughing lightly  
He suffers from paranoia  
And I can hardly stand him  
He's being chased by the entire regiments  
Of Russian peasants  
Storming like swarming ants  
From behind Kazakhstan  
He is lost  
You can't help him  
As far as I'm concerned  
If his father slapped him  
In his childhood  
I tell him bluntly

He should settle that with him  
Not with me

But he says  
It's not about that

Okay, do you want me  
As a Croat  
To compensate you  
For the Second World War  
Who's going to pay me

No, it's not about that  
He repeats  
Prague is full of shady characters

That doesn't surprise me, I say  
It's the same everywhere  
This is about something else, he says  
I have no future  
In my own country

I wouldn't get upset  
About that I say, you will eventually find the  
support  
Of some humanitarian association  
But please  
Take a look at my case

You don't understand, he says  
Remember Jan Palach, think of bureaucracy  
And tanks  
Those two things are more powerful than people  
This is the end of us all

Be careful, I say to myself  
That Jew is spreading  
Anti-Russian propaganda  
So I tell him: Sorry, bro,  
I understand you  
But I'm not here  
To put the world  
In order

More often than not  
I'm not even capable  
Of trimming my own nails

It's by all means true  
Then I wake up

The day begins normally

After we did it smoothly on the kitchen floor  
And anywhere we happened to find ourselves  
My current wife sings  
Baking ham  
However in the morning I can hardly find  
    anything agreeable  
Her voice irritates me  
I'm speculating maybe it's time  
To change wives again

I get out: seven fat cows  
Of General Motors

Are grazing asphalt in the driveway  
And the green buzzing flies are circling  
Around the three overflown garbage cans  
Similar sights  
Up and down  
The street  
Humanity increasingly consumes plastic  
Iron and paper  
The production of waste is on the rise  
Jan Palach is dead  
Kafka is in his castle  
Croatia looks like a split watermelon  
Wrapped in its own twilight faraway  
As I'm heading down the hill towards the ocean  
Lighting my pipe  
And just like waves on the sand  
Once again I'm adding  
Nil to zero

Though I know (just as my ancestors knew)  
That I'm still able to hit hard.

## Tonight It Will Rain Over London

Again in London five years later  
It's a beautiful sunny day  
In the Life of Samuel Johnson  
At Foyles

Once in New Yorker  
I read an interview with Fellini  
Who said that London is actually  
The centre  
Of our decadence and  
There you have it:  
The English Queen  
Painting and fine arts, film, poetry  
Forces of progress, British  
Museum and free  
Love



As you could imagine  
I felt pretty miserable in Los Angeles:  
How could have I missed out on all this  
While living there?  
How long can a living person  
Allow things and women too  
If they are great  
Or come from a well-to-do background  
To continuously slip out  
Of his hands?

Now that I'm here again today  
I can clearly see that the course of history is  
                  inexhaustible  
That the IRA won't ever reconcile with  
The rest of the Empire  
And that art is sold by the pound  
Just like Swiss cheese  
And Italian salami  
And that Nelson's ears are dirty

And free love is a bit rotten and indeed  
Available to everyone  
Just like the bare ass of European liberalism  
It floats up and down  
The River Thames  
While my dollars  
Are weaker than five years ago

As for the English themselves  
Even today they act like gentlemen  
Pretending not to notice  
As I watch them on the underground  
Those serial readers of The Daily Telegraph  
I tell myself:  
Take a look, please, just take a look at  
What literacy and culture can do  
And I can't but envy them  
For they carry their umbrellas  
With much more facility  
Then I do

Expertly concealing their undies  
And their petty  
Filths

Based on their behaviour  
A normal person can't draw any  
Conclusions

Still, I would say  
Tonight it will rain over London  
Over Europe  
And over all of us  
Just as it's already undeniably raining  
Inside of me.

## St Augustine (a Medieval Study with Some Gothic Elements of the Contemporary World)

I don't think it's that important  
if he was black or  
white. There is that kind of man:  
who will never do you injustice  
or inflict any harm. God  
forbid! You can dance all over  
his bare skull or kick him  
in the ass and yet he'll say  
that's okay.

As you will be reading him,  
he will slowly crawl under  
your skin deeper and deeper  
like a tick, like tattoo ink,  
like the theoreticians of new mathematics  
or scientific materialism,  
like a shirt.

You will surely have your share of troubles in this  
life,  
trying to pass through  
the eye of a needle, to survive  
on this winding road  
of wars and love  
and nonsense,  
while he will, upright like a candle,  
continue insisting on his principles  
requesting as time goes on  
impossible things from you. For the love  
of Him, not him personally,  
he would say. And you  
maybe won't have a chance  
to withdraw.

If you accept (and you are free to do so!),  
that's your moment: it will cost you dearly.  
You will see him budding, rising  
right there before your eyes, invading your loyalty  
with his poisonous roots. You will hold

your breath, but that's just the beginning: from  
there onwards  
everything will go  
smoothly. He won't give you the chance  
to recover.

Feelings of guilt will always  
dog you. You will walk through the forest  
of sinful masochistic thoughts  
as if you're trodding upon  
the bones of your enemies.

If need be, he will  
sell you for peanuts. You will die in combat  
in the Holy Land  
or fighting for some lofty Ideal;  
you will lay with your own mother,  
if he says so. He will have  
endless understanding

for your  
case.

So you may eventually realize that  
there's never anything new under the Sun.  
So you may never open  
your windows wide, never feel the urge to step out  
into the fresh air.

## Statesmen

I don't know where statesmen find the energy  
To keep taking such good care of me  
So self-sacrificially  
As if I give final meaning  
To their mature age.

In all honesty, I'm not worthy of  
Their slightest attention.  
I cover my own travel expenses  
And mostly grow vegetables  
Along with various hopes  
Waging wars on insects, in short  
I water  
My own garden.



Ever so often my wife  
Calls out to me in the night: Wake up, man!  
You're grinding your teeth again!

What can I do, woman, I say  
If you feel good awake,  
Life will certainly give you  
Troubled dreams.

So I get up, make myself a coffee  
And turn on the radio to hear Bach  
Or Stravinsky  
But there's Breaking News:  
The statesmen are busting their balls  
Over my case.

I am (once more) moved  
As well as thankful and concerned  
About their own health  
I step out onto the balcony and I shout into the  
dark

Into the night: Wake up, people!  
But just like God's endless love  
They listen only to their inner voice  
That tells them – as everyone already knows –  
To try to identify with me  
Not to leave me alone  
On the open road;  
For they can see that I'm in trouble

Which is actually  
true.

I don't doubt  
That those sons of bitches  
Are doing everything to help me. The elder ones  
Among them are washing down their last pills  
With cognac while touching with their  
                  trembling  
Hands the last pair of boobs  
Lighting up their last cigar

Lighting up finally the entire history  
With their own death.

So that I could  
Take my next step  
Through the dark.

But this stepping ahead  
Doesn't make me feel any better.

Nonetheless, we must allow  
For the possibility that they know what they're  
doing,  
So therefore one shouldn't, in my opinion, pity  
them.

One can also find comfort in the fact  
That they leave behind a massive trail  
Of yellow ants in the garden: a gentle reminder  
That tomorrow I'll be happy again.

## Tarragona (a Philosophy of History)

Imagine this:

Maybe all those Phoenicians,

Greeks, Carthaginians

And Romans along with

The millions of natives

Latinised in the mid 7th Century as well as

A bunch of Visigoths and Arabs

The discovery of America, Philip II of Spain

The French Revolution

Goya's Black period

Plus several civil

Wars

In short, no less

Than three thousand years of slaughter

Subversion, destruction and

Rebuilding  
Were needed so that  
Even today  
Tarragona could remain  
Standing atop that hill  
Overlooking  
The sea

So that  
Antonieta Cabré  
Could come of age there and  
Having met me  
By the ruins of the amphitheatre  
Agree  
To lay with me

Not thinking for a split second  
That the consequences  
Of that act  
In the next 3.000 years

Could be  
Catastrophic

Or else

Resurrect humanity.

## Since We're Talking About Poetry

*in memory of my mother*

When someone approaches me with the question  
What is poetry  
I regularly reply that I'd love  
To live a few more years in Sukošan  
Or inside one of the picture postcards  
Of Filip & Jakov and outlive the masters  
Of these times adding that I wished things  
weren't  
As expensive as they are nowadays

If my interlocutor tells me  
That those places are  
No big deal  
For they can't hold a candle to  
Monte Carlo or the Waikiki shore  
I just look at him  
Take another drag of my cigarette and reply

That he's quite right because  
In a way that's true  
And therefore also  
Beautiful

But whenever we talk about poetry  
I will somehow always find way  
To veer the conversation towards the topic of  
Sukošan and Filip & Jakov  
Though they are not places of great importance  
They are enough for me today to know  
That poetry is just like people  
A violent gesture  
In the immeasurable eye of an otherwise perfectly  
Indifferent azure.



## Limitations

I

I don't know how it is with others  
But I feel as if I'm destined to choose  
Between the frigidity of Anglo-Saxon women  
And the sharp odour of Black ones.

II

Staring one's whole life  
At a bunch of slaughtered peasants from Lika  
Lying there in the sun  
In the dust  
With their legs spread like carps  
In corduroy jackets!

### III

It remains to lay down solid  
And reasonable reasons against  
Mental hygiene and social fallacies  
To prove that justice is possible and desirable.

### IV

Birth

Education

Fatherhood

Divorce

2nd Marriage

Death.

Why are

All

Important dates

In a man's life

Negative?

V

The motor vehicle is a sign of this time  
A coffin is the sign of the motor vehicle  
Either Freud or the Russians  
Got it right:  
The truth is in the tractor  
or  
exclusively  
Between the legs.

VI

Look at this side  
Of our national interests:  
I'm standing by the road  
That leads nowhere

I escort the dead

I'm the one who shouts in the middle of the night  
Swearing and requesting weapons  
And the Flag.

## VII

It's hard to believe  
How quickly time passes: today  
Every whore on Via Veneto  
Is younger than I am.

## VIII

Think what you will  
Drink the best cognac, smoke cigars  
5 dollars each  
Life is a poor compensation for eternity.

IX

I'm the truth on this side of the lie  
Worms await you on the other.

X

If loving means knowing,  
Why am I always in search  
Of an ideal wife?

XI

That's what poetry is all about:  
Never forget to mention  
The jagged flower  
The sceptre in the hand of an idiot.

## XII

We have to thank the Dear Lord  
For laying sickness and old age at our door  
Otherwise these sons of bitches would enjoy  
eternal life.

## XIII

Let everyone have the right to  
self-determination:  
I'm the man with one hand on the wheel  
Holding a hot-dog in the other.

## XIV

I propose to the Central Committee  
To bring up the following question for discussion  
At the next plenary session:

At the cemetery the Chairman  
Is merely the *primus inter pares*.

## XV

One summer afternoon in 1949  
As the rattle of the OZNA\* machine-guns  
Announced the death of the last caveman  
    on Mt Velebit  
I stood on the bank of the Zrmanja River in  
    Obrovac  
Staring at the water.

I must have then for the first time felt the urge  
To become a poet:

---

\* OZNA (Odjeljenje za zaštitu naroda/Division for People's Protection) was the security agency of Communist Yugoslavia between 1944 and 1946.

The nails sunk deep  
Into the skin of his palms.

## XVI

All work tires me  
Funerals tire me  
The sky tires me  
The waves on the sand tire me  
Even enclitics tire me  
But most of all  
The telephone tires me  
As well as dirty underwear  
The rabble.

## XVII

I'm the man who for seven days a week  
Observes the ships in the port of Los Angeles



The one who each morning  
At the corner of Wilmington and B Street  
Turns left

I told you, the man with one hand on the wheel  
Holding a hot-dog in the other.  
I don't know many things  
My cultural consumption boils down to  
TV and the topless bar on  
Friday afternoons

However, sometimes I think I can sense the vast  
Space stretching endlessly over the ocean  
At those moments I have a feeling that the world  
Begins at my feet

Let everyone believe what they want

But I tell you  
No matter what people smarter than me would say  
The best definition of poetry

Is a woman with legs spread wide apart  
– in semi-darkness on a rainy night –  
Standing in the doorway of a cheap hotel.

### XVIII

That's how I am  
Unless you prove to me that  
There are better alternatives  
I will go on eating.

### XIX

The trees have emigrated  
God has emigrated  
We've squeezed the last drop of oil  
Everywhere you look you see rows of abandoned cars  
Like emptied mausoleums  
Of higher state executives

As from time to time  
Some frustrated SOB  
With absolutely no ideological background  
Whizzes across the empty horizon.

We will all be here for a long time to come

## When I Think About You Old Poets

*in memory of A. G. Matoš*

When I think about you, old poets  
I clearly see that my time is not glorious  
Once it was possible to spend a night  
at a hotel  
walk by the river Seine  
lay some slut *en passant*  
and then wisely search for the so-called deeper  
meaning  
of life. But today,  
a wise man is always  
on alert, always  
in a defensive mood: death can find  
you anywhere and so can the rebellion of masses  
a sexually transmitted disease or some revolutionary  
celebration  
or  
some Nobel Peace Prize winner

My time is not glorious It could not have been  
considering the way it started When I was  
a kid Sartre was  
a great man  
Napoleon was dead and Krleža wrote reports  
from the youth work actions  
until one day I told him  
like a brother *tête-à-tête*:  
Come on, man, let's be  
real! Why don't you just leave  
in peace and take all those October leaves with  
you, all that  
shock work and entire dialectics. Nothing is ever  
going to change here. That's exactly how it was,  
you couldn't talk to anybody  
openly I started smoking when I was thirteen  
and lost my first tooth when I was twenty one  
Meanwhile, the crooks were running this world  
the best they could: back then one needed  
to play soccer well otherwise  
you were absolutely lost When I would look

in the dead of winter down Brotherhood & Unity  
Street

in Zaprešić there were dead leaves on the trees,  
snow

and mud up to your ankles and the fog  
would descend already at noon while I was growing  
up (that did not depend on me) and I had  
to adapt to that kind of world  
by becoming tough and resilient, swift  
like meanness, slippery like  
an eel, cunning like a living antithesis  
of everything there is

Oh forgive me, old  
poets for I was a true child  
of my time:  
*a real son of a bitch.*

## I Agree With You

I agree with you  
As Nietzsche said  
God is Dead:  
It's impossible to conceive of a living god  
Who would fall so low  
To have fun at our expense.

On the other hand, it's obvious that nobody  
Is taking care of business: nobody is helping us  
As if anyone could help us at all  
That's why it's becoming increasingly difficult,  
I believe, to secure firewood for winter  
Increasingly difficult to start a family  
Or to get used to one woman  
And polluted homeland air.

Based on all that, I can conclude that  
The devil on the other hand is problem-free  
He is always here like the lull of the first snowdrop  
in spring:

We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere  
And now we're heading in right direction

We'll get there

In any case, it has been scientifically proven  
That everything has its end  
Just like when the early morning fog slowly  
dissolves above the sea

That's how our view will gradually clear up:  
There will be only negative storage boxes left in the  
wake of tourists

A scorched tree here and there  
An occasional sandwich made of heavenly manna.  
In the meantime let everyone live the best they can.



But I will ask you this, fellow Christians, what  
are we going to do  
If we find out on the other side that thanks to  
the Devil's mischief  
God isn't dead, but on the contrary,  
He's alive and moreover  
Doing really well?

## Croats Are Getting On My Nerves

Croats are getting on my nerves  
No wonder, I've been hanging out with them  
For already thirty eight years.

Firstly, everyone is expert on everything.  
Secondly, they leave trash behind them.  
Thirdly, they are able to drive you nuts  
With their talk about revolution and women.  
The smoke from their cigarettes fills the bars  
Inside the triangle stretching from München  
To Vancouver and the docks of Sydney:

In their left hand a bunch of green onions  
In their right a piece of roasted lamb  
In their pocket the Catechism of Croatian  
kamikazes.

Furthermore, they always find excuses  
For their behaviour;  
Like the great Russian statesmen  
They always come up with fitting advice:  
Why don't you write sentimental poems?  
You should be more gung-ho!  
We rightfully expected more from you.  
Say Croats.

You can fuck around with poetry, I reply,  
But not with me.

And that's enough to offend them.  
– *Anything* is enough to offend them –

They just light up another cigarette and  
Emigrate somewhere.  
Sometimes I don't see them for years.  
Sometimes for decades.

I pick up their trash  
And build it into the next poem.  
I don't have to overstate that I'm sorry  
That they get offended so easily.

But a Croatian poet has the right  
And the patriotic duty  
To say what's getting on his nerves.

In my case it's the Croats.

Maybe it has to do with this anxious feeling  
That those people are a part of my destiny?  
Maybe the reason lies in the fact that  
Slowly but surely I'm losing my temper?  
Maybe.

I allow for many possibilities, but I don't see  
Any reason for finding that strange.

## Marx Is Dead

Marx is dead  
Nietzsche banged his door  
For the last time  
Lenin got on the express train  
My neighbour wakes up with wetness between  
Her thin legs and despite that  
She claims her dreams  
Contradict Freud  
Finally Mao swam over  
The Yellow River  
Rockefeller kicked the bucket  
Under suspicious circumstances  
Sartre will soon be gone  
Soon Krleža will also  
Turn the corner  
Soon the autumn wind  
Will cover with leaves

The last carriage  
While I'm having breakfast in bed  
In Playa Mazatlan Hotel  
Listening to the drops  
Of tepid subtropic rain sliding  
Down the window panes  
Down the fat flesh of cacti  
As the young chamber-maid enters smiling  
    embarrassingly  
Seemingly looking for something  
She says her name is Rosa Alba  
I call her *hermanita*  
Eating my breakfast  
Scanning her legs, her age, her breasts  
Contemplating if I should  
Offer her an extra wage  
Or not

It's not my time  
To die yet.

## I Think I'm Smiling

*for Ivan Slamnig*

I came out here to the beach to spend  
My lunch hour: I removed my shoes and  
Now I'm sitting on the sand  
Under the soft spring sun  
Smoking and looking at the waves  
As they die peacefully on the shore

I'm a little taken  
By the fact that I'm turning forty

Beautiful young women are passing  
Along ocean's edge  
With their trousers rolled up  
I see them as they enter my vision  
As I watch the waves  
I know that the law of probability  
Is on my side, that there is one among

Them whom I would be able  
To seduce technically speaking  
Without great difficulty  
But my gaze doesn't follow them

I stare straight ahead into the waves  
As they die peacefully on the sand

I'm not interested in the volleyball players  
Behind my back  
I'm not interested in children  
Or their parents or those few swimmers  
Or surf boards or rubber suits  
I'm not interested in seagulls or dogs

I'm just sitting here watching the waves  
As they die peacefully on the sand  
I smoke and from time to time  
Clear my throat and spit  
Between my knees into the sand



I think I'm smiling  
Under the soft spring sun  
Lightly and indeterminately  
As a man who feels as if he's  
Just won something  
But isn't sure if he cares about his  
Victory at all

The years will come and go  
They can try to derail me  
But they can't bring me anything  
I haven't already lived through

Nothing I haven't already died for.

## Yet Another Proof of a Reasonable Investment

*(a contemporary novel)*

Recently in New York on Park Avenue  
I bumped into the whore I paid in Salerno in 1961  
With half a pack of cigarettes and 350 liras in cash.  
Now a respectable lady, she paid me back  
My money many times over.

We didn't recognise each other right away.  
We sat down at the Roosevelt Hotel Cafe,  
Talked a bit about Broadway,  
About contemporary theatre in general:  
Oddly enough, we shared similar ideas.

She invited me home for a cup of tea,  
Showed me some Pollock originals,  
An old propeller and other avant-garde pieces.

Then we talked a bit more about theatre.  
She recognized me when I undressed.

The moral of the story: *always invest reasonably*

## America

Our five year old girl  
Stood in the doorway of her room  
Her eyes big and startled  
But since I'm a reasonable man  
I restrained myself and calmly said  
To my wife reclining on the couch: Woman,  
So far it somehow worked, but it isn't  
Working anymore. Honestly,  
Only two unpleasant things  
Happened to me in this life:  
You and Yugoslavia!  
I added: your mere presence is enough  
To make me wish to disappear, jump out of  
My own skin, turn into the thin mist  
Hanging over the fields full of stover  
Around Bakersfield.

– Truly, the whole afternoon I was haunted  
By the image of Preko  
Seen from the waterfront in Zadar

Curled up like a snake, my wife  
Coolly read  
Some romance novel  
(I believe it was number five  
on that week's bestseller list)

Okay, I added, that means that at least  
We again agree on something.

So I took out my most essential clothes  
And threw them into the back seat of the car  
Then I came back to the house  
To say goodbye to our little girl  
Who waited there crying  
I lifted her up and kissed her

Reminding her that daddy loves her so much  
In passing I added to my wife  
To keep all our earthly goods  
Including my photographs

When I went down to the street again  
The first yellow lights were on  
In the port of San Pedro  
As well as on the ships anchored there  
So I looked up again  
And saw our girl sternly gazing at me  
Through the balcony railing and I waved to her  
Getting into the car thinking  
Maybe I should return for her sake  
And tell my wife: Life has always been a dirty  
Blackboard; let's wipe it clean, baby,  
And start again!  
But I did none of that,  
I just turned the key, shifted into gear,  
And with teary eyes, I admit,

With tears in my eyes, headed  
Into the early twilight

Through the desert called America.

## The New Left

So once I met this blonde  
About 30 years old  
At 02:00 PM.

The rest of the day we spent  
Sipping tea on a terrace with an ocean view;  
In the evening I took her to the best  
Restaurant in town

She introduced herself  
As the daughter of a Ukrainian cloth tradesman,  
A Jewish girl from New York,  
An intellectual type:  
She had a PHD and allegedly the biggest breasts  
North of the Grand Canyon



I worked on them the whole night  
But I don't remember if I squeezed out a single  
spark.

She kept on quoting  
C. Wright Mills and claimed  
That because of her marital trauma and recent  
divorce

She was a bit  
Despondent.

It rained in the morning when I fell asleep  
In the hotel room with seven candles  
Interestingly enough, though a catholic  
I did not have a problem with that

On her way out she left me  
Half a bottle of rum from the Bahamas, a few  
Copies of some progressive magazines several  
months old  
The original edition

Of Macdonald's book *The Root Is Man*  
And a certain STD  
That I regularly took to the beach  
In the next twenty or so days  
Handing it over to others  
Just like a baton  
In the ceremonial relay race in honour of  
Comrade Tito's birthday

But it never properly caught on

Our doctor later explained  
That the immunity of my blood was closely  
related  
To our historical circumstances  
The Ottoman occupation  
And our national misfortune

I don't know.



## Laissez Faire (a Modest Proposal)

Once again Barcelona has dawned  
in the rain; from my window you can't see  
any further than the Church of Sagrada  
Familia I believe that the Middle Ages  
are still here  
so why not let Gaudi be here as well  
but in our time I would never  
build anything similar;  
I think we need more divorces  
of healthy Christian marriages  
more sports and less  
religion; a nice  
Olympics that would seal our  
brotherhood in terror  
Certainly more money also  
Consumer society

should be organised around  
money Rains should fall  
only at the telephone requests  
of big landowners  
and state-owned agricultural  
estates I think humanity should finally  
be given a fair chance As things stand I sincerely  
admire my American wife for her endurance  
She claims she's happy when I'm happy  
(which isn't very often)  
She doesn't doubt that I'm an excellent  
husband and I don't try to deny it  
but if I walk out in the street  
it rains  
There's no firewood in the house  
and you can feel winter in the air  
like the fair distribution  
of Our Lord's  
rotten fruits  
I know: the Picasso Museum is over there

and the Christ of Lepanto: in the old times  
a normal guy could find someplace to warm his  
bones

But this is not the time of wonders or aesthetics,  
this is not the time for contemplation:  
more and more I read crime literature  
and the encouraging reports  
from the Third World  
by the Associated Press It is obvious  
that humanity is crowding in on me  
more and more heedlessly  
just like my young female  
students with their firm asses  
and lack of palpable experiences  
But humanity won't let up  
Humanity assails me left  
and right  
and through the middle Humanity believes, hopes  
for something while I'm getting soaked at the bus  
station  
I have known socialism

and capitalism, several different types of  
democracies  
and I don't expect anything from them:  
neither to stop this rain  
nor to allow me to win the lottery  
or to welcome the arrival of a new Moses.

(May they all die  
in themselves  
just as I have lived  
in them.)

## Programmatic Poem

One summer morning deep in a canyon above  
the Santa Monica hills  
I was in bed reading moustached Croatian poets  
Listening to the sounds of a tennis game through  
the window  
Played outside in the court in the shade of a big  
eucalyptus tree

As far as I could tell they played in pairs  
Our hostess and her lover on one side  
And the elder daughter with her then fiancé on  
the other  
Every now and then one could hear our host  
keeping score

When the younger daughter brought breakfast  
into my room



Barefoot and dressed in a short dressing gown  
like a slave girl  
from some picture  
I put down my book and told her somewhat  
disjointedly  
That I'd rather give myself to her than to the  
entire poetry, tennis  
*Deutsche Sprache* and the heart-wrenching  
Serbian linguistics

You see, I gambled on them throwing me out of  
the house  
But she – not understanding a thing – agreed on  
what was crucial

Outside someone was winning the game in the  
morning sun  
One could hear laughter and our host's sadistic  
voice bellowing:  
Forty Love  
Just as she bit into the pillow to suppress her cry

While I stood on top of her young and healthy  
like a real Greek god  
But since I'm not Ivan Slamnig\*, *I couldn't take it*,  
so I let myself go!

---

\* Ivan Slamnig (1930–2001) was one of the greatest Croatian poets of the 20th century. He was an erudite, university professor and *poeta ludens* par excellence. The reference here is to Slamnig's well-known poem *Croatian Poets*, written in the 80s, towards the end of which Slamnig declares that Croats share their language with Serbs "like a chunk of mutton in a bowl of lentils" only to immediately conclude quite unexpectedly in English "*and I have taken it!*". Boris Maruna, on the other hand, being in his youth a fervent Croatian nationalist and anticommunist, simply „*couldn't take it*“, so he fled Yugoslavia in the early 60s and remained in exile until the final disintegration of the SFRY (Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia) in 1991.

## The Immortality of the Great American Hero

The Great American Hero

Also known as

*Le Grand Héros Américain*

Can survive

Any accident

For him nothing

Seems to be a problem

You smash a truck

With a trailer

Into his Porsche

He survives

You trash his cerebellum

With a heavy spanner and you throw him off

The Golden Gate Bridge

In San Francisco

And nothing

As if nothing happened

At all  
The Great American Hero  
Simply  
Cannot die  
Not even in his own dream  
Though sometimes he wishes so  
Because he himself knows  
That it's quite useless  
To die during dinner time  
In San Francisco  
Only to end up washed ashore by the tide  
In Oakland  
At breakfast

## Why I'm Not Able To Finish My Dinner Like All Normal People

All I remember of Croatia is some nameless little  
girl from Zagorje

Lying naked among primroses in the spring grass  
I also recall Krapina carrying clay like Ophelia's  
hair

Downstream into the Sava River. After so many  
years, that's actually it,

But as I'm having dinner in a cheap restaurant on  
the other side of the world

And the young waitress smiles at me as if she  
owes me something

And her breasts and her legs

Keep sending me certain messages

That will never again arrive at the right place

At the right time

As I'm drowning in the vortex of news buzzing  
all around me

From Russia from Germany from Poland from  
Hungary from Bulgaria  
I know that the little girl from Zagorje is still  
waiting for me  
And that Croatia is somehow still there  
As I keep on eating wondering why I'm not like  
other people  
Where does this fever in my head my belly and my  
hands come from  
Why am I not able to finish my diner like all  
normal people  
Why can't I finish my dinner like all normal people  
Why can't I just leave here with the feeling that I  
could have eaten  
One more plate  
Why am I not receiving messages from my brain as  
they arrive  
Why can't I take my child for a walk over the  
weekend  
Drink a can of beer sleep regularly wake up  
regularly

And generally be satisfied like an ordinary human  
being.

I push the plate aside and get up and pay  
Smiling at the waitress and then I go home

I sit down and turn on the computer  
And when the screen's empty slate appears before  
my eyes

In fever, blood and sweat  
(What did you expect?)

I write one more poem.

So I hover my whole life over that little girl from  
Zagorje

Whose name I have long forgotten

But who still waits for me stubbornly

Lying naked in the grass, her hair spread

Among the primroses of some distant day in my  
youth.

As Krapina flows gently carrying Ivančica into the  
Sava River

While Croatia is despite everything still somehow  
there

I know that my poem works.  
It works, for I cannot have it any other way.  
No way, *merde!*  
It works

*La poésie c'est moi.*



## Introductory Poem

In these poems you will search in vain  
For some deeper meaning  
Other than the one that they themselves contain  
On the other hand the reader will easily  
Perceive the obvious I mean first and foremost  
The place of action which is always given  
    beforehand  
One should also presume that the author had in  
    his time read  
Aristotle  
    and that he's no stranger to Ben Jonson  
That means that the author understands your  
    problems  
As well as the basic mechanics of drama  
    that time heals all wounds  
Dragging the dead towards the estuary of  
    oblivion

Hence these poems rest on the premise that  
Even the more superficial of readers should  
    understand them  
Right off the bat, or at least to the point that  
    anybody  
Is able to understand anything at all  
As for the rest, the author claims with full  
    responsibility  
                    that it simply does not exist  
In reality and that perhaps it may have never  
    existed in the first place  
All the characters are fictional as are all the  
    actions  
Some five hundred Croatian villages several  
Cities  
    two entire town quarters midnight street  
    washers  
Post offices garbage collectors  
And in one case an entire nation.

## Fighters from Vukovar

Fighters from Vukovar did not wear flak jackets  
by Giorgio Armani or suits by Pierre Cardin  
They despised Gucci and Croata ties  
And when we watched them on our TV screens  
Sunk deep in our comfortable fauteuils  
From our pleasant flats in Tuškanac and Pantovčak  
As they ran and jumped over the bricks among the  
ravaged homes  
We somehow sensed that their innocence  
Reached deeper than our pride and that for some  
big things in life

A man does not need anything: neither cocktail  
parties nor neon lights  
Just perfect love  
Absolute danger

## I Too Have Experimented

I led a tough life  
all right just don't let anybody tell me  
that I haven't tried  
that I didn't roll a dice or two  
because if he's born as a Croat  
a man cannot expect too much from life  
and while others were taking care of their empires  
seizing power and counting profits  
I waited in Torremolinos  
for some new Erika to turn up  
that tiny clipping of our world  
to spend a night in my bed  
I would be waking up sleepy with a hangover  
knees trembling with anxiety  
while they were taking their cold showers  
followed by floor exercises  
their abdomens were as hard as

spring boards  
their eyes as blue as those lakes up in the Alps  
and tits as powerful as the German  
economic miracle  
yet they would still somehow get along with me

their spirit was Teutonic no doubt  
although they neither had a clue who Tacitus was  
nor did I bother to explain  
they lived in the eternal present tense  
or on vacation  
and upon departure they would leave  
overflowed ashtrays behind  
the empty bottles the smell of iodine  
the entire herd of white guinea pigs  
staring at me cunningly from all corners of the  
room  
bursting with contentment.

## In the Chiaroscuro Light of Eternity

As we walk through the rooms of the renovated  
Prado Museum

I realize you're for the first time in a real gallery

Your eyes glow and questions keep popping up

You're completely wrapped in the invisible light

That once shone on the old masters

I'm explaining Goya and Velázquez

The justifiably half-concealed face of the man on  
the cross

The dark corners of human souls

Bosch's premonition of the Apocalypse

El Greco's late cathedral

The War in Croatia and

The Thirty Years' War

The unenviable conditions of consumer society

The true result of some thousand years of  
bloodshed

I'm telling you: All those paintings, my dear  
daughter, merge into one  
Single painting by Goya who always got it right  
Human reason will always generate ghosts  
But the July sun is outside on the streets of Madrid  
You are only seventeen and of course  
There are two sides to every coin in one's hand  
While those four represent the four  
Basic elements of defeat:  
Earth, water, air and fire and  
As far as I'm concerned regardless of the American  
laws  
And your age  
You can light up a cigarette in Café Gijón  
Drink a bitter with or without alcohol  
And the reason I'm telling you about the destinies  
of those people  
Is because I don't know of any other way of telling  
you  
How much I love you and that there's nothing  
more beautiful

For me than to see you happy  
And carefree, wondering at this life  
In the chiaroscuro light of eternity.



## Poem

To walk upright  
To wear light clothes in wintertime  
To avoid posing senseless questions  
    to my women  
To avoid being bored at parties  
To think about the future  
To remember the past  
To distinguish people from scum  
To distrust kings  
Lords, wise heads  
    and teachers  
To always spit at the right spot  
To be a whore among whores  
To be a hard worker among hard workers  
To be a brother among brothers  
To be who I am  
To be what I will be

Always less than what you'd predict  
Always more than  
What you can imagine  
To boldly walk the edges of life  
To follow my own voice  
To betray it if needed  
To have no regrets  
When I cast a last look  
At the mountain tops and valleys of this world:  
To pack more humanity  
Into my poems  
Than words can tell.

## Ruđer Bošković\* Studies Tide and Ebb

A cranky and frustrated Jesuit at a manly age  
(What else would you expect from him?)  
Observing from his window at dusk  
Quite methodically one must add  
A certain lady in her thirties  
Already a little squashy and stitched up at the edges  
– somewhat like Euclid's geometry itself –  
Certainly a mother of two or three  
Most probably a middle class specimen  
Swinging her hips in a slightly provocative manner

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\* Ruđer Josip Bošković (1711–1798), Rogerius Iosephus Bosconivius, was a Croatian physicist, astronomer, mathematician, philosopher, diplomat, poet, theologian and a polymath from Dubrovnik. He was a Jesuit who studied and lived in Italy and France where he published many of his works. In his works Bošković *inter alia* anticipated atomic theory and discovered the absence of atmosphere on the Moon.

Prompting our Ruder to conclude quite accurately  
that Mr Husband  
Has already acquired certain working habits  
Along with the need to socialise and have  
A glass or two too many at his regular  
Card games on Fridays and Saturdays  
She is walking out of the supermarket  
Carrying two plastic bags in her hands filled with  
groceries  
And the third one with probably at least by the  
looks of it  
A box of Tampax Super in it  
So our Ruder changes the topic and begins  
contemplating  
Whether women's monthly cleansing is all that  
natural  
Or it comes straight out of Saint Paul's letters  
As one of the pure and natural female needs such as  
Wearing pantyhose or a certain type of make-up  
Then due to some mysterious intervention or under  
the influence

Of certain associative processes leading back to  
his childhood memories  
He instantly remembers the sea in Dubrovnik  
and the ships carrying  
Ice and cotton and sighs looking at the full  
Moon rising above the roofs  
Realizing at that instance of pure inspiration  
that there's a severe  
Mutual dependence between the Earth and the  
celestial bodies  
And that the tide and ebb are eternal phenomena  
Affecting both the sea and women alike  
So he felt greatly relieved  
That he's never going to see California.

## On the Way to Acapulco

I'm merely a tenant here, I said  
Intending to bring the class division into  
    conversation  
Emphasizing my negative stance towards private  
    property  
You don't need to be, she said  
It all depends on you  
Or on *him*, I replied like a tough guy  
Pointing down to my pyjama pants  
(When it comes to business, a man has to be hard  
    as nails)  
She exhaled seemingly offended, then took a large  
    breath and continued:  
I will enable you to meet up with your parents  
I will pay for your trip to Europe  
I will buy you a new car

I will take you with me and my husband to  
Acapulco  
You will have everything, everything, everything

What about my freedom? I asked lightly getting up  
from the bed

Two times a month, she replied  
Two measly times a month, she repeated as if she'd  
been

Programmed at the famous IBM HQ in  
Boca Raton, Florida

Please, don't insult me, I said  
And let me think about it

The temptation was there: she had a husband and  
money

I did not have a husband or money  
I believe in monogamy, I said eventually  
If you could have your way, I should have  
At least fifteen or so women

Why? she fired back successfully, just be with me  
There isn't a woman in California, I said, who could  
    tie me down  
Apart from that, you are not rich enough  
To pay me for the whole month  
There I began putting on my clothes

Two times a month, she approached me  
    unflinchingly  
With her night-gown opened and the ramosse bluish  
Veins under the root of her breasts  
No, my lady, for your own sake, no  
I'm going to ruin you financially, I said  
Pushing her away purely for humanitarian reasons  
Honestly, my heart was not in the deal any more

Tomorrow I will pick up my dirty laundry, I said  
    seriously  
Knocking out the netted screen and jumping  
    through the window  
    onto the morning dew



I got into my old VW, turned on the ignition  
and shifted  
Into first gear

Leaving Acapulco somewhere behind me  
Faraway in the south.

## Quivering Marble

If you ever visit my ex wife in Los Angeles  
Ask her to show you the photograph  
Taken at Hadrian's Villa in Rome.  
You will notice that it was the end of summer:  
Castelli Romani wrapped in mist  
It's morning between nine and ten and I'm wearing  
    a new expensive coat  
A man in his better times and years  
– The last of the American tourists strolling around –  
On one of the terraces there's a marble Venus  
I approached her from behind  
Having firmly grabbed her breasts  
And if you look really close  
It seems as if the marble is quivering  
While my Missus is adjusting lenses  
To let in the proper measure of light  
While some of the tourists are turning around

Observing this little spectacle  
My new coat is open wide and it covers from aside  
Venus's bare thighs  
My head nesting between her neck  
And left shoulder  
While I firmly cup her breasts in my palms.  
Now my lady is placing everything in focus  
She's taking her time and it's taking her an awful  
lot  
To select the proper frame before she finally snaps  
the shot:  
On the photo you can really see the marble  
quivering  
As Venus smiles disinterestedly looking somewhere  
Into the distance.  
  
Me too.

## It Was Easier Loving You From Afar

*pour Bernadette*

It was easier loving you from afar,  
Being with you through those nights of endless  
    literary discussions  
As the fog lifted above the sea and you could sweep  
    away  
With a light movement of your hand all those  
    memories  
That did not fit into the long chain of sentences  
    infused with longing:  
Your image virtually indestructible.  
But now that I've come too close you force me to  
    feel you like a rotten tooth,  
An open wound, a hammering nerve, senseless  
    flesh  
Like sickness that renders us both equally helpless  
As if faced with the proclamation of final disaster.  
Whereas once love used to be a pure and verbatim

Sensation of loneliness  
Persons and landscapes drawn by memory  
Sway languidly like seaweed under the waves  
Those days spent away from you, those endless  
    literary nights  
The world stripped of reality but finite and  
    compact  
Like a good poem firmly bandaged from all sides  
And me lost in pipe smoke as I lean against the  
    bars of distant seas  
Dividing us eternally like an admiralty  
Of their own hallucinations.

## Summer Ending

These verses that you're writing will be of no use  
to you

It's getting dark and the town is showered in late  
summer rains

The asphalt's gratitude evaporates under our  
marching feet

Summer is ending

Announcing yet another changing of skin

The ripe fruits of autumn already exhibit tiny  
marks of death:

A worm of suspicion gnaws at everything you  
ever wanted

The rains are rinsing the city washing away sand

Women and nights, all those walks under pine  
trees along the shore,

Literary discussions and political debates

Those moments of entering the ocean, the bars

The residue of liquor at the bottom of emptied  
glasses

The fish bones: the whole sludge of various truths  
Like verses that never came to life.





## Three Encounters with Boris Maruna

One afternoon in late January 1990, I happened to be in Split at my parents' tapping some borrowed jazz records, when the phone rang. It was my old friend Predrag Lucić,\* already an accomplished young journalist, who had just returned from his trip to the United States where *Slobodna Dalmacija*, our local daily, sent him to cover the first ever Convention of HDZ\*\* in the USA, held

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\* Predrag Lucić (1964–2018) was an award-winning Croatian poet, playwright, journalist and editor, one of the founding members of the legendary political and satirical weekly Feral Tribune that left an idelible mark on the Croatian public life in the 90s and early 00s. By universal acclaim, Predrag is considered one of the greatest satyrist in the history of Croatian literature.

\*\* HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) is a Croatian political party first officially registered in February 1990. The HDZ is

in Cleveland, Ohio. Considering that the first free elections were only a few months away and that the future President of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman was also in attendance, it seems in hindsight that the gathering indeed bore a certain historical significance. I can still remember the excitement in my friend's voice, for he had never been overseas before, and I could sense he was eager to share his impressions. He summoned me to his place: "Man, you've got to come over *now*, I brought a load of goodies, plus I have an interesting story for you!" *Goodies* were, of course, vinyl records that we had been collecting frantically since our early teens, perpetually hungry for the new sounds and lyrics of our beloved American singer-songwriters like Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Lou Reed, Tom Waits,

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a centre-right party with a strong conservative-nationalist profile. Its founding member Franjo Tuđman became Croatia's first president in 1992, after HDZ won majority at Croatia's first free multi-party elections in 1990.

Randy Newman and Joni Mitchell. Needless to say, we were also obsessed with poetry and literature in general, thinking that excessive reading might somehow preserve our sanity in the face of collective nationalistic hysteria that was slowly but surely devouring the little space that the already declining Yugoslav Communist Party had left for free and critical thinking. Those were chaotic pre-war times of great political turmoil all across Yugoslavia, when people were quickly turning coats and changing sides (as a rule from left to right!) so the political arena was swarming with former communists who overnight woke up as hard-core nationalists. The amount of hypocrisy circulating in public life was simply astounding. Being raised on rock'n'roll, the Frankfurt School, Pier Paolo Pasolini, British punk and New Wave, French existentialists and above all the American Beats, looking devotedly up to those great American counter-culture figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Burroughs and, last but not

least, the “dirty old man” Charles Bukowski, my friend and I had no choice but to try to maintain our quest for intellectual integrity in the face of very worrying circumstances.

So, an hour or so later, sitting comfortably in Predrag’s room, we cracked open a bottle of Ballantine’s, lit up our beloved red Winstons, and got into talking. Actually, right off the bat Predrag announced: “Can you believe that during those couple of days while I was hanging out with our American compatriots, I met only *one* normal guy!” *Normal* in our vocabulary meant someone who was free spirited, immune to ideology and resistant to bourgeois middle-class values. “His name is Boris Maruna and he is a *brilliant* poet! The man writes like Bukowski, like the Beats, no bullshit whatsoever, he goes straight for the goods!” “You’re kidding me”, I replied readily, “no one from anywhere within Yugoslavia writes like the Beats, except Vojo!” Vojo was of course Vojo Šindolić, our mentor and older “brother”, who already translated

and published a sizable library of beatnik poetry and had been one of the editors of *Džuboks*, the only rock music publication in the former Yugoslavia. For us Vojo, whom Predrag met in Belgrade when he was studying there, was a big authority on literary issues, for not only that he translated our heroes, but he also personally *knew* them, he mingled in those *high* bohemian circles in New York and California, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure and last but not least Patti Smith and even His “Bobness”, Dylan himself.

“Just *listen* to this guy!”, said Predrag pulling out a slim volume of poetry from his knapsack, proceeding to read in his authoritative bass bariton the entire poem *Hrvati mi idu na jetra* (Croats Are Getting On My Nerves). After he finished, we remained silent for a couple of seconds, then we both laughed like crazy giving each other high fives in appreciation of the great new literary discovery.

I was honestly surprised to find that apart from

the ingenious Ivan Slamnig there actually was a Croatian poet with a real sense of humor. Because, as we know too well, one doesn't go to Croatian poets if he wants a good laugh. Let us just for a second remember the dark and depressing verses of Slavko Mihalić or Dubravko Horvatić, both Maruna's contemporaries, along with thousands of pages filled with pure "doom and gloom", produced by other Croatian (post)modernist poets, because it appeared that contemporary Croatian poetry had become infused with a negativity so deep that any other lighter approach to verse seemed to say the least unwelcomed if not entirely illegitimate. Then, all of a sudden there was this man, an expat living in Los Angeles, whose itinerant biography stretched from Anglo-Saxon to Hispanic horizons, a poet with an original voice who was in a few simple lines able to deconstruct and demistify a lofty patriotic subject matter bringing it down to earth.

Understandably, meeting Boris Maruna

(1940–2007) in person had a strong impact on my friend, not only because Predrag himself was already a fully formed poet, but also because his own father was a long time *gastarbeiter* in Germany and he was well aware of how profoundly melancholy if not downright depressing the typical Croatian brand of homesickness can be. My own uncles, who also worked for decades in Germany for various construction companies, were for years sharing accommodation with other labourers, sleeping on the sites in wooden shacks, just to save up some more money to send home. Those people were getting regularly drunk on *šljivovica*, drowning their nostalgia in the heartbreaking Bosnian *sevdah* songs made popular by Bosnian folk singers such as Silvana Armenulić and Hašim Kučuk Hoki. On the other hand, Boris Maruna was an expat of an entirely different order, a political emigrant with strong ties to the Croatian right wing revisionist emigrant circles, a poet with idiosyncratic yet learned voice familiar with most of the canonical

works of Western literature, from St Augustine to Nietzsche, via Schopenhauer and Montaigne. At the same time, as it was clearly evident in his poetry, he was also profoundly bruised by life having had his share of troubles ever since leaving Croatia as a young man in 1960, together with his two brothers, because as a staunch Croatian nationalist he simply couldn't stand the Yugoslav version of authoritarian Communism. It was the voice of an individualist who did not suffer fools lightly and who refused to succumb to cheap patriotic sentimentalism even though that was the predominant sentiment in the spiritual milieu that he had been immersed in within the Croatian diaspora for most of his adult life. I also loved how he reverted back to the conversational verse that Dragutin Tadijanović unsuccessfully tried to intrude already in the 1920s, but it seems that Croatian (post)modernist poets somehow preferred to stay enclosed in their ivory towers of "language games", as Wittgenstein would have it. On the other hand, mundane matters of



this *human all too human* world, such as politics, philosophy, history, cultural differences, existential challenges, homesickness, class struggle and last but not least sex, were seldom on the agenda of Croatian poets, whereas in Maruna's case they represented recurrent themes that he zealously explored in his writing.

Towards the end of our session, Predrag produced a mint LP record, a beautiful album by the jazz trumpeter Donald Byrd, entitled *A New Perspective*, originally issued in 1964 (the year both of us were born and Maruna was in his fourth year of exile!) on the legendary Blue Note label. "I bought this in Cleveland on discount, can you believe it!" "Wow!", I exclaimed truly impressed already by the cover where the famous horn man is leaning against the hood of a Jaguar E-type, a true 60s icon. "I picked this up even though my escort didn't like it!" "What do you mean?", I said. "Well, the guy's comment was: 'You're not going to buy that, are you? The man is *black!*'" "Jesus!", I said. "Exactly",

confirmed Predrag, “apparently our beloved diaspora only has ears for *white* music!” “Croats are getting on my nerves!”, I concluded and then we both burst into uncontrollable laughter.

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As the war was already raging in Croatia in 1992, I worked as an English teacher in the secondary school in Čazma, travelling daily by *Čazmatrans* buses an hour and a half from Zagreb to Čazma and the same way back. The news on the radio in those days were dramatic and mostly terrifying, with the war in Bosnia having started and steady numbers of casualties being reported on a daily basis. As many of my close friends were scattered in trenches all the way from Slavonia to northern Dalmatia and further down to Herzegovina and the Dubrovnik hinterland, I considered myself lucky that I could hold on to that teaching job. One day in a bookstore on Cvjetni trg in Zagreb, I

picked up Boris Maruna's new collection of poetry, *Ovako* (So, Alfa, Zagreb, 1992) and it immediately became the most trusted companion on my daily travels. In the meantime, I read somewhere in the papers that Maruna had repatriated to Croatia at the request of President Tuđman himself and was now living and working in Zagreb. Upon this second encounter with his poetry, I wasn't actually looking for humour or philosophical and historical musings, for his wit or hard existentialist insights, but rather for Maruna's concise and evocative vignettes of America. I was clearly myself in an escapist mood, I wanted something other than the war, the bloodshed and suffering that for the moment threatened to engulf our entire horizon. I guess I became to a degree the living and breathing epitomy of T. S. Eliot's well-known proposition that "humankind cannot bear too much reality". Thus the very mention of toponyms such as Hollywood, Westwood, Beverly Hills, Golden State Freeway, Sunset, Ventura Boulevard, Santa Monica, San

Pedro or Hermosa Beach could instantly improve my mood and make my blood rush as I could somehow feel that eternal California sunshine seeping through the window of the moving bus, right out of that dark and rainy Moslavina night. It was the overwhelming feeling of hope and happiness one senses perhaps when cranking up The Byrds' version of *Mr Tambourine Man* while speeding down some coastal highway on a sunny day in an open roof sports car. So, while sipping tepid coffee and flipping through Maruna's book at the drab and dismal bus terminal in Ivanić Grad, where we would regularly stop on our way to Čazma, I desperately tried to transport myself to some distant moment in the future imagining myself, once all that destructive madness was finally over, strutting down Sunset Boulevard preferably in the company of some imposing tall blonde reminiscent of the gorgeous Michelle Phillips of the Mamas and Papas.

Years later, I remembered this while standing

on the porch of Charles Bukowski's old bungalow on De Longpre Avenue in Los Angeles with the Hollywood sign clearly visible through thin layers of smog up there in the hills, as my incidentally tall and blonde wife took photos.

\* \* \*

Fast forward to 16 June 2003 – I'm on the train to Rotterdam from The Hague, where I lived for so many years earning my bread as a translator for the United Nations. I'm on my way to meet the man himself, as Boris Maruna was one of the guests at the famous Poetry International Festival. On the train, I was leafing through his selected poems *Upute za pakleni stroj* (Instructions for the Infernal Machine) once again, admiring how one is always able to find something fresh and unexpected in his verses, continuously discovering new angles and hidden overtones, which only goes to prove that the work of a truly great poet is indeed

inexhaustible if not eternal. When I spotted him in the lobby of the Schouwburg Hall in the centre of Rotterdam, he looked much less imposing than I expected him to be judging from the photographs. One could clearly see that his health was declining as he looked somewhat frail and was bald from the therapies he was undergoing. We were briefly introduced by our colleague, the poet Sibila Petlevski, and I was surprised that he actually knew who I was. He loved the fact that the Feral Tribune publishing house, where Predrag and I were both on the editorial board, had published John Fante's novel *Ask the Dust* (Feral Tribune, Split, 1995 and 2001) and he praised the translation of our tireless comrade Vojo Šindolić. Then we moved to one of the nearby bars and talked for a couple of hours. In Maruna's charming presence one simply lost the sense of time. He was chatting virtually about everything, jumping from one subject matter to another, from literature in general to late 60s LA, from years spent in exile to his still new life in Croatia,

remarking how ever since he returned he mellowed down politically having become more left leaning and less nationalistic, emphasizing that he may have made a political U-turn\* (sic!) of sorts, having eventually become one of the more pronounced critics of President Tudman and his HDZ. Actually, he even openly sided with SDP (Social Democratic Party), the heirs to the former Communists whom he once hated so vigorously, in an attempt to overthrow the nationalistic regime, which actually happened in 2000. “You know why I don’t hate Croatian communists anymore?”, he said at one

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\* The letter “U” was the symbol the Ustasha regime (1991 – 1995), a Croatian Quisling group of Hitler supporters who in the Second World War created a puppet Nazi state, the so-called Independent State of Croatia infamous for its concentration camps for the extermination of Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and Croatian Communists. In his youth, Boris Maruna was sympathetic towards the Ustashas, but later in life abandoned their revisionist ideology, becoming himself a moderate Americanised liberal democrat.

point. “Why”, I said, “even though you couldn’t go home for thirty years because of them?” “Because they brought up their children as capitalists!” Then he laughed heartily and ordered us a new round of Martell Cognac. He also remarked with a big mischievous smile that while in exile “many were donating for Croatia”, whereas he was “appropriating for Croatia!”, adding that his brother had his expensive car stolen just a couple of days after his return to his beloved homeland. Maruna had clearly seen enough of the world to have any illusions about his compatriots or anybody else for that matter. He said that one of his former like-minded conservative nationalists asked in wonder what the hell happened to him that he had softened so much and Boris replied: “California! Sexual revolution!” There we both burst into laughter again. He inquired about my family and nodded appreciatingly when he heard that my mother was from Imotska Krajina. “I know that region very well”, he said kind of respectfully. He also inquired about my



favorite literary figures. He said he used to meet Charles Bukowski often when he was living in San Pedro. “Dirty old man? Come on! Don’t believe those stories, Damir. He was a very neat man, very neat man, very neat...”, he kept repeating. During our conversation he was often interrupted either by attentive young waitresses or fellow female festival participants and he was openly flirting with everyone, switching elegantly from English to Spanish then back to Croatian, so one could clearly see that he felt greatly at ease in both female company and a multicultural environment. Eventually, he signed the book for me and made an interesting and funny drawing. He walked me half-way to the railway station complaining that he would have no choice but to soon take the post of the ambassador to Chile for the simple reason of boosting his pension. Finally, we shook hands and he reminded me to pay him a visit when I’m in Zagreb.

On the train back to The Hague, leaving once again through Maruna’s collection of selected

poems, I realized that the reason I liked his writing so much lied in the fact that he actually shared that same old “tough” vibe that all of the great cultural pessimists had (“This will all end up at Bleiburg!”), people like Hemingway, Camus, Cioran, Céline, Bernhardt, Beckett or Bukowski, those hardened apologists of individualism to whom you simply couldn’t sell anything, let alone the optimistic ideas of human liberation and unlimited progress. Then it occurred to me that it would be actually *neat*, as

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\* The title of one of Maruna’s better-known poems from his collection *So* (Zagreb, 1992). Bleiburg is a municipality Austria, located in the district of Völkermarkt, with 4.100 inhabitants. In May 1945, at the end of World War II, a large column of Croats fled from the fascist NDH (Independent State of Croatia) via Slovenia to Bleiburg, fearing the reprisal of Tito’s partisans. Among them were Ustasha soldiers but also a number of civilians. There they were halted by British soldiers who handed them over to the partisans. Some of them were deported to Yugoslav prisons and penal camps, whereas a large number were executed on the spot without any trial whatsoever. This massacre became known as the Bleiburg Massacre.

Boris would put it, to try to translate some of his poetry into English, thus symbolically “depatriating” him back to America where he found his poetic voice and where he eventually became the man that he was. So, finally here it is, eighteen years later – Boris Maruna in English translation – a unique poet with a Croatian heart and an (almost) Anglo-Saxon mind, an unapologetic bard who composed his verses dryly and mindfully always trying, as he himself noted, “to pack more humanity” into his poems “than words can tell”.

Damir Šodan

Split, August – November 2021



**Boris Maruna**, one of the most important Croatian poets of the 20th century, was born in Podprag, Jasenice in the Zadar hinterland in 1940. In november 1960, along with his brothers, he left Croatia (then a part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia) and spent the next thirty years of his life in exile. After a short initial stay in Italy, he left for Argentina. In 1965 he moved briefly to London, UK, and from there finally to the United States where he studied English and American literature in Los Angeles. In 1971 he went to Spain where he got a degree in Spanish and Latin American studies at the University of Barcelona. Subsequently, he lived again for two years in Rome, only to finally return to Los Angeles where he lived until his return to Croatia in the summer of 1990. In California he trained to

become a computer programmer and worked as an independent market adviser. Throughout his self-imposed exile, he was actively involved in the political and cultural life of the Croatian diaspora and regularly contributed to publications such as *Hrvatska revija* (Croatian Review) and the London-based *Nova Hrvatska* (New Croatia). Prior to his return, Maruna's poetry was only available abroad as he was considered a *persona non grata* by the Yugoslav communist authorities. His first collection published in the independent Croatia was *Ovako* (So, Zagreb, 1992), followed by *Bilo je lakše voljeti te iz daljine* (It Was Easier Loving You From Afar, Zagreb, 1996). He also published a prose collection *Otmičari ispunjena sna* (The Abductors of the Fulfilled Dream, Zagreb, 1995) and two additional volumes of poetry, *Uputstva za pakleni stroj* (Instructions for An Infernal Machine, Zagreb, 1998) and *Ovako je pisao Katul* (This Is How Catullus Wrote, Zagreb, 2005). His no nonsense, neorealistic/existentialist style forged during years

spent in exile, was recognised as an original and fresh contribution to Croatian poetry in general and has been influential on the younger generation of poets. Upon his return to his homeland, Boris Maruna became increasingly very critical of the new nationalist government and was one of the pronounced voices of dissent in the new political climate in the years after the Homeland War. He translated Charles Bukowski, Pablo Neruda and Nicanor Parra into Croatian. Towards the end of his life he became the Croatian ambassador to Chile. He died in Zagreb in 2007.





**Damir Šodan** (Split, 1964), Croatian poet, awarded playwright, translator and editor graduated from the Zagreb University with a BA in English Literature and History. He has published six volumes of poetry, two collections of plays and an anthology of contemporary Croatian “neorealist” poetry. He translated Charles Simic, Raymond Carver, Leonard Cohen, Charles Bukowski, Richard Brautigan, Frank O’Hara and many others into Croatian. His poetry has been translated into more than 20 languages, including Arabic, Hebrew, Galician, Korean and Chinese. He is one of the editors of the *Poezija* (Poetry) magazine in Zagreb. For more than two decades he worked as a translator for the United Nations and now he is a full-time writer and literary translator. He lives between The Hague, Netherlands and Split, Croatia. His most

recent publication is a book of haikus, *Raven, Buddha, Yamaha* (Naklada Vuković-Runjić, Zagreb, 2021).

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