

Improvising Memory

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Milorad Krystanovich

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Milorad Krystanovich was born in Croatia and has lived in Birmingham since 1992. He studied Creative Writing at the University of Birmingham and is a member of Writers Without Borders, Cannon Poets and the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators. Milorad works as a language teacher at the Brasshouse Centre in Birmingham. *Improvising Memory* is his sixth poetry collection, and follows on from *The Yasen Tree* (Heaventree Press, 2007).

Neither do men light a candle,
and put it under a bushel,
but on a candlestick;
and it giveth light unto all
that are in the house.

MATTHEW V.15

Dedicated to my father
Dušan Krstanović
1926 – 2009

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I am grateful to Cathy Perry, Martin Underwood, Jane Commane, Matt Nunn and David Hart who supported me in bringing out this collection. And to the people who cared and prayed for me.

The poem below is dedicated to all of you.

Directing Sunlight

(The title of my photo from this book cover)

To preserve the lichens of time
found marked on the places
waiting for daylight in the picture
as if exposed on my window-sill,

to have the exhibition of dreams
presented as poems in a book –
I conduct an empty glass vase
to become less empty of rainwater

and improvise it in the poetry gallery.

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FOREWORD

This book seems to mark a moment for taking stock. It has long puzzled me how we live 24 hours a day for (to date) however many years, but that if asked for a biographical note and are told *in no more than 200 words, please*, we do it. We live the long haul or the merry dance and then sum it up in a paragraph.

Or it might be put like this, for better or worse (and probably we never know) we exist in the terms of other people's conversations about us. We think we have a life of years, when who we are is ten minutes when two friends (or not) meet by chance on a bus.

Or we are our markers. For some reason or another we are listed, our name is in the records, and look, here's a photo. When was that? Don't know, I remember him younger.

Or, *here's one of his poems*. Here's a book of them. So *this* tells us who he is? This is him present and correct, this explains him?

It would not best please a journalist who came with pad and shorthand to record an interview, to be given the book and told, "This is it, this is me".

Milorad's first book, after coming to Birmingham from Croatia in 1992 without fluent English, was *Easel And Ashes* (Writers Without Borders, 2000), in Serbo-Croat with English translations, for which Cathy Perry then and later, while herself knowing no Serbo-Croat, was important in his making the transition between the languages. Jonathan Davidson in his Introduction said that "although Milorad's personal history haunts the work this is not just autobiography. Its aims are higher – it is poetry written with a genuine desire to understand, to communicate and to commemorate."

A few of the poems from that first book with a few new ones were included (in Serbo-Croat and English) in the anthology, *Griot*, 2001, edited by Kampta Karran and Cathy Perry, and it is worth noting that the publisher of this, too,

was Writers Without Borders, a boundary-crossing group of not a little significance in the Birmingham cultural mix.

The Language of Wounds (WWB), of his own newly English poems, not from Serbo-Croat, followed in 2002. John Alcock in his Introduction said, “At once we can gauge the increase in fluency and command which these poems reveal. In Milorad’s case, the ‘frontiers of writing’ were there to be crossed.”

In her Introduction to his next book, *Where Spirits Touch* (WWB, 2004), Brenda Parker wrote, “Milorad has a deep sense of the inextricable closeness of the two [language and experience], and he explores in his poems the chasm created when they are ripped apart.”

There is a more complex history in this short survey of his deployment of languages than I can account for: the next book returned to both English and Croatian. *Four Horizons/Cetiri Vidika* (Heaventree, 2005) was in English on the left side of each double page, with as it were a return of the Croatian on the right, as if the English had come first. This book had no introduction.

The latest book prior to this new one, was (in English with no Croatian), *The Yasen Tree* (Heaventree, 2007). In my own Foreword to that book I ventured the thought that Milorad “won’t become a Brummie poet but is likely to become in practice and recognition a significant European one.” I remain of this opinion. In her review of the book in the final issue of *Raw Edge Magazine*, Julie Boden found there “a confident unEnglish in English”.

I have no direct knowledge of Croatia, but my sense of it does not include a Birmingham-type city there at all; nor do these poems conjure the Birmingham I know; something else is going on here. If I may interpolate my own experience, my poems find the Welsh sea willynilly, they find boats, gulls, hills, there is the persistent presence of a desolate hut; I am after 40 years almost beginning to acknowledge I am a Birmingham poet; without the *Cymraeg* never truly a Welsh one.

In this subtle book, full of verbal, atmospheric, relational surprises, there is shadowy light, the moods of weather, light and dark, day and night, of moonlight, of sea, a beach, between waking and dusk, of dreams and day dreams; there is bird, flight, wings, 'wingfriend', there is un-named 'her' and 'his', 'me' and 'you'. One finds mixing even within single metaphor-making sets of lines the abstract notion and the everyday.

I have found myself thinking these poems are in a condition of unstable translation, but not with any notion of their inadequacy or secondariness, on the contrary, only that they are finely balanced in Milorad's catching of them, in their fragile and surprising making.

My hunch is, that in Milorad's cultural past and memory, there is an unEnglish Central European working with the surreal, the imagist, expressionist (I attach mere labels), in poetry parallel to movements in the visual arts. One might speak of the dream/nightmare world of the wide-awake poet.

To give the book some context in time and space, the poems were written in Birmingham during the few years prior to mid-May 2009, when they were brought together for publication. The book is innocent of what was to happen shortly afterwards, when Milorad was diagnosed with a brain tumour. The poems relate to, are the signs of, are the insights, memories, people he met, was with, during that previous time.

After almost a year of medical treatment, Milorad remains delightfully present, not yet certain of the eventual outcome, not complaining, on the contrary smiling – and I am sure keeping mostly to himself the extent of the fears, the distress and the physical unpleasantness – and looking now to doing further writing after this period's enforced slowdown.

David Hart
April 2010

INSIDE OUT-CASTING

Telepathic Relief

You were guiding me from marginal fragments
to the epicentre of dramatic scenes:
from the face of a passer-by
to the accidental audience
where the city square hosted
sunlight in the fountain cascade.

The poem could reduce the white of blankness
from the page as the lines cover
the blank meaning of the sheet itself.

Inside Out-casting

There on the silhouette of this city,
not only the air is bearing
the sign of dusk:

the streetlights cannot turn
their cones upside down
to floodlight the lower sky,

the moss hangs from these street lamps
and expand its shade
but I am missed from that line of green.

There is no division between the evening's
drama and its denouement
in the dark over the hilly outskirts:

the cat's eyes are glowing
between the cars on the motorway
where the noise cannot settle down.

Staring at the moon's capable ascension,
my dog is no longer my companion.
I am left alone in the myth of the earth.

Soon

You tell me, 'See you soon', and you have gone.

Your voice still echoes, every word shredding daylight
as if harpoon after harpoon was flung through
a distillation of unformed tears before the cry.

It still seems the sky took your shadow out of haze,
there is no shade, only the line of nameless trees
where your halo chimes through the breeze.

A pattern of sighs filtering in and out,
your form is airy, far removed from rainbows,
even time is gathered from beyond, from no man's land.

No cloud is alone in the blue, apart from that
of two wings belonging to no bird nor plane in flight,
only the white of an angel appearing in this blank sheet

as I listen still to every sound entering my silence.

Presence

When it was time, you held your doll
and sat on your dad's shoulders
under his umbrella, under that shade of dark.

As he walked through the rain's perpetual tune
chancing your childhood, brightening the grey,
you hummed how the raindrops drummed the black cloth:

tap-tap, tap-tap, the rainwater was fragmented
into separate tones, each drop a note in music,
you closed your ears half on yourself, half on your voice.

it conjured the rhythm of your flight
among the people in the street and you wished
no ending, no landing, no being alone.

Now it's raining again and you feel the sky
could stay over the clouds forever:
harmony expands her hold on daylight

and the day is spread out by its form
while her lover's hand on her shoulder
rejuvenates the membrane of her smile.

Tap-tap, tap-tap, the rainfall cannot reach her
under the transparent bell of her umbrella:
the drummer on her way to the shrine of melody,

she hears the passers-by praising
one who has directed the rainwater concert –
the composer returns to the certainty of her song.

Turning

Before dawn, you gazed at the stars over the horizon
and, seeking sleep amongst thousands of dreams,
you tried to turn stardust into the early sunlight:

*Is it safe to leave your pain not written,
the ache which belongs to your hand
or to stretch out your fingers towards another spring?*

On the garden lawn, the snowman was dying;
how the blankness of your notebook could not be brought
to daylight, the distance finding itself in your diary:

*You've forgotten the night – the damp secret of darkness –
but not the moth caught in the spider web by the door frame
in the corner where the street light is stuck to the dusty wall.*

Nothing like noon mounted the thrashing remnants
of everything invisible, un-gathered and lost for you –
still by the window, your eyes fixed on the bronze sky:

*Who could see the credits of pollen marked on the vase
but not your fingerprints on that glass
empty of water, empty of flowers and as empty as ancient?*

Caressing your reading glasses rather than your pen,
you tried to adopt the power of flight from the wood-pigeon
hoisting its wings above the grey bark of the pine branch:

*Oh girl, clouds also need the air for flying to me –
the afternoon sun sliding from the hammock of the blue;
as if I'm your father, only poetry reaches its destination,*

He said and left the pine bristle between the pages
of the book, each tiny pine leaf
shining like a green filament.

SILENT INHERITANCE

Out of Darkrooms

The lady and the castle-builder
walk along the beach,
a camera hanging around her neck,
his shadow slipping away.

Are you listening to me?
Taking the photograph of a trough,
she cannot hear her own voice
or his reply – *yes, if you are the sea.*

Wave after wave feeds the moats
around the sand castles,
the breeze creeping upon her hair
but not blowing it across the lens.

Are you following the boat?
He paddles in the shallows
and cannot hear himself or her response –
yes, if its sail matches my skirt.

The summer air laces to its frame
in the picture of the low sky:
coping with the sound of water,
the afternoon is their only burden.

Hibernation Cushion

After the sleepless night they are not at ease:
no difficulty in opening their eyes,
no reason to wake up
but they both can see

the fallen tree with its hibernation cushion
of dry leaves not fallen, and spread
beneath the branches on the footpath.

Their grey leaf-skin matches their skeletons
but not the tree surgeons' uniforms:
she gazes at their green shadows
chopping the branches, sawing the trunk;
he stares at the sawdust –
the first sign of the morning's entrance.

Magic Lantern

She is a photographer of happy faces,
her eyes can see
above the surface of objects:

the sails of her images are anchored
in the place alighted on the glitter
rocking in the fluid for processing films.

She is a darkroom magician
who takes photographs of wakened vases
and new flower pots
but roses, blossoms, wild flowers
appear on the white walls of her studio.

The light of her pictures is brighter
than daylight from the sky's cupola:

to benefit from her album-niche
he has to shape his sight less carefully,
so as to collect the scattered details of life.

Celluloid Collection

Overpowered with voices, the evening air
cannot record their contours,
not even they could whisper
to dislodge snow from the evergreen branches.

But the winter hovers its soul-veil
and examines the sound of grass
rising up in their footprints:

*be still and draw your smiles,
they teach you how to pose,
it is echoing from their footsteps.*

Looking at the reverse of each photograph
they both feel the influence of whiteness –
the twisting path overgrown with flashes.

Non-communicators

No difference between two songs of air:
the air blows through a birdcage
where the bird sings its solitude.

The study furniture witnesses the air
at the address of a double presence –
the stillness of her and the quietness of him.

Although they are not in there
the window looks at them – two absent singers:
they speak no language of things

but the pane talks to them
through its tongue of transparency.

Silent Inheritance

Waiting for the river –
the ultimate mirror that flows
only between two bridges –

to find the balance in the floating jars
of candles on perfumed water.

Listening to the hum of tuning forks,
the song named after
the water's cosmic origins:

to activate the slice of a waterfall
where surface and depth interplay.

Guarding the rainbow from clouds –
the trinket that fades
at the far side of the sky –

to arrive in the waiting-room
before rain melts snow outside.

Removing the Inner-stone

The pebble, stranded by her computer,
cannot be returned to the beach
where it was collected by him:

tonight he still belongs to the dark scene –
the sleepless sea splashes
his hands on her keyboard.

Tonight, sand gathers the summer daylight
as she rolls the shingle
from the seabed to the crests
where the waves' foam-frost is colder
than ice in the crave of the winter's age.

In-earth

Wings on their own cannot fly
despite their sympathy for the skylark
with its thirst for songs and hunger for flocks.

Her hand cannot write on its own
though it, with his other one, bears
a blank sheet through the harmony of a pair.

But her fountain-pen can bleed
if she leaves it uncapped
near an ink-well,

and a feather-duster yet tests the air
on its gravitated fall, as a figurine tries
to break the motionless into movements.

Thanks to the furniture their house is
not empty while they are on holiday:
the hot filaments warm the lampshade,
but not their study.

Thanks to night, dust is hidden in darkness:
if he wants to read her letters,
he has to dig and dig
until light brightens the remnants of envelopes.

Outside the Paradox

As if he is silhouetted against the sail,
her voice dusts down
like plaster-powder coating the shore.

After the waves' return, the beach is
painted in the colour of sand,
yet paint flakes mix with the foam.

The horizon is still a fixed distance
that the sailing boat can leave –
its sails navigated by water ghosts.

Sea wind rattles through the scatter
of tissue shadows in the port
where there are no free moorings.

Air power strips down the call
from the boat, each word –
separate debris prospers along the coast.

Stranded under the branches, she is
the captain of wreckage who cannot escape
the coloured meeting with dusk.

Dream Gap

Night streams through the midsummer
and darkens the fenced enclosure.
Not irritated by the lime tree blossom,
they sleep near the pine tree.

Coloured like the skin of the moon,
the garden is no longer their property,
not even they can tame the sky to enter
and mend their entwined dream.

Clothed only in tree flowers,
passers-by sing and dance in their clogs,
none of them halt to wake the sleepers
to listen to their steps and their song:

*we cannot fall asleep and join you
in the base of dying moonlight,
not even our shadows leave
our outstretched arms,
nor can we change
this serenade into
an empty silence.*

Kinetic Construction

Abandoned in the open-air dance,
they both blank out
and bear the scars of their souls.

One wreath of grass is still
around their necks,
it remains silently
as it should be in an album.

Lit by the flash reflected
on the ice-surface –
her camera is beneath,
in the frozen flow.