Broken Records
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NEIGHBORHOODS OF POETRY

Loop to Pilsen, Over a Decade Into the 21st Century.

Riding on the Pink Line el from downtown Chicago to my Pilsen neighborhood, I sat behind two teenagers, a boy and a girl, who were swapping composition notebooks filled with crude drawings, Manga-inspired, and lines of verse, maybe lyrics, maybe poems. I was coming back from a band practice followed by a long walk up and down the greenest streets in the Lincoln Park neighborhood. Between the affluent Lincoln Park and the working-class Pilsen, first the Brown Line and then the Pink Line trains thundered above busy highways and streets. Views of steel and glass towers along the lake, on a bright June afternoon, made it seem as if the tracks were elevated miles above the ground. I wouldn’t be surprised if the boy, the girl, and I were not the only ones thinking about poetry at the time.

I’m thinking of Branko Miljković, a tragic Yugoslav poet from the mid-twentieth century, the kind of poet you get into as an angsty teenager. One time I translated his most famous poem into English just to see how it would sound in another language, stripped of all the baggage it carries in its original, Yugoslav context. I knew it had been translated before, but I wanted to try my own hand.

*Everybody Will Write Poetry*

the dream is an old-time forgotten truth
that no one can verify any longer
now foreign lands sing like the sea and anxiety
east is west of west counterfeit movement the fastest
now wisdom sings with the birds of my neglected disease
a flower between the ashes and the scent
those who refuse to survive love
and lovers who turn back the time
the garden scent the earth recognizes no more
and the land that remains faithful to death
since the world is not the sun’s only care

but one day
the sun will stand where the heart used to be
human speech will contain no words
that the verse will disavow
everybody will write poetry
truth will grace all words
where verse is at its finest
the one who sang the first will retreat
and leave the verse to the rest
I accept the grand thought of the future poetics:
one unhappy man cannot be a poet
I take upon me the judgment of that fledgling singing mob:
ring in a new song or the storm will ring in your ears

but:

will freedom know how to sing
the way slaves sang praises to her

Branko Miljković, 1960

I translated the poem, but I am never completely sure
whether Miljković thinks it’s a good thing everyone will write
poetry. Will all poetry be good when everybody starts writing it?
Good or bad, in coffee shops and bars around Chicago, groups of
characters meet daily and they speak, sing, or rap their verse—
everybody already writes poetry, it seems, even though utopia is
far away, and receding.
In the summer of 2009, Café Mestizo’s open mic and a
Pentecostal congregation right across the street would each start at eight. Each stage spoke in its own tongues and people danced and moved around and sang. We at Café Mestizo could peek through the open doors of the storefront church: bright overhead lights, rows of red plastic picnic chairs. They could peek inside the dim café and see the furniture and lighting that may have been collected in alleys: no two chairs alike, no two lamps alike, except those with missing shades, resembling strange cubist nudes. At ten o’clock, both the Café Mestizo open mic and the Pentecostal church service would wrap up, no crossover between the two, other than people carrying guitars in cases, brushing past one another.

*Karl Marx Street, 1988-1990.*

It was soon after I read some Miljković that I began to write my own free-verse poetry that was different from serious or silly rhymed quatrains or couplets I had been writing until then. I didn’t understand most of Miljković, but I think I was drawn to the dark imagery, the angst, and the irregular rhythm of it. When I read “Everybody Will Write Poetry,” I wasn’t sure (and I still wonder) what Miljković meant by the opening lines: “the dream is an old-time forgotten truth / that no one can verify any longer.” In this vague record of disillusionment, “the dream” could refer to the poet’s ambition of achieving some Parnassus-high mastery when his skill, emotion, and consciousness are merged. I know now that Miljković and his friends were called neo-symbolists, and they loved ancient, romantic, and surrealist poetry equally, but had no use for the elapsed socialist realist and proletarian movements—so maybe “the dream” refers to the older generations’ striving to create workers’ poetry?

I was fourteen when two poems of mine appeared in an anthology of schoolchildren’s poems about Dudik, the site of World War Two atrocities in my hometown. I don’t have a copy of the anthology, but I remember that one of my poems mentioned “a path to death,” and how there were “lots of folk terms for evil people,” but I didn’t name who the evil people were or what those terms were. Sarajevo poet Duško Trifunović, also a successful lyricist for some pop and rock acts in the 1970s and 1980s, edited the anthology and wrote in his blunt, but truthful
introduction that these were poems children wrote as assignments from their teachers, but he also mentioned that he could tell that some of these children would continue to write poetry out of their own need and gift for it.

When I was twenty-one, a legit lit journal called Reč (Word) out of the anti-Milošević Radio B-92 in Belgrade featured a few of my poems. I had written one of them when I was sixteen, on the eve of the war, though I wasn’t aware war was on its way. That poem was titled “Dolphin.” It mentioned the tree with deep red leaves that grew in front of the window of the room I shared with my brother in my parents’ apartment on Karl Marx Street. The poem did not mention the drunks pouring in and out of the “Grmeč” tavern across the street. The poem went on about how the tree would bloom again, and maybe children would stop learning how to be cruel. The speaker in the poem says she is a dolphin who will break apart the aquarium that traps her and turn the whole town into a sea.


Sometimes I’m not sure whether “Everybody Will Write Poetry” is predicting the bright future of the imminent communist telos realized, or some dystopia instead. Not some sci-fi dystopia, obviously, but rather a tragic derailment from the revolutionary promise. Is it a good thing, that “one day / the sun will stand where the heart used to be”? Sun, an enormous burning rock with no human compassion? In any case, Branko committed suicide three decades before Yugoslavia broke apart and hell broke loose.

I knew a guy who was fighting in the last war in Bosnia when he was barely out of his teens. At some point, he found himself hiding in a house near his grandparents’ village for weeks after finding his father murdered. He had to bury his dad himself. The house was nearly empty of furniture, as almost everything that could be carried had been looted, and there was only one book in there: a copy of the Bible, which he proceeded to read from cover to cover in one sitting, to get his mind off fear and grief. He pretty much expected to die any minute, and it was a miracle he was not found and murdered too. He thinks God and Jesus had something to do with his survival and indeed with him staying
sane under the circumstances. Maybe so. He found God that way, although he was raised an atheist. But would he convert without the act of reading, without finding the accidental and the deliberate moments of poetry in that religious text? Would religion appeal to so many people if it were written in the language of math? This guy didn’t become a preacher—he became an artist, and he paints.

“Everybody will write poetry,” and all those freed people with pens in their hands will even sing their verse, all joyful and, as such, impatient with miserable poets of the past. And that inquisitive closing couplet: will life in utopia be as good as our imagination paints it? Most likely, Miljković was thinking of his own confusing present, both in Yugoslavia (workers’ “paradise”), and in newly independent states throwing off colonial shackles in Africa and Asia. There he is, poised in the middle of the 20th century, and masses of people worldwide are obtaining first literacy, then political voice, and next will come lyric voice. And if he was referring to his present, does the poem have any significance in American English in the 21st century? I want to answer, but a part of me is still in Belgrade in the 20th century.

_Tram Number Two, Mid-1990s._

There is an area of Belgrade they call “Krug Dvojke,” named after the route of tram number 2. The tram that doesn’t have terminals, but circles around downtown from early morning until late evening. Within the route of the tram are numerous cultural institutions, some of the most stylish boutiques, highly priced real-estate, and addresses that some see as the only area a self-respecting Belgrader would call home. But, as a wiki dictionary of slang defines it, “Krug Dvojke” is also “a way for a clochard and a homeless person to spend a good portion of his day during winter in a warm and dry spot, for the price of one paltry tram fare.” And so, like the cores of all European cities, this is where the city’s poorest and poshest live or at least ride the same trams side by side in peace. A few steps from a stylish boutique, there is a street vendor with a cardboard box as an improvised stand and a selection of cheap threads.

Within “Krug Dvojke,” Dorčol is one of the oldest neighborhoods. Its Turkish name and, typical for Belgrade, history of
destructions and reconstructions, each disparate era leaving behind an artifact or two, but all of them blending together in the familiar crumbling of the neighborhood’s façades. True to form, the building in Đorđol where the Center for Women’s Studies was housed in the mid-1990s ended up torn down and then completely rebuilt around the turn of the millennium. Around June 1995, I earned a certificate of Belgrade’s Center for Women’s Studies, and later it turned out that the year I’d spent attending those classes would have more to do with the trajectory of my adult life to come than my five years at the accredited, old Belgrade University. First, a professor from the Center for Women’s Studies told me about a graduate school in Budapest that gave their post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet students free tuition and small stipends. Once in Budapest, I heard about the US creative writing programs, which brought me to North Carolina and finally to Chicago, where I’m writing this with not one, but three graduate degrees in hand.

The Center for Women’s Studies was housed in a pre-World War Two apartment building, a long trolley ride from where I lived. I was too young, too uneducated and too much of a refugee to be an insider in this activist and intellectual circle, but when one reporter interviewed us students, I proclaimed that not only was I a feminist, but that my grandmothers and mother supported my politics. And so that statement was printed, along with my name, in one of the most widely distributed daily newspapers in the country. The paper with that article and my quote made it even to the village in Bosnia where some of my extended family lived, and the word is that they were shocked that “Snežana was a lesbian and that her mother and grandmother support her in that lifestyle.” I never bothered to look up the newspaper in question, so I don’t know whether I was misquoted or the extended family simply conflated “lesbian” with “feminist.”

I have no idea which way Branko Miljković swung—but I have to wonder, what if it turns out that he was a gay man living in the time and place when no one was out of the closet? Straight or gay, I imagine he could have been among gay poets and artists, aware of the irony that the workers revolution did not involve a revolution of hypocritical bourgeois sexual norms. Metaphors pile up in the middle of the first stanza of “Everybody
Will Write Poetry” and refuse to be unpacked:

now wisdom sings with the birds of my neglected disease
a flower between the ashes and the scent
those who refuse to survive love
and lovers who turn back the time

I saw Allen Ginsberg read in Belgrade. I think it was in late 1992. I had read some Ginsberg, some of it in the original, because I had developed a habit of going to the small library of the American Cultural Center. But that institution didn’t organize the reading; it was at Dom Omladine. Even in the 1990s, Belgrade had an art and music scene that was on a lifeline if not necessarily lively. Many of those engaged in various protests against Milošević’s regime showed up in Dom Omladine to hear Ginsberg read his poems, sing, chant, and talk about war-mongering generals as so sexually repressed that they waged wars in order to be surrounded only by young men. The regime media warned people not to go see the “homosexual poet, enemy of Serbia,” but the intimidation didn’t work. Besides, everyone knew that nothing would happen if you did attend, because Belgrade, and “Krug Dvojke” in particular, were designated areas of some kind of freedom of expression. Still, Serbia was not a routine stop on the itinerary of even one of the most restless beat poets.

Within “Krug Dvojke,” you’ll see buildings from all the chapters of the city’s past, though most of them from the 19th and 20th centuries, and mostly out of order and without some master plan, buildings that shouldn’t be standing side by side, but in Belgrade they do, and somehow it works. Dom Omladine is on a busy corner with buses and trolleys clanking up and down both streets, a building designed and constructed as an arts and culture space for Belgrade’s youth during nineteen sixties. It packs a lot of action on its two floors: a bookstore, a gallery, a bar, a movie theater, a venue for live shows, and an auditorium for readings, lectures, and debates. Artists, literati, musicians, journalists, and university students mingle there every day and into the night.

I arrived to the reading early to beat the crowd and found a
seat with a good view of the small stage with a table and a few microphones. I remember that it was a black-box kind of a room, and that all of us seemed to have worn black or subdued dark colors, including Ginsberg, his translator, and the actors who read the Serbo-Croatian translations of the poems. Ginsberg had his trusty harmonium on the table in front of him. Before the whole thing began, a woman and a man in those gold yellow Hare Krishna robes walked in, each carrying flower wreaths; not lotus, because where would they find lotus flowers in Belgrade in the late fall of 1992, but roses, carnations, daisies, yellow lilies. Visually, that’s what I remember: watching the Technicolor Hare Krishna couple giving flowers to Ginsberg and company, against the background of black walls and tables, watched by the auditorium of pale faces wearing black, brown and grey.

UNC-Wilmington Campus, 2005.

There is a poem Branko Miljković wrote that argues, I think, that poets use metaphors in order to hide that which they fear saying directly (my translation):

_A Critique of Metaphor_

Two words about to be uttered touch
And evaporate into an unknown meaning
That has nothing to do with them
Because there is a single word in one’s head
And the poem’s only purpose
Is to avoid that very word
That’s how words teach one another
That’s how words invent one another
That’s how words tempt each other to do wrong
And the poem is a string of blind words
But their love is entirely obvious
They thrive on your convenience
They are more beautiful the more powerless you are
And when you use up your strength when you die
People say: my god he wrote such great poems
And no one doubts the word you never said
My last semester as an MFA student in North Carolina, my university brought Robert Creeley to teach a month-long, intensive poetry workshop. We met four times a week in a windowless conference room with posters on the walls advertising past readings by famous visiting writers and poets passing through the university. Creeley was never late, never cancelled a class or a one-on-one consultation. One weekend, he got ill and an ambulance drove him to the emergency room, yet he simply showed up to class on Monday. He told us to start a blog, and two of my classmates got to work and started “Mad Yaks.” “RC” contributed to the blog both while he was in Wilmington and after he left North Carolina for Texas at the end of February of 2005, up until the news came in March that Creeley was gone.

RC’s second blog post, dated February 17, 2005, and still up there at http://madyaks.blogspot.com, began with a link to some satirical article about former Attorney General John “Let-The-Eagle-Soar” Ashcroft being a “top contender” for the Poet Laureate honor. I knew that some of the students in the workshop found themselves to the right of Creeley on the political spectrum, but no one ever debated him—everyone was in awe of a great poet and a World War Two veteran well into his 70s, his body frail and fighting illness. And while our own young convictions were sometimes shrill and sometimes had a ring of posturing, Creeley spoke his mind (always against politicians in power and the wars they led) with hard-earned matter-of-factness. In the middle of it all, he taught us and wrote with us, and his lectures were all impromptu streams of consciousness and memory. The last time we saw him, all nineteen of us co-wrote a poem that closes with cryptic lines by RC:

it’s here
again
I think I
do

Sometimes lines eschew metaphor, but still hide something behind pronouns that reference something secret, behind auxiliary verbs that lack completion. All of us, including RC, continued contributing to the blog with poems and writing prompts after
the Creeleys went to Texas, their next temporary residence. Here is one entry I posted on March 4, 2005:

new exercise

... or maybe not even an exercise, but rather a call for people to post their poems, old or new, that are consciously written as tributes to poets they like. I think we always write tributes—just because we’re under the influence of other writers. We can only hope we’ll also be a little innovative, not just derivative, from time to time.

this is an old and derivative poem I wrote after reading an essay by Denise Levertov in which she wrote about her corresponding and then falling out with Robert Duncan (vis-a-vis the paperback edition of the entire D.L./R.D. correspondence). Original line arrangement is lost due to the limitations of the blog, but that doesn’t really matter.

Statement of Style

sequence of smooth lines
it’s the mystic propaganda
spine, vertical carrier
green apple syrup
pills to ease the pressure
medicines extracted from sap

upright when you begin
loose, as you end the movement in an arch

recipes known to communions of
letter-writing poets
in ghettos
and forgotten cities

postures created for us
to remember beings as metaphors
to connect with bees and with tigers
returning to the den
And here is RC’s response the following day:

_Echoes_

Snezana’s post stirs a lot—and her evocation of Denise Levertov, especially in the concluding lines, is very powerful—the metaphor, being the thing rather than like it, etc. At that same time we were in Wilmington some twenty years ago, I got hooked on Thomas Hardy—who, be it said, only repeats his verse form some fifty times in over a thousand poems. Curiously it was Allen Ginsberg who prompted me to read him—and could himself quote veritable reams. Anyhow here goes:

_VERSIONS_

after Hardy

Why would she come to him,
come to him,
in such disguise
to look again at him—
look again—
with vacant eyes—
and why the pain still,
the pain—
still useless to them—
as if to begin again—
again begin—
what had never been?
*

Why be
persistently
hurtful—
no truth
to tell
or wish to?
Why?

The weather’s still grey
and the clouds gather
where they once walked
out together,
greeted the world with
a faint happiness,
watched it die
in the same place.

As said, I wrote this (and a few others like it) back then in the early 80s. Probably the poem I’m most echoing here is “The Voice,” a classic anthology chestnut: http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem928.html.

Now back to the ranch!

The article talked about the US developing robots to fight instead of human soldiers in battlefields, and it was unrelated to any of the poems we were to discuss that day. Why did Creeley read the article to us, the only article he read out loud the whole month? We didn’t discuss the article at all, if my memory serves me well. Rather, we moved on to the usual topics of the class: poetry, writing, and Creeley’s memories. Some of us sitting still, others rocking in their manager chairs placed all around the conference table in that small, windowless room, we read our poems one by one, talked, listened, and then dispersed. Perhaps Creeley hoped the article would resonate and we’d write new poems, in a new language, to challenge the world in which we lived, and that we’d echo, but not imitate, the poems he’d seen
over and over through the decades. Maybe he read it to make us think what it even means to write, and especially write poetry, here in the United States in a time when most of the country’s poets will never witness a war first-hand, but will keep on paying for wars. Some of us have stopped writing, some of us keep stumbling, still in the dark.