

DEBELJAK, Aleš



Aleš Debeljak holds a Ph.D. in Social Thought from Syracuse University, New York. He is currently chair of the cultural studies department at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. A poet, cultural critic and translator, he has won several awards, including the Prešeren Fund Prize (the highest literary award in Slovenia) and the Miriam Lindberg Israel Poetry for Peace Prize (Tel Aviv). His books have appeared in Croatian, Czech, German, English, Polish, Hungarian, Italian and Japanese translations. His recent publications in English include *Reluctant Modernity*, *Twilight of the Idols: Recollections of a Lost Yugoslavia*, and books of poems: *Anxious Moments*, *The City and the Child*, *Dictionary of Silence*.

Aleš Debeljak, pesnik, kulturni kritik in prevajalec, je predstojnik oddelka za kulturologijo na Fakulteti za družbene vede v Ljubljani. Doktoriral je na Syracuse University v New Yorku. Prejel je številne nagrade, med njimi nagrado Prešernovega sklada za poezijo in Miriam Lindberg Poetry for Peace Prize v Tel Avivu. Njegove knjige so izšle v hrvaščini, češčini, nemščini, angleščini, poljščini, madžarščini, italijanščini in japonščini. Njegove najbolj znane pesniške zbirke so *Mesto in otrok*, *Slovar tišine* in *Nedokončane hvalnice*. S svojo ameriško ženo in tremi otroki živi v Ljubljani.

ALEŠ DEBELJAK

Bosnian Elegy

*for Miljenko Jergović
Sarajevo-Zagreb*

Sing, young poet, touch my burning skin, darkened by long treks
through the wild hills to the ends of the world. Don't give up now,
when the gunners' fevered sights are trained on the stained facades
of museums and palaces. They cower silently, like spent reliquaries.

Just list what remains: flocks of swallows twittering under former
arches and campaniles, the eternal wisdom of the French novel
we read in the bomb shelter, the silvery down which disappears
from a baby's earlobes, thunder from the Pannonian plains.

The smell of gunpowder irritates the lungs. We haven't yet crossed
the line. Speak now: the surface of the pool ripples. I don't know
if it will be blessed. Rings glow in the depths. What remains unknown

rejoices. Believe me: I'm ready, sing to me for the last time of the gentle
love of storms, of the mysteries of a woman's shadow and a marble
staircase. Sing, as you sang before your hair turned gray!

The City and the Child

No cry, really, is meaningless. Only when an archangel appears, like a blue gentian on a mountain slope, do we know, if only for an instant, our native land. Your Babylonian moan will not die away. That's why poets never sleep. The task

seems clear now: this will be a chronicle of pain.

The size of a melting glacier. Which floods poppy fields and villages, targets painted on the portal's slender frieze, the lush filigree of Turkish silver: each tear deepens you.

You stand on the immovable rock. The word around you crumbles into the abyss. You drink the water of life, drawn from the mouths of those who breathe with you. Each morning they come to witness

your rebirth. Like this poem. It won't be long before it will be silenced by an avalanche. But a thousand echoes will spring up in its place. For the love flowing through your veins is the seed, the blossom, and the fruit.

Migrations

You see everything, everything: the breath of flies, a teapot whistling, a cartridge recklessly shot off at daybreak, a pattern on the wallpaper, the gloom of a concert hall, dusty violins left in haste on the floor, an inscription in the language of the two

prophets who came to the Slavs, things drowning in infinite light, a scream tearing suddenly across the sky, gleaming metal, a column of children and women carrying newborn babies, the scent of basil in a garden, a trickle of plum juice oozing into the rutted

tracks left by retreating armies. Everything. You see graveyards. And metastases of white-hot pyres. Here the world we know lets out its final gasp. The ancient order of violence is returning to the hearths.

The magic of words is dying out. And a girls' choir stands in silence. A trail points east, across a snowy pass. Nothing erases it. Now you know the bell tolls for you and for us.

Cosmopolis

*For Josip Osti
Sarajevo-Ljubljana*

Listen well: is that the trumpet's call? The cavalry
rides through history. The shadow of an ancient battle
wants to be the truth again. A distant stairway winds toward a cloud.
Mountains fall, a chalice trembles. Emptiness spills over

the edge. Yet you, miraculously, grow faster than you can be
destroyed. A titmouse will not leave its nest. The west wind
tempts you with redemption in a hollowed loaf of bread
at the Last Supper. A broken toy. More children are missing.

Yet you endure. You interrupt the world's monologue, its endless drone.
You're the flickering snow on the screen, which is always on. The vault
of the universe above you is crystal clear. The rest of us

stare helplessly into the cold prison of the stars. We watch a finger
rise from the flame flickering behind your back, which never consumes you.
And on the arch of the sky the finger writes, tirelessly, "I am."

Mercenaries

The wind has died down in the vineyards on the hills. A moth flaps
against a carbon lamp. Evening draws a feeble breath. A prayer, unheeded,
disappears in the twilight. God remains indifferent. From a distance
we watch the heirs to a mighty throne tremble at the decrees. Dynasties

endlessly rise and fall. North and south, east and west: we serve you
faithfully. The triumphal arch pierces the clouds. It's not mulberry juice
that sticks to our palms. We grip our shields. In a dismembered country
a tangled vine grows in neglect. We can only guess at its suffering. Langobards,

Scythians, masters of Norik: in the name of another's victory we opened
treasuries and skulls, leaving behind us empty caverns. Now we rest.
Our work is done. It will not be easy to begin again.

Our sight, too, has given out. All we can see is the simple order
of things. Not much, less than nothing. We don't even recognize
the face in the puddle when at times it reflects our own image.

Weather Forecast

A spring shower rushes over the sunken monarchy. Will it ever end?
The rhythm striking the window lulls me into a deep coma.
I hand myself over to silence and flow into damp soil
so that in a year or two I can live in a cloud: my true sanctuary.

A faithful horse takes a Cossack towards town. Perhaps the rider
doesn't know it yet: his death, like all languages erased from the earth,
will be laid at invisible feet. Even greater adventurers await the end
of the natural cycle. But it's not up to me to judge.

I can only rain on the crying child in diapers, on carts
and burnt skyscrapers, on the tobacco smuggling route. I rain:
I don't ask where the windows in black have gone. I cover everything,

like a transparent varnish. I rain. On a balance in the market, on coffins
used for shelter. I rain down on the spine of the boy who will stand
before a line of sturdy soldiers and give an order: and the line will shudder.

Faces in Front of the Wall

Humble is the charity of early mornings. Everything that happens then
must happen: to you, to me, to the whole world. Temptation
is great indeed: we gaze, enchanted, as a fire's eternal glow
melts the columns of cathedrals, a virgin's slumber, and the hidden

spring of a toy. We watch, motionless, as in a tranquil
family crypt. Each of us, I think, is already doomed. We are silent.
What else could we do? Like a stunned witness in a country
when it was still a country. It lives on, exiled into an image

which won't let us sleep. Day and night quiver in our pupils. Do we
kneel, hoping the storm will take pity on us and bring a mother's gentle
forgiveness? That it will blur the line between the altar and the offering?

I guess, I know: there is no greater mistake. Embers cover the fire screen.
Even the blood spilling down a girl's hip has lost its taste. It doesn't smell
like plowed soil crumbling in our fingers. In vain we try: we're less than a footnote.

Translated by Christopher Merrill and the author

ALEŠ DEBELJAK

Bosanska elegija

*Miljenku Jergoviću,
Sarajevo-Zagreb*

Poj, mladi pesnik, dotakni se mi vnete kože, ožgane od dolgih begov čez obzorja, skoz gričevnata brezpotja, ne odnehaj zdaj, ko vročična zrkla topničarjev strmijo v razpoke na štukaturi muzejev in palač, ki nemo ždijo. Kakor izrabljene svetinje.

Naštej preprosto, kar je še ostalo: jate lastovic, ki ščebetajo pod bivšimi zvoniki in oboki, večna modrost francoskega romana, ki beremo ga v zaklonskih, srebrnikast puh na ušesnih mečicah dojenčkov, ki naglo že odpada, zamolkli grom z ravnih Panonije.

Duh smodnika draži pljuča ljudi. Mi nismo stopili čez črto v pesku. Spregovori zdaj: gladina tolmana valovi. Ne vem, če bo blagoslovljena. V mulju žarijo prstani. Radostijo se neznane

stvari. Verjemi, res: pripravljena sem. Zadnjič mi zapoj še o ljubezni mili do neviht, o skrivnosti ženskih senc in marmornih stopnišč, poj, kakor si pel, ko še nisi osivel.

Mesto in otrok

Noben stok, zares, ni brez namena. Le kadar arhangel se nam prikaže kot v planini modri svišč, za bežen hip morda spoznamo, kje stoji izbrana domovina. Ne bo zamrl tvoj babilonski vršič. Zato ne spijo pesniki. Naloga

zdaj se jasna zdi: to bo kronika in v njej bolečina. Velika kot gruda ledenika, ki se topi. In preplavi nasade maka in vasi, tarče v frizu vitkega portala in razkošne gube turškega srebra: vsaka solza te poglobi.

Stojiš na skali, ki se ne premakne. Okrog tebe svet se kruši v prepad. Ti piješ živo vodo. Črpaš jo iz ust ljudi, ki s tabo dihamo. Zraven so kot dokaz, ko se

zjutraj spet rodiš. Kot tale pesem. Še malo in utišal jo bo plaz. A tisoči odmevov se namesto nje pognalo bo v zrak. Ker ljubezen, ki teče ti skozi žile, je seme, svet in sad.

Selitve

Vse vidiš, vse: dihanje muh, piskajoči čajnik, naboj, brezskrbno izstreljen v svit, motiv tapete, polmrak koncertne dvorane, prašne violine, v naglici puščene na parketu, napis v jeziku dveh prerokov, ki k Slovanom

sta prišla, stvari, ki se utapljajo v neizmeri luči, krik, ki šine v sekundi do neba, blesk kovine, kolono mladoletnikov in žensk, ki nosijo novorojence, baziliko, kako diši v gredici, tenke curke slivovega soka, ki

pronica v razpokano zemljo, zgaženo od umikajočih se armad. Vse. Vidiš pokopališča. In metastaze razbeljenih grmad. Tu bo izhropel znani svet. Davni red nasilja se vrača na

ognjišča. Ugaša magija besed. In nem stoji dekliški zbor. Proti vzhodu vodi sled, čez zasnežen prelaz. Ne izbriše je noben napor. Zdaj veš, da bije stolpna ura za vas in nas.

Kozmopolis

za Josipa Ostija,
Sarajevo-Ljubljana

Prisluhni dobro: je to trobente tenki spev? Konjenica
jezdi skoz minule dni. Senca davnega spopada hoče enkrat
še resnica biti. Daleč je stopnišče, ki se vije do oblaka.
Sestopajo gorovja in kelih drgeta. Čez rob se zliva mu

praznina. A ti, tako čudežno, rasteš hitreje, kot te
uničujejo. Sinica noče zapustiti gnezda. Zahodni veter
te vabi v odršitev, izdolbeno v kruh na mizi zadnjega
kosila. Počena vrtavka. Vedno več je že pogrešanih otrok.

A ti vztrajaš. Svetu segaš v besedo, v neskončni monolog.
Migetavi sneg si na ekranu, ki večno je prižgan. Svod
vesolja nad teboj je kristalno jasen. Vsi drugi smo, ki

nemočno zremo v temnico mrzlih zvezd. Gledamo, kako se iz
plamena, ki ti nad hrbtom trepeta, a te nikoli ne použije,
dviga prst. In piše, piše neutrudno svoj »sem« na obok neba.

Najemniški vojaki

Umiril se je veter v goricah. Vešča buta ob karbidovko.
Večer slabotno diha. Prošnja, neuslišana, v somrak izgine
ob brezbriznosti boga. Mi od daleč gledamo, kako se od
pravil in nujnosti tresejo nasledniki mogočnega prestola.

Tudi dinastije menjajo se v nedogled. Jug in sever, vzhod,
zahod: zvesto služimo. Slavolok prebodel je oblake. Ni sok
murve, kar lepi nam dlani. Ščite tesno stiskamo. V razkosani
deželi trta čaka neobrezana. Samo ugibamo, kako ji je hudo.

Langobardi, Skiti in vladarji Norika: v imenu tuje zmage smo
odpirali zaklade in lobanje. Za nami so ostale prazne jame.
Zdaj počivamo. Končana je naloga. Začeti znova je težko.

Tudi vid nas pušča na cedilu. Kar sploh lahko ugledamo, je
enostavni red predmetov. A to je malo, manj kot nič. Še
obrazov ne spoznamo, ko včasih luža nam nakloni lastni lik.

Meteorološka slika

Pomladna ploha vrši čez potopljeno monarhijo. Se bo sploh končala? Ritem, ki ob šipe tolče, ziblje me v globoko komo. Izročam se tihoti in odtekam v vlažno prst, da čez leto, morda dve, naselim notranjost oblaka, ki je moj pravi hram.

Proti mestu nosi zvesti konj kozaka. Najbrž še ne ve: njegova smrt, nič drugače kot izkoreninjeni jeziki, res bo položena k nevidnim nogam. Ko naravni ciklus se zaključi, to še večje pustolovce čaka. A ni moje, da bi sodil. Jaz

morem le kapljati na jokajoče dete v plenicah, na vozove in ožgane stolpnice, na tihotapsko pot tobaka. Kapljam: ne sprašujem, kam so vdove v črnem šle. Vse prekrivam, kot prozorni

film laka. Kapljam. Na precizne tehtnice, na krste, ki za zaklon služijo. Kapljam po hrbtenici dečka, pred katerim, ko nekoč bo prednje stopil in dal ukaz, vzdrhtebo bojo strumne vrste.

Obrazi pred zidom

Skromna je miloščina zgodnjih juter. V njih zgodi se vse, kar se zgoditi mora: zate, zame, za ves svet. Skušnjava je res velika: očarano strmimo, ko neskončni sij požara taja stebre katedral, deviški sen in skrivno vzmet igrače.

Negibno zremo, kakor v spokojni rodbinski kripti. Vsak od nas je, mislim, že preklet. Tiho smo, kaj bi drugega. Kot osupla priča v deželi, dokler je še bila. Zdaj naprej živi, izgnana v podobo, ki ne pusti nam spati. Ki dan in noč v

zenicah nam trepeti. Mar klečimo v upanju, da se neurje nas usmili in prinese odpuščanje, kakor blaga mati? Da zabriše mejo, ki loči dar od žrtvenika? Ugibam, vem: ni večje zmote.

Ogorki so zasuli že okvir ekrana. Še kri, ki po dekliškem boku je spolzela, izgubila je okus. Na diši kot zemlja preorana, ki pod prsti se drobi. Trudimo se, a ne gre: manj smo od fusnote.