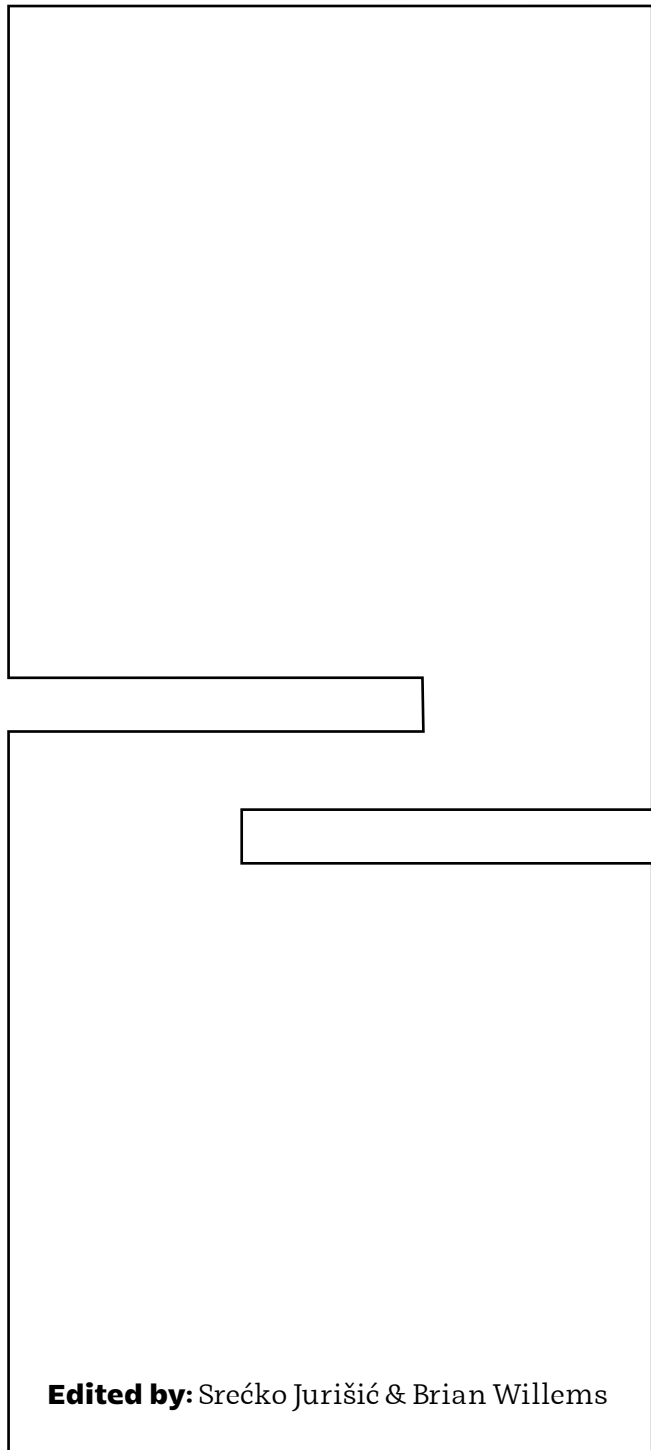


Cross Cultural Studies Review

A journal for comparative studies
of culture, literature, and the arts



Edited by: Srećko Jurišić & Brian Willems

Translations - Jurica Pavičić

Jurica Pavičić or the Chronicle of Croatian Desenchantment

Srećko Jurišić*

University of Split

The Mediterranean crime novel is the fatalistic acceptance of this drama that has hung over us ever since a man killed his brother on one of the shores of this sea.

— Jean-Claude Izzo¹

The year 1989 saw the death of Leonardo Sciascia, the Italian writer and politician who wrote extensively on Cosa Nostra, and very few crime novelists after him have opted for socially engaged fiction. However, Andrea Camilleri, Sciascia's close friend, gained a strong critical approval with his lengthy book series on commissario' Montalbano which was a major success both on the local and global levels. The series opens up with the 1994 novel *The Shape of Water* and it touches upon all of the important aspects of Italian reality, from illegal immigration, the Arab Spring, to the violent and deep state-orchestrated G8 turmoils in Genova in 2001. Camilleri was to become one of the harshest critics of Berlusconi's regime' – which, rather curiously, also started in 1994. The events taking place in Italy were by no means an isolated phenomenon. In the early 2000s, Massimo Carlotto, the Italian crime novelist and left wing activist wrongfully sentenced to a prison sentence, came up with the definition of the Mediterranean noir' à propos Jean-Claude Izzo, the French journalist, novelist and activist whose sun-lit but dark prose reminded him of Camus when it came to writing about the Mediterranean in the era of late global capitalism; as Oran in Camus or Barcelona in Montalbán, Marseille plays a crucial role in Izzo's work through its constant cross-cultural hybridizations. When Izzo died of cancer in 2000 he was already a legend of sorts in France, celebrated with reprintings of his work, and, very soon, in Italy where Carlotto, at the time at the peak of his literary fame, recommended the publication of Izzo's Marseille trilogy (1995-1998) to his publisher, e/o edizioni, the same publishing house representing Elena Ferrante, to be more precise, and its English speaking outpost', Europa Editions.

* sreckojurisc@gmail.com

1 Jean-Claude Izzo, *Garlic, Mint and Sweet Basil*, New York: Europa Editions, 2013, p. 21.

All these authors – together with the Moroccan writer Driss Chraïbi and his Inspector Ali series and the Greek novelist Petros Markaris with his Haritos series – became prominent in the Nineties and set the majority of their body of work within the Mediterranean basin, exploring the social and political implications of the inner sea which, in the state of growing political abandonment, becomes the playground for organized crime on various levels, from Sciascia's classical mafia novels and evolving into Saviano's *Gomorrah* (2006), depicting the neapolitan camorra. This is the choral *crónica del desencanto*, the chronicle of disenchantment. This expression comes from José F. Colmeiro in his 1995, found in the first book-length study dedicated to the narrative fiction of the Spanish novelist Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and his private eye, Pepe Carvalho, a series that started back in the Seventies, during the last phase of Franco's regime while Spain was transitioning towards its democratic future.

Given this context, Jurica Pavičić's work could be read as an embodiment and a chronicle of the Croatian post-war transition that took place in the Nineties and well into the new millenium, starting with his 1997 novel *Plaster Sheep*, a real-life narrative based on controversial episodes of the Yugoslav war. The book had huge resonance in Croatia and represents a milestone in the Croatian prose of the Nineties. The novel eventually had a film adaptation, Vinko Brešan's *Witnesses*, with Pavičić as a co-writer. Since his debut, Pavičić has written, along with his novels, film criticism and widely appreciated, award winning columns, and his work as a journalist, apart from creating an important fan base, continues to be a constant source of inspiration for his narratives. *The Sunday Friend*, his second novel, was published in 2000 and it is a crime novel dealing with the links between post-communist wild capitalism and corrupted politics, while his third novel, *Minute 88* (2002), revolves, as in the football novels by Markaris or Montalbán, around the corrupt football milieu and its subculture, whereas his fourth (*Her Mother's House*, 2005) features the overwhelming influence of the Catholic church on Croatian Society. After *Little Red Riding Hood* (2006) – another crime novel, this time dealing with the modernization of a generation of Croatian women – and two short story collections, Pavičić published *Woman From the Second Floor*, showcased here with two chapters translated into Italian and English. In *Woman From the Second Floor*, Pavičić again includes powerfully depicted female characters in a thriller. The story follows Bruna, the main character, on her dramatic path through the dynamics of the Mediterranean patriarchal family all the way through to the poisoning of her mother-in-law, and an attempt at redemption after serving a prison sentence. It may well be said that this novel introduces the reader to the new, more mature phase, of Pavičić's poetics with features that used to be the strong point of his short stories – such as poignant psychological insights and

a solid grip of the atmosphere – which expands to all of the dimensions of the novel. A trilogy of sorts follows, starting with *Red Water* (2017), an award-winning crime epic story spanning through roughly thirty years of Dalmatian history, including *The Book About South* (2019), a collection of 23 essays discussing the Mediterranean and the Dalmatian social and cultural heritage facing the contradictions of the post-communist era, and ending with *Prometheus' Son* (2020), a cold-case thriller reprising one of the characters from *Red Water*, former detective Gorki Šajin, who is now a representative of a big real estate fund which acquires land in Dalmatia for tourist development, bringing Šajin into conflict with the island microcosm of his ancestors, his father above all, and then diving into the frictions of the perennially active relationship between the Modern and the Ancient in the Mediterranean, knowing that this is the location of the tragedy of the inner sea. This is a relationship that spills over the limits of genres, and Pavičić's work, just like Sciascia's, defies this type of classification. It is worth mentioning that Sciascia is one of the authors Pavičić looks up to. In that sense, Patrick Raynal, who directed the prestigious 'Série noire' for Gallimard from 1991 to 2005, did something very important. And he did it twice, during his term' as editor regarding the position, greater than the genre itself, of detective fiction. He published a new translation/adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* in 1994 and then again, symbolically, shortly after Jean-Claude Izzo passed away. Here is an excerpt from his editor's note: "Crime fiction aficionados adore the classical poetry of references to tragedy. For them, it's an amusing and provocative manner to claim the eternity of literature in spite of those who see noir as a minor genre destined to disappear. I wanted to use my time as the head of Série Noire to go a little bit further with this provocation by publishing a new translation of the darkest of tragedies, one where this cursed king, who is the assassin of his own father before becoming the lover of his own mother, heads the investigation, leading him to learn that he himself is the perpetrator. Freud made a treasure of it. So did all the authors of Série Noire."²

2 Patrick Raynal, in Sophocles, *Oedipe roi*, Trans. Didier Lamaison, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 3, translation mine.

The Woman from the Second Floor, by Jurica Pavičić

Translated by Brian Willems

29.

Anka continued to be poisoned all summer. The whole of June, July, and August Bruna performed the same meticulous pharmaceutical rituals twice a day. She would prepare a meal. She would divide it equally onto two plates. And then she would heap some powder that smells of garlic onto one of them. That was the plate she would give to Anka.

In the summer, Bruna usually used to cook light, boiling green beans and zucchini, putting bowls of radish, wild asparagus and tomato salad together. Now things have changed. It was easier for her to mix the poison into thick, stewy dishes. Although it was hot, she cooked bean and pasta soup, veal with peas, tripe and cod stew all thick, soupy dishes full of garlic and oil, dishes in which the bromadiolone would get lost in a mixture of heavy smells. Anka loved that kind of food. She would dig into it with real pleasure, and with an appetite that made Bruna both happy and scared.

The summer months passed by, and the mouse poison seeped into Anka's body, from lunch to lunch, from dinner to dinner, in microscopic, irrevocable doses. It entered through the palate and irreversibly circulated through the vascular system, toward the lungs, marrow, lymph nodes, and liver. Bruna continued to attend the old woman all day. And she continued to get Anka out of bed, bring her to the table, and still wash her armpits and hair, smelling her skin that reeked of milk skin. In the palm of her hands she held Anka's wrists, scalp, flesh, and skin, feeling Anka's body as she touched her. She watched out for any tiny symptoms, symptoms which only she could read: a slight redness of the eyes, cracked lips, bruises that don't heal. Anka's veins burst and became brittle, and her blood thinned. The bromadiolone traveled through her veins and arteries, finishing off this impossible condition.

Strangely, in those months Anka also became different. She no longer acted with that contemptuous, curt hatred toward Bruna. She became mild, almost grateful, nearly gentle. Instead of a grumpy, one-syllable thanks, now Bruna got a look that was full of some kind of newly found

mildness. Then - when Anka would nearly drown in her dead-calm goodness - Bruna would have a prick of conscience because of what she was doing. A prick, but just a short one. She continued on, to the rhythm of lunch and dinner, dinner and lunch. She would cook stewed green beans, chicken fricassée and chickpea soup, and every time one dish would be spiced with a pinch of poison. She just had to wait. To wait, for the blood to thin, for the artery walls to collapse.

All this time, Mirela still stopped by. She stopped by at least once a month, but just for a bit and always alone - without her husband and child. She would carefully hug her mother, take her out for a walk and help her get changed in the evening. She would clean Anka's apartment, do her laundry, and tidy the yard. But - she didn't cook. From the very first Bruna said that she would cook for everyone.

When she stopped by, Mirela would spend a lot of time on the phone. From afar she guided unknown handymen to install a tub and sand the parquet in the unfinished apartment. Her phone would ring, and then she would be talking in cryptic formulas to someone up in Zagreb, discussing some distant, byzantine office intrigues.

All this time, Mirela treated Bruna guardedly and timidly. She addressed her cautiously, with a mixture of discomfort and obvious guilt.

Mirela would come on Friday and leave on Sunday. She would leave by the afternoon bus, back to her ripped up apartment and a shaky career. And when Mirela would leave, the old woman would sink one more turn into some indefinite indignation. She would look at Bruna with sadness, as if looking at a defective replacement instead of the original. Blood is blood. She wasn't blood, she was a stranger.

Bruna would gaze at that look of indignation, and think. She thought about how life flows on. Everyone's but hers. And then she would tackle dinner, and in the dinner she would throw a pinch of powder that smelled like garlic.

One afternoon in early September, Anka suggested they go for a walk. Bruna got her settled in her wheelchair, lowered her into the yard, and pushed down in the direction of the sea. For a long time they made their way through blocks of new buildings that became uglier and more ornate and as they got near the shoreline. And then, all at once, the road went down into a muddy, grassy plateau that the municipal government filled in long ago, when the Pope came to town. Magnificently imagined, the plateau by the sea now stood as a sad mockery, neglected, and covered with a thicket intersected by tracks from truck tires. Bruna circled the muddy plain, then continued down the road before emerging onto the part of the shore with tended beaches.

They walked for a long time along the graveled beaches, full of bathers, next to the trampolines for kids, tennis courts, and pizzerias. They walked

and reached the nautical harbor. Bruna was pushing the wheelchair along the fence, past the dry-docked boats that smelled of tar, paint thinner, and algae. They walked, then reached a grove along the coast.

There was a restaurant in the woods. It had a winter garden enclosed by glass, which acted like an outside space so the guests could smoke. Ever since they had last been there, the glass lobby grew in all directions, like a metastasis.

Bruna stood in front of the restaurant and looked at the familiar place. The fact is that she is there – and that she is there with Anka – aroused in her an unexpected, painful grief.

We met here for the first time, Anka suddenly said. Does it ring a bell, that day Mirela had the baby baptized? Anka almost said it with a tenderness, with tone that Bruna hadn't expected. Why not - Bruna replied - I remember. I remember very well.

They stood and looked at the glass restaurant. There is a large group of people in the restaurant sitting at a long, festively decorated table celebrating something that looked, from the outside, like a baptism. There was a stroller by the table in which there slept an unconscious child. At the head of the table sat two elderly people, apparently a grandma and grandpa. Grandpa had a tie with a wide knot and a bright geometric pattern, which looked like it was last worn in the 1970s. No voices reached outside through the glass. Bruna was watching the family fiesta as if it were a silent movie. The people inside opened their mouths and gesticulated, but no sound reached her. Those - silent - people in the restaurant seemed indescribably happy.

They moved on, toward the center of town. They took a spin past the sand shoals and reached the tip between the two bays. People in swimming suits under tamarisk trees played chess, children were sprayed by water from the outdoor shower, and somewhere behind – on the horizon - the late afternoon twilight blushed. The red sun was setting on the horizon, somewhere behind two rows of islands, tall trees, and an unfinished apartment complex.

It's nice – Anka said.

And it was nice. So nice that you could freeze that moment and frame to last forever.

And then Bruna snapped awake. We have to go home - she said. We have to go home, it's late. She said that and pushed the wheelchair uphill, away from the sea, toward their neighborhood, street, and house. Toward the kitchen in which an unfinished dinner awaited.

It was the beginning of September. Fifteen days later, Anka Šarić was dead.

30.

Anka died in her sleep. Bruna found her dead one Thursday in late September. Like every day, she got up that morning, took a shower, and got dressed for the office. She went downstairs to put Anka on her feet and get her dressed. When she entered the room, she didn't hear her usual, muffled breathing. She approached the bed and pulled down the sheet. The old woman was milky white, blissfully calm. Instead of her constant expression of everlasting indignation, her face radiated with unexpected serenity.

Bruna sat down in the kitchen and stared at herself for a long time, in complete apathy. And then she got up and picked up the phone. First she called for an ambulance. Then she called Mirela in Zagreb. Finally she sent a message to Frane. Frane, who that morning set sail from Dalian toward Korea.

When she finished the phone calls, she went back to the room. She found some kind of sheet and tucked it under the old woman's chin. She straightened her body, folded her arms across her chest. Although dead, Anka still smelled the same, like a mixture of milk scum/curd and sweat. The old woman's limbs were still flexible. It meant that she had died recently, before dawn.

When Bruna laid the old woman on the couch, she sat down in the armchair beside her, waiting for the paramedics. She watched the old woman's body slowly cool and become rigid. She thought she would feel relief, or remorse, or excitement, or fear. But - she felt nothing: if anything, then maybe just a grain of vague, unexpected grief.

She sat like that for an hour and a half, maybe two. Finally, through the closed window she heard the sound of a van in the courtyard. There was a brief silence. And then the doorbell rang.

At that moment, she knew: one period of her life had come to an end. Her life can move on from this impasse.

She got up and opened the door for the coroners. It was the 22nd of September, a little after ten in the morning.

La donna del piano di sopra di Jurica Pavičić

Traduzione dal croato di Srećko Jurišić

29

Ha continuato ad avvelenare Anka per tutta l'estate. Tutto giugno, e luglio e agosto. Due volte al giorno Bruna, con cura, officiava lo stesso farmaceutico rito. Preparava il pasto. Faceva due piatti uguali. Poi in uno di essi versava la polvere che odorava d'aglio. Era il piatto che dava ad Anka.

D'estate Bruna era solita preparare piatti leggeri, i fagiolini lessi o le zucchine; nell'insalatiera combinava insalate di ravanelli, asparagi selvatici e pomodori. Ora le cose erano cambiate. Il veleno riusciva a scioglierlo più facilmente nei piatti brodosi, densi. Nonostante facesse caldo continuava a preparare pasta e fagioli, vitello con i piselli, la trippa, il brodetto di bacalà, tutti piatti densi, a cucchiaio, e pieni d'aglio e d'olio, piatti in cui il bromaldione finiva col perdersi nel miscuglio degli odori forti. Anka aveva un debole per pietanze così. Mangiava abbondantemente e con gusto, con un appetito di cui Bruna gioiva e che le faceva paura.

I mesi estivi passavano e il veleno per topi entrava nel corpo di Anka, di pranzo in pranzo, di cena in cena, in dosi microscopiche, irrevocabili. Entrava attraverso il palato e circolava irreversibilmente nell'apparato circolatorio, verso i polmoni, il midollo, i linfonodi e il fegato. Bruna continuava a servire l'anziana donna per giorni interi. Continuava a tirarla fuori dal letto, aiutarle a mettersi a tavola, lavarle le ascelle e i capelli, a sentire l'odore della pelle di lei che odorava di panna acida. Le sue mani tenevano i suoi polsi, il cuoio capelluto, le carni e la pelle, percepiva il suo corpo al tatto. Osservava i sintomi lievi, che solo lei sapeva leggere: leggero rossore degli occhi, le screpolature sulle labbra, i lividi che non si riassorbono. Le vene di Anka si rompevano e si facevano fragili, il sangue si diluiva sempre di più. Bromaldione scorreva nelle sue vene e i suoi vasi sanguigni approssimando alla fine quell'insostenibile stato di cose.

Per miracolo, in quei mesi Anka era cambiata. Non trattava più Bruna scaricandole addosso quella mistura di disprezzo e di odio. Si era fatta dolce, c'era quasi gratitudine in lei, o persino dolcezza. Invece dei scorbutici ringraziamenti bisillabici, ora ringraziava Bruna con uno sguardo pieno di una dolcezza (blagost) ritrovata. Talvolta – quando Anka, per

brevi attimi, galleggiava nella bonaccia di bontà – Bruna provava rimorso per quello che stava facendo, ma erano attimi. Andava avanti, a ritmo di pranzi e cene, cene e pranzi. Preparava la zuppa di fagiolini, lo spezzatino di pollo, i ceci al brodo e ogni volta un piatto lo condivideva con un pizzico di veleno. Doveva solo aspettare. Aspettare che il sangue si diluisse, che le pareti dei vasi sanguigni si assottigliassero.

In tutto questo tempo Mirela le veniva a trovare. Veniva almeno una volta al mese, ma per brevi periodi e sempre da sola – senza il marito e il figlio. Avvolgeva con un abbraccio affettuoso la madre, la portava a passeggiare e l'aiutava a cambiarsi la sera. Metteva a posto l'appartamento di Anka e il cortile, le lavava i panni. Ma non cucinava. Bruna, già la prima volta, le aveva detto che lei avrebbe cucinato per tutti.

Quando veniva, Mirela passava molto tempo al telefono. A distanza, dava indicazioni all'ignota manovalanza che nel suo appartamento in ristrutturazione stava montando la vasca da bagno e levigava il parquet. Le squillava il telefono e si metteva a parlare con qualcuno, lassù a Zagabria, per formule criptiche, rivangando lontane, bizantine trame d'ufficio.

Tutto questo tempo, Bruna nei confronti di Mirela era premurosa e timida. Le rivolgeva la parola cautamente, con un misto di imbarazzo e di evidente colpa.

Mirela arrivava il venerdì e ripartiva la domenica. Ripartiva con il pullman del pomeriggio verso l'appartamento divelto e una carriera precaria. Quando la figlia ripartiva, la vecchia affondava di un ulteriore giro di vite in un indefinito malumore. Guardava Bruna con malinconia, come se rimirasse la supplente non all'altezza dell'originale. Il sangue del suo sangue era il sangue del suo sangue. Lei il sangue non lo era, era un'estranea.

Bruna vedeva quello sguardo amaro, e pensava. Pensava che le vite degli altri andavano avanti. Tutte tranne la sua. Ma poi si metteva a preparare la cena e nella cena metteva il pizzico di polvere che sapeva d'aglio.

Un pomeriggio d'inizio settembre Anka le propose di andare a fare una passeggiata. Bruna la sistemò sulla sedia a rotelle, la fece scendere in cortile e la spinse verso il mare. Camminarono a lungo tra gli isolati di palazzi appena costruiti, più fronzuti e brutti man mano che si scendeva verso la linea costa. Poi la strada sbucò su una spianata, tutta fango ed erba, che l'amministrazione locale fece fare tempo addietro, quando la città doveva ricevere il papa. Pensata in maniera maestosa, ora la spianata sul mare se ne stava come un triste sberleffo, abbandonato, invaso dai rovi attraversati qua e là dalle tracce di pneumatici dei tir. Bruna fece il giro attorno allo spiazzo fangoso, continuò sulla strada e sbucò nella parte con le spiagge curate.

Passeggiarono a lungo seguendo le spiagge ghiaiose, piene di bagnanti, passando accanto ai trampolini per bimbi, campi da tennis e pizzerie.

Camminando avevano raggiunto il porto turistico. Bruna spingeva la carrozzella lungo il recinto, accanto alle barche tirate a secco che odoravano di catrame, solvente e alghe. Camminando arrivarono fino alla pineta.

C'era, nella pineta, un ristorante. Aveva anche un giardino d'inverno in vetro che si fingeva giardino vero per permettere agli ospiti di fumare. Dall'ultima volta che vi erano venute la parte in vetro si era espansa in tutte le direzioni, come una metastasi vitrea.

Bruna se ne stava di fronte al ristorante e guardava. Stava guardando un luogo noto. Il fatto di trovarsi lì - e di trovarvisi con Anka - risvegliò in lei un'inattesa e forte pena.

Qui ci siamo conosciute, disse Anka all'improvviso. Ricordi? Quel giorno al battesimo del figlio di Mirela? Lo aveva detto quasi con tenerezza, con un tono che Bruna non si aspettava. Come no - rispose Bruna - ricordo. Ricordo molto bene.

Ferme, guardavano il ristorante in vetro. Dentro, un grande gruppo di persone era riunito attorno a una lunga tavolata adobbata a festa e stava festeggiando qualcosa che da fuori sembrava un battesimo. Accanto al tavolo c'era il passeggino in cui dormiva placido un bambino. A capotavola c'erano due persone anziane, probabilmente i nonni. Il nonno portava la cravatta col nodo largo, con un disegno sgargiante e geometrico che dava l'impressione di essere stata indossata per l'ultima volta negli anni settanta. Attraverso la parete di vetro non arrivava alcun suono. Bruna guardava la festa di famiglia come se guardasse un film muto. Le persone all'interno aprivano bocche e gesticolavano, ma a lei non arrivava suono alcuno. Quelle - mute - persone all'interno del ristorante sembravano immensamente felici.

Continuarono a passeggiare verso il centro passando accanto alla rada sabbiosa e arrivarono alla punta tra le due insenature. La gente in costume da bagno giocava a scacchi sotto le tamerici, i bambini si schizzavano addosso l'acqua delle docce e da qualche parte dietro - all'orizzonte - il rossore serale stava tingendo il tramonto del tardo pomeriggio. Il sole rosso calava da qualche parte dietro le due file di isole, gli alti alberi e i residence costruiti a metà.

Bello - disse Anka.

Ed era bello. Bello al punto che veniva la voglia di congelare l'attimo, incornciarlo per farlo durare.

Ma Bruna si scosse. Dobbiamo tornare a casa - disse. Dobbiamo tornare a casa, è tardi. Disse quelle parole e spinse la carrozzella in salita, allontanandosi dal mare, verso il loro quartiere, la loro strada e la loro casa. Verso la cucina in cui le attendeva una cena da finire.

Erano gli inizi di settembre. Quindici giorni più tardi, Anka Šarić era morta.

30

Anka era morta nel sonno. Bruna l'aveva trovata morta un giovedì di fine settembre. Come tutti i giorni, anche quella mattina si era alzata, si era fatta la doccia vestendosi per andare in ufficio. Era scesa al piano di sotto per aiutare Anka ad alzarsi e a vestirsi. Entrando nella stanza, non aveva sentito il solito respiro sommesso. Si era avvicinata al letto scostando le lenzuola. La vecchia era lì, color latte e beatamente quieta. Invece dell'espressione di perenne mestizia il suo volto irradiava una pace inaspettata.

Bruna andò a sedersi in cucina e se ne stette lungo tempo a fissare un punto davanti a sé, stordita. Ma poi si alzò e prese il telefono. Chiamò prima l'ambulanza. Poi telefonò a Mirela a Zagabria. Alla fine mandò un messaggio a Frane. Frane che quella mattina era salpato da Dalian in direzione Korea.

Dopo aver finito con le chiamate rientrò nella stanza. Trovò un lenzuolo e lo piegò sotto il mento della vecchia. La mise diritta e le incrociò le mani sul petto. Pur morta, Anka odorava sempre uguale, la stessa mistura di panna acida e sudore. Le membra della donna erano ancora flessibili. Voleva dire che era morta da poco, forse prima dell'alba.

Dopo aver messo la vecchia sul divano, si adagiò nella poltrona accanto a lei in attesa dell'ambulanza. Osservava il corpo della vecchia che si stava lentamente raffreddando, irrigidendo. Credeva che avrebbe provato sollievo, o rimorso, o perfino eccitazione, o paura. Ma non provava nulla: se mai si poteva parlare di sentimento provato c'era giusto un punto di insperato dispiacere.

Era rimasta seduta lì per un'ora e mezzo, forse due. Finalmente attraverso le finestre chiuse le giunse il rumore del furgone dal cortile. Ci fu un breve silenzio. Poi il suono del campanello.

In quel momento se ne rese conto: si era chiusa un'epoca. La sua vita poteva andare avanti.

Si alzò e andò ad aprire la porta al medico legale.

Jurica Pavičić,

interviewed by Srećko Jurišić

– 1

How do you deal with genre boundaries? Reading, for example, *The Woman from the Second Floor*, you get the impression of overcoming the boundaries of a crime novel, but also at the same time a ‘pleasure’ on your part to move within genre prose?

I have no reservations about being pegged as a genre writer. It’s a niche that I love and towards which I don’t cultivate any elitist distance. It’s something, after all, that I learned through my work as a film critic. In film studies anyone who uses concepts such as “trivial literature” is ridiculed, these are categories that were already considered *ad acta* even in the 50s by *Cahiers du cinema*. When I moved to my current publishing house – Profil – as an author, I insisted that my first two novels come out in their “black” edition, in which genre writers were and still are published: le Carré, Rankin, Camilleri, Dolores Redondo, and Akunjin.

So I love the aegis of a genre writer. Another thing is that I’m aware that my prose inhabits an interspace that is partly and partly not genre-oriented. This is also true for some of the writers I love, such as Patricia Highsmith, for whom *The Sweet Sickness* is a genre book and *Edith’s Diary* is not – although both are very similar in spirit, style, theme, and characters. What I love to take from genre writing and that which I strive to take are strategies for reader enjoyment. I love writing books that can’t be put down. I want to use thriller stopwatch mechanisms, parallel montages, and suspense strategies; I love it when a book of mine has genre attractions like narrative twists, puzzles, cliffhangers, and conflicts. What turns me off from writing “orthodox” genre books is the schematic nature and repetitiveness of the composition. I love classic detective novels as a reader. But as a writer I avoid them because the structure is too obvious to me. You know it in advance: the corpse at the beginning – the detection process – the point of view of the investigator – the puzzle. In a way, it’s like writing a sonnet: you know in advance that there must be an octave and a sestet. It robs me of the part of my job that is my favorite in writing, and that is research into composition. That’s why I take what I like from a genre, but I don’t like being stuck there. I’d say I’m a writer with one-and-a-half-feet in genre, but not both. But that goes for a lot of the genre writers I love: Gillian Flynn, Ruth Rendell, Leonardo Sciascia.

– 2

Do you consider writing for example a novel or screenplay a hobby in comparison to journalism? Do you have any writing routine? What is your writing process?

Journalism provides me with a salary, it feeds my family. Therefore, it is number one. I always publish three to five articles per week in the daily newspaper I write for. However, I write fast, which is why I have enough time for prose. As a rule, I dedicate the second part of my morning to prose, when I have already finished my newspaper assignments. Also, in the winter – when the day is short and I'm at home more – I write prose in the afternoon and evening. Usually journalism serves me as a warm-up, and then I'm at full speed when I go back to prose. And even if I could, I wouldn't like to be a full-time prose writer. There is something gloomy, or anxious about the fact that you're locked in a room with a single text for two years, and after many months you lose any kind of distance from it, and then you release it into space like a Voyager probe and expect the return "blip" of another intelligence. In my way, this long period is interrupted by small adrenaline stimuli. The daily newspaper is like this: today you write, tomorrow it comes out and everyone comments, and the day after tomorrow it falls into oblivion. The newspaper text is like a cooked, eaten lunch. Preferably: tasty.

– 3

Your texts, novels, and short stories are strongly marked by place. What is the role of the Mediterranean in your writing, as well as the urban, and the, let's call it, rural?

Place is very important to me. Both my journalism and my literature stem from being somewhere – physically, not virtually, on Google. This often happens to me when I go for a walk, let's say I see a house divided in half, one half is beautifully maintained and the other covered with nettles, briars, and rust. And then I think, "This is a good starting point for a story." Most of my prose comes out of such spatial sensations. I can write prose only if I understand the space in which it takes place, if I can physically represent and describe it. In both literature and film, I love works that are fictional, but at the same time a documentary about a world – those in which we find out what these people eat, what houses they live in, what they do, for what salary, how they behave... This is a prerequisite for writing about someone, about the world. That is why I am inevitably a native writer, a regional one. This connotation in Croatian literature has somewhat parochial, negative connotations – but in my opinion it shouldn't. Both Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor were native writers.

– 4

Reading your novels and short stories provides an impression of the strong influence of nature and different meteorological conditions in your prose. How much does the climate (e.g. the dichotomy of the southern/northern winds, the jugo and bura) affect your work?

Yes, this is something I was not aware of until it was once noticed by fellow journalist and writer Ante Tomić. He told me that in my prose the dramatic resolution always takes place simultaneously with the transition of the weather from the southern jugo wind to the northern bura. It has to do with the fact that I'm a bit of a meteoropath, I have a hard time with jugo and I love bura. But it also has to do with the anthropology of the winds in the Adriatic. Jugo is perceived as a muggy, gooey wind that carries rot, disease and stagnation. Bura is dramatic, powerful, cold and strong – but it also brings clear skies, dry air, clear views, and is associated with purification. One proverb says that “bura is a clean woman”.

– 5

Writers usually start with a place or a character. What is the case with you? What is the embryo of one of your texts?

Place. Also the narrative situation, the relationship of the characters, the position in which the character finds themselves, or to which they have been brought. I usually start with a certain dramatic tension, like I'm writing a screenplay. I imagine the abyss in front of which the character is standing at the beginning of the “third act”. I understand that this is largely a screenwriting, dramatic-filmic way of thinking. And my work on scripts has something of a filmic way of thinking opinion. For example, I plan a novel carefully, I usually write a draft in advance, a kind of “model” of a future novel chapter by chapter on about 15 pages. This is very similar to what filmmakers call a sequence- or step-outline.

– 6

When looking at your catalog of characters, it seems that your poetics, to put it crudely, very often gives an active role to the female characters. Is this a commitment to a kind of program, a rational design?

No, although I eventually became aware that this is what I do. I have a friend with whom I go hiking and who is an eager reader, although she is not related to any cultural profession – she's a computer programmer. She once jokingly asked, “will a woman kill anyone again in your next book?” Often it happens that I have a couple of main characters in a book. One of them is intelligent, sensitive, insightful, and their intelligence is used

to illuminate the world – but they are also passive, unsure, conformist, and incapable of action and confrontation. On the other hand there is a character who is not afraid to act and resolve a problem – and, yes, it is usually a woman. And it seems to me that in life this is usually the case. In principle, I like to write a book in which the hero (or heroine) is active, is faced with a problem. It is there which probably exists the nucleus of what was later read as genre writing. Maybe it's a reaction to the tradition of Croatian prose in which a lethargic, inactive, resigned, and cynical anti-hero is too-often dominant. Obviously such characters have historically had a psychological reflex to occupy passive, colonized, and subjected positions, just as the nation itself in the past. My generation confronted this passive inaction and submissiveness first historically in the 90's in the war, and later in a literary manner in the years thereafter.

– 7

In his *Breviary* Matvejević mentioned insulomanija (islandmania), what's your relationship with the islands, Croatian ones and those in general, since they are often a setting you choose (for example the island in *Prometheus' Son*)?

I am originally from an island: my grandfather is from the village of Vrbanj on Hvar. But already my father was born on the mainland in Split, so I have no property on the island, I've never lived there, I've always stayed on the island more or less as a tourist, even when I stay there for a longer period. As a child, I would spend weeks in the summer with my mother's sister on the small island of Zlarin near Šibenik – a small commune of 140 inhabitants, without a car, and at that time without running water. It was kind of my Combray, and a lot of my ideas about islands were formed at the time, and Zlarin provided me with the archetypal image of island communities, a real ur-place. Regarding islands, I'm fascinated by this dialectic of proximity and distance. They are isolated, a bit left to their own devices. Everything that is existentially necessary comes across the sea – often even bread; but historically from across the sea there came the Other, the Unwanted: the tax collector and the pirate. Islands are closed worlds that can teach us about solidarity, mutual assistance, safe-keeping, and taking care of rare resources (primarily water). They are separated from the “real” world, but this real, authentic world is often one that is close by, within easy reach, since in Croatia inhabited islands are often only a few miles from cities and the mainland, and you can often clearly see the city lights from them. And yet, they are another world, and much is denied them – a world that has cinemas, high schools, specialist doctors, entertainment. In a way, it is as if they are a metaphor for all of Croatia that is (was) so close to great cultural centers such as Venice, Vienna,

and Rome – and yet it remained a suburb of those cultures, a remote periphery where everything arrives with a delay and a distorted echo. All this together creates a kind of island state of mind, an awareness of existential displacement, of grief, of the inaccessibility of illusions. It is no coincidence that there are many great island writers in Croatia, such as Marinković, Šegedin, Nazor, Popadić, S. Novak, Belan – and that most of them have this kind of sadness and existentialism in their prose.

– 8

Given the Croatian reality in which you are immersed as a journalist and columnist, how do you balance the relationship between fiction and fact in your literary texts?

It depends. There are news topics that I would not want to write about as a novelist, and fictional and other themes that I would not be interested in as a journalist. But there is also a space of overlap, where part of their themes is the same. I suppose this includes the land-construction-tourism speculations I wrote about as a journalist, and then I wrote about something similar in the novel *Prometheus' Son*. But when I write about the same in both media, I have to write in opposite ways. In a newspaper column there is a key thesis, an argument, and one must hear your voice and your opinion. In prose you have to let your characters gain autonomy, to have their own reasons, even if you do not like what they're doing. When I work on a new book, before my editor Adriana Piteša even reads the manuscript I tell her to mark all the places where I seem to protrude from the characters, where she feels that my commentator's voice can be heard. That's what I usually try to remove. We prose writers take no pleasure in the concerns of factual writing. I enjoy the imaginative aspect of writing fiction. I've never had a desire to write a documentary novel like Truman Capote: it would deny me my favorite part of the work.

– 9

When you think it is necessary to separate yourself from a real Dalmatian setting: in *Woman from the Second Floor* we are in Split while in *Prometheus' Son* we move to a not-so-well defined island and in *In Red Water* we were also in some unspecified location somewhere along the Dalmatian coast?

When the action takes place in a big city, then I use Split without hesitation (or Zagreb, in *Little Red Riding Hood*) and then it is topographically accurate: every address, house, street, and port are correct. But in smaller locations this is not convenient. If you have a small village priest, and if this is a place is real, then you have a real priest. If you have a

pharmacist, it has a pharmacist. So then I create fictional, heterotopic places, like how Camilleri created Vigàta. I usually take elements of a place, the buildings, topographical features, and historical events that existed somewhere, those that I heard of or saw myself. The island from *Prometheus' Son* is thus a Frankenstein's monster composed of elements of at least 12 island locations.

– 10

Camilleri owes a good part of his fame to his pseudo-Sicilian dialect, and the latest work by Ivica Ivanišević (*Tomorrow is a New Lunch*) is also written in good part in the Split dialect; In *Prometheus' Son* you wrote in a literary language with some dialect inserted: is that because of an impulse to transition to a dying-out dialect and how do you linguistically shape your texts?

I have to admit that I became stylistically and poetically liberated when I decided not to be enslaved to the literary standard. Until then, I'd written in a language that wasn't actually my mother tongue and I always felt that my prose was a bit like a movie you're watching with English international subtitles. Then, at some point, I read Jergović's collection *Inshallah Madonna*, in which he insists on using Bosnian and Bosniak Turkisms more than in other books. I realized that I might not understand every third or fourth word, but that it still contributes to the experience of the text rather than spoiling it. So I decided in my prose to immerse myself as much as possible in the lexicon of the world I am writing about. In Croatian and ex-Yugoslavian prose, from Andrić to Dalmatian writers, the presence of spoken language and dialect was usually reduced to the language of narration being the standard and the language of the dialogue the dialect. I wanted to break this duality by introducing a lexicon from the dialect into the language of the prose narration, which remains the standard: therefore, I will not use a tomato, nightstand, or fork in prose narration, but rather pomidora, kantunal, or pirun. It's a method with which I can write prose in the way that I write and as I like to write, but – of course – it's questionable whether such a linguistic hybridization could be used to write, say, a SF novel. In doing so, the general reversal in language that's been happening in Croatia after the year 2000 probably helped me in this "pollution" of standards. Croatia found itself in a new sociolinguistic situation that urban vernacularisations like in Zagreb and Split become more prestigious than the standard language, and their user-friendliness grew due to the abundance of it in pop music, hip-hop, and TV series in the dialect. Thus, today, the language of journalism is much more open to dialectal vocabulary than it was up to the 1990s. As for *Prometheus' Son*, the principle is the same, I just went maybe two or

three steps further because that book is dominated by old characters, so their language is archaic. In addition, this novel deals with a community stuck in a time that is afraid of change, and their language must reflect that as well.

– 11

Your writing is inevitably permeated by Dalmatia, Split, and southern Croatia in general, which is especially well seen in a kind of trilogy – In *Red Water*, *The Book of the South*, and *Prometheus' Son*. Do you think that you have exhausted this source of inspiration in some way, or do you, for example, have a need to write something about Split (you once announced something in this direction)?

I have written a lot about Split, probably more than any other topic. I have a whole collection of essays (*Split by Night*) that only deals with transitional Split. But, as far as prose is concerned, in my most recent books I've left Split behind to some extent, in the collections of stories and the last two novels I've dealt with the island, hinterland, and the coastal Dalmatia of small places. So it's actually the other way around: my fingers itch to return to urban Split in prose, and the novel I'm writing now will be distinctly Split and urban, and also distinctly about the family, and claustrophobic, minimally reduced to three characters and one apartment.

– 12

Have you, and not only in a literary sense, thought about leaving the Mediterranean, and if so, where? And how do you explain how, for example Split or Zadar, despite a kind of cultural remoteness in relation to the continental homeland, manages to retain some of the most interesting literary voices (Dežulović, Tomić, Mravak, Savičević Ivančević, Periš, etc.) and then even attract some (Baretić, Lujanović)?

I'm not thinking about leaving the Mediterranean, because I'm not thinking about leaving Split. I was born here, I live here, and I hope to die here. I love traveling, but I love it because I have a home. I'm not a nomad. As for Split, I don't have a very clear answer. It is unusual that that same Split had a lot of important culture from the 50s to the 70s – a strong theater, its own indigenous film, great architecture – but it did not have a prose writer at all. With the exception of Smoje and Enzo Bettiza, who are completely different stories (one lived in Italy, and the other was then understood exclusively as a popular media phenomenon), Split in the second half of the 20th century had no prose writers. Most of those who were prominent – say Živko Jeličić – are unfortunately unreadable today.

It's hard for me to interpret that explosion of creativity. With the writers of my generation such as Baretić, Tomic, and, Dežulović, the common factor is perhaps what we all have been, or at the same time were, journalists, and thus Split attracted (kept) us as a strong local media group – through *Slobodna Dalmacija*, which in the 80s and 90s was a powerful, creative, and stimulating place to work. I can say for sure that, if it were not for *Slobodna Dalmacija*, I would live in Zagreb today. But still, if that explains our generation, it's hard for me to explain how that wave of creativity extended to the generation of Olja and Tanja Mravak. It's interesting that in Split, culture works in a way that you rely on yourself. If you need a support system – as in the creative industries, theater, or film – Split is artistically on the edge.

– 13

How do you see the Mediterranean component in contemporary Croatian literature? Are there any books that have caught your eye in that sense and that you would recommend?

I almost don't know where to start. I would definitely mention *Goodbye Cowboy* by Olja Savičević, which is in my opinion the best Croatian novel of the 21st century. Then, the stories of Tanja Mravak. *The Bone-Legged Bride* by the Zadar writer Želimir Periš. *Proximity to Everything* by Zlatko Stolica. *Magnificent Vipers* by Ante Tomić. The stories of Boris Dežulović. *Garbin – Evil Wind* by Anela Borčić. *The Devil Entered the Girl* by Tisija Kljaković. Zoran Ferić's prose of the island of Rab.

– 14

The best crime novels or even thrillers often owe their quality to the author's ability to incorporate a humorous or at least ironic component into them: what is your relationship with laughter when writing?

It's not my thing. I think I'm privately witty, but there are people who are so much wittier than I when it comes to writing so that it would feel like I were playing basketball against LeBron James. In addition, humor needs a dominant narrator, an all-encompassing voice, and I avoid that in prose.

– 15

What was the last thing you learned from a writer dear to you?

By reading, I learn techniques, solutions via craft. From Cormac McCarthy – whom I adore – I learned how to avoid using quotation marks in dialogue (which I hate, and which he hates).

– 16

The psychology of your characters catches the eye. In 1941, the American psychologist Harvey Cleckley wrote the book *The Mask of Sanity*, which analyzes certain psychopathological types that are seemingly completely healthy and thus function in society (Kurt Vonnegut, for example, linked this book to the personality of George W. Bush), while they are actually deprived empathy and similar necessary feelings and are harmful to the country in which they live and their fellow citizens. In your opinion, which Croatian psychological type deserves a literary treatment?

Psychopaths are not so interesting to me in literature. I'm more interested in opportunists, people who make mistakes through their actions, words, or by omission, and it bothers them a little, but not so much that they risk the consequences for themselves and their loved ones. It's a Croatian social and character type that I can always write about again and again.

Translated by Brian Willems