



A White Egg

For White Death

some poems of Milan Dekleva

A White Egg

For White Death

A White Egg

For White Death

some poems of Milan Dekleva

translated by Anthony McCann & Julija Potrč



H_NGM_N_BKS 2011

a H_NGM_N portable document format chapbook

www.h-ngm-nbks.com

layout & design by nate pritts

P r e f a c e

It is a great pleasure to be introducing new readers to the work of Milan Dekleva through these translations. As well as being one of Slovenia's most admired poets Dekleva is a talented musician, novelist, journalist, playwright, children's book author and the translator of most of the English language children's cartoons appearing on Slovene TV. While it's true that it is always a bit reductive and artificial to place a poet in her or his national and linguistic context, especially in the space of a preface that does not allow for substantive exploration of those contexts, it is also true that in some ways Dekleva's poetry is very much a Slovene poetry, just as his life has been very much a Slovene life. Born to parents displaced, like so many, from Trieste (Trst in Slovene) during the war, he came of age in the Yugoslavia of Tito, a country that no longer exists except in all those persons who were formed in it. Some of his interests and the methods and preoccupations of his poetry, like his education, are shared with his contemporaries. You can certainly see bits of the frantic generative energy of Tomaž Šalamun in him, as well as the startling and sharp juxtapositions of the great early twentieth century Slovene modernist Srečko Kosovel, beloved of both Šalamun and Dekleva. You can also see in Dekleva the attentiveness to silence and being that has characterized inheritors of another major current in post-war Slovene poetry, called by many "dark modernism." But Dekleva's work also seems to maintain itself outside of any particular mode or current in Slovene poetry. This is certainly partly because of his particular sensibility, which seems characterized at times by a benign sort of aloofness. Dekleva also has brought important external influences into his own poetry and into Slovene poetry with his interest in Buddhism and in Chinese and Japanese poetries. His first collection of poems was a book of haiku, the first serious engagement of a Slovene poet with this form. For me, Dekleva's poetry is further and very particularly distinguished, by the uncompromising gentleness that permeates its solemn moments, its serious engagements with time, mortality, and silence and its satirical treatments of human endeavor and European culture and history. I mean by their uncompromising gentleness the way in which they often slice away illusions and complicate experience without any gratuitous cruelty and bombast as well as without any self-satisfied certainty. Dekleva's touch is so light and kind (and even kindly comic), and the peeling away so relatively painless, that the pain of the peeled-away moments that the poems arrive at resonates more fully for the lack of cruelty in our deliverance unto them. Even at their darkest they cradle us with an uncoddling tenderness that is also full of distance

– a distance that feels at times like something one might call, for lack of a more precise word, wisdom. Yet they feel unpedantic, disinterested in claims to a special wisdom, wisdom here being maybe really just another term for experience. And it is in experience, which so often takes the form in these poems of wonder, that one finds the laughter and joy of these poems. To be more specific I'd like to look closely here at the first poem in the selection, the one beginning with the line "on a winter afternoon."

Dekleva's sensibility seems particularly well displayed in this poem, or, to put it better, this poem makes it easier to point to what seems to me to be one of the core sensibilities of his poems. This also feels appropriate since the poem seems to be about how certain visual moments/images catch and make the invisible visible, tangible, sensible. The poem consists of two stanzas that each present what are called "games." In the "game" of the first stanza the slowness of the waves disperses the light so that "we can see it/with one pair of eyes." In the second stanza, the interior scene--with the photo of young Lech Walesa, the peeling paint of the door of the Viennese club, and the banal "chipped bowls of chips"-- catches something also invisible, which might be named history or time or human time or culture or historical time, but which in the poem is experienced as the tone of the poem, its wonder, its surprise, and its quiet laughter. In its pointing to Walesa, to Walesa's youth, to that older Austro-Hungarian decay, and even to the chips, so much of the recent history of Europe is conjured up, pointed to as something strange that has suddenly already happened some time ago. How strange that it should all have happened, that all of that is "over" and yet is never over, is still alive in death in the present constellation of this cultural-political world, this Europe. How strange that the political figure Walesa has become has all the inevitability of the finished to it, how different it all once seemed, thirty some years ago. How strange that he ever should have been young, how uncanny that now he be old. Another thing that seems important to me for the tone in Dekleva's poems is the approach to wonder that we see here. Wonder here is something in the world that we participate in, participating in its conjuring in the constellations or 'games' of our interactions with the world (with our single pairs of eyes), but which does not belong to any one of us; as a poem of his from the 80s put it, "wonder outlives us."

I first encountered this poem, and Milan's work and Milan himself at the Sinji Krog (Azure Circle) Poets Translating Poets festival in Slovenia in the fall of 2010. Sinji Krog is a unique sort of festival mostly taking place between the participating poets who spend days and days working together using all the common languages at their disposal to produce versions of each other's poems in as many languages as possible. Poets read these versions at the various public events scheduled throughout the festival, but the

festival's emphasis is really on the work and on the relationships created between the participants. This is in keeping with festival founder and organizer Barbara Pogačnik's faith that there is something that happens when poets translate each other together that just doesn't happen in other circumstances. Though I don't agree that the versions poets produce translating each other are always "better" or even as good as versions produced by dedicated translators working closely with a body of work over many years, I agree with Pogačnik that there is something in this collaborative process that is singularly exciting and very special. It has definitely opened up, for me personally, new fields of experience as a poet and as a human speaker of language.

Also at this festival I met my co-translator, Julija Potrč. Julija is a professional translator in Ljubljana where she does literary translation, legal translation work and also teaches Finnish language classes at the University. In 2010 she won the Slovene Younger Translator's prize. She is a delightful person to work with and much sought after by Slovene poets as a collaborator on translations and I felt very lucky to meet her and hit it off with her at Sinji Krog. Through the kindness of friends and of the Slovene Writer's Association, I was able to stay in Slovenia for another six weeks after the end of the festival. Julija and I worked closely together in those weeks, sometimes meeting daily, translating the larger selection of Milan's poems you have here, as well as the work of some other Slovene poets.

The vocabulary and music of English gratifyingly, often after some serious struggle, allowed us to create these versions, which seem faithful to the sound and sense of the originals. Often the versions do remain quite close to what might be called 'literal translations'; at other times the sense and feeling of the poems twisted our English syntax and music into different shapes, which correspond, we believe, to the originals but at a certain slant, or different remove. This collaborative work was really a joy. Working with Julija, pushing, cutting, twisting, erasing and otherwise bending language in the service of these poems, watching and hearing their English versions emerge between us and then taking these versions to Milan, and going over them with him---it was great, rich fun. This is a practice I hope to continue to keep close to my own work as a poet. It's something very different from translating alone, which I have done from Spanish. There is an element of the séance, it seems to me, to all translation. This collective translating felt even more like a séance to me. The most obvious reason being perhaps that my knowledge of Slovene is exceedingly basic to non-existent. What tiny, and I mean tiny, understanding I have of it is borrowed from my very poor skills in Russian, Czech and Slovak. My total dependence on Julija, my need to check everything with her, and her desire to check everything with me, and our desire later to check

everything with Milan, made the process of conjuring the new English versions feel even more like drawing something up and out of the dark than translating alone does, or than writing a poem does—though both of those activities certainly can feel somewhat, if less dramatically, similar at times. This bringing of an invisible—these English versions of the poems—into visibility (and into the audible, into hearing) also seems to me to correspond, maybe a little obliquely, to the ‘games’ of the poem of Milan’s discussed above. And, as is true in those ‘games,’ though we all participated in the calling forth of these English versions, they feel not really of each of us individually nor of the two or three of us together; they belong to no one and anyone, and just like poetry, language and the world itself, ‘outlive’ us in the sense Milan has given that word.

—Anthony McCann

on a winter afternoon
the wind was faster than the waves
that was the point of the game:
slow water's reply,
its softer will
to scatter light
so we could see it and understand it
with a single pair of eyes

a different game came to mind:
in frozen time
facing each other were the flaked
red door of a Viennese student club,
a nicotine-yellowed photo
of young Lech Walesa and
chipped bowls full of chips.

there's someone else in me,
he's different.
I don't know him
because he always slinks off
if I talk to him.

he hides behind things
bigger than his shadow,
then he laughs,
retarded as a fern.

when he pours himself into
a coffee cup and plays dead
I prefer to leave. because he's not
the kind to give in.

if I step into a summer evening that's
too deep, nailed to the sky
with unbearable blueness,
he taps me on the shoulder and pants:

can you see your god,
now that you've let yourself go?
I look back, but he's already
in the thyroid and I can't kill him.

you'll just have to wait a little,
I hear him say. he's viciously stomping on
mitochondria: you'll just have to
bear it a little longer,

rainman.

White Orgasm

What misery that you cannot
Suck up her gaze
And conceive.
Birth's not going to rip you open,
A white orgasm won't
snow down on you.
You are a wasteland.
These dancing storks and their
swampy sentiments can't help you.

As consolation, before your window
there's a gnarled cherry tree
and flowers. You'll give these blossoms to her,
but too late.
Or only in your thoughts. Or,
clod that you are, never.

all of a sudden I'm an ancient Mesopotamian
god who knows about the foam of existence,
about erotic star shifts, who dreams of the
whipped orgasm's sweet groan,

but then: a scream from the plasma screen,
showing a pitiful cripple, a child
who will never get to be mister
universe, his fate infectious

as stalinism. outside is a
dangerous, full night and a world
betting on a saviour. I know Vienna is

somewhere out there, soaked with blessed marzipan
sticks--an abandoned little mutt and cursed
poet around the corner. but in me, the blogging muhmmammed,

there's just this joyous, pre-new year's farewell.

F u g u e

I begin with one voice, the silvery
silicone whistle of the flintmen.
with it, I establish the curvature
of the motif. a second, supplemental

voice came from a distant life tragedy,
an unknown pulsar. with it I introduce
an azure cadence. the third voice
is a sound recording of mother's milk

dripping through the spiral of a child's growth.
with it I call forth a vision of light falling at a slant
and the changing of the seasons. the fourth voice is
regal—the open eyes of Oedipus

buried in dandelion fluff.
with it I bring forward a battlefield of
sound and silence. they play together like saliva
in glass, like barking in a prayer, like water in

the acrostic of the hypnotized. no one who
hears me will be any younger. no one
can ever speak of my end.

P a r e n t s

We need long feet and a hat
level with the magnetic
axis of love. Love for the continuum
and the to be continued. Because we are seduced.

Because we are seductive. Even through the umbilical cord
we nourished curly memories of the little angels
with their rosy cheeks and yellow poop. They're ours,
ours, as different as peas in a pod. Sweet

their secret weeping, wrathful
their contradictions. Clan of the same clan,
blood of the same blood, in the end god
is divided equally among us.

Their weeping silences us. It silences the parenthood of the child
as well as the childish parents. But before—
everything that came before was ours in vain.
Everything that is ours for you is now in vain. And this

is bloody freedom. The disinheritance
that gnaws at our pith.

something big is growing
under nietzsche's moustache:
a nest of nothingness.
a white egg for white death.

those who want to avoid
madness can't see the nothingness.
they can't see, white people
against a white background,
writing white verse in the whiteness of gas,
in the bluish spleen chambers.

Mindfulness comes too late,
white skin cracks quickly,
a snow lamb bleats in the heart.
no more path out from the grave,
no more white dirt of white zeroes,
knowledge is always awful.

whatever sprouted from man
has left him
in the white time of white clones
in a language without modes.

the january sun was overtaking people
and the spring, shining on naked mannequins
with white sheets of paper on their backsides,
probably taped there by a sensitive window dresser.

my heart warmed
because the window, clean and untouched, was an image
of a perfect poem.

a moment later i was thinking of the book
se questo é un uomo
by primo levi,
of the nakedness of real, unprotected bodies
in the cold of perfect silence.

is this the poem which,
in my memory, is not called
oświęcim but, in the language
of the masters,
auschwitz?

all of a sudden the morning sun
sketched two patches of light on a forest path that'd been
walked a thousand times. they were unusually strong,
greasy from their secret life,
as if taken from a comic book
or a sci-fi film
in which we're touched by the terror
of the extraterrestrial, the gremlin-like,
which is, in fact,
a substitute for the divine,
a substitute for the unpredictable,
wide-open future.

the same sensation in my contracted lungs
overcame me many years ago, when we shivered
in the setting sun in Oban,
on the shore of Gaels.
the bay was bleeding and that serial killer
rinsed the feeling of immortality
off into the water and
carefully wiped the blade
with northern calm.

he was done with mankind
until morning, I thought.

silence,
divine peace,
snow on a blooming cherry tree,
the light of a supernova.
a decent poetics
could be crafted
from the escalation of absence.

this can't be the birth of a future speech,
it can only be the death of a past one.

the skeleton of wisdom, present and real

The wind in the willow trees rustles differently
Than the wind of thoughts in our heads.

Leaves above the breathing water
Don't have to strut

in front of love
which declares itself
with the dawn

and is always
hardly an inkling, barely a trace.

The Distance of Pain

The distance of pain is the first nearness
to strike us
it's the heaviest weight
that eventually passes.

The distance of pain
is a mistake in the cellular
communication of the gods,
who tenderly, on the edge of the blade,
carry us home.

The distance of pain
is silvermute:
what, love, do we know,
stuffed as we are with earth,
about the hundred times rinsed,
the wounded
tongue of shells?

The pearl is between us, and the shock
of the olive tree.

First snow while walking in the woods
I'm not thinking about the sixteenths of silence,
I'm thinking about the knots of crystallized time

Sunday bells ringing in the distance
I'm not thinking about god, I'm thinking about bronze

I'm water, he's bronze
I laugh, he shivers:
diaphragm belly, skin of the sky

since all that appears,
out of concealment
is a market stand
which sells appearances
we should bow down
to the blue iris.

aristarchus writes about the iris,
it obsessed the master of kyoto.
in his overlooked note to the critique
of pure reason, kant places it
high above death.

there's no point in interpreting appearances,
appearances are meant to be seen.

I still remember
the white flowers on a cut down cherry tree.
now I know that sensibility
is not a competition in fondness,
it's not a standard to be used
with the living.
sensibility is a comparison
through which eternity
can approach us,
bending over us like a mother,
watching us closely.
sometimes, when we're entranced,
it would kiss us.

I drag myself after you like a broken toy

Can you feel love
As the ground opens up
And swallows the poem's permanence?
I admire its irrevocability!

Attached to you, half paralyzed,
I'm a witty metaphor for the will to power,
With genitals smelling of moonlight
Blind like a diamond
And infatuated with you—

Let admiration wait!

your face is always connected
to the fragrant resin of the pines
and with slanted boutique light
on a Mediterranean summer morning:
a unique face, a unique love.

epiphany is exclusion: all that is tender
unites, just like the posthumous voices
of wheat tuned into a single sheaf.
violence, horror, and anxiety
freeze for a second in the beyond.

there's no love because it keeps
surging forth, scaring off worry clouds
and laughing in the face of great ideas.

there's no love because it's not here yet
and never will be
without resin and vanished light.

Milan Dekleva is the author of countless volumes of poetry, of several books of fiction and of a number of plays. His poetry has received most, if not all, of the more prestigious awards for poetry in his country. His work has been translated into numerous languages. Dekleva worked for many years as a journalist and is also a translator of literary work and of children's cartoons. He lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Anthony McCann is the author of *Father of Noise*, *Moongarden* and *I Heart Your Fate*. He lives in Los Angeles.

Julija Potrč is a translator from English and Finnish into Slovenian. Some of the authors she has translated include John Barth (co-translation), Kate Chopin, H. P. Lovecraft, and Finnish poets Paavo Haavikko and Pentti Saarikoski. In 2010, she was awarded the prize for best young literary translator in Slovenia. She lives and works in Ljubljana.