



Barren Harvest
Selected Poems of Dane Zajc

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A World of Voices



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Ales Debeljak

BIOGRAPHY OF SOLITUDE IN THE POETRY OF DANE ZAJC

It was a pleasant May afternoon in the late nineties. Intimations of summer in Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia, were already visible. Fresh air languidly rose up from the slow-flowing green river and enveloped the old city quarter under the medieval castle in the promise of things to come. The improvised gardens in front of the restaurants had emerged only days before. Sun rays revived the memories of the bygone bourgeois time, locked in the cobble-stoned streets that have been laid out during the long reign of the Viennese royal house of Habsburgs, the dynasty that traditionally ruled the Slovenian lands until its empire disintegrated at the end of the World War I. Slovenia and its people, however, have persisted in this patch of Europe, wedged between the Alps and the Mediterranean, between the Balkan mountains and the vast Hungarian plains.

Dane Zajc and I sat at the table in front of a popular cafe »Nostalgia«, sipping cappuccino and enjoying long silences in our meandering conversation. The glaring sun of summer was not yet the order of the day. No need, then, for sunglasses. They remained in their quivers on the table. From time to time. Dane's restless hands, speckled with the brown spots of a man in his early seventies, would come to rest on the surface of the table, from time to time toying with the case. Then they would just as suddenly retreat to a pyramid of his long fingers. Dane Zajc is the greatest living Slovenian poet not only according to the professional opinion but also according to the general popular consensus, a combination that is extremely difficult to attain in matters of literature. I daresay, alas, that the pedestrians passing by before us do not know that. If an artist today wants to reach an audience wider than interpreters of useless words, humanities students and other poets, he must subjugate his creative neuroses to the demands of the consumer market. He must transform his words into a conveniently formulaic wisdom that can be compressed into a happy soundbite with which Eastern European countries have, for better and worse, become increasingly familiar since the »velvet revolutions« of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Dane Zajc, however, was born too early for this particular form of subjugation. In 1929. He spent the first fourteen years of his life in a remote village in the Slovenian mountains. During the Second World War, German occupying soldiers burnt his family home to the ground. As sometime courier for the Partisan resistance, Zajc occasionally descended to the valley. But he spent most time working a miserable plot of a vegetable garden to help his family survive: a family that lost its two elder sons to the war. The intimate world of the young poet was thoroughly defined by the experience of nature and violence. It might have been an education of sorts, but it was certainly not a sentimental one.

His work, on the other hand, was not divorced from sentimental influences though Zajc was able to fence off a stifling dependence on his early inspiration. In addition to

Slovenian writers, the formative sources of Zajc's poetic work were Russians. Russians. Russians. No wonder: Slovenia was until 1991 when it attained a full-fledged independence, a part of Yugoslavia, a patchwork of diverse peoples, cultures, languages, and religions that its unchallenged leader, Marshal Tito, controlled with a cunning mind of a grand diplomat and with an iron hand of a communist despot. The eastward-looking orientation of Tito's imperium left a deep mark on generations of writers who were not only isolated from democracy and capitalism but also from Anglo-American aesthetics. In their youths, the generation that Dane Zajc belonged to, learned instead the poems of Jesenin and Pushkin by heart. Lermontov and his stormy romantic exaltation, his sentimental pessimism, his rapturous sensuality: all of these aesthetic forces shot into Zajc like a bolt of lightning during the decade spanning the late forties and early fifties. In the work of Salzburg pharmacist, George Trakl, and in the urban elegies of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Zajc later discovered strange and beautiful horror that made his lifelong association with the voiceless people possible. »There was only enough room left for Anna Akhmatova and the uncompromising poetry of witness«, said Zajc and took a long drag on his Marlboro Light. He discovered the ingenious Vladimir Hlebnikov (whose trans-rational language would have such a decisive influence on the early avant-garde revolt of yet another Slovenian living legend. Tomaz Salamun) too late to leave a lasting mark on his poetic work.

So I can only nod when Dane, in response to any question, provides me with a catalog of his favorite film directors. From the shockingly poetic Luis Bunuel and the multiple melancholic mirrors of Andrej Tarkovsky. to the documentary sharpness of Italian neo-realists to the carnal knowledge of Federico Fellini to the repressed passions in the opus of Ingmar Bergman. The roster is, I suppose, fairly predictable. Dane Zajc, after all, came of age in the era when Stetson hats and silk stockings, Montgomery raincoats and gas-powered cigarette lighters were smuggled in from Italy only to represent precious goods on the black market of consumer items that the Communist party deemed unsuitable. It was somewhat easier to breathe in the cultural sphere. Not only did the Ljubljana art houses roll weekly propaganda reels but also serious artistic films by contemporary West and East European directors. Thus the Communist party catered to the appetite of the masses hungry for novelty and widened the horizons of youthful audiences who were not fed on a diet of industrially-produced American dreams as they are today.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, we love and hate, it seems, under a canopy of illusions about democracy and the freedom of »the end of history«. In this context, we don't even mockingly laugh any more at *social realism* because its pedagogy of working class heroism has become so hopelessly passe. At the same time, we seem to be closing our eyes before the waves of aggressive advertising and its sublime aesthetics of the organic illusion of harmony and attractive shape, the signature component of *capitalist realism*. This is perhaps even more pernicious than socialist realism, its outdated counterpart, which up through the 1960s was the enforced aesthetic orthodoxy of the totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe. Capitalist realism is arguably more pernicious, for it insinuates itself into the minds of consumers as it beguiles them, with increasing success, into replacing any meditation- on the beautiful and the good with the enjoyment of beautiful consumer goods. In the process it commodifies not only the

products themselves but the mental frame within which the enjoyment of them takes place. The most this illusion can do is provide a formal fascination, which can no longer be compelling on an existential level. If you want to retreat before this unceasing flow of images, music and words to the temporary haven of art, you must today voluntarily isolate yourself in order to obtain a moment for contemplation, perhaps even a grace of epiphany.

In the political sphere. Yugoslav communists may have not experienced an epiphany. It was rather a pragmatic move that made them recognize the need for relative independence of the artistic imagination in the wake of the self-preserving break with Stalin in 1948. Consequently, they revoked the so-called theory of the »Partisan birch-tree«. This theory demanded of an artist to include in each and every artwork a reference to the ideological narrative of a proletarian revolution. Hence, even such innocuous artistic genre as landscape painting had to contain a birch tree under which a Partisan fighter could rest, revealing thus the artist's commitment to the red horizons of communist Utopia. The authorities explicitly recognized aesthetic autonomy at the Yugoslav Party Congress in 1958, though they have applied it in an admittedly selective manner. That was the year that Dane Zajc finally succeeded in publishing his first book of poetry - *Burnt Grass* - although the printing was undertaken at his own expense. The book, while not officially banned, was next to impossible to obtain on the market.

Dane Zajc had no desire to close his eyes to the fruit of the totalitarian barren harvest. In his book, he confirmed the primacy of an individual over the collective and summoned a sense of human mortality in order to combat the Potemkin villages of communism. Not only in aesthetic terms, but also in terms of moral opposition. Dane Zajc was engaged in the struggle against the dictates of the regime. Zajc's growing distance from the Yugoslav government of »workers, farmers and honest intellectuals« was tangibly spelled out in 1951. With three months in jail. Zajc had performed at the public literary reading. A zealous informant reported his alleged anti-regime pronouncements and Zajc, branded a »verbal delinquent, was sentenced to one month of solitary confinement before being transferred to the common prison. At that time. Zajc's political stigmatization should have earned him a trip to the Naked Island. Tito's transplantation of a Stalinist gulag to a rocky island in the Adriatic Sea. Zajc's mother, a simple peasant, had long maintained a stoic and self-preserving silence. But when Zajc was imprisoned, she walked to the headquarters of the political police in the center of Ljubljana. Somehow she found her way to those in charge; she banged her fist on the table and said: I've already given you two sons, I won't give you a third, told me Zajc and took another sip from a cold capuccino.] offered him another cigarette and for a while we silently watched the schoolgirls and rare tourists making their way past our table at the »Nostalgia« cafe. Zajc was ultimately not sent off to the labor camp. But he was thrown out of high-school and sent to the military service where he spent two long years in the olive green uniform of the people's army.

After he got out, Dane Zajc helped to found an important cultural journal. *Revija 57*. It was explosive and provoking periodical, introducing existentialism into the Slovenian public sphere. It didn't last long. However, even after 1964. when the communist

authorities banned yet another dissident magazine. *Perspektive*, Dane Zajc did not relent though he had to wait until the death of Tito in 1980. The volatile political conditions were then sufficiently relaxed to allow for the *New Review* monthly publication which Dane Zajc helped establish. It was a forum for the intellectual nationalism which played a decisive role in creating the foundation for an independent Slovenian state. At the end of the eighties. Zajc recognized the increased relevance of civil disobedience, having participated in the oppositional Commission for Human Rights, in numerous demonstrations and at protest readings at the Association of Slovenian Writers; events designed to radically challenge communist grip on power.

Shadows over our »Nostaliga« table grew longer. The air turned chiller and Zajc grew silent again. While his habit of silence may be annoying for the interviewer, it is an inspiration for reveries. Alone in my thoughts. I thus conjured a particularly poignant image. I pulled it from the archive of my personal memory. What did I see? I saw the dimmed hall of France Preseren Club in the Ljubljana neighborhood of Trnovo. The alternative theatre appears, despite the addition of new velvet curtains, like what it once was: a forum for amateurs. Hovering above the squeaky wooden chairs of the front row.] I see the faces of excited poets who have gathered to see the greatest of the great in our literary profession. Photographers crouch before the low stage. In the jam-packed hall, an audience of more than one-hundred and fifty sip beer, smoke and wait patiently. It is April 1994 and finally evenings of live poetry have resumed at the Club. To describe this particular performance, the Slovenian language is most appropriate in its denial of a distinction between a song (that comes from a throat) and a poem (that lies written on a blank page). In English, the words sent up a barrier between the two notions: in Slovenian, it is the same word. Dane Zajc and Janez Skof: Recital for Poetic Words and Accordion. Two bodies, one world, a broken barrier. In the magical circle that the two performers invisibly draw through the air of the theatre hall, a recognition of pain was slowly born. The poetic works of Dane Zajc emerged as the symbol of a wound, a wound inflicted by man's indebtedness to his own death. What is repressed in a human being as a mortal creature, is returning in the language of human being as a lethal creature. As Zajc shudderingly reveals in the poem *Barren Harvest*, violence is the primordial truth of the world and at the same time its fundamental metaphor. Zajc's poetic description of the horror of his brother's death is one of the political reasons why he could not bring out his first collection with an official Slovenian publishing house. That the revolution in the name of which communists justified the death of so many fallen partisan fighters and civilians, might indeed prove to be but a compromised *barren harvest*, unworthy of immense suffering: such a conclusion was simply not tenable to the arrogant all-powerful authorities. Here, then, is a part of his poem that has entered a public vocabulary in Dane's home country:

I recognize his skull, mother said

*by its beautiful while teeth.
Beautiful while teeth*

biting into the soil.

beautiful brown eyes

filled with soil.

strong white bones

that once were hands,

hands that never caressed a woman,

strong youngs bones

caressing the soil

...Inconceivable is the harvest

of beautiful brown eyes,

the barren harvest

of the unfeeling earth.

In his second collection, *Tongue of Soil*, published in 1961. Dane Zajc rejected both the political and the aesthetic assumptions of the day. He created a new language, a new tongue, a *tongue of soil* that *speaks words of clay*. This innovative concentration on the earth's most material aspect lent him a certain relaxation and warmth, yet at the same time the power of destruction, revealed *as fire in [the] mouth*. In order to create, the poet - the eternal outsider - had to conquer his fear of discovery. Zajc knew that *black crows will kill a white one*. Moreover, he knew that this was not merely a characteristic of the then communist cultural and political hegemony, but also and above all, a description of the primordial mythical narrative of any collective in any historical epoch. In search of a new language. Dane Zajc often approached and even transgressed the border that divided poetry from mysticism. The mystic feels that words are not sufficient and for this reason he grows silent. The poet, for the same reason, sings on. The poet must always try to gather the elemental words from a life which lacks mythical totality. He must gather meaning from the whinnying of crows above solitary mountains, from the *the movement of things in a morning breeze*, from *strangers, your children, from the same, in another world, the same*. To absorb the ritual incantation in the poems of Dane Zajc implies a surrender to another world, a world of magical enchantment and sacrifice, to Biblical parallelism and to the authority the ancient Greek choruses used to command.

It is not merely a biographical detail to note that for nearly a quarter of a century Dane Zajc has been the fortunate renter of a cottage in the highlands above the glacier Bohinj

Lake. Zajc is a passionate mountaineer who is not intimidated even by dangerous winter expeditions. In his attachment to the Alpine world of rugged peaks and abandoned high mountain pastures, in his attachment to the world of sharp edges, it is necessary to recognize the fundamental source of Zajc's poetic vocabulary. Birds, ravines, insects, organs, blindingly bright light, vipers, sky, water and *mountains, veiled behind eyes*: all of these are signs of the eternal continuity of being.

Another recollection, another image: one autumn day in 1990 - or perhaps it was spring - I met Dane in America. This was the first time we had met in the United States. Even in the third millennium, it is not usual that two Slovenian writers run into each other at the same literary reading in the same American city. At that time American readers could not reach for a single anthology of Slovenian writers and English translations of Slovenian poetry books could be counted on a carpenter's hand (that is to say, a hand with three fingers missing). Our meeting was thus more relaxed than it might be today. In other words, Dane and I had come from an anonymous national tradition to perform in a culture where the yoke of anonymity is carried only by individuals. Dane's young readers saw him as a great poet regardless of his reputation in Slovenia about which in any case they knew nothing. Deep individual immersion in his poetry, however, demonstrated that good art knows no temporal limits, ethnic prejudices or international opinion. In spite of the necessary awkwardness caused by linguistic borders which are the borders of the world, a good poem, although through the veil of translation, will plant a kiss on the most intimate part of its reader, because to be good it must speak of an archetypal situation in which the reader discovers with astonishment her own portrait. Precisely because of this quality, Zajc's grateful American readers invited him to lead a three-day workshop in Chattanooga, Tennessee - the kind of workshop with which the self-involved country between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans teems. As I was completing my doctoral dissertation at an university in New York at the time, I was already well-acquainted with an institutionalization of poetry as a discipline which is taught at colleges in such a way that besides the attainment of craft and skills, participating writers also acquire a nomadic micro-collective which in the enormous spaciousness of this disturbing and fascinating culture cannot hope for the advantages of European cafe society and other more spontaneous forms of social life. Here I will leave aside the thought that the cafe, like most traditionally civilizing institutions in contemporary Europe, is disappearing into the fog of nostalgic myth. I will instead offer what I hope is a revealing anecdote. For several hours already, Zajc had been sitting motionless on a green, worn-out armchair in the living room of Richard Jackson, a poet and literature professor who had written about Zajc in a number of lucid essays. The party unfolding around him was reaching a crescendo of sorts. There was not a quiet corner in the house. Of course, it was only appropriate to have a celebration at the end of the workshop and the lectures on the uses of style in contemporary poetry. Dane Zajc probably didn't much care about the style. Why would he? He had only ever mastered one style: his own. The one that emerged from the aching marrow in his bones. If a man writes a founding tablet in the spiritual architecture of his people, the lush ornamentation in the new confessionalism or the experiments of the new formalism may justifiably fail to interest him greatly, if at all. Central to his interest is the way his own dark obsessions can be expressed in a poem that is as fragile as it is lyrical. Zajc gazed into the crowd of stoned, enervated and eroticised

students as well as the American and European poets who had come to read their work in the deep American south. There he sat: the greatest living Slovenian poet in a hospitable house in the middle of suburban nowhere, surrounded by throng of gifted honors students and ignorant daddy's girls, frustrated editors of literary supplements and romantic college bards. Only the day before, all us had had listened to Zajc's public reading with astonished respect. The audience was treated to a reading from a tiny limited-edition booklet of poems: Michael Biggins' and Michael Scamell's translation of Dane Zajc's *Ashes* in the series entitled *Poetry Miscellany Yugoslav Chapbooks* that was published by the creative writing program at the University of Tennessee. Dane Zajc didn't care much for all this attention. He felt the same indifference in 1982 when he was a visiting Fulbright writer at Columbia University in New York and the Russian-American poet Josip Brodsky, a Nobel Laureate, publicly described his work as »the great poetry of a small nation«. The praise that Brodsky gave Zajc was definitely no small complement. All the same, I believe that Zajc intuitively felt that praise, although alluring and desired, has a significance that belongs to external order of things.

Of course, compliments, congratulations, awards and appreciative essays take on a certain importance in social terms. In terms of the existential impulse of art — which can touch a wounded soul because itself emerges from a wounded soul - all of this carnival, however, is of slight relevance. At the party in that Tennessee suburb. Dane Zajc rose from his chair only once. He approached a young woman who I, though I had attentively prowled the rooms of the house, did not remember. The hero of Slovenian letters exchanged a few words with her. Even today. I recall the metaphysical revelation that overcame me when he responded to my provocation: *Hey, Dane! Go for it! It's your turn now!* With this exclamation, I attempted to celebrate the fact that grateful groupies do not only belong in the domain of pop stars and football players. But Zajc's response floored me. With a gentle voice, he whispered: *Solitude departed for an instant*

Selected poems of Dane Zajc. presented here for the first time in a comprehensive English translation, make solitude depart for an instant, offering a reader a glimpse into a world that is as ancient as it is modern. Poetry that springs from an understanding of solitude as the main feature of human condition, reminds us that we may transcend solitude only for an instant as even in the climax of erotic union between the two bodies, orgasms are in fact two. not one. Poetry as a form of erotic consummation of a bond between humans is thus wedded to an impossible pursuit of totality and perfection, oscillating between an individual solitude and collective fulfillment. In this regard, poetry of Dane Zajc calls out the deepest secret of existence that is perhaps the only thing we truly share.

BARREN HARVEST

I recognize his skull, mother said,
by its beautiful white teeth.

Beautiful white teeth
biting into the soil,
beautiful brown eyes
filled with soil,
strong young bones
that once were hands,
hands that never caressed a woman.
strong young bones
caressing the soil.

Full of brilliant young teeth sown in the earth.

Each spring the earth blossoms.
The cruel hard earth
that swallows us in her dark jaws.
The death of old men is hard.
But harder still is the harvest
of beautiful brown eyes
eyes that have never seen a naked woman.
that have never been kissed by her
whispering lips: I'm yours
(eyes that have seen nothing yet).
Inconceivable is the harvest
of beautiful brown eyes,
the barren harvest
of the unfeeling earth.

I remember you. brother.
Our mother recognized
your white teeth.
Your young white teeth
were the earth's barren harvest.

LUMP OF ASHES

For a long time you carried fire in your mouth.
For a long time you hid it there.
Behind a bony fence of teeth.
Pressed within the white magic circle of your lips.

You know that no one must catch scent
of the smoke in your mouth.
You remember that black crows will kill a white one.
So you lock your mouth.
And hide the key.

But then you feel a word in your mouth.
It echoes in the cavern of your head.

You begin to search for the key to your mouth.
You search for a long time.
When you find it, you unlock the lichen from your lips.
You unlock the rust from your teeth.
Then you search for your tongue.
But it isn't there.
You want to utter a word.
But your mouth is full of ashes.

And instead of a word
a lump of ashes rolls down
your blackened throat.
So you throw away the rusty key.

And you make a new language from the soil.
A tongue that speaks with words of clay.

BROWN CALL

The white legs of day come with quiet footsteps.
They come and they awaken things.
So that things will open their sleeping eyes.
So that they will open them and seek
what they lost in sleep.
Each thing will seek its sister.
So that things will be united with the sunlight.
So that nothing will be lost.
Nothing alone.
Nothing left out.

Open the lake of your eyes for me,
so that I may look into your sky,
at your white birds,
so that I may listen to the brown call of your eyes.

The call which you awaken.
The call which you call
and whose echo blossoms on my lips.
And my mouth is filled with the sweet scent of flowers.
The light is brighter than their fire.
Noon is higher and day is eternal
because you wander in its temple.

You give flowers their scent.
Into their hands you pour white rounded movements.
With your warm fire you ignite a bonfire of words
and in the morning the light of your love lies upon my hair.

Upon the hair with which you cover me every night,
so that I sleep as if I were sleeping in your body,
so that I no longer exist,
so that there's only you.

Only you will walk in the blue temple of day.
The light shining through your body
will run through my body and through my bones.
And I will no longer exist.
And there will only be you.
Because you are the tongue in my mouth.

THE EXECUTIONER

in what hole what cave in what closet what room
eyes half open for no reason
night steals in between dreams and sleep
and who hung this reflection on the cave's wall
and who licked the face of sleep
with a course tongue quickly suddenly coldly
who sliced these eyelids
who cut through hearing so sound could trickle in
who pants with heavy animal breath in this place
who treads with cloven hooves on the bowels of silence

ah I see in the long corridor a stumbling prisoner
ah I see wretchedness in his defeated walk
who sings that quiet song from anguished throat
but the sentence was already handed down and the executioner has risen
who hangs this picture of a broken skull on the wall
but a cold sun is already shining out from the center of his body
and the executioner has already seen the name scribbled on the paper
has already greased the rope
ah I see him in the empty corridor waiting numb
before a blind window

THIS AND THAT

The two walk together
connected, inseparable.
One staggers,
the other supports him.
This one swears,
that one whispers verses
into a sea of his own verses.
This one falls, that one rises
to lift the other up, to comfort him.
Sometimes, only sometimes they are one,
then they shine, then he shines through them.

But they fall apart again.
This one looks into the distance.
That one counts the monsters in his head.
This one hopes fragile hopes.
That one trembles with fear.
They swim in a dark lake
and wave their wartish trunks
in the dark night of his body.

SILENCES

when you wade naked
into the soft glass of the morning sea
when the clouds are all faces
and between them the highest depths

that place where you gave your word
that country in the sky
transforms, grows, vanishes

there a bird flutters there
under a great mountain
there a star twinkles and doesn't disappear
there bats fly in a staggering chase

in the evening you listen to
the muffled breaths, count them
and you go to a valley where you've never been

breath after breath you count
and you fall
soft as a sigh