The Poetry of Dragica Rajčić

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KATHY MAC


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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION:
The Poetry of Dragica Rajčić

I met with Dragica Rajčić on a mid-summer afternoon, a few days after the capture of war criminal Radovan Karadzic, and a few days before she was to fly home to Switzerland. During her year-long visit, Dragica was a guest of the Max Kade German House and an artist-in-residence at the University of Kentucky. The Croatian-born poet writes her verse in non-native German and phonetically creates the words she does not know how to spell. Her five books of poetry have been uniformly well-received, and her unique perspective on the intricacies of war lends her poems a real and raw urgency. Dragica fled to Switzerland at the outbreak of war. Since then she has won numerous awards and prizes for her poetry and has donated proceeds from her work to fund humanitarian efforts in Croatia.

Needless to say, I was eager to meet her. I found her at a small, round table in Common Grounds Coffee House, her arms laden with laptop, bag, and paper cup. She rose from her chair to greet me, friendly and bright-eyed.

I cannot deem our meeting an interview. Dragica was more interested in conversation than questions and answers. When asked about her decision to write poetry in German, she directed me to interviews posted on her website. When asked how her role as a mother affected her poetry, she opened her laptop and pulled up pictures of her beautiful daughters, designers of elegant clothing, posed and smiling their mother's infectious smile. Her son, she said, was acting as her travel agent. She had been speaking with him on the phone all morning, planning her return. I stopped reading from my list of questions, turned off the recorder and began to talk with Dragica. Later, I revisited and re-read the interviews on her website, the discussions that detail her awards, her background, her creative choices in writing poetry. It is information I encourage you to seek, though it is not the information I gleaned from our casual afternoon meeting.
Here is what I learned of Dragica on that day:

She keeps an ongoing computer file of ideas for her current project, a book about Hermann Broch, an Austrian writer and humanitarian who also studied philosophy, mathematics, and psychology. When she pulled up the file on the day of our meeting, it was 115 pages long, single spaced. She admits that she finds novel writing difficult because it takes so long, because you change during the process.

She has decided to leave behind her clothes in America, so that she can pack her daily writing papers in her suitcases. She has accrued many stacks of paper, and she doesn’t want to leave them behind.

Her published collections of poetry, stacked neatly and vertically upon the coffee house table, are easy to pocket in the hand. They are uniform, and they are individual, each a different color so that she might easily grasp the correct volume when she wants it.

She is a confessed read-aholic. As a young writer, she was influenced by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. She continues to be influenced by philosophers and writers who “think and think and think,” but, as a writer, she has become herself.

She thinks a lot about language: why would we fall in love? Why not fly in love?

She writes about war because she has witnessed much, because it is incomprehensible, because it is real. We speak of Karadzic’s capture, his more than a decade on the run, and she says, “How is it possible for a human being to do such killing? To live with it?” How could he live so long, re-named, bearded, and tucked away in an “ordinary” life? This question drives her poems. She says that one thing war has taught her is that you cannot plan ahead. You are never guaranteed your plans.

We leave the coffee house hours later, and I drive her to a nearby convenience store.

She has graciously, in the midst of our conversation, allowed the reprinting of a sampling of her award-winning and internationally acclaimed poems in this edition of disclosure 18. From her 2000 volume Post Bellum, we include “Bosnia 92/93,” “Bosnia 95,” and “A House, Nowhere.” From her most recent collection in 2004, Buch von Glück, (Book of Happiness), we include “For My Children,” from her 1986 volume, Halbgedichte einer Gastfrau, “Metamorphosis” and from her 1994 volume Nur Gute kommt ins Himmel (Only Good Comes into the Sky), “Future in Croatia.”

It is our privilege to present them to you here.

* All poems by Dragica Rajčić translated by David Dollenmayer, Worcester Polytechnic Institute

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Bosnia 92, 93

they say
everything can be fixed
think
we're dumb, children who've been tripped up
a piece of land
on account of a piece of land
another word for WAR
detergent for brain

fathermothersister land defense
fathermothersister at funeral
call your name only son
have your birth certificate
for your country means death notice
scream
no, thanks
stay unborn my son

From Post bellum, 2000

Bosnia 95

the Latin word for war will occur to me later
now I'm looking for children's pants
cut off the right leg
sew up the opening
with invisible thread
on my tongue lies uninjured
an unheard prayer
want to believe
can't believe
hold tight
that blow to the face
to the back of the head
is good for anything
that everything will reveal
hidden meaning
to someone like me
later when it doesn't matter any more
to live like a human being
want
to ask
what good
war killing is

From Post bellum, 2000
For My Children

A country
Beyond
A country
With
Good meadows
With people made of
Gold
A country
With
Gardens, rooms, warmhand
A country made of
Daily bread
A country made of
Sharing and giving
A country made of
No person
Brings death to another
A country
Made of a sound never heard before

A country
Whose passport
I knit from
Dreamthornyarn

A house, nowhere

if
piece
by piece
faith
falls off
of words.
what
will I do there
what will I do then
I'll collect syllables
build them
a house, nowhere

From Post bellum, 2000

From Buch von Glück, 2004
Metamorphosis

I could
be a lot of things
Grandmother nodded
yes
she’s modest
and clever
Father said
at some point I stopped being
a promising child
a fresh look
said Grandmother
shameless the way
she acts
yelled Father
I’ll make
a woman of you
said my husband
Now I’m going to
drive all the persons
out of myself
What will everyone say then?

From Halbgedichte einer Gastfrau, 1986

Future in Croatia

I thought the earth would stop turning for shame or stars
would leave the sky one after the other, the trees wouldn’t
grow anymore and flowers no longer bloom. I thought
people would crowd onto all the roads and carry candles
to show sympathy for the dead. I never thought that there
would be war in my life and read about war to imagine
that which was no longer possible. There’s nothing left for
me to think – They’ve thought out everything without me!

From Nur Gute kommt ins Himmel, 1994