

# Poems by Drago Štambuk\*

## THE COMING OF THE CROATIANS TO THE SEA<sup>1</sup>

Infinity's ghosts wrest themselves free from the wrinkled slab,  
 on an altar of hard sea they burn, all seven, dry vinestock  
 and wrack. Earth is fled away before the end, smoke rises  
 towards the crowns of trees, the worm spawns in the heart. The  
 snake coils her pulse, tongue forked, fanging with black fire.

Where do you hail from, where will you go, rain scudding  
 swift towards you? Sharp are the lances and beaks of this  
 ancient sea. The road is brittle, the opening a mousehole,  
 dust chokes the wedding day, a vault of flame refracts  
 your primordial light. Brushwood of destiny, angry snakes  
 with fishbones along the branches. Nitrogen hums, weavers pick

leaved stingrays out of the pasture. They brought you  
 your indigo name, turned blood and vine a lighter blue,  
 wiped their skin with a vinegared sponge and mixed a newer colour,  
 to Velebit, holy mountain. A dark cloud dozes above it, spattering  
 the wild gods. Horuathos is your name, light-skinned friends,  
 the sea the eagle's dream and image, a votive of searing brass.

## EXODUS<sup>2</sup>

Here they meet, the pulses of seas and hands of love;  
 blue Adriatic and rippled Ionia tie their trembling  
 in a knot of indissoluble union, beneath a crown  
 of parting for the open sea of legacy. Lips touch  
 in the Straits of Otranto, and a Croatian spirit hoists sail.  
 Our bodies, twin seas, weighed down with wealths of salt,  
 embrace, entwine. The Naiad Straits, narrows of salvation,  
 mackerel in ranks like the Greeks at Marathon. Lips  
 grow heavy, nuggets of wet gold, and spindrift salt  
 deposits rings round rugged hearts. An undead folk  
 floats by like a Whitsun parade. Fenced around  
 with islands phantom and real, Graeco-Croatian  
 handclasp, pact of Argonauts ancient and new.  
 Glittering in a rocking cradle, cradle of aged sea,  
 odd Cyclopean eye. A crown of thorns  
 around the staff of the Kingdom. Olive Sunday.

\* Drago Štambuk is one of Croatia's finest poets. Born on the Adriatic island of Brač, he studied medicine at the University of Zagreb. From 1983 to 1994 he lived in London doing clinical research in the field of liver diseases and HIV/AIDS. In 1991 during the war against Croatia he became his country's first representative to Great Britain, and is currently Croatia's ambassador to India.

Beloved cities, oh folk of mine, they leave your blood to rot.  
 It has been allotted the calm of the seabed and the blue  
 ash of burning, in the excluded dusks of a glowing  
 Croatian death.

**WALLS OF SEA<sup>3</sup>**

*for Bobo Novak, after reading 'Devils'*

They begin to flay me, hazy, inch by inch,  
 edge by edge, flake by flake.

Snowdust by snowdust, breath by breath,  
 Kiss by kiss, hair by hair.

When the print of lips has peeled away, and air,  
 What remains is dead skin, living veins, embers.

I am licked by a legion of tongues from the cellar,  
 I rampage with a blue stake beneath the waves.

Cracking a flask of oil against a lucky cliff,  
 A hirsute dancer bursts, wild, in front of the blind window.  
 In the imperial cellar they seek a crock of gold,  
 but only find an urn with three Croat bones.

(London, 23 August 1988)

**ANTHRACITE**

Darkness your adornment,  
 moon and stars  
 your lesser signs.

Your island temptation,  
 calling  
 and pain.

Crystalline chaos!

I hide all I know.

The spark  
 bridges  
 the tips of naked hearts.

**ASPALATHOS<sup>4</sup>**

Imperial city,

in white ships  
 through your portals

pass, ever older,  
our ancient souls.

Parathalassia.

An archipelago of compacted pain  
soughs on a sorrowing sea.

The Good Shepherd's sarcophagus  
founders in a zealot's shroud.  
In a harbour of phantom engines  
our tangible craft are ground away.

**OUT OF THE DUMB, SUMMER DAWN A SWIMMER**

grasps at waves,  
slashed by their crests;  
as if to dig a grave in the sea.

Weighed down with desire,  
without uplift, sinking.

Only in the floury dusk,  
when the first suns  
spill the dust of ether  
broken from the stone of yearning,  
does he forget himself on the wings of golden waves.

From the deeps of pineclad Radonja  
a parted ear-shell hears him.

**SPALATUM<sup>s</sup>**

A refracted ray sinks into the green  
and the city, enduring hard and unreal  
on its distant shore, melts the connective tissue of memory  
and slips ever deeper into dark cellars.  
The figures of the happy years have been erased,  
and the pain, the gentleness — a hand could hold it all,  
with a couple of names, a square and the smell of the port.

A phantom ochre Harbourmaster's House  
drifts wearily into the space of centuries.  
As if I had never been there, tiny,  
lost between the ancient palms,  
sensing every possible decay and delicate  
death, my back turned to the darkened palace.  
But before it, lord, was that the sea?

(Hampstead Heath, 2 June 1984)

### STORM ON BRAČ

From the torn blossom of the  
almond tree,  
bees are gathering pollen.

### ISLAND, MOUSEHOLE<sup>4</sup>

Gashed with quarries, healed with chapels.  
A goat and a heap of stones in a shaft of light. A narrow  
garden is grazed. Cradle and doorstep, marble rain.

Wait till I catch you, scallywag, scamp; seakale, patch of green.

The saints survive. Nicholas, Adrian, Michael, Thomas.  
In the boat, wheat, oil, a dowry rope. Roll on,  
desire, around Vidovica, drive lances of rain  
into a vitrified sea. Wind winnows the ashes of hearts.

### SEABED

The stingray,  
in electric waves,  
sucks in, breathes out mud.

### 1918

Ships sail far away,  
carry off our loved ones  
to faraway foreign lands,  
ships sail far away.

They carry off our lives  
in chests of snow-white flour  
and barrels of golden oil  
to greedy foreign lands.

Ships sail far away,  
and split our hearts with their prows,  
what shall we do with the halves  
in a faraway foreign land.

*Translated from Croatian by F. R. Jones*

### Notes:

- 1 Above the Dalmatian islands rises the peak of Velebit, sacred to the ancient Croats. The Croats (Hrvati) first entered recorded history in the seventh century, when they crossed into the north-western provinces of the Byzantine empire. They were known to Byzantine historians as 'Horuathi', which popular etymology has taken to mean the 'fair-skinned'. Legend has it that the Croats were led to the sea by five brothers and two sisters, as depicted in many a nineteenth-century painting; their names are known to every Croat.
- 2 The Straits of Otranto, between Italy and Corfu, link the Adriatic with the Ionian Sea. Olive Sunday — what we know as Palm Sunday — is so called because olive branches are carried to church.
- 3 In an essay, the writer Bobo Novak tells how, in Italian mystery plays, the devils always spoke Croatian.
- 4 Aspalathos: Greek name for the city of Split; Parathalassia: seaboard.
- 5 The centre of the port of Split — known in Latin as Spalatum — is formed by the palace of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, with its rooms now houses, its basilica the cathedral, and so on; the front wall of the palace lines the sea.
- 6 A 'dowry-ropes' (*kordun*) is a heavy necklet of twisted gold thread, a family heirloom passed down to the bride on her wedding day.  
Written after the BBC's Bookmark programme on the Serbian Epics, January 1994

**ZAGREUS**

Torn into pieces,  
when will you restore  
your integrity,  
crawling slowly, cautiously,  
into the city that nearly  
bears your name?

How perfectly this slippery  
name fits the city's desolate  
inconsistency, its half-divine  
and half-human nature.  
Who'll devour Persephone's child,  
and bare its heart to Gora Petrova,  
for the last glimpse of the fuming sun?

Here, in the Croatian graveyard,  
I feel the Titans' lust and eternal betrayal.

Dear little hand, pass me the shabby rattle,  
and my anger's teeth will trigger  
the old King's gnashing.

**GASPARD**

You slept through the night.  
Extinguished stars lie on the table  
among scattered clothes.

In the nosalacrymal corners  
white, crumbling tears.

Breath taps your eyelids.  
You will not open.

**EVAPORATION FROM THE ILIAC PELVIS**

At the edge of the night road —  
a dead hedgehog with its grist  
of hatched viscera.

The beam of undipped headlights  
has crystallized in its yellow eyes.

Dead hedgehog,  
and I neither quickening my heartbeat  
nor slackening my pace.

**NARCISSUS IN CLAY**

Close as the bedding I lie on.  
Dear as the suddenly shining sun.

Like a flowerbed of dewy grass  
washing away the heat of my soles.

Approaching you with the face of a mirror,  
I am a clay fragment in the water of your heart.

### **THE WALL**

There's this wall  
buried in my memory, something  
I can't circumvent, surmount,  
dominate, much less pull down  
or detonate, despite the black trails  
of gunpowder I've brought to it.

When I lean my ear to it  
I hear voices on the other side,  
mostly inaudible,  
words that draw me, others that repel.

Now their feet have started pacing.

### **DIOCLETIAN'S DUST**

Couldn't unclench the mouth of the Sphinx  
with a stainless spoon. This ghost  
elusive like the steaming summer rain.

And in a raincoat dusted by granite  
was to be seen pointing to the shower's  
historic portent, the rain counting out  
square centimetres of polished peristil,  
Luxor gasping in that vapoured steam.

My legs tingling, I try to drag myself  
along a white edge to the black of night,  
holding my hands out to the glittering drops,  
the attempt a preconceived failure.

My eye encounters flashing pebbles  
that fill the vestibulum. They arrive  
abruptly from the South, from Brac's spine,  
the breed of maleficence.

Misjudged Emperor,  
I lack the strength for love.

In the darkness, the slanted pike's eyes glow.

Beneath the rain's curtain,  
something rises that shouldn't exist.

**RESURRECTION OF DEAD BONES**

When reality is wiped out by violence  
 meditation upon it becomes an act of faith.

*Claudio Magris, Dunube,*

There is no homeland until the four winds' spirit  
 breathes life into the sea's corpses and scattered  
 skeletons, and Croats rise up to the surface of the dark —  
 blue grave, then swim with gentle strokes,  
 to the silver of the eastern shores, to pass through the crags  
 into the empty, shorn lands. The prow of God's providence  
 will knock at the shipwrecked sailor, and from thick  
 darkness

the boat-angel will draw a pail of sweet water  
 and carry it to his cracked lips. People of eternal thirst  
 and forced allegiances, boldly, without fear, turn to  
 the sea of your name; mirror of trembling death  
 and wasting, look into it and you will recognise  
 your own soul, crucified. Aged, like cliffs  
 caked with salt, flammable like grass on the hearth  
 of solar summer. A soul that floats on the surface  
 unmixing with the water of time. The olive,  
 your crucifix tree, sorrowful people, of the rough  
 embrace and painful closeness. But still you drop  
 your candle-wick into the soul's oil, the healing stream from  
 the press of centuries, fusing the rush-lights of our secret  
 tongue

to justify the thorn's mark; you line up names of princes,  
 kings, and search,  
 time and again, for the living water, eternal  
 Croatia in the courts of the sea's light; so that the lone  
 underground river may not dry up, in the barren  
 rocks of the porous world, from endless loneliness.

\* \* \*

Here I am, constructing ruins,  
 not even the strongest wind  
 shall harm them.

*Poems from "Incompatible Animals" (Calcutta, 1995) Written in English by D. Štambuk*