

Modern Poetry in Translation
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Poetry and the State

Edited by David and Helen Constantine

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Series Three, No. 15

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Vlado Kreslin

Six poems

Translated from the Slovenian by

Urška Charney

Vlado Kreslin is one of the Balkans' best loved poets and folk musicians. Born in 1953, he has become something of a national institution in Slovenia, almost a folk hero. Songs from his fourteen albums, and based on poetry from his thirty-year career, have inspired films and novels. He performed with young refugees from Bosnia during the Balkan war, and he featured in a large concert in 2000 in Sarajevo, where for the first time after the war the leading artists from ex-Yugoslavia performed together in a show of post-war unity. Though Kreslin has been a rallying point for political causes, his poems are in general apolitical. But he employs pastoral imagery and cultural references from various antagonistic factions and ethnic groups in poetic displays of unity. He has been variously compared to several other musician/poets, 20th-century troubadours, including Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie. Like Dylan, with whom he performed twice, Kreslin has published books of lyrics and books of poetry, and his work has inspired other artists, including one poem, 'Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom', which inspired both an award-winning novel and an award-winning film. Like Guthrie, Kreslin is not merely a troubadour, but has become a folk symbol himself.

A native of the impoverished region of Prekmurje in Slovenia, he became the spirit of the area, giving talks and performing countless benefit concerts to raise funds in support of the region's fragile infrastructure. There are few points upon which Slovenes of all walks of life, cultural backgrounds, and age groups agree, but their love for Kreslin's poetry and music is one of them.

Vlado Kreslin was awarded the honorary title of Quincy Porter Fellow at Yale University in April 2009. In that same year, he was selected by the Slovene Ministry of Culture to tour Russia, Poland, and the Ukraine as an ambassador of Slovene culture: poetry readings as a pan-Slavic bridge-building effort.

Immigrant song

Other-worldly children joined our school
For those precious days
When the circus overtook our village.

They must have been Yugoslav,
For they understood us.

They defended the goal and dribbled
In a foreign way.
Their cries were different,
They were a new sensation,
Worldly and poor,
First to draw attention.
We all wanted to sit with them
To learn a trick or two.
We were star-struck
For tomorrow they might attend a school in Maribor,
The next day in England perhaps,
Children wild and wise.

They brought us
Names of exotic ports of call,
Which we carefully scrawled
In our small, well-worn notebooks.
Smells of distance and unknown.
These bold, maroon-eyed carriers of the world,
Which waits for us
Somewhere.

At twelve, I met them once more.
I slept on their bunk bed,
In that miserable trailer.
My mother passed out as they found me
The next morning at five,
After a night-long search
Up and down the Mura River,
The firefighters, militiamen and boatmen.

Sure,
When their loudspeakers played The Rolling Stones,
When last month they were in Madagascar,
And tomorrow they'll go to Maribor,
And then perhaps to England.
As the magician summoned someone up to the stage,
The whole arena from that little village next to Mura hid
 beneath their benches,
So Stanci and I volunteered to perform with them.
And the acrobat kept referring to me as
Young master!

She must have been Yugoslav,
For I understood her.

Years on at an Australian airport,
The cymbals – hundred pounds overweight –
Said the lady at the counter.
Where are you from?
From Slovenia,
Gosh, I skied in Kranjska Gora, she said,
How's Bled?
Her eyes lit up with a glow.
No overweight,
No worries, it's not a problem at all,
Safe journey,
Good luck, Slovenes!

She must have been Yugoslav,
For I understood her.

See, as the train winds on

Look out at the Veneto,
The train winds the grey fields,
Far away lies its destination,
Abroad, where the grass never blooms.
Faces dark and creased with pain,
Their wooden suitcases, cracked with drought,
Now held captive by the train's screaming whistle.
The steam engine robs them of a dream,
As it tumbles down the parallel path,
With night sinking deep around them.
What land will they wake to in the new day,
Where will new morning break?

The fields, green with tall swaying grass.
Fields of youth,
Land that once resounded with child's play,
Laughter and joyous tears,
Exiles from a land of happiness past.

Sadness meanders down the rail slats,
Away from home,
Away from Matajur,
Far away
Far.

For a loaf of bread, for two chocolate bars,
For a new home built of coal.
The train will wind them to a stop,
To a new life among strangers, miners of the unknown.

See as the train winds out of the Veneto,
Away, away into the unknown.
The fields, green with tall swaying grass,
Will I smell it again,
When,
Ever again?

The farewell ashes

I open the window to shed the ashes one last time,
To hear the tread that carries you away.
To inspire the oblivion, to expire your scent,
To exhale you, banished out of my dreams,
To hear the steps that draw you into the night.

Can I hold on to anything or have you taken it all?
A vow of love, a life-long sunset,
Golden rings and letters, all photos gone with you,
A summer getaway for two and a slice of heaven?
Can I hold on to anything or will you rob me of it all?

A new day still knows time to spare,
A child's cry sunk silent into night.
My fingers clasp to the first memory,
Your red belt reminiscent of that glorious night.

I open the window to shed the ashes one last time,
To hear the tread that carries you away.
The last melody I'd carry
To the place where it played only for us,
To hear the step that draws you into the night.

A new day still knows time to spare,
A child's cry sunk silent into night.
My fingers clasp to the first memory,
Your red belt reminiscent of that glorious night.

Far from my beginning

The picture is fading into a grey oblivion,
On it your forefathers, along with your smile.
Lacquered shoes, a new lace-trimmed frock,
An enticing scent of her cake,
Your mother, how slender, how beautiful.

Who is he that sits by you,
And the young woman who cradles you?
A tall building now ploughs this soil,
I feel the spirits of yesterday,
What a sweet-faced child you once were.

Far in the depths of my past,
Far in the distance
Dwells my beginning, my place of birth.

Dark blue descends over the hilltops,
I bring my chambers to light.
Once ardent in my eye,
The glitter has now vanished with years,
The colour is ever more a stranger
To the picture.

Far into the depths of my past,
Now in the distance
Dwells my beginning, my place of birth.

There in the mist by the Mura River

The elders still remember
When the village was woven into one
Even a stranger was welcome
To raise a glass with a word or two.

At times, when the sun sank deep
Up from vineyard hills into our moor,
The echo of dulcimer allied with the air,
The hamlet and meadows caressed by its flare.
Four men you were often to meet,
Mustachioed faces, clinging to red violins,
Their hearts imbued with soul-stirring music.
And if you gave away a daughter or two
The fiddle and bass sharpened your heels.

At times, when dusk covers the earth,
And southern breeze ruffles the hair,
Then you might hear them play, vivid with lore,
In misty air above the moor.

Black guitar

At every feast
In those early days of youth,
Our home resounded with song
Played by the mustachioed gypsies.
My father too swept the strings of that black guitar,
The one he had bought
With his first wages.

Do you still have that guitar, sir?
Sir, do you still play that black guitar?
That, sir, was the greatest of all.

Years on,
When they would pass and reach out for a coin or two,
They'd ask him about the guitar.
Years on, as they stole away to the bar,
Far from their resting instruments,
Which enchanted the guests through the night.
Their women too,
As they knocked on our door,
To plead for our garments, tattered and worn,
Would ask, eyes gleaming:

Do you still have that guitar, sir?
Sir, do you still play that black guitar?
That, sir, was the greatest of all.

Once in a while, when back at my home,
I empty a few glasses,
Embraced by the shade of our chestnut tree,
I drink with my friends,
Whose lives are still bound to that land.
Then, strings by the table,
The gypsies would never miss a chance
To play up the crowd,
And ask once again,
With their childish eyes and voices deep and coarse:

Do you still have that guitar, sir?
Sir, do you still play that black guitar?
That, sir, was the greatest of all,
Indeed, the greatest of all.