Sunrise in the Eyes of the Snowman
by Goran Simić

Reviewed by Anna Mioduchowska

I was a boy just yesterday.
I am the ghost of the house today,
growing up languid as a hothouse flower,
or a lizard daydreaming of becoming a dragon. (20)

Poet does not appear on Immigration Canada’s list of preferred occupations, and not surprisingly, poets who have achieved some degree of success in their homelands rarely choose to emigrate in times of peace. We have the civil war in former Yugoslavia, and PEN Canada, to thank for Goran Simić’s presence among us.

Sunrise in the Eyes of the Snowman, launched during Simić’s appointment as Edmonton’s Poet-in-Exile, is his fifth collection of poetry since his arrival in 1996 from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and his first written in English. In the Acknowledgements he calls it “my private poetry donation to the English language.” It is a worthy donation, as well as a moving testament to a poet’s struggle to cross from the language that gave his poetry birth into a language that has become its proverbial shelter in the storm.

Struggle is the overall theme of the collection: to be reborn into his new language, that “wild sea / which attacks my weak tongue” (33), into peace, where he wants to become “an ordinary man” (35), struggle to remember even as he longs to forget the horrors of the siege of Sarajevo, to love. In case this sounds heavy duty, the whimsical, finely wrought first poem in the book alerts us to the fact that we are in the hands of an accomplished poet, which will make the risk of turning the next page worthwhile.

Simić writes with the urgency of someone who has packed a lot of living into the last two decades and needs to transpose it with the help of imagination or suffocate. Rather than a spiritual or philosophical enquiry into the effects of violence, his poetry is a visceral tug-of-war with its twisted offspring. Memories of the siege of Sarajevo, 1992–96, haunt his sleep, so that nightmares weave their way through the entire collection. Civil war is compared to a mental institution, where

On the left lie those who pretend to be ill
to avoid execution.
On the right lie those who pretend to be ill
because they were chosen to execute those
on the left.

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But after midnight

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all the patients
play chess so nobody wins
and punish those who feel better
with a double dose of pills.

Outside of the hospital it’s worse. (22)

There is also the familiar guilt of the survivor, guilt of the deserter, as emigrants are often viewed in times of strife by those who stay behind, guilt of wanting to be washed clean of the past. Fable, allegory, surrealistic images and scenarios help to bring into relief the experience of being a stranger (“The Immigrant Talks to the Slot Machine,” “What I Was Told,” “My Accent”). As a displaced person, an exile, he longs to become visible. “Please turn off that TV and listen to my silence / howling atop the shining antenna” (30) he begs in “Facing the TV.”

Simić is at his best when he controls – but does not subdue – feverish emotion and imagination are controlled with his craft. With a few choice surrealistic images he can place the reader in an unfamiliar landscape with senses wide awake. Some of my favourite poems are the poignant “Spring is Coming,” in which hope crawls out of the ruins, shell-shocked, unprepared for peace; the allegorical “Where Is My Brick” and “Confession of the Pimp’s Cat.” “Candle of the North,” even with its few awkward moments such as “decomposed documents of long-dead blood donors” (46) scattered on the beach, succeeded in moving me to tears.

Not all the poems are equally successful. I was quite baffled by the poet’s decision to include rhyming quatrains in the book, for example. Those end-of-line rhymes disturb for all the wrong reasons. My other complaint is the occasional lapse into lugubrious excess. “Making Love” positively writhes with twisted erotic images of “an octopus grip[i]ng its victim,” screaming rooster, screaming swan, priest’s “underwear / on the door of the orphanage” (24), which belong in the poetry of a much younger poet. “If I Told You” offers another example.

The bloopers are minor, however, when weighed against the rest. Canada’s poetic community has gained an interesting voice in Simić, and his determination and energy to continue writing in spite of the many barriers in his way can only be emulated. A word of congratulations to the publisher, or the elegant cover and general appearance of the book. Buy it – you won’t be disappointed. ♦

Anna Mioduchowska’s poems, translations, stories, essays and book reviews have appeared in anthologies, journals, newspapers and on buses, and have aired on the radio. In-Between Season, a poetry collection, was published by Rowan Books. Eyeing the Magpie, a collection of poetry and art, was published in collaboration with four fellow poets.

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