A Bouquet of Balkan Haiku


Žepski gorocvijeti / Mountain Flowers of Zepa, by Smajil Durmišević. English translations by Đurđa Vukelić Rožić (Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Meligrafprint, 2012). 107 + 105 pages, in Bosnian and English from opposite ends; 20.5 cm. Glossy green and four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-9958-677-09-0. No price given; inquire at smaildur@bih.net.ba.


Reviewed by Charles Trumbull

I would wager that, excepting Japan, there are more haiku poets per capita in the Balkans than anywhere else in the world. As I discovered on my recent travels through Southeastern Europe, haiku is popular and widespread. The main goals of Balkan poets seem to be to enter their haiku in international and national contests and to get their work into book form. We North Americans can be envious that not infrequently grants are available from municipal and central governments to subsidize the publication of poetry books.

Though more compact than the Croatian haiku anthology, An Unmown Sky (2011; reviewed in MH 43.1), Shadows of Chestnuts is every bit as important an event for Serbian haiku. The book features 153 poems by 73 poets, some already well known in the West, others less so:

new year—
my new face stares
at my old face
chasing each other
among meadow dandelions
two yellow dogs

Saša Važić

In his “Afterword,” Pavić presents a fine review of Serbian haiku history, detailing the first attempts at translation by Miloš Crnjanski in the late 1920s and the inestimable contributions of the academics Vladimir Devidé and Aleksandar Nejgebauer in the 1970s, before turning to more recent developments. The bibliography and poets’ biosketches are useful as well.

Zoran Mimica is a Croatian haikuist who divides his time between his homeland, Vienna, and London. He has been writing haiku since the 1970s and publishing since the mid-1990s, but this is his first published book. As if to catch up all at once, this book packs six haiku to a page for a total of some 474. Of these, 114 appear in a section titled “Published haiku,” the remainder previously unpublished. I find the haiku tend to be purely descriptive and often monotonous, for example, these two, one from the Croatian journal Haiku in 2006, and
the second one first published in *Without Keys:*

- the snow
- is going
- to melt — soon

Japanese lady
enters by mistake
the gentleman’s

These things, plus rather casual editing, make this book a tough slog.

**L**judmila Milena Mršić is a member of the Three Rivers Haiku Group in Croatia, and *A Breeze in My Hair* is an example of a book subsidized by the city of Ivanić-Grad. Hardbound, edited by Dubravko Korbus, with translations into English by Đurđa Vukelić-Rožić and ink illustrations by Božena Zernec, this volume is really a collaborative Three Rivers production. Like Mimica, Mršić satisfies herself with haiku that are primarily descriptive, often substituting poetic language, irony, or natural oddities for resonant images:

- a winter day
- miller’s white moustache,
- hair and hands

New Year’s Eve
fireworks tremble
in his shiny eye

**U**nlike the other poets we are considering here, the Bosnian Smajl Durmišević, by day a public health professor, seems to be writing in virtual isolation in the historical city of Zenica. This, his first poetry collection, intersperses a number of haiku with longer poems. Durmišević’s topics are strongly nationalistic in tone, crying out for unity in the most ethno-religiously diverse and vexed country in Europe. He often uses native flora and fauna to voice his passion, and the region’s native marble becomes a metaphor for the permanence of the Bosnian people:

- Picking young nettles,
- growing from the bosom
- of a dead village

Guard the marble,
my son, There is our beginning
and our end.

**I**felt like Sherlock Holmes as I tried to puzzle out the relationship between this all-Romanian senryu anthology and the Romanian-American one edited by Valentin Nicolițov and Bruce Ross (also 2012,
reviewed in *MH* 43.3). The bilingual book went to press three months before the all-Romanian one and features senryu of fifteen Romanian and fifteen North American poets, whereas *Pay Day* has sixty-four Romanian poets represented. The poems, translations, and author bios in the former book are exactly the same as in the latter, though *Pay Day* includes a few more senryu by each poet. The works range widely in style and quality, from the more traditional, such as the first one below, by Florin Vasiliu, to the more contemporary, as the second one, by Vasile Moldovan:

A child in tears, 
All the snowflakes melted in her palm.  
His sweetheart putting on her wig …
Lunar eclipse  

**Dan Doman’s *A Path Through Autumn Grasses*** is a substantial collection of the poet’s photographs accompanied by his haiku, all nicely printed on coated stock. In an essay at the end of the book Doman argues for photo-haiku as a new form of visual poetry, although he traces the history of the genre back forty-plus years, from Ann Atwood’s solo books in the 1970s and collaborations in the 1980s and ’90s with Günther Klinge. An introductory essay, “Sign and Color,” by Dumitru Radu speaks of the semantic and aesthetic correlations between the poetic text and the photographic image. The problem in this book, however, is that the text/image correlation is too often one-on-one, leaving no room for the viewer/reader to join in and interpret. These two haiku, for example, are accompanied by photos of a snail on a mossy log and a girl in a white dress on a riverbank, respectively:

cloudless sky —  dry lake —
a snail crosses the stream  stepping over sand, a girl
on a log  in a white dress