

**Suzana Matić**

***Selected poetry***

**Translated from Croatian by Ira Martinović**

*It was because I didn't know to answer the question they've all been asking, although I wanted to  
because I revealed too much about myself and yet had to reveal some more  
because I tried too, hard after not trying at all  
because I believed emotions shouldn't be named  
because I couldn't take orders and walk straight until I had a bird tattoo shaped warning on my ankle*

*because what we miss the most  
is what we truly are*

## **This is how I beat you**

I did not beat you by forgetting. No. I do not forget the likes of you.

I beat you with time. Built a wall in clay stamped with good times; ramparts too tall for giants to step over, too tall for thieves to jump, too tall for voice to soar across.

I beat you with determination. My resolve is that thunder splitting the sky, my resolve is the scream of Atlas, broken for mocking the gods, it is a conspiracy of the night and the storm, and I welcome it with thirsty eyes riveted to the heavens cracking open every time I whisper – *No*.

I beat you with beauty. I harvested it from the world and devoured it and rebuilt myself with it and gave it back to the world, for it was the only vow my traitorous self hadn't broken, and I stopped there, at that last line of defense, and chose not to see the ugly in the world. Gratefully, the world plucked the empty shells of barren wishes from my eyes and let the wind carry them to the six corners of itself.

I beat you with flame. I've learned how to become the fire, how to become the fever and burn through the night. All my fires are already within me.

I beat you with strength. The kind that doesn't come from bones. My thoughts are lethal, my thoughts are sharp, my thoughts show no mercy. They grip the strongest man's hand and bend it, even the hand that knows every shortcut to my throat, the one I don't want there. It's a terrible thought: it makes wells in my heart gasp for water, silences my words, dries my mouth, and breaks all the spells and curses.

I beat you with someone better. We've twined our fingers into sailors' knots and untwined them at night. And he saw the color of my eyes and took my sighs away and erased my mistakes reading the lines of my palm, the scabs on my knees and the frostbite on my fingers – and wiped the tear from my cheek, licked it and said *It tastes of woods and meadows...*

and he saw inside my body and awakened it, and tucked in that child that sleeps underneath my bones, curled for warmth, and when I woke up – he knew how to let me go.

I beat you triumphantly. I was an army with war flags waving free, I was a sight to behold. You would have bet against yourself on the battlefield if you'd seen me. Without you, I was the best myself.

I beat you with kindness. And I am done. My life reflects the name they gave me.

I beat you with the love I used to feel for you.  
And that, you will never forgive yourself.

## **Rock-paper-scissors**

*(The one who cares less wins)*

when man comes face to face with a woman  
the one who cares less wins  
when man stands face to face with a man  
the one who is less of a man wins  
when a woman looks a woman in the eye  
the one with more innocent hands wins  
when reality comes face to face with dreams  
the loser is the one who can be seen, caught, shot  
when reality faces reality  
I don't know  
I'm still searching for at least one of those  
with all my senses  
when a dream meets a dream  
again, I don't know  
I only had one  
and that was long ago  
when the sky meets the sea  
the only winner is in-your-face kitsch  
when the sky meets the sea under my bones  
I lose (myself) in downward slant and italics  
when the sky meets a bird  
the loser is the ground, obviously  
when a face meets its reflection  
another clear outcome  
every morning everywhere, after every sleepless night  
the face loses to its reflection on the screen  
when a night faces the morning  
in a haze of barely tangible wakefulness  
the losers are dreams and beauty  
night after night after my night  
when a coast touches a coast  
the loser is the river  
and yes I know that's what bridges are for  
don't  
just don't  
when alpha faces omega  
collateral damage could write a greek tragedy  
a myth  
when a girl faces a myth  
collateral damage is girlhood  
gone  
when past meets past  
in the rear-view mirror  
what's been written by victors?  
has it even been written  
or are we yet to face the battle against ourselves

armed with a  
brand  
new  
rear-view mirror  
when your word faces mine  
man's against woman's  
victorious is no-one  
an uneasy unsigned truce on no-one's land  
when the male gaze meets pure female skin  
twice  
the gaze spits on the truth  
not even once  
the truth succumbs  
three lies before the rooster crows  
the female voice  
buries the friendship  
when two poems come face to face  
most points go to the one with most arrows  
when all the poems come together  
among everything that was good  
all the poems about me  
the poems that knew me  
the crown goes to the one that forgave me  
for not being enough

when all the poems come together  
on roads I haven't stumbled on  
the winner is the poem  
the poem is the winner  
although life can make you believe it isn't  
but what does life know about  
poetry  
what does life know about  
balls out of play  
life is a near-sighted linesman  
poetry-deaf  
but ready to call an out  
for me  
who loves everything but me  
the unloved poem is the one to love

when a game faces a game  
when childhood innocence looks into the eye of bitter failed adulthood  
rock-paper-scissors  
I say paper wins  
I've always seen it win  
in the trembling times  
of growing pains and flesh wounds  
in these times  
incurable

when stone faces paper  
the winner is the paper  
with a poem written on it  
feel free to cast the first stone  
if you disagree  
throw a rock at the poem  
this one or any other  
at words on paper  
at me  
verbavolant, poems remain  
stones fly away even faster

the one who cares less wins for sure  
but I've never cared less  
I've cared more  
than anyone in the world  
my victories didn't look the part

I beat whistling arrows with quiet verse

I beat stones by wrapping my self around them  
like paper

picture that

## DON'T!

Page 93. of a book I liked:

*Love comes around when you least expect it and don't look for it.*

I'm not expecting you at all. I'm not looking for you.  
I have zero interest in you.  
Still, be warned: don't show your face at my door.  
I will not open.  
Honestly, I can't stand you. You're a bad egg. Spoiled and insufferable.  
You give me dark circles. You make me suffer.

And I haven't thought of you in... Good God, who knows how long  
(*one thousand four hundred sixty-two days, sixteen hours and twenty-one minutes*)  
I don't even remember you any more.  
So we've promised each other we'd never part,  
our thoughts would be one,  
our souls would breathe the same breath walking side by side.  
Whatever. I've forgotten all that.  
In any language I still remember (all foreign to me now)  
I'll swear on both murmuring black wells  
on thousand and one night of crumpled letters  
on three mountains of untranslated stories and fifty-seven meandering poems  
that I haven't given you a single thought.

Not even one.

Not only am I not expecting you, not only am I not looking for you...  
I forbid you to show up.  
What do you mean, why? I just *do*. There. As simple as that.  
I can do anything I want to. I am the strong one. I've always been the strong one.  
I came first in every cross country marathon, every job ad, every pop-psych test;  
I am a 100 out of 100 in one hundred attempts,  
I am an impossible dream come true  
... a dream everyone else was too scared to dream.

I don't need you.

But if you're still too stupid to stay away – I already know I won't hear you ring the bell.  
I've cut the wires.  
Don't bother to knock – I won't hear that, either.  
I'm too busy with life.  
Don't bother to knock – I'm too busy working breathlessly and writing breathlessly and going out  
breathlessly and traveling and making friends  
... and loving. Breathlessly.

Yes – loving? So what?

Yes – I've been kissed, yes – I've been touched,

my eyes have been looked into, my necklace nibbled, my fingers unclenched...  
So, there. I can live without you.  
Breathlessly.

I can go on like this forever; breathlessly. And never open the door.  
Even if you sleep on my doorstep forever.  
Even if you wait for me one thousand four hundred sixty-two days, sixteen hours and twenty-one  
minutes  
like I didn't wait for you.

Even if you besiege me for ten years, with one thousand Achaean ships.  
I can live through *The Iliad* three times and still have breath to write four more  
all in rhyme, all in heroic hexameter, and never miss a beat  
and never go weak;  
I've hoarded so much inside my walls I could feed all your armies  
... twice.  
Don't bother bringing presents, either. *Timeo Danaos*, says the warning under my spyhole.

So be wise – for once – and give up.  
It's all in vain.

But if you still ring that bell  
and if it happens to work  
and if I happen to open  
and if I happen not to shoot on sight  
or chase you away with water or broom or incense, or a fateful final canto;  
if I allow you to peek for one second behind the rampart wide... if.  
If you catch a glimpse – peeking in through the spyhole – of the unseeing eyes and purplish dark  
circles...  
Know that I was waiting for someone else.

And if he happens to have your face... you're thinking upside down:  
it's you that have his face.

And if that face happens to be perfect...  
Well, who would want an imperfect enemy anyway?



## The Killer

that one time after I killed love with a verse

I thought...

so I'm the one who finally put a stop to that love too,

I'm the one who one day dressed in red,

took the sword into her hands and...

...

...

I'm the one who then received applause and had confetti thrown at her...

I'm the pro bono killer who gladly done the dirty work...

*(I have to somehow start breathing)*

I thought...

this is how it feels to be someone that does not have time to realize they've led a tiger on

a silk leash,

someone who just committed manslaughter,

someone who out of their own rotten nature swerved suddenly into

the unforgivable nature of crime,

*(inhale - exhale - you can do it...)*

I thought...

so these are the hands that have turned all their blades into pens,

struck with them,

and then threw them onto the floor, horrified.

*(you can... slowly... inhale...)*

I thought - for all who draw the pen...

*(...exhale)*

sorry - said the sword and let out a wail.

I exhaled.

I watched her lying on the floor, bloodless. put

my ear to her lips, and then, in a panic,

as many times before, tried to catch her breath in

my mirror.

she did not breathe.

I created you.

*(not breathing)*

I've carried you all my life *(you can... slowly... inhale...)* with bandages on my hands...

*(inhale - exhale - you can do it...)*

I've conquered you...

*(you can do it... inhale...)* I

executed you *(exhale...)*

I will breathe life into you again...

*(inhale...)*

exhale... inhale... exhale...

inhale.

*so when you say that our breaths would separate from our souls with each step we take together*

*... I know exactly what you mean.*

## What do you mean, how?

if you had been read from a palm  
if I had been warned about you all my life  
if you had found me anyway  
if I were been sorry I were late  
if you were pale and sickly, sending crumpled paper by a four-horse carriage u  
if you were strong and tall and made my knees buckle with one look  
if my dress turned red and burned every time I looked at you  
if the entire Nevsky Prospect was a line on your palm  
if you were shameless and insane  
if you were a poet or illiterate  
if you were to woo me in sixteen languages I knew and two more, smooth and Russian-sounding  
if you were awfully young or frighteningly old  
if you stole everything I owned  
if you asked me for what I'd never had  
and found it  
if you had a sparkle in your eye  
like a never-setting sun  
winking  
if you knew everything about me and never needed to ask  
if you had to ask and ask and ask  
if you found every quivering path  
of mine  
if I envied the quiver  
although mine  
if my lips turned blue without you  
if you never lost me  
if you never misplaced me  
if you charged and attacked me  
if you hunted me down  
if you were a verb wrapped around my bellybutton  
if you were a noun on the tip of my tongue  
if you had a birthmark over your upper lip

and never let me trace it with my finger

that's how you do it.

so what do you mean, how?

### **Insert an Intruder into the Letter**

No, I don't write stories, or ballads, or epitaphs.

Not even plays for which I once had a very God-given gift. My  
whole life I've been writing one and the same letter.

During those full moon nights it was mostly translated by inexperienced  
students

and autodidact botanists, thinking that it would be them who would know exactly where that  
blade of grass which heals me grows  
and every bitter wound it conveys, everyone by now knows verbatim.

My whole life I'm writing one and the same love letter.

And sometimes someone mistakenly wanders into it... and does not know how to escape. And  
sometimes someone mistakenly finds themselves in it... and wants to  
dwell on too long.

And only once is it this segment, right here

My words always attract two kinds of fears: that I'll go and that I'll stay.

And only once it's been precisely this worry: that there is no place for fear, that all the  
peaks have already been mastered, all seas crossed, but the wonders have ceased.

The third fact with which I could hardly ever cope is that the  
third petal has no name;

Loves me... Loves me not...

Appropriate words and names grow less and less in number, and for the most part I already squandered them all.

And just when I had that “once” wrongly named this petal I knew I disappointed my four best friends, three male improbabilities and this one me that I write.

But my fear was wondrous  
...and so eloquent.

On just a millimeter of my skin he wrote three thousand epistles.  
And at the end he gently tattooed silence on my left shoulder.

## The room

we're measuring walls to tear down  
I'm planning in my head  
you've got the space  
I've got the vision  
and, OK, sure, there's things to be torn down  
but it's not my fault  
is it  
I just sketched a bit  
a door over here  
a sink over there  
for a sip of water  
a table to sit and eat  
a window to let in some sun  
and make it one big instead of two small  
that blocks the light  
don't you agree?  
you say you don't want stone pretending to be wood  
I agree  
we have a plan, you and me  
split-level floors  
you look at my plans  
and then lay the groundwork  
light partitions  
your arms are fine beams  
and I slip between them  
soft  
like wool insulation  
we have to keep warm, don't we?  
and then a layer of cardboard and plaster  
for me to write on  
double-sided single entendre  
you decide on the color scheme  
take your time  
I'll write your name,  
you tell me,  
on that tile over there  
I laugh  
don't you know I've been here all along?  
I'm the wool, the cardboard  
the partition wall  
of the room you've been living in

## **The face of the dream**

I shook out a dream this morning  
downwind  
like a towel heavy with salty sand  
the wind swept it back  
into my well-rested eyes  
onto my face  
into the creases left there by the pillow  
I hugged  
like the sea leaves dunes  
in the sand

I shook out a dream this morning  
downwind  
the wind swept it back  
like a million grains of sand from my reef  
like the beach I played on as a child  
the shore where sailors ran aground  
like the grain  
where I ran aground  
and forgot

## Guilty

you think me guilty  
for not allowing them to love me *their* way  
for demanding it be *my way or the highway*  
for waiting too long, leaving too soon,  
forgiving without cause and insisting on anger  
for eating like a bird and working like a horse  
for sleeping too little and dreaming too much  
for walking like a zombie and showing up uninvited  
for leaving invited  
for giving myself with abandon and keeping to myself  
for playing offense like Brazil  
and defense like a homeland...  
for keeping my silence and writing my heart out  
for trusting blindly  
lying in your face  
averting my eyes  
putting walls  
and shedding my skin.

for having loved too much, once.

I say you're the guilty one  
for showing up too late.



## **My Majesty**

I bought a queen-sized bed  
as tall and sturdy as a house  
I haven't had to sleep on the floor for a while  
this is a bed I need to climb up to  
not lie down on  
It's so high I'm above it all  
And it feel so good falling asleep seems a waste of time  
It feels wrong to miss out on enjoying it  
So I still have trouble sleeping  
I use it for other things, though;  
eating fruit, writing poems, making phone calls, laughing  
Listening to my kids wine about money  
Telling them to go take it from my wallet  
I ain't getting up.  
Your Majesty, they call me,  
Finally, I have a throne.  
And I found it in an Ikea catalog,  
under queen-size beds.  
It took them two days to build it;  
my father, my son and my brother.

## **Sweeping wind**

Violent wind swept my dreams last night  
a sea storm  
raging in the little apartment  
I called home  
and felt safe in  
(I knew that)  
but never really lived there  
The whole place was swaying like an inflatable boat  
bought long ago  
to some spoiled brats we were supposed to look after  
while they learn how to swim  
Not my kids, or yours  
You pulled the boat out of the shed  
and dropped it onto the blue  
to appease the brats, maybe  
or to use leftover free days  
You didn't even look at the already gray piece of the sky  
clouds moving in  
You didn't even remember all the brats  
you and I never had  
already knew how to swim  
and were no longer drowning inside me carried by the current of your touch  
You had forgotten  
you'd thrown the baby out with the bathwater  
Why did you even come here?, I screamed  
Get out of my face, I screamed  
chewing words  
famished  
Spitting them out into the darkness  
unchewed  
where there were no seagulls to grab them  
I spit them down the wind  
raging  
pinning aground all the forgiveness in the world  
Go away, I said; go away and never come back  
And turned my back  
Not wanting to watch you leave my boat  
leaving with nothing but your astonishment  
of a child, hopeful,  
who had forgotten he was a man  
with a face of a manchild  
And so I never saw you leave  
but I felt it  
The sky went quiet  
I thought once the joy of your return would silence it  
but now, like thunder, love  
that had seeped from me

roared  
I lay down on the deck and wept  
for not loving you any more  
and then woke up soaked  
in my boat with sheets and pillows  
crumpled  
tormented by the storm  
And I remember well  
My apartment and the deck and the children we never had  
And your face that had gotten old  
I know it used to be mine and  
I loved it like crazy  
The only thing I don't know  
is  
who  
you are.

## **I sharpened the butter knife**

as we sat down to eat  
not hungry at all  
I'm staring straight ahead  
into milk buns  
dried out in  
our daily bread basket  
your eyes riveted to a napkin  
carefully folded cone  
on my plate  
aware of the emptiness  
my pet peeve  
nothingness wrapped in linen  
where endless landscapes were meant to be  
but never mind  
I always have been  
a white-faced diplomat's wildest dream  
and I'll stick to the protocol  
even with crusty eyes  
still sleepy

I push off the table  
my chair squeaks a bit  
as does the tableware drawer  
in which my hand goes without thinking  
carelessly  
drawer gaping like a crack in the rock  
I climbed once, not long ago  
porous rock  
crumbling  
collapsing in itself  
*What's the matter with you rock*  
Nina Simone  
followed me all the way down

*Oh, sinnerman*  
crumbling or not, stone isn't food  
it's just a chip on my shoulder  
I've beetrying to shake  
maybe the question is  
do we still need  
our daily bread  
should we all go  
low-carb  
and  
low-profile  
But that's not the question for me  
Underfed

never on a diet  
never clean-cut  
although ready to follow the protocol  
of the last breakfast

I don't know if you're looking at me  
as I fumble around the empty tableware drawer  
I keep telling myself I don't care  
it won't matter, anyway  
I've sharpened the butter knife this morning  
and as I was doing that  
it never crossed my mind  
knives can be  
heated

## **The gun and me**

I made cookies for the thing at school  
six trays  
with filling and all  
Russian tea cookies and Proust's Madeleines  
and then arranged them on a platter  
covered with cellophane  
folded over carefully  
and glued with a glue gun  
hot

I think it's 100 degrees  
the glue  
and I was careless for a second  
touched the clear hot lava  
glued my finger to the cellophane  
the pain shot through me  
through the bone  
OK, not really, but...  
God, I cried

and had a meltdown  
over a tray of cookies  
with a gun in my hand

## **As if I had a clue**

yesterday my dramatic younger child  
had a rough day  
*this was the worst day of my life, mom*  
she said through tears  
and then said  
*we both cried*  
and then said  
*I always cry a lot*  
*but for him it was the third time ever*  
and said a couple of more times  
third time ever  
and added, shaking  
*we almost broke up*

and I talked for hours  
about life  
about love  
about relationships  
about boys  
about freedom  
about freedom to be who you are  
about freedom to let others be who they are  
about love again

as if I had a clue

## When did you get so big David

when did you get so big David  
and how many times  
you're tall like your dad  
but your shoes are already bigger  
sometimes in the evening  
I'll notice them: size 46 in the hallway  
and it makes me remember your tiny feet  
I used to lift to my eyes  
to soothe them, long ago  
As the nature slept this winter  
your legs in their Mustang jeans  
(I had to talk you into)  
became a man's legs somehow  
I saw them the other day  
hairy  
sticking out of last year's shorts  
now too small  
and pretended I still recognized them  
pretended they weren't two new guests in our home  
that will take getting used to  
like your voice took getting used to  
your voice that makes me want to hear you sing  
your voice that makes me wish I heard it more  
singing  
playing guitar behind closed door  
pressing strings with your grown-up fingers  
you take after your dad's side, I say  
but then, you're so skinny  
your body is like mine, sadly  
we never should have let you drop swimming  
but you insisted on playing soccer  
you've always known exactly what you wanted  
that's one thing you got from no-one  
but yourself  
But still, tell me when you got so big, David  
overnight, obviously  
but which night?  
must have been one of those nights  
I fell asleep before you did  
drained out  
but you had stayed up  
Or maybe it was day  
that day I realized you were no longer mine to raise  
just to talk to  
Or that day you left me speechless  
with your brains and words  
with how right you were



Yes, it was probably that last one –  
unless it was the one I realized how tiny I was  
and fretted over you missing me in the crowd  
Although – I wish it was the day you lofted me off the floor  
instead of saying hello  
as if I was the child and you the parent  
The day you kissed my head from above  
after not giving me a peck for the longest time  
especially in public  
Maybe that's where you got so big; in the public  
in the street  
That's probably it: I haven't even recognized you the other day  
and you were walking straight toward me  
Or maybe it was the opposite  
maybe you grew up behind closed doors  
of a bathroom  
I wouldn't know, would I?  
You've been hiding from the camera lately  
ever since you got so big  
the freshest photo is three years old already  
and any photo I manage to take  
ends up erased  
and I keep telling you to grow up and stop doing that  
None of this is fair, David  
Your silence  
closed doors with light seeping,  
me on the other side  
with my theories  
on the other side of the exit to life.  
Or even worse – alone with my theories right next to you  
my head on your bony shoulder  
as we're watching a movie we miraculously both like  
Or driving you somewhere,  
you in the passenger's seat  
your knees up to your chin  
all bent  
looking almost ridiculous  
switching radio stations  
spitting out apathetic answers  
about school and life  
and then the next moment you say something so cool  
I envy myself because you're mine  
This isn't cool any more, David;  
tell me when it happened  
It must have been tonight, I'm sure it was today  
You're asleep, peaceful, unaware  
I have just taken the perfect photo  
I caught you  
not with my camera, though  
But still good perfect to make me realize

you're going to need new jeans  
again.

**No title**

these kids are not like me  
I played school even after school  
these armies are not like mine  
my army dies without a worthy cause  
this man is not like you  
he loves me without a reason  
this world is the most perfect world  
of all the worlds I've never been to

## What we gave to love

No matter the final score or the average time  
No matter if we've found the one  
Or our longing had the last laugh on all horizons ahead  
No matter if we were seen as who we think we are  
Or misunderstood every step of the way  
No matter the breakdowns, divorces, lies...  
All the firm decisions turned false alarms  
No matter if we were able to understand  
And be understood  
If we were given a chance to give  
And receive what we most yearned for  
If we allowed them to love us  
Or put spokes in their wheels

No matter if we wanted to patch things up  
And made it  
Or threw it all away  
Slammed into ground and stomped on it

No matter if we ever gave back  
What we'd spent a long time taking  
No matter what

What we gave to love  
Is ours forever

...

*I can only speak for myself  
But I'm not to be trusted  
Since as of today very short hair again graces my very long neck  
I have new earrings  
And a new skirt  
Long, all the way to my ankles  
With ten percent metallic thread  
And I'm no longer skinny because I've lost four kilos  
And once again I'm beautiful and empty  
And I'm Googling pedestrian bridges  
Because after all I'm working on one  
And bridges aren't really my forte  
I've had the weirdest day (based on a true story)  
and failed to deliver a signed book, a heavy hitter  
I Googled love last night as well  
(4.530.000.000 results in 0,10 seconds)  
and realized, for the umpteenth time, that's not my forte, either  
I'm a repeated love offender  
and what I gave to love is forever mine*

*and I know how to wear it with my new skirt  
and four kilos less  
I know how to wear it when you're beautiful and empty*

*I can only speak for myself  
but again, I can't be trusted  
I've always found life unbearably easy  
and although this bridge is giving me trouble  
I've never shied away from difficult tasks*

*I can only speak for myself  
but as I watch other women prance around, light  
and men strut their broad shoulders  
what I want to know is*

*How do they carry the weight of what they once gave to love?*

### **I remained... (what goes around comes around)**

before I realized what was important was remaining true to myself, for the longest time I thought I needed to change  
before I realized I didn't want to change myself, for the longest time I believed I could change the world  
before I thought I could change the world, I believed the world would change for me  
before I believe the world would change for me, for the longest time I wanted to stop writing for  
before I tried to stop writing, I kept telling myself *never again*  
before I first said *never again*, for the longest time I thought *forever*  
before I first though *forever*, for the longest time I had no thoughts... I was happy  
before I was happy, I cried long and hard  
before I cried long and heard, I was named after tears  
before I was named after tears, no one knew I would be true to my fragile name  
before I was true to my fragile name, I never knew I'd be unbreakable  
before I was unbreakable, I burst every sinful stitch  
before I burst every sinful stitch, I thought I could be perfect  
before I thought I could be perfect, I was loved unconditionally  
before I was loved unconditionally, I had no idea love could be given  
before I learned love was given, I thought in love there were no rules  
before I thought in love there were no rules, I believed what was important was remaining true to myself  
and so I remained