CROATIAN LITERATURE REHR

Robert Perišić

"Robert Perisic is a light bright with intelligence and twinkling with irony, flashing us the news that postwar Croatia not only endures but matters."

- Jonathan Franzen
on *Our Man in Iraq*

"This jivey — and I should say x-rated — story stays with us. "

- Alan Cheuse, NPR
on *Our Man in Iraq*

"A must-read... brilliantly captures modern-day Zagreb."

- The Guardian
on *Our Man in Iraq*

Robert Perišić is a prominent Croatian writer and journalist.

Perisic was born in 1969 in Split, Croatia. He lives in Zagreb and works as free-lance writer.

His books are authentic portrayals of society in transformation and its (anti)heroes.

Robert Perisic published a poetry collection entitled *Dvorac Amerika* (*Castle America*, 1995), two short story collections, *Možeš pljunuti onoga tko bude pitao za nas* (*You Can Spit on the One Who'll Ask for Us*, 1999) and *Užas i veliki troškovi* (*Horror and Huge Expenses*, 2002), a novel *Naš čovek na terenu* (*Our Man in Iraq*, 2007), a theatre play *Kultura u predgrađu* (*Culture in the Suburbs*, 1997) and a screenplay for Dalibor Matanić's film *100 minuta Slave* (*100 Minutes of Glory*, 2004). He was editor of the *Godine* and *Godine nove* magazines. During nineties he published literary reviews in the *Feral Tribune* weekly. Currently he publishes literary column in the *Globus* weekly.

His novel *Naš čovjek na terenu* (*Our Man in Iraq*), published in 2007, was a bestseller in Croatia and received the prestigious Croatian literary award *Jutarnji list*. The German edition of the novel (*Unser Mann vor Ort*) also received "Literaturpreis der Steiermärkischen Sparkasse 2011" in Graz, Austria. The English edition of the novel is published in June 2012 by Istros Books. In April 2013 US edition came out and it won wide and unanimously postive press coverage.

FOREIGN RIGHTS:

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INFO

http://ourmaniniraq.com/press-and-praise-for-our-man-in-iraq/

http://www.timeoutcroatia.com/culture/literature/robert-perisic/

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MAIN WORKS:

Castle America (*Dvorac Amerika*), poetry

You Can Spit On The One Who'll Ask For Us
(*Možeš pljunuti onoga tko bude pitao za nas*), short stories

Horror and Huge Expenses (*Užas i veliki troškovi*), short stories

Our Man in Iraq (*Naš čovjek na terenu*), novel - **Jutarnji list Prize**, Zagreb, 2008; **Literaturpreis der Steiermärkischen Sparkasse**, Graz, 2011

Introduction to Funny Dance (*Uvod u smiješni ples*), autobiographical prose

Sometime Later (*Jednom kasnije*), poetry

Culture in Suburb (*Kultura u predgrađu*), play
(staged 2000-2002. in Drama Theatre "Gavella", Zagreb)

100 Minutes of Glory (*100 minuta Slave*), screenplay, film director Dalibor Matanić

TRANSLATIONS:

You Can Spit On The One Who'll Ask For Us: Serbia (B92), Hungary (Gondolat Kiadó)

Horror and Huge Expenses: Slovenia (Beletrina), Serbia (B92), Czech Republic (Větrné mlýny)

Our Man in Iraq: Serbia (Profil Belgrade), Bulgaria (Damyan Yakov), Macedonia (Makedonska reč), Slovenia (Beletrina), Austria (Leykam Buchverlag), Italy (Zandonai), UK (Istros Books), US (Black Balloon Publishing)

RIGHTS SOLD:

Our Man in Iraq: Sweden (Gavrilo förlag), Czech Republic (Art Libri), Turkey (Final), Egypt (Ibn Roshd), Ethiopia (Hohe)

" . . . terrifically witty and original. . ."
– The Toronto Star
on *Our Man in Iraq*

"How deeply satisfying it is to hear Perisic's wry voice take a different angle, and tell a different story."
– ZYZZYVA
on *Our Man in Iraq*

"It is a refreshing reminder of the new global village to read a novel like Robert Perisic's Our Man in Iraq, which studies the fighting in Baghdad from the distant shores of Croatia."
– The Boston Globe
on *Our Man in Iraq*

Robert Perišić
Our Man in Iraq

(excerpt from a novel)

Saddam is a young villager from the outskirts of Basra. He was named after the president. What can he do? He spreads his hands, spreads his hands wide like a scarecrow, and I spread mine too, spread mine wide, and we chat like two scarecrows in the field, except there are no crops, no plants, no grass, and no birds for us to scare away, only sand and scrap iron. His village, said Saddam, is in a bad place, a very bad place. There's fire there, he says, a lot of fire, so he stuck all his goats in a pickup truck and took to the road like Kerouac, except there's no literature, no Neal Cassady, no poetry, no shade under the vine, as they say back home. His tire burst, and Saddam the goatherder was out on the Basra-Baghdad highway, with a flat tire and there was no spare. So Saddam is patching his tire, the goats are bleating in the pickup, an idyllic scene. Abrams tanks pass by, all looking ahead, amassed forces around Saddam's goats. I crouch beside him, looking at the tire, as if I'm going to help, but I don't.

When he started to send me his psychedelics, I called him by satellite phone. He acted as if he didn't hear me well, a bad connection. Since then he hadn't been in touch by phone. He wrote that it's dangerous, they can be located, but he continued to send emails every day—he didn't care that we were a weekly.

Then I wrote him an email telling him to come back. No answer.

I parked near our apartment block in front of the Last Minute travel agency. In the window big letters advertised thailand, new york, cuba, tibet, malaga, kenya. Every day you could decide at the last minute.

Would I go to Cuba? Or to New York—the center of the universe? Or to Tibet, to have a revelation and come back a new person?

That wouldn't be bad, I thought.

I saw straight away how he looked at me when we met a month ago in Zagreb after years of not seeing each other.

The layout guy Zlatko had had a baby daughter that day and treated us to a round of drinks; afterward I went and sat in the bar close to the office to wait for Boris. Cuz was over half an hour late.

I expected he'd got lost. But then I saw him coming along the street, glancing around cautiously. His gait took me back to when we were teenagers and greeted each other loudly with a clap on the shoulder and a yell of "Hey, old chum." We learned a rakish swagger: walking broad-legged with our hands in our pockets as it if was cold. We put on a show of enthusiasm when we met in bars and clubs because we were relying on each other in the event of a fight, I guess.

He was wearing orange-tinted shades and smiled like a mafioso pretending to be a Buddhist. Sinewy, with a longish face, we'd always been similar. He even had a streak of color in his hair, a yellowish stripe behind his ear. He looked quite urbane. You could tell he didn't live in our village, which incidentally has expanded quite a bit but still isn't a city, so we called it a "settlement."

But Boris lived in Split—cuz was a city boy, good on him. I wouldn't need to feel embarrassed if anyone I knew passed by. He acted so sluggishly that I thought he was smacked out.

But he said he'd been clean for a long time. Now he told me he'd come to the big smoke because, like, there's no perspective back 'ome. He wore his underdoggery in a slightly high-handed way like victims of the system do. Soon he took out some sheets of paper and handed them to me.

The pages were densely typed with a worn ribbon—you could hardly see the words, but I made them out best I could as he just stared straight ahead, smiling at the fruit juice he'd ordered, smoking Ronhills and blithely blowing rings.

He'd given me poems in prose on some intangible topic. Never mind, I thought, at least he was literate, and that was something.

"You need to take this to a literary magazine and let them have a look," I said.

"It doesn't matter. I can do any kind of writing." He started tapping with his leg. His smile faded.

"Look, this is literature of sorts, it's special in its own right. For newspapers you need to write concisely."

"That's even easier."

"If there's an opening, I'll let you know."

"Fine," he said, as if I was abandoning him.

When he asked me what my girlfriend did I felt like I was boasting.

Once, long ago, we listened to the same records and were so alike in dress and behavior that old grandma Lucija could hardly tell us apart; and now look at us. I recognized myself in him but watching him now I seemed to remind him of some form of injustice. He looked at me like an apparition that had been magically beamed from the summertime shallows where we played "keepy-uppy" in our swimming trunks, into the actors' jet set, and from there had skydived down into a newspaper office overflowing with cash.

"I could write what no one else will," Boris said "It's no sweat for me."

"Shall we have another drink?"

"I've only got 20 kunas."

"It's on me."

I ordered another beer and he—I couldn't believe it— another juice. The conversation wasn't going to get more fluid.

"Don't you drink?" I asked.

"Now and then."

I launched into a spiel about my drinking habits—an inane, incoherent story. But I had to say something so we wouldn't sit there like two logs. We sat there for a little longer and finally he mentioned his degree, which he hadn't been able to finish.

"Sorry, what was it that you studied again? I just remember it was pretty exotic."

"Arabic."

"Iraq," I said, thinking, thinking. Rabar, the only true go-getter on the staff, had defected to GEP a month earlier, and he was now reporting for the competitors in Kuwait. Here was a job in the offing.

"Morocco," He said sadly.

"What about Morocco?"

"Dad was chief engineer; we had servants and a pool. Then—wham!—the old man had a heart attack. Right there by the pool."

"Yes. I know."

He'd gone to the international school, but they also learned Arabic. Every time he thought of something in Arabic he'd remember his old man. Once he'd overheard two Arabs talking in the street; he followed them to a café, sat at the next table, and listened to them. He understood everything they said. After that he enrolled in Arabic in Sarajevo but couldn't finish uni because the war began.

"OK, and now have a think about this," I said. "Would you go to Iraq? The Yanks are going to attack any day."

"Sure!"

"Now, our guy who went to war zones had his ways of doing things. I don't know how, but he always coped. He sent things by mail—the photos and the texts. There are also these satellite phones."

"No probs, I'll get the hang of it."

"Have a good think. It's war."

"No sweat."

"Sure?"

"Peace has become a problem for me."

He'd been there for a month.

When Sanja entered the apartment I was pretending to read a Jimi Hendrix biography. I must have looked even more dejected than I felt.

"Are you angry? Listen, I really couldn't go and see the flat," she said straight away. "I ran into a journalist from *The Daily News*."

"You're joking, from GEP? How long did you talk for?"

"An hour maybe. Plus the photo shoot."

"That's more than a little statement. Was it a proper interview?"

"Don't worry, I was careful not to let any cats out of the bag," she smiled, noticing the remnants of the pizza on the table.

"I've already eaten, I couldn't wait," I said.

"No trouble. We ordered a whole pile of kebabs. Do I stink? I don't caaare." She imitated a naughty child and fumigated me with her onion breath, trying to kiss me while I kept trying to evade her.

In the end I let her kiss me, but then it wasn't fun for her anymore.

"Have Jerman and Doc been cramming their lines?"

"Ingo has moved the dress rehearsal to eleven in the evening. He has to work with them before that. But the craziest thing is he gives me more shit than he does to any of the others. I mean, they disrupt me too, but he comes down on me to assert his authority."

"Well well, the progressive vents his fury on the girls!"

"All he tells me is that I have to act like a punk. His spiel is, like, I have to rebel against how others see that role." She imitated his way of smoking while constantly looking up at the ceiling. "He shouts at me all day."

"He's obviously panicking. You all are."

"I know. But today I was about to tell him where he could stick it. If punk's what you want, punk's what you'll get."

I adored her like this: her pugnacity, her independence, her attitude.

"Well, tell him where he can shove it!" I said.

"I will!"

"He should think twice, it's too late to throw you out now!"

I wanted her to feel my support. She had to act with conviction and show she was prepared to defend herself. She wasn't going to swear at the director, but she should at least feel that she could.

Sanja was against Boris going to Iraq, against the war, against anyone writing about such a spectacle, against infotainment, and I had an inkling she wasn't exactly enthusiastic about my relatives either. OK, neither am I, but I always defended them.

I assured her that it wasn't because he was a relative of mine but because he was the right person for the job—he knew Arabic, he was literate, and war wasn't a problem for him. I'd spared her all the details but I had to talk to someone so I gave her a quick rundown of the situation and, of course, it all

sounded like a confirmation that she was right.

"A mistake," I concluded.

"You're too sentimental. Your relatives are just using you."

"Can we talk about something else?"

"I had a kind of premonition, but you were so enthusiastic about him."

"Who me? Enthusiastic?"

"Don't get angry. You're just a bit naive, you misjudge people."

She waited for me to say something.

I waited too.

Not until our third summer together did we set off on an official tour to meet the in-laws: several days with hers, several days with mine.

It looked a bit like an actor's workshop: we watched each other fine-tune our performance, took care that the other didn't put their foot in their mouth, sat at the table stiffly and respectably and exchanged pleasantries in regional slang. I didn't exactly know my lines. But I talked about the high price of living, various ailments, and car accidents.

They asked us about our life in Zagreb in a well-intentioned, worried tone and suspected we were living the wrong way; we tried to stick to factual matters and somehow extricate ourselves because we couldn't openly admit that we aimed to live a life diametrically opposed to theirs.

It was interesting that we weren't able to tell them anything about our life as it really happened. When you looked at it, there was hardly anything to say. Our life barely existed, as if it had been left behind in some secret argot, where I had also left my real being, while this impostor sat at the table, enumerated bland facts, nattered about traffic, and introduced himself to her parents as me. His gaze wandered around the flat. At Sanja's parents' there was nowhere to look—there was no empty space. Her mother had a morbid fear of open spaces and the flat was so crammed that there was hardly any air to breathe.

On our second morning there, Sanja suggested to her mother that they knock down the wall between the kitchen and the living room to gain more space, and I made the mistake of seconding the idea. Her mother glanced at me in consternation. She was used to her daughter having strange ideas but was disappointed that Sanja had found the same sort of guy. She immediately ridiculed the idea with her Mediterranean temperament. She spoke exclusively to Sanja— you could tell that she couldn't discuss such intimate topics as knocking down the wall with me. Probably Sanja wanted to appear a mature adult in front of me, so she kept contradicting her mother, and not just about the wall. You couldn't really call it an argument, more a mutual show of disrespect, which seemed to keep them cheerful in a way and create a special closeness. Their taunting and teasing actually showed how much they were at home.

I couldn't talk with her mother like that—I respected her—so I was condemned to silence. Also, my future motherin-law kept her jabs and wise-talk exclusively for Sanja, not me, because she respected me.

Having fallen silent about the wall, I found it hard to talk at all. Our people are like that: they'd always prefer to build a wall than knock one down. They always liked having two rooms rather than one.

I spoke very cautiously with Sanja's dad, of course. He had disappointment written on his brow. Politics was his particular chagrin; all the parties were a letdown. He watched the news avidly, read the newspaper, and was disappointed time and time again. That seemed to be his main occupation. He wanted to know if we journalists were disappointed too. "Oh yes!" I exclaimed and mentioned a few practical examples. I felt a kind of need to join him in disappointment, but maybe he thought I even wanted to outdo him in that because I was a journalist in Zagreb and had the opportunity to get disappointed firsthand, so in a way he didn't want to listen. Whenever I opened my mouth he'd start explaining how much Zagreb was out of step with the situation on the ground, which was one of the things that disappointed him most.

I sipped beer, slowly, and watched the news. The mass of empty beer cans grew, rattling in the rubbish bin until they were crushed down into a smaller pile.

I thought of telling Sanja that one actually didn't look so lost among all the little tables at my parents' place, after a drink or two.

"My folks have got a nice courtyard and a garden, you'll see," I said cheerfully.

Then we arrived and I saw the garage. They'd told me about the new garage and were pleased with themselves for fitting it perfectly into the courtyard. Using a remote control, they proudly opened up the garage as if they were officially opening a new production line.

Yep, my folks had become bourgeois, so to speak, and we sat there like we had at Sanja's folks'. The new edifice that had replaced the courtyard stuck out like a sore thumb. And you couldn't say anything against it. I was about to say a word and they came down on me like a ton of bricks. How dare I cruise in from Zagreb and lecture them—from Zagreb, mind you. Zagreb with its holier-than-thouness was like a red rag to a bull. They needed that new addition: our garage is our castle.

My mom whispered to Sanja, forging a female alliance, that she didn't need to listen to me all the time because men were stupid: let them have their whims. My father generally followed her remarks with a smile, and here and there heckled his old lady just for fun, which Sanja was supposed to find amusing. I tried to mediate these conversations as far as possible by drawing attention to myself, but my parents only had eyes for their daughter-in-law because, seeing as I'd brought her, it was clear to them that we were going to get married.

Then we were back in our rented flat. Things had stopped evolving and I didn't know exactly what we'd think up next, what lifestyle. We just had to avoid repeating the same old patterns, I told Sanja. We had to break through in a new direction, bore a tunnel, build a bold viaduct, whatever.

But then Boris had popped up, a feature in the landscape like my parents' garage. I simply couldn't explain to her the whole depth of the problem, so I turned the laptop toward her. "Read some of his stuff and tell me what you think."

Resistance is removed like a wart with a laser. I guess all this looks like a film when you see it on TV, the desert is just the right backdrop, as if you were colonizing Mars, you have no idea if there's any life there, you search for it, move on, there has to be something, at least bacteria or remains, fossils, fossil fuels, who knows what, you never know if the aliens have weapons of mass destruction, what level of technology they're at. Here's an embedded journalist, a Bush, Tudjman, or Miloševic man, someone's fan, please circle the correct answer, and he asked me what I thought about weapons of mass destruction, if there were any, and would they be used in the Battle for Baghdad. He provoked me because everyone somehow realizes that I'm an amateur, no idea how those pros tick, but of course Saddam's boys don't have weapons of mass destruction because you definitely wouldn't attack them if they did, so never fear, we can be calm, I said optimistically, and we toasted with alcohol-free beer. The people love me. What more can I say? I feel accepted, but then the storm begins, a wind from the south brings eddies of dust and fine, fine sand, it fills your mouth, nose and eyes, so we fled to the cars and sat in those closed cars all day, sweating, you can't see a thing, you don't dare to open a window, not in your wildest dreams, not in your wildest fucking dreams. The sand will make its way in, into your brain. Inside it's unbearably hot, brain waves, frequencies, bro, I wanted to call you just now to see what the weather's like there, but they told us to be careful with the Thuraya numbers because they could be located, rocketed, and there's no point in me getting charcoaled here just because of the weather.

Sanja smiled as she read. "He's just having fun." "I don't know if he's gone crazy or not." "I think it's tongue-in-cheek," she said. "He's messing me around, the dickhead! If anyone's the

object of that humor, it's me." "I don't find it all that weird, you know. He has no training
in your language. I think if someone sent me to tag along
behind the Yanks as if I was reporting on a sports event, I think
I'd kind of want to muck up too." "OK, I know you're against the war." "And why shouldn't I be? At least this guy is saying something; your paper doesn't have any position on the war."

"So basically you mean he's being subversive?"

"Consciously or not."

So they were the subversive ones, and I represented the system; they were on the side of freedom, and me—of repression. Sanja laughed as she read more. So he's witty, and I have no sense of humor? And I have to rack away at the crud he's written to patch it up while the young 'uns could let it all hang out.

"I'd publish it like that," she said.

"I can't publish that. We're a normal newspaper, not a fanzine for nutters."

"Yes, you lay down what's considered 'normal,'" she said.

"Tell that to Ingo. Sounds like you're a bigger punk at home than on the stage."

"That was below the belt."

"You're lecturing me as if I'd just started thinking about all this today! I know all that stuff! But that's how I get paid, and I'm having to take out that fucking loan. I know what's possible and what's not!"

"I'm lecturing you? You keep talking. *Stop yelling*."

The *Buena Vista Social Club* soundtrack sounded through the speakers. I'd seen the film and realized something was wrong with the Cubans. They were so much better than us.

I had a nose for talents and starlets, relatively gifted individuals with their hearts set on recognition and fame. Maybe the point was that for years I'd spent too much time in bars and knew every idiot. In a nutshell, I volunteered as the newspaper's human resources agent because whenever they needed someone young and enthusiastic they'd ask me.

That's how fresh blood arrived in journalism, including
even the Chief. It may sound strange, but I picked him up too, straight from a bar, back in the dawn of the democratic changes, and led him by the hand to the paper. Poetically put, his success was faster than the wind. Because our country has great social mobility. We don't have a stable elite. Socialism destroyed the old elites—what little bourgeoisie and provincial aristocracy we had, war and nationalism in the '90s destroyed the socialist elite. And then democracy happened and the remnants of the nationalist elite had to be done away with.

Defeated elites can survive in nooks and crannies. Oh yes, they can conduct their businesses and pull the strings from the shadows; but out in the light of day, in representative media we constantly needed new people. New columnists and opinion-makers, new faces, new photos. So, in the ten years of feverish change we'd gone through three media paradigms: socialist, wartime, democratic.

Uncompromised people were in short supply. If until recently you'd listened to Lou Reed, worked as a waiter, or studied viticulture, you now had the opportunity to put forth those new values. Democracy, pop culture, slow food. Without questioning capitalism, of course—we're not Reds!— so there was nothing you could do about the privatization that was pushed through in the '90s by the shock troops of happiness. The dough was safely stashed away and young media cadres came along to portray an idyll of Europeanization and normalization. After all, what else is there to do after the revolution has been carried out and the dough tucked away? What we needed now was harmony, security, consumers, and free individuals who paid off their loans. We could promote a little hedonism too, let people enjoy themselves, but within limits, of course, so as not to displease the Church.

We were a new society, a society with constantly changing backdrops and new illusions. We were all new at the game. There was no House of Lords, landed gentry, or old bourgeoisie, only the former socialist working people who'd spruced themselves up and now crowded forward in a carnivalesque exertion, grasping for the stars. The Eastern European post-communist version of the American dream did exist. Success depended on chance amidst the general turmoil and rapid repositioning. One of the ordinaries would be shot into orbit. But who?

The Chief had outdone me, there was no doubt about that. He became the great editor, while I was still collecting losers by the roadside. And Pero, as we know, was no longer the same person.

I'll never forget when Pero began to progress; for a time he shunned my gaze, greeted me hurriedly, avoided sitting at the same table as me. Had he forgotten who'd brought him to the office in the first place?

I always made the same mistake: I inadvertently reminded people of what they used to be.

Later I accepted him as a new person who had nothing to do with the waiter from Limited. Then he, in turn, accepted me again.

Logically thinking, I must have changed in some way too, despite my best efforts. If Pero became my boss nothing could stay the same.

I mentioned these things to Sanja, I think, but always with a laugh and a joke, as if I was wafting in a higher universe safe from so-called social values. Stuff from the world of careers didn't interest her anyway. She only saw love. Our love and love in the wider world. Ecology. Genuineness. She loved me just the way I was. It was only recently that she'd begun to follow the Career column of the horoscope.

And now, through nervous conversations, we'd begun to arrive at it, at the context—like in *Alien*, when the crew, after initial arrogance, begins to grasp the magnitude of the problems lurking in the cave in that distant galaxy.

Translated from Croatian by Will Firth