Classic Poetry Series

Czeslaw Milosz

- 64 poems -

Publication Date:

2013

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Czeslaw Milosz (30 June 1911 – 14 August 2004)

Polish poet, prose writer and translator of Lithuanian origin and subsequent American citizenship. His World War II-era sequence The World is a collection of 20 "naive" poems. He defected to the West in 1951, and his nonfiction book "The Captive Mind" (1953) is a classic of anti-Stalinism. From 1961 to 1998 he was a professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1980 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Life

Czesław Miłosz was born on June 30, 1911 in the village of Šeteniai (Kėdainiai district, Kaunas County) on the border between two Lithuanian historical regions of Samogitia and Aukštaitija in central Lithuania (then part of Russian empire). He was a son of Aleksander Miłosz, a civil engineer, and Weronika, née Kunat. His brother, Andrzej Miłosz (1917–2002), a Polish journalist, translator of literature and of film subtitles into Polish, was a documentary-film producer who created some Polish documentaries about his famous brother.

Miłosz emphasized his identity with the multi-ethnic Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a stance that led to ongoing controversies; he refused to categorically identify himself as either a Pole or a Lithuanian. He once said of himself: "I am a Lithuanian to whom it was not given to be a Lithuanian." Milosz was fluent in Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, English and French.

Miłosz memorialized his Lithuanian childhood in a 1981 novel, The Issa Valley, and in the 1959 memoir Native Realm. After graduating from Sigismund Augustus Gymnasium in Vilnius, he studied law at Stefan Batory University and in 1931 he traveled to Paris, where he was influenced by his distant cousin Oscar Milosz, a French poet of Lithuanian descent and a Swedenborgian. His first volume of poetry was published in 1934. After receiving his law degree that year, he again spent a year in Paris on a fellowship. Upon returning, he worked as a commentator at Radio Wilno, but was dismissed for his leftist views. Miłosz wrote all his poetry, fiction and essays in Polish and translated the Old Testament Psalms into Polish.

Miłosz spent World War II in Warsaw, under Nazi Germany's "General Government," where, among other things, he attended underground lectures by Polish philosopher and historian of philosophy and aesthetics, Władysław Tatarkiewicz. He did not participate in the Warsaw Uprising due to residing outside Warsaw proper.

After World War II, Miłosz served as cultural attaché of the communist

People's Republic of Poland in Paris. In 1951 he defected and obtained political asylum in France. In 1953 he received the Prix Littéraire Européen (European Literary Prize).

In 1960 Miłosz emigrated to the United States, and in 1970 he became a U.S. citizen. In 1961 he began a professorship in Polish literature in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1978 he received the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. He retired that same year, but continued teaching at Berkeley.

In 1980 Miłosz received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Since his works had been banned in Poland by the communist government, this was the first time that many Poles became aware of him.

When the Iron Curtain fell, Miłosz was able to return to Poland, at first to visit and later to live part-time in Kraków. He divided his time between his home in Berkeley and an apartment in Kraków.

In 1989 Miłosz received the U.S. National Medal of Arts and an honorary doctorate from Harvard University.

Through the Cold War, Miłosz's name was often invoked in the United States, particularly by conservative commentators such as William F. Buckley, Jr., usually in the context of Miłosz's 1953 book The Captive Mind. During that period, his name was largely passed over in silence in government-censored media and publications in Poland.

The Captive Mind has been described as one of the finest studies of the behavior of intellectuals under a repressive regime. Miłosz observed that those who became dissidents were not necessarily those with the strongest minds, but rather those with the weakest stomachs; the mind can rationalize anything, he said, but the stomach can take only so much.

Memorial to fallen Gdańsk shipyard workers, featuring a poem by MiłoszMiłosz is honored at Israel's Yad Vashem memorial to the Holocaust, as one of the "Righteous among the Nations."

A poem by Miłosz appears on a Gdańsk memorial to protesting shipyard workers who had been killed by government security forces in 1970.

Miłosz's books and poems have been translated into English by many hands, including Jane Zielonko (The Captive Mind), Miłosz himself, his Berkeley students (in translation seminars conducted by him), and his friends and Berkeley colleagues, Peter Dale Scott, Robert Pinsky and Robert Hass.

Miłosz died in 2004 at his Kraków home, aged 93. His first wife, Janina, had predeceased him in 1986. His second wife, Carol Thigpen, a U.S.-born historian, died in 2002. He is survived by two sons, Anthony and John Peter.

Miłosz's body was entombed at Kraków's historic Skałka Church, one of the last to be commemorated there.

A Felicitous Life

His old age fell on years of abundant harvest.
There were no earthquakes, droughts or floods.
It seemed as if the turning of the seasons gained in constancy,
Stars waxed strong and the sun increased its might.
Even in remote provinces no war was waged.
Generations grew up friendly to fellow men.
The rational nature of man was not a subject of derision.

It was bitter to say farewell to the earth so renewed.
He was envious and ashamed of his doubt,
Content that his lacerated memory would vanish with him.

Two days after his death a hurricane razed the coasts.
Smoke came from volcanoes inactive for a hundred years.
Lava sprawled over forests, vineyards, and towns.
And war began with a battle on the islands.

Czeslaw Milosz

A Hall

The road led straight to the temple.
Notre Dame, though not Gothic at all.
The huge doors were closed. I chose one on the side,
Not to the main building-to its left wing,
The one in green copper, worn into gaps below.
I pushed. Then it was revealed:
An astonishing large hall, in warm light.
Great statues of sitting women-goddesses,
In draped robes, marked it with a rhythm.
Color embraced me like the interior of a purple-brown flower
Of unheard-of size. I walked, liberated
From worries, pangs of conscience, and fears.
I knew I was there as one day I would be.
I woke up serene, thinking that this dream
Answers my question, often asked:
How is it when one passes the last threshold?

Czeslaw Milosz

A Magic Mountain

I don’t remember exactly when Budberg died, it was either two years
ago or three.
The same with Chen. Whether last year or the one before.
Soon after our arrival, Budberg, gently pensive,
Said that in the beginning it is hard to get accustomed,
For here there is no spring or summer, no winter or fall.

“I kept dreaming of snow and birch forests.
Where so little changes you hardly notice how time goes by.
This is, you will see, a magic mountain.”

Budberg: a familiar name in my childhood.
They were prominent in our region,
This Russian family, descendants of German Balts.
I read none of his works, too specialized.
And Chen, I have heard, was an exquisite poet,
Which I must take on faith, for he wrote in Chinese.

Sultry Octobers, cool Julys, trees blossom in February.
Here the nuptial flight of hummingbirds does not forecast spring.
Only the faithful maple sheds its leaves every year.
For no reason, its ancestors simply learned it that way.

I sensed Budberg was right and I rebelled.
So I won’t have power, won’t save the world?
Fame will pass me by, no tiara, no crown?
Did I then train myself, myself the Unique,
To compose stanzas for gulls and sea haze,
To listen to the foghorns blaring down below?

Until it passed. What passed? Life.
Now I am not ashamed of my defeat.
One murky island with its barking seals
Or a parched desert is enough
To make us say: yes, oui, si.
'Even asleep we partake in the becoming of the world.”
Endurance comes only from enduring.
With a flick of the wrist I fashioned an invisible rope,
And climbed it and it held me.

What a procession! Quelles délices!
What caps and hooded gowns!
Most respected Professor Budberg,
Most distinguished Professor Chen,
Wrong Honorable Professor Milosz
Who wrote poems in some unheard-of tongue.

Who will count them anyway. And here sunlight.
So that the flames of their tall candles fade.
And how many generations of hummingbirds keep them company
As they walk on. Across the magic mountain.
And the fog from the ocean is cool, for once again it is July.

Czeslaw Milosz

A Poem For the End of the Century

When everything was fine
And the notion of sin had vanished
And the earth was ready
In universal peace
To consume and rejoice
Without creeds and utopias,

I, for unknown reasons,
Surrounded by the books
Of prophets and theologians,
Of philosophers, poets,
Searched for an answer,
Scowling, grimacing,
Waking up at night, muttering at dawn.

What oppressed me so much
Was a bit shameful.
Talking of it aloud
Would show neither tact nor prudence.
It might even seem an outrage
Against the health of mankind.

Alas, my memory
Does not want to leave me
And in it, live beings
Each with its own pain,
Each with its own dying,
Its own trepidation.

Why then innocence
On paradisal beaches,
An impeccable sky
Over the church of hygiene?
Is it because that
Was long ago?

To a saintly man
--So goes an Arab tale--
God said somewhat maliciously:
"Had I revealed to people
How great a sinner you are,
They could not praise you."

"And I," answered the pious one,
"Had I unveiled to them
How merciful you are,
They would not care for you."

To whom should I turn
With that affair so dark
Of pain and also guilt
In the structure of the world,

If either here below
Or over there on high
No power can abolish
The cause and the effect?

Don't think, don't remember
The death on the cross,
Though everyday He dies,
The only one, all-loving,
Who without any need
Consented and allowed
To exist all that is,
Including nails of torture.

Totally enigmatic.
Impossibly intricate.
Better to stop speech here.
This language is not for people.
Blessed be jubilation.
Vintages and harvests.
Even if not everyone
Is granted serenity.

Czeslaw Milosz

A Poor Christian Looks At The Ghetto

Bees build around red liver,
Ants build around black bone.
It has begun: the tearing, the trampling on silks,
It has begun: the breaking of glass, wood, copper, nickel, silver, foam
Of gypsum, iron sheets, violin strings, trumpets, leaves, balls, crystals.
Poof! Phosphorescent fire from yellow walls
Engulfs animal and human hair.

Bees build around the honeycomb of lungs,
Ants build around white bone.
Torn is paper, rubber, linen, leather, flax,
Fiber, fabrics, cellulose, snakeskin, wire.
The roof and the wall collapse in flame and heat seizes the foundations.
Now there is only the earth, sandy, trodden down,
With one leafless tree.

Slowly, boring a tunnel, a guardian mole makes his way,
With a small red lamp fastened to his forehead.
He touches buried bodies, counts them, pushes on,
He distinguishes human ashes by their luminous vapor,
The ashes of each man by a different part of the spectrum.
Bees build around a red trace.
Ants build around the place left by my body.

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole.
He has swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch
Who has sat much in the light of candles
Reading the great book of the species.

What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament,
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?
My broken body will deliver me to his sight
And he will count me among the helpers of death:
The uncircumcised.

Czeslaw Milosz

A Song On The End Of The World

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
No other end of the world will there be,
No other end of the world will there be.

Czeslaw Milosz

A Task

In fear and trembling, I think I would fulfill my life
Only if I brought myself to make a public confession
Revealing a sham, my own and of my epoch:
We were permitted to shriek in the tongue of dwarfs and
demons
But pure and generous words were forbidden
Under so stiff a penalty that whoever dared to pronounce one
Considered himself as a lost man.

Czeslaw Milosz

A Treatise On Poetry: IV Natura

Pennsylvania, 1948-1949

The garden of Nature opens.
The grass at the threshold is green.
And an almond tree begins to bloom.

Sunt mihi Dei Acherontis propitii!
Valeat numen triplex Jehovae!
Ignis, aeris, aquae, terrae spiritus,
Salvete!—says the entering guest.

Ariel lives in the palace of an apple tree,
But will not appear, vibrating like a wasp's wing,
And Mephistopheles, disguised as an abbot
Of the Dominicans or the Franciscans,
Will not descend from a mulberry bush
Onto a pentagram drawn in the black loam of the path.

But a rhododendron walks among the rocks
Shod in leathery leaves and ringing a pink bell.
A hummingbird, a child's top in the air,
Hovers in one spot, the beating heart of motion.
Impaled on the nail of a black thorn, a grasshopper
Leaks brown fluid from its twitching snout.
And what can he do, the phantom-in-chief,
As he's been called, more than a magician,
The Socrates of snails, as he's been called,
Musician of pears, arbiter of orioles, man?
In sculptures and canvases our individuality
Manages to survive. In Nature it perishes.
Let him accompany the coffin of the woodsman
Pushed from a cliff by a mountain demon,
The he-goat with its jutting curl of horn.
Let him visit the graveyard of the whalers
Who drove spears into the flesh of leviathan
And looked for the secret in guts and blubber.
The thrashing subsided, quieted to waves.
Let him unroll the textbooks of alchemists
Who almost found the cipher, thus the scepter.
Then passed away without hands, eyes, or elixir.

Here there is sun. And whoever, as a child,
Believed he could break the repeatable pattern
Of things, if only he understood the pattern,
Is cast down, rots in the skin of others,
Looks with wonder at the colors of the butterfly,
Inexpressible wonder, formless, hostile to art.

To keep the oars from squeaking in their locks,

He binds them with a handkerchief. The dark
Had rushed east from the Rocky Mountains
And settled in the forests of the continent:
Sky full of embers reflected in a cloud,
Flight of herons, trees above a marsh,
The dry stalks in water, livid, black. My boat
Divides the aerial utopias of the mosquitoes
Which rebuild their glowing castles instantly.
A water lily sinks, fizzing, under the boat's bow.

Now it is night only. The water is ash-gray.
Play, music, but inaudibly! I wait an hour
In the silence, senses tuned to a beaver's lodge.
Then suddenly, a crease in the water, a beast's
black moon, rounded, ploughing up quickly
from the pond-dark, from the bubbling methanes.
I am not immaterial and never will be.
My scent in the air, my animal smell,
Spreads, rainbow-like, scares the beaver:
A sudden splat.
I remained where I was
In the high, soft coffer of the night's velvet,
Mastering what had come to my senses:
How the four-toed paws worked, how the hair
Shook off water in the muddy tunnel.
It does not know time, hasn't heard of death,
Is submitted to me because I know I'll die.

I remember everything. That wedding in Basel,
A touch to the strings of a viola and fruit
In silver bowls. As was the custom in Savoy,
An overturned cup for three pairs of lips,
And the wine spilled. The flames of the candles
Wavery and frail in a breeze from the Rhine.
Her fingers, bones shining through the skin,
Felt out the hooks and clasps of the silk
And the dress opened like a nutshell,
Fell from the turned graininess of the belly.
A chain for the neck rustled without epoch,
In pits where the arms of various creeds
Mingle with bird cries and the red hair of caesars.

Perhaps this is only my own love speaking
Beyond the seventh river. Grit of subjectivity,
Obsession, bar the way to it.
Until a window shutter, dogs in the cold garden,
The whistle of a train, an owl in the firs
Are spared the distortions of memory.
And the grass says: how it was I don't know.

Splash of a beaver in the American night.
The memory grows larger than my life.
A tin plate, dropped on the irregular red bricks
Of a floor, rattles tinnily forever.
Belinda of the big foot, Julia, Thaïs,
The tufts of their sex shadowed by ribbon.

Peace to the princesses under the tamarisks.
Desert winds beat against their painted eyelids.
Before the body was wrapped in bandelettes,
Before wheat fell asleep in the tomb,
Before stone fell silent, and there was only pity.

Yesterday a snake crossed the road at dusk.
Crushed by a tire, it writhed on the asphalt.
We are both the snake and the wheel.
There are two dimensions. Here is the unattainable
Truth of being, here, at the edge of lasting
and not lasting. Where the parallel lines intersect,
Time lifted above time by time.

Before the butterfly and its color, he, numb,
Formless, feels his fear, he, unattainable.
For what is a butterfly without Julia and Thaïs?
And what is Julia without a butterfly's down
In her eyes, her hair, the smooth grain of her belly?
The kingdom, you say. We do not belong to it,
And still, in the same instant, we belong.
For how long will a nonsensical Poland
Where poets write of their emotions as if
They had a contract of limited liability
Suffice? I want not poetry, but a new diction,
Because only it might allow us to express
A new tenderness and save us from a law
That is not our law, from necessity
Which is not ours, even if we take its name.

From broken armor, from eyes stricken
By the command of time and taken back
Into the jurisdiction of mold and fermentation,
We draw our hope. Yes, to gather in an image
The furriness of the beaver, the smell of rushes,
And the wrinkles of a hand holding a pitcher
From which wine trickles. Why cry out
That a sense of history destroys our substance
If it, precisely, is offered to our powers,

A muse of our gray-haired father, Herodotus,
As our arm and our instrument, though
It is not easy to use it, to strengthen it
So that, like a plumb with a pure gold center,
It will serve again to rescue human beings.

With such reflections I pushed a rowboat,
In the middle of the continent, through tangled stalks,
In my mind an image of the waves of two oceans
And the slow rocking of a guard-ship's lantern.
Aware that at this moment I—and not only I—
Keep, as in a seed, the unnamed future.
And then a rhythmic appeal composed itself,
Alien to the moth with its whirring of silk:

O City, O Society, O Capital,
We have seen your steaming entrails.
You will no longer be what you have been.
Your songs no longer gratify our hearts.

Steel, cement, lime, law, ordinance,
We have worshipped you too long,
You were for us a goal and a defense,
Ours was your glory and your shame.

And where was the covenant broken?
Was it in the fires of war, the incandescent sky?
Or at twilight, as the towers fly past, when one looked
From the train across a desert of tracks

To a window out past the maneuvering locomotives
Where a girl examines her narrow, moody face
In a mirror and ties a ribbon to her hair
Pierced by the sparks of curling papers?

Those walls of yours are shadows of walls,
And your light disappeared forever.
Not the world's monument anymore, an oeuvre of your own
Stands beneath the sun in an altered space.

From stucco and mirrors, glass and paintings,
Tearing aside curtains of silver and cotton,
Comes man, naked and mortal,
Ready for truth, for speech, for wings.

Lament, Republic! Fall to your knees!
The loudspeaker's spell is discontinued.
Listen! You can hear the clocks ticking.
Your death approaches by his hand.

An oar over my shoulder, I walked from the woods.
A porcupine scolded from the fork of a tree,
A horned owl, not changed by the century,
Not changed by place or time, looked down.
Bubo maximus, from the work of Linnaeus.

America for me has the pelt of a raccoon,
Its eyes are a raccoon's black binoculars.
A chipmunk flickers in a litter of dry bark
Where ivy and vines tangle in the red soil
At the roots of an arcade of tulip trees.
America's wings are the color of a cardinal,
Its beak is half-open and a mockingbird trills
From a leafy bush in the sweat-bath of the air.
Its line is the wavy body of a water moccasin
Crossing a river with a grass-like motion,
A rattlesnake, a rubble of dots and speckles,
Coiling under the bloom of a yucca plant.

America is for me the illustrated version
Of childhood tales about the heart of tanglewood,
Told in the evening to the spinning wheel's hum.
And a violin, shivvying up a square dance,
Plays the fiddles of Lithuania or Flanders.
My dancing partner's name is Birute Swenson.
She married a Swede, but was born in Kaunas.
Then from the night window a moth flies in
As big as the joined palms of the hands,
With a hue like the transparency of emeralds.

Why not establish a home in the neon heat
Of Nature? Is it not enough, the labor of autumn,
Of winter and spring and withering summer?
You will hear not one word spoken of the court
of Sigismund Augustus on the banks of the Delaware River.
The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys is not needed.
Herodotus will repose on his shelf, uncut.
And the rose only, a sexual symbol,
Symbol of love and superterrestrial beauty,
Will open a chasm deeper than your knowledge.
About it we find a song in a dream:

Inside the rose
Are houses of gold,
black isobars, streams of cold.
Dawn touches her finger to the edge of the Alps
And evening streams down to the bays of the sea.

If anyone dies inside the rose,
They carry him down the purple-red road
In a procession of clocks all wrapped in folds.
They light up the petals of grottoes with torches.
They bury him there where color begins,
At the source of the sighing,
Inside the rose.

Let names of months mean only what they mean.
Let the Aurora’s cannons be heard in none
Of them, or the tread of young rebels marching.
We might, at best, keep some kind of souvenir,
Preserved like a fan in a garret. Why not
Sit down at a rough country table and compose
An ode in the old manner, as in the old times
Chasing a beetle with the nib of our pen?

Czeslaw Milosz

Account

The history of my stupidity would fill many volumes.

Some would be devoted to acting against consciousness,
Like the flight of a moth which, had it known,
Would have tended nevertheless toward the candle's flame.

Others would deal with ways to silence anxiety,
The little whisper which, though it is a warning, is ignored.

I would deal separately with satisfaction and pride,
The time when I was among their adherents
Who strut victoriously, unsuspecting.

But all of them would have one subject, desire,
If only my own -- but no, not at all; alas,
I was driven because I wanted to be like others.
I was afraid of what was wild and indecent in me.

The history of my stupidity will not be written.
For one thing, it's late. And the truth is laborious.

Berkeley, 1980.

Trans. Robert Hass and Robert Pinsky

Czeslaw Milosz

An Hour

Leaves glowing in the sun, zealous hum of bumblebees,
From afar, from somewhere beyond the river, echoes of lingering voices
And the unhurried sounds of a hammer gave joy not only to me.
Before the five senses were opened, and earlier than any beginning
They waited, ready, for all those who would call themselves mortals,
So that they might praise, as I do, life, that is, happiness.

Czeslaw Milosz

And Yet The Books

And yet the books will be there on the shelves, separate beings,
That appeared once, still wet
As shining chestnuts under a tree in autumn,
And, touched, coddled, began to live
In spite of fires on the horizon, castles blown up,
Tribes on the march, planets in motion.
“We are, ” they said, even as their pages
Were being torn out, or a buzzing flame
Licked away their letters. So much more durable
Than we are, whose frail warmth
Cools down with memory, disperses, perishes.
I imagine the earth when I am no more:
Nothing happens, no loss, it’s still a strange pageant,
Women’s dresses, dewy lilacs, a song in the valley.
Yet the books will be there on the shelves, well born,
Derived from people, but also from radiance, heights.

Czeslaw Milosz

Annalena

It happened that sometimes I kissed in mirrors the reflection of my face, since the hands, face and tears of Annalena had caressed it, it seemed to me divinely beautiful as if suffused with heavenly sweetness. I liked her velvet wetness, long voyages in the delta her legs. A striving upstream toward her beating heart through more and more savage currents saturated with the light of hops and bindweed. And our vehemence and triumphant laughter and our hasty dressing in the middle of the night to walk on the stone stairs of the upper city. Our breath held in amazement and silence, porosity of worn-out stones and the great door of the cathedral. Over the gate of the rectory fragments of brick among weeds, in darkness the touch of a rough buttressed wall. And later our looking from the bridge down to the orchard, when under the moon every tree is separate on its kneeler, and from the secret interior of dimmed poplars the echo carries the sound of a water turbine. To whom do we tell what happened on this earth, for whom do we place everywhere huge mirrors in the hope that they will be filled up and will stay so? Always in doubt whether it was we who were there, she and I,, or just anonymous lovers on the enameled tablets of a fairy-land....

.....LAmoureuse initiation

Czeslaw Milosz

Ars Poetica?

I have always aspired to a more spacious form
that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose
and would let us understand each other without exposing
the author or reader to sublime agonies.

In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent:
a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us,
so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out
and stood in the light, lashing his tail.

That's why poetry is rightly said to be dictated by a daimonion,
though its an exaggeration to maintain that he must be an angel.
It's hard to guess where that pride of poets comes from,
when so often they're put to shame by the disclosure of their frailty.

What reasonable man would like to be a city of demons,
who behave as if they were at home, speak in many tongues,
and who, not satisfied with stealing his lips or hand,
work at changing his destiny for their convenience?

It's true that what is morbid is highly valued today,
and so you may think that I am only joking
or that I've devised just one more means
of praising Art with thehelp of irony.

There was a time when only wise books were read
helping us to bear our pain and misery.
This, after all, is not quite the same
as leafing through a thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinics.

And yet the world is different from what it seems to be
and we are other than how we see ourselves in our ravings.
People therefore preserve silent integrity
thus earning the respect of their relatives and neighbors.

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person,
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,
as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,
under unbearable duress and only with the hope
that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.

Czeslaw Milosz

Artificer

Burning, he walks in the stream of flickering letters, clarinets,
machines throbbing quicker than the heart, lopped-off heads, silk
canvases, and he stops under the sky

and raises toward it his joined clenched fists.

Believers fall on their bellies, they suppose it is a monstrance that
shines,

but those are knuckles, sharp knuckles shine that way, my friends.

He cuts the glowing, yellow buildings in two, breaks the walls into
motley halves;
pensive, he looks at the honey seeping from those huge honeycombs:
throbs of pianos, children's cries, the thud of a head banging against
the floor.
This is the only landscape able to make him feel.

He wonders at his brother's skull shaped like an egg,
every day he shoves back his black hair from his brow,
then one day he plants a big load of dynamite
and is surprised that afterward everything spouts up in the explosion.
Agape, he observes the clouds and what is hanging in them:
globes, penal codes, dead cats floating on their backs, locomotives.
They turn in the skeins of white clouds like trash in a puddle.
While below on the earth a banner, the color of a romantic rose,
flutters,
and a long row of military trains crawls on the weed-covered tracks.

Czeslaw Milosz

At a Certain Age

We wanted to confess our sins but there were no takers.
White clouds refused to accept them, and the wind
Was too busy visiting sea after sea.
We did not succeed in interesting the animals.
Dogs, disappointed, expected an order,
A cat, as always immoral, was falling asleep.
A person seemingly very close
Did not care to hear of things long past.
Conversations with friends over vodka or coffee
Ought not be prolonged beyond the first sign of boredom.
It would be humiliating to pay by the hour
A man with a diploma, just for listening.
Churches. Perhaps churches. But to confess there what?
That we used to see ourselves as handsome and noble
Yet later in our place an ugly toad
Half-opens its thick eyelid
And one sees clearly: "That's me."

Czeslaw Milosz

By the Peonies

The peonies bloom, white and pink.
And inside each, as in a fragrant bowl,
A swarm of tiny beetles have their conversation,
For the flower is given to them as their home.

Mother stands by the peony bed,
Reaches for one bloom, opens its petals,
And looks for a long time into peony lands,
Where one short instant equals a whole year.

Then lets the flower go. And what she thinks
She repeats aloud to the children and herself.
The wind sways the green leaves gently
And speckles of light flick across their faces.

The charms of the ordinariness soothe the threat of anxiety.

Czeslaw Milosz

Campo di Fiori

In Rome on the Campo di Fiori
Baskets of olives and lemons,
Cobbles spattered with wine
And the wreckage of flowers.
Vendors cover the trestles
With rose-pink fish;
Armfuls of dark grapes
Heaped on peach-down.

On this same square
They burned Giordano Bruno.
Henchmen kindled the pyre
Close-pressed by the mob.
Before the flames had died
The taverns were full again,
Baskets of olives and lemons
Again on the vendors' shoulders.

I thought of the Campo dei Fiori
In Warsaw by the sky-carousel
One clear spring evening
To the strains of a carnival tune.
The bright melody drowned
The salvos from the ghetto wall,
And couples were flying
High in the cloudless sky.

At times wind from the burning
Would driff dark kites along
And riders on the carousel
Caught petals in midair.
That same hot wind
Blew open the skirts of the girls
And the crowds were laughing
On that beautiful Warsaw Sunday.

Someone will read as moral
That the people of Rome or Warsaw
Haggle, laugh, make love
As they pass by martyrs' pyres.
Someone else will read
Of the passing of things human,
Of the oblivion
Born before the flames have died.

But that day I thought only
Of the loneliness of the dying,
Of how, when Giordano
Climbed to his burning
There were no words
In any human tongue
To be left for mankind,

Mankind who live on.

Already they were back at their wine
Or peddled their white starfish,
Baskets of olives and lemons
They had shouldered to the fair,
And he already distanced
As if centuries had passed
While they paused just a moment
For his flying in the fire.

Those dying here, the lonely
Forgotten by the world,
Our tongue becomes for them
The language of an ancient planet.
Until, when all is legend
And many years have passed,
On a great Campo dci Fiori
Rage will kindle at a poet's word.

Czeslaw Milosz

Child of Europe

1
We, whose lungs fill with the sweetness of day.
Who in May admire trees flowering
Are better than those who perished.

We, who taste of exotic dishes,
And enjoy fully the delights of love,
Are better than those who were buried.

We, from the fiery furnaces, from behind barbed wires
On which the winds of endless autumns howled,
We, who remember battles where the wounded air roared in
paroxysms of pain.
We, saved by our own cunning and knowledge.

By sending others to the more exposed positions
Urging them loudly to fight on
Ourselves withdrawing in certainty of the cause lost.

Having the choice of our own death and that of a friend
We chose his, coldly thinking: Let it be done quickly.

We sealed gas chamber doors, stole bread
Knowing the next day would be harder to bear than the day before.

As befits human beings, we explored good and evil.
Our malignant wisdom has no like on this planet.

Accept it as proven that we are better than they,
The gullible, hot-blooded weaklings, careless with their lives.

2
Treasure your legacy of skills, child of Europe.
Inheritor of Gothic cathedrals, of baroque churches.
Of synagogues filled with the wailing of a wronged people.
Successor of Descartes, Spinoza, inheritor of the word 'honor',
Posthumous child of Leonidas
Treasure the skills acquired in the hour of terror.

You have a clever mind which sees instantly
The good and bad of any situation.
You have an elegant, skeptical mind which enjoys pleasures
Quite unknown to primitive races.

Guided by this mind you cannot fail to see
The soundness of the advice we give you:
Let the sweetness of day fill your lungs
For this we have strict but wise rules.

3
There can be no question of force triumphant
We live in the age of victorious justice.

Do not mention force, or you will be accused
Of upholding fallen doctrines in secret.

He who has power, has it by historical logic.
Respectfully bow to that logic.

Let your lips, proposing a hypothesis
Not know about the hand faking the experiment.

Let your hand, faking the experiment
No know about the lips proposing a hypothesis.

Learn to predict a fire with unerring precision
Then burn the house down to fulfill the prediction.

4
Grow your tree of falsehood from a single grain of truth.
Do not follow those who lie in contempt of reality.

Let your lie be even more logical than the truth itself
So the weary travelers may find repose in the lie.

After the Day of the Lie gather in select circles
Shaking with laughter when our real deeds are mentioned.

Dispensing flattery called: perspicacious thinking.
Dispensing flattery called: a great talent.

We, the last who can still draw joy from cynicism.
We, whose cunning is not unlike despair.

A new, humorless generation is now arising
It takes in deadly earnest all we received with laughter.

5
Let your words speak not through their meanings
But through them against whom they are used.

Fashion your weapon from ambiguous words.
Consign clear words to lexical limbo.

Judge no words before the clerks have checked
In their card index by whom they were spoken.

The voice of passion is better than the voice of reason.
The passionless cannot change history.

6
Love no country: countries soon disappear
Love no city: cities are soon rubble.

Throw away keepsakes, or from your desk
A choking, poisonous fume will exude.

Do not love people: people soon perish.
Or they are wronged and call for your help.

Do not gaze into the pools of the past.
Their corroded surface will mirror
A face different from the one you expected.

7
He who invokes history is always secure.
The dead will not rise to witness against him.

You can accuse them of any deeds you like.
Their reply will always be silence.

Their empty faces swim out of the deep dark.
You can fill them with any feature desired.

Proud of dominion over people long vanished,
Change the past into your own, better likeness.

8
The laughter born of the love of truth
Is now the laughter of the enemies of the people.

Gone is the age of satire. We no longer need mock.
The sensible monarch with false courtly phrases.

Stern as befits the servants of a cause,
We will permit ourselves sycophantic humor.

Tight-lipped, guided by reasons only
Cautiously let us step into the era of the unchained fire.

Czeslaw Milosz

Christopher Robin

I must think suddenly of matters too difficult for a bear of little brain. I have never asked myself what lies beyond the place where we live, I and Rabbit, Piglet and Eeyore, with our friend Christopher Robin. That is, we continued to live here, and nothing changed, and I just ate my little something. Only Christopher Robin left for a moment.

Owl says that immediately beyond our garden Time begins, and that it is an awfully deep well. If you fall in it, you go down and down, very quickly, and no one knows what happens to you next. I was a bit worried about Christopher Robin falling in, but he came back and then I asked him about the well. 'Old bear,' he answered. 'I was in it and I was falling and I was changing as I fell. My legs became long, I was a big person, I grew old, hunched, and I walked with a cane, and then I died. It was probably just a dream, it was quite unreal. The only real thing was you, old bear, and our shared fun. Now I won't go anywhere, even if I'm called in for an afternoon snack.'

Czeslaw Milosz

City Without A Name

1
Who will honor the city without a name
If so many are dead and others pan gold
Or sell arms in faraway countries?

What shepherd's horn swathed in the bark of birch
Will sound in the Ponary Hills the memory of the absent—
Vagabonds, Pathfinders, brethren of a dissolved lodge?

This spring, in a desert, beyond a campsite flagpole,
—In silence that stretched to the solid rock of yellow and red mountains—
I heard in a gray bush the buzzing of wild bees.

The current carried an echo and the timber of rafts.
A man in a visored cap and a woman in a kerchief
Pushed hard with their four hands at a heavy steering oar.

In the library, below a tower painted with the signs of the zodiac,
Kontrym would take a whiff from his snuffbox and smile
For despite Metternich all was not yet lost.

And on crooked lanes down the middle of a sandy highway
Jewish carts went their way while a black grouse hooted
Standing on a cuirassier's helmet, a relict of La Grande Armée.

2
In Death Valley I thought about styles of hairdo,
About a hand that shifted spotlights at the Student's Ball
In the city from which no voice could reach me.
Minerals did not sound the last trumpet.
There was only the rustle of a loosened grain of lava.

In Death Valley salt gleams from a dried-up lake bed.
Defend, defend yourself, says the tick-tock of the blood.
From the futility of solid rock, no wisdom.

In Death Valley no hawk or eagle against the sky.
The prediction of a Gypsy woman has come true.
In a lane under an arcade, then, I was reading a poem
Of someone who had lived next door, entitled 'An Hour of Thought.'

I looked long at the rearview mirror: there, the one man
Within three miles, an Indian, was walking a bicycle uphill.

3
With flutes, with torches
And a drum, boom, boom,
Look, the one who died in Istanbul, there, in the first row.
He walks arm in arm with his young lady,
And over them swallows fly.

They carry oars or staffs garlanded with leaves
And bunches of flowers from the shores of the Green Lakes,
As they came closer and closer, down Castle Street.
And then suddenly nothing, only a white puff of cloud
Over the Humanities Student Club,
Division of Creative Writing.

4
Books, we have written a whole library of them.
Lands, we have visited a great many of them.
Battles, we have lost a number of them.
Till we are no more, we and our Maryla.

5
Understanding and pity,
We value them highly.
What else?

Beauty and kisses,
Fame and its prizes,
Who cares?

Doctors and lawyers,
Well-turned-out majors,
Six feet of earth.

Rings, furs, and lashes,
Glances at Masses,
Rest in peace.

Sweet twin breasts, good night.
Sleep through to the light,
Without spiders.

6

The sun goes down above the Zealous Lithuanian Lodge
And kindles fire on landscapes 'made from nature':
The Wilia winding among pines; black honey of the Żejmiana;
The Mereczanka washes berries near the Żegaryno village.
The valets had already brought in Theban candelabra
And pulled curtains, one after the other, slowly,
While, thinking I entered first, taking off my gloves,
I saw that all the eyes were fixed on me.

7
When I got rid of grieving
And the glory I was seeking,
Which I had no business doing,

I was carried by dragons
Over countries, bays, and mountains,
By fate, or by what happens.

Oh yes, I wanted to be me.
I toasted mirrors weepily
And learned my own stupidity.

From nails, mucous membrane,
Lungs, liver, bowels, and spleen
Whose house is made? Mine.

So what else is new?
I am not my own friend.
Time cuts me in two.

Monuments covered with snow,
Accept my gift. I wandered;
And where, I don't know.

8
Absent, burning, acrid, salty, sharp.
Thus the feast of Insubstantiality.
Under a gathering of clouds anywhere.
In a bay, on a plateau, in a dry arroyo.
No density. No harness of stone.
Even the Summa thins into straw and smoke.
And the angelic choirs fly over in a pomegranate seed
Sounding every few instants, not for us, their trumpets.

9
Light, universal, and yet it keeps changing.
For I love the light too, perhaps the light only.
Yet what is too dazzling and too high is not for me.
So when the clouds turn rosy, I think of light that is level
In the lands of birch and pine coated with crispy lichen,
Late in autumn, under the hoarfrost when the last milk caps
Rot under the firs and the hounds' barking echoes,
And jackdaws wheel over the tower of a Basilian church.

10
Unexpressed, untold.
But how?
The shortness of life,
the years quicker and quicker,
not remembering whether it happened in this or that autumn.
Retinues of homespun velveteen skirts,
giggles above a railing, pigtails askew,
sittings on chamberpots upstairs
when the sledge jingles under the columns of the porch
just before the moustachioed ones in wolf fur enter.
Female humanity,
children's snots, legs spread apart,
snarled hair, the milk boiling over,
stench, shit frozen into clods.
And those centuries,
conceiving in the herring smell of the middle of the night
instead of playing something like a game of chess
or dancing an intellectual ballet.
And palisades,
and pregnant sheep,
and pigs, fast eaters and poor eaters,
and cows cured by incantations.

11
Not the Last Judgment, just a kermess by a river.
Small whistles, clay chickens, candied hearts.
So we trudged through the slush of melting snow
To buy bagels from the district of Smorgonie.

A fortune-teller hawking: 'Your destiny, your planets.'
And a toy devil bobbing in a tube of crimson brine.
Another, a rubber one, expired in the air squeaking,
By the stand where you bought stories of King Otto and Melusine.

12
Why should that city, defenseless and pure as the wedding necklace of
a forgotten tribe, keep offering itself to me?

Like blue and red-brown seeds beaded in Tuzigoot in the copper desert seven centuries ago.

Where ocher rubbed into stone still waits for the brow and cheekbone it would adorn, though for all that time there has been no one.

What evil in me, what pity has made me deserve this offering?

It stands before me, ready, not even the smoke from one chimney is lacking, not one echo, when I step across the rivers that separate us.

Perhaps Anna and Dora Drużyno have called to me, three hundred miles inside Arizona, because except fo me no one else knows that they ever lived.

They trot before me on Embankment Street, two hently born parakeets from Samogitia, and at night they unravel their spinster tresses of gray hair.

Here there is no earlier and no later; the seasons of the year and of the day are simultaneous.

At dawn shit-wagons leave town in long rows and municipal employees at the gate collect the turnpike toll in leather bags.

Rattling their wheels, 'Courier' and 'Speedy' move against the current to Werki, and an oarsman shot down over England skiffs past, spread-eagled by his oars.

At St. Peter and Paul's the angels lower their thick eyelids in a smile over a nun who has indecent thoughts.

Bearded, in a wig, Mrs. Sora Klok sits at the ocunter, instructing her twelve shopgirls.

And all of German Street tosses into the air unfurled bolts of fabric, preparing itself for death and the conquest of Jerusalem.

Black and princely, an underground river knocks at cellars of the cathedral under the tomb of St. Casimir the Young and under the

half-charred oak logs in the hearth.

Carrying her servant's-basket on her shoulder, Barbara, dressed in mourning, returns from the Lithuanian Mass at St. Nicholas to the Romers' house in Bakszta Street.

How it glitters! the snow on Three Crosses Hill and Bekiesz Hill, not to be melted by the breath of these brief lives.

And what do I know now, when I turn into Arsenal Street and open my eyes once more on a useless end of the world?

I was running, as the silks rustled, through room after room without stopping, for I believed in the existence of a last door.

But the shape of lips and an apple and a flower pinned to a dress were all that one was permitted to know and take away.

The Earth, neither compassionate nor evil, neither beautiful nor atrocious, persisted, innocent, open to pain and desire.

And the gift was useless, if, later on, in the flarings of distant nights, there was not less bitterness but more.

If I cannot so exhaust my life and their life that the bygone crying is transformed, at last, into harmony.

Like a Noble Jan Dęboróg in the Straszun's secondhand-book shop, I am put to rest forever between tow familiar names.

The castle tower above the leafy tumulus grows small and there is still a hardly audible—is it Mozart's Requiem?—music.

In the immobile light I move my lips and perhaps I am even glad not to find the desired word.

Czeslaw Milosz

Conversation with Jeanne

Let us not talk philosophy, drop it, Jeanne.
So many words, so much paper, who can stand it.
I told you the truth about my distancing myself.
I've stopped worrying about my misshapen life.
It was no better and no worse than the usual human tragedies.

For over thirty years we have been waging our dispute
As we do now, on the island under the skies of the tropics.
We flee a downpour, in an instant the bright sun again,
And I grow dumb, dazzled by the emerald essence of the leaves.

We submerge in foam at the line of the surf,
We swim far, to where the horizon is a tangle of banana bush,
With little windmills of palms.
And I am under accusation: That I am not up to my oeuvre,
That I do not demand enough from myself,
As I could have learned from Karl Jaspers,
That my scorn for the opinions of this age grows slack.

I roll on a wave and look at white clouds.

You are right, Jeanne, I don't know how to care about the salvation of my soul.
Some are called, others manage as well as they can.
I accept it, what has befallen me is just.
I don't pretend to the dignity of a wise old age.
Untranslatable into words, I chose my home in what is now,
In things of this world, which exist and, for that reason, delight us:
Nakedness of women on the beach, coppery cones of their breasts,
Hibiscus, alamanda, a red lily, devouring
With my eyes, lips, tongue, the guava juice, the juice of la prune de Cythère,
Rum with ice and syrup, lianas-orchids
In a rain forest, where trees stand on the stilts of their roots.

Death, you say, mine and yours, closer and closer,
We suffered and this poor earth was not enough.
The purple-black earth of vegetable gardens
Will be here, either looked at or not.
The sea, as today, will breathe from its depths.
Growing small, I disappear in the immense, more and more free.

Czeslaw Milosz

Dedication

You whom I could not save
Listen to me.
Try to understand this simple speech as I would be ashamed of another.
I swear, there is in me no wizardry of words.
I speak to you with silence like a cloud or a tree.

What strengthened me, for you was lethal.
You mixed up farewell to an epoch with the beginning of a new one,
Inspiration of hatred with lyrical beauty,
Blind force with accomplished shape.

Here is the valley of shallow Polish rivers. And an immense bridge
Going into white fog. Here is a broken city,
And the wind throws the screams of gulls on your grave
When I am talking with you.

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls.
That I wanted good poetry without knowing it,
That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,
In this and only this I find salvation.

They used to pour millet on graves or poppy seeds
To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds.
I put this book here for you, who once lived
So that you should visit us no more.

Czeslaw Milosz

Earth Again

They are incomprehensible, the things of this earth.
The lure of waters. The lure of fruits.
Lure of two breasts and the long hair of a maiden.
In rouge, in vermillion, in that color of ponds
Found only in the Green Lakes near Wilno.
An ungraspable multitudes swarm, come together
In the crinkles of tree bark, in the telescope's eye,
For an endless wedding,
For the kindling of eyes, for a sweet dance
In the elements of air, sea, earth, and subterranean caves,
So that for a short moment there is no death
And time does not unreel like a skein of yarn
Thrown into an abyss.

Czeslaw Milosz

Encounter

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago.Today neither of them is alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.

Czeslaw Milosz

Faith

Faith is in you whenever you look
At a dewdropp or a floating leaf
And know that they are because they have to be.
Even if you close your eyes and dream up things
The world will remain as it has always been
And the leaf will be carried by the waters of the river.

You have faith also when you hurt your foot
Against a sharp rock and you know
That rocks are there to hurt our feet.
See the long shadow that is cast by the tree?
We and trees throw shadows on the earth.
What has not shadow has no strength to live.

Czeslaw Milosz

Father Explains

"There where that ray touches the plain
And the shadows escape as if they really ran,
Warsaw stands, open from all sides,
A city not very old but quite famous.

"Farther, where strings of rain hang from a little cloud,
Under the hills with an acacia grove
Is Prague. Above it, a marvelous castle
Shored against a slope in accordance with old rules.

"What divides this land with white foam
Is the Alps. The black means fir forests.
Beyond them, bathing in the yellow sun
Italy lies, like a deep-blue dish.

"Among the many fine cities that are there
You will recogni2e Rome, Christendom's capital,
By those round roofs on the church
Called the Basilica of Saint Peter.

"And there, to the north, beyond a bay,
Where a level bluish mist moves in waves,
Paris tries to keep pace with its tower
And reins in its herd of bridges.

"Also other cities accompany Paris,
They are adorned with glass, arrayed in iron,
But for today that would be too much,
I'll tell the rest another time

Czeslaw Milosz

Forget

Forget the suffering
You caused others.
Forget the suffering
Others caused you.
The waters run and run,
Springs sparkle and are done,
You walk the earth you are forgetting.

Sometimes you hear a distant refrain.
What does it mean, you ask, who is singing?
A childlike sun grows warm.
A grandson and a great-grandson are born.
You are led by the hand once again.

The names of the rivers remain with you.
How endless those rivers seem!
Your fields lie fallow,
The city towers are not as they were.
You stand at the threshold mute.

Czeslaw Milosz

Hope

Hope is with you when you believe
The earth is not a dream but living flesh,
that sight, touch, and hearing do not lie,
That all thing you have ever seen here
Are like a garden looked at from a gate.

You cannot enter. But you're sure it's there.
Could we but look more clearly and wisely
We might discover somewhere in the garden
A strange new flower and an unnamed star.

Some people say that we should not trust our eyes,
That there is nothing, just a seeming,
There are the ones who have no hope.
They think the moment we turn away,
The world, behind our backs, ceases to exist,
As if snatched up by the hand of thieves.

Czeslaw Milosz

How It Was

Stalking a deer I wandered deep into the mountains and from there I saw.

Or perhaps it was for some other reason that I rose above the setting sun.

Above the hills of blackwood and a slab of ocean and the steps of a glacier, carmine-colored in the dusk.

I saw absence; the mighty power of counter-fulfillment; the penalty of a promise lost forever.

If, in tepees of plywood, tire shreds, and grimy sheet iron, ancient inhabitants of this land shook their rattles, it was all in vain.

No eagle-creator circled in the air from which the thunderbolt of its glory had been cast out.

Protective spirits hid themselves in subterranean beds of bubbling ore, jolting the surface from time to time so that the fabric of freeways was bursting asunder.

God the Father didn’t walk about any longer tending the new shoots of a cedar, no longer did man hear his rushing spirit.

His son did not know his sonship and turned his eyes away when passing by a neon cross flat as a movie screen showing a striptease.

This time it was really the end of the Old and the New Testament.

No one implored, everyone picked up a nodule of agate or diorite to whisper in loneliness: I cannot live any longer.

Bearded messengers in bead necklaces founded clandestine communes in imperial cities and in ports overseas.

But none of them announced the birth of a child-savior.

Soldiers from expeditions sent to punish nations would go disguised and masked to take part in forbidden rites, not looking for any hope.

They inhaled smoke soothing all memory and, rocking from side to side, shared with each other a word of nameless union.

Carved in black wood the Wheel of Eternal Return stood before the tents of wandering monastic orders.

And those who longed for the Kingdom took refuge like me in the mountains to become the last heirs of a dishonored myth.

Czeslaw Milosz

I Sleep a Lot

I sleep a lot and read St. Thomas Aquinas
Or The Death of God (that's a Protestant book).
To the right the bay as if molten tin,
Beyond the bay, city, beyond the city, ocean,
Beyond the ocean, ocean, till Japan.
To the left dry hills with white grass,
Beyond the hills an irrigated valley where rice is grown,
Beyond the valley, mountains and Ponderosa pines,
Beyond the mountains, desert and sheep.

When I couldn't do without alcohol, I drove myself on alcohol,
When I couldn't do without cigarettes and coffee, I drove myself
On cigarettes and coffee.
I was courageous. Industrious. Nearly a model of virtue.
But that is good for nothing.

I feel a pain.
not here. Even I don't know.
many islands and continents,
words, bazaars, wooden flutes,
Or too much drinking to the mirror, without beauty,
Though one was to be a kind of archangel
Or a Saint George, over there, on St. George Street.
Please, Doctor,
Not here. No,
Maybe it's too
Unpronounced

Please, Medicine Man, I feel a pain.
I always believed in spells and incantations.
Sure, women have only one, Catholic, soul,
But we have two. When you start to dance
You visit remote pueblos in your sleep
And even lands you have never seen.
Put on, I beg you, charms made of feathers,
Now it's time to help one of your own.
I have read many books but I don't believe them.
When it hurts we return to the banks of certain rivers.

I remember those crosses with chiseled suns and moons
And wizards, how they worked during an outbreak of typhus.
Send your second soul beyond the mountains, beyond time.
Tell me what you saw, I will wait.

Czeslaw Milosz

In Black Despair

In grayish doubt and black despair,
I drafted hymns to the earth and the air,
pretending to joy, although I lacked it.
The age had made lament redundant.

So here's the question -- who can answer it --
Was he a brave man or a hypocrite?

Czeslaw Milosz

In Warsaw

What are you doing here, poet, on the ruins
Of St. John's Cathedral this sunny
Day in spring?

What are you thinking here, where the wind
Blowing from the Vistula scatters
The red dust of the rubble?

You swore never to be
A ritual mourner.
You swore never to touch
The deep wounds of your nation
So you would not make them holy
With the accursed holiness that pursues
Descendants for many centuries.

But the lament of Antigone
Searching for her brother
Is indeed beyond the power
Of endurance. And the heart
Is a stone in which is enclosed,
Like an insect, the dark love
Of a most unhappy land.
I did not want to love so.
That was not my design.
I did not want to pity so.
That was not my design.
My pen is lighter
Than a hummingbird's feather. This burden
Is too much for it to bear.
How can I live in this country
Where the foot knocks against
The unburied bones of kin?

I hear voices, see smiles. I cannot
Write anything; five hands
Seize my pen and order me to write
The story of their lives and deaths.
Was I born to become
a ritual mourner?
I want to sing of festivities,
The greenwood into which Shakespeare
Often took me. Leave
To poets a moment of happiness,
Otherwise your world will perish.

It's madness to live without joy
And to repeat to the dead
Whose part was to be gladness
Of action in thought and in the flesh, singing, feasts
Only the two salvaged words:
Truth and justice.

Czeslaw Milosz

Incantation

Human reason is beautiful and invincible.
No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,
No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.
It establishes the universal ideas in language,
And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice
With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.
It puts what should be above things as they are,
Is an enemy of despair and a friend of hope.
It does not know Jew from Greek or slave from master,
Giving us the estate of the world to manage.
It saves austere and transparent phrases
From the filthy discord of tortured words.
It says that everything is new under the sun,
Opens the congealed fist of the past.
Beautiful and very young are Philo-Sophia
And poetry, her ally in the service of the good.
As late as yesterday Nature celebrated their birth,
The news was brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo.
Their friendship will be glorious, their time has no limit.
Their enemies have delivered themselves to destruction.

Czeslaw Milosz

It Was Winter

Winter came as it does in this valley.
After eight dry months rain fell
And the mountains, straw-colored, turned green for a while.
In the canyons where gray laurels
Graft their stony roots to granite,
Streams must have filled the dried-up creek beds.
Ocean winds churned the eucalyptus trees,
And under clouds torn by a crystal of towers
Prickly lights were glowing on the docks.

This is not a place where you sit under a café awning
On a marble piazza, watching the crowd,
Or play the flute at a window over a narrow street
While children's sandals clatter in the vaulted entryway.

They heard of a land, empty and vast,
Bordered by mountains. So they went, leaving behind crosses
Of thorny wood and traces of campfires.
As it happened, they spent winter in the snow of a mountain pass,
And drew lots and boiled the bones of their companions;
And so afterward a hot valley where indigo could be grown
Seemed beautiful to them. And beyond, where fog
Heaved into shoreline coves, the ocean labored.

Sleep: rocks and capes will lie down inside you,
War councils of motionless animals in a barren place,
Basilicas of reptiles, a frothy whiteness.
Sleep on your coat, while your horse nibbles grass
And an eagle gauges a precipice.

When you wake up, you will have the parts of the world.
West, an empty conch of water and air.
East, always behind you, the voided memory of snow-covered fir.
And extending from your outspread arms
Nothing but bronze grasses, north and south.

We are poor people, much afflicted.
We camped under various stars,
Where you dip water with a cup from a muddy river
And slice your bread with a pocketknife.
This is the place; accepted, not chosen.
We remembered that there were streets and houses where we came from,
So there had to be houses here, a saddler's signboard,
A small veranda with a chair. But empty, a country where
The thunder beneath the rippled skin of the earth,
The breaking waves, a patrol of pelicans, nullified us.

As if our vases, brought here from another shore,
Were the dug-up spearheads of some lost tribe
Who fed on lizards and acorn flour.

And here I am walking the eternal earth.
Tiny, leaning on a stick.
I pass a volcanic park, lie down at a spring,
Not knowing how to express what is always and everywhere:
The earth I cling to is so solid
Under my breast and belly that I feel grateful
For every pebble, and I don’t know whether
It is my pulse or the earth’s that I hear,
When the hems of invisible silk vestments pass over me,
Hands, wherever they have been, touch my arm,
Or small laughter, once, long ago over wine,
With lanterns in the magnolias, for my house is huge.

Czeslaw Milosz

Lake

Maidenly lake, fathomless lake,
Stay as you were once, overgrown with rushes,
Idling with a reflected cloud, for my sake
Whom your shore no longer touches.

Your girl was always real to me.
Her bones lie in a city by the sea.
Everything occurs too normally.
A unique love simply wears away.

Girl, hey, girl, we repose in an abyss.
The base of a skull, a rib, a pelvis,
Is it you? me? We are more than this.
No clock counts hours and years for us.

How could a creature, ephemeral, eternal,
Measure for me necessity and fate?
You are locked with me in a letter-crystal.
No matter that you're not a living maid.

Czeslaw Milosz

Late Ripeness

Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,
I felt a door opening in me and I entered
the clarity of early morning.

One after another my former lives were departing,
like ships, together with their sorrow.

And the countries, cities, gardens, the bays of seas
assigned to my brush came closer,
ready now to be described better than they were before.

I was not separated from people,
grief and pity joined us.
We forget - I kept saying - that we are all children of the King.

For where we come from there is no division
into Yes and No, into is, was, and will be.

We were miserable, we used no more than a hundredth part
of the gift we received for our long journey.

Moments from yesterday and from centuries ago -
a sword blow, the painting of eyelashes before a mirror
of polished metal, a lethal musket shot, a caravel
staving its hull against a reef - they dwell in us,
waiting for a fulfillment.

I knew, always, that I would be a worker in the vineyard,
as are all men and women living at the same time,
whether they are aware of it or not.

Czeslaw Milosz

Love

Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many.
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,
Without knowing it, from various ills—
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.

Then he wants to use himself and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn’t matter whether he knows what he serves:
Who serves best doesn’t always understand.

Czeslaw Milosz

Magpiety

The same and not quite the same, I walked through oak forests
Amazed that my Muse, Mnemosyne,
Has in no way diminished my amazement.
A magpie was screeching and I said: Magpiety?
What is magpiety? I shall never achieve
A magpie heart, a hairy nostril over the beak, a flight
That always renews just when coming down,
And so I shall never comprehend magpiety.
If however magpiety does not exist
My nature does not exist either.
Who would have guessed that, centuries later,
I would invent the question of universals?

Czeslaw Milosz

Meaning

When I die, I will see the lining of the world.
The other side, beyond bird, mountain, sunset.
The true meaning, ready to be decoded.
What never added up will add Up,
What was incomprehensible will be comprehended.
- And if there is no lining to the world?
If a thrush on a branch is not a sign,
But just a thrush on the branch? If night and day
Make no sense following each other?
And on this earth there is nothing except this earth?
- Even if that is so, there will remain
A word wakened by lips that perish,
A tireless messenger who runs and runs
Through interstellar fields, through the revolving galaxies,
And calls out, protests, screams.

Czeslaw Milosz

My Faithful Mother Tongue

Faithful mother tongue,
I have been serving you.
Every night, I used to set before you little bowls of colors
so you could have your birch, your cricket, your finch
as preserved in my memory.

This lasted many years.
You were my native land; I lacked any other.
I believed that you would also be a messenger
between me and some good people
even if they were few, twenty, ten
or not born, as yet.

Now, I confess my doubt.
There are moments when it seems to me I have squandered my life.
For you are a tongue of the debased,
of the unreasonable, hating themselves
even more than they hate other nations,
a tongue of informers,
a tongue of the confused,
ill with their own innocence.

But without you, who am I?
Only a scholar in a distant country,
a success, without fears and humiliations.
Yes, who am I without you?
Just a philosopher, like everyone else.

I understand, this is meant as my education:
the glory of individuality is taken away,
Fortune spreads a red carpet
before the sinner in a morality play
while on the linen backdropp a magic lantern throws
images of human and divine torture.

Faithful mother tongue,
perhaps after all it's I who must try to save you.
So I will continue to set before you little bowls of colors
bright and pure if possible,
for what is needed in misfortune is a little order and beauty.

Czeslaw Milosz

Not Mine

All my life to pretend this world of theirs is mine
And to know such pretending is disgraceful.
But what can I do? Suppose I suddenly screamed
And started to prophesy. No one would hear me.
Their screens and microphones are not for that.
Others like me wander the streets
And talk to themselves. Sleep on benches in parks,
Or on pavements in alleys. For there aren't enough prisons
To lock up all the poor. I smile and keep quiet.
They won't get me now.
To feast with the chosen-that I do well.

Translated by Robert Hass

Czeslaw Milosz

On Angels

All was taken away from you: white dresses,
wings, even existence.
Yet I believe you,
messengers.

There, where the world is turned inside out,
a heavy fabric embroidered with stars and beasts,
you stroll, inspecting the trustworthy seems.

Short is your stay here:
now and then at a matinal hour, if the sky is clear,
in a melody repeated by a bird,
or in the smell of apples at close of day
when the light makes the orchards magic.

They say somebody has invented you
but to me this does not sound convincing
for the humans invented themselves as well.

The voice -- no doubt it is a valid proof,
as it can belong only to radiant creatures,
weightless and winged (after all, why not?),
girdled with the lightening.

I have heard that voice many a time when asleep
and, what is strange, I understood more or less
an order or an appeal in an unearthly tongue:

day draw near
another one
do what you can.

Submitted by sophie

Czeslaw Milosz

On Prayer

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.
All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge
And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,
Above landscapes the color of ripe gold
Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.
That bridge leads to the shore of Reversal
Where everything is just the opposite and the word 'is'
Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.
Notice: I say we; there, every one, separately,
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh
And knows that if there is no other shore
We will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

Czeslaw Milosz

One More Contradiction

Did I fulfill what I had to, here, on earth?
I was a guest in a house under white clouds
Where rivers flow and grasses renew themselves.
So what if I were called, if I was hardly aware.
The next time early I would search for wisdom.
I would not pretend I could be just like the others:
Only evil and suffering come from that.
Renouncing, I would choose the fate of obedience.
I would suppress my wolf's eye and greedy throat.
A resident of some cloister floating in the air
With a view on the cities glowing below,
Or onto a stream, a bridge and old cedars,
I would give myself to one task only.
Which then, however, could not be accomplished

Czeslaw Milosz

Preface

First, plain speech in the mother tongue.
Hearing it, you should be able to see
Apple trees, a river, the bend of a road,
As if in a flash of summer lightning.

And it should contain more than images.
It has been lured by singsong,
A daydream, melody. Defenseless,
It was bypassed by the sharp, dry world.

You often ask yourself why you feel shame
Whenever you look through a book of poetry.
As if the author, for reasons unclear to you,
Addressed the worse side of your nature,
Pushing aside thought, cheating thought.

Seasoned with jokes, clowning, satire,
Poetry still knows how to please.
Then its excellence is much admired.
But the grave combats where life is at stake
Are fought in prose. It was not always so.

And our regret has remained unconfessed.
Novels and essays serve but will not last.
One clear stanza can take more weight
Than a whole wagon of elaborate prose.

Czeslaw Milosz

Raja Rao

Raja, I wish I knew
the cause of that malady.
For years I could not accept
the place I was in.
I felt I should be somewhere else.

A city, trees, human voices
lacked the quality of presence.
I would live by the hope of moving on.

Somewhere else there was a city of real presence,
of real trees and voices and friendship and love.

Link, if you wish, my peculiar case
(on the border of schizophrenia)
to the messianic hope
of my civilization.

Ill at ease in the tyranny, ill at ease in the republic,
in the one I longed for freedom, in the other for the end of corruption.
Building in my mind a permanent polis
forever deprived of aimless bustle.

I learned at last to say: this is my home,
here, before the glowing coal of ocean sunsets,
on the shore which faces the shores of your Asia,
in a great republic, moderately corrupt.

Raja, this did not cure me
of my guilt and shame.
A shame of failing to be
what I should have been.

The image of myself
grows gigantic on the wall
and against it
my miserable shadow.

That's how I came to believe
in Original Sin
which is nothing but the first
victory of the ego.

Tormented by my ego, deluded by it
I give you, as you see, a ready argument.

I hear you saying that liberation is possible
and that Socratic wisdom
is identical with your guru's.

No, Raja, I must start from what I am.
I am those monsters which visit my dreams

and reveal to me my hidden essence.

If I am sick, there is no proof whatsoever
that man is a healthy creature.

Greece had to lose, her pure consciousness
had to make our agony only more acute.

We needed God loving us in our weakness
and not in the glory of beatitude.

No help, Raja, my part is agony,
struggle, abjection, self-love, and self-hate,
prayer for the Kingdom
and reading Pascal.

Czeslaw Milosz

Road-Side Dog

I went on a journey in order to acquaint myself with my province, in a two-horse wagon with a lot of fodder and a tin bucket rattling in the back. The bucket was required for the horses to drink from. I traveled through a country of hills and pine groves that gave way to woodlands where swirls of smoke hovered over the roofs of houses, as if they were on fire, for they were chimneyless cabins; I crossed districts of fields and lakes. It was so interesting to be moving, to give the horses their rein, and wait until, in the next valley, a village slowly appeared, or a park with the white spot of a manor house in it. And always we were barked at by a dog, assiduous in its duty. That was the beginning of the century; this is its end. I have been thinking not only of the people who lived there once but also of the generations of dogs accompanying them in their everyday bustle, and one night - I don't know where it came from - in a pre-dawn sleep, that funny and tender phrase composed itself: a road-side dog.

Czeslaw Milosz

Sarajevo

Now that a revolution really is needed, those who were fervent are quite cool.

While a country murdered and raped calls for help from the Europe which it had trusted, they yawn.

While statesmen choose villainy and no voice is raised to call it by name.

The rebellion of the young who called for a new earth was a sham, and that generation has written the verdict on itself.

Listening with indifference to the cries of those who perish because they are after all just barbarians killing each other.

And the lives of the well-fed are worth more than the lives of the starving.

It is revealed now that their Europe since the beginning has been a deception, for its faith and its foundation is nothingness.

And nothingness, as the prophets keep saying, brings forth only nothingness, and they will be led once again like cattle to slaughter.

Let them tremble and at the last moment comprehend that the word Sarajevo will from now on mean the destruction of their sons and the debasement of their daughters.

They prepare it by repeating: "We at least are safe," unaware that what will strike them ripens in themselves.

Czeslaw Milosz

Statue of a Couple

Your hand, my wonder, is now icy cold.
The purest light of the celestial dome
has burned me through. And now we are
as two still plams lying in darlmess,
as two black banks of a frozen stream
in the chasm of the world.

Our hair combed back is carved in wood,
the moon walks over our ebony shoulders.
A distant cockcrow, the night goes by, silent.
Rich is the rime of love, withered the dowry.

Where are you, living in what depths of time,
love, stepping down into what waters,
now, when the frost of our voiceless lips
does not fend off the divine fires?

In a forest of clouds, of fcam, and of silver
we live, caressing lands under our
And we are wielding the might of a dark scepter
to earn oblivion.

My love, your breast cut through by a clinel
knows nothing anymore of what it was.
Of clouds at dawn, of angers at daybreak,
of shallows in springtime it has no remembrance.

And you have led me, as once an angel led
Tobias, onto the rusty mashes of Lombardy.
But a day came when a sign frightened you,
a stinma of golden measure.

With a scream, with inunobile fear in your thin hands
you fell into a pit that ashes lie over,
where neither northern firs nor Italian yews
could protect our andent bed of lovers.

What was it. what is it, what will it be
we filled the world with our cry and calling.
The dawn is back, the red moon set,
do we know now? In a heavy ship

A helmman comes, throws a silken rope
and binds w tightly to eaah other,
then he pours on friends, once enemies,
a handful of snow.

Czeslaw Milosz

Study Of Loneliness

A guardian of long-distance conduits in the desert?
A one-man crew of a fortress in the sand?
Whoever he was. At dawn he saw furrowed mountains
The color of ashes, above the melting darkness,
Saturated with violet, breaking into fluid rouge,
Till they stood, immense, in the orange light.
Day after day. And, before he noticed, year after year.
For whom, he thought, that splendor? For me alone?
Yet it will be here long after I perish.
What is it in the eye of a lizard? Or when seen by a migrant bird?
If I am all mankind, are they themselves without me?
And he knew there was no use crying out, for none of them would save him.

Czeslaw Milosz

The Dining Room

A room with low windows, with brown shades,
Where a Danzig clock keeps silent in the corner;
A low leather sofa; and right above it
The sculpted heads of two smiling devils;
And a copper pan shows its gleaming paunch.

On the wall a painting that depicts winter.
A crowd of people skate on ice
Between the trees, smoke comes from a chimney,
And crows fly in an overcast sky.

Nearby a second clock. A bird sits inside.
It pops out squawking and calls three times.
And it has barely finished its third and last call
When mother ladles out soup from a hot tureen.

Czeslaw Milosz

The Rising of the Sun

I did not expect to live in such an unusual moment.
When the God of thunders and of rocky heights,
The Lord of hosts, Kyrios Sabaoth,
Would humble people to the quick,
Allowing them to act whatever way they wished,
Leaving to them conclusions, saying nothing.
It was a spectacle that was indeed unlike
The agelong cycle of royal tragedies.
Roads on concrete pillars, cities of glass and cast iron,
Airfields larger than tribal dominions
Suddenly ran short of their essence and disintegrated
Not in a dream but really, for, subtracted from themselves,
They could only hold on as do things which should not last.
Out of trees, field stones, even lemons on the table,
Materiality escaped and their spectrum
Proved to be a void, a haze on a film.
Dispossessed of its objects, space was swarming.
Everywhere was nowhere and nowhere, everywhere.
Letters in books turned silver-pale, wobbled, and faded
The hand was not able to trace the palm sign, the river sign, or the sign of ibis.
A hullabaloo of many tongues proclaimed the mortality of the language.
A complaint was forbidden as it complained to itself.
People, afflicted with an incomprehensible distress,
Were throwing off their clothes on the piazzas so that nakedness might call
For judgment.
But in vain they were longing after horror, pity, and anger.
Neither work nor leisure
Was justified,
Nor the face, nor the hair nor the loins
Nor any existence

Czeslaw Milosz

The Road

here where you see a green valley
And a road half-covered with grass,
Through an oak wood beginning to bloom
Children are returning home from school.

In a pencil case that opens sideways
Crayons rattle among crumbs of a roll
And a copper penny saved by every child
To greet the first spring cuckoo.

Sister's beret and brother's cap
Bob in the bushy underbrush,
A screeching jay hops in the branches
And long clouds float over the trees.

A red roof is already visible at the bend.
In front of the house father, leaning on a hoe,
Bows down, touches the unfolded leaves,
And from his flower bed inspects the whole region.

Czeslaw Milosz

Theodicy

No, it won’t do, my sweet theologians.
Desire will not save the morality of God.
If he created beings able to choose between good and evil,
And they chose, and the world lies in iniquity,
Nevertheless, there is pain, and the undeserved torture of creatures,
Which would find its explanation only by assuming
The existence of an archetypal Paradise
And a pre-human downfall so grave
That the world of matter received its shape from diabolic power.

Czeslaw Milosz

To Mrs. Professor In Defense Of My Cat's Honor And Not Only

My valiant helper, a small-sized tiger
Sleeps sweetly on my desk, by the computer,
Unaware that you insult his tribe.

Cats play with a mouse or with a half-dead mole.
You are wrong, though: it's not out of cruelty.
They simply like a thing that moves.

For, after all, we know that only consciousness
Can for a moment move into the Other,
Empathize with the pain and panic of a mouse.

And such as cats are, all of Nature is.
Indifferent, alas, to the good and the evil.
Quite a problem for us, I am afraid.

Natural history has its museums,
But why should our children learn about monsters,
An earth of snakes and reptiles for millions of years?

Nature devouring, nature devoured,
Butchery day and night smoking with blood.
and who created it? Was it the good Lord?

Yes, undoubtedly, they are innocent,
Spiders, mantises, sharks, pythons.
We are the only ones who say: cruelty.

Our consciousness and our conscience
Alone in the pale anthill of galaxies
Put their hope in a humane God.

Who cannot but feel and think,
Who is kindred to us by his warmth and movement,
For we are, as he told us, similar to Him.

Yet if it is so, the He takes pity
On every mauled mouse, every wounded bird.
Then the universe ofr him is like a Crucifixion.

Such is the outcome of your attack on the cat:
A theological, Augustinian grimace,
Which makes difficult our walking on this eart.

Czeslaw Milosz

Unde Malum

Where does evil come from?
It comes
from man
always from man
only from man
- Tadeusz Rozewicz
Alas, dear Tadeusz,
good nature and wicked man
are romantic inventions
you show us this way
the depth of your optimism
so let man exterminate
his own species
the innocent sunrise will illuminate
a liberated flora and fauna
where oak forests reclaim
the postindustrial wasteland
and the blood of a deer
torn asunder by a pack of wolves
is not seen by anyone
a hawk falls upon a hare
without witness
evil disappears from the world
and consciousness with it
Of course, dear Tadeusz,
evil (and good) comes from man.

Czeslaw Milosz

Veni Seer

Come, Holy Spirit,
bending or not bending the grasses,
appearing or not above our heads in a tongue of flame,
at hay harvest or when they plough in the orchards,
or when snow covers crippled firs in the Sierra Nevada.

I am only a human being: I need visible signs.
I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.
Many a time I asked, you know it well,
that the statue in church lift its hand, only once, just once, for me.
But I understand that signs must be human,
therefore, call one person, anywhere on earth,
not me-after all I have some decency-
and allow me, when I look at that person,
to marvel at you.

Czeslaw Milosz

What Does It Mean

It does not know it glitters
It does not know it flies
It does not know it is this not that.

And, more and more often, agape,
With my Gauloise dying out,
Over a glass of red wine,
I muse on the meaning of being this not that.

Just as long ago, when I was twenty,
But then there was a hope I would be everything,
Perhaps even a butterfly or a thrush, by magic.
Now I see dusty district roads
And a town where the postmaster gets drunk every day
Melancholy with remaining identical to himself.

If only the stars contained me.
If only everything kept happening in such a way
That the so-called world opposed the so-called flesh.
Were I at least not contradictory. Alas.

Czeslaw Milosz

Where the Sun Rises and Where it Sets

Once, when returning from far Transylvania
Through mountain forests, rocks, and Carpathian ridges,
Halting by a ford at the close of day
(My companions had sent me ahead to look
For passage), I let my horse graze
And out of the saddlebag took the Holy Scripture;
The light was so gracious, murmur of streams so sweet,
That reading Paul's epistles, and seeing the first star,
I was soon lulled into a profound sleep.

A young man in ornate Greek raiment
Touched my arm and I heard his voice:
'Your time, O mortals, hastens by like water,
I have descended and known its absyss.
It was I, whom cruel Paul chastised in Corinth
For having stolen my father's wife,
And by his order I was to be excluded
From the table at which we shared our meals.
Since then I have not been in gatherings of the saints,
And for many years I was led by the sinful love
Of a poor plaything given to temptation,
And so we doomed ourselves to eternal ruin.
But my Lord and my God, whom I knew not,
Tore me from the ashes with his lightning,
In his eyes your truths count for nothing,
His mercy saves all living flesh.'

Awake under a huge starry sky,
Having received help unhoped for,
Absolved of care about our platry life,
I wiped my eyes wet with tears.

No, I have never been to Transylvania.
I have never brought messages from there to my church.
But I could have.
This is an exercise in style.
The pluperfect tense
Of countries imperfective.

Czeslaw Milosz

Window

I looked out the window at dawn and saw a young apple tree translucent in brightness.

And when I looked out at dawn once again, an apple tree laden with fruit stood there.

Many years had probably gone by but I remember nothing of what happened in my sleep.

Czeslaw Milosz

Winter

The pungent smells of a California winter,
Grayness and rosiness, an almost transparent full moon.
I add logs to the fire, I drink and I ponder.

"In Ilawa," the news item said, "at age 70
Died Aleksander Rymkiewicz, poet."

He was the youngest in our group. I patronized him slightly,
Just as I patronized others for their inferior minds
Though they had many virtues I couldn't touch.

And so I am here, approaching the end
Of the century and of my life. Proud of my strength
Yet embarrassed by the clearness of the view.

Avant-gardes mixed with blood.
The ashes of inconceivable arts.
An omnium-gatherum of chaos.

I passed judgment on that. Though marked myself.
This hasn't been the age for the righteous and the decent.
I know what it means to beget monsters
And to recognize in them myself.

You, moon, You, Aleksander, fire of cedar logs.
Waters close over us, a name lasts but an instant.
Not important whether the generations hold us in memory.
Great was that chase with the hounds for the unattainable meaning of the world.

And now I am ready to keep running
When the sun rises beyond the borderlands of death.
I already see mountain ridges in the heavenly forest
Where, beyond every essence, a new essence waits.

You, music of my late years, I am called
By a sound and a color which are more and more perfect.

Do not die out, fire. Enter my dreams, love.
Be young forever, seasons of the earth.

Czeslaw Milosz

Woe!

It is true, our tribe is similar to the bees,
It gathers honey of wisdom, carries it, stores it in honeycombs.
I am able to roam for hours
Through the labyrinth of the main library, floor to floor.
But yesterday, looking for the words of masters and prophets,
I wandered into high regions
That are visited by practically no one.
I would open a book and could decipher nothing.
For letters faded and disappeared from the pages.
Woe! I exclaimed-so it comes to this?
Where are you, venerable ones, with your beards and wigs,
Your nights spent by a candle, griefs of your wives?
So a message saving the world is silenced forever?
At your home it was the day of making preserves.
And your dog, sleeping by the fire, would wake up,
Yawn, and look at you, as if knowing.

Czeslaw Milosz

You Who Wronged

You who wronged a simple man
Bursting into laughter at the crime,
And kept a pack of fools around you
To mix good and evil, to blur the line,

Though everyone bowed down before you,
Saying virtue and wisdom lit your way,
Striking gold medals in your honor,
Glad to have survived another day,

Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
You can kill one, but another is born.
The words are written down, the deed, the date.

And you’d have done better with a winter dawn,
A rope, and a branch bowed beneath your weight.

Czeslaw Milosz

You Whose Name

You whose name is aggressor and devourer.
Putrid and sultry, in fermentation.
You mash into pulp sages and prophets,
Criminals and heroes, indifferently.
My vocativus is useless.
You do not hear me, though I address you,
Yet I want to speak, for I am against you.
So what if you gulp me, I am not yours.
You overcome me with exhaustion and fever.
You blur my thought, which protests,
You roll over me, dull unconscious power.
The one who will overcome you is swift, armed:
Mind, spirit, maker, renewer.
He jousts with you in depths and on high,
Equestrian, winged, lofty, silver-scaled.
I have served him in the investiture of forms.
It's not my concern what he will do with me.

A retinue advances in the sunlight by the lakes.
From white villages Easter bells resound.

Czeslaw Milosz