

Classic Poetry Series

Christopher Merrill
- poems -

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Christopher Merrill(24 February 1957 -)

Christopher Merrill is an American poet, essayist, journalist and translator. Currently, he serves as director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. He led the initiative that resulted in the selection of Iowa City as a UNESCO City of Literature, a part of the Creative Cities Network. In 2011, he was appointed to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO.

Life and career

He was educated at Middlebury College and the University of Washington. He has published four collections of poetry, including *Watch Fire*, for which he received the Peter I. B. Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets. He has also published translations, several edited volumes, and four books of nonfiction. His work has been translated into twenty-five languages, and his journalism appears in many publications. For ten years he was the book critic for the daily radio news program *The World*. He has held the William H. Jenks Chair in Contemporary Letters at the College of the Holy Cross.

Awards, fellowships, and prizes

Sherman Brown Neff Fellowship, University of Utah (1986–1987)

John Ciardi Fellow in Poetry, Bread Loaf Writers' Conference (1989)

Pushcart Prize XV in Poetry (1990)

Editors' Award in Poetry, *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry & Prose* (1990)

Ingram Merrill Foundation Award in Poetry (1991)

Readers' Choice Award in Poetry, *Prairie Schooner* (1992)

The Academy of American Poets Peter I. B. Lavan Younger Poets Award (1993)

Translation Award, Slovenian Ministry of Culture (1997)

Finalist, Los Angeles Times Book Prize (for *The Four Questions of Melancholy: New and Selected Poems by Tomaz Šalamun* (editor)) (1997)

Writers Association of Bosnia-Herzegovina Annual Literary Award, The Bosnian

Stecak (2001)

Translation Awards, Korean Literature Translation Institute (2003, 2004, 2006)

Kostas Kyriazis Foundation Honorary International Literary Prize (2005)

Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, French Ministry of Culture and Communications (2006)

A Boy Juggling A Soccer Ball

after practice: right foot
to left foot, stepping forward and back,
to right foot and left foot,
and left foot up to his thigh, holding
it on his thigh as he twists
around in a circle, until it rolls
down the inside of his leg,
like a tickle of sweat, not catching
and tapping on the soft
side of his foot, and juggling
once, twice, three times,
hopping on one foot like a jump-roper
in the gym, now trapping
and holding the ball in midair,
balancing it on the instep
of his weak left foot, stepping forward
and forward and back, then
lifting it overhead until it hangs there;
and squaring off his body,
he keeps the ball aloft with a nudge
of his neck, heading it
from side to side, softer and softer,
like a dying refrain,
until the ball, slowing, balances
itself on his hairline,
the hot sun and sweat filling his eyes
as he jiggles this way
and that, then flicking it up gently,
hunching his shoulders
and tilting his head back, he traps it
in the hollow of his neck,
and bending at the waist, sees his shadow,
his dangling T-shirt, the bent
blades of brown grass in summer heat;
and relaxing, the ball slipping
down his back...and missing his foot.

He wheels around, he marches
over the ball, as if it were a rock

he stumbled into, and pressing
his left foot against it, he pushes it
against the inside of his right
until it pops into the air, is heeled
over his head- the rainbow! -
and settles on his extended thigh before
rolling over his knee and down
his shin, so he can juggle it again
from his left foot to his right foot
- and right foot to left foot to thigh-
as he wanders, on the last day
of summer, around the empty field.

Christopher Merrill

Coordinates

A map on which the names have been erased,

A compass pivoting on a black cross,

Sextants dismantled and displayed in a store

Razed and rebuilt in the Jewish Quarter—this is

How to draw coordinates for the next battle

On memory and desire, with a set of tools

No one knows how to use. And so the colonel

Peeling an orange at the command post

Hums an aria from *La Bohème*

Until a mortar lands outside his door.

The trial will resume next week, if the judge

Survives the latest attempt on his life—though the jury

Impaneled for the duration of the war

Cannot reach a verdict in the case

Of the man gagged and hanging from the ceiling

Of the machine shop: the ghost prisoner,

AKA God's beloved. His testimony

Must be thrown out, new witnesses examined,

And the court reporters banished before the judge

Can order him to be strung up again.

Cicadas emerge, numbered and ranked, their clear

Wings beating—a light arriving from a star

Glimpsed from the depths of an abandoned mine.

We won't make it out alive, the guide said

And tumbled down the shaft. What remains?

A shred of plastic flapping in the nest

The birds left in the hedge, a speckled egg

That never hatched, a file of summonses

Lost in the flood. The trees hum in the dark.

Pray for the guide. Pray for everyone.

Heroic poses generate suspicion,

According to a poll taken on board

The wooden ship bound for the Orient.

Hence the captain's orders are delivered

Through the sous-chef who signed up to resurrect

The art of navigating by the stars.

The first mate is afraid to leave his cabin.

The stowaway will lead the mutineers.

And the passengers will tell you anything

If you will take them safely to Ceylon.

To break the back of the iambic line,

The prisoner in his metal cage, exposed

To sun and wind and rain, summoned a host

Of voices from the vast storehouse of his reading

And listening, and cast them on the page

Like glittering shells collected at high tide,

In a new line variable as the surf

He could no longer hear from his death cell

In Pisa: by the law, so build yr/ temple...

The verdict? Silence and unsentencing.

The tower leans toward mystery. Which is to say:

The past, present, and future, the masonry

Of which is lined with cracks through which to glimpse

A second space—i.e. eternity.

Thus Mimi, coughing, seizes Rodolfo's sleeve

To sing goodbye. Thus a seasick passenger

Prays for deliverance. And thus the poet charged

With treason marks off in the sand the days
Until his execution, while the colonel
Is buried with full military honors.

After the torture and interrogations,
The water-boarding and sleep deprivation
And menstrual blood flung in his face, the ghost
Prisoner revealed the coordinates
For the Roman razing of Jerusalem
And the itinerary that John followed
To Patmos to compose his Revelation
For the seven churches in Asia. The guard
Removed her underwear. And from the throne
Proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices...

Christopher Merrill

Diptych

Poem Beginning with a Line by My Daughter, Abigail

When I wake up, I'm still asleep.

And when I get dressed, my clothes are missing.

And when I finish breakfast, I'm always hungry.

And when I walk to school, the street is empty.

And when I open my book, the pages are blank.

And when I count the boys in my class, the walls are blue.

And when I count the girls in my class, the walls are yellow.

And when the bell rings for recess, the playground is gone.

And when I come home, the house is dark.

And when I open the mail, the lights switch on.

And when I try to whistle, my mouth becomes a balloon.

And when I begin to sing, the balloon sails out the window.

And when I enter the garden, the flowers turn their backs on me.

And when I pet my cat, she flaps her wings and flies away.

And when I call my dog, a wolf lopes out of the woods.

And when I sit down to dinner, the table is crowded with people I don't know.

And when I ask for dessert, everybody claps their hands.

And when I climb into bed, I'm wide awake.

Diptych (2)

Lines for Jane and Jonathan Wells

How the white horses gallop through the city

At nightfall, when the fog rolls in from the sea

And one by one the street lamps fail to light.

o

The curtain of the port rises on nothing—

No buoys and no boats. Only the cry

Of a gull flying somewhere over the water,

o

And then the whinnying of the last horse

Rearing before the gate it will pass through

On its hind legs to join the rest of the herd.

o

Only this—and the light above your door.

Christopher Merrill

Fall And Recovery

For example, the crack widening in the window of the plane flying over Greenland: crazing is the word used by the safety inspector to describe the mesh of lines spreading from the bullet-sized hole in the plastic through which shine glaciers melting in the sea below—ridge upon white ridge gleaming in the sunlight of an autumn morning, which goes on and on as the plane heads westward. The inspector contracts and releases the muscles in his legs, curling his toes under the seat in front of him, raising and lowering his feet, listening, again, to a partita by Bach. Soon it will be time for another meal, another film, and the blue expanse of the sea. The flight seems endless, suspended like a breath above the earth, a line inscribed in the sky subject to the same forces of gravity and velocity that mark the rising tides. The passenger closes his eyes, and as he falls asleep he thinks, I must be crazy to keep doing this. The crack opens into light.

Christopher Merrill

Ghazal

for Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001)

There's no sugar in the Promised Land.

Swear by the olive in the God-kissed land.

I heard your laughter in the jackal's howl

When the monks chanted in the Psalmist's land.

They knelt on the mountain top, pilgrims of the Book,

Until the viper in the rod hissed, "Stand!"

Prophets, oracles, and bards agree:

The tyrant always plays the dumbest hand.

The way you danced along the crowded bar—

The saffron harvest in a star-crossed land.

Our teacher, moon-tanned, slept with one eye open.

He was the absence of field, the sodless strand.

The faithful praying in the catacombs—

Do they measure what they must withstand?

These orders from Iberia remain

In effect: Like unto like. All others banned.

They set sail without charts or compass, searching

For the lost tribes, and never missed land.

Lava and salt spray and your final couplet:

New worlds inscribed in parchment, pumice, sand.

The cemeteries above Sarajevo

Extend the boundaries of a lost land.

Your favorite show: General Hospital.

Shall we go for a walk? No! I'll get tanned.

In Beirut, Baghdad, and Jerusalem

The war photographers are in command.

The heart turned terrorist when the poet died.

Now all the world's a revolutionist land.

If Paradise is full of stationary, write

To me in your most lavish, embossed hand.

Eat seven olives, my grandmother said,

And you will never live in a famished land.

Another war in the imperium?

The poet's warnings can be read, glossed, scanned.

Unwitnessed in the night, the empty mosques

And temples burn in the Belovéd's land.

The new exhibit in the war museum—

Portraits commissioned in a possessed land.

Ragas at daybreak, Motown at midnight:

You sang for everyone, a wind-tossed band.

Will this Christ-bearer find his only friend

In the Promised Land—in blesséd Shahid's land?

Christopher Merrill

Ghazal (2)

Ghazal (2)

<I>For Dawn Upshaw</I>

O water, be the string to my guitar.

The land's encircled? Follow the evening star.

The flight attendant heads for her hotel—

The fossil of a bird rising through the tar.

Another photo-shoot for the pregnant model

We met in Andalusia, in a bar!

The way the sun burned through the morning fog—

Blood from a white-tailed deer struck by a car.

The soldier at the checkpoint waved us through,

While the mendicant examined his cigar.

A plague of locusts and a partial eclipse

Of the sun: send a virgin to the altar.

The neurologist at his retirement party

Thanked everyone for gauging him from afar.

The sun, the mountains, and the sea: these framed

The tragedy born of the scimitar.

Bored? Seeking love? Adventure? The divine?

It's a good time to go to Zanzibar.

The emperor dismissed the courtier

Who had prepared for famine instead of war.

And so they charged into an ancient land,

Like cattle herded into an abattoir.

The scholar's parting gift to the defrocked priest:

The fetus of an ape, preserved in a jar.

Take the reins, please. Now. I can't see the road,

Thanks to the blows I received from that hussar.

The naturalist bitten by a rattlesnake

Wore a black leather glove to hide his scar.

Steer clear of the volcano rising from the sea

Or else you'll lose that load of cinnebar.

They entertained the spirits of their marriage—

A turning of the bones in Madagascar.

A plume of smoke and ashes on the deck:

The startled lookout dangles from the spar.

Again they rose at dawn to sing hosannas:

If you're a Romanov, then I'm the czar.

Christopher Merrill

Lines On The Death Of Ingmar Bergman

A woman sketching, a man steeped in gin—

Note how the final scene assembling

In the rain shadow of a mountain range

Ablaze from ridge to ridge carries no hint

Of the catastrophe: the smoke, the wind.

o

Nor do the daily rushes, catalogued

For a committee of historians

Attempting to discern the exact moment

Of the republic's death, contain instructions

For the executor of the estate—

o

The editor, that is, who was unwisely

Sacked on the second day of shooting, then hired

By the film maker's estranged wife to save

From the approaching fire a commentary

On eschatology: The Seventh Seal.

Christopher Merrill

Poem Ending With A Line By George W. Bush

The screening of the film on genocide,
Designed to build momentum for the final
Lecture at the festival of human rights,
Was marred by the projectionist's refusal
To dim the lights in the auditorium.
We looked around, confused, until someone quoted
The president: There's no cave deep enough
For America, or dark enough to hide.

Christopher Merrill

Portage

The canoe had sprung a leak, and so they had to portage to the sea, along a foot path abandoned to marauders from the city. When their guide could not identify the tracks in the mud, the cry of the bird perched in the dead tree behind them, or the markings on the boxcar rusting on the remains of the trestle destroyed in the last war, they set the canoe down and removed from their backpacks the handguns delivered to their rooms the night of their departure. The instructions were clear—Use only in an emergency—and yet they could no longer decipher the meaning of the phrase that had inspired them to leave before the ferry sailed into the harbor: the only anchor ever yet imagined by man. One fired at the bird, another aimed at the boxcar, the third ordered the guide to take the lead. From the bushes came the sound of something tearing, then footsteps, whimpering, silence. The guide scanned the shore, debating where to put in for the journey to the island on which they would draw up a new judicial code. The bird circled above the tree, and the sea blazed into light. No one knew which way to turn.

Christopher Merrill

The Petitions

The edifice was complete—the signatures, secret teachings, and sacrificial victims locked in stone, the jewelry, linens, and banners of the vanquished hung from the parapets—when a great wind swept through the city.

o

The walls and towers glistened with salt spray; a sheet of music sailed down the street, toward the harbor, where the last fishing trawler was in flames; the door to the lighthouse swung open; no one entered or left.

o

The harbor was protected by a natural lagoon, beyond which sailed a fleet of warships, of indeterminate origin, awaiting the order to attack.

o

An order which would be delivered from on high, said the trusted courtiers.

o

Pearl divers, purse seiners, silk traders, coffee merchants, vendors, vintners, customs officers, carvers of casks, gunrunners, sawyers, salt collectors, street cleaners, appraisers and collectors, surveyors and adjusters—all fled with their families.

o

The city they built in the desert grew concentrically, adding rings of houses and roads that reached into the mountains, where a band of anchorites had settled to await the end of time, keeping vigil through the day and night.

o

Do not be foolish in your petitions, one monk advised his brethren, lest you dishonor God by your ignorance—and still they begged for more: miracles and visions and glory.

o

Of Whom they knew nothing, for all their certainty about the intricacies of His design.

o

The same certainty that governed the spread of the city to the edge of the known world.

o

Beyond the border, refugees from the flood plain huddled around fires fed by the timbers of the boats swamped in the storm that washed their huts and horses away.

o

The faithful watched this spectacle as if from a vast distance, conscious of the fact that disaster is always near at hand.

o

Praying to be spared: Lord, have mercy...

Christopher Merrill

Vespers

Vespers

The hammer falls silent, a mourning dove coos in the pigeon house by the olive grove, and in the renovated church the bells ring for vespers.

oo

I close the ancient Book of the Sea to read from a pocket-sized manual of prayers, trading soundings and silhouettes of headlands for another anchorage:

Now that the day hath run its course, I praise thee, O Holy One...

And if my petitions for favor lead to an examination of the soul?

Forty years ago, boarding a sailboat, I saw my father wind his watch around his wallet, a stripe of gold cinching a wad of leather, like an amulet.

And when the mast snapped in a gust of wind, capsizing the boat, his watch and wallet sank to the bottom of the lake.

What I remember from underwater were the bubbles of my breath rising to the surface, the taste of algae, the greenish tinge of the sun and sky.

Thus a life of pure sensation passed before my eyes—and little has changed since then.

Time and money, my father joked, rowing back to shore.

To which I add: Into thy hands, O Lord Jesus Christ, my God, I commend my spirit...

Christopher Merrill

Without

On the first day the goat climbed to the top branch of the acacia tree and said, The ship sailing to the new world will sink before it leaves the harbor. He stayed there all night, counting the stars in three constellations that he had never seen before, and in the morning he cleaned himself up and said, The fishermen mending their nets will never take to the sea again. Leaves fell from the tree, the herder called from the ridge, and the goat, frisky in the heat, bounced on the bare branch until late afternoon, when he drifted off to sleep, unafraid of what the waxing moon might bring. That night he dreamed of a hyena chasing a lion up a valley into which the sea rushed, dividing the continent between the ones with gold and the ones without. And when he woke at sunrise on the third day, believing that the whitecaps in his dream were the pages of an unwritten book left on the ridge from which the herder called to him, he said, Here I am.

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