Classic Poetry Series

Czeslaw Milosz

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

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.

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.

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, thought 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

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.

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 recognize 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

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.

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.

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?

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.

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.

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.

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.

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?

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

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.

Shorts 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

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 it should always be.

On the day the world ends Women walk through 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 there will be, No other end of the world there will be.

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 each other, then he pours on friends, once enemies, a handful of snow.

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.

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.

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.