

## *Ars Poetica?*

Czeslaw Milosz (transl. Milosz & Lillian Vallee)

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 it's 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 the help 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.

*Berkeley, 1968*

***Veni Creator***

Czeslaw Milosz (transl. Milosz & Robert Pinsky)

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 man: 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  
lifts its hand, only once, just once, for me.  
But I understand that signs must be human,  
therefore call one man, anywhere on earth,  
not me—after all I have some decency—  
and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you.

*Berkeley, 1961*

***Gift***

Czeslaw Milosz

A day so happy.  
Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden.  
Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.  
There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.  
I knew no one worth my envying him.  
Whatever evil I had suffered, I forgot.  
To think that once I was the same man did not embarrass me.  
In my body I felt no pain.  
When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and sails.

*A Song on the End of the World*

Czeslaw Milosz (transl. Anthony Milosz)

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:  
There will be no other end of the world,  
There will be no other end of the world.

*Warsaw, 1944*