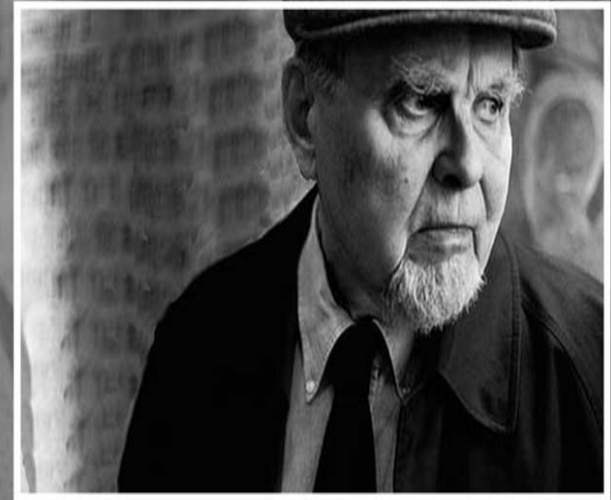


IF THERE IS NO GOD:

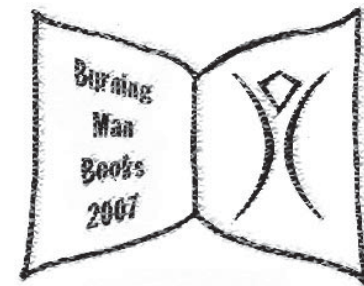


**SELECTED POETRY AND PROSE
OF CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ**

**EDITED BY RAYMOND SOULARD, JR.
AND KASSANDRA SOULARD**

*If There is No God:
Selected Poetry and Prose
of Czeslaw Milosz*

edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.
& Kassandra Soulard



Number Fifty-four

**If There is No God:
Selected Poetry and Prose
of Czeslaw Milosz**

Burning Man Books is
an imprint of
Scriptor Press
2442 NW Market Street-#363
Seattle, Washington 98107
cenacle@mindspring.com
www.geocities.com/scriptorpress

*We were down at Powell's Bookstore in Portland, Oregon,
it was a pretty high night, we crouched in a corner
with dozens of poetry books, kept coming back
to the poetry in this volume, it insisted . . .*

This volume was composed
in the AGaramond font
in PageMaker 7.0 on the
Macintosh G4 computer



At Dawn

How enduring, how we need durability.
The sky before sunrise is soaked with light.
Rosy color tints buildings, bridges, and the Seine.
I was here when she, with whom I walk, wasn't born yet
And the cities on a distant plain stood intact
Before they rose in the air with the dust of sepulchral brick
And the people who lived there didn't know.
Only this moment at dawn is real to me.
The bygone lives are like my own past life, uncertain.
I cast a spell on the city asking it to last.

Amazement

O what daybreak in the windows! Cannons salute.
The basket boat of Moses floats down the green Nile.
Standing immobile in the air, we fly over flowers:
Lovely carnations and tulips placed on long low tables.
Heard too are hunting horns exclaiming *hallali*.
Innumerable and boundless substances of the Earth:
Scent of thyme, hue of fir, white frost, dances of cranes.
And everything simultaneous. And probably eternal.
Unseen, unheard, yet it was.
Unexpressed by strings or tongues, yet it will be.
Raspberry ice cream, we melt in the sky.

Berkeley, 1975

After Paradise

Don't run anymore. Quiet. How softly it rains
On the roofs of the city. How perfect
All things are. Now, for the two of you
Waking up in a royal bed by a garret window.
For a man and a woman. For one plant divided
Into masculine and feminine which longed for each other.
Yes, this is my gift to you. Above ashes
On a bitter, bitter earth. Above the subterranean
Echo of clamorings and vows. So that now at dawn
You must be attentive: the tilt of a head,
A hand with a comb, two faces in a mirror
Are only forever once, even if unremembered,
So that you watch what is, though it fades away,
And are grateful every moment for your being.
Let that little park with greenish marble busts
In the pearl-gray light, under a summer drizzle,
Remain as it was when you opened the gate.
And the street of tall peeling porticoes
Which this love of yours suddenly transformed.

Berkeley

When I was in San Francisco in 1948 I did not know that on the other side of the Bay was the city which was fated to be my longest place of residence, so that even the Wilno of my high school and university years cannot compete with it. I was enchanted with the journey to San Francisco, but it was like going to another planet, not to a place where one might live. Despite that visit, I pictured Berkeley in a false light when in 1960 I accepted an invitation to assume the post of lecturer. I thought it was situated on the Bay. Nothing of the sort: concrete on top of landfills, land reclaimed from the sea, empty wetlands, beside them industrial and warehouse districts, then the black ghetto, and only then, higher up, the city of white people. I thought there would be beaches and swimming. Ha! Not a grain of sand, and the water too dirty and too cold, because a cold current flows past these Pacific coasts. The view of the Bay, the islands, and the skyscraper city seen from the Berkeley hills is spectacular, but lunar. Like the quintessence of American spaces and the alienation of man.

Café

Of those at the table in the café
where on winter noons a garden of frost glittered on windowpanes
I alone survived.
I could go in there if I wanted to
and drumming my fingers in a chilly void
convoke shadows.

With disbelief I touch the cold marble,
with disbelief I touch my own hand.
It—is, and I—am in ever novel becoming,
while they are locked forever and ever
in their last word, their last glance,
and as remote as Emperor Valentinian
or the chiefs of the Massagetes, about whom I know nothing,
though hardly one year has passed, or two or three.

I may still cut trees in the woods of the far north,
I may speak from a platform or shoot a film
using techniques they never heard of.
I may learn the taste of fruits from ocean islands
and be photographed in attire from the second half of the century.
But they are forever like busts in frock coats and jabots
in some monstrous encyclopedia.

Sometimes when the evening aurora paints the roofs in a poor street
and I contemplate the sky, I see in the white clouds
a table wobbling. The waiter whirls with his tray
and they look at me with a burst of laughter
for I still don't know what it is to die at the hand of man,
they know—they know it well.

Warsaw, 1944

Faith

Faith is in you whenever you look
At a dewdrop 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 here to hurt our feet.
See the long shadow that is cast by the tree?
We and the flowers throw shadows on the earth.
What has no shadow has no strength to live.

Warsaw, 1943

Churches

People go to church because they are divided beings. They wish, for a moment at least, to find themselves in a reality other than the one that surrounds them and claims to be the only true reality. This daily reality is unyielding, brutal, cruel, and hard to bear. The human "I" is soft in the center and feels every moment that its adaptation to the world is doubtful.

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.

Bypassing rue Descartes

Bypassing rue Descartes
I descended toward the Seine, shy, a traveler,
A young barbarian just come to the capital of the world.

We were many, from Jassy and Koloshvar, Wilno and Bucharest,
Saigon and Marrakesh,
Ashamed to remember the customs of our homes,
About which nobody here should ever be told:
The clapping for servants, barefooted girls hurry in,
Dividing food with incantations,
Choral prayers recited by master and household together.

I had left the cloudy provinces behind,
I entered the universal, dazzled and desiring.

Soon enough, many from Jassy and Koloshvar, or Saigon or
Marrakesh
Would be killed because they wanted to abolish the customs of their
homes.

Soon enough, their peers were seizing power
In order to kill in the name of the universal, beautiful ideas.

Meanwhile the city behaved in accordance with its nature,
Rustling with throaty laughter in the dark,
Baking long breads and pouring wine into clay pitchers,
Buying fish, lemons, and garlic at street markets,
Indifferent as it was to honor and shame and greatness and glory,
Because that had been done already and had transformed itself
Into monuments representing nobody knows whom,
Into arias hardly audible and into turns of speech.

Again I lean on the rough granite of the embankment,
As if I had returned from travels through the underworlds

And suddenly saw in the light the reeling wheel of the seasons
Where empires have fallen and those once living are now dead.

There is no capital of the world, neither here nor anywhere else,
And the abolished customs are restored to their small fame
And now I know that the time of human generations is not like the
time of the earth.

As to my heavy sins, I remember one most vividly:
How, one day, walking on a forest path along a stream,
I pushed a rock down onto a water snake coiled in the grass.

And what I have met with in life was the just punishment
Which reaches, sooner or later, the breaker of a taboo.

Berkeley, 1980

Esse

I looked at that face, dumbfounded. The lights of *métro* stations flew by; I didn't notice them. What can be done, if our sight lacks absolute power to devour objects ecstatically, in an instant, leaving nothing more than the void of an ideal form, a sign like a hieroglyph simplified from the drawing of an animal or bird? A slightly snub nose, a high brow with sleekly brushed-back hair, the line of the chin—but why isn't the power of sight absolute?—and in a whiteness tinged with pink two sculpted holes, containing a dark, lustrous lava. To absorb that face but to have it simultaneously against the background of all spring boughs, walls, waves, in its weeping, its laughter, moving it back fifteen years, or ahead thirty. To have. It is not even a desire. Like a butterfly, a fish, the stem of a plant, only more mysterious. And so it befell me that after so many attempts at naming the word, I am able only to repeat, harping on one string, the highest, the unique avowal beyond which no power can attain: *I am, she is*. Shout, blow the trumpets, make thousands-strong marches, leap, rend your clothing, repeating only: *is!*

She got out at Raspail. I was left behind with the immensity of existing things. A sponge, suffering because it cannot saturate itself; a river, suffering because reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees.

Brie-Comte-Robert, 1954

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 backdrop 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 of possible,
for what is needed in misfortune is a little order and beauty.

Berkeley, 1968

Blacksmith Shop

I liked the bellows operated by rope.
A hand or foot pedal—I don't remember which.
But that blowing, and the blazing of the fire!
And a piece of iron in the fire, held there by tongs,
Red, softened for the anvil,
Beaten with a hammer, bent into a horseshoe,
Thrown in a bucket of water, sizzle, steam.

And horses hitched to be shod,
Tossing their manes; and in the grass by the river
Plowshares, sledge runners, harrows waiting for repair

At the entrance, my bare feet on the dirt floor,
Here, gusts of heat; at my back, white clouds.
I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this:
To glorify things just because they are.

With Her

Those poor, arthritically swollen knees
Of my mother in an absent country.
I think of them on my seventy-fourth birthday
As I attend early Mass at St. Mary Magdalen in Berkeley.
A reading this Sunday from the Book of Wisdom
About how God has not made death
And does not rejoice in the annihilation of the living.
A reading from the Gospel according to Mark
About a little girl to whom He said: "Talitha, cumi!"
This is for me. To make me rise from the dead
And repeat the hope of those who lived before me,
In a fearful unity with her, with her pain of dying,
In a village near Danzig, in a dark November,
When both the mournful Germans, old men and women,
And the evacuees from Lithuania would fall ill with typhus.
Be with me, I say to her, my time has been short.
Your words are now mine, deep inside me:
"It all seems now to have been a dream."

Berkeley, 1985

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

Warsaw, 1943

Nature

Disenchantment, love. For trees, for a river, for birds. Certainly, in our childhood we do not know that this is called love. Linden trees, oaks, maples simply existed when I was a seven-year-old. Now I know that it is possible for them not to exist and that their fates are connected with people. My great-grandfather Syruc planted them around 1830 and some of them have survived, whereas nothing survived from the library he, like his friend Jakub Gieysztor (the author of memoirs) collected, although on a smaller scale. Gieysztor spent a lot of money on books supplied to him by Jewish used-booksellers in Wilno. Enchantment at a very young age is a sacrament, an experience whose memory acts upon us throughout our life. Having been wounded, I ought to have become a complete pessimist; my ecstatic praises of existence can be explained by that early gift I received through my five senses.

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.

Please, Doctor, I feel a pain.
Not here. No, not here. Even I don't know.
Maybe it's too many islands and continents,
unpronounced 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, 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.

Berkeley, 1962

On a Beach

The sea breaks on the sands, I listen to its surge and close my eyes,

Here on this European shore, in the fullness of summer, after the big wars of the century.

The brows of new generations are innocent, yet marked.

Often in a crowd a face resembling—he could be one of the destroyers

If he were born a little earlier but he doesn't know it.

Chosen, as his father was, though not called.

Under my eyelids I keep their eternally young cities.

The shouts of their music, the rock pulsating, I am searching for the core of my thought.

It is only what can't be expressed, the "ah" mumbled every day—:

The irretrievable, indifferent, eternal vanishing?

Is it pity and anger because after the ecstasy and despair and hope beings similar to gods are swallowed by oblivion?

Because in the sea's surging and silences one hears nothing about a division into the just and the wicked?

Or was I pursued by images of those who were alive for a day, an hour, a moment, under the skies?

So much, and now the peace of defeat, for my verse has preserved so little?

Or perhaps I have only heard myself whispering: "Epilogue, epilogue"?

Prophecies of my youth fulfilled but not in the way one expected.

The morning is back and flowers are gathered in the cool of the garden by a loving hand.

A flock of pigeons soars above the valley. They turn and change color flying along the mountains.

Same glory of ordinary days and milk in a jug and crisp cherries.

And yet down below, in the very brushwood of existence, it lurks and crawls,

Recognizable by the fluttering dread of small creatures, it, implacable, steel-gray nothingness.

✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕

I open my eyes, a ball flies past, a red sail leans on a wave which is blue in the gaudy sun.

Just before me a boy tests the water with his foot, and suddenly I notice he is not like others.

Not crippled, yet he has the movements of a cripple and the head of a retarded child.

His father looks after him, that handsome man sitting there on a boulder.

A sensation of my neighbor's misfortune pierces me and I begin to comprehend

In this dark age the bond of our common fate and a compassion more real than I was inclined to confess.

Alchemy

During my lifetime I have had occasion to be a witness to the changing social position of this word. At first, everyone knew that alchemy was just prescientific chemistry, a field that properly belongs to a time when the boundary between magic and science was blurred. Later, researchers who studied intensively the century of alchemy, the seventeenth century, posed the question: "What exactly did the hope of finding the philosopher's stone and of extracting gold mean at that time?" These researchers discovered the spiritual dimension of alchemical operations and their connection with the Hermetic tradition. There followed an era of respect for symbols and archetypes to which Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade, as well as many others, contributed so much. The alchemist's workshop ceased to be merely a place where there were strange-looking retorts, alembics, and fire-sustaining bellows, because *transmutation* (a favorite word signifying the transformation of one element into another) of the highest order happened there. Ultimately, the concept of spiritual alchemy, well-known in the seventeenth-century circles of the Hermetics, was vindicated.

After

Convictions, beliefs, opinions,
certainties, principles,
rules and habits have abandoned me.

I woke up naked at the edge of a civilization
which seemed to me comic and incomprehensible.

The vaulted halls of the post-Jesuit academy
where I had taken my classes
would not have been pleased with me.

Though I preserved a few sentences in Latin.

The river flows through a forest of oak and pine.

I stand in grass up to my waist,
Breathing in the wild scent of yellow flowers.

Above, white clouds. As is usual in my district,
an abundance of white clouds.

By the river Wilia, 1999

Gift

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.

Berkeley, 1971

Religion and Space (excerpt)

I am not afraid to say that a devout and God-fearing man is superior as a human specimen to a restless mocker who is glad to style himself an “intellectual,” proud of his cleverness in using ideas which he claims as his own though he acquired them in a pawnshop in exchange for simplicity of heart. Besides, it seems to me that we are born either pious or impious, and I would be glad were I able to number myself among the former. Piety has no need of definition—either it is there or it is not. It persists independently of the division of people into believers and atheists, an illusory division today, since faith is undermined by disbelief in faith, and disbelief by disbelief in itself. The sacred exists and is stronger than all our rebellions—the bread on the table, the rough tree trunk which *is*, the depths of “being” I can intuit in the letter opener lying in front of me, entirely steeped and established in its “being.” My piety would shame me if it meant that I possessed something others did not. Mine, however, is a piety without a home; it survives the obsessive, annihilating image of universal disjointedness and, fortunately, allows me no safe superiority.

A Certain Neighborhood

I told nobody I was familiar with that neighborhood.
Why should I? As if a hunter with a spear
Materialized, looking for something he once knew.
After many incarnations we return to the earth,
Uncertain we would recognize its face.
Where there were villages and orchards, now nothing, fields.
Instead of old timber, young groves,
The level of the waters is lower, the swamp disappeared
Together with the scent of *ledum*, black grouse, and adders.
A little river should be here. Yes, but hidden in the brush,
Not, as before, amidst meadows. And the two ponds
Must have covered themselves with duckweed
Before they sank into black loam.
The glitter of a small lake, but its shores lack the rushes
Through which we struggled forward, swimming,
To dry ourselves afterwards, I and Miss X, and one towel, dancing.

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.

Buddhism

My attraction to the teachings of the Buddha is obvious, since what has troubled me throughout my life—the suffering of living creatures—is at the center of the all-embracing empathy of Prince Siddhartha. Buddhism is charitable, bringing experience of the sacral to many people who are unable to reconcile themselves to the contradictions of the biblical religions, to a personal God. Buddhism, neither theistic nor atheistic, simply does not speak about the beginning of the world and a first cause, and therefore it need not wrestle with the question of how the Creator can be at one and the same time both good and evil.

Pastels by Degas

That shoulder. An erotic thing submerged in duration.
Her hands are entangled in undone plaits of red hair
So dense that, combed, it pulls, the head down,
A thigh, and under it the foot of another leg.
For she is sitting, her bent knees open,
And the movement of her arm reveals the shape of a breast.
Here undoubtedly. In a century, a year
That have vanished entirely. How to reach her?
And how to reach the other in her yellow robe?
She puts on mascara, humming a song.
The third lies on the bed, smokes a cigarette,
And looks through a fashion journal. Her muslin shirt
Shows a white roundness and pinkish nipples.
The painter's hat hangs on the entresol
With their dresses. He liked to stay here, chatting,
Sketching. Our human communion has a bitter taste
Because of the familiarity of touch, of avid lips,
The shape of loins, and talk of an immortal soul.
It flows and recedes. A wave, a sighing of surf.
And only a red mane flickered in the abyss.

Veni Creator

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
lift 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

The Experience of War (excerpt)

Living according to values accumulated by the labor of generations—values composed of the efforts of saints, thinkers, artists—man exists within certain frameworks; his thoughts and feelings develop according to a particular ritual. From the words of the prayer that his mother teaches him, through his readings and studies in school, to his experience of social life, he draws from the storehouse of humanistic hierarchies. Without being aware of it, he assimilates values; he understands his own existence and the existence of humanity as a struggle for ever more perfect goals. He senses that man is not only an animal, but something greater. His moral sense finds support in customs, in law, in religious commandments, in the current language of slogans and appeals to his fellow citizens. It is a critical moment for him when this fragile surface is sundered and he sees the depths of human nature. Everything collapses; everything seems artificial and ephemeral in comparison with these elementary facts: the cruelty of human beings that is identical in its results with the cruelty of nature; the ease with which in one second a sentient, thinking creature turns into a dead object; the treatment of individuals (each one of whom, he had believed, is a unique being) as toys to be destroyed, thrown from place to place, mutilated. At such a moment all possible perspectives for contemplating man disappear; there remains but one—the biological perspective. The rest appears to be an unessential superstructure.

Fear-Dream (1918)

Orsha is a bad station. In Orsha a train risks stopping for days.
Thus perhaps in Orsha I, six years old, got lost
And the repatriation train was starting, about to leave me behind,
Forever. As if I grasped that I would have been somebody else,
A poet of another language, of a different fate.
As if I guessed my end at the shores of Kolyma
Where the bottom of the sea is white with human skulls.
And a great dread visited me then,
The one destined to be the mother of all my fears.

A trembling of the small before the great. Before the Empire.
Which constantly marches westward, armed with bows, lariats, rifles,
Riding in a troika, pummeling the driver's back,
Or in a jeep, wearing fur hats, with a file full of conquered countries.
And I just flee, for a hundred, three hundred years,
On the ice, swimming across, by day, by night, on and on.
Abandoning by my river a punctured cuirass and a coffer with king's
grants.
Beyond the Dnieper, then the Nieman, then the Bug and the Vistula.

Finally I arrive in a city of high houses and long streets
And am oppressed by fear, for I am just a villager
Who only pretends to follow what they discuss so shrewdly
And tries to hide from them his shame, his defeat.

Who will feed me here, as I walk in the cloudy dawn
With small change in my pocket, for one coffee, no more?
A refugee from fictitious States, who will want me here?

Stony walls, indifferent walls, bitter walls.
By order of their reason, not my reason.
Now accept it. Don't kick. You are not going to flee any further.

Berkeley, 1985

December 1

The vineyard country, russet, reddish, carmine-brown in this season.
A blue outline of hills above a fertile valley.
It's warm as long as the sun does not set, in the shade cold returns.
A strong sauna and then swimming in a pool surrounded by trees.
Dark redwoods, transparent pale-leaved birches.
In their delicate network, a sliver of the moon.
I describe this for I have learned to doubt philosophy
And the visible world is all that remains.

An Hour

Leaves glowing in the sun, zealous hum of bumble bees,
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.

Anka

In what hat, from what epoch,
Is Anka posing in the photograph,
Above her brow the wing of a killed bird?
Now she is one of them, beyond the threshold
Where there are no men, no women,
And the prophet does not give separate sermons
To the ones covered with shawls
So that their long hair does not provoke lust,
And to the tanned, bearded men in draped burnouses.
Saved from the furnaces of World War II,
Trying on dresses in reflected mirrors
And blouses and necklaces and rings,
With a hairstyle and makeup for the wars of her career,
Happy to go to bed or just talk over wine,
The owner of a beautiful apartment, full of sculpture.
Left to herself till the end of the world,
How does she manage now, fleshless?
And what could the prophet find to say, when he has no thought
Of the hair under a shawl and the secret
Fragrance of skin and of ointments?

A Confession

My Lord, I loved strawberry jam
And the dark sweetness of a woman's body.
Also well-chilled vodka, herring in olive oil,
Scents, of cinnamon, of cloves.
So what kind of prophet am I? Why should the spirit
Have visited such a man? Many others
Were justly called, and trustworthy.
Who would have trusted me? For they saw
How I empty glasses, throw myself on food,
And glance greedily at the waitress's neck.
Flawed and aware of it. Desiring greatness,
Able to recognize greatness wherever it is,
And yet not quite, only in part, clairvoyant,
I knew what was left for smaller men like me:
A feast of brief hopes, a rally of the proud,
A tournament of hunchbacks, literature.

Berkeley, 1985

The Nobel Prize for Literature Lecture (excerpt)

The exile of a poet is today a simple function of a relatively recent discovery: that whoever wields power is also able to control language and not only with the prohibitions of censorship but also by changing the meaning of words. A peculiar phenomenon makes its appearance: the language of a captive community acquires certain durable habits; whole zones of reality cease to exist simply because they have no name. There is, it seems, a hidden link between theories of literature as *écriture*, of speech feeding on itself, and the growth of the totalitarian state. In any case, there is no reason why the state should not tolerate an activity that consists of creating "experimental" poems and prose, if these are conceived as autonomous systems of reference, enclosed within their own boundaries. Only if we assume that a poet constantly strives to liberate himself from borrowed styles in search of reality is he dangerous. In a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot. And, alas, a temptation to pronounce it, similar to an acute itching, becomes an obsession which doesn't allow one to think of anything else. That is why a poet chooses internal or external exile. It is not certain, however, that he is motivated exclusively by his concern with actuality. He may also desire to free himself from it and elsewhere, in other countries, on other shores, to recover, at least for short moments, his true vocation—which is to contemplate Being.

If There is No God

If there is no God,
Not everything is permitted to man.
He is still his brother's keeper
And he is not permitted to sadden his brother,
By saying that there is no God.

Time

Our human species has pondered for centuries the question of where the world came from. Some have said that it must have had a beginning; others, that it has always existed. For us, "always" has lost all meaning, because there was no time before the Big Bang, even if neither our imagination nor our language can grasp the concept of timelessness. What existed before there was something? The medieval scholastics from the schools of Chartres and Oxford held that there was divine light. Its *transmutatio* into physical light created the universe. They would have been delighted to accept the theory of the big Bang, and would have said, "Well, of course."

To think about time means to think about human life, and this is such a broad topic that to consider it means to think in general. The differences that divide us—sex, race, skin color, customs, beliefs, ideas—pale in comparison with the fact that we are all woven out of time, that we are born and we die, mayflies who live but a day. The inconceivable "now" escapes backward or inclines forward, it is already a memory or an aspiration. Speech, in which we communicate, is modulated time, just like music. And do not painting and architecture translate rhythm into space?

I am filled with the memory of people who lived and died; I write about them, conscious all the while that in a moment, I, too, will be gone. Together we are like a cloud or a nebula among the human constellations of the twentieth century. My contemporaries: our kinship rests on our having lived at the same time, although in different countries and geographic expanses. In a sense, that kinship is stronger than any tribal bonds.

This World

It appears that it was all a misunderstanding.
What was only a trial run was taken seriously.
The rivers will return to their beginnings.
The wind will cease in its turning about.
Trees instead of budding will tend to their roots.
Old men will chase a ball, a glance in the mirror—
They are children again.
The dead will wake up, not comprehending.
Till everything that happened has unhappened.
What a relief! Breathe freely, you who suffered much.