

# *Lake of Darkness*

Karen Fitzgerald  
a portfolio of 12 photogravure etchings with  
5 poems by Czeslaw Milosz

## Poetry text

*The five poems by Czeslaw Milosz were printed letterpress by Leslie Miller for the portfolio; this is the order of their sequence within the portfolio.*

### *The Bird Kingdom*

Flying high the heavy wood grouse  
Slash the forest sky with their wings  
And a pigeon returns to its airy wilderness  
And a raven gleams with airplane steel.

What is the earth for them? A lake of darkness.  
It has been swallowed by the night forever.  
They, above the dark as above black waves,  
Have their homes and islands, saved by the light.

If they groom their long feathers with their beaks  
And drop one of them, it floats a long time  
Before it reaches the bottom of the lake  
And brushes someone's face, bringing news  
From a world that is bright, beautiful, warm and free.

*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 woods 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 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.

*Berkeley, 1964*

## *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 seams.

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 the 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 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 lightning.

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 draws near  
another one  
do what you can.

*Berkeley, 1969*

## *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  
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.

## *An Appeal*

You, my friends, wherever you are,  
Whether you are grieving just now, or full of joy,  
To you I lift this cup of pungent wine  
As they often do in the land of France.  
From a landscape of cranes and canals,  
Of tangled railway tracks and winter fog,  
In the smoke of black tobacco, I make my way  
Toward you and I ask you a question.  
Tell me, for once at least laying  
Caution aside, and fear and guarded speech,  
Tell me, as you would in the middle of the night  
When we face only night, the ticking of a watch,  
The whistle of an express train, tell me  
Whether you really think that this world  
Is your home? That your internal planet  
That revolves, red-hot propelled by the current  
Of your warm blood, is really in harmony  
With what surround you? Probably you know very well  
The bitter protest, every day, every hour,  
The scream that wells up, stifled by a smile,  
The feeling of a prisoner who touches a wall  
And knows that beyond it valleys spread,  
Oaks stand in summer splendor, a jay flies  
And a kingfisher changes a river to a marvel.  
In you, as in me, there is a hidden certainty  
That soon you will rise, in undiminished light,  
And be real, strong, free from what restrained you.  
That above the mold of broken flagstones,  
Above memory and your transformation  
Which is like the flight of birds when ice  
Crumbles in the traces of hooves—above everything,  
It will be given to you to run as celestial fire,  
To set sails ablaze with your flame at dawn  
When ships trail smoke and archipelagoes  
Wake up, shaking copper from their hair.

No, I address you here, from the ashes of winter,  
In the simplest words, not to induce doubt  
Or to call melancholy, for instance, the sister of fate.  
On and on. The heart is still beating.  
Nothing is lot. If one day our words  
Come so close to the bark of trees in the forest,  
And to orange blossoms, that they become one with them,

It will mean that we have always defended a great hope.

How should I defend it? By naming things.  
That isn't easy. I say the word "dawn"  
And the tongue by itself affixes "rosy-fingered"  
As in childhood of Greece. The sun and the moon  
Have the faces of gods. I am not certain  
That Poseidon won't emerge suddenly  
From the sea bottom (he wears an earring)  
Ploughing the waves with his motor, towing a retinue of nymphs.  
And I wander in the alpine forests and meadows  
Every cleft in the rock seems to me a gate  
Through which one enters the underworld. I wait for a guide.

And space, what is it like? Is it mechanical,  
Newtonian? A frozen prison?  
Or the lofty space of Einstein, the relation  
Between movement and movement? No reason to pretend  
I know. I don't know, and if I did,  
Still my imagination is a thousand years old.

Jump into the water with your clothes on.  
Such heaviness (deadweight, as sometimes in our dreams).  
It's the same with us. We wear the brocade  
Of past centuries or dress in false purple.  
Covering our faces with velvet masks,  
Classical, playing again what has been played  
before,  
And yet, I affirm, this is the earth of wonder.  
It gives us the gift of eternal youth.

To you I lift this cup, here, on the stage,  
I, one voice, no more, in the vast theater.  
Against closed eyes, bitter lips.  
Against silence, which is slavery.

*Brie-Comte-Robert, 1954*