

A Czeslaw Milosz Sampler :

Learning:

To believe you are magnificent. And gradually to discover that you are not magnificent.
Enough labor for one human life.

Road-side Dog, Czeslaw Milosz, 60

Description:

Description demands intense observation, so intense that the veil of everyday habit falls away and what we paid no attention to, because it struck us as so ordinary, is revealed as miraculous, a revelation of reality known in Greek as *epiphaneia*. . . *epiphaneia*, epiphany, interrupts the everyday flow of time and enters as one privileged moment when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things.

Excerpted from AGAINST INCOMPREHENSIBLE POETRY in To Begin Where I Am, Czeslaw Milosz, 383

Descriptions by Milosz -

In a Landscape:

In a landscape that is nearly totally urban, just by the freeway, a pond, rushes, a wild duck, small trees. Those who pass on the road feel at that sight a kind of relief, though they would not be able to name it.

Road-side Dog, Czeslaw Milosz, 31

From My Dentist's Window:

Extraordinary. A house. Tall. Surrounded by air. It stands. In the middle of a blue sky

Road-side Dog, Czeslaw Milosz, 93

WATERING CAN:

Of a green color, standing in a shed alongside rakes and spades, it comes alive when it is filled with water from the pond, and an abundant shower pours from its nozzle, in an act, we feel it, of charity toward plants. It is not certain, however, that the watering can would have such a place in our memory, were it not for our training in noticing things. For, after all, we have been trained. . . Photography contributes to our paying attention to detail and the cinema taught us that objects, once they appear on the screen, would participate in the actions of the characters and therefore should be noticed. . . The watering can has thus a good chance of occupying a sizable place in our imagination, and, who knows, perhaps precisely in this, in our clinging to distinctly delineated shapes, does our hope reside, of salvation from the turbulent waters of nothingness and chaos.

Excerpted from WATERING CAN, in Road-side Dog, Czeslaw Milosz, 87

Happiness:

Between the ages of seven and ten I lived in perfect happiness on the farm of my grandparents in Lithuania. . . My grandparents' farm, where I was born, had belonged to my mother's family for several centuries, during which its landscape gradually changed, and I now know that I should be especially grateful to my great-grandfather, who, on a grassy slope descending to the river, planted many trees, creating a grove like park. And he established orchards, two by the house, the third a little farther, beyond the old white-walled granary. It was long ago, and huge oaks and lindens made my fairyland, while orchards allowed me to discover the taste of apples and pears of many species.

I lived without yesterday or tomorrow, in the eternal present. This is, precisely, the definition of happiness. I ask myself whether I now mythologize that period of my life. We all build myths when speaking of the past, for a faithful reconstruction of fleeting moments is impossible. The question, however, remains: Why do some people speak of their childhoods as happy, others, as miserable? The extreme vividness and intensity of my experience forces me to believe in its authenticity. It was, I do not hesitate to say, an experience of enchantment with earth as a Paradise.

I was a lone child in a magic kingdom that I explored from early morning till dusk. . . I was a little Adam, running all day in a garden under trees that seemed to me even bigger than they were in reality, with my perceptions and fantasies unhampered by the sarcastic jeer of a demon. . . I remained innocent, which means that I had not formed any judgment on the cruelty of the world. My happiness came, it seems, from - as William Blake would say - cleansing the gates of perception, in avidly seeing and hearing.

A path in the shade of oaks led down to the river, and my river was never to abandon me throughout my life, wherever fate carried me, even during my years on the far shores of the Pacific. Its slow current allowed the growth of water lilies, and in certain places their pads covered the whole surface. Its banks, with their rim of calamus, were shaded by bushes and alder trees. I spent hours watching sunlight on water, movements of little water creatures and flights of dragonflies and . . . I am ready to call it daydreaming, yet it would not be correct, for this would suggest passivity, while my imagination was vividly active. Thus as a child I was primarily a discoverer of the world, not as suffering but as beauty. The trees of the park, the orchards, and the river founded a separate realm of intensified, radiant reality more true than anything situated outside. . .

Many years later, at the age of eighty, I returned to the place of my birth and childhood. The landscape had changed. . . I found myself in the spot, now marked by a clump of weeds, where the house once stood. Instead of a round lawn before it, a tangled forest of young trees, mostly maples, began, sloping down to the river. The lawn was nearly impassable, as the old paths had disappeared in the wild outgrowth. Here and there an aged oak or elm

survived. The orchards were gone, just of their old age, to judge by the few dry stumps remaining. Everything here had been abandoned for years, and nobody seemed to make use of the land. . .

I did not feel any regret, or anger, or even sadness. I was confronted not by the history of my century but by time itself. Granted the privilege of return, what was most important at the moment was the tangible element of flowing time. I went down to my river. It had no lily pads and no calamus, and its reddish color confirmed the presence of chemical plants operated in its upper run. A lonely wild swan kept itself immobile in the middle of oily water, an incongruous sight, suggesting illness or the bird's suicidal intent.

The sky was clear, vegetation lush on that June day. I tried to grasp and name my feelings. My memory recognized the outline of hills on the other side of the river, the slope of the park, a meadow by the road, a dark shaded patch of greenery where once there was a pond. In spite of all the changes, the configuration of the terrain persisted, and it seemed to me I could have found my way even with closed eyes, for my feet would have carried me everywhere themselves. Then something happened. . . I was looking at a meadow. Suddenly the realization came that during my years of wandering I had searched in vain for such a combination of leaves and flowers as was here and that I have been always yearning to return. Or, to be precise, I understood this after a huge wave of emotion had overwhelmed me, and the only name I can give it now would be - bliss.

Excerpted from HAPPINESS in [To Begin Where I Am](#), Czeslaw Milosz, 20-26

A LITTLE TREATISE ON COLORS:

The leaves of the oaks are like the leather of bookbinding. How to speak otherwise of them, when in October they take on a brown hue and are as if leathery, ready to be set with gold. Why this excessive poverty of language any time we deal with colors? What do we have at our disposal when we try to name the splendor of colors? Some leaves are yellow, some red, and is that all? But there are also yellow-red, and flame-red, and bull's blood-red (why this recourse to comparisons?). And birches. Their leaves are like small, pale-yellow coins, sparsely attached to twigs which are of what hue? Lilac, from the lilacs, and violet, from the violet (again, these unwieldy comparisons). How does the yellow of birch leaves differ from the yellow of aspens, underlaid with copper, stronger and stronger, till copper wins. A copper color? Again a thing, copper. And probably only green and yellow are deeply rooted in the language, for blue the etymologists associate with *flavus*, yellow, while red again, in its old Norse forms, goes back to trees, the rowan or *reyrnir*, the mountain ash, or perhaps to rust. Is the language so resistant because our eyes are not very attentive to details of nature unless they serve a practical purpose? In October, pumpkins ripen in the fields and their color is orange. Why this recourse to orange; how many eyes saw oranges in a northern country?

[Road-side Dog](#), Czeslaw Milosz, 97