



A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry

Czesław Miłosz (Editor)

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"A collection of 300 poems from writers around the world, selected and edited by Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz. Czesław Miłosz's *A Book of Luminous Things*—his personal selection of poems from the past and present—is a testament to the stunning varieties of human experience, offered up so that we may see the myriad ways that experience can be shared in words and images. Miłosz provides a preface to each of these poems, divided into thematic (and often beguiling) sections, such as "Travel," "History," and "The Secret of a Thing," that make the reading as instructional as it is inspirational and remind us how powerfully poetry can touch our minds and hearts. "

A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry Details

Date : Published April 1st 1998 by Mariner Books

ISBN : 9780156005746

Author : Czesław Miłosz (Editor)

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : Poetry, Anthologies, Nobel Prize



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Tara says

A really wonderful anthology of international poets. Some of them are pretty old, like 1,000 years or so - but there are also lots of contemporary poets, and often the two are showcased side by side. Miłosz also gives a little preface or description before a new poet or poem. Since the poems vary widely in geography, culture, and history, these little snippets really helped me to appreciate each poem and learn something new or fun.

s.penkevich says

'I have always felt that a poet participates in the management of the estate of poetry, of that in his own language and also that of world poetry.'

-Czesław Miłosz

For those, like me, that always wished they could have enrolled in one of Miłosz's courses at Berkeley, can find a bit of a consolation in *A Book of Luminous Things*. Edited, with a wonderful introduction asserting his intention to not defend poetry but '*remind readers that for some very good reasons [poetry] may be of importance today*', and a slew of interpretations and insights into the poems found within, by Miłosz himself, this collection is a great way to experience world poetry through Miłosz's guiding eyes. He wishes to allow us to witness poetry with the same pure fascination and joy it reaches him, selecting the poems in order to show how '*the artist in his work has to capture and to preserve one moment, which becomes, indeed, eternal*'. Separating his collection into eleven sections, grouping them by ideas capturing a singular moment or emotion such as *The Secret of a Thing*, *Travel*, *Nonattachment*, or even *Women's Skin* (choosing to avoid '*Adding a few drops to the sea*' of Love poetry and instead focusing on the sensation of pleasurable skin sensations, particularly those of women as detailed by women), Miłosz offers commentary and examples from a wide variety of poets across the globe to please our eyes. Viewing poetry through the eyes of my favorite poet is an uplifting and educational experience, introducing me to many new names and reaffirming the genius of poems I've long loved.

The single best aspect of this collection is Miłosz's commentary on the sections and poems. He occasionally analyzes the poem, but most often shares the emotions that boil inside him while caressing each carefully crafted line, and to share in these insights is truly rewarding. It is like attending a lecture by the great Nobel Laureate himself.

TED KOOSER

This poem, on a little town in Minnesota, is a synthetic image or even a collage. There is no single observer. First, we see the last car of a moving train, then we receive information about two lights in the darkness, one a bulb in the prison, the other a flashlight handled by an old woman And so altogether a province. The prison is an important building; and old house with cats belonging to a lone woman (the husband dead, children somewhere far away). Simultaneous images - moments are recaptured.

LATE LIGHTS IN MINNESOTA

At the end of a freight train rolling away,
a hand swinging a lantern.

The only lights left behind in the town
are a bulb burning cold in the jail,
and high in one house.
a five-battery flashlight pulling an old woman downstairs to the toilet
among the red eyes of her cats.

This collection is like riding shotgun with a friend and listening to their favorite album while hearing all their insights to each lyric, and discovering what each note means for them. I had a friend once where we would just drive around and analyze our favorites in such a way, a friend that would bestow such wonderful quandaries of life and attempt to deconstruct them to illuminate the joys in each detail. These drives not only taught me a lot about what I value in life, always looking to this friend as a teacher of sorts, but also let me truly appreciate the poetry of existence. This collection reminds me very much of those drives, except here I am passenger to the great Miłosz, and although he doesn't always give his opinions, he directs you towards beauty and asks you to decide for yourself what ideas and emotional fulfillment you can extract from each piece.

PO CHÜ-I
772-846

And here travel at night, before dawn, in a horse carriage, obviously only one stretch of a longer journey - it associates in my mind with similar travels in my childhood when automobiles in my remote corner of Europe were few. I love Po Chü-I for the extraordinary vividness of his images

STARTING EARLY

Washed by the rain, dust and grime are laid;
Skirting the river, the road's course is flat.
The moon has risen on the last remnants of night;
The travellers' speed profits by the early cold.
In the great silence I whisper a faint song;
In the black darkness are bred somber thoughts.
On the lotus-bank hovers a dewy breeze;
Through the rice furrows trickles a singing stream.
At the noise of our bells a sleeping dog stirs;
At the sight of our torches a roosting bird wakes.
Dawn glimmers through the shapes of misty trees...
For ten miles, till day at last breaks.

It is especially gratifying to read him praise so highly poets and poems that I have already loved, reaffirming my joy and giving me a bit of validation in my own opinion. It's like finding out your favorite musician loves the same songs you love. It's like a connection reaching beyond death, this glimmer of shared love, that human connection that makes reading and living so rewarding, powerful and beautiful, made only the more poignant by sharing it with a personal hero that really made me love this collection. Hearing him speak of Mary Oliver, a poet who might as well own my heartstrings, among others, really gave me joy.

MARY OLIVER
1935-

In view of the great number of nihilizing experiences in literature of the twentieth century, one should appreciate wisdom drawn by people from their contact with nature. Those experiences cannot be rationally defined. But perhaps most essential is the feeling of a universal rhythm of which we are a part simply thanks to the circulation of our blood. In this poem of Mary Oliver's, good and evil, guilt and despair, are proper to the human world, but beyond there is a larger world and its very existence calls us to transcend our human

WILD GEESE

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Occasionally, he tends to take a stab at poets, offering a reason why he dislikes a certain poem, yet still includes it within his collection for other reasons. I personally love Wisława Szymborska, yet Miłosz asserts that she is *'too scientific and that we are not so separated from things'* in his description of, what I find truly lovely, *View With A Grain of Sand*. He includes it, however, for its brilliant depiction of the opposition of *'the human (i.e. language) to the inanimate world and shows that our understanding of it is illusory'*. There are a few other cutting remarks by Miłosz throughout this collection, and often it leaves you wondering if he actually hated the poem.

This collection contains poets from across the globe, and has introduced me to many I had previously never heard of. While his own Polish poets are represented heavily, Wisława Szymborska, Anna Swir (all of hers are translated by him personally, and he offers great praise to her art), Adam Zagajewski, and Zbigniew Herbert among them, a great deal of space is given to the ancient Chinese poets. Miłosz loved these poets for their philosophical eye and for their ability to *'draw with a few dashes a certain situation'* in such marvelous power. Take for example Tu Fu, a poet heavily referenced in this collection (and one I must certainly find a collection by soon):

WINTER DAWN

The men and beasts of the zodiac
Have marched over us once more.
Green wine bottles and red lobster shells,
Both emptied, litter the table.
"Should old acquaintance be forgot?" Each
Sits listening to his own thoughts.
And the sound of cars starting outside.
The birds in the eaves are restless,
Because of the noise and light. Soon now
In the winter dawn I will face
My fortieth year. Borne headlong

Towards the long shadows of sunset
By headstrong, stubborn moments,
Life whirls past like drunken wildfire.
(translated from the Chinese by Kenneth Rexroth)

Many reviews here seem to complain of the high number of Chinese poets, which do seem to dominate the collection, yet they were Miłosz's favorites and analyzing their prose gives a great insight into his own. There are moments where one can clearly draw the connections of inspiration and see the great techniques Miłosz sharpened in his studies of these masters. It is also interesting to note that these same reviewers neglect to mention that the single greatest quantity of poems come from English written, particularly American, poets (I will concede that this is a male dominated collection, and I feel that an inclusion of more female poets would have been to its advantage). While Miłosz does touch upon the standards, offering some classic Walt Whitman or the William Carlos Williams we all loved, and loved to groan over, in our Lit 101 courses, he does contain many of my favorites. This collection, published in 1996, predates the Poet Laureate status of many of the American poets included, such as Billy Collins, Charles Simic, Ted Kooser, W.S. Merwin and even fellow Nobel Laureates like the incredible Tomas Tranströmer (if you enjoy poetry and have yet to read *The Great Enigma: New Collected Poems*, I urge you to find it and bask in it as soon as possible!) find honorable mention before most of America even realized who they were. Although many of these names were already relatively decorated at the time, I still credit Miłosz with having a great eye for poetry.

Composed of a vast assortment of wonderful poets, this collection is a great little dip through world poetry and a satisfying treat for anyone who loves Miłosz. While it isn't as focused as most poetry collections, this has the charm and nuance of being a book put out by a great poet which sets it above the basic 'Best English Poems' or '100 Poems To Blow Your Fucking Mind' nonsense that fill up bargain bins and shout to all half-hearted poet enthusiasts to purchase so they can have enough background to outwit the common streetwalker. This collection has heart, and personalized insight that really grasps the heart.

4/5

W.S. MERWIN

The following poet inspires us to reflect on what seldom crosses our minds. After all (literally after all), such an anniversary awaits every one of us.

FOR THE ANNIVERSARY OF MY DEATH
Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star
Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And boding not knowing to what

Ci says

This anthology by Czeslaw Milosz has taught me much about reading poetry. It has also provided me a list of poets' works for future reading. I highly recommend this book for anyone who is intrigued by the ability of good poems reaching the rarefied realm of consciousness: truth, beauty, sufferings and nobility. These poems are highly distilled; they are also short, vivid and accessible.

There is no T.S. Eliot, because the Milosz made "accessibility" the primary criterion for this anthology. Except a few exceptions, these poems are grounded in tangible sensory reality commonly recognizable by most readers. Milosz likened these poems as "figurative paintings" instead of abstract ones. In addition, these poems are relatively short, rarely running into the second page. Yet the ideas and emotions in most poems are complex. These are not endless rhapsodic chants of moonlights and the beauty of the beloved! Love poems are included, but thankfully limited in numbers.

What is a good poem? As Milosz said, if philosophy can be considered as a generalizing principles, then poetry is about the particulars: the irreducibly subjective experience of human lives. Edward Hirsch used "message in a bottle" as a metaphor for poetry, while I venture to borrow Emily Dickinson's "salientness" as in "*Tell all the truth but tell it slant*" to imagine a slant beam of concentrated light shining on an object. These dramatic elements — a single light, surrounding darkness, and the heightened object —bring home the truth. There are several poems fit into this image of a poetic quality that is absolute and epiphanic. A few examples here: **Wislawa Szymborska's "Four in the morning", Zbigniew Herbert's "Elegy of Fortinbras", and Linda Gregg's "Night Music".**

The author has segmented this collection into different themes, yet I think these themes are general grouping mechanism only. Read them all even if you are not interested in "Nature" or "Travel" in the chapter titles. I am enthralled by most of the poetry in the sections "Epiphany", "Nature", "The Moment", "Nonattachment", and "History". I am sure my second reading would enlarge and deepen my appreciation of poems that I have found puzzling in the first read.

On my list of to-read poets are: **Robinson Jeffers, Denis Levertov, To Fu (translated Kenneth Rexroth), Anna Swir, Tadeusz Rosewikz, and Rumi.**

Laura says

This was good, but I didn't love it. I was surprised not to love it, considering I like so many of the poets represented here. But I didn't love it. The choice of poems was - I don't know, deliberately non-magical, maybe? I'm all for everyday life - I'm a big fan of taking the ordinary and making it strange. But many of these poems were all ordinary, no strange. That said, it does have some wonders.

Kelly says

Nothing Twice

-Wisława Szymborska

*Nothing can ever happen twice.
In consequence, the sorry fact is
that we arrive here improvised
and leave without the chance to practice.*

*Even if there is no one dumber,
if you're the planet's biggest dunce,
you can't repeat the class in summer:
this course is only offered once.*

*No day copies yesterday,
no two nights will teach what bliss is
in precisely the same way,
with precisely the same kisses.*

*One day, perhaps some idle tongue
mentions your name by accident:
I feel as if a rose were flung
into the room, all hue and scent.*

*The next day, though you're here with me,
I can't help looking at the clock:
A rose? A rose? What could that be?
Is it a flower or a rock?*

*Why do we treat the fleeting day
with so much needless fear and sorrow?
It's in its nature not to stay:
Today is always gone tomorrow.*

*With smiles and kisses, we prefer
to seek accord beneath our star,
although we're different (we concur)
just as two drops of water are.*

*

Witness

-Denise Levertov

*Sometimes the mountain
is hidden from me in veils
of cloud, sometimes
I am hidden from the mountain
in veils of inattention, apathy, fatigue,
when I forget or refuse to go
down to the shore or a few yards
up the road, on a clear day,
to reconfirm*

that witnessing presence.

Bethany says

In any anthology of poetry, some poetry is a hit and some is a miss. This book had a wide variety of hits. I adore poetry, in all its forms, and even the old English poems that involved dense language and intricate rhyming schemes were still interesting and easy enough to understand. I love that Milosz specifically wanted to choose poems that were easy to read and easy to understand.

This book was light and refreshing and represents everything I adore about poetry.

S. says

This anthology was a serious underachiever – I found little excitement in it. Of course there were some good poems, but many of them so well known that they provided little surprise (ever hear of Walt Whitman?).

Part of the problem is Milosz's apparent love of the Chinese. I almost felt he would have been happier doing a whole anthology of Chinese poets. No disrespect to the Chinese, but I felt I was going to o.d. Chinese poetry is pretty much all contemplation, and unless you're looking exclusively for that, they bogged this down. There are also a lot of Polish poets, which again isn't bad, but it made a strange mix.

Let's do some math. Of 234 poems, 49 poems were by Chinese poets. 34 were by Polish poets.

40 were by women. Given history, I don't expect true equality here, but this seems skewed. Oh wait, there was a section called "Women's Skin," in which Milosz made an effort to balance by bringing in "woman in her flesh, particularly as described by herself" in a way that gives "voice to her femininity." This is a short section, as "today there is a plethora of poems written by women, but I do not find many corresponding to my very specific criteria." I won't pursue this statement, but basically all I can say is what an asshole.

Milosz includes four poems by the Frenchman Jean Follain, two of which he pretty much prefaces by saying he's not so sure about the poetry of Jean Follain.

He's got a couple poems by Linda Gregg, whom he considers one of the best American poets, possibly because (?) "she used to come to my classes at Berkeley."

One starts to wonder what the criteria were for being included in this anthology, which overall is a yawner. And I have yet to mention the worst thing about it – the short introduction to each poem, which was invariably banal and sometimes wasn't much better than a paraphrasing.

So, if you want a decent anthology of Polish poetry go for Milosz's Postwar Polish Poetry, which isn't bad. If you want Chinese, there are plenty of excellent anthologies of that country's poets, like One Hundred Poems from the Chinese edited by Kenneth Rexroth.

Claxton says

I know -- big deal, another poetry anthology. Still, I love this one because I dig the editor's tastes, and I love that he chose poetry that is life affirming. He says, "I rejoice in being able to make an anthology as this one, and it may be a source of optimism that in this cruel century such an anthology could be made." Amen.

Johnny says

I don't know how I would begin to review a poetry anthology, especially as my interactions with them are typically one hitter quitters, dropping in for one poem, tumbling it for a bit, and dropping back into the world. They almost become reference, right?

This works well not as a reference but as something to read through, pages at a time. My attention span doesn't allow for me to stay in one steady line for too long, and the swamps of poems (these are good swamps) swamp me in in a real way.

But this is great, and Milosz' comments are wonderful. Contrasting it with Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart: while I maybe 'enjoy' the RBSH poems more, this one holds true to the title: it's luminous without being light, grey sun beaming straight through the calming clouds.

Best poem is the ancient Chinese one about the dude sobering up. I'll come back and post it later, maybe.

Laura says

The Window

A storm blew in last night and knocked out
the electricity. When I looked
through the window, the trees were translucent.
Bent and covered with rime. A vast calm
lay over the countryside.
I knew better. But at that moment
I felt I'd never in my life made any
false promises, nor committed
so much as one indecent act. My thoughts
were virtuous. Later on that morning,
of course, electricity was restored.
The sun moved from behind the clouds,
melting hoarfrost.
And things stood as they had before.
~Raymond Carver

Utterance

Sitting over words
very late I have heard a kind of whispered sighing
not far
like a night wind in pines or like the sea in the dark
the echo of everything that has ever
been spoken
still spinning its one syllable
between the earth and silence.
~W. S. Merwin

The Birds Have Vanished

The birds have vanished into the sky,
and now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.
~Li Po

Olivia Maia says

gostei muito mais das escolhas de poemas das partes finais, e por isso a leitura se arrastou até chegar lá. tem poema de todo tipo, então pode ser interessante pra descobrir autores obscuros (principalmente chineses, que pelo jeito milosz adora os chineses).

Ken says

I bought this, along with a collection of Robert Hass essays, at the Oblong Book Store in Rhinebeck, NY, in the Hudson Valley. Visiting the Valley was more fun than visiting the City, at least for this more-rural sort, and those two books will always remind me of geography--where I was, when I was, why I was--thus gaining stature among books on my bookshelves (most with a more humble pedigree).

What makes this collection is the guiding hand of Czeslaw Milosz, who made it such a personal mix chiefly by adding a ton of old Chinese poetry with poets like Li Po, Wang Wei, Chang Yang-hao, Ch'in Kuan, Tu Fu, Po Chü-I, Sun Man Shu, et al. Milosz loves their word pictures and their complexity masquerading as simplicity. A vast majority of poems come with commentary by Milosz first, providing insight and a flashlight before one launches into the dark mysteries of the poem. Milosz also provides plenty of Walt Whitman's work and some of his personal favorites from eastern Europe (e.g. Anna Swir).

The thematic divisions of the book are as follows: Epiphany, Nature, The Secret of a Thing, Travel, Places, The Moment, People Among People, Woman's Skin, Situations, Nonattachment, and History. For aspiring poets, a roadmap of well-traveled byways and methods. For readers of poetry, a lovely and luminous trip through short poems, as most all of these collected works are contained on a single page.

Guy says

My clearest feeling response to this was disappointment. And I have been struggling with why. The poetry chosen by Miłosz was generally very good to excellent, but often enough flat. I somehow felt myself plodding through the collection, rather than dancing or racing. And, even worse, found myself comparing the collection to Robert Bly's enthralling and stimulating collection *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness*. I am very well aware that it does a disservice to both to compare, but something in *Luminous Things* kept my mind on it. Perhaps it is my feeling that Miłosz was trying to teach something rather than inspire something.

I do know that a part of my reaction is because I found Miłosz's introductory comments heavy, a bit dull and a bit pedantic in a *teacherly* tone that put me off. Perhaps this feeling is me getting old. But let me give you an example.

PO CHÜ-I

772-846

Po Chü-I read and respected philosophers. Some people called him a Taoist. Nevertheless, he allowed himself malice in addressing a legendary sage, the creator of Taoism. Let us concede that it's a difficult problem, discovered by similar poets who announce the end of poetry, and yet continue writing.

The Philosophers: Lao-Tzu

"Those who speak know nothing:

Those who know are silent."

Those words, I am told,

Were spoken by Lao-tzu,

If we are to believe that Lao-tzu,

Was himself one who knew,

How comes it that he wrote a book

Of five thousand words?

Translated from the Chinese by Arthur Waley

In this case, not only is the introduction dull, but so is the poem chosen. My reaction to this particular example may be coloured by my having read Taoist stuff for more than 30 years, including the 'problem' of Lao-Tzu's apparent hypocrisy.

I did see some excellent poems, and many new ones to me from writers I like. But, as in the one I am citing below, I found that Miłosz's introduction did not inspire me.

MUSO SOSEKI

1275-1251

Nonattachment and liberation are, in poetry, often associated with old age because the years bring — in any case, they should bring — some wisdom, as in this poem by a Japanese poet.

Old Man At Leisure

Sacred or secular

manners and conventions
make no difference to him

Completely free
leaving it all to heaven
he seems a simpleton

No one catches
a glimpse inside
his mind

this old man
all by himself
between heaven and earth
Translated from the Japanese by W.S. Merton

Jobie says

It was a decent selection of poems. Fewer indigenous tribal poems and a bit heavy on Polish poets.

Some time of the editor's comments were frustrating. Several times based on his comments it was obvious he didn't understand them poem. Once he even said "I feel this is a good poem." Really? His ridiculous commentary almost ruined the anthology for me. If it's not going to add insight into my deeper understanding of the poem, just don't say anything.

The stars are for the poems, NOT for the editor's non value add comments.

K.D. Absolutely says

Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004) was a Polish poet, prose writer and translator of Lithuanian origin. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980.

Tomorrow, the Filipinos group here in Goodreads will celebrate our 2nd year anniversary. Our main activity during the celebration will be a poetry reading. This will be our first time to have this kind of ambitious activity. As I try to read at least one work written by each of Nobel Prize awardees, I picked and read this book by Milosz. I thought I could use the previous books of poetry that I've read like that of by Seamus Heaney or that of Tomas Tranströmer but their kind of poems will be very hard for me to read (I wasn't born with a gift of gab) much more to interpret and explain to my fellow members in the book club. They are too profound and a mere reader like me will stutter and run out of words trying to decipher their meaning. I am familiar with some of the poems of Pablo Neruda particularly those that were included in the movie *Il Postino* but I am expecting many members to get from those. So, I settled for this book.

A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry, first published in 1996, is not an anthology of Milosz's own poems. Rather, he only chose, edited and provided introduction to the book and to each of the

100 or so poems. He explained that these were not all of his favorite poems because he only included those that are less popular from his own country (Poland) or countries not well-known for poems like China, Japan or other Eastern European countries.

The 100 or so poems are grouped into sections and each section has some explanations from Milosz on why they are group together and how poetry can give meaning to those poem's main theme. For example in the section called Situations, poems tell stories about or reflect the situations about a certain country, place or event in a certain period of time. As world revolves and progresses, more poems are written. And poems *are from our memory, and not only our own memory, for we are like a thread in a huge fabric of generations*. He further explained that this fabric today has extended more and more, for knowledge of history and of literature and art of other civilizations increases, and roads are open for traveling through centuries and millennia.

Anyway, I am picking the one from this book:

POETRY READING

by Anna Swir (1909-1984)

*I'm curled into a ball
like a dog
that is cold.*

*Who will tell me
why I was born,
why this monstrosity
called life.*

*The telephone rings. I have to give
a poetry reading.*

*I enter.
A hundred people, a hundred pair of eyes.
They look, they wait.
I know for what.*

*I am supposed to tell them
why they were born,
why there is
this monstrosity called life.*

I think this book is a good opening for the poetry reading. This is Milosz's intro to the poem: "*Poetry readings are not common in some countries. In others, among them Poland, they draw an audience that doesn't treat poetry as an aesthetic experience only. Rather, in one way or another, such audiences bring to the event their multiple questions about life and death. This poem captures well the ignorance and helplessness of both the poet and her listeners.*"

By doing poetry reading, our group is trying to make the Philippines join those countries that appreciate not only the aesthetic beauty of poetry but also expanding our understanding of what life is.

I hope that this will be not the first and the last. I think there is something in poetry that everyone can enjoy

only if we try to sit down and appreciate this genre.
