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A Special Issue

Ten Years After the Velvet Revolution
Voices from the Czech Republic

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A Special Issue

Ten Years After the Velvet Revolution

Voices from the Czech Republic

Guest Editor
Richard Katrovas



A. E. Fournet
Moravia, Czech Republic, 1993



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Preface

For all the years between 1939 and 1989 (except during a short period in the sixties that ended with the Russian invasion of 1968), no poem could be published in Czechoslovakia without prior approval from the government. Poets whose work did not suit the regime were banned from publishing, gave up writing entirely, or passed their manuscripts around only among people they knew. Others left the country. Eleven years ago, with the fall of Communism, poetry was freed in the Czech lands.

However much we Americans may have learned about Communism, the idea of blanket cultural repression remains astonishingly foreign to us. So it is particularly interesting that almost as soon as all restrictions on Czech cultural life were lifted, a large community of English-speaking expatriates began to assemble in Prague. In the early nineties, writers of all sorts arrived, many of them Americans—some, it seems, as though they were coming home.

New Orleans Review is fortunate to count poet and teacher Richard Katrovas among its friends. As a resident of Prague over the last ten years, he has been able to open for this journal a wide and bright window onto the literary world of the Czech Republic, where both Czech and expatriate poets write and publish. We thank him and the people who worked with him, Petr Bílek, who collected the Czech poetry included here, and Gwendolyn Albert, who collected the expatriate work. Special thanks also to Bill Lavender of Lavender Ink for the initial typesetting work for the issue. Finally, we are most grateful to the Prague Summer Seminars of the Division of International Education, Metropolitan College, University of New Orleans for a generous grant in support of this special issue.

Guest Editor's Preface

I'm honored to serve as guest editor for this issue of *New Orleans Review*, and to offer up herein a sampling of two Praguesian literary cultures that have coalesced over this remarkable decade, the native one and the one born of the fluctuating expatriate community that has thrived here since the Velvet Revolution. Globalization is one of those abstractions that has particular resonance now, but only acquires substantive meaning when we point to something in our lives that seems to embody it. You are holding globalization in your hands.

The following anthology of poetry written in the Czech lands attempts to present poetry as the vital sounding of a culture in a state of becoming. We proceed on the belief that poetry reveals something vital about a people that no other form of expression can, and that indeed something vital about the Czech lands, the nexus of European history and culture, is revealed in stunning fashion by this sampling of lyric poetry. We believe that this special issue of *New Orleans Review* will be of interest not only to the poetry aficionado, but to anyone interested in the culture, the spirit of the Czech lands, the geographical and historical heart of Europe.

Translation is an art, and though art may be produced against a deadline, it prefers to languish. We've done our best to bring the Czech portion of this work into English, and to this end I have been a heavy-handed editor, tinkering with other people's translations such that any false steps and instances of infelicity one may perceive here I cheerfully take full responsibility for. My own facility with the Czech language is so weak I cannot proceed unassisted in translating, and Dominika Winterová, my brilliant and gifted spouse, was the Czech-language boss throughout. Besides editing and/or reworking thoroughly the translations of others, we collaborated on and argued through the translating of many of these poems, and all that is good is because of her, and all that is not, well, reflects my limitations. I thank all the

translators, but especially Jiří Flajšar, a young Czech who is himself becoming a very good English-language poet. Jiří Flajšar and his colleagues produced many more (some rough, some quite polished) translations than we could use here, and of the ones we have included, I, with a *česko-anglický slovník* in my lap and shouting questions every eight minutes to Dominika, imposed my own ear onto their efforts; for instances where I have changed, but failed to improve upon, their good work, I apologize to them and the reader.

I also extend heartfelt thanks to Deborah Garfinkle, who is much better qualified than I to organize such a project as this. She supplied some fine translations for this gathering, and I predict that in the future she will be one of the most important translators of, and English-language commentators on, Czech poetry. In several instances where my involvement with a text went beyond even heavy-handed editing, I added my name as a co-translator; I did this not in the spirit of appropriation but protection: accusations that too many liberties were taken may be leveled squarely at me and me alone.

I thank Petr Bělek for his expert selections and introduction. I hope that someday he composes an expanded version of his thoughtful and wise overview, and finds a sensitive translator with whom he may work to bring it into English in the form it deserves to occupy.

I thank Gwen Albert for compiling the “expatriate” miscellany of poetry we’ve included here (I inserted two of her poems, and one of my own), and I apologize to her and other of my fellow “expats” for cutting back on the fine work she compiled; space, alas, was the main issue, and I’m certain that someday, soon, someone will compile a big, rich anthology that chronicles the literary activities of “the Left Bank of the nineties,” as Alan Levy, the elder statesman of English-language writers in Central Europe, famously dubbed it.

Finally, I’d like to thank Sophia Stone for having faith in this project and for being a passionate and most effective advocate for the high standards of this journal.

Richard Katrovas
Prague
January, 2000

Czech Poetry of the Nineties



A. E. Fournet
Praha, Czech Republic, 1995

Introduction

A year or two after the November 1989 revolution, Western journalists and graduate students in Prague were all asking the same question: How is the writing of today different from that produced under Communism? They meant, I presumed, in terms of subject matter, theme, poetics, and inspiration. At first, I felt a little ashamed to admit that prose fiction and poetry did not seem to have changed much, since most of the work published in the early nineties had been written in the seventies and eighties, but repressed by the old order. Then, a few years later, it became obvious to me that an important change had already occurred. While the quality of the writing was no different, the context and the role it had played in Czech society for the past two centuries had undergone a radical change that could be compared to the one experienced by Kafka's Gregor Samsa: internally, in its soul, literature had remained the same, but externally it had become so different that even its essence was perceived as altered. At the same time, mass media and culture, which could be compared to Gregor's sister, Greta, had recognized its own identity. As in *The Metamorphosis*, with Gregor and his sister Greta, the decline and fall of the one had gone hand in hand with the growth and integration of the other.

To understand what had been happening, some historical context is necessary. Czech literature is a typical literature of a minor nation. "Modern" Czech literature was viewed as an essential tool for the construction of a new Czech national identity when it was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The new writing was supposed to fill the need for big historical narratives that would encourage the inhabitants of Czech lands and Moravia to identify with the concept of a Czech nation. Because there was no distinct region inhabited by Czechs only, no heroic epic describing a gorgeous past, no unifying religion, and most of all, no Czech state, the Czech language became the rallying

point in the people's search for belonging. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Czech literature established the notion of the writer as instructor to the masses. Literati became the "conscience of the nation," the soul, or heart, around which all the people of the Czech nation could unite. Poets served as motivators and advisors, as tutors on subjects such as political theory, sociology, and philosophy. They supported the people, serving them, solving their problems, praising and encouraging them.

Assigned the function of fighting putative enemies of the Czech nation, the literature of National Revival held great power. In this role it was not intended to demonstrate a writer's uniqueness or the originality of his poetics. Authors were valued who provided the people with "beautiful" and "poetic" narratives, heavily-ornamented allegories that illustrated a set of predefined values. The masses were supposed to peel away all poetic devices and artifice from poems, stories, or plays in order to decipher their messages. A work of literature was highly praised if in this way it promoted commonly-held ideals. If its values differed, a work was expelled from the collective context. Until the 1890s, Czech literature refused to recognize the idea of individual uniqueness that belonged among the important values of Western culture (expressed in the works of Wordsworth, Byron, Whitman, and Melville, for example). While the writers of the "big" national literatures of the nineteenth century focused on the universe of a character's soul, which replaced the universe of the external world, writers in Czech established the concept of the writer as a role model in the drive for social unity, an idea that later inspired both Václav Havel's philosophy of "living in truth," and Communist presidents' participation at writers' conferences and their attempts to write novels.

When the "Czech Modern" movement discovered subjectivity, a split occurred between a few experimenting avant-garde writers on the one hand, and the public taste on the other. While the public continued to prefer the "beauty" of intelligible ideas, the new writers discovered poetics as a game, as a gesture; they used hyperbole in place of allegory. The image of the poet shifted to visionary, decadent, dandy, rebel, satanic apprentice, and other similar characterizations. But this new style

did not last long: the outbreak of World War I and the establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia returned poetry to its former role while during the same period prose fiction continued to debunk the nineteenth century idea of a collective identity.

Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hašek, and Karel Čapek, coming from very different directions, all arrived at the idea of “the man without qualities.” They offered no immense realms of self like those presented in the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Henry James, or, in its most exaggerated and luxurious forms, Marcel Proust and James Joyce; instead, these writers joined Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, Bruno Schulz and Witold Gombrowicz in establishing a distinctly Central European conception of existential humanity, a universe of beings denied all means of a collective or personal identity. Predictably, at the time they appeared, the novels of these latter writers were read as bleak aberrations, products of insane minds, or simply as texts void of meaning.

After a decade-long period of innovation, during which Czech writers, including poets, explored surrealism and existential analysis, under the threat of Nazi occupation in the mid-thirties, writers gave up creating clowns and explorers of the Realm of Nowhere, and reclaimed the role of moral leaders and patriots. Once more, Czech literature reverted to allegories and addresses to the masses. Archetypal settings and exotic topics were abandoned for motifs of Home and Native Land, and references to important historical figures whose lives stood as emblems for “living in truth.”

During fifty years under two totalitarian regimes, Nazi and then Communist, poets were expected to produce ideologically-correct narratives. A set of binary oppositions (“Us vs. Them,” Czechs vs. Germans, “Normal People” vs. Communists, Ideology vs. Reality, etc.) created a need for Czech writers to develop a set of poetic references to familiar emblems and situations that were the stock subject matter for writers at both ends of the political spectrum.

Writers who began publishing in the fifties seemed to have complete faith in Communism. These regime poets could boast that there were thousands of copies of their books in print, even though they were distributed free to libraries, or recycled unsold to make way for new

editions. But most members of the following generations began their writing careers believing they could play a game with the regime: they thought they could publish officially while keeping a distance from official rhetoric, that they could write “normally.” The characteristic poetic device of “independent” but officially-published poets was the hint or allusion renaming subjects that for political reasons could be safely mentioned only indirectly. However, because there existed only a few publishing houses, all state owned, such writers either increasingly accepted the demands made by the ideologists of literature and culture, or were expelled from the ranks of those allowed to publish at all.

During both the Nazi and Communist periods, however, two streams of Czech literature existed outside the aegis of the regime. Writers who left the country were often able to publish with small, exile presses, although there were only limited opportunities for them to get their books into the hands of the countrymen they had left behind. The exile community was relatively small; and, especially since the seventies, its members were more concerned with their own economic well-being than with reading poetry. Most of the poetry written in exile had few original ideas to offer; it reiterated views already shared by its writers and readers. And, paradoxically, this poetry exhibited many of the same features as the official poetry published by the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, supporting a world of binary opposition, and ideological emblems and blueprints, and advocating the subordination of the individual to the collective. The only difference was that the poles of the binary paradigm were reversed.

The other stream was produced by those who remained in the country, but either chose not to publish officially, or were not allowed to. From the fifties on, many such unofficial writers circulated their work in samizdat editions, typewritten manuscripts distributed among friends, acquaintances, and literary critics who had been banned by the regime. Among its readers and writers, unofficial poetry carried an ethical authority that translated automatically into aesthetic value. What or how anyone in this situation wrote was far less important than the fact that the writer was “living in truth,” in opposition to the regime. Writing was seen as a by-product of this exemplary life choice. Unofficial

poets considered their thoughts and the social context of their lives to be worthy of direct textualization. They stressed authenticity, the unadorned recitation of personal attitudes and everyday experiences. Little room was left for topics other than the Individual vs Society.

Czech poetry of this period was extremely context bound. Yet for this reason, in a way that may seem anachronistic to those familiar with the present role of poetry in the West, poetry held a prestigious position in Czech culture. Books of poetry were regularly reviewed in literary reviews and in newspapers. In 1984 the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Jaroslav Seifert boosted the sale of poetry books to fifty thousand copies in a single day, and even books by formerly-banned poets allowed to return to official publishing typically reached five thousand to ten thousand copies.

The fall of Communism created a completely new situation for poets and poetry. After the revolution, almost two thousand private publishers emerged. Instead of two periodicals covering all of contemporary literature, suddenly there were dozens of monthlies and quarterlies appearing and disappearing. All at once, anyone could publish anything he or she liked; and although there was no way to count them, due to the lack of a central registrar or a single distribution channel, the number of new people publishing poetry immensely increased.

But another change accompanied this one: no one cared any more. Soon, almost all the big publishers stopped publishing poetry because no one was buying it. Under Communism, writers devoted to the regime had lived quite comfortably, but today there are only five or six writers who make a decent living from their books. None of them is a poet. Since 1993, except for books by a dozen big names, almost all Czech poetry has been self published or produced by presses whose names appear only on one book. At most, newspapers review collections of poetry two or three times a year. Booksellers refuse to sell poetry because they say readers are not interested; readers say they cannot find new titles, and even if they could, have no money to buy books. And poets are not familiar with one another; most, while they find some time to write, say they do not have time to read the work of other poets. The only efficient way to get a book of poems is to ask the writer.

Still, poetry has been written, published, and read in the Czech Republic since the revolution, and I believe this anthology offers an illustrative sampling. The question is: what is its vision of the world? Czech poetry is still trying to create a comprehensive picture of itself. Czechs have been questioning the role of poetry in society since the end of World War II, although it is hard to reach any conclusion on the subject since the same people who have no faith in it continue to write it. But while nobody in the nineties expects poetry to function as a tool for social reconstruction, the old slogan of the post-World War II hangover days, coined by poets themselves, that poetry is a whore, seems to have disappeared as well.

There is no common view any more. With dozens of poets banned after the Communist takeover of 1948, and almost a hundred more banned after the Russian occupation of 1968, the nineties have become an era of "returns" and "discoveries." Poetry that dates as far back as the fifties is now being published for the first time. Many poets are publishing poems from different decades side by side, so there is no fixed line between the past and the present. Some poets, old and new, have even returned to the old theme of the Czech lands, Czech identity, "Czech-ness," partly because political events, like the split between the Czechs and the Slovaks in 1993, reopened the issue of who we are. But there is also a nostalgia for a world that was easily intelligible, and even adventurous, due to the constant presence of an obvious enemy of the Czech people.

Life under Communism has become as much a part of the Czech historical consciousness as life under the Hapsburgs. But this consciousness is accompanied by an impulse, almost unanimous among us, to distance ourselves from any utopian dream of a collective, nation-based identity. Messianic rhetoric and patriotic feeling have been replaced with a sober, analytic skepticism. Living under Communism for so long made many Czechs acutely aware that poetry needed a moral and ethical dimension, and there are poets today who affirm this belief, some of them publishing poems on religious themes banned decades ago; others deny it entirely. Surprisingly, their choices do not seem to be determined by their ages.

No longer do poets assume that everyone experiences reality in the same way. Today's poems do not grant the reader the pleasure of discovering the key to and then joyfully deciphering an allegory that refers to universally-recognized enemies and representatives of virtue. During the last decade, Czech poetry has become a venue for private rather than for public discourse. Sometimes it seems as though poems have appeared in public only by accident. They read like entries in an intimate journal and risk alienating the reader through their lack of intelligible references. Where titles used to offer key ideas or summaries that completed the reading of poems, titles may now simply consist of asterisks, or the initials or names of the poet's friends, so the poem seems to be a private address to those friends. Furthermore, writers expect all their collections to be read as a whole, as a series of attempts to name the same thing, or as variations on an idea. In general, inter- and meta-textual references have taken the place of a direct exploration of the real. Books refer to the author's previous books, and the poems to each other. Poems are given archetypal or even fairy tale settings and motifs, and are filled with deliberate ambiguity, textual games where signifiers seem to float free of their signified. It is as if the poet says: Please attach any meaning you like to what I write, because so far there is none.

Up until 1989, besides holding in common a generally generation-based set of assumptions about the world, Czech poets of a given period shared the same poetics. Their texts alluded specifically to each other's texts, as well as to cherished works of the past. Now each book of poems seems to start over from the beginning; and when poets do allude to the work of other writers, the influence is not acknowledged. Poems are filled with deliberately appropriated motifs, images and devices, but no source is offered. It does not seem to make any difference from whom they have been taken. Even the significance of originality seems to be evaporating. And in spite of their intertextuality, texts by the same writer do not seem to belong to the same oeuvre, because each writer's poetics change from book to book.

In the realm of the poetics, black humor, surrealism, and stream of consciousness have all reappeared in the past ten years. One of the most "contemporary" Czech writers is Jiří Kolář, not included here, who

stopped writing poetry in the early sixties. Decades ago, Kolář constructed a poetics based on a refusal to use metaphor, analysis, or coherent structure. He wrote with no intention of delivering a message, recording fragments of language from everyday life, including political banners and newspaper headlines. Because he created open texts whose meanings are left entirely to the reader to discern, Kolář now appears completely up to date, even though he has not written poetry in almost forty years.

There was a time, mainly in the sixties, when Czech poets believed in linguistic experimentation. They inclined toward visual poetry, and toward a kind of invention that returned to the roots of the language. They believed in the capability of poetry to name new ideas. Today, with the exception of a few older poets, Ivan Diviš, Karel Šiktanc, Miroslav Červenka, Czech poetry has become much more easily translatable because its expression is less complex; its effect is not dependent on the use of false or true etymologies. One major poet of the nineties, J. H. Krchovský, is wholly untranslatable, because his rhythm and rhyme patterns are so intricate that both form and meaning cannot be reproduced in the same translation.

A dramatic change in the audience for poetry, the move of poetry from a public to a private context, has inevitably been followed by a shift in the way readers are addressed, and in the roles and selves adopted by lyric voices. Although these changes also occurred in Western poetry, an essential feature of Czech writing has been that they occurred over the course of only a few years, rather than many decades. Czech poets seem to be shocked by the sudden silence around them and all the more ready to speak in new and radically different voices. However, because in "new" poetry there is no boundary between past and present, and older poets are having to come to terms with the burdening legacy of what they wrote long ago, the impulse toward change is juxtaposed with the impulse to stand still. This anthology, a limited sample of Czech poetry, attempts to represent both tendencies.

Z okna jídelního vozu při neškodném pivu

viděls už po kolikáté mjet svou rodnou zemi,
kde ses narodil, ale ve které nežiješ,
aby ses vracel do země sousední, kde žiješ
a kde máš rodinu.

A vždy nanovo ti tvoje rodná země
z těch oken připadala buď jak pobělohorská
anebo husitská. Pozorovali ji
s jistým opovrhlivým napětím, ale i
neuvěřitelným soucitem, soucitem,
jak ji probouzí opakovaná vražda.
Hledal jsi zámky, hledal jsi hrady,
jimiž je poseta jak album známkami,
ale nic jsi neuzřel. Buď je zbourali,
anebo zavřeli, takže tam nikdo nemůže,
anebo je prostě zapomněli,
což je to nejhorší.

A tak jsi pohyboval zády,
aby ten vlak už tu zemi přejel,
aby to už bylo za tebou,
taky proto, že se zkracuje tvůj život ...

(*Verše starého muže*, 1998)

From the Dining Car Window Over a Harmless Beer

Several times you have gazed out at your motherland
where you were born but no longer live slipping away,
and returned to her neighbor where you now live
and where your family resides.
And yet again from these windows your motherland
appears as you imagine her after defeat at White Mountain,¹
or even after the Hussite Movement.² You observe her
with a certain scornful unease but likewise
with unbelievable compassion, compassion
as if a recurring murder awakened her.
You scan for manors, the castles
with which she was studded like an album with stamps
but you see nothing. Either they are torn down
or closed up so no one can get in
or they are simply forgotten
which is worst of all.
And so you shift in your seat because to do so
seems to make the train move faster move
the country farther behind
and because your life is running out ...

trans. Deborah Garfinkle

Život a dílo básníka by se neměly oddělovat,

básník by se měl podávat lidem takový, jaký je *vsutku*,
se vším svým utrpením, prasárnami,
dobrymi skutky, skromností i naopak haurstvím,
to všechno by se mělo hlasem zveřejňovat na náměstí,
odkud bychom z davu zaslychali tu smích, tu řehot,
tu jásot i potlesk;
nečiní-li se to,
dochází později k pomluvám a vyvýšenostem,
kde obojí vede ke změnám ve vědomí lidí,
kouřově se v něm kotoučují a vyspirálují mýty,
ale právě z mýtu falešně žijí národy,
které se pak zákeřně vrhají na národy sousední ...

(*Verše starého muže*, 1998)

The Life and Work of a Poet Should Not Be Parted

A poet should offer himself to the people as he *really* is,
with all his suffering, piggishness,
good deeds, modesty, even swagger;
all such should be made public in the square
where he may hear the crowd's laughter, guffaws,
jubilation and applause;
failing this,
he'll resort to slandering and haughtiness
both of which cause transformations of the people's minds
wherein the myths by which they falsely live
spiral off like smoke, myths
which precisely are the lies and treachery
of nations stoning nations ...

trans. Deborah Garfinkle

Stephen Hawking

CHTĚJÍ TEORII VŠEHO,

TJ. CHĚŠJÍ SADU ROVNIC,

z nichž by se dalo vyčíst vše, co a kde se právě děje
v nesmírném veškerenstvu.

Ne, ne že bych byl proti tomu, ne

že bych jim nepřál dosažený úspěch, provázený
burácením triumfu,

ne, že bych si nepřál poznat Steve Hawkinga

ne, že bych si nepřál poznat Paula Daviese,

ne, že bych si s nimi nepřál pohovořit

u skotské a borového dříví,

ale obávám se, že onou sadou nepostihnou člověka,

tuto spanilou nestvůru, tohoto ožralého netvora,

vzpěrače břemen, milovníka,

což je umění ze všech nejlacinější.

Přál bych si obecnou teorii člověka,

kteřou by bylo možno vysvobodit ho

ze sebe sama, vytáhnout jeho útroby

přes přepážku vlasů a poručit mu,

aby se choval slušně, a to i tenkrát

kdyby nebylo Boha. A poručil bych,

aby umění básnické bylo rovnomocně uznáno s úsilím jejich

co víc, aby kralovalo i astronomii, a to proto,

že, je-li dobré, útočí přímo na srdce,

jde těsněji na tělo,

zatímco teorie všeho je mráz a led,

takové, jaké nacházíme v kosmu.

(Verše starého muže, 1998)

Stephen Hawking

they want a theory of everything,

i.e., a set of equations

with which you could read all, what's happened and where, right now,
in the great immensity.

No, it's not that I'd be against such a thing,

that I wouldn't wish them easy success attended
by resounding triumph,

nor that I wouldn't wish to know Steve Hawking,

nor that I wouldn't wish to know Paul Davies,

nor that I wouldn't wish to chat with them

over a scotch by the fire;

but I'm afraid this bunch won't touch what's human,

the charm of that freak, that drunken monster,

lifter of burdens, lover

whose art is the cheapest of all.

I'd rather a theory of all that is human

by which it would be possible to set us free

of ourselves, to take out our bowels

over the barrier of hair and command us

to behave ourselves even in the event

there is no God. And I would decree

that poetry be as powerfully celebrated as their efforts,

what's more, that it reign even over astronomy because

when it's good it drives straight into the heart

into the body

while the theory of everything is frost and ice

the likes of which we find throughout the cosmos.

trans. Deborah Garfinkle

Jak je možno zastavit pokračující zkázu,

jaké jsou hodnoty, o něž má člověk a společnost usilovat
aby byl zachován a obnoven Řád?

Tot' Konfucius.

Pupkatý Buddha s očičkama zalitýma sádlem
brouká: vyhnout se bolesti a hledět,
kde tesař nechal díru.

Sokratovým hlavním povoláním bylo obtěžovat lidi na agorě
a klást jim úkladné otázky.

A Platón, který jeho počínání a pouliční rozmluvy zapsal
nám jej zachoval, jenže vykazuje fašistoidní rysy
požadavkem vyhnání básníků z obce
a sklonem stranit euthanasii.

Ne, nejde nic. A tak tu strmí ohnivý sloup Kristův
s jeho Zmrtvýchvstáním
o němž, alas, alas! nemáme sebemenší důkaz,
natožpak průkaz. O čem se nemůže mluvit,
o tom se musí mlčet, pravil Wittgenstein,
a tak jsem vydán fantasmagoriím,
přízrakům promítaným na zeď pražské
či newyorské podzemky
a jak se vagóny natřásají
jobovsky ve mně jsou roztřeseny
všechny kosti.

(Verše starého muže, 1998)

How to Put a Stop to All the Continuing Destruction

What values should humanity strive for
that order may be restored and preserved?

That's Confucius.

Big-bellied Buddha with tiny eyes half closed
by fat little lids

cooed: steer clear of pain and get going
while the gettin's good.

In Agora Socrates' chief duty was to annoy,
ask people devious questions.

And Plato who recorded his deeds and lingo
preserved both, but shows too
his Fascist tendencies

as when he demanded exile of the poet
and advocated euthanasia.

Well, nothing works. And so here looms Christ's fiery column
with his Resurrection

of which, alas, alas! we haven't the slightest evidence
much less proof. Of which one must not speak,
about which Wittgenstein said one must hold his tongue
and so I'm given to phantasmagoria,
specters projected on the walls of Prague
or New York subways,
and as the cars rattle,
Job-like in me tremble
all my bones.

trans. Deborah Garfinkle

*

Nic mi tu nepatří
 Rodný dům zahradu dětství
 drží synovci majetníci
 pod klíči

V ulicích
 sbírám do náruče
 dávné drahé hlavy
 které se po letech
 a po dnech vytratily

(Divoká dráha domovů, 1998)

*

I own nothing here
 Ancestral home, childhood garden
 are kept by proprietors, the nephews,
 under lock

On the streets
 I gather in my arms
 dear long-gone heads
 vanished
 over years, days

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

*

Potkala jsem opilého starce
Dávno se chvělo jeho milované tělo
na mém
Poznal mě ale šoural se
podél zdi
obklopen mrtvými
kteří jsou zapotřebí
světu

(Divoká dráha domovů, 1998)

*

I came across an old drunk
whose beloved body long ago shivered
over mine
He spotted me but shambled on
along the wall
encompassed by those dead
whom the world
requires

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

*

Lekal ji jako živé
maso pod kladivem
A ona sahala
ještě po štěstí

I u cíle
kam se navrací
hledajíc jenom jeho
ji předběhnul

Na těžé dráze
měřené pouze
jinými stopkami

(Odrostlá blízkost, Brno, 1996)

*

He was scary as living
meat under the mallet
and she was still
grasping for happiness

And even at the finish line
to which she returned
searching only for him
he passed her

On that same track where they
were gauged only by
different stopwatches

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

*

Jak ho milovala
a kolik hodin
prostála před jeho dveřmi

Ještě po letech
mu dala podržet
své dítě
s jiným

Už se netrápí
Mrtvý teď patří jenom jí

za dnů a za nocí
jak věrné milující zvíře
které jí lehá u nohy

(Divoká dráha domovů, 1998)

*

How she loved him
and how many hours
she spent standing at his door

Still after years
she let him hold
her child by another

No longer is there suffering
The dead are hers alone

all through days and into nights
an adoring faithful beast
lying at her feet

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

*

Její nádherný zářivý
úsměv kdysi
Dnes mi nabízí
baculatýma starýma rukama
dobrotivý dotek
který se ujal
a kvete
navzdory životu

(Divoká dráha domovů, 1998)

*

Her resplendent
smile then
Today she proffers
from her plump old hands
a kindly touch
which assumes
and blossoms
in spite of life

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Dávná krajina

Jakoby tu ještě táhli cikáni
 podél doutnajících ohňů mládí.
 A nedaleký hřbitov, zed', túje ...
 Nic se za ta léta nezměnilo,
 jen několik hrobů přibýlo,
 jiné srovnal čas.

Sem tam přejede auto po staré
 popraskané betonce,
 nad ní na vysokém sloupu trčí
 bezhlavý svatý v mírném záklonu,
 po vypjatých prsou se mu řine zelená krev.

Všechny vrstvy krajiny jsou nehybné,
 jen v mých žilách roste sladce krutá
 touha trvat,
 zůstat tvář v tvář.
 Už dávno však je vyslovena cena,
 kterou splatím všechny tváře světa.

Přes rudnoucí čelo slunce táhnou
 nezmarň havrani,
 a mlčky.

(*Hra o smysl*, 1990)

The Antique Landscape

As if Gypsies still passed here
 beside smouldering campfires of youth.
 And the local cemetery, the wall, arbor vitae ...
 Nothing changed over years,
 just a few more graves
 as others disappeared.

Once in a while a car goes by on the old
 cracked concrete road,
 over which on a high pedestal
 the headless saint pokes out a little, bent backwards;
 down his exaggerated chest gushes green blood.

All strata of the landscape are stagnant,
 except that in my veins grows sweetly that cruel
 desire for self-preservation,
 to remain face to face.
 But long ago the price was fixed
 at which I'll pay for all the faces of the world.

Across the blushing forehead of the sun trawl
 quiet diehard
 ravens.

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Bouře

Kapky na plechovém parapetu
a čím dál bližší hřmění.
Děti zahnal domů déšť,
ted' se ozývají ve zdích, veselé hlasy mládát, pláč.
Perlet' obilí
se zmítá v zášlezích větru, na obloze
se hrozivě přeskupují mraky.
Jimi projíždějí na svých vozech bozi, pokud nelétají,
v zářivém smíchu blýskají jim obnažené zuby.
Jenom Narcis se kochá vlastní krásou
a ohlušená Echo opakuje dutý chropot hromu.
Davy lidí se hýbou v prostoru a čase —
jsou zrny námelu, když hlasy bičuje bouře.
Na mé tváři se usadil
popel shořelého dění, v srdci ještě doutnajících,
když už kdosi ve mně touží
v nové požáry a blesky.

(Hra o smysl, 1990)

Storm

Drops on the sheet metal sill
and the thunder easing closer.
Raindrops drove the children home;
now one hears in the walls some merry, some weeping little voices.
Pearly corn
sways in the gusts; in the skies
thunderheads rearrange menacingly.
Through them gods fly chariots, or just fly:
bare teeth glitter in their shining smiles.
Only Narcissus dwells in his own beauty,
and deaf Echo reissues the hollow thunder.
Crowds are off through space and time,
grain spurs when ears are whipped by storm.
On my face ashes of events, still smoldering in my heart, settle,
whereas someone inside me desires
into new flames and flashes of lightning.

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

U rybníka

Labutě chňapají kousky rohlíků a chleba.
Jejich flotila zvolna odplouvá,
slunce se oslnivě rozlévá hladinou.
Muž s obličejem Quasimoda
— má na tváři a odulém rtu oheň —
koupá černého vlčáka. — Apor —, říká
a vlčák se divoce vrhá do studené vody
pro kus klacku. Obnažuje bílé tesáky,
bílé jak sliny dítěte, jak stařecké vlasy,
jak zahryznutý čas, který nepustí a drží vše,
dokud neorve kořist na holou kost.

(*Nevyhnutelnosti*, 1996)

At the Pond

Swans grab bits of rolls and bread.
Their fleet is slowly moving off;
sun spills dazzlingly on the surface.
A man with Quasimodo face,
red birthmarks and swollen lips,
is bathing a black Shepherd. "Fetch," he says
and the dog hurls itself wildly into the cold water
for a stick. It bares white fangs,
white as children's spit, as old men's hair,
as time whose teeth sink deeply in, holding on to everything
until it's stripped to the bone.

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Tady vysoko

Miroslavu Červenkovi

Zimy tak málo
že sníh žárlivý i na veselku v bílém

Jen tady vysoko
jen tady na té hanbě z uchlastaných
okapů a z hltů do hrstě a oslintaných
tlam

pták výkřik hořek strom
ledová pila kousek od břehu
plive drahokámen
a zuby

V kredenci lesa cingrlátko hrom
A naše holá bytost
bázlivě naznak překocena pod námi
osahává nás náhle slepě ukrutnýma
rukama
a k pláči suchá
bije hlavou hihňá se
a řve

jak pominuta štěstím

Třesou se stehna vod
Tenká
rezivá hra na lešenářskou trubku

Up Here

for Miroslav Červenka

There's so little winter
the snow's jealous of a white wedding

Only up here
only here in the infamy of boozy
eaves from swigs of fistfuls slobbering
snouts

birdcry dolorous trees
frosted handsaw close to the bank
hawks up precious stones
and teeth

In the forest sideboard a trinket thunders
and our naked essence
timid supine turned over beneath us
patting us with hands
of one brutal and blind
and dry to tears
pounds its head giggles
and roars

as if crazed with joy

The thighs of the waters tremble
Slight
rusted game with scaffolding pipes

Jestli nás vidí Bůh
jsme ozlacení pronikavou lítostí
návratu do vlastního těla

Ale kam
jinam virbl zdí
houf spratků tryskem tlačí po dálnici kočárek
a k hlavě sklonění
— jako by vystřihání z bronzového papíru —
kácí se smíchy olizují nůž
úpěnlivého pláče
Kdoví kdo narozen?

A kterej z nich je žena?

(Hrad Kost, 1995)

If God sees us now
we're gilded with the oozing pity
of restitution to our bodies

But where
else this tattoo thumping on a wall
a gang of brats helter-skelter shoves a pram down the hall
then bows toward the head
—like holiday figures cut from bronze foil—
they roll about laughing they lick the knife
Who knows who gets born?

And which of them is a woman?

trans. Jiří Flajšar

Bůh se myje

Svléká se... A voda chrstá

do neciček Páně.
Trnou

lodi letadlové
v Tichém oceáně.

Dřív si hrál.

Dřív chtivě lezl
na hřbet každé vlny —
a jak voda tekla z nestoudného rána,

oceán byl po zem
dívčích nader plný

a země jak sukně
k nadržům vykasaná.

Ted' — co den —

to z pevnin čpí
jak z vykřičených domů.
Strmí trosky z moří, hladových jak chrti.

Ted' si kdekdo chodí
do svatýň jak domů.

God Washes Up

He undresses... And water splashes

from God's little washbasin
Aircraft

carriers in the Pacific
are stupefied.

He used to horse around.

He used to climb lustily
the crest of each swell
as water flowed from the impudent morning.

The ocean was earthdeep
full of virgin's bosoms

and the earth like a skirt
tucked up breast high.

Now — each day —

it reeks from continents
as from houses of ill repute.
Towering ocean debris, hound-hungry.

Now everyone goes
to shrines as to home.

Ted' má kdekdo hřbitov
z těch, co dohnal k smrti.

Tře si tvář.

A hrozí z vody
ptákům na útěku,
jako by ho znali, když bejvával mladší.

Nahý starý člověk
sám sobě až k vzteku.

Nahý starý Pámbu

sám sobě až k pláči.

Ted' už ví,

že všemohoucnost,
co kdy přežít chtěla,
sama sobě kroutí na výsostech smyčku.

Že i strach z moci.
Který duši z těla

zobrací ti narub

jako rukavičku.

Pokleká

Now everyone has a graveyard
of those he haunted to death.

He rubs his face.

He shakes his fist from the water
at birds scattering
as though they knew him when he was younger.

Naked old man
alone with himself unto tears.

He now knows

omnipotence
which once sought survival
ends up a noose in the Other World.

That there even exists a fear of power
which turns you

Soul from body

inside out

like a glove.

He kneels,

a v patách za ním
zmlká souš i moře.
Všichni chtějí slyšet, jestli ještě dýchá.

Stár, přemlouvá Pámbu
i své vlastní hoře.

At' se ještě zdrží.

At' tak nepospíchá.

Couvá z vln ... A voda pryčší

zpod neciček Páně.
Trnou

lodi letadlové
v Tichém oceáně.

(*Tanec smrti*, 1992)

and behind his heels
the land and sea fall silent.
All want to hear if He's still breathing.

Being old, he tries to convince
his own grief.

To stay a little longer.

To slow down.

He backs out of the waves ... And water rushes

from under His little washbasin.
Aircraft

carriers in the Pacific
are stupefied.

trans. Jiří Flajšar and Richard Katrovas

Nějaká krutost

Nějaká krutost
dřepí
dejchá až smrdí dům až mokrá okna

Ze rzí a z vlků z rozpaků plísň
jablka lezou nalitá krví

vše naše prázdné ruce křížem poskládané
do mechu jako metrové dřevo

Někde tu v kůlně
někde v tom šeru topory seker
hladké až zima až ledová
bázeň...
šimpány stehna ještě je
potkat ještě je jednou obejmout v hrsti
ještě se s jednou rozdupat kolem

kolečko
mlýnský
už se to točí už ti jdou šejdrem
nohy i oči už tě to
nese už to jde samo
takový krásný
laciný
drámo

Some Cruelty

Some cruelty
squats
panting till the house stinks windows moisten

From rust and wolves from strips of mold
apples creep drunk with blood

all our empty hands are crosshatched
in moss-like tailored planks
Somewhere here in the shed
Somewhere in the gloom ax handles

sleek unto winter unto icy
dread...
apemen a thighbone is yet
to come to terms with them to embrace them once again in a fist
yet again to trample yourself

tiny spinner
grinder of grain
it yet twirls now they go away
feet and eyes now it carries
this now it goes alone
so beautiful
like cheap
drama

psi pupkem do křoví
žebříky klekají v koutě
otec jde z třešňový maminka z švestkový poutě

kruci,
ted' to tak pustit...

nacimprcampr jesličky a les
bravůra bravu cukrová fara
matčiny příkazy jak Bůh je nad nimi
ver-šič-ky kusový
maso

Jeseň se lísá tře se luft
hrajú si s prsteny na jejích hubených prstech

Nějaký stařec v patře zalit smrtelností
dne
zmateně vstává k slzám oslněn
trýznivou krásou stolu

Hřmí
Zvony zaplat' pámbu jenom v neděli

Věže tu mluví málo

(Hrad Kost, 1995)

dogs belly into the shrubs
ladders kneel in the corner
father leaves the cherry mother the plum festival

christ
to set it loose now
allfuckedup the haytroughs and the woods
barnyard bravado sugary parsonage
mother's orders as God is their judge
lit-tle ver-ses piecemeal
meat

Autumn cuddles rubs the drafts
I toy with rings on her thin fingers

Some old man up there soaked in immortality
befuddled he gets up blinded by tears
by the torturous splendor of the table

Thunder
Bells thankgod only on Sunday

The spires here say little.

trans. Jiří Flajšar

Je pryč den dva

Je pryč den dva,
obec i paměť něžně vylidněna
Jen silou vůle tvary trnou z par jen
soumrak převeliké postavy ...
plná sedla, prázdná stání
růst pláňat voní jako spánek,
vše v teplém domě — kde bylo tak mělko —
po vysoký pas

Žlut' hýří Tone zapařený sad
Koťatům stojí v očích svíčky
A dát se do smíchu znamená jenom obavu
se smát —

však prvně bez ní
na těch samých cestách,
jak by tě teprv stihla nádhera jít ve dvou!

Rumělkou hrad
Modrý plát ledu pod skákacím prknem
A žáčky jako nic:
jde od nich kužel záře jak olizují
staniól a horko od párků lochtá je
v obličejí

Ano, dej uhřát
Kropí peróny
Kdyby dnes přijela bude mít uplakané boty

Gone a Couple Days

Gone a couple days,
and the village and the memory tenderly depopulated
Only by strength of will do figures of steam grow rigid only
the twilit giant shape ...
complete saddle rigs, empty stalls
growth of crab trees smells like sleep
all in a house whose warmth was shallow:
up to the waist

The Yellow lavishes, steamy orchard grows waterlogged
Candles stand in kittens' eyes
And to burst out laughing means only fear
of laughter —

but the first time without her
on that often-shared path
is to be struck suddenly by the beauty of walking together!

Vermilion castle
Blue ice sheet under a spring board
And schoolgirls as nothing:
they emit cylinders of light as they lick
the foil and hot sausage steam
tickles their faces

Yes, the plot heats up
The platforms get sprinkled
If she arrives today, she will wear weepy shoes

Báň Echa pod mosty ... výjevy sladkosti,
 jen zvuky nakrátko
 jak by je ufik nožem
 Máš obě prázdná. S ní i sám.
 A keř kus od závor oslepen oranží
 (jak vechtr pod sakem rozsvítil baterku
 aby si nahmát bolest)

Oblastní mapa Kasy Odjezdový řád
 V dálce blesk těla nad pískovým šutrem

A ve skle čekárny ti lesklá scénérie
 tvého stínu rozhýbaná průvanem
 připadne toporná
 jak náruč bez rukou

jak touha bez prudkosti

(*Šarlat*, 1999)

Echo chamber under the bridge ... spectacles of sweetness,
 resoundings are brief
 as though whittled down by a knife
 You've both vacancies. With her and without.
 And shrubs near the crossing go blind with orange
 (as the watchman flicks on the flashlight
 under his jacket to touch his pain)

Regional maps Counters Schedules of departures
 In the distance the flash of a body over sandstone

And in the glass of the waiting zone glossy scenery
 of your shadow, stirred by the updraft.
 seems stiff
 as an armless embrace

as a toothless longing.

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

On TV: Předpověď počasí

Přes Island bílý vítr
 okluzíva klouže koulí Ale ty
 neposloucháš zas už je ti u prdele
 jak bude zejtra zas už jen vejráš
 na ten bizarní povědomý útvar uprostřed
 fázované fotky ze satelitu
 tlustou čarou obtažený navždy
 nerovnovážný kupírovaný
 navždy tobě kusý Ted' TO
 zvětšili okrově TO svítí na modrém pozadí
 náhlá krabatost obvodu úměrná
 krabatosti geneze Jo to není
 Wyoming s pravými úhly Dívej
 zleva se to topí zprava
 krvácí Dívej se na TO
 dívej zvykej dívej nevejrej vyjevenče dívej
 jak bude
 u
 nás

(*Za řekou*, 1996)

On TV: Weather Forecast

White swirls across Iceland
 glides occlusive rolls But you
 don't listen again you don't give a shit
 about the weather tomorrow you just walleye
 at the bizarre familiar shape at the center
 of a phased satellite photo
 outlined forever with a thick line
 disproportionate and cropped
 to you forever mottled Now IT
 is enlarged ochre IT lights up on the blue background
 suddenly its wrinkled borders match
 the wrinkles of its origins Well it ain't
 right-angled Wyoming Look
 it bleeds Look at THAT
 look get used to it look don't just stare you zombie look
 at the weather
 in
 us.

trans. Jiří Flajšar and Richard Katrovas

Čechy ti pustnou

Čechy ti pustnou pod nohama
Kudy kmitáš úspěšný s knírkem
S katafalčíkem diplomatky
Příští šéfe
Mých synů

Čechy vám pustnou pod nohama
Za každou saunu vašich vil
Pupkový chrám kapličku infarktovou
Sto kmenů padlo
V pohraničí

Čechy jim pustnou pod nohama
Mosty jim hoří za patama
Vagón jak vyděšené židy
Do Němec veze
Ornici

Čechy mi pustnou pod nohama
Z hoven malátných měst vybírám
Slůvka kdys lnoucí k padlým vírám
Jak nestrávené
Pecičky

(*Za řekou*, 1996)

Bohemia Is Laid Waste

Your Bohemia is laid waste
You mustachioed workaholic
With the briefcase like a tiny sarcophagus
You boss of the future
And my sons

Your Bohemia is laid waste
For every sauna in your mansions
Beerbelly shrine to heart attacks
On the borders
A hundred species collapse

Their Bohemia is laid waste
Bridges flame up at their heels
Freightcars haul arable land
Like scared Jews
To Germany

Bohemia is laid waste
And as from the shit of somnolent villages I peck
Out little words encrusting ruined faiths
Like undigested
Seeds

trans. Jiří Flajšar and Richard Katrovas

Večerní zprávy

Z duší čpí výmluvná bahniska
Vymkni se, touho má
ze srdce vylom se křehce.

Země si po bohu nestýská
Bud' ho má
či ne, a pak už ho nechce.

(*Za řekou*, 1996)

Evening News

The souls stink of sloughy alibis.
Break loose, my desire,
delicately chew out from my heart.

The earth's not lonesome for God.
Either she's got him
or not, and then she doesn't even want him.

trans. Jiří Flajšar

stroj času

vidím je před sebou
 kamarády u plného stolu
 plného nádob na víno
 a nádob na popel

všem je
 dobře
 básně nám kouří z hlavy
 vše špatné
 je zapomenuto

blázince a sebevraždy
 dokonce i přirozená
 smrt

snad tak i zůstane
 jenom
 nesmím
 otevřít oči

(*Zlá milá*, 1996)

from Time Machine

I see them in front of me
 friends at a plentiful table
 covered with wine bottles
 and ashtrays

everybody feels
 fine
 poems are wafting from our heads
 all bad
 is forgotten

asylums and suicides
 even natural
 death

maybe this will not change
 only
 I must not
 open my eyes

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

venkovský dům

Pes lítal od plotu ke zdi
tma byla kulatá a tichá
že slyšet šepot rzi

a v polích poržával vlak:

to ona lyrika ta cizopaska
podobna pornografii
hrozí se smíchu
to ona lyrika ta cizopaska
to ona lyrika ta cizopaska

tak zvolna a tak temně
neúprosně netečně
osamoceně vdechuje mě

(*Zlá milá*, 1997)

from *Country House*³

The dog was running between the fence and the wall
the dark was so round and quiet
one could hear the whisper of rust

and in the field a train was whinnying:

lyric poetry that parasite
like pornography
is scared of laughter
lyric poetry that parasite
lyric poetry that parasite

so slowly and so darkly
merciless and uninterested
it breathes me in

trans. Dominka Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Rodiče Novákovi

Zcela holohlavý
Bůh z nekonečné výšky
hledí do moře
jako do talíře polévky

A dole
dole
za stolem
ten náš

Hledí do polévky
jako do moře

Zcela holohlavý
Bůh z nekonečné výšky
na pospas větru
vytrhne si vlas

A dole
dole
dole
nad talířem
ten náš

Když vlas padne do polívky
bude Mesiáš

(Papírové polobotky, 2000)

The Novaks †

Completely bald
Eternal Father from eternal heights
peers into the sea
as into a bowl of soup

and down
down
at the table
our dad

Looks into his soup
as into the sea

Chrome-domed
God from endless height
at the wind's mercy
will pluck out a hair

And down
down
down
into dad's bowl

There will be, when a hair falls into the soup,
a Messiah

trans. Ema Katrovas and Richard Katrovas

Pod jabloní

Novák sedával v létě pod jabloní

Ráno slunce dralo se listovím
Večer tma se listovím nedrala

Někdy si přivstal a padla mlha
Někdy si přivstal a mlha stoupala

Někdy mu na hlavu padlo zralé jablko
Někdy ho jablko minulo nebo bylo nezralé

Celá léta se Novák z těch úkazů
snažil vyvodit něco prospěšného

Když ne pro sebe
alespoň pro lidstvo

Byl už takový

(Papírové polobotky, 2000)

from Under the Apple Tree

In summer Novak used to sit under the apple tree

Mornings sunlight seeped through the leafage
Evenings dark did not seep through the leafage

Sometimes he rose early and the fog descended
Sometimes he rose early and the fog lifted

Sometimes a ripe apple fell on his head
Sometimes the apple missed his head or was not ripe

For years Novak attempted to draw from the phenomenon
a useful conclusion

If not for himself
then for humankind

He was just like that

trans. Dominika Winterová

Vinárna u posledního penízu

Vypravěči sluší rozvleklost

ale text Iliady se musí
vejít na účtenku
štamgasti mi říkají charón
a: nesnáším symboly
víte co je to styx?
v kodani bar pro transvestity
pracoval jsem tam
jako šatnář
pod městem chodí rypadla
slyšíte to chroustání?
u posledního penízu?
odstřeleno vyváto
nádraží Těšnov?
škoda tak pěkného slova

pinglovská samomluva
varujte se podobných míst

(Zlá mlá, 1997)

from The Last-Penny Wine Bar

Verbosity Becomes a Raconteur

but the text of the Iliad must
fit on a tab
the regulars ask for Charon
and: I can't stand symbols
know what the Styx is?
a transvestite bar in Copenhagen
I worked there
as a coat check
below the city excavators stroll
hear the crunching?
to the last cent?
blasted blown away
Tesnov Station
shame such a nice word¹

waiter's soliloquy
avoid such places

trans. Deborah Garfinkle

*

Víš ty, Bože, vůbec o mně,
 žes mě zavřel v tomhle domě?
 Vzpomeneš si někdy na mě,
 jak tu sedím v hnojné jámě?
 Stvořils vavříny i oměj,
 co z toho jsi schystal pro mě?
 Odsoudils mě k marné slávě
 nebo pojdu někde v slámě?

S kůží v ruce Bartoloměj
 pokorně Tě prosím, Pane:
 Už mě nenech vězet marně
 v Leviatanově tlamě.

(Magorovy labutí písně, exil, 1986; Magorova summa, 1998)

*

Do you know, Lord, of me at all,
 that you've bolted me in this cell?
 Do you ever even think of me,
 sitting in this shithole?
 You've fashioned laurel and Monk's Hood,
 yet which of those is reserved for me?
 Have you bid me to vainglory
 or to give up the ghost on a straw bed?

My fate in hand, a Bartholomew,
 I beseech Thee meekly, Lord:
 Don't leave me stuck much longer
 in these Leviathan jaws.

trans. Jiří Flajšar

Rockerův návrat

Věnováno Petrovi a Dagmar Kadlecovým
v upomínku na II. rockerský zájezd.

Konečně zase doma.
Zahrada zarostlá.
Kopřiva dvoudomá,
lebeda,
chybí jen otep indiga
na provaz konopí.

V maštali žíznivý kůň
a kočka sere v lilijích.
V kuchyni holka asijská
smutně a výhružně očima zablýská.
A v krvi líh.

Podáváš čertu prst
a on ti žere z ruky,
hlasivky odumřely v krku.

Jak moudrý Voskovec byl,
teprve teď opravdu víš.
Doma jseš tam, kde se oběsíš.

(*Magorův Jeruzalém*, samizdat, 1987; *Magorova summa*, 1998)

Rocker's Return

Dedicated to Petr and Dagmar Kadlec
in remembrance of Rocker's Round Trip II.

Home again at last.
The garden is overgrown.
Stinging nettles
orache
everything but a faggot of indigo
to dye the rope of hemp.

The horse in the stable is thirsty;
the cat is shitting in the lilies.
In the kitchen an Asian girl
is sad and angry, eyes glinting.
In your blood are spirits.

You offer your fingers to a devil
and he eats from your hand,
speech cords wither in your throat.

What a wiseass Voskovec⁶ was
only now you truly know.
Home is where you hang yourself.

trans. Jiří Flajšar

V. B. a jeho Marii

Moje žena odešla spát,
než šla spát,
zeptal jsem se jí,
jestli mi to má za zlý, jak jsem,
sed jsem k psacímu stroji a
začal psát tohle blús nebo jak se to jmenuje a
chtěl jsem napsat, co sem se zeptal svojí
ženy než mne opustila mezi dveřma,
a začal jsem psát a rozpomínal jsem se
a musel jsem jít ke dveřím koupelny
k prosklenejm dveřím
a zeptat se svojí ženy,
zatukat a ona otevřela co chceš
prosimtě
píšu blues Vrátovi a mám to tak vylízaný
že si nepamatuju na poslední otázku co jsem ti řekl
a ona mi řekla ptal ses
máš mi něco za zlý
řekla jsem ti nemám

Bože můj ve své slávě
ověnčený všemi prapory a korouhvemi
zahalený všemi purpurovými plášti
proč mi neumožníš psát jako Ch. Bukowski?
Proč jsi mne obdařil jenom tím, abych byl sviňák?
Proč jsi mne nadal jenom tím, abych byl hajzl?
Proč jsi mi dal talent tak mizerný, abych skrze
skrže dveří světlo koupelny

To V. B. and His Marie

My wife went to bed
but before she slept
I asked
do you hold the way I am against me
then I sat at this typewriter and
wrote out this blues or whatever you want to call it and
I wanted to write about what I'd asked my wife
before she got up and walked through the door
and I wrote and felt the pain of remembering
until I had to go to the bathroom door
the glass door
and ask my wife
I had to knock and she opened What do you want
PLEASE
I'm writing this blues for Vrata and I'm so fucked up
I can't even remember the last question I asked you
and she says you asked me
do I hold anything against you
no I don't I hold you

Oh God in Thy glory
all wreathed with flags and banners
and clad in purple cloaks
why don't you let me write like Charles Bukowski?
Why did you make me just a prick?
Why did you give me only the talent for being a shit?
Why were you so sparing with my talent that
through the light of the bathroom door

zeptal se svojí ženy
co jsem ti řekl
a ona za zlý
nic ti nemám

(*Magorovi ptáci*, samizdat 1988; *Magorova summa*, 1998)

I have to ask my wife
what did I tell you
and she says against you
I hold nothing

trans. Jiří Flajšar

Pavlovi Bergmanovi

Nikomu už to nevysvětlíš,
kdo tam nebyl.
Na to je námitka
stará, známá:
Měl jsem se proto nechat zabít?
Do koncentráků se nechat odvést?
Měl jsem se narodit proto dřív?
Měl jsem snad proto trpět s těmi,
kteří to štěstí měli,
že dřív a hůř se narodili?

Nevím.

Nikomu už to nevysvětlíš.
Dneska matka mé ženy řekla,
že Svatí Otcové dobře měli,
který hřích nejtěžší
mate hlavy.

O šestém hovořila.

O šelestění listí na podzim nikdo se nezmíní,
je jaro.
Nikomu už nic nevysvětlíš.
Skrz okno možná paprsek svou pavučinou tmou prozáří.
A když ne, o nic nepřijdeš.
Ani tak snad nic neuvidíš.

To Pavel Bergman

You can't really explain anything to anyone
who wasn't there.
There are always such
old objections:
Should I have let myself be killed?
Be taken away to a concentration camp?
Should I have been born sooner?
Should I have suffered with those
so lucky
as to be born, and worse, back then?

I don't know.

You can't really explain anything to anyone.
Today my mother-in-law spoke of
how well the Holy Father knows
which of the Mortal Sins
is most confounding.

She mentions the Sixth.

No one mentions the rustle of leaves in autumn,
for it is spring.
You can't really explain anything to anyone.
Rays through the window may web the dark.
And if not, you lose nothing.
Maybe you wouldn't see anything anyway.

A náhodou kdybys to uviděla,
těm, co tam nebyli,
nic nevysvětluj.
Nic nevysvětlíš.

(*Magorův soumrak*, 1997; *Magorova summa*, 1998)

And if by chance you see something
don't try to explain
to anyone who wasn't there.
You can't explain anything.

trans. Robert Hýsek

První elegie

Ach, kdo nám řekne, proč jsme sem vlastně přišli,
 a kdo si najde alespoň chvíli k vysvětlení.
 Jdem Alejí vzdechů a její jméno nám neříká nic,
 neboť my nevdechnem rozkoš, kterou vyvolal pátravý dotyk.
 ba ani smutek nad tím, kdo tady leží za hřbitovní zdí.

Jediné, co jsme schopni vyslat jako vzkaz nebi,
 je sípavý dech — ten stoupá prostředkem ostružiní.
 Co chvíli se ohlédnem ještě, někdo se ale dokázal ukrýt
 za tenké kmeny třešní a my se mu marně
 snažíme podat ruku. Ach, kdo nám řekne,
 jak daleko ještě a jak se jmenuje vesnice na obzoru.

Ale lopuch už brzy rozprostře nad námi stan
 a střevlíci najdou si cestu živůtkem tvých letních šatů.
 Jen kdyby alespoň na chvíli odhalil tvář a řekl:
 „Tato cesta vede ke Lhotce a dál pak je les a smrt.
 Předtím je třeba po viklavých kamenech přejít vodu.“

(*Maloměstské elegie*, 1999)

First Elegy

Oh, who will tell us, to begin with, why we came here,
 and who will spare at least a small while to explain.
 We move down the Avenue of Sighs whose name says nothing,
 for we'll not inhale the lust engendered by a searching touch,
 nor sorrow for who's lying here behind the graveyard walls.

The only message we may send to heaven
 is wheezing breath that rises from the midst of blackberries.
 Now and again we still glance back, though someone could hide
 behind slight cherry stems and we try, in vain, to
 extend to him a helping hand. Oh, who will tell us
 how far yet is that village on the horizon and its name.

But over us burdock will soon unfold its tent
 and beetles will meander through the bodice of your summer dress.
 If only he'd shown his face a while and said:
 "This way to Lhotka and further on but woods and death.
 Before that, one must cross over loose stones in water."

trans. Jiří Flajšar and Richard Katrovas

Druhá elegie

Však kdo nám velí překonat tento stesk?
Jen plačte, plačte, vy vypálené túje!
Až k samé dřeni dosáhl čpavý louh
z nevědomé ruky a marně provazy deště
potok slz chrání. Jeho jméno je bystré
jako je bystrý běh času, jehož svalnaté nohy
míhají se nám před očima.

Ale kdo musí pálit naše mrtvé? Nenávist k smrti
je zrůdná a kupí se ve slepém ramenu potoka.
Tam když sestoupí dívka, bude navěky mladá
a na tvář jí nasadí prezervativ
bez vzpomínek a budoucnosti.
Jen lehce vrtět hlavou bude ta loutka
a pak se vydá s konvicí louhu na cizí hroby.
A bílým vápnem, tím blátem časna,
bude se snažit vymazat prvotní hřích.

Však kdo nám velí překonat tento stesk?
Snad anděl, jehož uražená ruka
opisuje v noci ohnivé kruhy nad údolím.
A pak jdeme my zhola nevědouce
do zátoky, kde bubliny bahna
vedou k nám sorva slýchanou řeč.

A proto toužíme, neboť jazyk je touha
a za ní nám ukazuje andělova uražená ruka.

* * *

Second Elegy

Yet who commands us to outlast this languor?
Weep on, weep on, oh scorched arbor vitae, you Cyprus shrub!
To the very marrow reaches the acrid lye
from the untrained hand and the ropes of rain fail
to cordon off the brook of tears. Its name is agile
as time, whose muscular legs flash
before our eyes.

But who must burn our dead? Loathing of death
is perverse and collects in a blind branching of the brook.
If a girl descends there, eternally young she'll remain
without memory or future
but with a condom drawn over her face.
The puppet will only wag its head slightly
and then embark with a can of lye for strange graves.
With such whitewash, that mud of timeliness,
it will try to delete the first sin.

Yet who commands us to outlast this languor?
An angel, maybe, whose arm, severed,
makes fiery circles over the valley at night.
And then we're traveling, utterly unaware,
to the cove where bubbles from the mud,
almost inaudible, speak to us.

And that's why we desire, for language is a craving
beyond which the severed hand of the angel points.

* * *

Ach, plačte, plačte, vy vypálené túje
na hrobě otce a matky.
Ó vysaj, mateřídouško, lough
z kořenů, jimiž jsme přišli.
Klesáme dolů, za námi gothardský vrch
s branou věčného míru a nad námi krouží
uražená andělova ruka.

Proč ten prst stále mění směr,
proč jsme vtahováni do falešného světa?

Dívka s prázdným bělmem mihla se
dole v sadu — ty, výspo výšky,
zachraň nás před dalším pádem
hlubším než je náš stud.
Kde jsou dnes hranice pekla?
Roztrhaní výbuchem, zmítají se
šaškové na visutém laně
a kostra politá benzinem
snáší se z kostela na náměstí.

Dej nám udržet směr, kterým jsme vyšli.

Však kdo nám velí...

(Maloměstské elegie, 1998)

Oh weep, weep on, you scorched arbor vitae,
on the grave of the father and mother.
Oh maternal thyme, absorb the lye
from the roots through which we arrived.
We are descending, Gothard Hill behind us
with its Gate of Eternal Peace, while overhead circles
the severed hand of the angel.

Why does the finger point first there, then there,
why are we drawn back into a false world?

A girl whose eyes were vacant white flickered
through the orchard—you great promontory
rescue us from this freefall
deeper than our shame.
Where are the borders of hell today?
Torn by the blast, they are clowns
swaying on a high wire
and a skeleton drenched in oil
descends from the church on the square.

Let us maintain our direction.

Yet, who commands us...

trans. Jiří Flajšar and Richard Katrovas

Pátá elegie

(Sadař)

A první, kdo nás tu našel,
byl ovšem sadař,
co nahnílé hrušky napichoval
na zčernalý trojzubec.
Jak jsme se báli v přítmí,
když do křoví dolehl jeho dech,
ta slabá vůně nedávno strávené kmínky.

Co se ozvalo v našich žaludcích,
obracejících se strachem,
jiného nežli děs z toho,
že nejsme praví, že nemáme právo
vztahovat ruce —

Ten okamžik trval
po celou dobu života našeho otce
a možná i déle: Máme se zeptat?
Do křoví se opřel najednou vítr,
začaly padat první kapky deště
a ze tmy sadu se ozval hlas:
Holoto, dost! Smráká se. Polezte!

(*Maloměstské elegie*, 1999)

Fifth Elegy

(*The Orchard Keeper*)

And the first to find us here
was of course the orchard keeper
who impaled rotten pears
with a blackened pitchfork.
How we trembled in the twilight
as his breathing reached the shrubs
with the mild scent of just-drunk cumin brandy.

What echoed in our guts
upended by dread
what else but dismay
that we are untrue, that we have no right
to hold out our hands—

That moment persisted
the whole life of our father
and perhaps even longer: Should we ask?
The wind suddenly turned full force on the shrubs,
raindrops began to fall
and a voice rose from the orchard dark:
Enough, you brats! It's getting dark. Get out!

trans. Jiří Flajšar

Osmá elegie

Kdyby se tak objevil a řekl,
proč jsme stále přitahováni nocí.
Pes štěkne a obzor dostane barvu
kávého mléka. Kohout zaječí
a náhle proniknuvší světlo
donutí stíny klesnout na kolena.

Ale my už stojíme na podmáčeném břehu
a víme, že je čas sbalit rybářské náčiní.
My víme, že zas budem kropeni
hvězdným zrním a že nám za noci
vykvete v kůži tisíc malých ranek.

Naše objevy jsou za námi už z rána,
naši krev vypila v noci kuna,
naš dům stojí ohvězděn na kopci
a je domovem živých mrtvých.

Naše schopnost se oddat je bezpříkladná —
ale i ticho nás odvede od ženina prsu.
A my nasloucháme tak ostražitě,
že slyšíme i myšlené zvuky.

Noc v nás nalézá své děti.
A my se zastiňujeme
haluzemi černého bezu,
jak ti, co na hřbitově kropí cesty
ve stínu sochy Anděla Blažené Smrti
a z konviček jim kape černá krev.

Eighth Elegy

If only he'd appear and say
why we are ever drawn to darkness.
A dog barks once and horizon turns the color
of creamed coffee. The rooster screeches
and suddenly a piercing light
compels the shadows to fall on their knees.

But now we stand on the crumbling bank
and know it's time we pack our fishing gear.
We know the grit from stars again
will be broadcast on our skins, and at night
thousands of infinitesimal wounds will bloom.

We've made all our findings by morning:
our blood was drunk by a marten last night,
and our house stands starred on a hill,
home to the sentient dead.

Our capacity for devotion is exemplary,
but even silence repels us from a woman's breast.
And we listen so warily
we can even hear the sound of thought.

Night finds its children in us.
And we shelter each other
with berry-thick branches of European elder,
like those who dampen the graveyard aisles
in the shadow of the Angel of Blessed Death's statue,
black blood dripping from their cans.

Ve tmě vody se mihl stín
štíky větší než lze ulovit.
Vážka má větší rozpětí křídel
než my rukou, vodoměrka
kráčí po vodě jako Mojžíš.

Ale co je to proti zvyku,
který opět přinesla noc.
My jediná jsme schopni
plavat v tom nehybném proudu —
a kdyby se objevil ten, kdo to ví,
slyšel by jen suché praskání kloubů,
když si myjeme ve tmě ruce.

Ó, my Piláti! Propouštíme přátele
z našeho břehu jen proto,
že cítíme koprovou vůni noci.
Ale uchovat ji, kromě nás nedokáže nikdo,
ani ten, kdo sem přivedl ráno —

jen tak na zkušenou, jen na kus řeči.

Protože my máme svou noc v hlavách,
my ji ráno jíme jako koláč
a mluvíme s ním. Drobinčky noci
odpadají nám od úst
a rány, hvězdné prohlubně, rostou.

In the watery dark flashed
the shadow of a pike too big to hook.
The dragonfly's wingspan is broader
than ours; the water strider
traverses water like Moses.

But what is all that
compared to habitual night.
Only we are able to swim
in that static stream;
even if one in the know should appear
he'd hear only the dry cracking of knuckles
as we wash our hands in the dark.

Oh, we are such Pilates! We release friends
from our bank just because
we scent the dill of night.
But to store it up... only we, not even
he who bore the morning here, can do that—

just to try it out for a little conversation.

Because we have our night in our heads,
we eat it like a tart each morning
and talk to it. Crumbs of night
fall from our lips
and wounds, starry craters, deepen.

Pes štěkne a kohout ječí.

A on odchází, bezradný z toho, co se tu stalo.

(Maloměstské elegie, 1999)

The dog barks and the rooster screeches.

And he departs, uncounseled as to what has happened here.

trans. Jiří Flajšar and Richard Katrovas

Z obálky dopisu

co čekal sem že je líbesbríf
 strašlivě se šklebí Antonín Zápotocký
 ale jsem tak naměkko že ohleduplně
 rvu obálky druhou stranu
 a čtu o svých zhroucených nadějích
 „drahý, to je konec“
 atd. atd. atd.
 kdo jinému lásku kopá
 sám do ní padá
 stará jáma nerezaví
 potrháný je zas vnímání
 skutečnosti ztracený ztrhaný
 jak milosti strůny
 co ani nebyly
 tak jo, odpovím ti
 ale použiju známku
 s masovým vrahem
 Klementem Gottwaldem

je to fajn zem tady
 stačí vlastně posílat známky
 a na psaní můžeš kašlat
 jistě taky dobrej je kousek:
 Hus v Kostnici

From the Envelope

from what I thought to be a love letter
 Antonin Zapotocky⁷ grins real nasty
 but I'm so moved I gingerly
 tear the envelope on the other side
 and read my crushed hopes
 "sweetie, it's over"
 etc. etc. etc.
 who digs love for the other
 falls in himself
 old pits don't get rusty⁸
 my sentience cracks up
 of reality lost and broken
 like love strings
 which were not to be
 O.K. I'll write back
 but I'll use the stamp
 graced by mass murderer
 Klement Gottwald's head

this here's a fine country
 you can send just stamps
 and fuck the writing
 here's another juicy bit:
 Huss⁹ in Kostnice

anebo:

Se Sovětským svazem na věčné časy
s hvězdou a rozesmátou holčičkou

(Miluju tě k zbláznění, 1990)

or:

hogtied to the Soviets for all time
with a Star and a Smiling Girl

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Mý psaní bude nehezky

zatimco mýho bratra zavřeli
potloukám se po hospodách
žvaním spím s holkama
a myslím si že píšu

zatimco se předák kmene sebevraždí
dřinou tý svý hlavy
nechodím nikam jen blbnu
s variací na Gótej verš o ničem

zatimco se moje první panna modlí v blázinci
rvu se na nádraží zkouším balit kurvy
flákám se hulím startky sedím v kině
piju pivo a úplně tuhej dopisuju
pekelnou prózu

zatimco se mý přátelé ženěj
vodmodlívaj potraty a vomdlívaj
v šílenství a emigrujou
a zakládaj existence
lítám jak běs z jednoho průšvihů
do druhýho a zpět
do průšvihů prvního

zatimco sem zavřenej zasebevražděnej
zešílenej vožralej a mrtvej
vodpotratovanej a těhotnej a šťastnej
ta kniha bobtná a šklebí se

My Writing Won't Be Pretty

while my brother rots in the joint
I kill time in bars
talk bullshit make it with girls
and think I write

while the tribal boss commits somebody else's suicide
by the drudgery of his brow I get nowhere but stupid
with the sixtieth variation of a verse about nothing

while my very first virgin is kneeling to pray in the asylum
I get into fights at the train station try to romance whores
do nothing smoke the cheapest cigarettes sit in movies
swill beer and totally stiff my writing
some hellish fiction

while my friends are getting married
fainting from abortions and fainting
in madness and emigrating
and establishing decent lives
I run like crazy from one mess
to another and back
to the first

while I am jailed, suicided
driven goofy drunk and dead
aborted and knocked up and happy
the book swells and grins from cover to cover
and spooks me from the corner
to the center of the room

a straší mě a honí z kouta pokoje
do středu pokoje
křížovatka Anděl
se bude menovat Moskevská
a bude nehezka

mý psaní bude nehezky
sem ryba kus tlamy v lesku nebe
vody kus na háku

(Miluju tě k zbláznění, 1990)

the street named Angel
will now be called Moscow
and it won't be pretty

and my writing neither
I am fish lips in the sparkling sky
a chunk of water on a hook

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Zatím je večer

Paní v bytě v patře nade mnou
si asi zrovna teď lakuje nehty
ta lvice na ně dýchá
lakuje si nehty a dívá se do zrcadla
dává se do pořádku.
Budu se dívat jak jde po schodech.
Budu se jí dívat do očí.
Oheň se zapaluje sám od sebe
tobě zapálí mutant.
Tady v řece je ostrov. Bylo to tak vždycky
a ty dostaneš přes držku. Tak to prostě je.
Cesták na mě zírá
vykloubeným okem řidič si zapálil
herečka pohodila hřívou
zavřu okno a pak ho otevřu. Anebo ne nechám to jak to je.
Chlapík od pumpy
mi prodává cigarety chtěl mi prodat hodinky. Díváme se
na sebe.
Ptám se ho na cestu poznáváme se.
Pak budu studovat plyn poznám bombu
budu chtít ochutnat kdejakou krásku
a pak se možná budu řídit
nebem s blesky.
Zatím je večer stojím mezi barákama
na náměstí u kasáren
u telefonní budky v ruce pevně svírám své peníze
dnes večer chci opít nějaký lidi potřebuju

It's Only Evening

Maybe the lady in the apartment above mine
is painting her nails
a lioness she breathes on them
polishes and looks in the mirror
she puts on make up.
I will watch her walking down the stairs.
I will look into those eyes.
The fire is self-combusting
you will have light from the mutant.
There is an island on the river here. Always has been
and you'll get your ass whupped. That's it.
Traveling salesman stares at me
through a mangled window the driver lit a cigarette
the actress shook her mane
I close the window then open it again. No, I leave it as it is.
The guy from the gas station
sells me cigarettes, wants to sell me a watch. I ask him
for directions.
We are getting to know one another.
I will then study the gas get familiar with the bomb
I will want to taste any beauty
and maybe then I will steer
the skies with lightning.
It's only evening and I stand among houses
on the square of the barracks
by the phone booth clutching my money
tonight I want to get people drunk I need to

mluvit s mnoha lidma chci aby tam byli duchové
obrazy živý příbuzný dnes v hukotu tramvaje teď v hukotu moře
zatím je večer něco je skutečnost a něco kulisa

(V úterý bude válka, 1992)

talk to lots of people I want ghosts to be there
a picture of my living relative today in the rumble of a tram
now in the rumble of the ocean
it's only evening, something's real and something's a stage set

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Zbraně

Odjakživa toužím po zbrani
nejdřív to byl luk a šípy
kavaleristi padali jak mouchy
stranil jsem Navahům
pak Jack London v pletený čepici s kudlou
chudák kluk na lodi s vlkama
do skutečný války jsem se zapletl potom
byla ale papírová
nůž jsem začal nosit později
s anonymníma dopisama
taky jsem se ozbrojil společně s Petrem P.
za chůze v lese oštěpama
tehdy u Radarový hory... a nedostali nás.
Mačeta stojí 90 a kesr 120
a nebezpečí je všude a ve všem.
Manželce jsem koupil plyn
chci jí sehnat pistoli
brání se tomu říká: „kam by to šlo
kdyby takhle uvažovali všichni?“ a
„jen bys rozmnožil zlo na světě.“
Čekáme na násilníka
za dlouhý noci plánujem jak přejde park
vynoří se šikmo zleva
a zaútočí
a co ti mizerové v metru
dnes jsem potkal hned dva povídali si:
„kams ho říz?“
„do ksichtu“ pohupovali pálkama

Weapons

Since I can remember I've wanted a weapon
first a bow and arrow
the Cavalry dropped like flies
I was with the Navajos
then Jack London in a knitted cap with a blade
poor boy on the ship with wolves
only later was I in a real war
a paper one
then I started toting a knife
when the anonymous letters came
walking through the woods
Peter P. and I got armed with spears
near Radar Hill then... but they didn't catch us.
A machete costs 90 and a kesr 120
and the danger is everywhere and in everything.
For my wife I bought tear gas spray
but want to get her a gun
she protests: "Where would it lead
if everybody thought that way?" and
"You would only add to the evil in the world."
We are waiting for the perpetrator
over a long night we surmise how he will cross the park
emerge on the left
and attack
and how about those bastards on the Metro
I overheard two say:
"Where'd you cut him?"
"Right in the face." They were swinging their clubs

nohama sotva dosáhli na zem
zrovna nehajlovali
přál jsem si aby byli mrtví
„ale stejně je nemůžeš všechny pobít“ „a kdyby
tak bys byl jako oni“ říká mi. Nutím ji
aby nosila alespoň ten plyn
ale je to jen výmluva
abych na ni nemusel čekat večer když se vrací z kostela
a nemá pravdu
nebyl bych jako oni
byl bych živý.

(V úterý bude válka, 1992)

their feet hardly touching the ground
they weren't sieg heiling just that moment
I wished them dead
"But you can't kill them all and if you did
you'd be just like them" she tells me. I make her
carry at least the tear gas
but that's just an excuse so I don't have to wait for her at night
when she comes back from church
and she's wrong
I wouldn't be like them
I'd be alive.

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Káně lesní nebo-li myšilov

Janu Skácelovi

Pouze káním vedlo se hůře v r. 1848. Roku téhož a následujícího
sedláci, postřílevše neobyčejné množství velmi neškodných těchto
dravců na hnízdě nebo na číhané, přibíjeli je z chlouby na vrata u
stodol, a to pouze proto, že tvorové tito příliš byli velcí, aby ostali
nepovšimnuti.

A.E. Brehm — Život zvířat

Hleděli jsme podzimním směrem

Lovci stříleli divoké husy
Každým rokem se hloubily
nové a nové
jámy v nebi
až jsme cítili docela hmatatelnou prázdnotu

Někdo řekl: Proč divoké husy neletí tmou
černější než naše svědomí?

A náhle bylo zřejmé
že i kdyby andělé snášeli
vejce
nebudou to *ta* vejce

Náhle bylo patrné
že i kdybych třikrát denně
kloktal déšť
neočistím svůj jazyk

The Mouse Hawk

for Jan Skácel

... only those large buzzards called mouse hawks were worse off in
1848. In that year and in the following, farmers shot an enormous
number of these harmless birds of prey in their nests or in ambush,
and nailed them proudly to barn doors; one may speculate that
these creatures were too big to go unnoticed.

A.E. Brehm — *The Lives of Animals*

We were gazing toward autumn

The hunters were shooting wild geese
Each year they'd punched
newer and newer
holes in the sky
until we could feel a quite tangible vacancy

Someone said: Why do the wild geese not fly in blacker dark
than our conscience?

And suddenly it was self-evident
that even if the angels laid
eggs
such wouldn't be exactly *those* eggs

Suddenly it was obvious
that even if three times a day
hard rains should sizzle
my tongue would not be cleansed

Protože už pro vždy bude slovo
tak trochu vejďumek
tak trochu podkladek
tak trochu kraslice

Někdo z nás řekl: Ale vždyť my byli slušní...

a byl cítit pukavec

*(bývá zle a bývá hůře
po dvoře chodí černé kuře)*

a oknem měsíc
jako kuna
jako nespavost

Zejí vrata do stodoly
v prázdné slámě krysy
a v bukových křídlech
díry po hřebech

(Názorný přírodopis tajnokřídých, 1989)

because evermore a word will be
a little like a shell sucked clean
a little like a painted egg shell
a little like an empty, painted shell

One of us said: But we were polite...

and there was a smell of rotten eggs

*(sometimes evil or worse may prowl
through doors will come the bleakest fowl)*

and through a window the moon
like a marten
like insomnia

the gaping barn
rats in the hay
and in the beechwood doors open like wings
holes where nails had been

trans. Ema Katrovas and Richard Katrovas

Noh šedohlavý

Je náramně hltavý a mnohdy tak dlouho žere, až ani z místa, kde zdechlinu nalezl, odletět nemůže. Mrtvým koňům a hovězímu dobytku dává přednost před zdechlinou prasat.

P. Jehlička — Názorný přírodopis ptactva

Tady chcíp' Pegas!

I slétli se Nohové
z břicha rvali noetiku
vyklovali z hlavy sofismata
srkali metafory žvýkali kantilény
mlaskali jambicky chlemstali realisticky

Kojoti a hyjeni
tu a tam urvali cancourek
smutný epigram srandovně epitať
zatímco Nohové pracovali svými zobáky
až nezbyl ani přechodník z mimochodníka
ani háček z klišky
jen hrudní klec

Poslechni si vítr
jak hraje Davidovy písničky
na harfu žeberní
poslechni si přesýpání písku v koňské hlavě
slyš temné orákulum: Kopati sobě hrob budeš
abys v něm nakonec brambory
skladoval...

The Griffin Hawk

The griffin hawk is voracious and often eats so long that it can't fly from where the carcass lies. It prefers the carrion of horses and cattle to that of pigs.

P. Jehlička—*A Field Guide to Birds*

Here rots Pegasus!

And Griffins of a feather flocked together
wrested epistemology from the gut
pecked sophisms from the head
sipped metaphors chewed cants
lip-smacking iambically slurping down realistically

Coyotes and hyenas
snatched tatters hither and yon
sad epigram humorous epitaph
meanwhile, the Griffins worked with their beaks
until there was no meat left in the metaphor
no sinews in synecdoche
just the rib cage

Listen to the wind
how it plays the psalms of David
on a harp of ribs
listen to the sand coursing through a horse's skull
hear the mysterious *oraculum*: Thou wilt dig thine own grave
even if at the end thou only store
potatoes in it...

Aj aj na Parnasu
chřestýše s chřestem vaří
snad i prasečí hlavu
Z nejkvalitnějšího černého svědomí vyrábějí briкеты
Na zimu třicet metrů sebranych spisů
a není to k ničemu
studí to jako čumák vlka

Když schází vnitřní oheň
nepomůže ani živočišné uhlí

Bejvávalo
že když si smrt brousila kosu
básník jí plival do ksichtu
nikoliv na brousek

A když už se lhalo
tak snad s větším záplem

Kdepak ty loňské laviny jsou —

Dost dlouho padal sníh
Dost dlouho si válelo nebe oblačné šunky
Dost dlouho básník Nimra
páchal na sobě v tichosti
samohanu

Ale teď už na to má
za dva zlatý koupil sekeru
tužku si přitesal
a píše a tvoří a trápí se a mučí se
a vida: na šimla si vydělal

Ah ah on Parnassus
vipers cook with capers
maybe even a pig's head
From the bestest blackest bad conscience they make briquettes
For the winter, three cords of collected prose
and it's useless
it's cold as a wolf's nose

When the inner fire goes out
not even charcoal tablets will help

There was a time
when Death sharpened his scythe
and the Poet spat in his face
not on a whetstone

And now when there are lies
perhaps they have greater ardor

You wonder where last year's avalanche —

Long enough snow has fallen
Long enough sky has propped its fat thighs on clouds
Long enough the Poetaster has abused himself
quietly alone

But now he can
buy an ax for two gold pieces
and sharpen his pencil
and write and create and suffer and torture himself
and see: he's earned enough to buy a white horse

O půlnoci v paneláku
tancuje s ním maděru

Copak tohle se smí?

Co se furt nimrá při zemi
ať už nám konečně ukáže
tu svoji bejkárnu
ať letí!

Odedávna povzbuzují Nohové
básníky
k létání
nakopnutím

je jen podivuhodné
že někteří opravdu vzlétnou
a letí —

(Názorný přírodopis tajnokřídých, 1989)

Around midnight in the housing project
it dances a madera with him

Is that permitted?

Why's he always dabbling about on the ground
let him finally show us
what he's got
and fly!

Long ago Griffins encouraged
poets
to fly
by kicking them in the ass

it's only weird
that a few actually shot up
and soared—

trans. Matthew Sweney

Čáp bílý

Také jedovaté zmijs jsou mu lahůdkou; ale dříve než je polyká, tepe
je zobákem tak často a prudce do hlavy, že jim přechází zrak i sluch.

A. E. Brehm — Život zvířat

Básníci hnízdí na stromech
na věžích ano i na domech
kam jim musí mládenec za pomoci dívky
vytáhnout kolo
aby si mohl básník hnízdo upravit

Ani blesk nezapálí stavení
na kterém básník své hnízdo má
A kdyby přece ve stavení tom
vyšel oheň
básník učiní hromový povyk a volá: Hohohoho!
Až lid se probudí

šlehá-li velký oheň z komína
básník usednuv naň
křídloma jej zakryje
a plamen udusí

Kdo by zboural hnízdo básníkovu
nebo ideály jeho o zem rozbíjel
či jeho zabíti se opovažoval
tomu se básník hrozně pomstí

Odletěv
přivede si zanedlouho

The White Stork

It also finds poisonous adders delicious. But before it swallows one
it pecks the thing so rapidly and hard the victim loses sight and
hearing.

A.E. Brehm— *The Lives of Animals*

Poets nest in trees
on spires, yes, and on houses
where a young fellow, assisted by his lady friend,
may install a wooden wheel
over their chimney to mark where the poet may build its nest.⁹

Not even lightning may enflame
a domicile where a poet has nested,
and if flames originate from within
the poet shrieks: Hohohoho!
to awaken all inhabitants.

When a huge fire blasts from the chimney
the poet blocks it out,
covers it with wings
to smother the flames.

Whoever would destroy the poet's nest
or smash its ideas to the ground
or even try to kill it
on that person the poet will exact revenge:

It will soar away to enlist
in a brief while a flock of fellow poets

hejno jiných básníků
a všichni nesouce v zobáčích žhavé uhly
z několika stran
zapalují dům

Není pravdou
že básníci nosí ženám děti
sic je to pěkná a prastará legenda

Avšak pokud se narodí dítě
v domě
kde na komíně klektá zobákem básník
dostane robátko do vínku
tak jemný sluch
že rozumí šepotům
i kvílení

Jen škoda
že básníků je méně
než komínů

Možná by se obecněji víc vědělo
co tím chce básník říci
když na naší střeše
melancholickou meluzínu
vysedí

(Názorný přirodopis tajnokřídlich, 1989)

and all in their beaks
will clamp white coals with which
from all sides they'll enflame that house.

It is not true
that poets bring children to women
though it is a nice old legend.

Nonetheless, when a child is born
in a house
where on the chimney a poet clicks its beak
the wee one will thereby achieve
so delicate an ear
it will comprehend all whispers
and howls.

What a shame
there are fewer poets
than chimneys

It would be more commonly known
what poems are saying
if on each roof a poet incubated
the melancholy drafts
through the chimney.

trans. Ema Katrovas and Richard Katrovas

Poslední milovníci jasných obrazů

Byla tak nesmyslně krásná
 před starým rozpadlým domem
 chyběla jí jen síť
 plná lesklých mrtvých ryb
 anebo sklenice melounové šťávy
 sponka ve vlasech
 něco osobního
 jako když řeknete
 „Vskutku Uhlí hoří“
 anebo
 „Holubi se nejraději procházejí
 po zeleném pásu duhy“

Byla tak nesmyslně krásná
 jak voda když spadne
 do jiné vody
 jako dům nad jezerem
 který má dva životy
 a druhý marnotratně dává
 rybám
 a nočním plavcům

A ptali se —
 proč stojí
 u starého rozpadlého domu
 ona která se narodila k tomu
 aby přivazovala šátky
 k mořským vlnám?

The Last Lovers of Clear Images

She was so blankly beautiful
 before the old crumbling house
 that the only thing she seemed to lack
 was a net filled with shiny dead fish
 or a glass of melon water
 a hairclip
 something private like if you said
 “Indeed, coal burns”
 or
 “Pigeons prefer to stroll
 on the green stripe of a rainbow”

She was so blankly beautiful
 it was water spilling
 into water
 like a house
 of whose lives over a lake
 one is wasted
 on fish
 and night swimmers

And some asked
 “Why does she
 who was born to tie scarves
 to ocean swells
 stand before the old crumbling house?”

Nahoře někdo se skřípotem
otevřel okno
a ona sáhla do kapsy
a vytáhla chleba s máslem
a oni se odvrátili
a odešli

poslední milovníci jasných obrazů

(Chvění závodních koní, 1986)

When someone upstairs creaked open a window
she pulled from her pocket
a slice of buttered bread

and the last lovers of clear images
turned away.

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Mrtví

Množství mrtvých roste
ale země je pořád stejně velká
a nebe i peklo taky.
V lese je těsno
nedá se dostat z místa na místo
mezi kmeny a podlouhlými
stíny mrtvých.
V lese je těsno a vzduch houstne,
je to bílý dech mrtvých,
jejich vydýchaný dech který my
vdechujeme
a vydechujeme
a vdechujeme
zatímco na půl cesty mezi námi a jimi
zůstává
hebká třesková živá
jediná skutečná
nicota

(*V podsvětím městě*, 1994)

The Dead

Their numbers grow
but the earth has not
nor heaven nor hell.
It is cramped in the woods
one cannot move from point to point
amid the tree trunks and elongated
shadows of the dead.
It is cramped in the woods and the air is thickening,
the white breath of the dead
is the staleness we breathe in
and breathe out
and breathe in
as halfway between us and them
remains
soft severe alive
the only genuine
nothingness.

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Jsou dny kdy mrtví přicházejí jako hlas

říkající že není dům
v kterém mé dětství
sedí u dřevěného stolu
s dřevěnými loutkami
pána a paní;
hlas opakující, že dům dětství
není,
že není dům smrti,
že dnem i nocí
nitra věcí hoří bílým
plamenem.

(V podsvětním městě, 1994)

There Are Days the Dead Come as Voices

saying there is no house
in which my childhood
sits at a wooden table
with wooden dolls
of a man and a woman;
a voice repeating there is no
house of childhood,
no house of death,
that day and night
essences burn with a white
flame.

trans. Dominika Winterová and Richard Katrovas

Filipika proti nevěřám

Kdo z vás, urozené paní, někdy nespál s Barnabášem.
 Kdo z vás si s ním nepohrál Až řval „Seš saň” a tak.
 A to je s ním ta potíž.
 Totiž že se z něj v rozhodujícím okamžiku stal hvězdář
 tak tak se nedloubal v nose Zíval do oblak
 a olizoval si tlapky Hospodyňka v něm sklopila oči
 a nakonec vděčně přijal Když ta ženská padla smíchy
 že ji nemusel srazit pěstí na nestydatou zem
 Aristokrat. Bez legrace —
 kdo kdy spal s hvězdářem Chraňte si to jako poklad
 Ušpinit se — co to udělá
 To já jsem ta špinavá
 Když já ostrý hochy žeru
 Visí tu stín co má sedavou povahu jako já
 Hvězdáři upaluj Lhaní tě zachrání
 Hod’ po mně sekeru
 Nespadla obloha
 to jenom
 stín
 used
 pod jabloní.

(Guláš z modrý krávy, 1993)

Philippic Against Infidelity

Who among you, honorable ladies, has not slept with Barnabas.
 Who among you has not toyed with him to make him shout
 “You bitch” et cetera.
 And that’s the trouble with him.
 He becomes an astronomer at crucial moments
 and he might as well pick his nose yawn into clouds
 and lick his paws The little housewife in him casts down her eyes
 and finally he gets why a woman falls down laughing
 Because he didn’t have to knock her down into the shameless dirt
 What a gentleman. No joke:
 those who’ve slept with an astronomer treasure it
 Getting dirty’s no big deal
 I’m the filthy one
 I’m just crazy about tough guys
 Here’s suspended a shadow whose nature is as sedentary as mine
 Astronomer go to hell. Lying won’t save you
 Toss your hatchet at me
 The sky didn’t fall
 only this
 shadow
 slouching
 under an apple tree.

trans. Ema Jelinková and Richard Katrovas

Blue

A copak ty,
tady
v zahradě jínu
počasí vrší se Den za den
za hlubokej Pařez
Zlej
Král
K nasrání sám
vínu díváš se do očí
A pak putuješ tramwají Lehoučký jako smítko
A pak putuješ pasážží krokem dinosaura
Jsi luční kobylkou
Jsi princeznou Pampeliškou
No jenom mi velmi připadáš smutný.
Takový nějak... smutný
Smutný, nebo tak.
Ráda bych ti uvařila guláš. Takovej modrej guláš
z nějaký hodný krávy.

(*Guláš z modrý krávy*, 1993)

Blue

What are you doing
here
in the garden of white frost
weather piles up day after day
behind a deep Stump
A bad
King
So alone it sucks
You look wine in the eye
And then you wander by tram Light as a mote
And then you wander an arcade at a dinosaur pace
You are a grasshopper
You are Princess Dandelion
You just seem very sad.
Well, someone... sad
Sad, or something like that.
I'd like to cook you goulash. A blue goulash
made of some nice cow.

trans. Ema Jelinková

Je 26 hodin

Je 26 hodin a někdo mi chodí za plotem.
Jako by sekal trávu.
Jako by jedl trávu.
Kousal.
Pes je na rozpacích.
Štěkat?
Nebo ne? Vysílá stanice Hvězda, je 26 hodin.
Sedím na schodě a někdo mi chodí za plotem.
Čekám, až mi uschne plátno.
Pálím cigarety, abych to nemusela čuchat.
Pálím cigarety. Plátno hrozně smrdí.
Hoří taky svíčka přilepená na smetáku, vysílá stanice Hvězda.
Je 26 hodin a pomalu přicházím na kloub kdo to:
To je Dáša.
Za plotem chodí kůň. Starej, nemocnej, ošklivej jak noc
a jí trávu.
Je to kůň Dáša.
Plátno schne a smrdí.
Svíčka zalepuje chlupy od smetáku — zapaluju další cigaretu.
Bude 26 hodin.

(Guláš z modrý krávy, 1993)

2600 Hours

It's 2600 hours and someone's walking around my fence.
Like he's cutting my grass.
Like he's eating my grass.
Chewing it.
The dog is confused.
Should I bark?
Or not? On TV Star Station is transmitting, it's 2600 hours.
I'm sitting on the step and someone is walking around my fence.
I'm waiting for my linen to dry.
I'm lighting cigarettes so as not to smell it.
I'm lighting cigarettes. The linen stinks awfully.
A candle, stuck to the broom, is also lit, Star Station is transmitting.
It's 2600 hours and I'm discovering who it is.
It's Dasa.
There's a horse walking around my fence. Old, sick horse ugly as night
munching grass.
It's Dasa the horse.
The linen dries and stinks.
The candle has stuck the broom strands together—I light another cigarette.
It will be 2700 hours.

trans. Ema Jelinková

Ten, který přichází, když usínám

Měsíc už rozkvétá, kde zaleskly se tvé stopy
a já se rozesazuji v korunách stromů
neboť přišel čas, abych ti vymyslela jméno.
Ten, který přichází, když usínám.
Lesní požár Jehož tělo je hebké a krásné
a proto odejde

Jako zlí odcházejí

Ten, který přichází, když usínám
Když z chýší unaveně stoupá kouř a rozlévá se po údolí
Trávou se plazí vzácní hadi a oči jim září
zatímco ten, který přichází, když usínám
se pomalu obléká do těla
Kterým jsem již od setmění přikryta
Které je mým lůžkem, mou přikrývkou i polštářem

Zvyk a nezvyk spolu zápasí
Jsem velký harém Mnoha žen
On je tisíc bratří zvláštního řádu
A velký chrám, Kde já, harém, ten řád potkávám
Na každém oltáři se pomiluji oblečena v smaragdy s tebou,
který přicházíš, když usínám
A vůbec nežárlím na ten dav černých cour Na plavé krásky
na bohyně pravdy To všechno jsem já

A i v předsíni na tebe čekám, šedá polární liška, velice
hebká na tebe, který přicházíš, když usínám

The One Who Comes as I Doze Off

The moon blossoms where your tracks sparkle
and I assume a seat in the crown of a tree
for it is time to name you.

The one who comes as I doze off.
A woodland in flames whose body is plush and lovely
and therefore he withdraws

like one who is wicked

The one who comes as I doze off
as smoke curls from the shacks, spreads over the valley
and exotic snakes glitter in the grass
the one who comes as I doze off
is slowly donning his body
the body I have used as a blanket since sunset
the body which is my bed, my blanket and my pillow

The habitual and non-habitual struggle together
I am the great harem of many women
He is the thousand brethren of an odd order
A huge temple where harem and brethren meet
Dressed in emeralds we make love on every altar
I and you who come as I doze off
By no means do I envy the crowds of dark sluts or fair beauties
or the Goddesses of Truth for I am all of them

Even in the hall it is I waiting for you, a grey polar fox, waiting
to be tender to you who comes as I doze off

Beru tě za ruce
Je noc
Přinášíš mi olověný šperk.

(Guláš z modrý krávy, 1993)

I'm taking your hands
It's night
You bring me a gem set in lead.

trans. Ema Jelinková and Richard Katrovas

Notes

¹ During the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) the Protestant Czechs suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Hapsburgs at White Mountain. Bohemia was laid waste and its inhabitants reduced to misery.

² John Huss (Jan Hus) was a religious reformer and Czech national hero who was burned at the stake in 1415. The Hussites were his followers.

³ The Czech *chata* or summer house is a powerful institution; during times of turmoil and oppression, Czechs have, literally as well as figuratively, tended to their own gardens.

⁴ Novák is a Czech name as common as Smith is in English.

⁵ Těšnov was a beautiful train station the communists tore down to build a parking lot. It is "such a nice word," perhaps, because it is close to *tesit se* which, meaning literally "to give pleasure," is evocative of "Pleasance" as a proper name in English.

⁶ Jiří Voskovec was a Czech actor and playwright who immigrated to the U.S. and appeared in, among other Hollywood feature films, *Twelve Angry Men*.

⁷ Klement Gottwald and Antonín Zápotocký were Communist leaders of the 1950s, whose pictures appeared on Czech stamps.

⁸ "Who digs a pit for another falls in himself" and "Old love does not get rusty" are old folk sayings. The quotation in lines 12 and 13 is from Karel Hynek Mácha, the greatest of the Czech romantic poets.

⁹ In the not-too-distant past, wooden wagon wheels were placed over chimneys to serve as nesting places for storks.

Expatriate Writing from Prague



A. E. Fournet
Praha, Czech Republic, 1993

*Allegiance to the Strange:
Prague Expatriate Writing of the Nineties*

I once asked my dear friend, the translator Vladimíra Žáková, how you say "expatriate" in Czech. It turns out you don't. The strongest Czech approximation is like the English "exile," the weakest something like the aristocratic-sounding "émigré." For many around the world, including Czechs, withdrawal from residence in or allegiance to one's native country is almost impossible to fathom as a desirable state. It is, however, a state in which some have found themselves in recent times, whether by accident or design.

The present-day connotations of "expatriate" among English speakers in Prague are twofold. The adjective "expat" in travel guides refers to bars or restaurants which cater to the large Anglo-American colony here with high-priced drinks, English-speaking waiters and almost a total lack of connection to Czech culture. The clientele work for Western companies, earn Western salaries and pay Western rents. Their stay here is temporary and their allegiance to home profound. They are primarily here because someone told them, or told someone they love, to come over to Prague and make some money.

Apart from this easily identifiable population, the rest of us non-Czechs are as various as our countries of origin, motivations, and interests, whether those interests and motivations are political, artistic, academic, or simply stem from the desire to escape from the maze of hypercapitalism. Those for whom the term "expatriate" recalls the literary founders of Modernism—Hemingway, Stein etc.—are probably the "writers," and we are periodically subjected to the notion that Prague is somehow the postmodern equivalent of interwar Paris. Be that as it may, regardless of what you do as vocation or avocation, if you live here long enough you begin to feel like what the Czech Republic calls you: a

foreigner. And it is on this basis that people from all over the world have met and attempted to communicate with one another in post-1989 Prague. English is quite definitely the primary language of this continuing cultural encounter.

Even among those who have totally assimilated—gaining citizenship, fluency and family—it is hard to avoid the daily reminders of one's outsider-ness in this place that was closed to the outside for so long and feared it so much. Part of this has to do with the rapidly changing political landscape of the country surrounding Prague. As the country has shrunk geographically, the definition of who is now foreign has widened to include many who were once citizens, Slovaks being the prime example. Czechoslovakia is no longer, despite the stubborn celebration of its birth every October 28. Also, returning Czechoslovak exiles are sometimes treated unfavorably indeed by those they left behind.

Editing a collection based on the geopolitical origins of the writers (rather than on the characteristics of their works) underscores the complexity of how humans identify themselves and the fundamental inability of our political entities to reflect that complexity. How is someone whose mother was Slovak and father was Czech, who spent the first six months of life in Prague, was subsequently raised in Scandinavia, lives three languages equally well and has chosen to return to Prague after twenty years in the U.S.—on that passport and retaining that citizenship—to be considered? This is a person for whom "native" is an obsolete category. Is this person "Czech"? Is she an "expatriate"? And if you turn to her writing, what do you find and where did it come from?

We foreigners do not only write. We also edit, translate and publish. The very best of the recent English-language literary contributions from Prague have not necessarily involved writers who live here, but editors and publishers who do. The gorgeous Prague-based journal *TRAFIKA*, whose high-quality translations of work from authors around the world are a stunning achievement, has only published one writer in seven issues who fits the definition of an expatriate in this country. Publisher Howard Sidenberg's Prague-based Twisted Spoon Press offers the works of Central and East European authors in English translation. Slovak

dissident Fedor Gál's Prague-based G plus G publishing house has produced historical and literary works on many issues relating to regional history and politics, some by "foreigners," in Czech, English and Slovak. The often-unnoticed translators are the real heroes of a Prague that today features English and German-language weekly newspapers as well as countless new titles in print.

I don't know that a reader will find much in common among the pieces included here, and it can be argued that what is here reflects primarily the editor's taste. To my ear the voices of these writers are unique, and identifying this quality as positive is doubtless the result of my individualistic upbringing in the U.S. It was not my original intention to present the work of mostly people with U.S. passports as samples of expatriate writing, since there are writers in Prague from every imaginable point of origin. But we cannot help where we are born, though it dogs us to the end of our days. Therefore, please consider this a brief glance along just one axis of the many worlds which overlap in this strange place during this very strange time, a place and time to which many outsiders have tenaciously pledged their allegiance.

My fellow strangers, enjoy your time outside.

JUSTIN QUINN

Sky

(beginning with half a line by Louis Armand)

The illusion concrete, the architecture solid, and yet the shoals plunge out toward it, and suddenly it arches—supple, eloquent—revolving through the air in total concert with them, chivvying, spurring, lifting up their millionweight to excellence, to parapets that have the whole land laid out fatefully below.

And then I turn onto the street and see them massed at the other end:—Waiting, black, the visors glinting in the sun, the perspex riot shields like scales; small waves of movement travelling across their numbers as they shift their weight from foot to foot, readjust their belts, or merely gaze off into the distance.

Filaments of syntax whip and couple through the air. Coruscations shimmer. The stitching gives and glints back in and out of blue and black and green and grey; it ripples, switching its allegiance in the changing sun rays; it is part, intricate part, of something which solicits furtherance. Observe the sky

above this empty street right now—the offing whelms and hisses with event—and them up there immobile, having stiffened, standing waiting for the word.

Manumission

Recently illiteracy, murder and malnourishment
were reinvented; the logo designed so that

these new products will leap out
from the shelves when you wheel down past

to get your week's stuff—books, food, things
to wipe the baby's ass and your own; designed

so that when you lift your hand out through the space,
the very air of the supermarket that's faceted with choice,

you'll feel that this product is for you,
that your personality is best expressed

through its purchase; it's *you*; you know it too
and ferry it home with the kind of consumer pride

you associate with the 1940s and '50s
when the world was a better place, and Ma

was not your Da in drag (like now)
and men in suits met in high-ceilinged rooms to

say that there are rights, that there are
human rights, and you could look out the

window into the suburban haze and not feel

that any moment your own hands

would swoop down from the skies
with exceptionally intricate weaponry destroying

foliage, cats, schoolchildren, you also,
while voiceovers promise plenitude, the trickle-down

effect, World Bank suits arriving any minute now, they say;
a time when your hand moving through

the air, whatever air that be,
was not what it (lift it up and look) is today.

Poem

A blue gull.
 A history lesson.
 You learn the names of some new pills.
 A safety match.
 Mail.
 Wild dogs.
 Seaweed candy in blue paper.
 A gull, a bird inhabited by houses.
 A bird.
 A hand.
 A bird inhabited.

The little match girl

Three's for the blind boy lives down the lane.

 Three's for the dairymaid, lives with the dairymaid
 lives on a farm in seattle, lives with the press.
 Speaks finnish, stopped talking to her mother.

 Three's for the housemarten, lives in his house.
 Three's for his house.

 I'm the nurse that closed the nursery.
 I learned that things outside my house exist.
 I knit professionally, I make things close.
 I learned today that things outside my house exist.
 The tables are uneven, I even them.
 The children are uncertain, I steady them.
 I am the nurse that holds the nursery in her hands.
 I learned today that things outside my house exist.

Down, ghost, honey

for Sonya Kennedy

Down, ghost, honey.

I think I will replace my love. See this poor man
next to the recording equipment? See the recording
equipment shine? Here almost alone in this room,
I think I will replace my love. This
is a terrible recording.

See how good the recording equipment was
in 1956, how solid, like you look at a parrot
and say oh! What a solid bird. A parrot is
large, that's why. And oh. In 1956. The microphones
were large, the tapedecks larger still. And
they hummed when they ran.

Down, ghost, honey.

You just walk around on your "feet." You just walk into things.
You think you know enough
to make a decision. But the thing is,
you think you know enough.
Life is full of surprises.
You think you know enough.
You don't.

Down, ghost.

Your body's not so heavy. Your heart is not so heavy.

Your face is so lovely I had to say so. Ghost, honey, you're
all in tinfoil, you're so fragile. Don't
think I don't want you to interrupt my writing. Don't.
Down.

from *Anatomy Lessons*

I

it was an anti-climax “in no uncertain terms”
the strange light of ending, “strange” (they),
like a memory of x—flickering in &
out of sight, between frames & parentheses...

the pronominal romance a little further along
a dreary road—that channel (or door, or
issue, or borehole)—thrusting towards it—
speed & no afterthought—motionless...

the sudden equivalence of all the coordinates
waning in febrile constellation, in their pale
sheep’s clothing, too far short of a miracle—
only conditionally, finitude, to kill & to eat:

a vaguely sinister intent all but naked now—
in the placenta, locked up, something, born at last
.....

IV

i arrive knowing nothing about you—appropriate
your anonymity, dispassionate as the weather...

so many possible scenarios & then everything
seems to be exhausted, already—stumbling towards
resolution (it’s not there, though, in that place,
anywhere—obsessed with the usual symmetries...

a tear in the curtain, a nail sticking out
from the wall—which we end up not realising
is virginal, is always virginal, insisting instead
that there have been & will be other lives

but as for putting them into words...)
fading in & out till we’re short of breath—

& the memory it leaves with us, in its image
scarcely conscious of having nothing to belong to
.....

XII

like glass, ready to shatter at any indefinite touch—the un-
intention intrudes, rushing up to mar the scene, so arbitrary
in the green light... it was a late winter that left the script
with so many irresolutions—things of unstable menace
lurking in the margin, the movement of attention through
an eye, jealous & unslept, the dissonant mocking applause,
the pathology wake in the guilt-plagued stage-phantom...

without a breath of separation the monologue resumes
(though the blood is fake, & only there for the sake of
appearance, not speaking in the present but as a *deus ex*
machina recalling lost life & longed-for resurrection)—

objects mutely differentiated: somebody switches on a light
& everything goes numb—the intervention without ever
seeming to begin is over, the ushers gone, the theatre empty

particulate matter that my job is to arrange

sometimes I just use my hands to sweep it
 little piles but sometimes
 I have to transfer it without tools
 once I just eyeballed it
 when I stopped it was a job well done
 there were skin flakes and scales
 little bits of the bikini atoll
 finally come down to demand justice
 I used my nails to pick one big piece up
 each one is different like snow or the ocean
 even the sea that ended up in the upper atmosphere
 at the end of the day I shake
 out my clothes and my hair
 I don't like to take my work home with me

all this cumulus

the tunnel of the road through the trees

some words fell off the wall of rock

peeled senselessly did curlicues and
 shangri-las susie kept away from me
 stayed in austria dancing all catty:
 beware scratching

beware: thoughts are like magnets and
 skin iron filings
 away under the heading
 southeast aphasia nicht spreken it
 built up and amounted to

people on the street
 hiding under their coats
 little shrunk bodies
 they reveal with the right password
 or grimace

first snow in Tabor

when your gaze is a
bright light
forgive my turning away.
life holds potential like
a bee trapped in a flower.
buzz buzz.
as the snow sinks into the grass
lately even a candle refracting
through a glass
is an interrogation lamp.
I didn't
do it.
a rose under snows juxtaposed
these humpy banks new on the list
of things that seem to be
staring at me.
the view
is dim
like my memory.

comb together

if I dreamt I dropped
like a spinning ankh into fire
I'd be embarrassed
the symbols were like cheap candy

I know the Easter Bunny
yawns like the phoenix
smudgy ashes ruin the soft
fur I like to pet

& dreams comb together the split
ends of our collective unconsciousness
or peek in the dirt bag
of the vacuum cleaner for
thoughts we forgot to think

the earl of sandwich nightmared
of islands not food, bucky fuller
dreamt standing up like a horse
of geodesic corrals

in all my dreams I'm lucid
like a person with rent money.

Time Passed

It was the kind of city where half the people carried violins, the other half reused grocery bags. Tragic weeks were marked by a failed audition or a torn plastic handle. Both might well entail suicide. They did not know what to do when the darkness first came. They were accustomed to the neon twenty-four-hour city life. After setting upon the burning of Gucci bags, they decided to stay for the winter. "There is more Kant than Nietzsche here," the giant muttered. "It's just that kind of place." And he threw away his balloons and went back into the manhole. "The sheets are so white." "Perhaps we can export bleach, along with old women and washboards." They were always looking for money-making projects. "Reupholstery? Car washing, coffee brewing or candy cane production?" Unfortunately, those ideas were rejected, as were Good Humor truck maintenance, light bulb installation, walnut gathering and others too numerous to mention.

"Tell me a story," she said, "one with a happy beginning, sad ending and many inexplicable deaths." He clipped his nails carefully, noting the condition of each cuticle. He could bring her to climax in under fifteen minutes, given favorable conditions and an ample supply of hairspray.

"Tell me a story," she begged, "about bus drivers, hash house waitresses and the international stock market." They sat at the table hurling masked insults, waiting for rich relatives to die. Solitaire was the game of choice, played for bus tickets and tea bags.

"Tell me a story," she cried, "of goat herders, pomegranate trees and a transatlantic ocean voyage." She grew tiresome, and cultivated a drinking

habit. He proclaimed her bourgeois, opting for oil drilling and mustache twirling. Months were spent searching for lavender-scented wax.

"Tell me a story," she demanded, "with two characters much like us who commit bloodcurdling murder due to a fatal misunderstanding."

In the Warm Womb of Violence

I've never known pain
in the ring.

No matter how often you get hit,
cut, there's only this warm,

inward feeling you're doing
what you were born to do.

I've broken my thumbs,
my hands.

Taken cuts around the eyes,
been clobbered on the ears,

smashed on the chin.
Never felt pain.

It feels good to hit, to be hit.
To feel that you and the other guy

are really blood brothers
in the warm womb of violence.

Pain only comes
when they unwrap your hands

and you're back to reality
suffering

like a normal human being.

On the Road II

I always dreamed
that some day
Hemingway would

pick me up
hitchhiking
across the States.

We'd have a beer.
I'd show him
my short stories.

I spent a lot of time
thumbing my way
across the great American desert

hoping to meet
and drink
with the man himself.

If he drove by,
he never stopped
to pick me up.

But three poets
in a beat-up convertible
gave me a lift.

After a few miles they opened
the glove compartment
and showed me a gun.

Asked if I had
any money for gas,
for food.

Ginsberg filed his nails
while Cassady drove.
Kerouac was stretched out

on the back seat
sipping wine from a milk carton.
The air smelled like burnt cabbage.

After I wrapped
a white hanky around my knuckles
they let me out.

So Many Feathers of Joy, and Where is the Bird?

When angels decide to give up their wings,
 They are like blind men
 Willing to circumcise their eyes again
 For the sake of a Vision.

What would you do if you were to learn
 That everything in your life
 Up until your encounter with this poem
 Was a misappraisal?

The very people closest to you ...
 Spiritual puppeteers.
 Could you find the courage to sever the strings?
 The same strings
 Which bind the very tightrope you were born upon?

The next time you meet a stranger,
 Stare deeply into the postbox of his eyes,
 And read there:
 The love letter—perhaps unsent—
 Written and meant
 For you.

Preludes to a Monster

Disturbed by infinity,
 The revolution revolves.

Disturbed by infinity,
 The thought of Love evolves.

Your heart makes
 The path of music seem
 A telepathic dream
 Of God to God.

It's true, the architects crumble,
 Along with their plans—
 But just look at Death's piano,
 And how it plays our hands.

*In Memory of Miroslav Procházka
Scholar of Czech Literature*

A smart little guy in love with his pain,
Franz Kafka made a bride of suffering.
In Prague today one sees in some young faces
exquisite torment of the heart that has,
it seems, no mortal object but their hearts.
Skinny goy Kafkas stare from trams and make
in sad reveries lives fashioned of sighs.
Prague's wan saint of odd angles and paradox,
of father haters everywhere and funk
of youth, still lives in footfalls down back streets
of Old Town at night, when men shuffle from pubs,
neither singing nor cursing, toward sleeping wives.

Late that June we argued in your office
about our jobs and your remuneration.
I stomped away certain my point of view
prevailed, and that our little global venture,
in which Americans soak up your culture
for a month, would flourish in spite of you.

Aficionado of a small republic's
grand tradition; seven years free to write
about the "unofficial" genius of
the old regime: that which stayed and suffered,
that which fled; you seemed in perfect conflict
with yourself, equally loving and resenting
America and things American,

and so it is from your good life I learn
the colonized would rout the colonizers,
except that they become, in part, the things
they hate in those who live to leach quick fortunes,
or live to search the lives of others for
some sparkling meaning lacking in their own.

Somewhere in Prague a girl is scribbling on
a pad, or daydreaming out a window.
She will, perhaps, someday embody all
her generation feels about itself.
Perhaps she'll suffer for her art, and just
as likely she'll exult, as Kafka did,
in how, in art, the selfish making of it,
all our sorrows blossom into grotesque joy.
She is not diminished by your death.
She will be the monster your life's work feeds.

The Rapture at Lety

As the first spring rain of the new millenium
falls on the mass graves

a tiny fist pokes up through the earth
and blossoms into a hand

then out of the pond the children come
their cries drowning out the frog song

they ravage the wreaths from Parliament
to play with the faded ribbon

they roll the boulders down the road
bust open the pig farm gates

they let the pigs go squealing
over the South Bohemian hills

they hear the steps of their mothers and fathers
retraced by the impatient shoes

who couldn't wait any longer and
broke loose from their cage at Auschwitz

a little girl runs to her mother's shoes
and feels herself rising above the earth.

They fit. She puts them on
and starts walking home.

(Editor's note: During the period of Nazi occupation, Lety in southern Bohemia was the site of a Czech-run concentration camp for Gypsies, many of whom ended up in Auschwitz. The site is now occupied by a pig farm.)

living without pictures of mars

1

red blue yellow and sometimes black
the dragonflies give each other a tow
or maybe a jump start. they are as big
as she said they would be and I
am flat on my back in the heat
dragonflies scattered above me like
points on an infinite grid. they skid
backwards and sideways the summer breeze
pushing relentlessly out to sea
as they resist without motors or sails
dipping in front of my eyes like yo-yos

2

one of our friends has broken his rib
and burned his face and look at his rash
the sun and the drink are diagnosed
but we know different his inner bird
is singing its forgotten eastern song
their word for vacation means *release*
and he hurls himself over rocks and cliffs
grabbing hot mussels from over the flame
forming the trumpeter's embouchure
from habit when liquor glides down his throat
it doesn't work he can't stop thinking

3

I believe that mars is red, a kind
of red beyond understanding
as if our digitalized transgression
could bring us a color undeformed anyway
who wants to go there raise your hand
virtual curiosity reigns among the
cubicle mountain climbers. hey
let's stage a mock landing on earth
otherwise flat on her own horizon
everyone wants to see her too but
no one wants to be here much longer
the dream of the exodus is being formed

4

our friend with the broken rib wakes up
a cigarette in his hand to report
he never called in to work like he promised
has no clue about his papers. release.
no puritan guilty enjoyment he simply
launches himself to his fate self-propelled
upon the harsh rocks and then he submits
to gravity, saying: I have no money
my passport is red I've gone as far west
as they'll let me and I've seen all I want
to see of life outside

5

communication is not impossible.
we understand so much of each other
already without the words and gestures
getting our way is the hard part.
the earth is blue like dragonflies
passports of fortune blue like the night
but isn't it all just fate? or was
there something in those pictures
of swirling clouds from the weather balloon
to forecast this unlucky roll of the dice for red?

6

I've seen all I want to see he says
at less than twenty-five years of age and I
can imagine what this all looks like
to you: the stinking open toilets
mafiosi with videocams, decrepit
women selling the guts of sunflowers
food without refrigeration, spoiled
children and endless card games
sweet port wine and vodka at ten a.m.
don't ask me why you wanted to see this
or what you thought you would find here

7

I believe that mars is red, the bloodshot red
of the eyes of a drunken ukrainian soldier
red of corrections red of a passport
entry stamp the borderline red of a highway

map red without seeing, red without being
red from lack of curiosity, red with
embarrassment red love and ire. I have looked
I have beheld I have pressed my nose to the
glass I have switched the set on and off
enough, red as the dawning millenium which
for two billion chinese means nothing at all

8

back home we are still martians,
foreigners: ugliest word in europe
of miracles, modern sewage systems
hot running water and working streetlights
while by the black sea on a dusty road
dragonflies mate in unfinished hotels
stuck waiting twenty-five years for a roof
and mars is the red of rusting cranes
red of a diode blinking away on the side
of the compliant, sailing robot
taking two years to get there, blind as a bat.

even they will need to know the nuts and bolts of what it was like and how it felt to live and be in liberated Prague in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Whatever Happened to the Left Bank of the Nineties?

Prague's Left Bank was conceived on a bench in the Wallenstein Gardens of Malá Strana one sunny Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1991. Patrick Cunningham, an intellectual entrepreneur from Santa Barbara, California had imported a group of high school students from the Cate School there to meet their future exchangees from the Korunní gymnázium in Prague 2 and I'd been invited to chat with both groups about life in the Czechoslovak capital before and after the Velvet Revolution. As Patrick and I and the local host, ad man Václav Senjuk, talked about the remarkable synergy going on between young Americans and Czechs of all ages, one of the kids asked me how Prague in the nineties compared to Paris in the twenties.

I surprised them with the news that I hadn't yet been born then, but added that I'd interviewed and written about one of the Left Bank's founding fathers, Ezra Pound, and yes, thinking aloud, what was happening in and around Prague did indeed reek of Pound's enduring admonition from the twenties: "Make it new."

The seed germinated and two or three months later, when *The Prague Post* was born on October 1, 1991, the first words in its first issue were my exuberant proclamation:

We are living in the Left Bank of the Nineties. For some of us, Prague is Second Chance City; for others a New Frontier where anything goes, everything goes, and, often enough, nothing works. Yesterday is long gone, today is nebulous, and who knows about tomorrow, but somewhere within each of us here, we all know that we are living in a historic place at a historic time. Future historians will chronicle our course—and I have reason to believe that they're already here—but

If ever there was a self-fulfilling prophecy, this was it. Disseminated by travelers and quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* and Associated Press and given coverage on the major television networks, it rang out around the world like a clarion call. In Nova Scotia, twenty-four-year-old Paula Arab heard my words and gave three-months' notice at *The Halifax Herald*, took some Czech lessons, sent some appealing clippings, and had a proofreader's job waiting upon her arrival that winter. Across North America in the San Francisco Bay Area, Ross Larsen, twenty-nine, of the *Fremont Argus*, just packed his bags and showed up unannounced; he became our news editor and married our first Czech columnist to write in English, Markéta Špinková, twenty. Petula Dvořák—conceived in Communist Czechoslovakia and born in California after her mother's fourth attempt at crawling under the Iron Curtain—warned us she was coming, but didn't tell us she was bringing along another recent University of Southern California journalism graduate, Glen Justice; confronted with that name, I put him on the crime beat. We also attracted contributors named Tanya Pampalone and Tiffany Harness.

It was not just a journalistic phenomenon, however, and much of the raw material was already on hand here when I coined my notorious phrase. Returning in 1990 after nineteen years of enforced absence from Prague, I found the cobblestones aswarm with young American, British, and Canadian volunteers who had arrived in the first bloom of the Velvet Revolution to teach English under the auspices of the Charter 77—New York and Education for Democracy movements, and stayed on, waiting out a seemingly endless recession that hit liberal arts graduates in quest of entry-level jobs particularly hard. Of the friends and relatives who came over to see why they stayed, some liked what they saw and crashed with them or came back as soon as they could wind up their affairs back home.

It sometimes seemed to me that two-thirds of Santa Barbara and one-third of Sacramento were in Prague at any given time. For searchers

who, over the generations, had wandered westward in quest of something better, there was nowhere to go but east—beyond Hawaii to the Far East or, in the seemingly opposite direction, to Eastern Europe. Many were lured to Czechoslovakia as a Land of Opportunity by the saga of Václav Havel, the jailed playwright who had gone, in that eventful year of 1989, from prisoner of conscience to president of his country. They were artists, writers, talents, and lost souls in search of themselves, as well as carpetbaggers, wheeler-dealers, and other operators looking to get in on the ground floor of an unleashed economy that also seemed to have nowhere to go, after shock therapy, but up.

The Americans, in particular, found needs to fill, and put down roots. Many resolved their language and licensing problems by mating with natives, energizing with American can-do spontaneity and ambition the Czech genius for ingenuity and improvisation. ("Let's invent the wheel." "Let's write classics.") They opened pizzerias and piano bars, McDonald's and Tex-Mex restaurants; they revitalized the kitchens of the splendid art nouveau municipal house, Obecní dům, and introduced the bagel, Czech nouvelle and California cuisines to Prague; they combined bookstores with coffeehouses, started amateur and professional theaters, fused twenty-first-century computerized quality control with the sixteenth-century craft of lute-making while learning from the masters they taught. And they published English-language periodicals.

One of the first YAPs (Young Americans in Prague) was John Allison, a thirty-year-old journalist who met the mayor of Prague in New York in 1990 and signed on to write letters and speeches in good English for him. When the mayor was ousted and landed what he considered a higher position as editor of the Czech-language *Playboy*, Allison jumped to a job at Prague Castle and then became editor of *Prognosis*, a counterculture English-language fortnightly newspaper. By the time *Prognosis* folded in 1995, when the backpackers went home and yuppies began arriving in droves, Allison had realized a boyhood dream and joined his hometown newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, as an opinion-page editor.

Like Allison, some of the young lawyers and accountants who'd jumped off the Stateside treadmill of working 128 hours a week while

bucking for elusive partnerships and going bald at thirty-five, went home with credentials that let them leapfrog the hierarchy.

In the dawn of Prime Minister Václav Klaus' "Economic Miracle"—with Prague threatening to become "the Wall Street of the East"—the Left Bank of the nineties hardly lost its fascination for the media. I maintained that the career-minded, money-conscious if not money-oriented, Young Urban Professionals and Young Upwardly-Mobile Professionals, not all of them terribly young, provided the same glue to solidify the phenomenon that dilettantes like Harry and Caresse Crosby had imparted to the *rive gauche* seven decades earlier; the first three issues of the literary magazine *One Eye Open* (*Jedním okem*) were put together during lulls on the night stenographers' shift at the Prague office of the Squire Sanders & Dempsey law firm.

"But where, then, is the first novel by Hemingway or Fitzgerald?" asked the local correspondent of the staid *Christian Science Monitor* Radio. Invoking Ezra Pound's motto of "make it new," I replied that, "it probably won't be a first novel; it might be a collage of pubic hair." When the interview was aired unedited, the gentleman was fired.

In 1994, a London newspaper, *The Independent*, send out Humphrey Carpenter—the Oxford-based author of *Genuises Together* (1987), the definitive history of Paris in the twenties—to examine the Prague phenomenon. His findings were distinctly affirmative:

You carry the Left Bank with you. Paris or Prague, the Twenties or the Nineties, it isn't a matter of discovering a European city and its culture. For Americans, in both places at both times, it's been the realization, or the hope, that something of the laid-back lifestyle and appetite for artistic experiment of these bohemian communities might filter into the national character back home.

GUEST EDITOR

RICHARD KATROVAS is the author of *Green Dragons* (Wesleyan University Press, 1983), *Snug Harbor* (Wesleyan, 1986), *The Public Mirror* (Wesleyan, 1990), *The Book of Complaints* (Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1993), *Prague USA* (Portals, 1996), *Dithyrambs* (Carnegie-Mellon, 1998) and *The Republic of Burma Shave* (Carnegie-Mellon, 2000). *Sweet Resistance: New and Selected Poems* is forthcoming from Carnegie-Mellon. He has taught at the University of New Orleans since 1983, and is the founding academic director of the Prague Summer Seminars.

CZECH POETS

MIROSLAV ČERVENKA (b. 1932) began his career in 1953 as a regime poet with a volume of "constructionist" poetry. By the second half of the decade he had become one of the most vigorous promoters and practitioners of "the poetry of the everyday" which reinvested Czech poetry in private life, in individual experience and feeling. In the early sixties he established himself as one of the nation's leading literary theorists, building on the legacy of the thirties' Prague School of Linguistics and its related structuralist lines of inquiry. He published on theoretical issues of poetics, prosody, and "textology" (*The Semantic Structure of the Literary Work*, 1978 in German, 1992 in Czech), as well as on Czech literary history. After 1968 he was banned from publishing and teaching. His poetry from that period was collected as *Typewritten Trilogy* (samizdat 1985; 1992). His most recent work, full of irony, skepticism, highly allusive and brimming with intellectual puns, appeared in *Behind the River* (1996).

IVAN DIVIŠ (1924-1999), early on, was concerned with ethics and morality, although his work proceeded from a poetic based on word

enumerations, influenced by stream of consciousness, particularly the kind practiced by surrealists. In 1969 he left Czechoslovakia for exile in Germany where he wrote some of his best poetry. His work incorporated both a longing for his motherland and a powerful indictment of those who remained behind. At its core, his poetry seems to center on a primal conflict between an abiding spirituality and an unvarnished nihilism. His poems since 1989 reflect a desire to be the proverbial "conscience of the nation."

SYLVA FISCHEROVÁ (b. 1963) began publishing in the late eighties. Her poems from the beginning centered on generational distinctions, characterizing, often in a tone of ironic politeness, the old regime's ideology as the vestige of a spoiled generation of fathers corrupting, slowly and inexorably, the young (*The Trembling of Race Horses*, 1986). Subsequently, her work became more reflective and intellectually complex (*Big Mirrors*, 1990), tending most recently toward symbolic, existentially skeptical perceptions of the world (*In the Underworld City*, 1994).

VIOLA FISCHEROVÁ (b. 1935) left Czechoslovakia in 1968. In exile, she published sporadically, but her work wasn't "discovered" by Czechs in her native country until the nineties. Her poetry stands in stark contrast to the (very male) Czech tradition of strong voices and (often) overwrought imagination. In her poems, imagination is less a matter of artifice than of timely silence. In this respect, her work is reminiscent of High Modernist Imagism, though she achieves in this minimalist mode a remarkable degree of personal disclosure.

MIROSLAV HUPTYCH (b. 1952) tends to compose collections of poems with strict unifying patterns. While his earliest work touched lightly on principles of the zodiac, subsequent collections have been strongly concerned with evoking and manipulating the resonances created by extracting fragments of antiquated zoological textbooks from their original contexts (*An Illustrated Zoology of Species With Hidden Wings*, 1989); much of his work has also focused on the juxtaposition of abstract

tarot symbolism and concrete human experience. His literary activities have led, quite naturally it seems, to an interest in visual collages; he has published hundreds of collage illustrations and two calendars, and has exhibited widely.

IVAN M. JIROUS (b. 1944), originally an art critic, became a leading figure of the Czech dissident culture during the period of Communist "Normalization" that followed the Soviet invasion of 1968, and on into the eighties. He spent several years in Communist prisons for organizing illegal rock concerts, art exhibitions and "happenings." His poetry is based on an extreme iconoclasm, relative to all social stereotypes and "official" values, contrasting with a deep sense of spiritual devotion grounded in Christian faith. His poems mix the banal and vulgar with a sense of the divine, and are often cast in traditional forms of rhyme and meter. Under the communist regime, he published only in samizdat. *Magor's Swan Songs* were published in exile; a collection of his poetry did not appear in the Czech Republic until 1998.

EMIL JULIŠ (b. 1920) developed in the fifties a style of composition centered on recording everyday events and utterances in textual collages to stress the cruelty and meaninglessness of social existence at that time. He was not published until the Prague Spring of the sixties when restrictions on publishing were temporarily eased (*Progressive Unhappiness*, 1965). He became one of the leading practitioners of "concrete" visual poetry, exploring graphic presentation, textuality, and the relationship between verbal and visual arts. His experiments developed into mathematical constructions. In 1970, under the post-1968 regime, all copies of *The New Land*, a collection based on these experiments, were destroyed as soon as they were printed. The book was reprinted in 1992. Since the seventies, when he was banned from publishing, his poetry has become more meditative and reflective.

JIRÍ RULF (b. 1947) was published "officially" near the end of the eighties; the best of his work analyzes the loss of values and the bad faith of the period following the Prague Spring of 1968 and ending with the

Velvet Revolution (*A Prospect For an Observation Tower*, 1988, and *Radio Bat*, 1992). Since the first half of the nineties, during which his work tended to be extremely abstract and even moralistic, he has regained and even exceeded his earlier form with *The Provincial Elegies* (1999), offering a poetry that blends narrative and meditation focused through a vivifying and condensing imagination. He brings back into Czech poetry a strong stress upon ethics without presuming to preach. He is also a journalist and translator of librettos.

KAREL ŠIKTANC (b. 1929) began writing "politically correct" Party-line poetry, but then found his real voice and developed his own style at the end of the fifties. His poems embody complex sound play, by turns euphonious and cacophonous. They are highly allusive parables that reference Scriptures, myths, and literature but always center on everyday experience (*Adam and Eve*, 1968). The speaker of his poems, the fictional self from whom they issue, seems by turns a priest and die-hard skeptic confused and lost in the world (*Czech Horologe*, samizdat, 1978; 1990). Grounded in quotidian detail, his poems address the universal themes of love, death and the mystery of existence directly and broadly (*The Dance of Death*, 1992).

BOŽENA SPRÁVCOVÁ (b. 1963) writes whimsical and dark poems that center on fragmented narratives. Her work reflects a decidedly postmodern reality in which rotten "traditional" values and institutions have been replaced by mere fakery and crassness. Her poetry is unique in its exploration of feminist issues. (*Goulash Made from a Blue Cow*, 1994; *Warnings*, 1996).

PAVEL ŠRUT (b. 1942) developed a poetics in the sixties, based on "demetaphorization," fragments of stories and utterances reflecting a sense of the limits of meaning (*Vowel Changes*, 1967). Banned after the Prague Spring, he made his living translating, writing lyrics for underground rock bands, and books for children that are famous for their wit, wisdom and humor. After twenty years of "official" silence, his work began to appear again after 1989, reflecting archetypal modern

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motifs: vanity, loneliness, the inability to rise above the quotidian and petty. Fragments of stories throughout his work are continually rewritten, re-conceived and reevaluated such that it is almost impossible to extract a poem not only from the context of the particular book in which it appears, but from the context of all his writing.

JÁCHYM TOPOL (b. 1962) was banned from attending a university or seeking any other form of higher education because his father was a famous dissident playwright. He became one of his generation's underground cultural leaders. His poetry creates a simple flow of associations and utterances that cry out against a lack of authenticity and social virtue (*I Love You Madly*, 1990). What began as an acid-tongued attack on Communist culture has broadened into a more general critique of Western civilization (*There Will Be a War on Tuesday*, 1992). Most of his poetic production occurred before the Velvet Revolution and the first couple of years after. He has through the nineties concentrated on writing prose fiction. His postmodern, polyphonic novel *Sister* received broad critical acclaim at home and abroad. Two novellas, *A Trip to the Train Station* (1995) and *Angel* (1995) followed.

EXPATRIATE POETS

LOUIS ARMAND, an Australian, is a poet and painter who teaches literature at Charles University in Prague, where he is completing doctoral work. His poems are reprinted from *Anatomy Lessons* (x-poezie, Prague/New York, 1999).

VINCENT FARNSWORTH was born in rural Las Vegas, Nevada, U.S.A. In the nineties he edited the Bay Area newsletter *AMP* before becoming the Managing Editor of *JEJUNE: america eats its young* magazine. He is the author of *Little Twirly Things* (Norton Coker Press, San Francisco, 1991). He is also a musician and collage artist.

PAUL POLANSKY is from Mason City, Iowa, U.S.A. These poems are from *Stray Dog* (G plus G, Prague, 1999). He is the editor of *Antonín Dvořák, My Father* (Czech Historical Research Center, Spillville, 1993), Otakar Dvořák's biography of the famous composer, and the author of the poetry collection *Living Through it Twice* (G plus G, 1998), an oral histories collection, *Black Silence* (G plus G, 1998) and a novel, *The Storm* (G plus G, 1999).

JUSTIN QUINN is an Irish poet teaching literature at Charles University in Prague.

JENNY SMITH is a founding member of the Prague School of Poetics, and the author of *Egon* (Involute Press, 1999), and several plays.

SHARON SWINGLE once wrote by day and worked for an opulent American law firm by night in Prague. This piece originally appeared in the 1992 debut issue of *YAZZYK* magazine, a short-lived but powerful English-language publication published and edited by Anthony Ozuna, Doug Hajek and Laura Busheikin.

LUCIEN ZELL was born in Los Angeles. He has traveled widely and currently lives in Prague with his spouse Aniko and their daughter Eden. These poems are reprinted from *The Sad Cliffs of Light* (Dharma Gaia Press, Prague, 1999).

ESSAYISTS

GWENDOLYN ALBERT is the California-born editrix of *JEJUNE: america eats its young* magazine. A 1989 Fulbright scholar, her poetry, essays, fiction and interviews have been published in the small presses of the Czech Republic, the Ukraine, and the U.S., and in many on-line venues. She is the author of *dogs* (1991) and *green, green* (1992), both from Norton Coker Press, San Francisco.

PETR A. BÍLEK teaches literary theory and modern literature in the Czech Literature Department of the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of Charles University in Prague. In 1992 he published two definitive books on contemporary Czech poetry and poetics (*The "Generation" of Lonely Runners*, and *The Windbuilders*). He has numerous published articles, essays, and reviews in Czech and in English. In the spring of 2000, he was a visiting professor at Brown University.

ALAN LEVY is the founding editor of the *Prague Post*. His forty-year career as an expatriate journalist has included publication in leading English-language journals including *Life*, *The New York Times*, and the *International Herald Times*. His books include *So Many Heroes*, an eyewitness account of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the controversial and critically-acclaimed *The Wiesenthal Files*, for which he was named U. S. Author of the Year in 1995.

TRANSLATORS

JIŘÍ FLAJSAR is a Ph.D. candidate at Palacký University where he also teaches creative writing and American Studies. His dissertation will concentrate on, among other American poets, Richard Hugo and Philip Levine. His English-language poems have appeared in *Ellipsis* and *Sequoia Review*.

DEBORAH GARFINKLE is completing her dissertation in the Slavic Studies program at University of Texas at Austin. She is a poet and translator whose work has appeared widely. She lives in Prague as a Fulbright scholar.

ROBERT HÝSEK is a Ph.D. candidate at Palacký University, where he is also a teaching assistant.

EMA JELÍNKOVÁ, a Ph.D. candidate at Palacký University, teaches nineteenth century British literature.

EMA KATROVAS attends school in New Orleans and Prague.

MATTHEW SWENEY, M.A., teaches American Literature at Palacký University.

DOMINIKA WINTEROVÁ holds a Ph.D. from Charles University in Comparative Linguistics and Literature. She is a freelance interpreter and translator, and in-country coordinator of the Prague Summer Seminars. Her translations of Czech poetry and prose have appeared in *Indiana Review*, *New England Review*, *New Orleans Review*, and *Poetry East*.

VISUAL ARTISTS

A. E. FOURNET, the recipient of many honors for her photographs, has both taught and exhibited widely in the U.S. and Europe. She is the Director of Photography for the Prague Summer Seminars, and she lives in San Diego, California. In these images from her *Litost* series, she works with a sense of nostalgia and regret for the things that have been disappearing since the Velvet Revolution under the onslaught of change in the Czech Republic.

JAN VOLF attended the school of graphic arts on Hollarovo Náměstí in Prague. He does not swim in the dim and muddy waters of hardly recognizable and ambivalent philosophical abstractions. He expresses real conflicts. We are in a situation. There is no way out. We have to swallow or be swallowed. We are an imp, a flying beast, a bird-eater, a flydragon or dragonchop. His work is created in the isolation of his studio, where a man is separated from the rest of the world. Here in lights, or rather in shadows, minimal creatures are born. Fresh lines are brought to life by cigarette smoke. The artist is attacked by those tiny creatures. The beasts bite the very hand that gives them life, and the artist suffers, and is happy to suffer, because suffering is a form of love.



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