



Volume 56, No.1 - Spring 2010
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Four Poems Susan Andersen

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Vilnius Streets *(For Czesław Miłosz)*

*Why should that city, defenseless and pure
as the wedding necklace of a forgotten tribe,
keep offering itself to me?*

C. Miłosz, "Dictionary of Vilno Streets"

Bridegroom
you are
timid with my language

Lapis and carnelian
seal your lips

You imagined I kept you waiting
to adorn my brow, my cheek
How long has it been?

Long enough you've taken on
another world's angers

Struck in the chest, unworthy
this senseless constancy

Onutė, Doritė
sirens of the theatre door

once caught you
in nets
plaits and engagements

But who can hold to oaths?
A smile promises more

You should know
The toll-takers still wait
You left without paying

How did you manage
by cart? By skiff?

Best you weren't here to see
the angels of Peter and Paul
blanch under whitewash

or Mrs. Klok go thin while her shop girls
grew bold on racism and cognac

German Street drinks to forget
it once was loved
little less than Jerusalem

A black undercurrent runs here still
tarnishes Casimir's shrine

Barbara was poisoned by a crown
her bones lay under Cathedral Square
her visage, the East-gate Madonna

Only an old man can recall
these lives so brief

so brief
anonymous
lived in a useless end of the world

Memories chase through Arsenal Hall
The door out is not within

And you were ever outside
the naming of things: A street
a hill, a tree in summer

This is how we live
cruel and sensible normal life

The past is no gift
Don't think to bring it back
Enough sadness fills the day

for you to sing
'til dusk, dear one

Have I grown
hard, maybe too cold
to risk a song?

Listen, music rises
Mozart, but not the Requiem

Teach me now
to move my lips
I'll speak the words you seek

2001

Aldona

That August evening after work was done
and supper finished (what there was of it)
heavy-limbed, warm, outside we'd come
to gossip on the steps or just to sit

in silence, watch the unrelenting sun
sink to the treeline. Seeing the forest backlit

you had an inspiration: Let's take a walk
into the wood – a better place to talk

And so by slanting evening sun we three
charted a crooked path through unmown grass
up to the very border where the trees
are young and wild – at last we made a pause
From deep within the wood there came a breeze
more like a chill – seasoned with bark and moss

Into the forest twilight-time we crossed
Silently, we minded our own thoughts

I remember that the earth was cool
my face, still warm, contrasting subtly
I remember that the creek was full
of summer rain – flowed swiftly, noiselessly
I remember that all was well with you
and that the change came suddenly

The path widened, the grade began to fall
It was for you, that night before the war

Your story came, first visualized, then told
a five-year child, brown eyes deep with wonder
wakened to dress in the night, dark and cold
Across an open field, up on his shoulders
your father carried you. He begged you hold
fast, be still until the forest cover

On the wide forest path he put you down
to cross the refuge border on your own

How far you've walked, Aldona, on your own feet
quiet, unnoticed, through the wood you've roamed
And every branching pathway that you meet
may look familiar, but it won't take you home
That bitter memory – is it not also sweet?
to know the moment when it all was gone?

The sun rose on your left that morning
the border guards' dog sounded a warning

2001

On the passing of a rainy day

"Come see the sunset"
Rush to the window with the others if you care to
see the four-minute miracle
garnet and mango over Dūkštų Street
meant to redeem this autumn day

That sun, vain hostess
spent her pension on color, not heat
left us on our own this whole dark day
I will not bid her good night
Let rainy day fade into rainy night on Dūkštų Street

This morning we woke to intimate sounds
high-heel tap and echo
wet pavement
shrill of brake and rush of tires

Afternoon pigeons' balcony sheltered with me
shared the chill and my smoke
all of us gathered with nothing to do but survey
the balconies across the square
the life assembled there

Steam from your onions condensed on the kitchen window
What a feast we had – formica and candlelight
while the rain ran crazy with the wind
after the last unfortunates late for supper

Let's all move in together
the rain and you and me
someplace the others would never care to go
Or better, stay with me here in this shadow
and listen to the rain on Dūkštų Street

I think of you when I wash clothes

I think of you when I wash clothes, and I know what
else you are saying, Rasa, in an e-mail jotted probably late
I think of you in marble office pink-light next to Franciscan ruins

I think of Franciscan Street where you met me near the trolley stop
walked with me through courtyards
under sagged electric wires

I think of you quick and quiet. Not the tour guide
you let me notice the cat with one green, one blue eye
bathing at the hand-glazed window

I think of you in coffee, calendars, *oh-did-you-hear*
but never mean and always true

I think of your sweaters. I know you made them
Did you know I made mine?
And why did we never talk of knitting or husbands
or the garden I know you must have?

I think of us trading the words of our bosses
Two blondies in angora
what were we talking?

I think of you when I wash clothes
and wonder how you keep the wool from fading