A Song On the End of the World
Translated by Anthony Milosz

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
No other end of the world will there be,
No other end of the world will there be.

On Prayer

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.
All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge
And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,
Above landscapes the color of ripe gold
Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.
That bridge leads to the shore of Reversal
Where everything is just the opposite and the word 'is'
Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.
Notice: I say we; there, every one, separately,
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh
And knows that if there is no other shore
We will walk that aerial bridge all the same.
I did not expect to live in such an unusual moment.  
When the God of thunders and of rocky heights,  
The Lord of hosts, Kyrios Sabaoth,  
Would humble people to the quick,  
Allowing them to act whatever way they wished,  
Leaving to them conclusions, saying nothing.  
It was a spectacle that was indeed unlike  
The agelong cycle of royal tragedies.  
Roads on concrete pillars, cities of glass and cast iron,  
Airfields larger than tribal dominions  
Suddenly ran short of their essence and disintegrated  
Not in a dream but really, for, subtracted from themselves,  
They could only hold on as do things which should not last.  
Out of trees, field stones, even lemons on the table,  
Materiality escaped and their spectrum  
Proved to be a void, a haze on a film.  
Dispossessed of its objects, space was swarming.  
Everywhere was nowhere and nowhere, everywhere.  
Letters in books turned silver-pale, wobbled, and faded  
The hand was not able to trace the palm sign, the river sign, or the sign of ibis.  
A hullabaloo of many tongues proclaimed the mortality of the language.  
A complaint was forbidden as it complained to itself.  
People, afflicted with an incomprehensible distress,  
Were throwing off their clothes on the piazzas so that nakedness might call  
For judgment.  
But in vain they were longing after horror, pity, and anger.  
Neither work nor leisure  
Was justified,  
Nor the face, nor the hair nor the loins  
Nor any existence.

Berkeley, 1973
A Confession

My Lord, I loved strawberry jam
And the dark sweetness of a woman's body.
Also well-chilled vodka, herring in olive oil,
Scents, of cinnamon, of cloves.
So what kind of prophet am I? Why should the spirit
Have visited such a man? Many others
Were justly called, and trustworthy.
Who would have trusted me? For they saw
How I empty glasses, throw myself on food,
And glance greedily at the waitress's neck.
Flawed and aware of it. Desiring greatness,
Able to recognise greatness wherever it is,
And yet not quite, only in part, clairvoyant,
I knew what was left for smaller men like me:
A feast of brief hopes, a rally of the proud,
A tournament of hunchbacks, literature.

1985

Distance

At a certain distance I followed behind you, ashamed to come closer.

Though you have chosen me as a worker in your vineyard and I pressed the grapes of your wrath.

To every one according to his nature: what is crippled should not always be healed.

I do not even know whether one can be free, for I have toiled against my will.

Taken by the neck like a boy who kicks and bites

Till they sit him at the desk and order him to make letters,

I wanted to be like others but was given the bitterness of separation,

Believed I would be an equal among equals but woke up a stranger.

Looking at manners as if I arrived from a different time.

Guilty of apostasy from the communal rite.

There are so many who are good and just, those were rightly chosen And wherever you walk the earth, they accompany you. Perhaps it is true that I loved you secretly But without strong hope to be close to you as they are.
Ars Poetica

I have always aspired to a more spacious form
that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose
and would let us understand each other without exposing
the author or reader to sublime agonies.

In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent:
a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us,
so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out
and stood in the light, lashing his tail.

That's why poetry is rightly said to be dictated by a daimonion,
though its an exaggeration to maintain that he must be an angel.
It's hard to guess where that pride of poets comes from,
when so often they're put to shame by the disclosure of their frailty.

What reasonable man would like to be a city of demons,
who behave as if they were at home, speak in many tongues,
and who, not satisfied with stealing his lips or hand,
work at changing his destiny for their convenience?

It's true that what is morbid is highly valued today,
and so you may think that I am only joking
or that I've devised just one more means
of praising Art with the help of irony.

There was a time when only wise books were read
helping us to bear our pain and misery.
This, after all, is not quite the same
as leafing through a thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinics.

And yet the world is different from what it seems to be
and we are other than how we see ourselves in our ravings.
People therefore preserve silent integrity
thus earning the respect of their relatives and neighbors.

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person,
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,
as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,
under unbearable duress and only with the hope
that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.