



"People's Militias" march on Charles Bridge in Prague during the communist takeover on February 28, 1948. This paramilitary organization of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was unconstitutional; nevertheless, it existed from 1948 until 1989. Photo used by permission of ČTK.

that life is something different
 than comfort
 that it is incessant fight
 the fuller the harder
 that joy
 is conditioned by strain
 love by purity
 truth by obviousness
 sorrow by genuineness
 that when you ask after man
 you must ask after mystery
 that when you look at yourself
 you see nothing
 if you leave the soul aside

Lord save me!

A Night with Hamlet

Vladimír Holan (1905–1980)

Holan is generally recognized as the greatest Czech poet of the postwar era. A Night with Hamlet, composed in the period 1949–56 and resumed in 1962, is his poetic diary, an imagined record of the solitary conversations of Shakespeare with his creation, Hamlet—the two of them being Holan's alter egos. After 1948 Holan lived in poverty and isolation, seldom leaving his flat on Kampa Island in the center of Prague. At night he drank red wine and wrote, in free verse bordering on prose, introspective poetry about the tragedy of human destiny. Holan's bitter verses faithfully reflect the miserable existence of an intellectual doomed to live in Stalinist Czechoslovakia. In 1963 the poem, excerpted below, was performed in Prague's literary wine bar "Viola" to enormous acclaim and nearly 150 performances. Published in 1964, the poem immediately made Holan famous across Europe.

Meanwhile everything, everything here
 is a miracle only once:
 only once Abel's blood
 which was to destroy all wars,
 only once the irrecoverable, the unconscious of childhood,
 only once youth and only once song,
 only once love, in the same breath lost,
 only once everything against heredity and custom,
 once only the loosing of contracted ties and liberation
 and so only once the essence of art,
 only once everything against the prison,
 unless God Himself should wish to build a house
 on this earth . . .

A green hawthorn leaned over the wall
 scattering on the road the buds of its curiosity.
 The window opened the wind, bringing a draught:
 Your deeds are many and yet none,
 but to do and to be is the envy of everyone!

Night smoked history, ate the fried wings
 cut from Mercury's ankles,
 and drank it down
 with the sweat of St Tragedy's organist . . .
 "Only when you make your peace with death," said Hamlet,
 "will you understand that everything under the sun is really new . . .
 Our body is not a canvas hangar
 for cutting into strips . . .
 But our subconscious plays tricks. . . . Even if we give
 alms, it is we who profit!
 So it is when we make love in error . . . Yet no!
 The groping sex of human beings means only
 to have the relation without the man. . . . And yet
 love's liver is found in sin.
 The tensing of the body reminds you of
 the profaning and chastisement of the spirit . . .
 Even in the presence of the sleeping we are not at ease
 for we do not know where they will halt,
 while we are stuck in our tracks . . .
 Consider how heavy a cat suddenly becomes
 when dead, while some man
 will spend the whole day shooting sparrows!
 Yes, there is the shame of a man and the shame of a woman.
 A man cannot bear to look at cotton-wool.
 And woman? No sooner born in the dry season,
 she is already flattering the rains . . ."

In a moment Hamlet added: 'Children are never satisfied with an answer . . .
 They will play with a cupboard full of secrets
 and finally carry off the key within themselves.
 Or they get ill and secretly open the letters
 of an imprisoned poet who used to
 pay for his own little room simply because
 the letter was opened by them . . .
 Or when ill they see in their dreams a pillar of fire
 and cry: It's a bough, a vein of God!
 Or in illness cannot free their minds
 of the unending handwork of women
 which aims only at keeping them warm
 and would weave a man into its pattern or else seize up . . .

Or they are well! Every moment
 hands reach for the slices of bread . . .
 And when they run out of the barn
 they may trample on the last grain of last year's harvest
 so that soon they will be more tempted
 to crown the skull of fire with a sheaf's golden wig.
 They are as full of life as a horse
 that doesn't feel its rider a stranger
 but its own thought . . . Rejoicing, shouting,
 they have been a year together without regrets,
 they have a sure remedy for anything that's not a miracle—
 all stains are only mud-stains
 on a new dress and can soon be washed off . . .
 Children! They have found the true names, we have only to pronounce
 them!

I interrupted and told him he looked like
 a millstone quarry.
 Have a drink, Hamlet! I said. Do you want it along with
 the oven, soul of the farm,
 or with the passion of the blood's cardinal points?
 But he didn't take it badly and said: "Pö-pa!"
 What's that? I asked and he replied:
 "They talk that way in Tibet!"
 and went on: "Virgins, ah yes, they know
 when a tree is unwell! . . . But I have known convicts.
 For some of them it's enough to imagine
 huge backsides, huge only because
 the leaden memory of the same crime
 forces them to squat without legs,
 unless they are swollen from all the beatings,
 since they smell of tar . . .
 'There was no tram!' said the woman. And the man replied:
 'It's worse when a ship is late,
 you, I mean, who like a ship
 leave in you under you a continuous line . . .'
 Yes. . . . Whereas virgins, yes,
 they know when a tree is unwell . . . And the cloth of their innocence
 always covers the male graftings,
 even if their stockings are made from the hair of whores . . .

Freedom, you know, is always kin
to voluntary poverty. . . ."

Night overlapped night . . . It bowed to the earth
or became a tomb for everything
the living and the dead were doing . . .

Maybe the living felt shy and were insolent . . .

And the dead, envious, not deliberately
but from heredity or vengefulness.

I understood when Hamlet said, not knowing my thoughts:

"What merely surrounds us now

one day will bury us . . .

Once I was present at a fire . . .

One of countless flames was enough for me to notice
that the whole hand of a fish-pond keeper who was there
had only a single joint

and to make me think of the bony sculpture
of nothing upon nothing . . .

The hair of a hanged man

is more sensitive when silky on the spine

and comes no closer to being

than to the hairs of knowledge.

But still more spacious

for the shivering quinine of Elsinore

was the sound of Ophelia cutting her toe-nails . . .

You know . . ."

No, I don't know, I said . . . But right now

I'm expecting guests, I added, annoyed

that he plainly liked his own misfortune . . .

Again he was not offended and went on:

"*Querer la propia desdicha*" . . . But what
moves a mother

would shatter argosies on the open sea . . .

Besides . . . If there is no God,

no angels and nothing after death,

why don't the worshippers of nothingness

bow down just to them,

the non-existent?

I had this feeling once

while hunting white falcon. . . . It also rises

from Chinese tombs. . . . And the tables of Moses

say the same . . . But from an inverted humility

or pride that is not yet clear—

for the bellows are only now being stitched up—

we would rather kiss a greyhound between the eyes and a horse on the
hoof,

and are not afraid to enter a library . . .

While hunting white falcon I have felt rhythm,

Before the tables of Moses, movement,

by the Chinese tombs, the symphony of rhythm

and, among the Ainus, gods, near, far, light and heavy . . .

Besides, at the moment

you are expecting guests

and they are already here since they've come before their time . . .

Yes, to see each other and talk together

and feel a warm trust

and heartbeat true as Rembrandt's needles,

though each of us is different from the other

(for *that* is what the soul does),

and yet not to catch the serpent by another's hand.

A jet engine is not for the poet . . .

And as a tree remains a tree while it bears some fruit

that ripens too soon

and some at the right time and some still later—

no, one cannot hurry with words

for we do not nor have we come

from the pitiable right of mankind

to be human for man's sake!

Effective love, you know? . . . The everyday is the miraculous . . .

The greater the poem, the greater the poet,

and not the contrary!" he added,

"And you are already a great poet if you ask yourself with whom you are
to be lost . . .

Yes, art as something that stops a swollen head . . .

I tell you, art is a lament,

something for somebody, nothing for everyone,

for simply by hoping you are already in the future . . .

There is always something that outstrips us, for even love

is only part of our certitude . . . Atonal harmony . . .

And pain as punishment
for being a fugitive . . .
Or is it that human aid,
which might have helped,
calls upon the aid of God?
I don't know, but from the *form* of some people I have
recognized
the true proportions of an octopus . . ."

The wind wrangled in the chimney. . . . And in some grove
ruffled the hair on a fallow-deer's penis . . .
And somewhere in history it chased Raleigh's drunken galleons
only to rip them apart,
as your mother once impatiently
tore her sleeves listening to Wagner . . .
But you can't drive out the soul by drinking, like a gopher from its hole,
for even if you think of it as so full-bosomed
that you say: what reserves!—you are still a being,
fixed in transitory form by the winged hate
of man and woman.

"Salamander in the fire!" Hamlet broke in.
And then frying the seed of the Word on the melted
bacon of his tongue, hissed:
"What a poet writes, an angel or demon *does* . . .
Thus dreams revenge themselves on uninterrupted consciousness!
I am always looking for a free canteen
whose the little window would not be that
of a prison cell where
the prisoner is watched,
the peephole called the judas . . .
'He that will not work shall not eat.' True,
but what is work? *To be faithful to one's lot, unselfishly,*
or to sell indulgences
or become a zealous stoker in a crematorium,
stick a thermometer in the rectum of war
or have to sing at the vintage
to prove you don't eat grapes,
examine a horse's teeth or like an executioner
rip out the nostrils of the condemned,
be corroded by vinegar and bile and take revenge on others

or burn off a woman's right breast
to make her an archer,
to be the seed of fate in history's womb
or the feeling that is condemned to forced labour
under the grey Siberia of old heads—
or on penalty of death to file off your fetters
and rather force your eyes out
than look at the horrors of today,
and yet still hear the singers
dead long ago, but free? . . .

Composition's net at best gathers in the ornamental . . .
I'm not indifferent to one little step or fall
of a child in the nettles. . . . If his mother tells him:
Go and get some rum for the tea,
off he goes, repeating: rum for the tea, rum for the tea,
and ends up whispering: heaven for me. . . .
No, no, I'm not indifferent to the single fall
of a child . . . Yet evil always rises
up humanity's spine, spattered with blood
like a dentist's staircase . . . Ancient
and weary, at each step it recoils in disgust,
yet rises again and again to the brain of pride,
for after so many attempts
by saints and poets,
after so many attempts by saints and poets to switch off the current—
it believes only in the moment of harmony
when there is a short circuit
between heaven and hell.
But of course . . . We can also wait
until something bursts and love falls on us . . .
Maybe our hope is in patience
and waiting. Imagine
life's terminus. . . .
An old man stands there, cowering
like words in the rain . . .
'I'm 'ere,' he says, 'waitin' for a gent
'o promised me a room, said it'd be unfurnished—
wouldn't worry me a bit—'
It was raining. And the old man's trust

was so blind or so openhanded
that it *saw* a snug future for him
and only the passers-by understood
that someone had taken him for a ride
under the *mezzo rilievo* of the moon. . . . But you know how it is:
suddenly nothing, absolutely nothing,
absolutely nothing facing us
like the moment when it seems
the future is behind us.
Lovers should be gay!
The universe, though as they say finite,
is also unlimited . . . A man is suddenly sick at heart,
a woman cold, instead of killing each other
they come together, grateful
once again to see something of their fate,
though it leads with shameless precision
to the poorhouse."

translated from Czech by Ian Milner and Jarmila Milnerová