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On April 18th of the National Poetry Month in the USA, at a sitting of the City Council of New London, CT, Mayor Michael Passero proclaimed Friday, April 22, William Meredith Day in honor of the late USA Poet Laureate, resident of Uncasville, CT, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

In this connection, I interviewed Richard Harteis, President of the William Meredith Foundation, writer and close friend of the great American poet. Meredith, who passed away in 2007, is a citizen of Bulgaria and of the City of Smolyan.

"Poets - 'The Biblical "Birds of the Air That Neither Sow Nor Reap Nor Store Away in Barns": Richard Harteis tells about the honorary Bulgarian citizen William Meredith and poetry in the USA". Interview by Valentin Krustev with Richard Harteis

Q. How do men of letters, especially poets, in the US, make both ends meet today?

Poets are something like the biblical "birds of the air that neither sow nor reap nor store away in barns," but depend on the "heavenly Father" to feed them. Him, and government grants, and teaching jobs, and poetry readings and book sales and patrons and possibly a wealthy spouse. Poets have to cobble together any number of resources to keep afloat and often have to keep a "day job." The American master, Wallace Stevens worked for an insurance company. Even the most famous in our culture, poets such as Robert Frost never made a living selling poetry, but had to sing for his supper at universities and readings of his poetry. Ironically, once they are dead, society seems to give them more currency. I recently sold some W.H. Auden books at auction, for example, which helped me pay the bills this winter.

I have to say things are improving in America though. There aren't many Medici patrons out there, but recently the Ruth Lilly estate donated \$200 million to the Poetry Foundation to support their programs, for example. The MacArthur

Foundation gives annual prizes to “genius” writers to support them for five years. There are a number of organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts which award fellowships. The life of the poet is often consumed with grant applications and hustling poetry readings to make ends meet when he would much prefer to be at his desk facing the blank page.

Q. Is the American state really interested in the country’s keepers and disseminators of traditions and culture: writers, artists, actors, musicians, etc. men and women of letters, arts and ideas for making their country and the world a better place?

Congressman Joe Courtney touches on this very idea in a letter of congratulations he sent to this year’s Meredith awardee, Gray Jacobik when he writes: “Congratuulations on receiving the 2016 Meredith Award. This is an honor reserved only for individuals who have proven their character through their behavior in contrtributions to society while striving to make it a better place to live. Our society historically relies on linguistic creativity to carry on the traditions of America’s rich culture.”

There are any number of official recognitions such as the Presidential Medal of Freedom, fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and so on. And there are big prizes such as the Pulitzer and National Book Award. But if you are talking about the American people, I would say yes, the arts are in our blood from Blue Grass music to folk ballads to contemporary lyricists such as Prince. We have popular poets such as Rod Mckuen who write popular “greeting card” poetry and erudite poets such as James Merrill who takes pride in not reading the newspaper and places an avocado seed in the window and lets it die, yes, lets it die. On the contrary, however, William Meredith always believed the highest goal of poetry was for it to be useful.

Hillary Clinton wrote the following to William in a birthday greeting for his 80th birthday and it summarizes well the role of the arts: "The arts have always been a unifying force in our world,

bringing people together across vast cultural, social, economic and geographical divisions. Through his work, William Meredith both enhances and strengthens the American spirit. As you honor Mr. Meredith, you celebrate the timeless power of poetry and poets as our American memory, our purveyors of insight and culture, our eyes and ears who silence the white noise around us, and express the very heart of what connects us, plagues us, and makes us fully human."

Q. You have just launched this year's William Meredith Poetry Award winner's book again at the Bulgarian Embassy in Washington D.C. Tell us shortly about this event.

An increasingly important activity of the Meredith Foundation (WilliamMeredithFoundation.org) has been the awarding of a prize in his name. (Previous awardees include the essential Bulgarian poet, Lyubomir Levchev.) Again this year, the Bulgarian Embassy has graciously hosted the announcement of this award with a reception and reading. William was accorded Bulgarian citizenship for his work in the culture in Bulgaria. He established a bridge between our artistic communities when he served as US Poet Laureate which continues to flourish. When I wrote Ambassador Poptodorova again this year asking if we might hold the celebration at the embassy, this is what she wrote back:

"Congratulations on everything you accomplished lately to keep the Meredith legacy alive. You know that the Bulgarian Embassy is home to William's soul, art and spiritual family so we will be happy to host an event commemorating him and his art."

This is the sort of genuine feeling expressed by the Ambassador which has meant so much to the foundation and William's friends over the years. She will be sorely missed.

Q. What should men of letters, arts and ideas do today to stir up people's minds for awareness of the challenges of the present day,

and would it be appropriate and productive to raise in a world rent by wars and terror, a slogan like this: Men of culture of all countries, unite!

Writing, by its very nature is a very private act. But in a great work of art, we see the universal in the particular as Aristotle would have it. There is a role for unions, and writers organizations such as International PEN whose goals include emphasizing the role of literature in the development of mutual understanding and world culture; fighting for freedom of expression; and acting as a powerful voice on behalf of writers harassed, imprisoned and sometimes killed for their views.

In our own political arena presently, Senator Bernie Sanders is calling for a genuine revolution to end financial corruption and has outlined The Urgency of a Moral Economy in his recent remarks at the Vatican. Some believe that poetry fails exactly to the extent it is didactic. But social activism has always been a current in the arts in our culture from Woody Guthrie to feminist and anti war poets in our culture. And Bulgarian poetry is founded on revolutionary ideals from Levski to Vaptsarov. So yes, count me in. Men of culture of all countries, unite!

Three poems by Gray Jacobik translated by Valentin Krustev

КОГАТО ТОКЪТ СПРЕ

Остават още само малко къщни работи в
неделя вечер: прането да се сгъне и да се
прибере,
да се изнесе боклука. Просто
занимание, почивка след останалите.
Прилепите пасат поля от въздух,
отдън гората се обажда сова.
През горния прозорец хванатият в

облак, гаснещ лъч от карнавала на
зализващото лято внезапно почернява
като всичко друго. Сигурно
на Виенското колело е имало деца. Дланите
ми се плъзгат по перилата на стълбата към
чекмеджето със свещи.
Няма какво да се прави, освен човек да легне и да спи.
Светът е тъмен, какъвто е бил винаги. Вятърът
потъва в музиката
на дърветата. Отдъхваме, обгърнати с
ръцете си, но тази вечер никаква искра не
пламва между нас,
така че аз разказвам някакъв спомен, ти
разказваш друг и продължаваме така,
напред-назад, изследвайки
сред обкръжилата ни плътна тъмнина
завоите, дарени ни от случая и
обещанията.
Като че ли се носим заедно навсякъде
и едновременно наникъде; после,
някогашното усещане на вечност се
промъква в нас, онова живо, променливо
чувство за преди-сега-и-пак – и да,
любов – ти; и да, любов – аз – някак си,
завинаги, сигурни сме в него. Или, може би,
така е с всички – неспособни да си
представим, че не съществуваме,
или пък края на нашата любов – усещането за
спасение, необходимият заслон, когато светлината е
угаснала и сме на тъмно.

The Power Outage

Still to be done, a few last Sunday night chores;
washed clothes to be folded and put away,
trash to go out. Simple doingness,
the respite of tasks. Bats are grazing fields
of air, a hoot owl calls in the back woods.
Visible from an upstairs window, the cloud-caught
glow of an end-of-summer carnival goes
suddenly black as all else. Must be children
stuck on the Ferris wheel. My palms slide down
banisters to the candle drawer. Nothing to do
but go to bed. The world is as dark as it ever was.
Wind is awash in the music of trees. We rest
in one another's arms but there's no spark
between us tonight, nothing to kindle,
so I voice a memory, and you voice another,
and we go back and forth like this, surveying
in deep enclosing darkness, the turns
circumstance and promises have given us.
We seem to be drifting together everywhere
and nowhere at once, then the old impression
of eternity sneaks up, that vivid mercurial
feeling of before-and now-and-again—and yes
love, you, and yes love, me—somehow, forever,
we're sure of it. Or perhaps this is only human,
unable as we are to imagine not being, or an end
to our love, the sense of a saving needed haven,
when light has failed and we're in the dark

БИВШИЯТ

В сдържаната атмосфера на отдавна отшумелия
раздор, чакаме с дъщеря ни закъсняващия с дни,
наш единствен, общ
дар. Тя е бременна с първото ни внуче.

За последен път го видях на сватбата ѝ. Преди нея –
рядко, колкото изисква някакво приличие. Нашият
живот е бил дяволски различен. Той не е
нелюбезен, но се придържа към объркващо

много мнения. Те летят безпорядъчно насам-
натам като бомбардиращи комари. Спускам
пред лицето си плътна маска от мълчаливо
съгласие. Скелетът под нея

заплашва да се усмихне, но той е онзи,
който умира – от СПИН и съответните
усложнения – женственият, девствен
хлапак, за когото се омъжих на двайсет и
две.

Възможно ли е да се каже нещо за онези, които
сме предали и напуснали? Никой от нас не
познаваше себе си; всеки
се страхуваше, че ще бъде унищожен от нуждите на другия

От тук страхът изглежда прекален и
безсмислен, но аз помня как залитах
цели седмици, сякаш някакъв звяр ме
раздираше и изтръгваше гърдната

ми кост. Стържехме нервите си със стъргалото
на общата ни младежка несигурност. Слабосилен,
измършавял, уязвим, само гласът му е същия.

Сигурно някога съм обичала звука му! Може
би, странно, в неописуемото царство на
живота ни – на дъщеря ни
и на нейното дете – онзи, за когото се омъжваме, е наш завинаги.

И в известен смисъл, той е мой, и аз почти го искам –
но единствено от съжаление или от забравена вина.
Всичките отминали отпадъци са изгребани отдавна.
Ето

ни, неговата някогашна съпруга, моят някогашен мъж,
детето, бременно с дете, лятната вечерна
чиста светлина и мистерията за това, как

всеки миг продължава и ни държи

присъстващи докрай.

The Ex

In the placable air of long dissolved discord, we wait with our daughter, days overdue, our single shared goodness. She carries our first grandchild.

In thirty years, not a word has tiptoed across the continent between us. We've led vastly different lives. He's not unkind, only holds a dizzying number

of opinions. Like bombarding mosquitoes, they fly in and out of range. Across my face I draw a tight mask of passive acquiescence. The skeleton underneath

threatens to grin, but he's the one who's dying—of AIDS and its complications—the effeminate, virginal boy I married when I was twenty-two.

Can anything be said to those we betrayed and abandoned? Neither of us knew ourselves; each feared we'd be destroyed by the other's needs.

That fear seems exorbitant from here, and pointless, yet I remember staggering about for weeks feeling as though a beast were daily ripping the sternum

out of my chest. We shred our nerves against the grate of one another's youthful insecurities. Weak, slight, vulnerable, only his voice is unchanged—

I must have loved its sound once! Maybe, strangely,
in the unreckonable realm of human life—our daughter's
and her child's—whomever we marry is ours forever.

And in some sense he is mine, and I almost want him—
but only out of pity, or forgotten guilt. All the dross
that had to go was long since skimmed off. Here

we are, his once-wife, my once-husband, the child
we made who is with child, this summer evening's
sterling light and the mystery of how each moment

goes on and on and holds us present until the last.

НЕМИТЕ ЛЕБЕДИ

Не са съвсем такива. Чувам ги над заливчето
как джафкат като кученца, освен това
грухтят и хъркат, съскат пронизително. Тук
популацията им е застрашително голяма.
Една семейна двойка

обитава всяко папратово заливче без изход. Миналата
седмица преброих двадесет и девет, движещи се
бавно в Мидълкоув, плъзгащи се със спокойна
самомнителност –
мандаринено оранжевите клюнове и онова едничко черно копче,

шиите, извити като S – нагоре и надолу по реката,
чистещи перата с клюн,
гмуркайки се, пляскайки, и понякога – тялото,
извисяващо се на масивните крила, после
перващо водата, предизвиквайки порой
пенливи пръски, хукващо

напред, препускайки, едва докосващо повърхността. Обичам
да наблюдавам долу, хванати в пъпешовата или в розовата светлина –

призори или по здрач – сенките, тъмно сиви или тъмно сини.
Два пъти съм виждала лебед, който се изправя в цял ръст и полита.

Размахът на крилата му е близо осем стъпки –
някакво тежкоподвижно туп-туп, след това въздъх-
вашо свистене, предизвикано от вятъра, който
се промъква през перата на крилата с всеки мах
надолу.

Нужно е да съкратим броя им с две
трети, бързо при това: един
възрастен изяжда дневно три
килограма водни растения, изтръгва
ги с корените или с коренищата и
унищожавя

още два пъти по толкова. Според еколозите това
всеунищожение е „изяждане“: никакво растително
възобновяване. По това те са като нас:
разрушават местообиталищата за останалите. Около

1910-та, някакви американски богаташи внесли някъде
от Франция първите лебедови двойки, за да разкрасят
имотите по Хъдзън.
Сега може да ги видите от щата Мейн до
Орегон. Убедена съм, че като гледаме
лебедите докато се плъзгат,

в нашите тела просветват някакви отблясъци
мистични, затова ни харесва да ги виждаме, но
тази птица застрашава плодовитостта на малките
чайкоподобни птици и на черните водорези;
ще убие зеленоглавите патици, младите канадски гъски, напада

приближилите я каякисти. Двойката се
размножава цял живот, и умре ли някой,
оцелелият окаяник не напуска
своето гнездо, ако липсващият дойде в
него. Чувството ни е познато...
Естествено,

според мита, преди смъртта си, той пее една последна,
прелестна, великолепна песен – крехката и нежна

Джуди Гарланд, пееща с потрепващ глас „Над дъгата“

–

лебедова песен – защото гърците вярвали,

че духът на Аполон се бил преселил в лебед,
но лебедът, останал сам, просто става
все по-слаб и умира от глад, както
правят някои безутешни хора, загубили
желание да продължат нататък.

Mute Swans

Are not completely so—I hear them across the cove
yipping like puppies, and they grunt, snort,
hiss shrilly. Around here, the population is
dangerously out-of-bounds. A breeding pair

resides on every reedy cul de sac. Last week
I counted twenty-nine moving indolently
along Middle Cove, gliding with calm aplomb—
tangerine orange bills and that single black knob,

S-curved necks—upriver and down, preening,
dipping, flapping, and occasionally, a body
rearing up on massive wings then whipping
a froth into a spume of spray, scuttling

forward in a racing skim. I love to watch
down caught in melon or rose light—
dawn, dusk—shadows deep grey or dark blue.
Twice I saw a swan lift up completely and fly,

its wingspan almost eight feet across,
a lumbering thwop-thwop, then a sighing
whistle as wind wove through
wing feathers on each downward stroke.

We must slash their number by two-thirds
and quickly: an adult eats six pounds
of aquatic plants daily, yanks them up
by the roots or rhizomes, wastes twice

that much. “Eat-outs” ecologists call such
complete destruction: no regrowth.
In this way, they’re rather like us:
mucking up habitat for the rest. Around

1910, a few wealthy Americans brought the first
pairs from France to grace estates on the Hudson.
Now they range from Maine to Oregon.
A mystical shimmer, I’m convinced, wavers

inside our bodies when we watch swans glide,
so we love to see them, yet this bird will scare
the fertility out of terns and black skimmers;
kill mallards, Canada goslings, attack kayakers

who come too near. A pair breeds for life,
and if one dies, the forlorn survivor won’t leave

the nest in case the missing one comes home.
We all know the feeling The myth is,

of course, that it sings before dying a final
exquisite, magnificent song—a wavering-voice
frail Judy Garland singing *Over the Rainbow*—
a swan song—because the Greeks believed

the soul of Apollo passed into a swan,
but the lonely swan simply grows weaker
and starves to death, the way some bereft
humans do who have lost the will to go on.

