

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 3 Theme: **Faith and Doubt**

Title: **Two Poems** Author: **Boris Pasternak**

These two poems were originally published in the "Toronto Slavic Quarterly" and are republished here under fair-use rules. They represent an original translation by Mr. Christopher Barnes.

In Holy Week

All the world's still wrapped in gloom.
At such an early hour
How many stars – no man can know,
And each like daylight is aglow,
And could it choose, then all the globe
Might well have slept all Easter through
To the chant of psalm and prayer.

Still all the world is wrapped in gloom.
An age must pass till early dawn.
Eternally the square has lain,
Outstretched to the crossing of the roads.
Before the light and warmth return
Must pass a whole millennium.

The earth lies there, exposed, laid bare,
Bereft of its attire
For swinging bells in empty air
In echo to the choir.

And from Maundy Thursday through
Till Holy Saturday
Water eddies swirl and scoop
And etch the banks away.

The woodland too is stripped and bare,
And now, during Christ's Passion,
Like solemn worshippers at prayer,
The pine trees pay attention.

And in a lesser space, in town,
As at a public meeting,
The naked trees all stand and strain
To peer through churchyard railings.

Their gaze is stricken with dismay.
There's reason for such terror -
As gardens flood and fencing breaks
And all the earth's foundations quake,
A God is being buried.

Then light gleams within the altar gates,
Black scarves and candles are held ready,
And tear-stained faces look about,
To welcome the procession.
And as they carry forth the Shroud,
Two birches at the entrance
Are forced to yield and bow them out.

They all process around the church,
Then back along the pavement,
Bringing spring and springtime talk
From open road onto the porch,
With a heady vernal air
And breath of communion wafers.

March throws a scattering of snow
To the cripples on the portico,
As if somebody brought forth
A reliquary and disposed of
All down to the final thread.

The singing lasts until the dawn.
And now that every tear is spent,
The Apostles and the Psalms
Exit and depart, now calm,
Through lamp-lit emptiness.

At midnight man and beast fall dumb
On hearing springtime's revelation:
Once weather clears, then just as soon
Can death itself be overcome
By the power of Resurrection.

Gethsemane's Garden

Impassive shimmering of distant stars
Illumined the dim turning in the road.
The highway led around the Mount of Olives,
And down below the brook of Kidron flowed.

Cut short by half, the meadowland tailed off.
And there beyond it stretched the Milky Way,
And also straining to escape aloft
Were olive bushes, silvery and gray.

Beyond the meadow lay a garden plot.
And leaving His disciples by the wall.
He said, "My soul is sorrowful unto death.
Wait ye here, and watch with me a while."

Now, without a struggle, He renounced -
Like so many borrowed things, dispensable -
Omnipotence and every work of wonder.
Now He was mortal, like the rest of us.

Night's farthest reaches appeared like a realm
Of nothingness and void, annihilation.
Banished was the universe's vastness;
Gethsemane remained the only habitation.

He gazed into the fathomless abyss -
Emptiness with neither source nor ending -
And sweating drops of blood, He prayed to the Father
That from this deathly cup He be exempted.

Then, taming His mortal agony by prayer,
He left the garden. There, among the roadside
Feather-grasses, the disciples lay,
Sprawled upon the ground and deeply drowsing.

And He aroused them saying, "The Lord ordained
That in my time you live – and yet you slumber.
For the Son of Man the hour has struck.
Into sinners' hands He must surrender."

Scarce had He spoken, suddenly appeared
A horde of slaves, a crowd of vagrants, glint
Of swords and torches, Judas at their head,
A treacherous kiss shaped ready on his lips.

Peter with his sword sought to repel them,
Smiting off one murderer's ear. "Cold steel,"
The Master said, "can never solve a dispute.
Put up thy sword. Return it to its sheath.

"Were it His will, could not the Father send
A host of winged legions to my aid?
Not a hair upon my head would suffer.
My foes would all be scattered without trace.

"But in the Book of Life a page has turned,
More sacred and more precious than all else.
That which is written must now be accomplished.
Amen. So let it therefore come to pass.

"The progress of the ages, like a parable,
In mid course may suddenly take flame,
And faced by that dread grandeur, I'm prepared
To suffer and descend into the grave.

"And from the grave on the third day I'll rise.
Then, like a fleet of barges down the stream,
The centuries will float forth from the night
And make their way before my judgment seat."

Boris Pasternak was a renowned author and poet. He lived in Russia and the Soviet Union, and died in 1960. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature and is best-known for his novel "Doctor Zhivago".

Discussion Questions:

What is your response to these poems? What do they evoke in you?

Pasternak argues through his quotation of Jesus that disputes cannot be solved through violence, is this true?

What are the most vivid memories you have of Holy Week and Pascha?