FROM A TERRACE IN PRAGUE
A PRAGUE POETRY ANTHOLOGY

edited by
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Preface

What makes a city inspiring? What combination of historic, political, sociological, architectural, geographic and meteorological elements compels us to write? In the 20th century alone, a number of key literary movements were centered in cities: New York in the 1950s and 1960s, Paris in the 1920s, London in the first decade of the century, for example. But few cities have attracted poets so steadily, from such a diversity of cultures as Prague. The city has been the central – if unlikely – subject of major poets from around the world for more than a century. From a Terrace in Prague gathers 120 poems from 16 languages written between 1888 and 2010 that describe Prague or an event that took place here. More than a poetry anthology, this book is the record of one city and the range of poetry it has inspired. In the poems collected here, the singular subject of Prague takes many forms: confidant, lover, relic, setting, object of praise, active force and mere backdrop. This collection allows us to read how literary movements, political beliefs and historic events affected poets’ descriptions of Prague, revealing both poetry’s metamorphic nature and the indelible elements of the city that have found their way into words.

The editorial focus of this collection has been put primarily on poets from beyond the borders of the Czech Republic to elucidate the number of international poets who have visited or written about Prague. The poems translated here from Czech only hint at the rich tradition of Prague poetry by those native to the city. One might question the accuracy of a description of Prague from a poet who has been here only temporarily or in some cases not at all. Perhaps there is an essence of Prague, a spirit that is unchanging and that can be more or less accurately captured in poetry. But historical, social and literary forces change the tools and vocabulary poets have at their disposal for description and therefore, where impressions and similes are concerned, accuracy is always relative. Each poem describes the city from a particular point of view, a particular terrace, so to speak, some of which are similar, some less so.

Walking through Prague with these poems in mind, one has an indelible awareness of the lineage of poetry written in and about these streets and buildings, many of which have remained virtually unchanged for centuries. Therein lies the startling tension of Prague, and its power to inspire: The city’s rulers, inhabitants and visitors have changed drastically, while its physical nature has remained much the same. This modern city affords a glimpse into time. How a poet interprets what he or she sees there varies according to history and cultural context. Some see intimations of death like Guillaume Apollinaire; some see the dialectic in action like Josef Hora; some see art and creation like Marcela

1 Arabic, Chinese, Czech, English, Finnish, French, German, Japanese, Mongolian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish and Ukrainian
Sulak and Larry Levis; some see tragedy and sacrifice like Jaroslav Seifert and Miroslav Holub; some, like Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg, see themselves.

From a Terrace in Prague has been designed for maximum utility. This collection is intended as a poetic guidebook to the city of Prague for those who live on both sides of its borders. The poems included here illustrate the main points of the stylistic evolution outlined in “A Short History of Prague Poetry” after this preface. The time span covered, from 1888 to 2010, reaches back to Prague poems written just before the modern period and brings the critical narrative to the present, as the city’s attraction for poets is very much ongoing. The profusion of poems in the anthology’s final section, which covers the two decades since the Velvet Revolution, reflects the important change in the history of Czechoslovakia and of Prague poetry wrought by the fall of communism and the resulting flood of foreign poets to the country. The poems are generally arranged chronologically according to the date of publication, but some poems have been rearranged to coincide with the events they address rather than the year in which they were published. In the case of close proximity of publication dates and subject matter, the poems are grouped thematically. Additionally, when poets have written more than one Prague poem in different decades, these have been grouped according to the earliest poem. It is assumed that readers may not be familiar with all the cultural and geographic allusions found here, and therefore a section of notes follows the poems. To present a more complete picture of Prague as a city of poetry, a map detailing the settings of the poems and photographs of the settings depicted in those poems have been included.

The international scope of this collection posed specific challenges, as the arduous, imperfect art of translation necessitates intense editorial acumen and a team of collaborators. This book would not exist without the help and patience of all the translators involved. The sheer diversity of cultures, languages and poetries included here was daunting, and the difficulty of finding and translating these poems became only more apparent as time went on and new poems were discovered in more “exotic” languages, suggesting other poems hidden between the covers of unknown books. An effort has been made in these translations to stay as close as possible to the form of the original poem, with exceptions in cases where fidelity to rhyme, for example, would result in a more obscure version in English. Where native speakers who were willing and able to translate into English were unavailable, translations were made through Czech. Though this situation is not ideal, it proved necessary with Mongolian poet Byambin Rinchen and Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri. It is hoped that

2 “The Park in 1957 in Prague” by Věra Weisitzová, for example, has been placed in the section covering the period between 1940 and 1959 although it was published in 1994. Similarly, Kamil Bouška’s “The Velvet Revolution” has been placed at the start of the section beginning in 1990, although the poem was published two decades later.
each poem’s essence, if not its physical attributes, has been carried across. Several poets featured in this collection never actually visited Prague, and a number of great poets did visit but unfortunately never wrote about the city. The Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet Czesław Milosz visited Prague in 1931, 1950 and 1990, and referred to the city in his autobiography as “My first western European city.” The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas came to Prague in 1949 as a guest of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union. Thomas had several meetings with Czech poets, including the elusive Vladimír Holan, whom he met at a party. While no poem remains to record Thomas’ visit, several stories about the poet’s time in Prague exist. Crossing Charles Bridge one day with his translator, an exasperated Thomas climbed the stone railing and threatened to throw himself into the Vltava if the translator didn’t stop irritating him. Thomas also reportedly wrote a poem comparing the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union to a cage, but tore it up, saying he did not want his words exploited. The American poet Frank O’Hara visited Prague briefly in the fall of 1963 after a professional trip to Amsterdam, where he oversaw the installation of an exhibition of the work of Franz Kline at the Stedelijk Museum. Unfortunately, no written record of his visit to Prague exists.

Complete objectivity is impossible in poetry, but taken as a whole, From a Terrace in Prague is a more objective description of Prague than any single poem. What is presented here is a city that is inviting, foreboding, violent, peaceful, energetic, somnolent, captive, free, beautiful, ugly, gothic, romantic and above all inspiring. May it stay that way. May this collection offer a vibrant record of contemporary and historic attempts to capture the spirit of Prague through various methods of poetry, and may it be a guide for future poets – not a map of the way forward but a testimony that no map is possible, or necessary.

Stephan B. Delbos
Smíchov, February 2011

6 In fact The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara, edited by Donald Allen, and City Poet by Brad Gooch disagree as to the exact date of O’Hara’s visit to Prague. The former suggests O’Hara was in Prague when President Kennedy was assassinated November 22, 1963, and the latter claims the poet arrived in the city November 24.