

EXCERPT FROM  
THE COUNTRY OF CONSCIENCE  
(FOR CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ)

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**Jim Wayne Miller**

There are two of every country.  
One country is really there—  
“this side of the river,” “these mountains,”  
a country felt and known,  
a native ground and tongue, our own people.  
It is a taste: burgoo, redeye gravy,  
Ukrainian balik, Georgian cheese bread.  
It is the smell of wood smoke, a pan of water  
on the stove singing an old song.  
It’s knowledge we fondle like loose skin on our dog’s neck.

The other country is a jigsaw shape  
one kind of history draws on what is really there,  
a shape seen on maps, or from the height of some idea.

There are two of every country.  
There are two histories.

One history is water flowing quietly  
for centuries over rock,  
and stone steps worn smooth by flowing life,  
people living a long time in one place  
like sycamores along a river,  
people sinking a well the way a tulip poplar  
sends down a long taproot.  
It’s a thought spiraling, switching  
back on itself again and again,  
like a cowpath ascending a hill,  
a thought making no more noise  
than a pen scratching paper.

Another history moves on wheels,  
clanks, creaks, raises clouds of dust:  
a slow-moving village turns like a masked raccoon  
caught blind in headlights to find itself  
in the way of a rolling war that crushes its fragile bones.

This history calls itself the state.  
It quarters soldiers in your house,  
barbecues your four-year-old's pet goat,  
discovers your horses tethered in the cave,  
your grandmother's silver in the well.

This history hires plainclothes operatives  
with two rolls of fat on the backs of their necks  
to tiptoe unsubtly  
up and down corridors of the world  
testing doorknobs for any opportunity.

This history hires per diem consultants  
who take war for their metaphor, declare  
progress, wage campaigns  
on target groups in designated sectors.  
(Pray you are not targeted for some leap forward,  
pray engineers of affluence aren't sent your way.  
You may be swept, while God is looking the other way,  
like a sparrow into the checkered grille  
of a cruising Cadillac.)

To escape this history you need luck.  
My grandfather, my father and I have it:  
born between times, far from big roads history moves over,  
we've kept out of the way of wars. We've flown  
like mountain grouse through holes in patterns of birdshot. . . .

*These are the beginning stanzas of this poem, reprinted from *The Brier Poems* (1997); used by permission of Gnomon Press.*