

Viewing a War Map From the Sky by Miklós Radnóti

Translated from the Hungarian & edited by Thomas Ország-Land (October 2014)

1.

HOW OTHERS SEE...

How others see this region, I cannot understand:



to me, this little country is menaced motherland
engulfed by flames, the world of my childhood swaying far,
and I am grown from this land as tender branches are
from trees. And may my body sink into this soil in the end.
When plants reach out towards me, I greet them as a friend
and know their names and flowers. I am at home here, knowing
the people on the road and I know where they are going –
and how I know the meaning when, by a summer lane,
the sunset paints the walls with a liquid flame of pain!
The pilot can't help viewing a war map from the sky,
and even Vörösmarty's* old house escapes his eye;
what can he identify here? grim barracks and factories,

but I see steeples, oxen, and grasshoppers, farms and bees;
his lens spies out the vital production plants, the fields,
but I can see the worker, afraid below, who shields
his labour, a singing orchard, a vineyard and a wood,
among the graves a granny still mourning her widowhood;
and what may seem a plant or a rail line that must be wrecked
is just a signal-house with the keeper standing erect
and waving his red flag, lots of children around the guard;
a shepherd dog might roll in the dust in a factory yard;
and there's the park with the footprints of past loves and the flavour
of childhood kisses – the honey, the cranberry I still savour,
and on my way to school, by the kerbside, to postpone
a spot-test one certain morning, I stepped upon a stone:
look! there's the stone whose magic the pilot cannot see...
No instrument could merge them in his topography.

True, most of us are guilty, our people as the rest.

We know our faults. We know how and when we have transgressed.

But blameless lives are among us, of toil and poetry and passion,

and infants with an infinite capacity for compassion –

they will protect its glow down in gloomy bomb shelters, till

our land is marked out again by the finger of peace... then they will

respond to our muffled words with new voices fresh and bright.

Extend your vast wings above us, protective cloud of night.

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* *Mihály Vörösmarty (1800-1855), poet.*

2.

THE HUNTED

From my window I see a hillside,

it cannot see me at all;

I'm still, verse trickles from my pen

but nothing matters in hiding;

I see, though cannot grasp this solemn,

old-fashioned grace: as ever,

the moon emerges onto the sky and

the cherry tree bursts into blossom.

3.

FRAGMENT

I lived upon this earth in such an age
when folk were so debased they sought to murder
for pleasure, not just to comply with orders.
Their faith in falsehoods drove them to corruption.
Their lives were ruled by raving self-deceptions.

I lived upon this earth in such an age
that idolized the sly police informers,
whose heroes were the killers, spies and thieves –
The few who merely held their peace or failed
to cheer were loathed like victims of the plague.

I lived upon this earth in such an age
when those who risked protest were wise to hide
and gnaw their fists in self-consuming shame –
The country grinned towards its dreadful fate
insane and wild and drunk on blood and mire.

I lived upon this earth in such an age...
The mother of an infant was a curse
and pregnant women were glad to abort.

The living envied the corpses in the graves
while on the table foamed their poisoned cup.

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I lived upon this earth in such an age...
when even the poet fell silent awaiting, expecting
an ancient, terrible voice to resound – because
one alone could utter a fitting curse on such horror:
the scholar of weighty words, the prophet Isaiah.

Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944) was perhaps the greatest poet of the Holocaust. More of his poetry
in Thomas Ország-Land's English translation appears in