

Where Could a Poet Run? by Miklós Radnóti

Translated from the Hungarian & Edited by Thomas Ország-Land (November 2015)



Budapest 1945

1.

The First Eclogue

Quippe ubi fas versum atque nefas: tot bella per orbem,

tam multae scelerum facies...

For here are right and wrong inverted; so many wars overrun the world,

many are the shapes of sin... (Virgil, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough)

Shepherd:

I have not seen you for long, did the call of the thrushes bring you?

Poet:

The woods resound with their clatter, spring must be on its way!

Shepherd:

It's not spring yet, the sky only teasing, look at that puddle,

how mildly it smiles... but when it is locked up at night by the frost
it will snarl! this is April, never be taken in by the fool –
just look, over there: the little tulips are bitten by frost.

...Why are you depressed? would you like to have a rest on a rock?

Poet:

No, I'm not even sad, I have grown so used to this horrible world
that sometimes it can't even hurt me – I'm only disgusted.

Shepherd:

Likewise. I've heard that on the wild ridges of the Pyrenees,
among corpses stiffened in blood, the red-hot cannon hold forth
and the bears and the soldiers together flee that terrible place...
that flocks of old people and women and children run with their bundles
and fling themselves to the ground when murder swoops from the skies
and the dead lie in such great heaps that no-one can clear them away...

I trust you know Frederico. Tell me, did he escape?

Poet:

He did not escape. Two years ago now he was killed in Granada.

Shepherd:

Garcia Lorca is dead! he is dead and no-one has mentioned!
News of the war can travel so fast – and, just like that,
a poet can just disappear! But was he not mourned by Europe?

Poet:

Mourned? Why, no-one has noticed. At best the wind, perhaps
when it gropes through the pyre's embers, remembers the odd broken
line of a poem that may be preserved for a frustrated future.

Shepherd:

He did not escape. Indeed, where could a poet run?
Even dear Attila* has perished – he only gestured
his *No* to the rule of the world, and who mourns his destruction?...

And how do you live these days? Does your poetry win a response?

Poet:

In the roar of the guns? Among smoking ruins, abandoned hamlets?
Still, I go on with my writing and live in this war-crazed world
like that oak over there: it knows it must fall, and although it bears

a white cross that marks it out for the woodcutter's axe tomorrow,
it bears forth new leaves regardless while awaiting its fate...

But you are fortunate. This place is calm, the wolves keep their distance
and you can forget that the flock that you tend belongs to another:
it must have been months since your master last came to call.

God bless you – must go – the night will be old before I reach home.

The moth of the evening is fluttering, shedding its silver of dusk.

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* Attila József (1905-1937), Hungarian poet.

2.

Upon a Jabbering Palm

Upon a jabbering palm-tree

crouching, I should be rather,

a free soul in earthly matter,

shivering, away from heaven;

where sage scholastic apes

would keep me company,

their calls, like a sharp and shiny

shower, wash over me;

and I would chant with the team
in a merry cacophony,
and cheer the harmony
of their rumps and noses whose shades
of blue would seem the same...

Above my enchanted tree
a giant sun would pace,
and I would be ashamed
for the human race:

the apes would grasp my pain,
for still, the apes are sane –
and, Oh! in their company
if I might share their merciful
good death beneath that tree...



Miklós Radnóti and his wife, Fifi

3.

In Your Arms

In your arms I lie, you rock me
quietly.

In my arms you lie, I rock you
quietly.

In your arms I lie, an infant,
silently.


In my arms you are a child, I'm
hearkening, watching, sensing you.

In your arms, I'm locked embraced
when I'm alarmed.


In my arms, when I embrace you,
I'm not alarmed.

In your arms, the great, the final
stream of silence
will not frighten me.

In your arms, death will arrive –
light and graceful
like a dream.

MIKLÓS RADNÓTI was murdered just 70 years ago, aged 35, by retreating Nazi  forces at the close of WW2. He has emerged as a giant of recent European literature and the greatest poet of the Holocaust. His surviving work,

describing the chaos and brutality of that tragedy in magnificent classical metre, has become hugely popular in his native Hungary despite the current resurgence of antisemitism there.

 THOMAS ORSZÁG-LAND (b. 1938) is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent. His last book was [here](#).

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