

Herewe are publishing a selection from the poems of
Attila József (1905-1937),
translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner.

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No Shriek of Mine
Nem én kiáltok

No shriek of mine, it is the earth that thunders.
Beware, beware, Satan has gone insane;
cling to the clean dim floors of the translucent springs,
melt yourself to the plate glass,
hide behind the diamond's glittering,
beneath the stones, the beetle's twittering,
O sink yourself within the smell of fresh-baked bread,
poor wretched one, poor wretch.

Ooze with the fresh showers into the rills of earth --
in vain you bathe your own face in your self,
it can be cleansed only in that of others.
Be the tiny blade upon the grass:
greater than the spindle of the whole world's mass.
O you machines, birds, tree-branches, constellations!
Our barren mother cries out for a child.
My friend, you dear, you most beloved friend,
whether it comes in horror or in grandeur,
it is no shriek of mine, but the earth's thunder.

(1924)

What Will Become of Him...
Mondd, mit érlel

What will become of him, whoever
has got no handle to his hoe,
upon whose whiskers crumbs don't quiver,
who dawdles, gloomy, thrawn, and slow;
who would from half a furlong's hoeing
keep one potato out of three,
whose hair falls out in patches, growing
bald unnoticed -- who'd care to see?

What will become of him, whoever
has but five acres under crops,
whose draggled hen clucks at the stover,
whose thoughts nest in a mudhole's slops;
when no yoke clinks, no oxen bellow;
when mother serves the family soup
and steam from a liquid weak and yellow
drifts from the bottom of the scoop?

What will become of him, whoever
must live alone and work alone;
whose stew has neither salt nor savour,
the grocer gives no tick nor loan;
who has one broken chair for kindling,
cat sitting on the cracked stove's shelf;
who sets his keychain swinging, jingling,
who stares, stares; lies down by himself?

What will become of him, whoever
works to support his family;
the cabbage-heart they quarrel over,
the film the big girl gets to see;
always the laundry -- dirt's slow strangling --
the wife's mouth tastes of vegetables,
and when the light's off, silent wrangling,
gropings, eavesdroppings, darkness, rules?

What will become of him, whoever
idles outside the factory,
a woman meanwhile hauls the lever,
a pale-skulled child sets the fusee;
when through the gates he gazes vainly,
vainly humps bags and market-creels --
he dozes, they rouse him inhumanely,
and always catch him when he steals?

What will become of him, whoever
weighs out potatoes, salt, and bread,
wraps them in newsprint's inky flavour,
and doesn't brush the scales he's read;
and in the gloom he dusts, complaining,
the rent is high, the tax is keen,
the price -- but what's the use explaining
the extra charge for kerosene?

And what will come of him, whoever
knows he's a poet, sings his fears,
whose wife mops up the floor forever,
who chases copy-work for years;
whose name's a brand-name, if he has one,
just like a soap or cooking-fat,
whose life is given, if he has one,
all to the proletariat?

(1932)

Without Hope
Reménytelenül

`Slowly, musingly`

I am as one who comes to rest
by that sad, sandy, sodden shore
and looks around, and undistressed
nods his wise head, and hopes no more.

Just so I try to turn my gaze
with no deceptions, carelessly.
A silver axe-swish lightly plays
on the white leaf of the poplar tree.

Upon a branch of nothingness
my heart sits trembling voicelessly,
and watching, watching, numberless,
the mild stars gather round to see.

In heaven's ironblue vault ...

In heaven's ironblue vault revolves
a cool and lacquered dynamo.
The word sparks in my teeth, resolves
-- oh, noiseless constellations! -- so --

In me the past falls like a stone
through space as voiceless as the air.
Time, silent, blue, drifts off alone.
The swordblade glitters; and my hair --

My moustache, a fat chrysalis,
tastes on my mouth of transience.
My heart aches, words cool out to this.
To whom, though, might their sound make sense?

(1933)

Ode
Óda

1

I am alone on these glittering crags.
A sinuous breeze
floats delicious, the infant summer's
suppertime simmer and ease.
I school my heart into this silence.
Not so arduous --
All that is vanished is aswarm in me,
my head is bowed, and my hand is
vacuous.

I see the mane of the mountain --
each little leafvein
leaps with the light of your brow.

The path is quite deserted,
I see how your skirt is floated
in the wind's sough.
Under the tender, the tenuous bough
I see you shake out your hair, how it clings,
your soft, trembling breasts; behold
-- just as the Szinva-stream glides beneath --
the round white pebbles of your teeth,
and how the welling laughter springs
tumbling over them like fairy gold.

2

Oh how much I love you, who've given
speech to both the universes:
the heart's caves, its trickweaving deepenings,
sly involute lonelinesses --
and starry heaven.
As water glides from its own thunderous fall
you fly from me and we are cleft and parted,
whilst I, among the mountains of my life, still call,
still kneel, and sing, and raise the echo with my cry,
slamming against the earth and sky,
that I love you, step-nurse, mother-hearted!

3

I love you as a child his mother's breast,
as the dumb caves their own bottomlessness,
as halls the light that shows them best,
as the soul loves flame, as the body rest!
I love you as we who marked for death
love the moments of their living breath.

Every smile, every word, every move you make,
as falling bodies to my earth, I press;
as into metal acids eat and ache,
I etch you in my brains with instinct's stress,
beautiful shapeliness,
your substance fills the essence they partake.

The moments march by, clattering and relentless,
but in my ears your silence lies.
Even the stars blaze up, fall, evanesce,
but you're a stillness in my eyes.
The taste of you, hushed like a cavern-pool,
floats in my mouth, as cool;
your hand, upon a water-glass,
veined with its glowing lace,
dawns beautiful.

4

Ah, what strange stuff is this of which I'm made,
that but your glance can sculpt me into shape? --
what kind of soul, what kind of light or shade,
what prodigy that I, who have long strayed
in my dim fog of nothingness unmade,
explore your fertile body's curving scape?

-- And as the logos flowers in my brain,
immerse myself in its occult terrain! ...

Your capillaries, like a bloodred rose,
ceaselessly stir and dance.
There that eternal current seethes and flows
and flowers as love upon your countenance,
to bless with fruit your womb's dark excellence.
A myriad rootlets broider round
and round your stomach's tender ground,
whose subtle threadings, woven and unwound,
unknit the very knot whereby they're bound,
that thus thy lymphic cellbrood might abound,
and the great, leaved boughs of thy lungs resound
their whispered glory round!

The eterna materia goes marching on
happily through your gut's dark cavern-cells,
and to the dead waste rich life is given
within the ardent kidneys' boiling wells!

Billowing, your hills arise, arise,
constellations tremble in your skies,
lakes, factories work on by day and night,
a million creatures bustle with delight,
millipede,
seaweed,
a heartless mercy, gentle cruelty,
your hot sun shines, your darkling north light broods,
in you there stir the unscanned moods
of a blind incalculable eternity.

5

So falls in clotted spatters
at your feet this blood,
this parched utterance.
Being stutters;
law is the only spotless eloquence.
My toiling organs, wherein I am renewed
over and over daily, are subdued
to their final silence.

But yet each part cries out --
O you who from the billioned multitude,
O you unique, you chosen, wooed
and singled out, you cradle, bed,
and grave, soft quickener of the dead,
receive me into you.

(How high is this dawn-shadowy sky!
Armies are glittering in its ore.
Radiance anguishing to the eye.
Now I am lost, I can no more.
Up in the world I hear it batter,
my heart's old roar.)

6

`(Envoi)`

(Now the train's going down the track,
maybe today it'll carry me back,
maybe my hot face will cool down today,
maybe you'll talk to me, maybe you'll say:

Warm water's running, there's a bath by and by!
Here is a towel, now get yourself dry!
The meat's on the oven, and you will be fed!
There where I lie, there is your bed.)

(1933)

Mama
Mama

On Mama now my thoughts have dawdled
all of a week. Clothes-basket cradled
creaked on her hip; she'd climb the stairway
up to the drying-attic's airway.

Then, for I was an honest fellow,
how I would shriek and stamp and bellow!
That swollen laundry needs no mother.
Take me, and leave it to another.

But still she drudged so quietly,
nor scolded me nor looked upon me,
and the hung clothes would glow and billow
high up above, with swoop and wallow.

It's too late now to still my bother;
what a giant was my mother --
over the sky her grey hair flutters,
her bluing tints the heaven's waters.

(1934)

My Eyes Jump In and Out...
Ki-be ugrál

My eyes jump in and out, I'm mad again.
When I'm like this, don't hurt me. Hold me tight.
When all I am goes crosseyed in my brain,

don't show your fist to me: my broken sight
would never recognize it anyway.
Don't jerk me, sweet, off the void edge of the night.

Think: I have nothing left to give away,
no one to have and hold. What I called "me"
is nothing too. I gnaw its crumbs today,

and when this poem is done it will not be...
As space is by a searchlight, I am pierced through
by naked sight: what sin is this they see

who answer not, no matter what I do,
they who by law should love, be claimed by me.
Do not believe this sin you can't construe,

till my grave-mould acquits and sets me free.

(1936)

The Scream
Kiáltozás

Love me wildly, to distraction,
scare away my huge affliction,
in the cage of an abstraction,
I, an ape, jump up and down,
bare my teeth in malediction,
for I have no faith or fiction,
in the terror of His frown.

Mortal, do you hear my singing,
or mere nature's echoes ringing?
Hug me, don't just stare unseeing
as the sharpened knife comes down --
there's no guardian that's undying
who will hear my song and sighing:
in the terror of His frown.

As a raft upon a river,
Slovak raftman, whosoever,
so the human race forever
dumb with pain, goes drifting down --
but I scream in vain endeavour:
love me: I'll be good, I shiver
in the terror of His frown.

(1936)

Tumble out of the Flood
Bukj föl az árból

Terrify me, my hidden God,
I need your wrath, your scourge, your thunder;
quick, come tumble out of the flood,

lest nothingness sweep us asunder.

I am the one the horse knocks down,
up to my eyes in dirt, a cipher,
and yet I play with knives of pain
too monstrous for man's heart to suffer.

How easily I flame! the sun
is not more prone to burn -- be frightening,
scream at me: leave the fire alone!
Rap my hands with your bolt of lightning.

Hammer it into me with rage
or grace: it's innocence that's evil!
that innocence could be my cage
burns at me fiercer than a devil.

A fragment from a wreck I lie,
tossed by a cruel tempest frothing;
alone; I dare, and I defy:
all merely signifying nothing.

I'd choke my very breath, to die,
your rod and staff thus disobeying,
and look you boldly in the eye,
you empty, human-faced unbeing!

(1937)

Eagle
Sas

Eagle, gigantic, diving
heaven's echoey precipices!
What winged thing's this, arriving
from voids and nothingnesses!

His starry beak of azure
devours the vaulted cosm,
his talons of erasure
rip at its flesh-warm bosom.

The world's eyeball, transparent,
weeps at the bloody capture,
the downy feathers errant.
This is the red dawn's rapture.

There is no height above it,
essence is torn and savaged;
there is no depth beneath it,
being itself is ravished.

One wing is my own aura,
the other wing is Flóra:
newborn, beyond all seeming,
each thus in each redeeming.

(1937)

Consciousness
Eszmélet

1.

The dawn dissevers earth and skies
and at its pure and lovely bidding
the children and the dragonflies
twirl out into the sunworld's budding;
no vapor dims the air's receding,
a twinkling lightness buoys the eyes!
Last night into their trees were gliding
the leaves, like tiny butterflies.

2.

Blue, yellow, red, they flocked my dream,
smudged images the mind had taken,
I felt the cosmic order gleam --
and not a speck of dust was shaken.
My dream's a floating shade; I waken;
order is but an iron regime.
By day, the moon's my body's beacon,
by night, an inner sun will burn.

3.

I'm gaunt, sometimes bread's all I touch,
I seek amid this trivial chatter
unrecompensed, and yearn to clutch,
what has more truth than dice, more matter.
No roast rib warms my mouth and platter,
no child my heart, forgoing such --
the cat can't both, how deft a ratter,
inside and outside make her catch.

4.

Just like split firewood stacked together,
the universe embraces all,
so that each object holds the other
confined by pressures mutual,
all things ordained, reciprocal.
Only unbeing can branch and feather,
only becoming blooms at all;
what is must break, or fade, or wither.

5.

Down by the branched marshaling-yard
I lurked behind a root, fear-stricken,
of silence was the living shard,
I tasted grey and weird-sweet lichen.
I saw a shadow leap and thicken:
it was the shadow of the guard --
did he suspect? -- watched his shade quicken
upon the heaped coal dew-bestarred.

6.

Inside there is a world of pain,

outside is only explanation.
The world's your scab, the outer stain,
your soul's the fever-inflammation.
Jailed by your heart's own insurrection,
you're only free when you refrain,
nor build so fine a habitation,
the landlord takes it back again.

7.

I stared from underneath the evening
into the cogwheel of the sky --
the loom of all the past was weaving
law from those glimmery threads, and I
looked up again into the sky
from underneath the steams of dreaming
and saw that always, by and by,
the weft of law is torn, unseaming.

8.

Silence gave ear: the clock struck one.
Maybe you could go back to boydom;
walled in with concrete dank and wan,
maybe imagine hints of freedom.
And now I stand, and through the sky-dome
the stars, the Dippers, shine and burn
like bars, the sign of jail and thralldom,
above a silent cell of stone.

9.

I've heard the crying of the steel,
I've heard the laugh of rain, its pattern;
I've seen the past burst through its seal:
only illusions are forgotten,
for naught but love was I begotten,
bent, though, beneath my burdens' wheel --
why must we forge such weapons, flatten
the gold awareness of the real?

10.

He only is a man, who knows
there is no mother and no father,
that death is only what he owes
and life's a bonus altogether,
returns his find to its bequeather,
holding it only till he goes;
nor to himself, nor to another,
takes on a god's or pastor's pose.

11.

I've seen what they call happiness:
soft, blonde, it weighed two hundred kilos;
it waddled smiling on the grass,
its tail a curl between two pillows.
Its lukewarm puddle glowed with yellows,
it blinked and grunted at me -- yes,
I still remember where it wallows,

touched by the dawns of blissfulness.

12.

I live beside the tracks, where I
can see the trains pass through the station.
I see the brilliant windows fly
in floating dark and dim privation.
Through the eternal night's negation
just so the lit-up days rush by;
in all the cars' illumination,
silent, resting my elbow, I.

(1934)

That Which Your Heart Disguises
Amit szivedbe rejtesz

`For the eightieth birthday of Freud`

That which your heart disguises
open your eyes and see;
that which your eye surmises
let your heart wait to be.

Desire -- and all concede it --
kills all who are not dead.
But happiness, you need it
as you need daily bread.

Children, all of the living
yearn for our mother's arms;
lovemaking, or death-giving,
to wed's to take up arms.

Be like the Man of Eighty,
hunted by men with guns,
who bleeds, but in his beauty
still sires a million sons.

That old thorn, broken piercing
your sole, is long since drawn.
Now from your heart's releasing
death, too, falls and is gone.

That which your eye surmises
seize with your hand and will;
that which your heart disguises
is yours to kiss or kill.

(1936)

And So I've Found My Native Country...
Íme, hát megjelentem hazámat

And so I've found my native country,
that soil the gravedigger will frame,
where they who write the words above me
do not for once misspell my name.

This black collection-box receives me
(for no one needs me any more),
this Iron Six that was worth twenty,
this coin left over from the war.

None needs that iron ring inscripted
with sweet words, that the world is new:
rights, land. -- Our laws are the leftovers;
now pretty gold rings all pursue.

For many years I had been lonely.
Then many people visited.
I'd have been happy if they'd stayed.
You are alone, was what they said.

And so I lived, useless and empty,
and now I see it all quite plain.
They let me play the fool until
by now even my death's in vain.

All through my life I've tried to weather
the whirlwind that would always blow.
I was more sinned against than sinning,
and it's a laugh that it was so.

Spring, summer, autumn, all are lovely;
but winter's loveliest for one
who hopes for hearth and home and family
only for others, when all's done.

(1937)

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