

Poetry of Miklós Radnóti translated by Miklós Nadasdi

Miklós Nadasdi offers 13 poems by Miklós Radnóti, translated from the Hungarian original into English.

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Miklós Radnóti (May 1909 - November 1944) was one of the greatest poets of Hungary in the 20th century. Born as Miklós Glatter, he changed his name to Radnoti in 1934, after his graduation from university with a dissertation on the artistic development of Margit Kaffka. In 1935, Radnoti married Fanni and in 1943, the couple converted from Judaism to Roman Catholic faith. In May 1944, Radnóti was called for his third military service in the forced labor army for those of Jewish origin and the battalion in which he served was deported to the copper mines of Bor, Serbia, which by then provided a high proportion of the copper requirement of the German war-industry. On September 17, 1944, Radnóti was forced to leave the camp in a column of about 3,600 fellow

servicemen of the forced labor army because of the military-offensive by Allied armies toward the end of World War II. He sustained the inhuman forced march from Bor to Szentkirályszabadja, Hungary, where he wrote his last poem on October 31. In November 1944, he and 20 other fellow servicemen were shot and killed by members of the Hungarian Guards. His last poems (*Razglednicas – kepeslapok*) were found in the pocket of his coat in the mass grave.

Miklós Nádasi was born on January 29, 1932, in Budapest. He received an M.D. degree at the Semmelweis University of Budapest in 1956, the same year when, during a revolution against the Soviet regime, he escaped from Hungary to Vienna. The following year he immigrated to Canada with the sponsorship of Hans Selye, the scientist who developed the stress theory. He worked as his postgraduate student at the University of Montreal where he obtained a Ph.D. degree in experimental medicine. This was followed by 34 scientific publications. In 1964 he moved to Toronto and became the vice president of medical affairs of Glaxo, a large international pharmaceutical company (now GSK). He also established a medical practice as a staff member of the North York General Hospital in Toronto. He is married, has two children, four grandchildren and a great-grandchild. Presently he is retired and lives with his wife in Toronto.

FROTHY SKY

The moon sways on a frothy sky,
being alive, I'm surprised.

Death is busily searching our time
and those he finds are all so white.

The year looks around and cries out,
it looks around and it feels faint.

What kind of autumn lurks behind me
and how numb the winter is from pain!

The forest bled and in the spinning time

every hour was bleeding also.

The wind was scribbling big
dark numbers in the snow.

I understand this and that one too,
the air is heavy around me,
lukewarm silence filled with noises,
as in the womb, surrounds me.

I stop here under the tree
while its crown rumbles in anger,
a branch reaches down. It grabs my neck?
I am not coward, nor am I slender,

just tired. I am quiet. So is the branch
as it tousles my hair, full of dread.
It would be time to forget but
I was never able to forget.

Froth gushes on the moon in the sky
a streak of green poison takes a dive.
I roll a cigarette for myself,
slowly, carefully. I am alive.

FLOWER SONG

Above you an apple tree's twig
falls down upon you lip,
more falls in a little while

on your hair and on your eye.

I can watch your lips all day
the twigs on your eye gently sway,
its light chases its own light,
kissing it would be sheer delight.

It seems that your eyes are closed,
above your eye-lids playful shadows,
they play with the petal, so tender
and falls into the dark somewhere.

Don't be scared, darkness is falling,
the mute, silvery night is calling,
the celestial branches bloom,
the lame world is lit by the moon

PARIS

At the corner of Boulevard St Michel and Rue
Cujas the sidewalk is slightly off-straight.

My gorgeous wild youth, I didn't desert you,
like an echo in a shaft you reverberate
in my heart and your voice doesn't stop.

At the corner of Rue Monsieur le Prince was the baker's shop.

And on the left a big tree in the park
turned already yellow, for it tries
to predict that Autumn is ready to start.

Freedom, you dear nymph with long thighs
dressed in glowing golden evening
are you still among the veiled trees fleeting?

Like an army, Summer marched with zest
dusting up the road and perspiring wild,
beating the drum followed by cool mist
and the scent floating on each side.
At noon it was Summer but not far ahead
sweet Fall came by evening with a wet forehead.

I lived like a child for my whim and found
all the pleasure I wanted and also,
like a learned elder who knew the world was round.
I was green and my beard as the snow.
I took walks, nobody gave it a thought
and then I sank underground where it was hot.

Where are you, oh, every well-known station:
Chatelet-Cité, St Michel-Odéon!
Denfert-Rochereau, - sounds like condemnation.
A map blooms on the mottled wall further on.
Where are you, oh! - I shout. I listen.
And body odour starts to boom and glisten.

And the nights! The nightly pilgrimage
from the outskirts to the Quartier.
Above Paris the strange, gloomy image

will the darkness ever go away?
When drunk from poem writing and half dead
and half undressed I fell into bed.

Oh, will I have strength to withdraw
from the heavy current of my life?
Below on the roof of the stinking, cheap bistro
the cat was mating. Shall I once more hear his miaows?
That gave me a pretty good idea
of the kind of shindy that in the arc,
sailing under the Moon, surrounded Noah.

LETTER TO SPOUSE

Silent, mute worlds deep down in hell
their silence roars in my ears and I yell
but no one can speak and nobody answers
from the war-torn country of those darned Serbs
and your voice touches my dream from far away
I find it again in my heart the following day
so I am quiet while my heart yearns
surrounded by humming, cool, proud ferns.

I don't know when can I hold you in my arm
you who were steadfast and grave as a psalm
and beautiful like the shadow as cast by the light
and whom I could find in the darkest night
now you are far away and somewhere you hide
as you flutter before my eyes from inside;

you were real and now just a dream, so restless
falling in the fountain of my adolescence

I badger you non-stop with my jealous doubt
to know if you still have me in your heart?

and if once at the top of my young life

hopefully you will again be my wife --

yet awake I know my wife, my friend you are
only unreachable, three countries apart.

Autumn arrived. Will it abandon me here?

The memory of our kisses has become so clear,
miracles I believed in have gone by,

bombers are now swarming up in the sky

which, just like your eyes, is bright blue

but it darkens as the planes fly through

and the bombs get restless, ready to fall.

How I would like to wipe out them all

but I am a captive, I am tied in ropes

while I am pondering over all my hopes

to find the way to you, that is my goal

even if that road leads only through the soul. --

and through many countries and through scarlet ember

if needed, with magic, I shall still get there

through raging flames I shall remain stark

and tenacious like a tree holds to its bark

and find peace from men who, when in peril, harness

weapons and power from their serene calmness

thus I become calm when as a slow, cool wave

the sound rule of 2X2 is taking shape.

FORCED MARCH

Only the crazy gets up after falling to the ground
 and moves his aching knees and feet without a sound
 and marches on as if wings would take him away,
 when the ditch tempts him, he doesn't dare to stay,
 when you ask him why not? maybe he says in one breath,
 his wife might be waiting and a more decent death.
 Still, he is crazy because back at home
 only the scorched wind twirls around all alone,
 the plumtree is broken, the wall lies on its back,
 the night is frightened, overcome with fret.

Oh, if I could believe it, not just hope in vain,
 and return to an inviting home again;
 if I could sit, like once, on the cool veranda,
 peaceful bees would hum, jam cooling in the plum jar,
 the late summer would sunbathe in the garden at ease,
 the fruits would swing naked up on the trees,
 at the hedge I would see Fanni with her blond hair,
 the forenoon would cast long shadows all over, --
 it is all possible! the moon shines, it can be done!
 Stop, my friend, yell at me, I'll get up and move on!

RAZGLEDNICA (Postcard) 1

From Bulgaria thick, wild cannon sound
 rolls over the mountain edge and thumps on the ground;

people, animal, carts and thoughts surge,
 the road neighs, recoils, the clouds run with urge.
 In this chaotic turmoil you're the one I find
 the only bright, unmoving constant in my mind
 and silently, as if the angel stared at the debris
 or an insect making its grave in the hollow of a tree.

RAZGLEDNICA (Postcard) 2

Nine kilometres from here
 haystacks and houses are up in smoke
 while on the edge of the fields
 mute and frightened peasants smoke.
 Over here the lake is curly
 from a shepherd girl's feet
 and the curly flock bends over the water
 slurping clouds in the heat.

RAZGLEDNICA (Postcard) 3

Bloody saliva drivels from the oxen's mouth,
 people are voiding bloody urine,
 the company stands in savage, fetid bunches
 and the hideous death above shakes the branches.

RAZGLEDNICA (Postcard) 4

I fell next to him, his body turned over,
 it was tight as a string when it is stretched.
 Shot in the head, -- That's how you'll end up too,
 I whispered to myself, -- just lay there in the trench.

Patience blooms into death here, --
 Der springt noch auf, -- I heard near,
 Mud and blood dried on my ear.

MIDNIGHT

Two clouds sit in the heavy hair
 of the evening sky facing each other grunting,
 it is midnight and up in the air
 pitiful Wednesday and wretched Thursday meet stumbling.

Grass grows, buds are feverish,
 silent cocoons' laps prepare butterflies,
 the busy creek is swaddling fish,
 over the dreamy mountain pearly mist flies.
 Your lashes are also covered with mist-pearls,
 on your lips flutter lightweight shadows,
 in your hair fake tag game for girls
 my mind so vividly recalls.

You are so beautiful and so young!
 and I'm thinking while admiring you keenly,
 perhaps one day I shall be triumphant
 and talkative palm tree branches will greet me!

EVENING IN THE MOUNTAINS

1.
 The evening starts to fumble the trees
 when down below the house appears

and at the bottom of the slope onion smell
and welcoming dense warmth dwell.

While I tilt my skis against the edge
a snowdrift is running along the bridge,
grabs me by the hair in the doorway
and hugs me like a girl going away.

2.

Tired people inside, steaming,
on the lamp a branch of mistletoe
left there since New Years Evening
and bright frost flowers on the window.

I came back because I miss you
and I'll shout into the night
like Nansen did when at the Arctic
his destination came in sight.

Oh, how long I've loved you! Without embrace
it feels like eternity, though just two days!
I warm my fingers with my breath
and start writing: "I love you 'till death!"

My nails squeak on the shiny glass
as your name in the mist appears
and under every dancing letter
the window starts to shed tears.

3.

"Eating, drinking, drinking, eating
what else can I do,
I want to sit around here
in peace an hour or two..."

And while I'm humming
tiredness
gets into me deep.

The words get scarce
and under me
the bench falls asleep.

4.

The roads are getting dark and hazy
it's dusk, my bed is hard like stone
but come on, my pen, don't get lazy,
this poem must be born!

5.

One is roaming in the snow,
puts on, then takes off his skis,
turns in somewhere, eats and drinks
and then relaxes with ease.

One just eats and drinks
then slowly counts to twenty,
falls asleep while swimming gently,
his dreams watched by the winter sky,
fancy words sleep inside him,

above tiny slow flakes fly.

6.

The wind dies down, snowfall starts anew,
it falls, swaying, caressing you.

In the warm mud of the mountain, deep.

bearded roots are heaving asleep

and cry out as if in trouble,

in their dream their tender branches

glisten like a fresh green bubble.

WAVERING ODE

How long I have been trying without success

to explain it all while being succinct,

the star-driven secret of my love you possess.

You are the life in me swelling, bustling,

and sometimes you are steady and certain

like a petrified snail fossil, it seems.

The Moon above me pulls the night curtain

and starts to hunt for little buzzing dreams.

And I still cannot tell, although I try,

what it means that, when I work,

above my hand I feel your watchful eye.

Metaphors are useless. I throw them in the dirt.

And tomorrow I start it all over,

for my worth is only what I am writing

in my poem, I know it so well.

It stays with me as long as I am lasting.

You are tired, like me, the day stretched too far,-

What else can I say? The objects exchange glances
praising you, there is half a lump of sugar
holding a drop of honey, it dances
to the tinkling sound of a drinking glass
which is happy because living with you is a bliss
and waits for your home coming and your grasp.
Perhaps I shall have time to tell you all this.
Shades of dreams are touching you lightly,
fly around then settle on your forehead,
your sleepy eyes once more find me,
your hair gets loose, spreads out on the bed,
you fall asleep. Your lids flutter, then get calm,
your hand on the bed, like a willow, sleeping,
I sleep in you as part of your being.
And I can hear from here how those
mysterious fine lines alter
in your cool palm.

FOR A MISSED EMBRACE

I was waiting for you like I did for supper
when my mother still came and stepped to my bed.
I was expecting you like a stupid youngster
is waiting for death, so desperate --
it didn't come, thank God -- you see how
happy I am, thinking of it now.

But it is even more stupid, I say
that you didn't come, though you will, one day!

Unrelenting demise shoves the world ahead
like the miner in the shaft pushing the coal,
once all the pieces he'd dug out were spread.
But deep down those who love are staying one whole.
What conflagration and drawn-out sword
was able to dazzle me and hold
 me back as the Moon passed through the night
from getting to you and grabbing you tight?

Among dead stars up in the sky with fervent
yearning I flew like pebbles tossed around --
How could I swim against the current
into your lap that's nowhere to be found?
While the clock was gabbling with deceptive speed,
you found a dancefloor tempting to your feet
 and enmeshed by the rhythm's flare
you trembled -- without me being there.

Aren't you annoyed when your stocking has a tear?
You are upset and complaining, no doubt.
See, it is the same what I have to bear
when, from our love, an embrace is torn out.
That artist quarrels with things that pass too fast.
Prove it to him, but with me, that truly, they don't last.
 Find out what to do and do it.
After all, as you know, I am not stupid.

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