

DEZSŐ KOSZTOLÁNYI
INEBRIATE OF DAWN

L'Harmattan Hongrie



COLLECTION KÁROLI

Collection dirigée par Enikő Sepsí

ISSN 2063-787X

DEZSŐ KOSZTOLÁNYI

INEBRIATE OF DAWN



SELECTED POEMS

TRANSLATED BY
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Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary
L'Harmattan Publishing • Éditions L'Harmattan

Budapest • Paris
2025

Publishing Director: László Trócsányi, Ádám Gyenes, Xavier Pryen
Series Editor: Enikő Sepsi

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H-1053 Budapest, Hungary

L'Harmattan France
5-7 rue de l'Ecole Polytechnique
75005 Paris

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The translators have used the following critical edition as their source text:
Kosztolányi Dezső összes versei, ed. Pál Réz, Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2005.

ISBN 978-2-336-47982-8

Volumes may be ordered, at a discount, from
L'Harmattan Könyvesbolt
1053 Budapest, Kossuth L. u. 14–16.
Tel.: +36-70-554-3177
www.harmattan.hu
librairie.internationale@harmattan.fr
www.amazon.fr

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Preface	11
Introduction	17

JUVENILIA

The Autumn Evening's Cool	25
-------------------------------------	----

WITHIN FOUR WALLS

Trees of Üllői Street	29
---------------------------------	----

COMPLAINTS OF THE POOR LITTLE CHILD

O death.	33
Nowadays, I dream of colored inks.	34
Bloodily we killed the ugly toad.	35
Go, little child.	36

BREAD AND WINE

Happy Sad Song	39
--------------------------	----

COMPLAINTS OF THE MOURNFUL MAN

The drinking-glass shatters	43
---------------------------------------	----

NAKED

The Father	47
Widow in the Streetcar	48
Girl in the Typist Pool	49
A Bad Poet Is So Touching	50
Beyond the Beyond	51
When Children Play	52
He Who Died Today	53
My Old Chum, with Eyeglasses	54

UPROARIOUS NATURE

The Ant	57
The Wasp	57
The Marbled White Butterfly (Melanargia Galathea)	57

SUMMING UP

Summing Up	61
Shining Wreath	68
For Life and Death	69
Europe	72
In Early September	74
Poet in the Twentieth Century	75
Happiness Speaking	76
Lovers	77
Song of Songs	78
Litany	80
Three Satires	82
Shrill Cries on a Spring Morning	88
When You've Passed Forty	89
Words in Company	90
Scarlet Withering	91
Autumn Breakfast	92
About Those Who've Vanished	93
The Evensong of Kornél Esti	94
Forty Snapshots	97
Marcus Aurelius	109
Ernő Osvát on His Deathbed	112
Fooling with My First Pair of Glasses	113
At Night by the Sleeper's Side	115
The Execution	116
Song of the Young	117
Travel Sketches	118
The Dead	124
Awakening	125
At Home	126
Our House	128
Despair	129
The Savage Blacksmith	130
February Ode	131
A Hundred Lines on Physical Pain	133
A Riddle for Grown-ups	137

Séance at the New York Coffee House	139
Supplication to Those Staying Behind	140
I've Got It Now	141
Funeral Oration	142
Inebriate of Dawn	144
Song of Nothingness	148

UNPUBLISHED IN KOSZTOLÁNYI'S LIFETIME

My Father in His Coffin	151
September Devotions	153
A Prayer on the Fly	157
Notes	159
Alphabetical Index by Title or First Line	161
About the Translators	163
Acknowledgments	165

*Inebriate of air – am I –
And Debauchee of Dew –*

Emily Dickinson
("I taste a liquor never brewed")

PREFACE



*"I was a guest invited to stand as a squire
to an unknown Lord most high"*

"I am delighted, dear Kosztolányi, to welcome you publicly on the occasion of this fine work. You will bring new honor to the Hungarian name that has been proclaimed by so many figures from Petőfi and Arany to Ady and Zsigmond Móricz, and this will place your young name even more prominently among those who constitute the intellectual and literary life of Europe today."

These words were written by Thomas Mann in 1923 to introduce the German translation of Dezső Kosztolányi's first novel, *Nero, a véres költő* (*Nero, the Bloody Poet*). Petőfi and Arany were the most significant Hungarian poets of the 19th century, while Ady and Móricz were among the most prominent authors of the early 20th century.

It is worth quoting Mann's statement in this preface to Dezső Kosztolányi's *Selected Poems*, since the author of numerous volumes of poetry, short stories, and four novels, though one of the greatest figures of twentieth-century Hungarian literature, is little known to anglophone readers.

In fact, there is reason to wonder whether a Hungarian poet experienced the same twentieth century as, e.g., an American poet. How similar and how different were the paradigms of American and Hungarian poetry then and now? Do we consider a poet great for the same virtues in both cultures? Viewed from California or Texas, but also from New York, Hungary lies in far-off region of Europe where thirteen million people speak a strange little language. But good poets can make an impact on their readers not only in their mother tongue; moreover, the differences between the original and the host language and culture can also create a positive tension by mixing the familiar and the new.

This tension was exploited by Kosztolányi, who was himself a translator from many languages. In addition to German, French and Italian, he also translated from English: Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde and even the American Thornton Wilder. He is credited with the first Hungarian translation of *Alice in Wonderland*; furthermore, a manuscript of his translation of Byron's *Childe Harold* was discovered at the time of writing this preface.

When translating Kosztolányi, John Ridland and Peter Czipott are oriented in the opposite direction. They not only make his poems available in English but also bring Hungarian poetry (as a genre?) closer to the English-speaking reader.

They have done an excellent job, although it was not easy. Translating Hungarian poetry presents a significant challenge due to the ambiguities inherent in the language and its cultural tradition.

Following the Renaissance and Baroque periods, literature in Hungarian began to assume a more prominent role in Hungary's culture, replacing Latin and German as the dominant form of expression from the eighteenth century onwards. Although the Enlightenment continued to exert a considerable influence in Hungary through German mediators, Hungarian writers also began to gravitate towards Paris during the Gallo-centric nineteenth century.

However, Hungarian literature is linked to world literature via the use of Finno-Ugric linguistic elements, which are not found in other, predominantly Indo-European languages, including Germanic, Slavic and Romance tongues. Hungarian grammar does not distinguish between grammatical genders; there are no verb tenses in the continuous form, nor is the passive voice a common construction in Hungarian. However, as an agglutinative language, it is capable of a degree of compression that is not found in other languages. This is exemplified, for example, by the structures of verbs expressing emotion, which include subject, predicate and (a singular) object. In Hungarian, these structures are rendered by a single word: for example, "I love you" and "I hate you" (respectively *szeretlek* and *gyűlöllek*). Furthermore, Hungarian differentiates between general and definite inflection. The infinitive is inflectional, and Hungarian's unbound word order can express a wide range of semantic nuances.

The addition of Turkish, Latin, Slavic and German loan words and, of course, modern 20th-century vocabulary has resulted in their fusion with the Finno-Ugric grammatical structure and basic vocabulary. This fusion has created a language that is acoustically highly suitable for poetry. It can produce verse with both stress and quantitative time meters, and can equally well render the classical hexameter, Dante's *terza rima*, Shakespearean blank verse, or the prosodic music of T.S. Eliot or Dylan Thomas. This may be the reason why Hungarian retains the musicality of rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration even in the 20th century, in strong contrast to trends in anglophone lyric poetry.

Both the life and art of Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936) are paradigmatic of the 20th century. He was born in the era of the Belle Époque and died just as the bloodiest years of the 20th century were knocking at the door. Despite the distance between Budapest and the communist Soviet Union to the east and national socialist Germany to the west in the 1930s, the Zeitgeist of the totalitarian dictatorships is perceptible in Kosztolányi's poems. It is no coincidence that in his poem "Europa," we see the saving role of culture and in "Marcus Aurelius," the emperor-philosopher is the one who opposes barbarism, becoming an iconic figure as the defender of civilization. "Nothing that's barbaric, / nothing imbecilic, dull, half-baked do I need."

The poet was born in Szabadka, Hungary, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. His father was a teacher of physics and mathematics and headmaster of a small-town grammar school. His cousin Géza Csáth (1887–1919) is considered one of the best Hungarian short story writers, but as a professional psychiatrist, he was also one of the first significant Hungarian followers of Freud. Kosztolányi arrived in Budapest in 1903 as a Hungarian and German philologist. He had already begun writing at this time, and together with several of his contemporaries, he became co-founder and contributor to the journal *Nyugat* (*Occident*) in 1908. This landmark periodical conveyed the new trends of Western literature and culture while, at the same time, preserving the Hungarian poetry based on its linguistic musicality.

Budapest enjoyed considerable development during Kosztolányi's lifetime, which often provided the backdrop and inspiration for his work. Kosztolányi has a particular interest in two cities. His birthplace, Szabadka (today Subotica, in Serbia), which was annexed to Yugoslavia after the First World War, becomes a city of the past and nostalgia with its memories of childhood and youth, while Budapest is a city of the present. It is perhaps not surprising that two of his four novels are set in the small town he left behind (*Pacsirta* / *Sky-lark*, *Aranyásrkány* / *The Golden Kite*). Another is set in Budapest in the 1920s (*Édes Anna*), while his first is set in ancient Rome (*Nero* – a bitter, poignant, and still timely parable about the modern phenomenon of the populist politician and the talentless rabble-rouser in one person).

The influence of Art Nouveau is still visible at the beginning of his art. Later in his career, the painterly quality of “Nowadays, I dream of colored inks” is supplemented by snapshots that can be arranged in albums but also are able to stand on their own, such as *Uproarious Nature*, “Three Satires,” “Travel Sketches,” or “Forty Snapshots,” the last title itself a clue.

His volume *Complaints of the Poor Little Child* from 1910 offers a stylized child's view of the times, as does the figure of his most famous short-story hero. Kornél Esti is an alter ego who, like his author, begins in a sleepy little town but ends up in the fast-paced Budapest of the 1930s. The protagonist undergoes a transformation from a child initially afraid of the world to a young, fiery poet who becomes a writer, editor and literary gentleman. The author and the alter ego represent the interpenetrable, dynamic relationship between the real and the created selves. The etymological root of Kornél Esti's surname is the Hungarian word “evening.” Kosztolányi frequently employs the metaphors of the evening, autumn, the autumn months, as well as the *topos* associated with lateness and remembrance – all are related to the most significant problem of modernity: time.

Kosztolányi's poetry, however, is characterized by a sort of duality: on the one hand, it evokes a sense of nostalgia for lost youth, and on the other, it reveals the loss of illusions of the “mournful man.”

This loss of illusion is exemplified by the “Evensong of Kornél Esti,” which could be considered Kosztolányi’s *Ars poetica*: “You must make your rounds on the heights / of life, be like Everything, / forever bathing in light: / you Nothing.” And the last verse: “Go glitter above the deep; / play-act in colorful clothing; / be like Nothing, something to keep, / you Everything.” *Nothing* and *Everything* are two sides of the same existence. For Kosztolányi, the artist’s primary task was to address the fundamental question of existence: “since my only task and destiny / are: *to be*” (“Poet in the Twentieth Century”).

In Kosztolányi’s view, what is tragic about humanity is that Man is destined to die without the prospect of an eternal existence: “Now look, I know there’s nothing I can believe in, / and I know just as well that soon I must be leaving” (“Inebriate of Dawn”). And what is exceptional about humanity is the uniqueness of each individual. And this uniqueness is not a result of his good or bad qualities, but of his human essence: “No matter who he was, the one who died / was light and heat” (“Funeral Oration”). The title and opening sentence of this poem evoke the earliest surviving Hungarian text of literary value, a 13th-century prayer. In contrast, the volume’s title poem, “Inebriate of Dawn,” begins with contemporary informal speech: “I’ve a story to tell you. If it wouldn’t be boring.”

In the first third of the 20th century, the individual is positioned in the central focus of artistic expression. But the same period already saw the dissolution of the concept of the individual becoming increasingly evident. As Albert Camus wrote in 1942: “Every man alive was privileged; there was only one class of men, the privileged class. All alive would be condemned to die one day; his turn, too, would come like the others” (*The Stranger*, Part 2, Chapter 5).

“September Devotion,” one of Kosztolányi’s last great poems, poses questions about existence that, in the twentieth century, art, rather than theology and philosophy, can answer perhaps most authentically. This is because the language that asks the question becomes the answer itself. “Why is Orion’s cap glowing like embers? / Why is a mild mist washing everything? / Who did this? What magician? Who remembers? / Why do you wonder—you—you wondrous being?”

Perhaps the poet’s secret lies in his ability to condense the questions of the young man about to enter life and those of the adult contemplating life in a timeless way.

Today, for many young Hungarians, Kosztolányi is not just a lesson in school but part of their everyday lives: his words can be read, and his most famous photographs can be seen on T-shirts and tote bags on the streets of Budapest and university towns. Even one of Hungary’s best-known alternative rock bands has taken the name of Kornél Esti, Kosztolányi’s famous fictional hero.

The translators of this collection have found English words for Kosztolányi's questions written in Hungarian. Thanks to their efforts, not only has Hungary (old and young) granted Kosztolányi acknowledgment, but perhaps English-speaking readers will also place him among his and their great European and American contemporaries.

Budapest, May 2024

Csaba Horváth

INTRODUCTION



Hungary is a country where writing, and especially poetry, has been a major public art for the four hundred-plus years in which one oppressor after another has sought to wipe the very language out. This history helps explain how the country could produce so many writers who would be ranked as world-class—if only the world knew of their existence. Very likely, most readers of books from presses devoted to poetry could name only a handful of Hungarian poets, at most. To understand why, it is helpful to summarize the conditions under which this poetry has tried to make itself known.

Hungarian, a Ural-Altaic language, exists on its own, with a few distant cousins in Finnish (not mutually comprehensible, despite rumors to the contrary), Estonian and Sámi, but no first cousins, let alone siblings, in the middle of a Europe where nearly all other languages are Indo-European and related one way or another (Romance, Teutonic, or Slavic)—a lonely eminence. You'd think the language would have been tempted to throw in the towel, after the Ottoman Empire built minarets and domes for 150 years and pushed Turkish words into its lexicon, and the Austro-Germans pummeled it often thereafter until and during World War II. In more recent memory, the Soviets took their turn, forcing schools to teach Russian as the compulsory second language. It is said that the resistance to this edict was simply to forget all of the language you'd been taught during the school year, and return at the end of summer with your knowledge of Russian as blank a slate as it had been a year before. This seems typical of a people who are said, in one of their endless jokes, to enter a revolving door after you and exit ahead. And there were plenty who exited in the twentieth century.¹

The Soviet occupation held on for ten years, from the end of World War II to 1956, when the Uprising temporarily drove them out before succumbing, rattling the whole country and shaking loose a quarter-million refugees to Austria and from there in a vast diaspora around the world. Outside of Melbourne, Australia, for example, there is a large Hungarian community center, with a chapel shared between Catholics and Lutherans. In Ontario, east of Los

¹ For a fine account of the heights achieved by just nine of these heroes of intellectual and artistic accomplishment, one need only read Kati Marton's *The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2006).

Angeles, there is a Calvinist Church; in the San Fernando Valley a community center, and in Los Angeles a United Hungarian House (and a similar one in San Diego's Balboa Park). For a long time, St. Stephen's was the downtown parish church for Catholic Hungarian expatriates in Los Angeles. There are local weekly newspapers in Hungarian communities of any size, and a national one out of the American Hungarian Foundation in Rutgers, New Jersey. And in Cleveland, where so many immigrants came to take on hard laboring jobs that it was for decades known as the third largest Hungarian city in the world, there is an Arpad Academy which presents medals for Hungarian-related achievements in the Arts and Sciences.

In the mother country the capital, Budapest, is much the largest center of cultural activity as well as population, but Debrecen, Szeged, Miskolc, Pécs, Győr, Sopron, Eger and some others are major provincial centers of arts and learning. Many of the greatest Hungarian writers were born elsewhere but came to Budapest to make their names, Dezső (Desiderius) Kosztolányi for one.

Kosztolányi Dezső (the order of names in his native country) was born in 1885, that seminal decade for Modernists who escaped being slaughtered in the First World War. His hometown, Szabadka, now Subotica, Serbia, was still part of Austria-Hungary. He died in 1936, three years before the slaughters of the Second World War began. His family is described as "intellectual," his father a school headmaster and teacher of physics, chemistry and mathematics, and Dezső at 18, just past the turn of the century, proceeded to the University of Budapest. His first writings were published in 1903, giving him thirty years in which he wrote an enormous amount of prose and poetry which made him without question one of the leading modern voices in Hungary. He published many short stories and several novels, of which *Skylark* and *Anna Édes* (the title character's name, her family name also meaning "sweet") are the best known in English; many articles in reviews and newspapers, as journalist and critic, ranging from impressionistic feuilletons to political commentary as well as substantial artistic and literary criticism. He did a regular weekly column for over twenty years, in addition to other journalism not part of that series. This range of writing was typical of Hungarian writers, given the small size of the Hungarian book market. His journalism could perhaps be viewed as a "day job" which supported his more strictly literary labors, above all, his own poetry.

His first book of poems, published when he was only 22, brought recognition but with a general sense that the writing was too self-consciously literary. Three years later, in 1910, however, his next book, *Complaints of the Poor Little Child*, instantly secured his lasting reputation as a leading modern voice. He lived through the First World War, in which Hungary was on the losing side (as

usual), after which a home-grown “Soviet” government ruled briefly. As Kosztolányi described its end, in the amusing first chapter of *Anna Édes*, its Commissar, Béla Kun, “was fleeing the country in an aeroplane. [...] The pilot of the aircraft was none other than the head of state himself.”²

After the Soviet failed, the nation came under the control of a Regent, Miklós Horthy, who had been an Admiral in the Austro-Hungarian Navy before the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920 took away Hungary’s corridor to the Adriatic Sea (and much else). Still, even in a truncated, land-locked nation without a Navy, Horthy absurdly remained an Admiral, wore gorgeous uniforms dripping with gold braid and medals, and paraded whenever he could on a white horse.³ The years between the Wars are called “the Horthy Era” and seem a relatively stable period during which Kosztolányi was one of the most active writers.

Kosztolányi’s poetic oeuvre amounts to some 24,000 lines, in 825 titled pieces covering 700 pages. Out of this abundance we have selected well over 100 poems individual poems, hoping to suggest the breadth of his subjects and style. (However, from the volume *Számadás / Summing Up*, the last one in his life, we included almost every piece.) While much of his middle period was in free verse, most of his poems were written in meter and rhyme, sometimes in traditional stanzas, sometimes ad hoc. But these categories differ from their English counterparts. In Hungarian, all words have their primary accent on the first syllable, which suggests that trochaic (or the related dactylic) rather than iambic meter would be natural. However, a great deal of Hungarian poetry is in iambic: the meter is quantitative, based on syllable length rather than stress, which gives Hungarian prosody a two-voice polyphony. Also, rhymes cannot easily be made on the last beat of a line, leading to what our poetry manuals would call “feminine” rhymes, and rhyming a whole poem in that form in English is usually seen as a tour de force, or a piece of light verse.

In fact, the Hungarian poet’s commitment to rhyme allows a looser combination of consonants around as many as two or three syllables’ vowels. There is no need to demonstrate here how this works in practice. The main point is that we have tried in our translations to follow the poet’s rhyme scheme, even when a fivefold string of a-a-a-a-a challenges us to carry all of it across the gaping chasm between the two languages, into the sparse collection of rhymes in English that don’t sound silly. We have taken it as a ground rule to play, where possible, by the same patterns of significant sounds as the Hungarian. The poet Miklós Radnóti argued this point succinctly in his prose memoir,

² *Anna Édes*, translated by George Szirtes (London, Quartet Encounters, 1991), 1.

³ In consequence, a biography by Thomas Sakmyster is titled *Hungary’s Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918–1944*. (Boulder, CO, East European Monographs, 1994.) The Wikipedia article on Horthy unfolds his enormously complicated, and in some ways very Hungarian, life story.

“Under Gemini.” Against a French poet’s scoffing dismissal of “Fidelity to form!” in translating poems, saying “We tell the truth about them in French,” Radnóti retorts:

“Truth? Without form? How can formless poems be true? The form is basic, old chap. That’s what strikes to the heart.”⁴

One quickly gains the impression that poetry has been terribly—or wonderfully and urgently—essential to Hungarians, and understandably so, given the loneliness of their language. How better not just to preserve it but to keep it alive than in poems? For foreigners, modern Hungarian poetry can be said to have begun with the life, work, and savage death of a young man, Sándor Petőfi, who in 1849 was killed in battle by Cossack troops brought in by the Austrian Emperor to help quell a rebellion—a Russian intervention eerily foreshadowing that of 1956.

Petőfi was barely twenty in 1845 when he wrote an adventurous, amorous, intelligent, at times spooky, often hilarious, and surprisingly moving poem, János Vitéz (John the Valiant)—moving both in keeping up its momentum and in affecting the emotions of readers and listeners. High school students for over a century have been required to memorize and recite dozens of the poem’s 1480 lines in order to graduate. That this was not felt as an undue or unkind burden is shown by the number of Hungarians who will tell you they memorized the whole poem.

As we mentioned, modern Hungarian poets, in the century and a half since Petőfi’s death, are constantly looking back to him and to János Arany, his friend and co-equal atop the Hungarian poetic pantheon, as benchmarks, exemplars who helped launch their common purpose of keeping the spoken language alive through concentrating it in literary forms. Dezső Kosztolányi worked in the midst of all this common creative endeavor, which included a great deal of translation from the literature of the rest of the world, and he himself translated poetry from China and Japan as well as Shakespeare and other English authors, and many works in other major European languages.

Kosztolányi’s writing is characterized by its humane and humanistic outlook, a compound of gentle irony, humor (not only in light verse, little of which we have translated), virtuosity (astonishing multi-syllabic rhymes and word pairings that are striking both semantically and phonologically), gentle melancholy, and a tendency to introspection. His melancholy was reinforced by Hungary’s severe truncation by the Treaty of Trianon, which ended World War I for Hungary and the consequent loss of his birthplace, where his parents still lived; the scar, as with most Hungarians, remained with him all his life and affected his outlook generally.

⁴ *Under Gemini*, translated by Kenneth and Zita McRobbie (Columbus, OH, Ohio University Press, 1985), 42.

Kosztolányi's irony is not to be confused with frivolousness. He fervently believed in the lightness that conceals depth—and in the superficiality of much that was morose pontification. This credo is proclaimed in “Evensong of Kornél Esti,” Kornél Esti being Kosztolányi's literary alter ego, or more to the point, his unrestrained id, brought to life in his novel, *Kornél Esti*, and his posthumously collected short stories, *The Adventures of Kornél Esti* (unpublished in translation).

It has been said that Hungarian lyric verse is one of the richest in poems about death, and Dezső Kosztolányi certainly contributed his share, especially in his final years as he suffered through the excruciating pain of oral cancer and its attempted treatments. One of his earliest surviving poems, written when he was 15, is included to illustrate the depth (and length) of his preoccupation with mortality. The theme recurs throughout his poetic oeuvre. Many of these poems express unvarnished despair, but some of the last, such as “Inebriate of Dawn” (considered by most Hungarians his supreme poetic masterpiece, and indeed, one of the greatest of Hungarian poems), find transcendence even in the absence of faith in an existence after death.

We have chosen to entitle both this volume and this poem not with a literal translation of its title, “Drunkenness at Dawn,” but with a nod to the great American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), who shared Kosztolányi's ability to combine lightness of manner and depth of spirit, as in this book's epigraph.

John M. Ridland
Santa Barbara, CA

Peter V. Czipott
San Diego, CA

JUVENILIA



The Autumn Evening's Cool

(Híves őszi este...)

Cool autumn evening,
all of me is chilled.
In the graveyard, in the graveyard,
my place there will be filled.

1900

—JMR and PVC

WITHIN FOUR WALLS



NÉGY FAL KÖZÖTT

1907

Trees of Üllői Street

(*Üllői-úti fák*)

May Heaven be lined with you,
trees of Üllői Street.
Your leafy canopies renew
a fragrant, flowery whirlwind, strew
a thousand white blooms, and repeat.
You gave us struggles and success,
gave us our very youthfulness,
trees of Üllői Street.

Open like this for others, too,
trees of Üllői Street.
Let them inhale the scent we do,
the fragrant balm, grow drowsy through
the evening hours, so sweet.
Hide the cypresses funebral,
let them believe youth is eternal,
trees of Üllői Street.

Your yellowing border starts to die,
trees of Üllői Street.
My fancy's sun drops down the sky,
the wind, as it whistles sadly by,
kills every shoot it meets.
Where does our youthfulness now fly?
You sad-leafed trees, reply, reply,
trees of Üllői Street.

1906

—JMR and PVC

COMPLAINTS OF THE POOR LITTLE CHILD



A SZEGÉNY KISGYERMEK PANASZAI

1910, rev. 1923

O death.

Only we know him, we little kids.
He stands in our paths:
we weep, we whimper with quivering lips.
O death.
He is our playmate and he trifles with us.
Racing, he dashes –
in Tag, he is It – and woe, woe be to us,
he tears at our collars, we spin around, frightened;
he cackles and smashes our noses right in.
We see him in wells, above the deep waters,
he lurks in dark rooms, he sits there and dodders.
Dressed in a sheet – as our wetnurse puts it –
with scythe in hand, his lips have all rotted:
he watches while plotting,
for the night-fever to drop in:
when the mercury clambers up from the bulb,
he covers his mouth and guffaws: a new cull!
His is the dance,
for He is death.
On Carnival nights as the grown-ups party,
in our little room the window looms darkly;
from out in the night
He stares in, causing fright.
We children combat him, engage him in fight
and fire our popguns when we have him in sight.

1910

—PVC

Nowadays, I dream of colored inks.

Yellow is prettiest. Many, many are the letters
I'd write a little girl with this yellow ink,
a little girl, my love since I met her.
I'd write criss-crosswise, in symbols like Japanese
and a friendly bird with curlicues.
I still want inks in many other colors,
In bronze and silver, and green and golden hues;
I'd still need others, many hundreds, thousands
and then I'd still need millions by the lorry:
amusing purple, wine, and muted gray;
prim and coy, and passionate and gaudy,
and I also need a mournful violet,
brick-red, and blue, but a pale blue, too,
exactly the color that door-window casts
under the entry arch in an August noon.
And I would also want a burning red,
the bloody color of the angry sunset
and then I'd write, keep writing on and on,
in blue to little sis, to mom in gold.
I'd write prayers in gold to dearest mother,
golden fire, golden words like gold
of dawn. And I'd never get bored, I'd keep on writing
in an ancient tower, on and on, never
ceasing, happily, my God, how very happily.

I'd color my life with these inks forever.

1910

—PVC and JMR

Bloodily we killed the ugly toad.

O it was horrific.

It was war, barbaric.

It was hellish-yellow after lunch.

Up to our necks in mud and grunge,

like bloody butchers we were slaving

till the fat frog, finally failing,

fell. Emerald green, with ruby eyes,

its belly sapphire, its legs turquoise;

it sweated diamonds full of poison.

With its skin of silken texture

and its legendary treasure,

the ghastly mother-frog fell prostrate.

With sticks we held her down and splayed her,

one of us cut, another slayed her,

to the graveyard-shore we bore her,

where her thousand tadpoles mourned her,

and with her bloody eyes she looked back

upon the dusk, the cursèd gloaming.

We stood there heartlessly, stiff, benumbed,

as if we were commanders, gloating.

Now here we are. In the tidy pantry.

After a fine battle. Our mouths are fashioned

into smiles, our slashing teeth to hide

disgust, and we proudly hold heads high:

we executioners, we dwarf assassins.

1911

—PVC

Go, little child.

Now this is over, too.
Go, dear child, my darling little boy.
The infinite is where your road takes you,
but now what awaits me is the void.
Nothingness. A few more venturesome years,
then manhood and the yellow dotard's tears.
Go, my dear, and please forgive the rhapsodist
who now is forcing you onstage to star,
attend the cheerless editors in Budapest,
mutely cover up your genuine scars.
Go to the New York⁵ and on its marble
café catafalque learn to die anew,
go into the crossfire of envious eyes,
let them see what's literary in you.
Go complain that he who took you to market
is the one who most loved you
and, having burgled your clean, small coffin,
has now opened your dead eyes, too.
Tell them: an orphan, now you're most orphaned –
a tiny beggar on the earthly orb –
Naked were you born, so set out naked now...
Go, poor one, go forth.

1910

—PVC

⁵ The New York Coffee House was a favorite writers' hangout in Budapest; it figures repeatedly in Kosztolányi's oeuvre.

BREAD AND WINE



KENYÉR ÉS BOR

1920

Happy Sad Song

(Boldog, szomorú dal)

I've got enough bread and I've plenty of wine,
and I have a child of my own and a wife.
So why should it sadden, this heart of mine?
I've had plenty to eat through all of my life.
I have a good garden: the trees cascade
into it, whispering, over my road:
walnuts, hazelnuts, poppy seed—
indoors the pantry groans with the load.
I have a good bedcover also, it's ample,
a telephone, and a suitcase for travel;
well-wishers call me a shining example,
and I don't curry favor, I never grovel.
No longer, my hazy and vague reputation,
fogged with the tears of a drunkard, unsteady:
if sometimes I'm first to present salutations,
often the others have hailed me already.
My house is all wired, the lamps are a-glow,
my cigarette case sterling silver, in truth,
my pen and my pencil dart to and fro,
my old pipe is smoking away in my mouth.
I've a bath for my body to feel refreshed,
and lukewarm tea for my nervous anger;
if I should go strolling in sad Budapest,
people won't take me for a total stranger.
What I sing could be called a rueful lament,
making tears course the faces of many a one:
old Hungary grants me acknowledgment
that it thinks of me as its young singing son.
But sometimes I come to a halt before sleeping,
anguished, declining, I fear, into dying,
I bury the treasure I hold for safekeeping
deep in the floor, well hidden away. Now lying,
a patient in fever who startles awake
and construes his dreams in wildest distraction,
my hand goes scrabbling for what it should take,

forgetting where once I sought satisfaction.
For the treasure I longed for is not to be found,
the treasure for which I had crumbled to dust:
I'm at home in this world, my feet on the ground,
in the sky there's no longer a home I can trust.

1917

—JMR and PVC

COMPLAINTS OF THE MOURNFUL MAN



A BÚS FÉRFI PANASZAI

1924

The drinking-glass shatters
& the teeth fall out.

The clothes shred to pieces
& the eyes weaken.

Keys and buttons are lost
& the life-lust fades.

The candle, waning, wanes
& the blood slows down.

The lamp crashes to earth
& the heartbeat stops.

Alas for me and you:
woe, woe to us.

1923
—PVC

NAKED



MEZTELENÜL

1928–1935

The Father

(Az apa)

How swiftly you recede in time's expanse
from me, my son.
Already bolting from the dinner table,
you run and vanish.
You read the paper while I speak to you,
and answer curtly.
You're with your friends. Your room is empty.
My soul is empty.
You fail to see my face's foolish love.
You don't notice me.
My squeaky voice strikes you as ugly.
My hand is heavy.
Your mother is, again, my only girlfriend.
I chat with her.
I mention our frolicsome past—softly,
so you don't hear it.
This is how I once left my father, too,
He, too, left like this.
With heavy sighs, and proud, accursed,
not even looking back.
O the solitude's like that of old,
when you were yet unborn.
The mornings scatter ashes on my head,
and noontimes are gray.
In the garden at night I watch the sky,
the trees, the leaves,
and I ask myself: why does the fruit not
understand the trunk?

1927

—PVC

Widow in the Streetcar

(Özvegy a villamosban)

Here in the streetcar, nobody at all
wants to give a seat
to this widow.
She just stands and keeps an eye out
for a spot
where she might sit.
Here's what's in her eyes, though: grace,
compassion, people.
I've come from afar;
I've stumbled forward through children's rooms
and cemeteries
until I reached this point.
But my husband's dead, there's no-one to protect me,
my sons have died,
my daughters, my dear son-in-law too,
and now I complete
this journey alone
to the end of the line.
Tell me, people,
when you see me lurching here
in my funny, odd little black hat,
with my buckling knees,
and my womb scarred
by frequent births,
doesn't it occur to you
to think of your own mothers?

1924

—PVC

Girl in the Typist Pool

(Gépirókisasszony)

You sit.

You attend to what you hear and my words—
become lightning—flash through your quick brain
and—condensed into order—
spark out brilliantly through your fingertips
as you pound that clacking, devilish-tiresome
steel piano.

This is how our lives pass by.
In uninterrupted work, vigilant attention,
amidst machines
continually clattering,
in ugly drudgery, even though our heads
contain light and reason, and our hearts, kindness.
You can't even talk about what interests you anymore,
or about what still hurts.
Just like me.

Wife of my thought.
Spouse of my soul.
Girl in the typist pool.

1924

—PVC

A Bad Poet Is So Touching

(Egy rossz költő mily megindító)

A bad poet is so touching. Now, for years
They've ignored and then forgotten him.
He shuffles along here, worn and gray. The buttons
dangle from his ragged coat; unpublished poems
whistle from his mouth on the winter wind.
Such power and arrogance! And on his face
loathing and envy, that from a distance seems
a rare affliction, even ethereal.
Beside him the famed, who paid
for articles extolling them, applauded
in concert halls: profiteers, fortune hunters.
Balding, proud, his apostolic brow
is wreathed with tears by Life, which deifies
his youthful dream he still believes in strongly.
Even his gaunt, tubercular appearance,
fault of poor food, is stylish. Like a book.
Complain in vain, Critiques and Literature.
He's all ideals. He is the ideal poet.

1924

—JMR and PVC

Beyond the Beyond

(Hetedhétország)

I ate the world and threw it up.
Life is possibly all the same.
I rumbled onward past borders and languages
with such insolent speed
that even I got scared.
Guten Morgen! they said, but just one day later: *Bonjour!*
and on one weird day's p.m.
they greeted me melodiously: *Good afternoon!*
I eavesdropped on peoples' pillow talk, peeked through their keyholes,
I spied what they do when entirely alone.
A mother was suckling her whiny baby.
I climbed towers too, devoured what museums and art galleries
held, clattered up
crazy department store escalators.
In the office above, four hundred typist girls
rattled pallidly away.
In the wonderful gramophone departments I heard
black music: jazz;
I bought a nicotine-free pipe, a necktie, a radio antenna,
and paid via pneumatic post at the one hundred eighty-seventh cashier
in the sparkling basement corridor,
and afterwards dined, rooftop alfresco, on pineapple.
There's hot and cold running water in every hotel,
And in some you can shop for books and even get
a shave at midnight. When telephoned, people come
instantly to your house. Yet, yet, I confess:
my final impression is, above all, depressing.
For when my train panted its way
toward these glorious cities at a mile a minute,
through the smoke and in the thinly dribbling moonlight
everywhere I looked, I saw with alarm,
most significantly,
sleeping and yet alert, the teeming graveyards.

London, 1927
—PVC and JMR

When Children Play
(*Ha játszanak a gyermekek...*)

When children play, they prepare for hours,
arranging things, discussing things—then suddenly
it all comes to an end. It has no middle,
just a start and end. Tell me, isn't our life
precisely like this, too? It has only just begun
and it's already finished. Its middle is as nothing.

1925
—PVC

He Who Died Today

(Aki ma meghalt)

He who died today,
just one hour ago,
is as ancient to me
as Alexander the Great, or Xerxes' soldiers.
Silence fills his ears,
dust and muteness, his mouth.
When old friends mention him
in old rooms,
I, leaden-headed, try
to recall him.
But I no longer comprehend him: he's alien.
I feign astonishment.
I cover him up with the long, long
banner of oblivion,
with ragged indifference, with silence,
because I'll never catch up to him, anyhow:
he's far ahead of me,
like Alexander the Great, or Xerxes' soldiers.

1927

—PVC

My Old Chum, with Eyeglasses

(Régi pajtás szemüveggel)

You've gone dove-gray completely, my childhood chum.
O where have you been,
what mill or granary have you been sleeping in,
you floury miller?
Clown of our ten-minute breaks, saucy little
rattling magpie, you,
this hairpiece doesn't suit you, no, not one bit,
nor your gravity.
There is glass over your sprightly eyes, a thin
ice membrane on them;
you stare from under it and drawl, "Dezső,
dear little Dezső."
I keep on staring, now looking at your eyes,
those familiar, merry
eyes of yours of old, frozen there in the ice,
deep under the ice.
How calm and distant, how sage they are,
almost cold already.
But mine: my eyes are hot, dear fellow: see,
they're flowing with tears.

1930

—PVC

UPROARIOUS NATURE



ZSIVAJGÓ TERMÉSZET

1930

The Ant
(*Hangya*)

Zealously ants work the soil.
Their bread and their adventure is love of toil.
No turmoil
if summer's mild: they see their winter corn won't spoil.

The Wasp
(*Darázs*)

Black-and-yellow assassin, dagger in hand:
tragic
wasp! Its quarrelsome, winged and nervous buzzing:
magic!
The wound it stabs, red-hot live coal: anthropo-
phagic!

The Marbled White Butterfly (Melanargia Galathea)
(*Galathéa*)

Great musicians are the birds.
I can't sing, but I can look for what I've heard.
When plants shoot bright sky-rockets, I need no word
to perceive the whole Universe, unblurred.
Nestless,
it flits this way onto its blooming prize:
a drunken, restless,
mute artist—offbeat likewise.

1928
—JMR and PVC

SUMMING UP



SZÁMADÁS

1935

Summing Up

(Számadás)

1.

You've said enough now, don't mince words, you coward,
it's no shame, so admit it—now you're free—
you wanted to be happy, it was too hard,
so be what you are: unhappy, utterly.

Be tortured thus, entirely, on the rack,
rather than halfway, bargaining uselessly:
you need not fear you suffer alone, you jack-
ass: plenty of you on Planet Earth, you'll see.

Kneeling, bellies exposed, chain-bound, they pass,
an endless caravan at its slow pace
into churches, into hospitals and prisons:

hurry there, you too, into your proper place,
and be a burning wick, a flicker, unbound:
make do with discontent's transcendent frisson.

2.

You're not alone—and you're better off, this way;
many strange people stare at you in wonder.
They neither greet you, nor idolize, nor pray,
nor roll their souls for you to trample under;

their glance at you is wooden, dull, and gray,
indifferent, though helpful (one in a hundred),
but when you live with these, your brothers, they
will dumbfound you. Their tribe cannot be numbered.

The family of those who lack family
out-shouts the rule of the majority,
a grim minority, hard and tenacious,

accused by the complacent noisily,
an unwritten Table of Laws which none can see,
a counter-voice, eternal and voracious.

3.

You're needed still, to make your kestrel screech,
don't ask if it's permitted or enjoined,
not sparing either blood or tearful speech,
but shriek your words into the hollow void;

they may not hear: don't let that cause a breach:
here you may still be gainfully employed,
and someone must interpret such as each
of these: the whore, and the wretch with wits destroyed.

Sit in a corner, or stand aside, and gaze,
let sympathy be the light your eye betrays,
go to the sufferers thuswise when you call

and don't glance at the broken one's stump sideways,
see him as indivisible, as he stays:
whoever belongs to none, belongs to all.

4.

Who else would offer water to the sick,
if not ourselves, who sit here sleeplessly?
Would a fanatic, martyr, heretic,
who dangles from a delusion drunkenly,

see the old spinster tossed aside like a stick?
Who would cry if our ears could not hear freely;
and would the ones who say they love through thick
and thin, still love? Without us what would the world be?

What would the world be otherwise? Not quite
the same. Who would there be who could do right
by the animals, faithful. Who would spread the balm

and who would be the one to rush at night
into infinite wonders with the lamp-light,
to write all down in Nirvana's cloudy calm?

5.

This land is gloomy. The terrorist's revolting,
whose spirit thuds against the wall; the grown
son, a corpse, his mother by him, vomiting
her barbarous wails—her terrifying tones—

what would you write? Their fate is down in writing:
where would you make—and how—our protest known?
But then where could you go? And what's delighting?
What interests, what longings are your own?

A heap of money, maybe? Buttered bread?
A movie star's cheap ribbon, that mere shred?
A car? An escapade? Some wretched turn,

a fizzing shindig? Flirtatious romp in bed?
Or tawdry life's crass cabaret, that spread
from which the head rings and the stomach burns?

So see and stay, orphan among the parentless,
stay here among your kind, at last stop here,
asking for nothing, expecting even less:
these truly are your brothers, not to fear;

conjure them in your study at your desk,
give them a more electrifying career;
if you survive the disguises and mute masks,
they may accept the words that you hold dear.

They will make sense of you, you of them, too,
those you have cried for, they will cry for you;
between their fates and ours, there's naught to choose,

without the battle-battered arms we threw
away, we can't be lost, no swords can do
us harm, since we have nothing left to lose.

7.

The happy man's a coward, you must say:
a craven, lying low, and locking up
every piece of his sparkling array—
his life, too, closed up like a little shop

of treasures he's too fearful to display;
his soul is cramped, and bears a barren crop;
when a child screams, thieves must be on their way;
trembling, he waits for eternity to stop.

His homeland is his house, his friends high-powered,
his kindred, his familiars—how they've cowered,
bordered by garden, henhouse, cellar door,

but the unhappy one camps out of doors,
a cloud his banner: he alone grows more
brave and good—a hero, not a coward.

1933

—JMR and PVC

Shining Wreath

(Fényes koszorú)

They have insulted the mother dear to me,
they're saying that she's already an old lady,
her forehead's wrinkled, her days are passing by,
and at such an age, her eyesight's surely dimming.

Oh my, how the wise ones understand the boorish
commands of Fate, oh my, such scholars are they!
But I in my ignorance cannot understand this.
Well then, do you know her, do your unruly mouths
dare speak about her true maternal love?
Did you see her face and the fairy light-in-darkness
of her blue eyes, when she rustled into the depths
of my childhood bedroom, banishing my terrors?
And as she leaned over my bed, all turned quiet around her,
the light grew all around her? Did you see then
how slowly she left the room, glancing back at me,
gilding the night and leaving me in peace?
Do you know that for me she is the only one,
and she's neither young to me, nor is she old;
she's merely my dear mother, whom angelic words
call Eulalia, the Beautifully-spoken One.

You see, I won't leave you behind, my blessed one,
and as when your little boy, already your knight,
went brandishing his fist, if any dared hurt you,
so now I clatter at life, despicable as a wild boar
that would, if it could, tear you apart with its tusks
and trample you into the dust: you, so majestic.
I'll never leave you behind—you, the very first
woman on Earth: your child-knight is still here
to defend you forever and, beyond all time,
he places your shining wreath upon your head.

1931

—PVC and JMR

For Life and Death

(Életre-halálra)

There's something I must say, getting
ready to go.

I lived here, Magyars: my blood and yours
equally flow.

Like one ignited into burning words
by death,

I declaim inflamed visions
with all my breath.

Together with you, together, together,
forever.

In the trenches, cornered, brothers in arms,
together.

What was this? The enormity of it cries out
in my heart.

Flame and cinders: who looks into them goes mad,
falls apart.

Because of it too, so very early,
I released

my tears, and sobbed through the long and
bloody feast.

I felt the void, the acid bath
of shame.

But once I saw how the harvest of
Canaan came.

A family that the round of the sky holds
and caresses.

The waists of the peasant girls that are
like princesses’.

Our tears which abundant carousals
drown in.

Youthful strength that prodigally scatters
its sins.

Nevertheless, everything that is yours
I hold close.

Your old moustaches, your purple-blue veins, so
varicose.

Your lordly temper, the like of which
cannot be found.

Words with an ancient, weighty, old-
fashioned sound.

My illusions that have wounded my life
from first to last.

Toward dawn, the violin that whines
into the past.

Grain fields swimming in mirages
above the loam.

The palace, mirrored through the
silvery foam.

The bones of my dead are going pale
underground,

my grandmother with her matronly face—
her sleep is sound.

Without family, in my wailing solitude,
all alone.

The long autumn looking back at
where it's flown.

Alas, my life has shackled me:
I'm locked.

Platonic love, you hot and living shackle,
my freedom's blocked.

Pure romantic love can only walk
in shackles.

I bring suit against my human entail that has
me shackled.

I bit into them and yearned for treasure that
does not exist.

This shackle, both dream and blessing,
I also kissed.

When my soul asked fate for what it never
conferred,

then János Arany enchanted me with
magic words.

Here and here only, I won't forget this
in the least.

Even in death I shall walk here only,
in the East.

Sorrow is more incandescent here, and joy strikes
the heart through.

What a lovely, wild and merry toast this was:
I do thank you.

1930
—JMR and PVC

Europe

(Európa)

Europe, it's to you
you, you, that my plea soars in the century's blind
chaotic upheaval
and while others toll their burial bells at night,
with strident Dionysian hymns, I bid you
a most merry "Good morning!"

O ancient continent,
You old, you pockmarked, you holy, you majestic
nurturer of souls, sifter of scents and savors,
miracle-worker, high-brow and literate,
aged Europe.

Though only our stepmother, I'll struggle for you,
my mouth will beat you down, bewitch you with kisses
and conquer you with words, so at last you'll love me.

Who can tear me away?
Who can tear me away from your motherly breast?
Haven't I always been your pure and faithful son?
Ever since I was just a pup, I've sat all night
in the light of my desk lamp, learning your lessons,
attentive, wonder-struck by your hundred-tongued speech,
so its every word wormed its way into my heart.
Ever since, I can make my babble understood
no matter where I land: I've many hundreds of kin,
no matter where I find myself, I've siblings by the thousand.

Didn't I see the old German grannies in Köln
scuttling under the rain, and the elfin, easy
French girls gamboling lightheartedly in Paris?
The silver wigs in the House of Lords in London?
And in the workers' district, in family rooms,
didn't I eat and drink with loud-mouthed Italians?
Didn't the ennui of the Slavs, of the pallid Slavs,

pain me to my marrow, the exhausted golden
glow of their mournfulness?
Everyone on this Earth is sweet to me, and my own;
I enlarge my heart so they all fit in together.

Accept me, as I you,
into your hearts, and
you, the poets, and you,
buglers of far-off lands,
join us in our appeal, there in your homelands
on our mothers' behalf, and we will then sue them
also, here at home, so that your mothers will live.
Shout it out together,
you gallant spirits of Europe, you poets,
that a cowardly beast is lurking in its lair
and half-blind moles are tunneling in the soil.
Sing it out together,
you lights, you princely powers, you spirit-princes,
that our fortress is the soul, an airy castle
which we build to the sky out of adamant affection
and out of airy words.
Set anew to building, poets, you who garrison
those castles in the air.

1930

—JMR and PVC

In Early September

(Szeptember elején)

The long, mute autumn lies back, motionless
in its golden robe, among its summer toys,
rich and luxurious, as the year destroys
its hopes of victory, a conquered Darius.

All around it, its scarlet fruits glow, spilled,
and it doesn't wait for its fancies to be filled,
the wind, the quiet, the greenish sky is chilled,
they whisper, it has done all that it willed,
it nods, it knows it, it has long been drilled
that life's beginning and end are one, fulfilled.

Nor does it hurt me that I must dispense
with all that's beautiful. I dress up in
the heavy golden cloak of wisdom, grin,
and my every word is smiling and indifference.

1930

—JMR and PVC

Poet in the Twentieth Century

(*Költő a huszadik században*)

On the proud bed of my self-regard I recline
contentedly, and, yellow on my duvet,
fall the night's electric light and the day's sunshine.
I lounge amid smoke and coffee,
since my only task and destiny
are: *to be*.

As much as we contain, that's all we're worth:
what's it to me, that aura of lies the world calls
work?

What do I care about their prophets—false.
I don't make deals with anything foul or base,
not with the screaming sports-mad crowd,
nor mathematics, nor Hollywood's blank face.
The healthy mind babbles gospels redeemingly
and boring lunacies, for all I care:
no concern of mine, the century's rag-doll jokers,
nor the oafish pilots chugging through the upper air.
I don't need the lordly spoils of the power-brokers,
or the cheap goodwill of the hoi-polloi's cheap roar.
My friends, what I proclaim is that two are many,
but one is more.

So let the past rattle away, and with it the simpleton future.
I must earn a treasure worthier and more sure.
I rule, even perched on the volcano's crater,
my throne secure.

I measure myself by the mold
of my own mettle.

When I let fall words, they are solid gold
medals.

Each bears my profile, like that of a king,
and engraved on its rim you'll see
this haughty writing:

Me.

1931

—JMR and PVC

Happiness Speaking

(Beszélő boldogság)

I have to speak now. Everybody loves me,
loves Happiness (that's me) because I live.
I always have to say, they are already
broken, the tribulations: they had to give.

I have to speak to the sky, the veins, the tree,
to you, as huge as space, unceasingness,
Soul, though you cannot hear: I'm heretic, see?
I speak to you alone, to Nothingness.

You who came into being out of pain
that raged in the rib-cage of the Natural Man,
and battered on the iron doors of death,

now you are born of me and of my song,
I break from a circle I've been locked in long:
rejoicing, I create you with my breath.

1932

—JMR and PVC

Lovers
(*Szerelmesek*)

Resting their heads in their palms,
they stare so hard at each other
as if they hadn't met for a millennium,
gracefully they gesture, tenderly turning
and slowly dandling
their bodies' precious pearls, wondrously burning,
then they adjust their mouths for the kiss that revives,
seeking the way-out from their accursed,
locked-in lives,
but still they hesitate, unmoving, in a long trance,
pull apart and gaze
up at the fog-shrouded apex in the rapturous distance,
where the great starry eyes assemble,
unhappy, staring wide-open, to don
the light desire that resembles
a heavy cross, and their mouths, eyes, and inner souls
tremble.

1933

—PVC and JMR

Song of Songs

(Énekek éneke)

From your mouth filled with manna you never
gave me enough bread and butter
to teach me to live forever,
like a flame, to hungrily flutter.

Never gave me enough to drink
from your blessed breasts, so I
could believe in my thirst, and think
of you as the power in the sky.

You call me daily to your table,
and treat me as a laughing matter,
the setting is rich—incomparable—
but empty, the glass and platter.

A man, I would always eat, drink, thrive,
as you bring the parade to a halt, for
you always promise, and then deprive,
raising your hand like a priest at the altar.

Like a whore you tempt with your lips,
sharpen your fingernails, and teach
me to drink the water that my eye drips,
and feed me with hopes I can't reach.

The blessing of your grace is victorious.
Released, you have me in thrall,
and panting, you hold me still, as glorious,
a man, between god and animal.

Thus you make present all past things,
so you aren't here, yet you remain,
you transform the finite to everlasting,
and wherever I look, there you are again.

You *are* what *is*, you are memory,
you're the one who sends, and then calls back.
I'd run from you, then back I'd scurry,
for my pain to weaken and grow slack.

Look, I know what this hide-and-seek
is about, I know what it's for,
O ever-new and worthless—weak—
nature's ancient collaborator.

But tell me, why should one keep intact
such faith on this shabby, flimsy earth,
this painful masterpiece you enact—
why have you built it since my birth?

Eternal sculptress, mysterious,
who marked me out for one fate, no other,
to play the game, joyless, serious,
raising me up to miracles—Mother.

1933

—JMR

Litany
(*Litânia*)

In this, my era:
the steel of flying machines rumbled into the skies.

In this, my era:
humanity did not know where its purpose lies.

In this, my era:
both wires and souls spoke out from inside the walls.

In this, my era:
wild distorted speech talked back in a Babel of cat-calls.

In this, my era:
suicides by the thousands tumbled onto the ground.

In this, my era:
poisons propelled the wretched into sleep profound.

In this, my era:
orphan women, ill, lay down upon the rack.

In this, my era:
psychoanalysts pried into souls through every crack.

In this, my era:
the healthy begged on the street corners like the weak.

In this, my era:
thrones and banks and peoples began to creak.

In this, my era:
trembling songs screamed out our psychic woes.

In this, my era:
the poet had to adapt his verse into prose.

In this, my era:
O how all of us were lost in our isolation.

In this, my era:
we wept as we bit into our bread ration.

In this, my era:
no-one at all was there to warm our poor hearts.

In this, my era:
God sat on his golden bough, sleepless yet apart.

1932

—JMR and PVC

Three Satires

(Három szatíra)

The Public Eminence

(Közéleti kitűnőség)

In a year, he attends some ten or twenty funerals and thirty banquets. He dictates as many letters of sympathy and telegrams of congratulation for his secretary's shorthand or Dictaphone. The economic crash "did not leave him indifferent, either." He grouses away about it. Meanwhile he puts on weight and then works off the surplus kilos in Marienbad each summer, which costs enough for several families to live a year in comfort. In the morning with his English trainer, he boxes to stay fresh. When he works, he mostly undersigns his name in a scribble—personally—and at such times he often stares, fatigued, into the light streaming in the window, his eyes gone misty. He must bear up under this oceanic workload, stay at his post, all in the public interest, no matter their hints that maybe it's time to go, because in this difficult time he mustn't rest, either, and so his watchword is always: "work." He's got high blood pressure. The famous German medical professors have prescribed him calm and moderation, and this is why, ever since, he only smokes cigarettes free of nicotine in a long holder, seventy in a day. He reads this and that, too. Mainly the memoirs of ministers and idiotic generals, never novels or verses, only that which is not trivial—pithy and "serious." At night, he squeezes his horrific swollen head into headphones and falls asleep in bed with a Viennese jazz band blaring in his ears.

He speaks Hungarian, German, and a little English too, but in all these languages only corrupted phrases: his mother tongue. He's said a million times: "I just got lucky," even when he didn't. His faded memory begins to fail. On the most stressful days, he doesn't even know who his mom was and his dad, and only occasionally remembers their given names. Other stuff has taken their place: a couple of phone numbers, documents, bad headlines. His soulless face is the color of dirt. It's already ripe for the earth. What are you waiting for? Into the ground with him. Bury him.

The Gentlewoman
(*Úriasszony*)

She's only forty kilos and most unhappy.
She exterminates her eyebrows, in company,
with a fine steel tweezers, tossing her
narrow head back and drawing red
moths above her lips with rouge, watching
herself in a hand-mirror. A couple of years
ago she wanted her breasts to be reduced
by a fashionable surgeon, but they talked
her out of it. She merely had, for safety's
sake, her appendix taken out; and aside
from this, a few other useless, surplus
organs, thereby to lighten herself still more.
She's now utterly empty, like an unpacked
suitcase or a novel by Dekobra.⁶
She swims, she flies, and goes to rhythmic gymnastics.
She plays rummy and bridge—but only in better
circles. As a girl, she dabbled at piano
also, but abandoned it. She abandons
everything. She takes her tragedy
on promenade and people pity her greatly.
She is the sorrowful gentlewoman.
When—at times—she's dressed up, she feels the cold.
She's hungry after dinner. "They don't understand her."
Not her husband, either, "that honorable boy"—
that's what she calls him—who earns the bread for her,
except she never does eat bread, instead
only aspic and grapefruit and caviar,
thus retaining her independence from him.
She's sick, poor thing. Extremely sick. She has
twenty toilets, thirty lovers and even more
"complexes." She always is dead tired.
Her speaking voice impersonal, mechanical,
like in the talkies, that sounds the same up close
or far away, and thus she speaks to no-one.

⁶ Maurice Dekobra (1885–1973; né Ernest-Maurice Tessier): one of the most fashionable French novelists of the interwar years, since fallen into near-total obscurity. Considered a subversive writer in the 1920's and 30's, his best-known book is *Madonna of the Sleeping Cars* (1925).

O Eve, Eve, ancient, sweetest Mother Eve,
how many times you come to mind when I see her,
your long mane, your lukewarm lazy thighs,
the manna of your warm breasts, your milk-flavored kiss,
as you lie there, sweet mother of us all,
in Paradise, among the flowers and serpents,
sheltered by the lovely tent of your hair.
She displays me her painted fingernails,
carmine, her curved nails, like an Amazon,
always promising to tear me to pieces.
But this doesn't interest me. Her chambermaid,
on the other hand. When she invites me
to tea, I kiss the maid on her mouth
while she's still showing me through the antechamber,
and on departing, too, after each visit,
It's the chambermaid's hand I kiss.

The Revolutionary

(*Forradalmár*)

He walks among us. A blessed, simple soul.
So very tender. His Christ-beard hangs in tasseled
tangles. He wears his warm and bloody heart
on his sleeve for all to see, like the owner's
blazon on a racehorse. This "horrific
Asia" hurts him, this "dear land" that others
bring to ruin, thus not allowing *him*
to bring to ruin. When he was young,
he married an ill-favored, tiny girl
and a nice big bank account. This
has supported him ever since, and
he can "live entirely for his ideals."
He's still not happy. His physique was trimmed
a little short, nose snubbed, and forehead low.
He now demands equality throughout,
a great redistribution, in the hope
that then he too will be issued with a straight,
stalwart spine, a lordly aquiline nose,
and from the brain-tycoon, a bit more gray matter.
His goal is neither more nor less than bringing
Salvation to Humanity. That's all
he worships. What is family to him,
what is a child and what's his orphaned woman?—
He is as surly as a badger with her
and even his mother huddles in the garret,
while he goes traveling, gobbling fine mousse.
Always he is Humanity's holy friend.
If he hears that they've trampled on Humanity's
corns at some conference, or if
he has the sniffles, he pins his mourning on
his heart and cannot fall asleep for agitation.
The two of them seem to understand each other.
Humanity is infinitely modest,
it doesn't pop in on him, go begging to him
for money, shoes, warm clothes, like Peter and Paul,
and this way he can live with it in peace.
Indeed, his eternal love never runs short.
To the beggars who extend their skinny hands

he never will give alms but gladly shakes
hands with them, every one, as man to man.
Such are his principles. And meanwhile
He is preparing for the big showdown.
On Sundays when the bourgeois forests sway
and bourgeois flowers bud, and hopped-up little
junior clerks are quaffing beer, and little
aunties, pensioned widows who have had to
work at scrubbing floors all week now sit
and stir their coffee, watching little boys
and little girls dressed in Sunday best
gnaw on salty crescent rolls and let loose
balloons by the roadside, bursting out in laughter,
he grimly monitors their revels, nudging
his friends, and says: "Blood will be flowing here
soon. Blood." Since, just as you fantasize
that one day you'll be sitting in your vineyard,
or spending a quiet evening reading, he
imagines blood, lynchings on lampposts,
peasants with scythes, and horrors; and he plays
parlor games, makes blacklists into which
he will inscribe the names of everyone,
scenting the corpses, he'll quietly order hangings.
Not out of hatred, mind, but from "historical
necessity." This madman's a public menace.
Not a menace to himself, since he would never harm
himself: that is his only merit.
Otherwise nobody gives a hoot about him
stoking his fury even more. He was
happy once. An angelic detective
was tailing him on the Corso, placidly,
like a nurse following a maniac,
to let him know to take some care for his life,
lest he might bump himself on his foolish head.
At this, he erupted, turned on his heels, enraged,
crying bloody murder and, appealing
before God and Man to the free and cultured world
and to the stars, his eyes rolling in blood
and his nostrils flaring, crying out:
"You reactionary!"

1930

—PVC and JMR

Shrill Cries on a Spring Morning

(Harsány kiáltások tavaszi reggel)

First, to live here in this world
and to live last.
To see the Earth, see it only once,
and never again.
To stand in the light, to eat and drink,
to bathe in kisses.
To watch the blue forget-me-not in the wind
on the brown soil.
To feel the radiance of thoughts
in my brown head.
To go to that place, beyond the ether,
to land in the valley.
To breathe, to shout ecstatically up
at the sky, at the sun.
Then suddenly to plummet, wildly,
and implode.

1929

—JMR and PVC

When You've Passed Forty

(Ha negyvenéves...)

When forty years have passed you, you wake up
one night, you stay awake for a long time,
you just can't sleep. You gaze at your room
there in the dark. Slowly you brood about
this and that. And there you lie, open-eyed,
as one day in your tomb. Taking this turning,
your life heads out onto a different path.
You marvel that you've lived between the Earth
and stars. A little nothing comes to mind.
You fiddle with it. You get bored and drop it.
At such times you may hear a noise in the street.
You know what every single noise must mean.
Not melancholy—sober and attentive.
Almost untroubled. You heave a sudden sigh.
You turn to face the wall. You sleep again.

1929

—JMR and PVC

Words in Company

(Szavak a társaságban)

People are talking away:
How they ate strawberries in the mountains, last
summer, and how at night in dark rooms, they
are scared, and how they'd laughed, these ten years past,
at an actor, and how their mother, long since buried,
was once so pale and hungry, barely alive,
and how, up in the sky, their kite had scurried,
and how their garden had an ancient beehive.
Like madmen in the asylum yard, amazed,
they see evanescent things that now have fled
and are no more, the memory is dazed,
and transient life a-jangle in their heads.
Only I look on and day-dream, wondering how,
and why, there's all this gaudy hullabaloo,
and start up in alarm, rubbing my brow.
What is this dream up to?

1930

—JMR and PVC

Scarlet Withering

(Vörös hervadás)

Forest,
your frost-burnt leaves are quivering as if fainting.
They're dying,
their scarlet withering has breathed over you.
So why this festive pomp? Why clothe yourself
in the blaring hues of radiant Cardinals' robes,
the color of drunken lovers, youthful rage,
and inflammatory insurrections
before you die?
Is it cause to celebrate—going numb, forgetting
the noisy crush of day-trippers, hikers, thrushes,
the rushing waters,
the sweet-cheap jingling jester's bells of life?
Is it so good, not living?
Are you happy?

1931

—PVC and JMR

Autumn Breakfast

(Őszi reggeli)

This is what the fall has brought. Cool fruit
on a glass platter. Heavy, dark-emerald grapes,
sweet enormous pears translucent as jasper,
and so many more of its lush and sparkling jewels.
A drop of water runs off a plump berry
and rolls away, just like a cut diamond.
This is pomp: compassionless, serene,
inward-turning perfection. I'd much prefer
to live. Ah, but already the trees beyond
are waving hello to me with their golden hands.

1929

—PVC

About Those Who've Vanished

(Azokról, akik eltűntek)

I kissed and kissed the dying,
I hung out with the departing, where they were lying.
For hours I stood by their beds, drying
and stroking their sweaty hair, buying
time, whispering spells in their ears to stay
like life, but the Great Way
called them to follow its tracks
and I bound their bundles up for them, tying
their packs.

Those whom we miss
have taken with them pieces of my soul:
I have remained here, whole,
although they stole
my faith, now mingled with their dust, their hole-
ridden clothes, and my earlier words have dropped in the abyss,
and on their mouths, what I had given them
has rotted: the kiss.

I have nothing. Yet all is such a wonder,
I'm rich, I walk about like the old miser
in rags, whom people pity, take as poor,
for he has buried everything he'd found—
the golden treasure—and now, beneath the mound,
deep underground
he knows his ancient mine is quite secure.

My friends,
my life onstage grows dim, nearing its end,
There's no reason to speak of what may come:
I often smile, more often I stay mum.
But more and more I feel that many strong,
good friends, a throng,
are making my bed below. That's why
my inner soul's so much at peace up here,
And out at night, in graveyards I stroll by,
I feel no fear.

1931

—JMR and PVC

The Evensong of Kornél Esti

(Esti Kornél éneke)

Set off, my song,
my valiant song,
let that which spits in your tracks for spite
grow pale as it follows your flight:
the pain, so strong.

You must make your rounds on the heights
of life, be like Everything,
forever bathing in light:
you Nothing.

Say neither this nor that,
neither what's true, what's not:
don't tell what's hurting you,
do not bemoan your lot.
Be alive, like the grass and tree,
both a wonderer and a wonder,
keep all in secrecy,
and fly, never bend under.

Be wise lust's outer skin,
what the fruit peel's perfect in,
its clothing like the green
on trees, the surface marine
illusion of depths.

With the shifting winds, let's away,
zig-zagging every which way,
in and out, night and day,
to everything that flashes
and will stay.

With nutty whimsies, parley,
with deadly dangers, mingle, play,
and ridicule the zealot
who only in the depths will pray.

What does the diver bring you
when he pops up from the foam?
Just sorry mud that clings to
him is all he carries home.
He sees nothing at all when the tumbling
waves dance their enchanting run:
he grunts down below, stumbling
on his air hose, his helmet weighs a ton,
self-important gravitas bolted
to his swollen glassy gaze.
Every diver has a bloated
aspect, just like this one's face.

Oh, how the depths are depthless,
and how deep is shallowness,
and how stolid is sobriety,
and how gloomy, gaiety.
We've known, long since, how light
what they take weightily,
and how weighty is the light
those bears look down on haughtily.
Holy clown-emptiness Art,
O cheeky daubs of the heart,
to laugh at the fever chart,
while the wounds still bleed and smart.
O clown, whose heroic task
hides death's terror-face with a merry
mask,
makes good music to mingle
rasping of torment with brassy
jingle
that, soothing and calming, borrows
today's lame jokes from tomorrow's
and slaps the sweetest rhymes
on its sorrows.

Paint life all dissolute,
grow yourself from your own root:
with your regal genius
do you know anyone more astute?
Laughing, delete the brute,
boring stuff, tedious;
and call the soul's attributes
to render the numb, despised
body's failures moot.

May you be always empty
and light; may you delight
in sighting with insight,
with the silk of a hundred bright
words fluttering, as a pennant might,
or a soap bubble, flying high
among the winds, to the sky,
as long as the soul, my song,
lives on, in beauty and whimsy's throng,
for—on my soul—I too
shall only live that long.

Go glitter above the deep;
play-act in colorful clothing;
be like Nothing, something to keep,
you Everything.

1933

—JMR and PVC

Forty Snapshots

(Negyven pillanatkép)

1. Poem

Mud and flowers, a swirling nothingness,
but if it suddenly flares, like a lightning bolt—
between two lines—the Sky opens up for us.

2. Poets

Like the orphaned cripple bumming cigarettes
on the bridge, we beg belief to come in style.
We, Europe's poets who are alive today,
and wish to guide her toward a fairer isle.

3. Honey on Bread

In a gateway by the city limits a child
munches dry bread, but ah—the enchantment—wild,
sweet, fecund light comes sprinkling down, all sunny,
and he begins to lick this celestial honey.

4. Summer

Say, did you see the summer steppe at mid-day,
when it reposes yellow and fat and slack
and everything's yellow, how cold and white the hay
yellowly flashes its sparks of silver flack?

5. Streetwalkers at High Noon

The streetwalkers in their scintillating dresses
rustle like inexpensive silken candies,
and whisper me softer than the breeze caresses.

6. Man in 1930

His fears that the things he owns will come to harm
buzz him awake, and having burgeoned swiftly,
they ring with deadly effect, like the alarm.

7. Female Portrait

She's wonderfully ripe, like an apricot,
and her smile dribbles down sweetly like its juice,
the way thick cream does onto candied fruit.

8. In the Hungarian Style

O gray mustaches and tearful wild outcries
in the roisterous wine-swimming light of dawn,
the violin sobs with it as life slowly dies.

9. Unexpected Guest

We're chatting still in our room about the pratt-
ling summer's gambols, and you, autumn, soundless,
creep in unnoticed, and, quiet as a cat,
are on us.

10. The Pen

The procession of my
endless days.
I stare at them, a hermit,
raving, crazed.
Can I wait and be alone,
be one who stays?
Sky above and earth below
darken black with haze,
till you, my pen, my plow,
can spark and blaze.

11. A Polish Woman, Dancing

O woman, you dear Pole,
an angel looks like this.
Your beauty's of the soul.
With this soft, melting kiss,
pray keep my memory whole,
be glad we went amiss
this one time, sad and sole,
be my unconsciousness
as you make my eyes roll,
ride me skyward bridleless.

12. The Radio

How mysterious it was to hear the voice
of the dear "distant one" from the next room.
Now nothing left is secret or far-off:
the lordly old mystique lies in its tomb.
How soberly on my Budapest radio
Westminster Abbey's bells toll out and boom.

13. Simile

Like the agèd nun who so longs for heaven already
that she nurses only lepers and, because she abhors
their wounds, sucks up the pus herself, self-punishingly:
so I, the enraged fanatic, slide into antiquity,
in the gloom, and wonder at the pure light among animals,
and gobble mud and swig the filth out of obstinacy.

14. Third-Class Carriage

A lady's in here too; she's hoarse,
a pale child held in her embrace.
She's beaten down; life's coarse:
her tremors' source.
She looks down, sighing, at the floor;
salty tears well up and pour.
Not even a bundle. All her store:
her life—no more.

15. October Landscape

The red leaves bleeding their vines.
In the yellow hush, fevered confessions.
Words. Screaming verbs on the fire-line.

16. A Ball at Home

Odd little girls, real cuties,
where have my old fancies flown?
Fallen to pieces, all life's beauties.
Oh, come to me still, and whisper me
something that's scandalously fruity.

17. Countryside

How long now I have been longing for you,
and now I've returned at last—behold!
Gypsy music, moonlight, wine, taboos,
dreamy girls and gracious families, too:
my drugs of old.

18. My Father

Two pairs of shoes, two suits, and was he grim!
We didn't even dare look up at him.
But some nights he would melt and soften; then he went
to unlatch the window, opened it wide for us,
and laid his "fabled treasure" out before us:
the pure moon in the dome of autumn's firmament.

19. Late Autumn on the Puszta⁷ at Ludas

On the porch, the oceanic plain
laughs at the red fire of the sunny days,
but the paprika's red chain
chases its yellow shade away.
Zig-zagging, my spirit soars and soars
in the must-scented, sunlit autumn out-of-doors,
rustling in the wind like a paper shred,
above it death and life,
the yellow and the red.

20. Childhood

Oh, childhood, age of tales of Fairyland:
dreams and reality in a foggy flow;
when snow fell, it was powdered sugar, and
the powdered sugar on the tablecloth was snow.

⁷ Puszta: barren stretches of the steppe or Great Plain of central Hungary; the word carries mythic resonances for Magyars.

21. A Cry

What is this longing that keeps running through
my blood? Woman, create: bear me anew,
mysterious mother of my happiness—you.

22. The New Folklorism⁸

Peasant-spirit Muse
who used to be so hale and hearty,
like your own ruddy hues:
now you paint yourself, and your cheap rouge
wears off from overuse.

23. Posterity

What is posterity?
We tramp the road and our tracks are covered by
the dust's dexterity.

24. Icebreak on the Danube

Oh, how the swollen torrent rages, dashing,
above; below, the ice crackles and fractures
like mobs of crazed barbarian rioters, smashing
and shattering mirrors, and chandeliers crashing,
in a huge storehouse for glassware manufactures.

⁸ Hungarian literature was polarized between bourgeois urbanist (*polgári*) and nativist rural (*népies*) schools; Kosztolányi, a leader of the urbanist school, had special disdain for bourgeois urban writers who affected rural folkloric habits.

25. Afternoon Siesta

I fell asleep with a book that I had planned
to read pressing my chest like a bag of sand.
I woke up and I tossed it down unscanned.
O, soon enough I will lie quietly and
stiffly, and will be covered by the land.
Impossible it should be something I can stand.

26. Rhyme on Earthly Systems of Justice

Here judgment is a sheer formality:
the prisons feed on criminality.

27. Sentimental Portrait of a Girl

You stand in a green slip like a slender
willow, flexible, light.
I gaze at you and I can see your life,
meek, virgin, slight.
Your heart, a bell, rings in the chapel
of your chest, so bright.

28. Off-kilter Rhymes

For only an instant I saw your sapphire-
blue eyes and you floated wondrously off,
like a zephyr.
My soul has guarded your image ever since,
rock-hard as granite,
and mine is the regret.

29. Sunless December Afternoon

Thundering,
the storm bites my window with vengeful rage
and growls darkly, like a grave, deep
bass, rumbling.

Half past five.
Fog and solitude, deadly desolation,
whoever is alone in a hotel room
fears for his life.

30. A Shining Face in the Dark

I looked for you,
then frosty winters blew,
and night fell, too.
I lost my bearings, as if I were blind,
and you—I didn't find.
We separated, parties who would sue,
but now, a glittering shape, you shine
in my isolation, imprisoned in my mind.
On the prison walls of night I paint you.

31. Memory

(Psychological definition)

Memory:
sometimes it seems to be, and other times
not to be.

(This one's perhaps more philosophical)

Memory
lives in you and exists but disappears when you
cease to be.

(Novelistic and fantastical)

Memory
leads you past tumble-down hovels, ruins, to an ancient
cemetery.

(Humble, sad supplication)

Memory,
crippled friend, extend to the sightless your one hand
whole and holy.

32. Drawing of My Dead Father's Head

I came on the night train. Winter,
long past sunset.
At home my Mother came out with that look
I'd never forget.
She fell into my arms. I didn't want to
look at him yet.
But she showed me how over there
two candles were lit,
and then, through the old glass doors
I could already see the infinitely familiar
head of the dead.

33. A Cry

Where are you, Father,
where are you, great one?
You're nowhere, yet you
are, and yet you're gone.
Something's hiding you,
it's locking me out.
What is this silence?
What is this redoubt?

34. Approaching Fifty

Approaching fifty, we toss away from us
all showy, motley trash that would besmirch,
and our soul becomes so grim and so exalted:
as cold and hollowly echoing as a church.

35. February

Pale silver smoke sneaking silkily through the trees.
The sharp hoar-frosty winter morning sky.
At such times when we shed our winter mittens,
the freeze bites us: and it feels as if we're bitten
by a wolf, the wound hurts that much, and we cry.

36. Still Life in the Hospital

A voice shouts out within me: stay alive!
And another also: swoon into nothing! Dive!
Already I can see its glimmering shore.
The torments wane, and the fever's horrid, keen
hallucinations, and in my head the morphine's
gold lightning-bolts begin to arch and soar.

37. Songless Tree

My little boy's giggling long ago flew away,
I stand alone.
I look into the past and future, waiting for
what's to be shown.
Joylessness, with snow and silence around me,
limits unknown,
I'm like a winter tree left in the forest,
when birds have flown.

38. A Sigh

The faithful child's eyes overflow,
I never can see fairies—this I know.
Better to say goodbye, good night, farewell,
and toss this great world off to one side like
a walnut shell.

39. My Solitude

Like the telephone in an abandoned house
that rings and rings all night in hopelessness,
so does my soul cry out alone, in vain,
so far it is from life and happiness.

40. My Mother

It was Death itself whom you once overcame,
giving me life, you most mysterious woman;
soon on the shores of Nothing I will greet
hard-handed Death, Mother, with your strong name.

1927–1935
—JMR and PVC

Marcus Aurelius

Medieval Rome lies here, all yellow,
but the sunset flames
like a bleeding lion
as you sit, astride your horse,
on the ancient Capitoline height,
Marcus Aurelius.

Bronze-headed Caesar,
with your golden beard,
and your blindly radiant statue-eyes
you stand watch, attentive,
and I stand before you.

Imperial loftiness
of human greatness,
eternal truth of
lofty paganism,
drawing back from the idiotic crowd,
living alone on your exalted throne,
beggar and emperor.

No cockeyed apostle,
no madman of the incoherent East,
august fellow writer,
head and heart in concert,
pain and wise foresightedness together,
abandoned on this planet Earth,
he who lives and he who fears to live
and, trembling, sees the Law, yet will stride with sober
steps to the grave, the burning light of reason's
lantern held in his hand,
disdaining the barbaric,
all that is false, all lies.

Nothing that's barbaric,
nothing imbecilic, dull, half-baked, do I need.
Nor do I need those who secretly broadcast
to the skies by radio, seers and diviners,
the crooked quacks who go fumbling in the vapors
of fancy made-up tales, that rabble of wretches
who, deceiving or deceived, seize on an omen
with their faces all a-twitch
like a lunatic's.

I need only the brave man, and the proud; him I need,
he is the one I love, who feels the Earth,
who boldly touches the contorted, horrid
stone-terror of Medusa's reality
and says: "this exists", "not that",
"here, this is the truth", "but that other's falsehood"
and at the last, tosses his body to the worms.
I need a hero, one
who faces horror in the noonday glare,
whose tears fall in the light
and one whose garland
is incandescent sorrow.

Already I'm far off, I've long flown off,
far from the cheap, watery bagpipe notes;
my soul is rambling between the South and the West
always with more freedom.
Here I cast off my mask, and then I must
put it on anew
and I walk, smilingly,
accumulating patience,
the haughty virtue of sustained submission,
suffering the filth, concealing in alarm
my imperial mantle, ragged, ripped apart.

Let me raise myself—
let me therefore raise my pure, skeptical,
zigzagging and distrusting human vapor-
soul toward you now,
I who came from Pannonia's
burial mounds and now live between the banks
of the brown Danube and the blond Tisza. O,
let me raise up once again this heart of mine
to your brotherly heart,
Marcus Aurelius.

Rome, 1929

—JMR and PVC

Ernő Osvát⁹ on His Deathbed

(*Osvát Ernő a halottaságyon*)

He was yellow, he was silver, he was red:
these three together: yellow, silver, red,
when on the hospital bed the assistant slowly
covered his thin naked body to the waist.
The great yellowness of his face. His silver head
handsome in its rich finery, silver mine
of our ancient treasures. And the heart was red.
It still wept droplets under the bandages.
His eyes stared at a light-bracket on the wall,
glassily, as in Rippl-Rónai's portrait,
in the true pose of his odd upward gaze.
This is what I observed, with curiosity,
craning my neck forward like a student,
the way he used to do: without a tremor
of the eye and seriously, so I could later
depict it for myself as well as bear
witness of it to others. But I stared
at that electric light so long, so motionlessly,
that I began to move, tired by the effort;
I went out quietly into the autumn night.
There, under the sky a wild longing
seized me for him to exist again, I wanted
it so much, so much: as much as his mother
wanted it, back when she was giving birth,
who bore him into the world in pain and blood.
And just as much as it hurt his mother once,
as he came into the world from her wide-open loins,
so it hurt as he tore himself from my soul,
departed, and doesn't exist and never will.

1929

—PVC and JMR

⁹ Ernő Osvát (1876–1929), editor of the leading Hungarian literary journal *Nyugat* (*Occident*) from 1908 until his death by suicide. His portrait was done in 1923 by the noted Hungarian post-Impressionist, József Rippl-Rónai (1861–1927).

Fooling with My First Pair of Glasses

(Játék első szemüveggel)

Actually,
lost in blessed mists, my eyes can see acutely.

Shimmering,
mirroring the ocean's light and the mountains' glimmering.

Removed,
far off, the sun blinks, and is, by the moon, approved.

Starlit,
the cool purity of mountains will share it.

One cannot
look too close-up, at the odious human rot.

What's real
hurts more than this bleary movie reel.

Off there
the world's run away. Or have I in despair run off—where?

Lenses,
tell me, can you discern what my luck dispenses?

Clean, clear,
bring me back the pure mornings of my young years.

The snow,
diamond-crystal, sheds pearls on the land below.

Peace stays,
and the other-worldly blue of my mother's gaze,

and Order,
my father's hand that holds me fast, my warder.

Amber
glows glimmer in my room from the embers.

Descry
your old image copied in the sky.

Window,
where is that happier home? Show me in—show!

1930

—JMR and PVC

At Night by the Sleeper's Side

(Éjjel az alvó mellett)

When you're asleep at night, I hear you breathe
and grow terrified: with this I do love's dance?
This wheezing, gasping, flimsy-sounding boiler,
this fitful orphan rattling sibilance?
I listen to the pitiful bellows grappling
to steal its life from nothing: from pure dearth,
with which my life is sympathetically rattling
in God's hands, which can smite it to the earth.
You, my all, my mysterious contrivance,
my accidental framework, a live steam-whistle
who, if you speed up, slow down, jolt to a halt,
madden me so I leap in the Danube's middle.
I must be crazy to build on something like this,
there is nobody crazier on earth than I:
the crooked card-sharp's smarter, or the sailor
who trusts his treasures to the storm-torn sky.
I kneel down; I spring up, a moaning wailer,
fear in my eyes, and night sweats all about;
like a sniveling old man, timidly whisper,
"Watch out, watch out!"

1934

—JMR and PVC

The Execution

(Kivégzés)

“Will it hurt?” he asked the hangman’s henchmen,
as matter-of-factly as when we ask the dentist
before a tooth extraction. They didn’t answer.
They strapped his right arm down to his left thigh
so that he stooped, all twisted, and led him off
at once. Roughly they hoisted him onto the scaffold,
up, up high. The hangman already waiting,
standing back on his ladder, unfolded his enormous
white handkerchief, to make the hanging man
drink in his own salty sweat as he died.
He inserted the neck into the noose to let
the weight of the man’s own body kill him, hanging,
the body his dear mother birthed in agony.
The diligent sidekicks worked the block and tackle
swiftly and busily. And his pale face
all of a sudden blushed deep crimson, as if
the hangman up beside him there had whispered
some dirty joke in his ear and made him feel
ashamed by something or other that had just happened.

1929

—PVC and JMR

Song of the Young

(Ének a fiatalokról)

They gape in wonder and break out laughing,
they stare ahead, then look back; stall
and turn around in bewilderment:
they don't yet understand at all.
For the first time they appear surprised,
their yearning eyebrows drawn up high;
up, up, they gaze, up at the moon,
its platter turning green in the sky—
the sun is reddening at the zenith—
each star sits tamely in its place;
there's a Greek fire burning in their eyes,
their weekdays all are holidays.
They walk this shabby wretched Earth
with dust and wear too well acquainted,
they walk this agèd senile world
as if it's a home all freshly painted.
How they observe, how they enthuse
when your mind's climbing up the wall;
they hope for miracles from a letter,
a news report or telephone call.
Say this with me: poor ignorant orphans,
new souls, free of contamination,
heroic—say this with me: poor loons!
glory to them, and exaltation.

1934

—PVC and JMR

Travel Sketches

(Útirajzok)

Roma

[Róma]

And those who died all now appear before me,
scuttling in through the rickety church door.
Seven hundred haggard figures enter here,
skinny little old ladies, five-and-thirty score.
All great-great-great-grandmothers of mine. Once,
they too walked into half-lit churches, shook
drops of holy water on themselves, and took
hold of their crosses, kissed them, sobbing, shaking.
Through countless Holy Masses they'd weep their way,
throw themselves down to pray before the altars,
and now, with their skeletal white fingers, they,
the dead, warn me again lest my faith falters.
I become drunk, entirely out of joy,
the heavens open and I see anew
the dusky coves of dim confessionals,
the cherry-red and violet robes, and you,
long stones worn down by knees in the processional
of prayers for life eternal, and with them all
the white, red, purple, precious little priests,
the pallid martyrs, the silent votive candles,
O incense-smoke, ecstatic rapture, pure;
gold wine from golden chalices, secure;
O heavenly rose, celestial sweet aroma:
O Roma, Roma, Roma, Roma, Roma.

1926

Bologna

Still dark when I pulled in from Rome
to Bologna and I disembarked.
It was oppressive, sweltering hot
in the hotel. An irresistible
longing grabbed hold of me to run,
for fun, to roam, to bathe myself,
immerse myself, disperse myself,
in all the foreign lives. And there I was,
already running down the stairs
under the city's porticoes
to the Temple of Petronius,
and to the secret rendezvous.
Light shouted out from everywhere,
light screamed at me along the street
like a memory from the distant past,
light shouted out that I should stop,
light shouted out that I should stay.
Night itself couldn't fall asleep.
With so much light, so many folk,
so many girls, so many youths,
my unfamiliar familiars.
Pale and serious college students,
some with their dense thick Latin hair
and on the air the smell of coffee
scented with ice, because the tiny
magical shops kept coffee brewing,
bubbling continuously, and the milky
nectar of coconut
being poured out
onto the ice they had shaved up.
Life flowed as in the theater.
And I sat down among them here,
not a spectator but an actor,
fastening my travel mask
over my face, fitting it tight,
as if I'd always lived with them,
their secrets and their memories.
I parroted the way they spoke:

*Caffè nero, signorina!*¹⁰
 Life, life, you are the dearest game.
Acqua fresca con ghiaccio!
 Play on, play on, life, the dear game.
 I chatted away: *Me dice?*
 And I waved them off: *Niente!*
 And within myself I sighed
 to my aging heart: *Gioventù!*
Giovinezza, giovinezza!
Dov' è, dov' è signorina?
 That's how I tossed away the change
 that was in my pocket, the silver coins;
 that's how I tossed away the strange
 words that had been in my mouth, my head.
 I sat and lingered until dawn,
 even forgot where I'd been born,
 I buried the man that I had been
 pretending that I, too, was alive.

1924

Stralsund

My face, which that scrawny little boy stares into,
 itself stares out the train compartment window.
 He's sitting in the garden autumn faded,
 preening himself, alone and bored and jaded.
 Clearly this is his lazy afternoon,
 expecting some huge fantasy to bloom.
 Nothing in life he finds worthwhile to see,
 and now he'd like to sit in place of me,
 seeing me as in some lordly paradise,
 pillows and traveling coat so white and nice.
 My little lad, alas, trains rush away,
 Time runs; don't peer into my soul: I'd say
 I'd love to be a child like you, alas!
 and not a tired traveler in First Class.

1934

¹⁰ Italian in italics: Black coffee, miss! / Cold water with ice! / What's that? / Nothing! / Youthfulness! / Youth, youth! / Where, o where has it gone, miss?

Between Sassnitz and Trälleborg
[Sassnitz és Trälleborg között]

The crystalline night draws stares of astonishment,
and we draw into our lungs the water's deep scent.
The moon has crept behind a curtain of cloud;
there, up in the flies, all soundlessly,
it hides and shines, an unseen source of light
on the pulsing, oscillating, plaiting sea.
It scatters silver thalers and pearl bangles,
embroidering with silver the water-meadow.
Leaning against the railings, the travelers
chatter praise for the clever director of the show.

1934

Malmö
[Malmö]

Malmö station. A gentleman
boards, and a young woman,
a nanny in a bonnet with a few
trunks, and a little girl in tow.
Sigrid. Ash-blond, her hair is loose.
A droplet, a chubby-cheeked angel with a ruddy face.
She's draped in a butter-colored gown.
She has a great big doll of her own,
as blond and blue of eye
as she.
Sigrid, who is
a dainty little northern miss,
well-disciplined but gay,
she waits until her tray
is brought—must be the food
tastes good,
she eats, they take it away,
then they
bring red fruit juice she quaffs
and laughs,
runs and zig-zags and gaily soars

through the huge compartment coaches' doors,
just like the fairies,
but she always carries
herself as she should—she rows, she hovers, dances, swims,
gets drowsy, falls into her dreams,
flies in their dreamy skies
as in the old stories,
and those seated around her, regard
her, smiling and demure, her guardians,
but in their eyes the secret glitters:
can happiness be any greater?
Indeed it can! Toward Stockholm station,
Sigrid wakes up and look—ah ha!—
who's that there, standing on the platform?—
her grandpa and her grandmama,
like two still larger dolls,
their gray hair fluttering, they cry.
Sigrid chortles, they chortle all.
They are so happy, who else chortles? I!

1934

Skeppsborn

Son of the distant South, here I reside.
Before me on the table two books lie:
the phone book and the Bible, side by side.
I've gradually made friends with indifference.
But my room already knows me, and the walls,
when I step in, greet me with deference.

1934

Stockholm

The steam heat sings, the flames a-flutter,
in the powdered sugar a small gold spoon,
and some secret childhood memory
hides in the brown, dim, lukewarm room.
The rain pours darkly outside. This old photo,
though foreign, seems to me like family.
With their golden-gray buns, bonneted, they nod
at me, sweet Swedish aunties, friendly.
The grandfather clock strikes slowly. We take tea
and while I crunch my crackers in their company,
out of the autumn fog, like a summer sky,
many friendly, gentle blue eyes gaze on me.
They remain silent, and I'm a silent man,
but in the end our silences don't quite mesh,
since I am silent in Hungarian
and they—in Swedish.

1934

An Old Tree in Hyde Park [Öreg fa a Hyde parkban]

Wise old greybeard, standing near a thousand years,
not even taking a breath, like an Indian fakir.
No longer any movement among its leaves,
and it has nothing to say to the other trunks.
It lives.
It thinks.

1929

—JMR and PVC

The Dead

were people once.
Though non-existent, they exist. Miraculous!
Neither doing nor desiring anything
still they keep their hold on us.
Mysterious, standing still amid runners and leapers.
In the deep, dark waters, they are mute and slow
sleepers.
Immutable
images, they've fossilized, forever
beautiful.
Non-living,
forgetting everything, dropping it in the dust,
ungiving
idlers under the undergrowth, without
sweet experience, which their hands have let fall out.
Here Newton doesn't know his one-times-one,
dull night plunges into his head,
Cleopatra's forgotten the kisses she had won,
Shakespeare, the English that he wrote and read.
Here the mother doesn't recognize her child,
a thousand cruxes no longer drive the scholar wild.
They're mere illusions, conjured into reality
by awe, prayers, kisses, and what else:
quotes from an ancient, ancient library,
masses of extinguished cells.

1934 (?)

—PVC and JMR

Awakening

(*Ébredés*)

In the morning, when you wake up and this everyday
resurrection blasts its trombones over your bed,
you already know many loved ones have slipped away
who were alive last night, and your heart feels dread,

but since what you dreamt is forgotten in the light of day,
this accounting is both so hazy, yet so fresh and new,
that for minutes the old scab's pain is now okay,
and you look at yourself, as if you're no longer *you*,

with indifference. You even dare to snicker
at what used to make you cry. You'll no longer bicker
that your fate's not yours: it's not disposable.

So—what else can you do?—you resignedly put
on shackles of remorse, like a body-suit of soot
that bores you, and know your fate is portable.

1932

—JMR and PVC

At Home

(*Otthon*)

Long ago
over heaven and Earth I rambled to and fro,
with fog before me, fog behind my back,
I whistled at the wind, with a snap-crack
of my fingers paid it, tramping on the highways.

Nowadays,
a hundred kilos is my soul's weight,
Alas! This is life's stirrup-cup: too late
for anything to light a fire in me.
Look, here's my gate, and here's my key,
here's my table and here's my bed.

My lust, dread
whore, who's mated here, there, everywhere,
spat out her foal, the flies went after her;
she whelped horrid monstrosities.

And these,
all of them are my progeny, my own,
they paddle in my blood and marrow bone;
and I am theirs, and they are mine,
they drink my bloody blood, my marrow wine,
with murderous delight.

At night
like a brown bear, the piano
bares his teeth in an angry show,
the divan lies low like a crocodile,
the armchair is a leopard biding its while,
daring me out to fight, rip into me and eat,
the armoire is an elephant lazy on its feet,
the stove snores in my face.

In such a place
and time, I stand among them, serious-sad,
and pure of heart, an old beggar who had
begotten this wild tribe of rowdy roughheads
and trembles, lest they tear him into shreds.

1930

—JMR and PVC

Our House
(*A mi házunk*)

Our window opens on another world,
it has no day and has no night.
Out the door, the whirlpool swirls, a chasm
ten fathoms deep beyond our sight.

We wander out one room into the other,
hearing speech and hearing cries,
hearing snickering too; we're stunned, our hearts
all hammering—what's passed, we can't descry.

We've long since not been glad for laughter,
and we're not allowed to cry for grief.
At such times when it hurts a lot, we look aside,
with cool, collected words our brief.

In our abode the mirrors all distort,
and every doorknob's got a backhand twist.
Life has left from here—why should we seek it?—
what exists is not what is; what is, does not exist.

The knife that stabs or strikes them down, or that
which tears or chokes them, makes others suffer.
In our case, fate wove suffering—inhuman, unbearable—
out of fog and thought: that's tougher.

We rarely mention it, so much do we
detest our wound, all swollen by its thickened
stitches. Who knows what sort of house ours is,
who keeps track of how much we sicken?

1932

—JMR and PVC

Despair
(*Kétségbeesés*)

I wait for them to get our table set
and clear it.
I wait for the guest to arrive, not to stay
but go away.
I observe one object, of odd, unexpected size,
a doorway, a button, or a pair of eyes.
I've broken you into a thousand pieces, you wide
world of unbearable chaos on every side.
And it's better for me not to look at the whole schmeer,
but to grab one broken-off bit and hold it dear,
and to stand there, stock-
still, a frozen block.
For the whole is alien to me, and out of its mind,
but the part is amiable, and kin of mine.

1930

—JMR and PVC

The Savage Blacksmith

(A vad kovács)

Suffering, that wanton, savage blacksmith,
with his dark sledgehammer batters me down;
striking sparks, I glare right back, with
a howl sing along to his sooty round.
Oh, how good that my life need not stay,
I'll just fall on the anvil and faint away,
go along with it all, nothing on my plate,
hurting like this, hanging on, I'll wait.
Beat me, wild smith, into long-distance running,
transfigure me, feelingless and stiff,
into perfection and craft and cunning,
singing a masterful, pain-hardened riff.

1930

—JMR and PVC

February Ode

(Februári óda)

Ai! In what pit does this February dump me,
what murky depths? Burning my world of dimming
stars to ashes. This monstrous wound
pounding me into the ground.

My destiny, hidden till now in hesitant fog,
is suddenly on me, prowling like a wolf
in my carpeted and cozy room,
baring its teeth at me.

I'd run away in panic but where can I go?
No exit; I mindlessly sound the alarm;
at the hard handle on the iron door,
the intention knocks.

Only you, my dear, stand here as if a shadow,
pallid and staring stock-still, already the widow,
blurred in the distance, whom her dead husband
has faithlessly abandoned.

There's neither an empty word on your lips, nor do you
whisper false hope. Like a miracle, you are
sober reality, and faithfulness
like death's—and quite as great.

I even forget the sanatorium's
palm trees and noon as dark as winter, and from
the depths into the shining heights
I shout up loudly.

It was good to walk with you across this mud-ball's
Bitter meadows, its countryside of gall,
O sweet mother of my happiness,
my partner in bad times.

I never loved myself. But you loved me.
Your true and simple goodness is so rapid,
and was so flaming, you have
overtaken me.

In the wind, the thought that "I might catch a chill"
could not have flitted across my mind when you,
foreseeing my self-absorption, already
said, "You'll catch a chill."

See how I praise you with practical, objective,
precise words as the only right perspective,
because you always were, each day,
like full sunshine.

Among the knives, with destiny on my shoulder,
I sing to praise, even as a cripple, even
without a mouth, with wounds in my mouth,
your kind great-heartedness.

1934

—PVC and JMR

A Hundred Lines on Physical Pain

(Száz sor a testi szenvedésről)

This song of mine's
a simple strain;
it sings of this:
it sings of pain.

It sounds like: *Ai!*
He whispers, hurts:
the head, the tooth,
the mouth, the heart.

Cuts like the knife,
stabs like the needle,
so horrid he is,
and yet so feeble.

Thin thread of voice,
a music quaking,
he sounds as if heaven
and earth were shaking.

He cries like water
and wails like hell,
he hisses, he trills
like a tinkling bell.

He broadcasts wide
that he's alive
and caterwauls
and babbles jive.

He grows and he swells;
and if he turns sickly
and shrinks, disappears,
he recovers quickly.

Now he's a steam-whistle
scream, to the life,
now he just cheeps
like a wee little fife.

He never ceases,
whatever you do,
he cuts and he hammers,
drills, chisels, rasps you.

He hollers and whoops,
rumbles and clatters,
constantly blathers,
natters and chatters.

When day's barely dawned,
he's already begun,
and he keeps right on going
'till the next rising sun.

He never gets bored
and neither do I:
I'm breaking a trail
under darkening skies.

Who he is, what he is,
I can't say exactly;
I don't even dare
to address him directly.

I can't lie in peace,
he won't let me sleep.
What else can I do?
Not let out a peep.

On my life's final slope
on its downward half,
this is our pastime;
we silently laugh.

I stand by his side,
I fall on my back;
he spins me along
a wild, frightful track.

I grow to detest him,
I curse him to hell,
then slowly and nicely
I make him my pal.

I don't wring my hands
or join in his choir;
about what it means
I don't even inquire.

I don't even inquire
what end it may serve;
I find it of interest
to merely observe.

His tune is just silly
even stupid and cheap
but it's surely not shallow
for its depths are so deep.

Its depths are the deep
into which I descend:
he putters about,
preparing my end.

He's stripping my body,
my body entire:
he's says it's all useless,
my earthly attire.

He's rushing and flitting
that Being so alien;
he violently breaks in
and now he's no alien.

I already await him,
no longer without;
inside of him now,
my soul gave a shout.

My blood's babbling loudly
as it calls out to die;
he's not the bad one:
the bad one is I.

1934

—PVC and JMR

A Riddle for Grown-ups

(Fejtörő felnőtteknek)

Can you guess what this is?
It keeps your mind nimble:
all the tables are set,
then they clear every table.

They rush down the streets,
they lie in their beds;
like butterflies, dreams
flit through their heads.

Rich metals and gems,
arms sweat as they haul them;
night-letters speed,
wild telephones call them.

Who's ringing the doorbell?
The doctor, the fevered
lover, mailman, or beggar;
the gas line is severed.

Headfirst they slam
into insolent Spring;
they battle for that,
casting votes, bellowing.

Their strollers get pushed,
a song quiets down,
for the song's quickly over;
older folks gaze around.

In the thicket of kisses
the whirlwind fog parts,
and they kill, they make love—
you killers, sweethearts.

You can't see the last
of the marchers, so varied.
Are they snickering there,
or has someone been buried?

A little skylarking,
a whole lot of sighing.
Have you guessed it yet, pal?
Can you guess what you're buying?

There's no greater good,
this treasure's the one.
The name for it: Life.
Its point? There is none.

1932

—PVC and JMR

Séance at the New York Coffee House¹¹

(Szellemidézés a New York-kávéházban)

The coffee steam spurts out and swirls, to spread
helter-skelter on the winter morning, hoary
and smoky, where with empty bellies we'd feed
on tobacco, espresso, and our dreams of glory,

and women, crudely, frantically our delight:
I sense your presence here, the impossible truth,
whims and adventures, the realms of verse I'd write,
and the wild, addictive aromas of my youth.

Osvát,¹² you could come out now, really—Death
might give you a pass to re-enter our land of breath,
to flicker behind the swirling baroque column;

let me see you again as I mourn for you, as always
offended that you're long vanished from our days:
you in your spectacles—massive, dominant, solemn.

1934

—JMR and PVC

¹¹ The favourite writers' hangout, having twisting neo-baroque columns, was also mentioned in "Go, little child" on page 36.

¹² Ernő Osvát, see the poem "Ernő Osvát on His Deathbed" and the footnote on page 112.

Supplication to Those Staying Behind

(Könyörgés az ittmaradókhoz)

When I die soon, bury me deeply,
don't see me appearing feebly,
let your parting partner disperse as fog, eerily,
and grant pardon to my poor self, freely.

Don't inspect my arms and digits,
just my intentions and not my merits:
you'll take the measure of my spirit
by my painful heart, my breast's hermit.

Sometimes while feasting, smoking, wining
I'd flog myself with toxic self-repining,
wielding my whip, my torment refining;
solitude was ever my monastic inclining.

I've sinned, as others have against me, lawlessly,
but nobody the way my soul did, rebelliously:
it spurred me on fitfully, relentlessly,
and this is why I'm a sinner sinlessly.

I can't withstand the grim eye, not this knave;
it will make an eternal Gehenna of my grave;
like a falling petal, my soul's not brave:
let my judge be mercy that forgave.

That which is sure and true as stone
casts me, as I die, into a new death-zone;
all mortals always stumble in the unknown:
my only solace comes from doubt alone.

Let flattering memory ever embellish me,
like the moon that scurries past the cloud-debris
and, spreading its forgiving smile unselfishly,
magically renders every puddle silvery.

1934

—PVC and JMR

I've Got It Now
(*Már megtanultam*)

I've already learned to be speechless,
to be bedmate to sheer apathy,
to live life numbly, lifeless,
to cry while laughing affably.

I know how to greet the witless,
to make nice while in a fit of ire,
to cheer as they step on me, heedless.
I've learned to be a survivor.

If only it all weren't so boring:
what fate brings, both bad and the good.
Just the same are my wounds I'm enduring:
I consider them as a doctor would.

All that hurts, and what exists: I grasp it.
So who'll give me my guerdon?
I'm no wet-eared newborn. I've got it:
Death, accept me as your son.

1932

—PVC and JMR

Funeral Oration

(Halotti beszéd)

You see, my brethren, how he up and died
and left us here, alone. He tricked us. Fie!
We knew him: great, he wasn't, nor a genius,
just one of us, our friend, all heart: congenial.
But he's no more.
Like earth's rock bed.
Oh woe, the treasure's fled
out the broken door.

Learn, all of you, a lesson from this matter.
Such is each man: distinct, for worse or better.
No copies of him lived, nor any now,
no two leaves are alike on any bough:
his like won't come to be in Time's long playing.

Behold this head, these friendly eyes decaying.
Look how his hand that soon will disappear
into that fog, unnamable, lies here:
stiffened into stone
a holy relic's bone
on which the ancient secret of his unmatched
life is, in runic symbols, deeply scratched.

No matter who he was, the one who died
was light and heat. We noised it far and wide.
The way he savored food, this dish or that,
and said so, with his lips that now lie flat
shut by silence; how his voice rang in our ears
like church bells tolling deep in sunken towers
drowned far below; and how not long ago,
he said: "Dear boy, I'd like some cheese, you know",
or drank his wine contentedly, and gazed
at his cheap smoke giving off its haze,
and ran to tell the telephone his dreams,
his yarns woven like multicolored skeins:
if only the lines upon his brow could speak,
they'd say that out of millions, he's unique.

Seek him as you might, it's all in vain:
he's neither here, nor on some Asian plain
or African Cape, nor in the past: for anyone
is ripe for future birth: just not *that* one.
Never more
will his odd, pale smile light up as before.
Slim's the chance that fortune's fairy wheel
will yield the wondrous replay of his spiel.

This is exactly like, dear friends of mine,
that old man in the fairytale's first line.
It just occurred to Life to think of him
and "Once upon a time..." we could begin.
Then down fell heaven's appalling weighty dome,
and—weeping, wailing—we began to moan.
He who, struggling, strove for right's subdued:
his own self-portrait sculpture, stiff and mute.
Can tears or words or drugs yet wake him? How?
Upon a time he was, just once: not now.

1933

—PVC and JMR

Inebriate of Dawn

(Hajnali részegség)

I've a story to tell you. If it wouldn't be boring.
I signed
off work at three in the morning.
And I lay down. But the machine in my mind
kept rattling, ticking and humming its grind.
I tossed and turned, irate, on my bed,
no dream would drift into my head
though I called for it, this way and that, with useless speech,
counted to a hundred, tried sleeping pills—out of reach.
What I'd been writing loomed over me fiendishly.
My forty smokes made my heart beat feverishly.
And other stuff too. The espresso. Nothing
worked. So I get up, shrug it off—I've done my best—
and start strolling around my room in my night clothing,
around me the family nest—
soft honeys from dreamland caressed
their mouths—and, stumbling like a drunken ass,
I look out through the window glass.

Wait, how should I start; how explain my design?
You know this house of mine,
and if you can remember my bedroom,
you can also recall
how shabby and empty is all
of Logodi Street, where I live; it looks like a tomb
from here.
The houses, wide open, seen through clear
windows, display their people, upended and blear,
sprawled horizontally,
and their rolling eyes go crossed and back, uncertain
in the fog of their minds, glimmering deceptively,
for the usual deficiency of blood to the brain
has undersupplied them.
Their shoes and clothes lie beside them,
and they themselves are locked in the cell-like room for keeps,

which they decorate dreamily when they're not asleep,
but—I can tell you—if you were to come upon them at this stage,
every home might as well be a cage.
An alarm clock ticks across the quiet of things,
gallops, limping, and instantly rings,
its brazen brutality
hammers the sleeper: “Wake up to reality.”
The house sleeps, too, dead in its stupidity,
as when, a century hence, its solidity
will collapse, and weeds sprout through it again,
and no-one will be able to determine
if it was our human home or an animal's den.

But higher up, my friend, there's the bright clear sky,
something pure, whose splendor shines, up there, so high,
trembling and solidifying, like fidelity.
Heaven's dome,
exactly as always, ancient even in days long past,
like Mother's bedspread, that patch of blue at home,
like the watercolor in my copybook, spreading fast,
and the stars'
breathing souls gleam silently, astir
in the lukewarm autumn night
before winter's bite,
away out there, farther than can be expressed,
they, who watched Hannibal's battles through the empty air
now watch me, who have fallen to earth here,
and stand at a window in Budapest.

What happened to me then, I've still not understood:
a huge wing, so it seemed, brushed over me,
and what I'd buried long ago leaned to cover me:
my childhood.

So long did I exult
at the rich wonders of the astral vault
that, eastward, day was already breaking, and in the wind
the stars, still throwing off sparks, had dimmed
unnoticed, and far away, a vast

beam of light flared past
the gate of a heavenly castle opened wide,
flames leapt around it outside,
something flashed and flew,
and the army of guests above were saying adieu,
the night-long ball streamed away
in the deep shadows cast before the break of day,
the forecourt swam in a flood of light,
on the stairs of the house stood its master, a man of might,
an illustrious lord, the giant of the sky,
the ballroom's haloed one, bidding good-bye,
and movement began—startled bell-tinkling, wonderful,
soft womanly whispering in the lull,
as when the dancing ends
and the doormen shout for the coaches of the friends.

A veil of lace
could be seen, as out of the place
of distant mist, apace,
it flowed with diamond grace,
in the faraway blue,
a lavish wrap for the prodigal, true,
dear lovely woman, her due,
and on it a great jewel
dusting light over this pure peace,
the pale sky's blue, afterworldly ease,
or perhaps an angel who with a virgin's care
and graceful gestures pins her sparkling, new
tiara into her hair,
and, quieter than a dream, she springs
into a tiny shay
rocking this way, that way,
deep in it she swings,
and with a mischievous smile goes dashing
onwards, while her wild steeds play
on the Carnival-flaming Milky Way—
in a burst of golden confetti their hooves strike sparks
amid the hundreds of coaches now leaving the park.

I stood there open-mouthed,
and out of sheer happiness I gave a shout:
They hold a ball in the sky, every night they step out,
and now the point of this great ancient secret
revealed itself: that Heaven's fairy spirits
at dawn return home from their visits,
their shining roundtrips orbit the infinite.

Until sunrise,
I stayed like that, staring with wide-open eyes.
Suddenly I spoke: So what were you looking for
on this Earth, what washed-out tales to wade through,
falling in thrall to what sort of whore,
what manuscript was so important to you
that so many summers passed, so many hoar-
crusted winters, so many an idle night,
that only now the evening unveils to your sight?

Fifty years—
My God! For fifty years—my heart pounds to hear—
while my dead ones, ever more numerous, disappear;
and all this time, fifty years, and shining where
I can see them, my living, celestial neighbors have twinkled above;
can they see me scatter my tears for all I love?
In short, I confess to you: humbled, in awe, I bowed
to the ground and gave thanks for everything, aloud.

Now look, I know there's nothing I can believe in,
and I know just as well that soon I must be leaving,
but, stretching my heart's strings to pluck it like a lyre,
I now began to sing praises to the blue fire
around Him, who is nowhere anyone knows, nor why—
to Him whom I can see neither now nor when I die.
For certain, today, as my muscles slacken and tire,
I feel, my friend, that here in the dust where I
stumbled amid souls and clods of soil and could not fly,
yet I was a guest invited to stand as a squire
to an unknown Lord most high.

1933

—JMR and PVC

Song of Nothingness

(Ének a semmiről)

All that I held today, I let it drop,
all that I knew today comes to a stop,
I hide my face, my hands its only prop,
and stretch away into the empty dark,
in the deep, magnetic trance that streams non-stop.

Whatever is, Nothingness is far older;
as for myself, I've known it to be bolder;
it can't be worse, in the eye of this beholder,
than Life, which it outlasts, far more enduring:
Life's blood-soaked wounds will fester and will moulder.

So new and unaccustomed, this cloak we wear
is ragged and binding, good for a few short years:
bad clothes for dressing in, though, washed by tears;
but soon how much at home the old coat feels:
infinite, wide, indifferent to our fears.

I'd long worn this old cloak, it was never shed;
I'd slumped into the Nothingness like a bed;
I got no better—nor worse, when all was said;
you needn't learn a lesson you've long known:
to disappear and lie on your back, dead.

Sign up for the other world if you're too scared,
beat on the graves of those death has not spared,
ask how their stubborn, silent calm has fared,
but they won't answer, all they say is this:
if they can stand it, we'll be as well prepared.

So sing on, friend, repeating after me:
what was it that our problem used to be,
that blowing from dust to dust won't set us free?
What made your heart ache, and made mine ache, too,
in Caesar's—or Napoleon's—century?

1933

—JMR and PVC

UNPUBLISHED IN KOSZTOLÁNYI'S LIFETIME



My Father in His Coffin

(Apám a koporsóban)

Father, progenitor, godlike,
What a nothingness
You are, and I, how ungodly.

For one whose father's gone,
In the wide world,
Is godless, all on his own.

Looming above me from afar,
And sternly handsome,
Your head, so very familiar.

Where are you? Tell me where to find
You. Where's your heart,
And mind, your shining human mind?

Once strong, now you're a weak, small man,
Lying like this,
You, once a prince among all men.

Still I hear you, like a cloudburst,
You giant, you
Who sired me and who loved me first.

You taught me where to walk, and how to.
But look at death:
I learn of that from you now, too.

Drawing my mask of blankness on,
I thank you for
Life itself; also for this lesson.

The winter wind whistles over;
Towards our crypt
I step a little forward, closer.

Calmly enough I stroll to it,
Since what awaits
Is not a miracle, but this, to wit:

That I am you, you're there, and I
Believe it now:
At last I know that I shall die.

Father, progenitor, godlike,
What a nothingness
You are, and I, how ungodly.

1927
—JMR

September Devotions

(Szeptemberi áhítat)

September morning, hold me in your halo,
don't, don't abandon me, September day,
not now, when you are blazing like a flambeau,
and from my eyes the ecstasy bursts away,
lift me up to you. Up again, to climb
above death, on the ruins of Antiquity:
help me, September, don't let me go this time,
my hotly burning kin, autumn so brotherly.
I didn't stammer shivering and quaking
prayers to the pale gods in a pagan rite.
I always turned to you, not to be aching
with their cold truth and their immense sunlight.
I'm worthy: look, I stand here where I stood,
many true tongues still speak of me with pride,
fertile dreams are still growing in my blood,
and women do not snicker at me and hide
behind my back. I neither want to drink
a cellar dry, nor eat a restaurant bare:
I want to trust life's worth—while on the brink—
to be renewed once more, before I stare
into the void. You, ripening the grapes
along the vine, protector of my fate,
my emperor, lead me: it's your hand that shapes
my trembling fate, but my soul and spine are straight.
My arms are strong enough to hold dominion;
Infinity, give me draughts of your elixir,
and you, being praise itself, gild me, your minion,
my head still handsome, and not graying, either.

See where the melon displays its ripe intestines,
its white teeth in its scarlet sinews glisten,
the wasp digs into a fat flower today,
its silk garage at the end of its long highway,
the grape bursts, swollen with its honey-fruit
and joy and happiness strike the speaker mute.

Without a doubt, we have reached a land that's wondrous,
the minutes flitting past as if they're winging,
a continuous festive party now surrounds us,
an extended lunch, and high tea, lingering.
My little sister ties up the garden flowers,
washes in a golden bowl in the early hours,
and when she comes back as the forest gathers dusk,
the golden motes drift down on her—stardust.

This is just the way it was in childhood.
The grown-ups talk incomprehensibly
among themselves, each sound so surly, rude;
each evening the wind blows, moaningly,
perhaps alarmed by a fallen, dark tree-leaf
and thinking about the winter, mud, and death.

Then too I find the afternoon disturbing,
that the sun is being buried by the shadows,
the Sonata pathétique on the piano, swirling,
as it used to in the provinces long ago,
Schumann, the orphan, sweet and going mad,
stumbles along the keyboard, mournful, sad,
and because he can no longer cry as he did,
from his mouth guffaws his schizophrenic id.

Never before did Earth hold wonders like these:
untranslatable whisperings among the trees,
above the trees, fringed with a skewed light,
orange flaming into purple, so bright,
the sunset blows a kiss to the clouds above it
and they bathe in rose-colored undulations of it.
Tell me, what sort of country is this childhood land,
so long submerged, what sort of heavenly land?

Oh, everything, even the ugly, is beautiful—
suffering, and the scorn of beggars as well.
Oh, let me put this chapel on display,
quietly fluttering in the heat-waves of noonday.
A girl at prayer, on her mouth unspoken sighs,
like blind people sleeping deeply, with crooked eyes,
fixing those eyes on the heavens beyond their reach,
as the aged deaf keep listening for God's speech.

Look how at night in the shadowy chaos cast
through his sooty workshop, the cobbler's at his last,
by a tiny flame, impoverished and futile,
like an old engraving in an antique Bible.

Now that the rain is pouring blackly down,
and out there something's gleaming in the dark,
like a fairy-tale Will-o'-th'-Wisp in a magic town,
under the black rain, golden windows sparkle.
Outside, the tempest's tired, slow lamentation;
inside, the promise and winter preparation,
the autumn cleaning by electric light,
my sense of awe finding heaven in my sight.

—

Tell me, why are the stars so large tonight
and why, like copper pans scrubbed over again
in the kitchen's afternoon, do they shine so bright?
From me, what can this secret life hope to gain?
Who keeps these tender mercies in such supply?
Who's buffing up the mountains and the sky?
What pantheism keeps on toying with me,
so I relive each century's memory?
Why is Orion's cap glowing like embers?
Why is a mild mist washing everything?
Who did this? What magician? Who remembers?
Why do you wonder—you—you wondrous being?

—

Flutter, my lovely life, flutter on and on,
though the murky night, no goal to rest upon.
Stop, clock; storehouse of days, collapse to rubble,
old grain storehouse rotting away with troubles.
You banners of my youth, fly swimmingly,
into the festal heights, slowly, above me.

1935

—JMR and PVC

A Prayer on the Fly¹³

(*Röpima*)

She's the rapid, shining flame. My Mary,
on this Earth she truly loves me. Mary
cries out heartily to see me. Mary
comes before me, screaming loudly. Mary
whispers roses in my ear. My Mary,
at my knees she gazes at me. Mary
reaches for the infinite. My Mary
tells me, sputtering: "No, no." My Mary
telephones and stamps her foot. My Mary
is the well-bred gentlewoman. Mary
cannot even boil an egg. My Mary
pops a lot of sleeping pills. My Mary
takes her tea, plays solitaire. My Mary
sighs and does embroidery. My Mary
hurries but she always makes time. Mary,
knowing nothing, knows all things. My Mary
is true and firm and honest. Mary
is immortal greatness. Mary
is impossibly good. My Mary
shows us human nobleness. My Mary's
lovely when she burns and glows. My Mary,
shabby and pale, is lovelier. My Mary
is loveliest as an ugly little thing. Mary—
our earthly globe's great marvel is she. Mary
is God's most wondrous caricature. My Mary,
both little girl and heroine. My Mary
is sweetness, grandeur, majesty. My Mary
is soft as swan's down, feathery. My Mary
is hard as diamond-rock. My Mary
fulfills my childhood fantasy. My Mary
is my youthful fever. Mary,
now I'm fifty is my prize. My Mary
is the laurel of my fame. My Mary

¹³ The Mary of this prayer is not the Virgin Mary, as one might have imagined; rather, it is Mária Radákovich, a married woman Kosztolányi met at a health spa in the summer of 1935, when he was already gravely ill.

is the pain that fills my life. My Mary
is my deathbed's radiance. My Mary
is mother, daughter, little sister. Mary
is past and future, brought together. Mary
is mine yet also is not mine. My Mary
is both the "never-ever" and the "always". Mary
is my soul-mate, my soul's bride. My Mary
is among all earthly women blessed. Mary,
see, this poem isn't even over, Mary,
for always I begin anew, My Mary,
this song already is as long, My Mary,
as my love for you is infinite, My Mary.

November 22, 1935

—JMR and PVC

NOTES

Nearly all of the poems have been translated in collaboration by John M. Ridland (JMR, 1933–2020) and Peter V. Czipott (PVC), but the order of their initials following each English poem indicates which of them was (usually only slightly) more responsible for the final version.

The following poems have previously appeared in periodicals, as listed here.

Czipott, P.V. and Ridland, J.M. (2016) “Bologna”, from “Travel Sketches” (Translation of “Bologna” from “*Útirajzok*”). *Miramar* 4: 38–39.

Czipott, P.V. and Ridland, J.M. (2016) “1. Poem, 10. The Pen, 32. Drawing of My Dead Father’s Head, 40. My Mother”, from “Forty Snapshots” (Translation of selections from “*Negyven Pillanatkép*”). *Miramar* 4: 40–41.

Ridland, J.M. and Czipott, P.V. (2015) “My Father in His Coffin” (Translation of “*Apám a koporsóban*”). *The Hudson Review*, Autumn 2015, LXVIII(3), 389. Also available online at <http://hudsonreview.com/2015/10/my-father-in-his-coffin/#.VkVS8r9JDcE>

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Czipott, P.V. and Ridland, J.M. (2014) “Song of the Young” (Translation of “*Ének a fiatalokról*”). *Per Contra: An International Journal of the Arts, Literature and Ideas*, Issue 31, online at <http://www.percontra.net/issues/31/poetry/song-of-the-young/>

ALPHABETICAL INDEX BY TITLE OR FIRST LINE



- A Bad Poet Is So Touching (*Egy rossz költő mily megindító*) 50
A Hundred Lines on Physical Pain (*Száz sor a testi szenvedésről*) 133
A Prayer on the Fly (*Röpima*) 157
A Riddle for Grown-ups (*Fejtörő felnőtteknek*) 137
About Those Who've Vanished (*Azokról, akik eltűntek*) 93
At Home (*Otthon*) 126
At Night by the Sleeper's Side (*Éjjel az alvó mellett*) 115
Autumn Breakfast (*Őszi reggeli*) 92
Awakening (*Ébredés*) 125
Beyond the Beyond (*Hetedhétország*) 51
Bloodily we killed the ugly toad. (*A rút varangyot véresen megöltük.*) 35
Despair (*Kétségbeesés*) 129
Ernő Osvát on His Deathbed (*Osvát Ernő a halottaságyon*) 112
Europe (*Európa*) 72
February Ode (*Februári óda*) 131
Fooling with My First Pair of Glasses (*Játék első szemüveggel*) 113
For Life and Death (*Életre-halálra*) 69
Forty Snapshots (*Negyven pillanatkép*) 97
Funeral Oration (*Halotti beszéd*) 142
Girl in the Typist Pool (*Gépirókisasszony*) 49
Go, little child. (*Menj, kisgyerek.*) 36
Happiness Speaking (*Beszélő boldogság*) 76
Happy Sad Song (*Boldog, szomorú dal*) 39
He Who Died Today (*Aki ma meghalt*) 53
I've Got It Now (*Már megtanultam*) 141
In Early September (*Szeptember elején*) 74
Inebriate of Dawn (*Hajnali részegség*) 144
Litany (*Litánia*) 80
Lovers (*Szerelmesek*) 77
Marcus Aurelius (*Marcus Aurelius*) 109
My Father in His Coffin (*Apám a koporsóban*) 151
My Old Chum, with Eyeglasses (*Régi pajtás szemüveggel*) 54
Nowadays, I dream of colored inks. (*Mostan színes tintákról álmodom.*) 34
O death. (*Ó, a halál.*) 33

Our House (<i>A mi házunk</i>)	128
Poet in the Twentieth Century (<i>Költő a huszadik században</i>)	75
Scarlet Withering (<i>Vörös hervadás</i>)	91
Séance at the New York Coffee House (<i>Szellemidézés a New York-kávéházban</i>)	139
September Devotions (<i>Szeptemberi áhítat</i>)	153
Shining Wreath (<i>Fényes koszorú</i>)	68
Shrill Cries on a Spring Morning (<i>Harsány kiáltások tavaszi reggel</i>)	88
Song of Nothingness (<i>Ének a semmiről</i>)	148
Song of Songs (<i>Énekek éneke</i>)	78
Song of the Young (<i>Ének a fiatalokról</i>)	117
Summing Up (<i>Számadás</i>)	61
Supplication to Those Staying Behind (<i>Könyörgés az ittmaradókhoz</i>)	140
The Ant (<i>Hangya</i>)	57
The Autumn Evening's Cool (<i>Híves őszi este...</i>)	25
The Dead (<i>Halottak</i>)	124
The drinking-glass shatters (<i>A pohár eltörik</i>)	43
The Evensong of Kornél Esti (<i>Esti Kornél éneke</i>)	94
The Execution (<i>Kivégzés</i>)	116
The Father (<i>Az apa</i>)	47
The Marbled White Butterfly (<i>Melanargia Galathea</i>) (<i>Galathéa</i>)	57
The Savage Blacksmith (<i>A vad kovács</i>)	130
The Wasp (<i>Darázs</i>)	57
Three Satires (<i>Három satíra</i>)	82
Travel Sketches (<i>Útirajzok</i>)	118
Trees of Üllői Street (<i>Üllői-úti fák</i>)	29
When Children Play (<i>Ha játszanak a gyermekek...</i>)	52
When You've Passed Forty (<i>Ha negyvenéves...</i>)	89
Widow in the Streetcar (<i>Özvegy a villamosban</i>)	48
Words in Company (<i>Szavak a társaságban</i>)	90

ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS



John M. Ridland (1933–2020), born in London, lived most of his life in California, teaching creative writing and literature for over 40 years at the University of California in Santa Barbara and publishing eleven volumes of original poetry. He also published translations of the Middle English “Gawain poet’s” *Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*, as well as the Hungarian Sándor Petőfi’s *John the Valiant*. With his wife, Muriel Ridland, he published two books of prose and poetry devoted to their son and his short life: *And Say What He Is: The Life of a Special Child* (1975) and *Epitome and Epiphany* (2017). With Peter Czipott, he issued book-length

selections of the verse of Sándor Márai (*The Withering World*; Alma Classics, Richmond, UK, 2013) and Miklós Radnóti (*All That Still Matters at All*; New American Press, Milwaukee, WI, 2014; revised edition 2020), as well as of individual poems appearing in journals in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Hungary. Ridland received the Árpád Academy (Cleveland, Ohio) gold medal in 2002 and the Bálint Balassi Memorial Sword in 2010.



Peter V. Czipott (1954–) was born in California to Hungarian émigré parents. Before retiring from a career in applied physics research, development and management, he began translating poetry with John Ridland and has continued translating both poetry and prose, including a book-length selection of poems by Bálint Balassi (*The Pen and the Sword*; Kairosz Kiadó, Budapest, 2022) and the novel *Journey by Moonlight* by Antal Szerb (Alma Classics, Richmond, UK, 2016). He received the Bálint Balassi Memorial Medallion in 2010, the Hungarian Gold Cross of Merit in 2020, and the Bálint Balassi

Memorial Sword in 2023 for services to Hungarian literature. The present volume includes the final fruits of his collaboration with his late friend, colleague, and mentor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Peter Czipott dedicates the volume to the memory of John Ridland. He thanks Enikő Sepsi for selecting the volume for the Károli Collection, Csaba Horváth for his Preface, Katalin Gáspár for shepherding the volume through the publication process, and Katalin Hegyi for her splendidly perceptive and thorough editorial review and proofreading of the text. Any remaining errors are Peter Czipott's responsibility.

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Printing: Prime Rate Ltd.
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