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P R E S S R E V I E W
FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

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Chevening

by Robert Selby

*This is the real England, I say, so what do you think?
It's a place of trees; of apple, pear, cherry and plum.
In the gaps is man's history, his urge to link
with others, forge commerce, lick a thumb
to count the realm's tender or sample harvest.
The railway came, but the speed it gave the world
entangled in this bracken and broomy darkness.
Life here is at the pace a picnic blanket unfurls.
Do you want to reset your watch to the toll of here?
Our years would lengthen into a summer's evening
of wine on a lawn under bat-flight.
Then we'll disappear.
All that'll be left: two glasses filled with morning,
your silk scarf over one of the two empty chairs;
two lit candles in the church for us, if anyone cares. ♦*

My Father from Hungary

by Monica Porter

It is a question I have, from time to time, asked myself. If I had had the sort of easy-going upbringing enjoyed by my contemporaries in the America of the Sixties, would I ever have become a writer? You could argue that a person turns to writing as an escape from painful reality, as a kind of self-help therapy, that it is born out of loneliness, unhappiness and a sense of alienation. I experienced all of those things, to some measure, during my childhood and adolescence.

America, as they say, is the land of the free, and back in the Sixties – especially in New York, where I lived – it was alight with liberalism and permissiveness. There was a social revolution going on, engineered by the young. But not in my house. We were a refugee family, uprooted by the Hungarian Uprising and transplanted in the West, and my home was culture-clash central. I knew a lot of Hungarian émigrés then and many of them wholeheartedly embraced the ways of liberal,

anything-goes America. But my mother was different. Embittered at having been forced, through the vicissitudes of fate, to leave everything behind in her homeland – property, relatives, singing career – she clung on to the one thing she could still control, her style of child-rearing. And unfortunately for me, she believed in the traditional, strict method she had herself been subjected to in rural Hungary in the early decades of the twentieth century. You can imagine how this alienated me from my peers and the mainstream culture around me. I poured out my troubles into poetry and other secret scribblings.

My father was a writer, too. He began writing at an early age and by his late teens was already the published author of scores of adventure novellas. His first full-length novel came out when he was twenty and made his name in Hungary. He once told me that he wrote out of loneliness. An only child, his parents had separated when he was still small, he was shunted around and for a while had to live in a children's home, where his Jewish background left him open to anti-Semitism. Inventing tales, some of them set in the Wild West or foggy streets of London, set his imagination soaring and peopled his solitary world with intriguing characters. Writing was his saviour, he said.

Of course it is undeniable that my father had a strong influence on me, and that children often follow in a parent's footsteps, so I might conceivably have

chosen writing as a career even if my mother had been totally different and I'd had an all-American youth full of laughs and hot fudge sundaes and hot dates at drive-in movies, like something out of the TV sitcom *Happy Days*. But somehow I doubt it. Having the compulsion to write is one part of the equation, but just as important is having meaty material to write about and my background certainly supplied me with that. My father's first serious novel was loosely autobiographical, as suggested by its title, translated as *His Parents are Divorced*. And throughout his long career, in both fiction and non-fiction, he frequently explored his early life and times. Likewise my complex, uneasy, atypical family background has been the subject of many of my newspaper and magazine articles, and featured in some of my books. The truth is that an unhappy childhood generally makes for a better story than a happy one and is more conducive to achieving success later in life. It is an effective spur.

This is a theme I examined in a book I wrote two decades ago called *Dreams and Doorways: Turning Points in the Early Lives of Famous People*. I interviewed a couple of dozen public figures, in various professions, to learn about the formative experiences and influences which made them into the high-achieving adults they became. Some kind of deprivation or obstacle was a key motivating factor for a large proportion of them. For example, for boxing

champ Henry Cooper it was extreme, 'bread-and-dripping' poverty in South London. For Olympic javelin thrower Fatima Whitbread it was being abandoned as a baby and growing up in a loveless children's home. For actress Susan Hampshire it was crippling dyslexia. For politician Edwina Currie it was the stifling orthodoxy of her provincial Jewish upbringing. And for Dave Prowse, the weight-lifting beefcake who went on to play Darth Vader and the Green Cross Code man, it was the tuberculosis which struck him down aged thirteen, resulting in a year's stay in hospital, followed by three years in a calliper.

Of course, in order to become a successful writer, you needn't have had a difficult, painful youth. One of my interviewees, Terry Pratchett, clearly enjoyed a rather jolly, stable childhood with close family relationships. This is perhaps reflected in the genre of writing he later specialised in, which is light-hearted and humorous. And it is science fiction, born out of an endless fascination with the 'sheer weirdness of the world', coupled with a wacky, inventive imagination. Not serious literature, which turns inward to plumb the dark depths of the human soul and psyche.

There are four other professional writers in my book: Douglas Adams, Judy Blume, Barbara Cartland and Penelope Lively. Douglas had a disturbed childhood as a result of his parents' vitriolic marriage and consequent divorce. As divorce was so uncommon back

in the Fifties, it set him apart from others. As he grew older he also felt different because he was so much taller than his peers and because he was left-handed: 'I do get this sense of the world having been designed for everyone other than me'. He told me he had been plagued by worries and self-doubt throughout his life; fertile ground for someone with creative talent, and perhaps his quirky, innovative brand of writing was his way of trying to make sense of it all and find his own place in the universe.

The American Judy Blume, bestselling author of novels for children and young adults, did not have a traumatic youth in New Jersey, but there were tensions and strained family relationships and a suppressed angst which 'eventually rose to the surface' when she was a married woman of thirty-five, and led to her divorce. 'It's a terrible thing to go through an adolescent rebellion at that age and drag your children through it with you,' Judy admitted. She said it was because she was fascinated 'by the child that she was' that so many of her books were preoccupied with the particular problems and anxieties of childhood.

You might not think that the oeuvre of someone like Barbara Cartland, the 'Queen of Romance', society belle and hobnobber with the privileged and pampered, could be born out of early deprivation. Her idealised novels featuring virginal damsels and dashing heroes don't bear much similarity to gritty real life, after all.

But I was intrigued to learn that she had had her share of serious misfortune in early life: the financial downfall of her once-wealthy father, followed by his death while fighting in the First World War (when Barbara was seventeen), leaving her widowed mother in straitened circumstances.

I wonder whether the prolific wellspring of her romantic fiction – 723 books which have sold an estimated billion copies worldwide – could possibly have been the war itself and its devastating aftershock? A quarter of a million British soldiers were killed during the WW1 and many thousands more were maimed or seriously injured. This generation of young men which was decimated was *her* generation. Along with her father, the war took many of her male friends and acquaintances. But her response was not to dwell on the tragedies and grieve; she was no Vera Brittain. Instead she escaped into a world of high romance, with its perpetual abundance of handsome young men, and where a happy ending could always be relied upon.

As for Penelope, she had a ‘peculiar, solitary childhood’ in Egypt, where her father worked for an Egyptian bank. Her remote parents largely ignored her and she was brought up by a governess before being sent to boarding school in England, aged twelve. The school was utterly unsuitable for the brainy, bookish girl, as it was a philistine establishment which valued only sports, which she hated. As a ‘school pariah’ she

had no choice but to hone her inner resources, which proved invaluable years later when, as a young wife and mother, she took up the vocation of novel-writing. She had no difficulty engaging in the lonely occupation. So the great ordeal of her adolescence – being ostracised – turned out to be an essential career asset.

There are many routes to the writing life, and I wouldn’t presume to make generalisations. But on the whole, I would say it is preferable to endure a measure of suffering if you are going to write for a living. As Seneca put it: ‘A gem cannot be polished without friction, nor a man perfected without trials.’

I suppose the real question I should ask myself is: would I rather have had a nice and easy, comfortable childhood, and not become a writer with oodles of juicy first-person copy, or was that early misery a price worth paying for my literary/journalistic output? As a teenager desperate to be part of the gang and ‘hang out’, I would have paid any price to be allowed out on dates with boyfriends and have sleepovers with the girls and go to all-night parties and raucous dances. Instead I would often be holed up in my bedroom, writing my anguished verses and woeful diary entries and trying to devise ways to sneak out of the house for secret assignations.

I had always written, from earliest childhood. Poems, stories, at least one silly play, and even an ‘autobiography’, which I began when I was six and

added a little to each year – an original method, I thought. My father gave me my first typewriter, a portable Olivetti, when I was ten. I still have this treasured childhood memento, safely stored away in a cupboard – my alternative to the bedraggled teddy bear or one-eyed doll.

My father also gave me a sense of self-belief. At the age of twenty-one, by now living in London, I set out to land myself a beginner's job in journalism and it never occurred to me that I wouldn't get one. People warned me about the obstacles: I wasn't English (this was the Seventies; London was a lot less multi-cultural then), I had no university education, I had no useful connections. Perhaps I should be applying for secretarial jobs instead, and with a little luck I might be allowed to do a bit of writing one day? I brushed this nonsense aside with disdain. And within three months I was taken on as staff writer for a venerable weekly magazine, the *Local Government Chronicle*. I stayed there for four years.

A decade or so later I wrote a book, *Deadly Carousel*, about my mother's courageous exploits in wartime Budapest. It turned out that the woman who had once given me so much grief had also provided me with my greatest subject as an author. And both derived from the same source: her forceful personality.

So, was all that teenage angst worth it in the end? Looking back from my present perspective and with the

wisdom of age, yes of course it was. I had a less liberated time than other teenagers did in the Swinging Sixties. Big deal. It was a long time ago and doesn't matter anymore.

But what I see most clearly, beyond any answers to these questions with which I sometimes tease myself, is the blunt fact that in reality, none of it could have happened any other way. As some author once said: I didn't choose writing, writing chose me. And I am eternally grateful that it did, because frankly, I'm not much good at anything else. ♦

Let Them Call It Jazz

by *Jean Rhys*

One bright Sunday morning in July I have trouble with my Notting Hill landlord because he ask for a month's rent in advance. He tell me this after I live there since winter, settling up every week without fail. I have no job at the time, and if I give the money he want there's not much left. So I refuse. The man drink already at that early hour, and he abuse me – all talk, he can't frighten me. But his wife is a bad one – now she walk in my room and say she must have cash. When I tell her no, she give me suitcase one kick and it burst open. My best dress fall out, then she laugh and give another kick. She say month in advance is usual, and if I can't pay find somewhere else.

Don't talk to me about London. Plenty people there have heart like stone. Any complaint – the answer is 'prove it'. But if nobody see and bear witness for me, how to prove anything? So I pack up and leave, I think better not have dealings with that woman. She too cunning, and Satan don't lie worse.

I walk about till a place nearby is open where I can

have coffee and a sandwich. There I start talking to a man at my table. He talk to me already, I know him, but I don't know his name. After a while he ask, "What's the matter? Anything wrong?" And when I tell him my trouble he say I can use an empty flat he own till I have time to look around.

This man is not at all like most English people. He see very quick, and he decide very quick. English people take long time to decide – you three quarter dead before they make up their mind about you. Too besides, he speak very matter of fact, as it it's nothing. He speak as if he realise well what it is to live like I do – that's why I accept and go.

He tell me somebody occupy the flat till last week, so I find everything all right, and he tell me how to get there – three quarters of an hour from Victoria Station, up a steep hill, turn left, and I can't mistake the house. He give me the keys and an envelope with a telephone number on the back. Underneath is written 'After 6p.m. ask for Mr Sims'.

In the train that evening I think myself lucky, for to walk about London on a Sunday with nowhere to go – that take the heart out of you.

I find the place and the bedroom of the downstairs flat is nicely furnished – two looking glass, wardrobe, chest of drawers, sheets, everything. It smell of jasmine scent, but it smell strong of damp too.

I open the door opposite and there's a table, a couple

chairs, a gas stove and a cupboard, but this room so big it look empty. When I pull the blind up I notice the paper peeling off and mushrooms growing on the walls – you never see such a thing.

The bathroom the same, all the taps rusty. I leave the two other rooms and make up the bed. Then I listen, but I can't hear one sound. Nobody come in, nobody go out of that house. I lie awake for a long time, then I decide not to stay and in the morning I start to get ready quickly before I change my mind. I want to wear my best dress, but it's a funny thing – when I take up that dress and remember how my landlady kick it I cry. I cry and I can't stop. When I stop I feel tired to my bones, tired like old woman. I don't want to move again – I have to force myself. But in the end I get out in the passage and there's a postcard for me. 'Stay as long as you like. I'll be seeing you soon – Friday probably. Not to worry'. It isn't signed, but I don't feel so sad and I think 'All right, I wait here till he come. Perhaps he know of a job for me.'

Nobody else live in the house but a couple on the top floor – quiet people and they don't trouble me. I have no word to say against them.

First time I meet the lady she's opening the front door and she give me a very inquisitive look. But next time she smile a bit and I smile back – once she talk to me. She tell me the house very old, hundred and fifty-year old, and she and her husband live there since long

time. 'Valuable property,' she says, 'it could have been saved, but nothing done of course.' Then she tells me that as to the present owner – if he is the owner – well he have to deal with local authorities and she believe that make difficulties. 'These people are determined to pull down all the lovely old houses – it's shameful.'

So I agree that many things are shameful. But what to do? What to do? I say it have an elegant shape, it make the other houses in the street look like cheap trash, and she seem pleased. That's true too. The house sad and out of place, especially at night. But it have style. The second floor shut up, and as for my flat, I go in the two empty rooms once, but never again.

Underneath was the cellar, full of old boards and broken-up furniture – I see a big rat there one day. It was no place to be alone in I tell you, and I get the habit of buying a bottle of wine most evenings, for I don't like whisky and the rum here no good. It don't even taste like rum. You wonder what they do to it.

After I drink a glass or two I can sing and when I sing all the misery goes from my heart. Sometimes I make up songs but next morning I forget them., so other times I sing the old ones like 'Tantalizin' or 'Don't Trouble Me Now'. I think I go but I don't go. Instead I wait for the evening and the wine and that's all. Everywhere else I live – well, it doesn't matter to me, but this house is different – empty and no noise and full of shadows, so that sometimes you ask yourself

what make all those shadows in an empty room.

I eat in the kitchen, then I clean up everything nice and have a bath for coolness. Afterwards I lean my elbows on the windowsill and look at the garden. Red and blue flowers mix up with the weeds and there are five – six apple trees. But the fruit drop and die in the grass, so sour nobody want it. At the back, near the wall, is a bigger tree – this garden certainly take up a lot of room, perhaps that's why they want to pull the place down.

Not much rain all the summer, but not much sunshine either. More of a glare. The grass get brown and dry, the weeds grow tall, the leaves on the trees hang down. Only the red flowers – the poppies – stand up to that light, everything else look weary.

I don't trouble about money, but what with wine and shillings for the slot-meters, it go quickly; so I don't waste much on food. In the evening I walk outside – not by the apple trees – but near the street – it's not so lonely.

There's no wall here and I can see the woman next door looking at me over the hedge. At first I say good evening, but she turn away her head, so afterwards I don't speak. A man is often with her, he wear a straw hat with a black ribbon and gold-rim spectacles. His suit hang on him like it's too big. He's the husband it seems and he stare at me worse than his wife – he stare as if I'm wild animal let loose. Once I laugh in his

face because why these people have to be like that? I don't bother them. In the end I get that I don't even give them one simple glance. I have plenty other things to worry about.

To show you how I felt. I don't remember exactly. But I believe it's the second Saturday after I come that when I'm at the window just before I go for my wine I feel somebody's hand on my shoulder and it's Mr Sims. He must walk very quiet because I don't know a thing till he touch me.

He says hullo, then he tells me I've got terrible thin, do I ever eat. I say of course I eat but he goes on that it doesn't suit me at all to be so thin and he'll buy some food in the village. (That's the way he talk. There's no village here. You don't get away from London so quick.)

It don't seem to me he look very well himself, but I just say bring a drink instead as I am not hungry.

He come back with three bottles – vermouth, gin and red wine. Then he ask if the little devil who was here last smash all the glasses and I tell him she smash some, I find the pieces. But not all. 'You fight with her eh?'

He laugh, and he don't answer. He pour out the drinks and then he says, 'Now, you eat up those sandwiches.'

Some men when they are there you don't worry so much. These sort of men you do all they tell you blindfold because they can take the trouble from your

heart and make think you're safe. It's nothing they say or do. It's a feeling they can give you. So I don't talk with him seriously – I don't want to spoil that evening. But I ask about the house and why it's so empty and he says:

'Has the old trout upstairs been gossiping?'

I tell him, 'She suppose they make difficulties for you.'

'It was a damn bad buy,' he says and talks about selling the lease or something. I don't listen much.

We were standing by the window then and the sun low. No more glare. He puts his hand over my eyes. 'Too big – much too big for your face' he says and kisses me like you kiss a baby. When he takes his hand away I see he's looking out at the garden and he says this – 'It gets you. My God it does.'

I know very well it's not me he means, so I ask him, 'Why sell it then? If you like it, keep it.'

'Sell what?' he says. 'I'm not talking about this dammed house.'

I ask what he's talking about. 'Money' he says. 'Money. That's what I'm talking about. Ways of making it.'

'I don't think so much of money. It don't like me and what do I care?' I was joking, but he turns around, his face quite pale and he tells me I'm a fool. He tells me I'll get push around all my life and die like a dog, only worse because they'd finish off a dog, but they'll let me

live till I'm a caricature of myself. That's what he say, 'Caricature of yourself.' He say I'll curse the day I was born and everything in this bloody world before I'm done.

I tell him, 'No I'll never feel like that' and he smiles, if you can call it a smile, and he says he's glad I'm content with my lot. 'I'm disappointed in you Selina. I thought you had more spirit.'

'If I was contented that's all right', I answer him, "I don't see very many looking contented over here.' We're standing staring at each other when the door bell rings. 'That's a friend of mine,' he says. 'I'll let him in'

As to the friend, he's all dressed up in stripe pants and a black jacket and he's carrying a brief case. Very ordinary looking but with a soft kind of voice.

'Maurice, this is Selina Davis,' says Mr Sims, and Maurice smiles very kind but it don't mean much, then he looks at his watch and says they ought to be getting along.

At the door Mr Sims tells me he'll see me next week and I answer straight out 'I won't be here next week because I want a job and I won't get one in this place.'

'Just what I'm going to talk about. Give it a week longer Selina.'

'I say 'Perhaps I say a few more days. Then I go. Perhaps I go before.'

'Oh no you won't go,' he says.

They walk to the gates quickly and drive off in a

yellow car. Then I feel eyes on me and it's the woman and her husband in the next door garden watching. The man make some remark and she lookout me so hateful. So hating I shut the front door quick.

I don't want more wine. I wan't to go to bed early because I must think. I must think about money. It's true I don't care for it. Even when somebody steal my savings – this happen soon after I get to the Notting Hill house – I forget it soon. About thirty pounds they steal. I keep it roll up in a pair of stockings, but I go to the drawer one day, and no money. In the end I have to tell the police. They ask me exact sum and I say I don't count it lately, about thirty pounds. 'You don't remember how much?' They say. 'When did you count it last? Do you remember? Was it before you move or after?'

I get confuse, and I keep saying 'I don't remember' though I remember well I see t two days before. They don't believe me and when policeman come to the house I hear the landlady tell him, 'She certainly had no money when she came here. She wasn't able to pay a month's rent in advance for her room though it's a rule in this house.' 'these people terrible liars,' she say and I think 'it's you a terrible liar, because when I come you tell me weekly or monthly as you like.' It's from that time she don't speak to me and perhaps it's she take it. All I know is I never see one penny of my savings again, all I know wis they pretend I never have any, but as it's

gone, no use cry about it. Then my minds goers to my father, for my father is a white man and I think a lot about him. If I could see him only once, for I too small to remember when he was there. My mother is a fair coloured woman, fairer than I am they say, and she don't stay long with me either. She have a change to go to Venezuela when I three-four year old and she never come back. She send money instead. It's my grandmother take care of me. She's quite dark and what we call 'country-cookie- but she's the best I know.

She save up all the money my mother send, she don't keep one penny herself – that's how I get to England. I was a bit late in going to school regular, getting on for twelve years, but I can sew very beautiful, excellent – so I think I get a good job – in London perhaps.

However here they tell me all this fine handsewing take too long. Waste of time – too slow. They want somebody to work quick and to hell with the small stitches. Altogether it don't look so good for me, I must say, and I wish I could see my father. I have his name – Davis. But my grandmother tell me 'Every word that come out of that man's mouth a damn lie. He is certainly first class liar, though no class otherwise.' So perhaps I have not even his real name.

Last thing I see before I put the light our is the postcard on the dressing table. 'Not to worry.'

Not to worry! Next day is Sunday, and it's on the Monday the people next door complain about me to the

police. That evening the woman is by the hedge, and when I pass her she says in very sweet quiet voice, 'Must you stay? Can't you go?' I don't answer. I walk out in the street to get rid of her. But she run inside her house to the window, she can still see me. Then I start to sing, so she can understand I'm not afraid of her. The husband call out: 'If you don't stop that noise I'll send for the police.' I answer them quite short. I say, 'You go to hell and take your wife with you.' And I sing louder.

The police come pretty quick – two of them. Maybe they just round the corner. All I can say about police, and how they behave is I think it all depend who they dealing with. Of my own free will I don't want to mix up with police. No.

One man says, you can't cause this disturbance here. But the other asks a lot of questions. What is my name? Am I tenant of flat in No. 17? How long have I lived there? Last address and so on. I get vexed the way he speak and I tell him, 'I come here because somebody steal my savings. Why you don't look for money instead of bawling at me? I work heard for my money. All-you don't do one single thing to find it.'

'What's she talking about? the first one says, and the other one tells me 'You can't make that noise here. Get along home. You've been drinking.'

I see that woman looking at me and smiling, and other people at their windows, and I'm so angry I bawl

at them too. I say, 'I have absolute and perfect right you be in the street same as anybody else, and I have absolute and perfect right to ask the police why they don't even look for my money when it disappear. It's because a dam English thief take it you don't look,' I say. The end of all this is that I have to go before a magistrate, and he fine me five pounds for drunk and disorderly, and he give me two weeks to pay.

When I get back from the court I walk up and down the kitchen, up and down, waiting for six o'clock because I have no five pounds left, and I don't know what to do. I telephone at six and a woman answers me very short and sharp, then Mr Sims comes along and he don't sound too pleased either when I tell him what happen. 'Oh Lord!' he says, and I say I'm sorry. 'Well don't panic,' he says, 'I'll pay the fine. But look, I don't think . . .' Then he breaks off and talk to some other person in the room. He goes on, 'Perhaps better not stay at No.17. I think I can arrange something else. I'll call for you Wednesday – Saturday latest. Now behave till then.' And he hang up before I can answer that I don't want to wait till Wednesday, much less Saturday. I want to get out of that house double quick and with no delay. First I think ring back, then I think better not as he sound so vex.

I get ready, but Wednesday he don't come, and Saturday he don't come. All the week I stay in the flat. Only once I go out and arrange for break, milk and

eggs to be left at the door, and seems to me I meet up with a lot of policemen. They don't look at me, but they see me all right. I don't want to drink – I'm all the time listening, listening and thinking, how can I leave before I know if my fine is paid? I tell myself the police let me know, that's certain. But I don't trust them. What they care? The answer is Nothing. Nobody care. One afternoon I know at the old lady's flat upstairs, because I get the idea she give me good advice. I can hear her moving about and talking, but she don't answer and I never try again.

Nearly two weeks pass like that, then I telephone. It's the woman speaking and she say, 'Mr Sims is not in London at present.' I ask, 'When will he be back – it's urgent' and she hang up. I'm not surprised. Not at all. I knew that would happen. All the same I feel heavy like lead. Near the phone box is a chemist's shop, so I ask him for something to make me sleep, the day is bad enough, but to lie awake all night – Ah no! He gives me a little bottle marked 'One or two tablets only' and I take three when I go to bed because more and more I think that sleeping is better than no matter what else. However, I lie there, eyes wide open as usual, so I take three more. Next thing I know the room is full of sunlight, so it must be late afternoon, but the lamp is still on. My head turn around and I can't think well at all. At first I ask myself how I get to the place. Then it comes to me, but in pictures – like the landlady kicking

my dress, and when I take my ticket at Victoria Station, and Mr Sims telling me to eat the sandwiches, but I can't remember everything clear, and I feel very giddy and sick. I take in the milk and eggs at the door, go in the kitchen, and try to eat but the food is hard to swallow.

It's when I'm putting the things away that I see the bottles – pushed back on the lowest shelf in the cupboard.

There's a lot of drink left, and I'm glad I tell you. Because I can't bear the way I feel. Not any more. I mix a gin and vermouth and I drink it quick, then I mix another and drink it slow by the window. The garden looks so different, like I never see it before. I know quite well what I must do, but it's late now – tomorrow. I have one more drink, of wine this time, and then a song come in my head, I sing it and I dance it, and more I sing, more I am sure this is the best tune that has ever come to me in all my life.

The sunset light from the window is gold colour. My shoes sound loud on the boards. So I take them off, my stockings too and go on dancing but the room feel shut in, I can't breathe, and I go outside still singing. Maybe I dance a bit too. I forget all about that woman till I hear her saying, 'Henry, look at this.' I turn around and see her at the window. 'Oh yes, I wanted to speak with you,' I say, 'Why bring the police and get me in bad trouble? Tell me that.'

‘And you tell *me* what you’re doing here at all,’ she says. ‘This is a respectable neighbourhood.’

Then the man come along. ‘Now young woman, take yourself off. You ought to be ashamed of this behaviour.’

‘It’s disgraceful’ he says, talking to his wife, but loud so I can hear, and she speaks loud too – for once. ‘At least the other tarts that crook installed here were *white* girls,’ she says.

‘You a damn fouti liar,’ I say. ‘Plenty of those girls in your country already. Numberless as the sands on the shore. You don’t need me for that.’

‘You’re not a howling success at it certainly.’ Her voice sweet sugar again. ‘And you won’t be seeing much more of your friend Mr Sims. He’s in trouble too. Try somewhere else. Find somebody else. If you can, of course’ When she say that my arm moves of itself. I pick up a stone and bam! through the window. Not the one they are standing at but the next, which is of coloured glass, green and purple and yellow.

I never see a woman look so surprised. Her mouth fell open she so full of surprise. I start to laugh, louder and louder. – I laugh like my grandmother, with my hands on my hips and my head back. (When she laugh like that you can hear her to the end of our street) At last I say, ‘Well, I’m sorry. An accident. I get it fixed tomorrow early.’ ‘That glass is irreplaceable’ the man says. ‘Irreplaceable.’ ‘Good thing,’ I say, ‘those colours look like they sea-sick to me. I buy you a better

windowglass.’

He shake his fist at me. ‘You won’t be let off with a fine this time,’ he says. Then they draw the curtains. I call out at them. ‘You run away. Always you run away. Ever since I come here you hunt me down because I don’t answer back. Its you shameless.’ I try to sing ‘Don’t trouble me now’.

Don’t trouble me now

You without honour.

Don’t walk in my footsteps

You without shame.

But my voice don’t sound right, so I get back indoor and drink one more glass of wine – still wanting to laugh, and still thinking of my grandmother for that is one her songs.

It’s a man whose doudou give him the go-by when she find somebody rich and he sail away to Panama. Plenty people die there of fever when they make that Panama Canal so long ago. But he don’t die. He come back with dollars and the girl meet him on the jetty, all dressed up and smiling. Then he sing to her, ‘You without honour, you without shame.’ It sound good in Martinique patois too ‘Sans honte’.

Afterwards I ask myself, ‘Why I do that?’ It’s not like me. But if they treat you wrong over and over again the hour strike when you burst out that’s what.’

Too besides, Mr Sims can’t tell me now I have no spirit. I don’t care, I sleep quickly and I’m glad I break

the woman's ugly window. But as to my own song it go right away and it never come back. A pity.

Next morning the doorbell ringing wake me up. The people upstairs don't come down, and the bell keeps on like fury itself. So I go to look, and there is a policeman and policewoman outside. As soon as I open the door the woman put her foot in it. She wear sandals and thick stockings and I never see a foot so big or so bad. It look like it want to mash up the whole world. Then she come in after the foot, and her face not so pretty either. The policeman tell me my fine is not paid and people make serious complaints about me, so they're taking me back to the magistrate. He show me a paper and I look at it, but I don't read it. The woman push me in the bedroom, and tell me to get dress quickly, but I just stare at her, because I think perhaps I wake up soon. Then I ask her what I must wear. She say she suppose I had some clothes on yesterday. Or not? 'What's it matter, wear anything' she says. But I find clear underclothes and stockings and my shoes with high heals and I comb my hair. I start to file my nails, because I think they too long for magistrate's court but she get angry. 'Are you coming quickly or aren't you? She says. So I go with them and we get in a car outside.

I wait for a long time in a room full of policeman. They come in, they go out, they telephone, they talk in low voices. Then it's my turn, and first thing I notice in the court room is a man with frowning black eyebrows.

He sit below the magistrate, he dressed in black and be so handsome I can't take my eyes off him. When he see that he frown worse than before.

First comes a policeman to testify I cause disturbance, and the comes the old gentleman from next door. He repeats that bit about nothing but the truth so help me God. Then he says I make dreadful noise at night and use abominable language, and dance in obscene fashion. He says when they try to shut the curtains because his wife so terrify of me, I throw stones and break value stain-glass window. He say his wife get serious injury if she'd been hit, and as it she in terrible nervous condition and the doctor is with her. I think, 'Believe me, if I aim at your wife I hit your wife – that's certain.' 'There was no provocation,' he says. 'None at all.' Then another lady from across the street says this is true. She heard no provocation whatsoever, and she swear that they shut the curtains but I go on insulting them and using filthy language and she saw all this and heard it.

The magistrate is a little gentleman with a quiet voice, but I'm very suspicious of these quiet voices now. He ask me why I don't pay my fine, and I say because I haven't the money. I get the idea they want to find out all about Mr Sims – they listen so very attentive. But they'll find out nothing from me. He ask how long I have the flat and I say I don't remember. I know they want to trip me up like they trip me up about my

savings so I won't answer. At last he ask if I have anything to say as I can't be allowed to go on being a nuisance. I think, 'I'm a nuisance to you because I have no money that's all.' I want to speak up and tell him how they steal all my savings, so when my landlord asks for month's rent I haven't got it to give. I want to tell him the woman next door provoke me since long time and call me bad names but she have a soft sugar voice and nobody hear – that's why I broke her window, but I'm ready to but another after all. I want to say all I can do is sing in that old garden, and I want to say this in a decent quiet voice. But I hear myself talking loud and I see my hands wave in the air. Too besides it's no use, they won't believe me, so I don't finish. I stop, and I feel the tears on my face. 'Prove it.' That's all they will say. They whisper, they whisper. They nod, they nod.

Next thing I'm in a car again with a different policewoman, dressed very smart. Not in uniform. I ask her where she's taking me and she says 'Holloway' just that 'Holloway'.

I catch hold of her hand because I'm afraid. But she takes it away. Cold and smooth her hand slide away and her face is china face – smooth like a doll and I think, 'This is the last time I ask anything from anybody. So help me God.'

The car come up to a black castle and little mean streets are all around it. A lorry was blocking up the

castle gates. When I get by we pass through I am in jail. First I stand in a line with otters who are waiting to give up handbags and all belongings to a woman behind bars like in a post office. The girl in front bring out a nice compact, look like gold to me, lipstick to match and a wallet full of notes. The woman keep the money, but she give back the powder and lipstick and she half-smile. I have two pounds seven shillings and sixpence in pennies. She take my purse, then she throw me my company (which is cheap) my comb and my handkerchief like everythin' in my bag is dirty. So I think, 'Here too, here too.' But I tell myself, 'Girl, what you expect eh? They all like that. All.'

Some of what happen afterwards I forget, or perhaps better not remember. Seems to me they start by trying to frighten you. But they don't succeed with me for I don't care for nothing now, it's as if my heart hard like rock and I can't feel.

Then I'm standing at the top of a staircase with a lot of women and girls. As we are going down I notice the railing very low on one side, very easy to jump, and a long way below there's the grey stone passage like it's waiting for you. As I'm thinking this a uniform woman step up alongside quick and grab my arm. She say, 'Oh no you don't.'

I was just noticing the railing very low that's all – but what's the use of saying so.

Another long line waits for the doctor. It move

forward slowly and my legs terrible tired. The girl in front is very young and she cry and cry. 'I'm scared,' she keeps saying. She's lucky in a way – as for me I never will cry again. It all dry up and hard in me now. That, and a lot besides. In the end I tell her to stop, because she doing just what these people want her to do.

She stop crying and start a long story but while she is speaking her voice get very far away, and I find I can't see her face clear at all.

Then I'm in a chair, and one of those uniform women is pushing my head down between my knees, but let her push – everything go away from me just the same.

They put me in the hospital because the doctor say I'm sick. I have a cell by myself and it's all right except I don't sleep. The things they say you mind I don't mind.

When they clang the door on me I think, 'You shut me in, but you shit all those other dam devils out. They can't reach me now.'

At first is bothers me they keep on looking and me through the night. They open a little window in the doorway to do this. But I get used to it and I get used to the night demise they give me. It very thick, and to my mind it not very clean either – but what's the matter to me? Only the food I can't swallow – especially the porridge. The woman ask me sarcastic, 'Hunger striking?' But afterwards I can leave most of it, and she

don't say nothing.

On day a nice girl comes around with books and she give me two, but I don't want to read so much. Beside one is about a murder, and the other is about a ghost and I don't think it's at all like those books tell you.

There is nothing I want now. It's no use. If they leave me in peace and quiet that's all I ask. The window is barred but not small, so I can see a little thing tree through the bars, and I like watching it.

After a. Week they tell me I'm better and I can go out with the others for exercise. We walk round and round one of the yards in that castle – it is fine weather and the sky is a kind of pale blue, but the yard is a terrible sad place. The sunlight fall down and die there . I get tired walking in high heels and I'm glad when that's over.

We can talk, and one day an old woman come up and ask me for dog-ends. I don't understand, and she start muttering at me like she very vexed. Another woman tell she she mean cigarette-ends, so I say I don't smoke. But the old woman still look angry, and when we're going in she give me one push and I nearly fall down. I'm glad to get away from these people, and hear the door clang and take my shoes off.

Sometimes I think, 'I'm here because I wanted to sing' and I have to laugh. But there's a small looking glass in my cell and I see myself and I'm like somebody else. Like some strange new person. Mr Sims tell me I

too thin, but why he say now to this person in the looking glass? So I don't laugh again.

Usually I don't think at all. Everything and everybody seem small and far away, that is the only trouble.

Twice the doctor come to see me. He don't say much and I don't say anything, because a uniform woman is always there. She look like she thinking, 'Now the lies start.' So I prefer not to speak. Then I'm sure they can't trip me up. Perhaps I there still, or in a worse place. But one day this happen.

We were walking round and round in the yard and I hear a woman singing – the voice come from high up, from one of the small barred windows. At first I don't believe it. Why should anybody sing here? Nobody want to sing in jail, nobody want to do anything. There's no reason, and you have no hope. I think I must be asleep, dreaming, but I'm awake all right and I see all the others are listening too. A nurse is with us that afternoon, not a policewoman. She stop and look up at the window.

It's a smoky kind of voice, and a bit rough sometimes, as if those old dark walls theyselves are complaining, because they see too much misery – too much. But it don't fall down and die in the courtyard; seems to me it could jump the gates of the jail easy and travel far, and nobody could stop it. I don't hear the words – only the music. She sing one verse and she

begin another, then she break off sudden. Everybody starts walking again, and nobody says one word. But as we go in I ask the woman in front who was singing, 'That's the Holloway song,' she says. 'Don't you know it yet? She was singing from the punishment cells, and she tel the girls cheerio and never say die.' Then I have to go one way to the hospital block and she goes another so we don't speak again.

When I'm back in my cell I can't just wait for bed. I walk up and down and I think. 'One day I hear that song on trumpets and these walls will fall and rest.' I want to get out so bad I could hammer on the door, for I know now that anything can happen, and I don't want to stay lock up here and miss it.

Then I'm hungry. I eat everything they bring and in the morning I'm still so hungry I eat the porridge. Next time the doctor come he tells me I seem much better. Then I say a little of what really happen in that house. Not much. Very careful.

He look at me hard and kind of surprised. At the door he shake his finger and says, 'Now don't let me see you here again.'

That evening the woman tells me I'm going, but she's so upset about it I don't ask questions. Very early, before it's light she bangs the door open and shouts at me to hurry up. As we're going along the passages I see the girl who gave me the books. She's in a row with others doing exercises. Up Down. Up, Down up. We

pass quite close and I notice she's looking very pale and tired. It's crazy, it's all crazy. This up down business and everything else too. When they give me my money I remember I leave compact in the cell, so I ask if I can go back for it. You should see that policewoman's face as she shoo me on. There's no car, there's a van and you can't see through the windows. The third time it stop I get out with one other, a young girl, and it's the same magistrates court as before.

The two of use wait in a small room, nobody else there, and after a while the girl say, 'What the hell are they doing? I don't want to spend all day here.' She go to the bell and she keep her finger press on it. When I look at here she say, 'Well what are they for?' That girl's face is hard like a board – she could change faces with many and you wouldn't know the difference. But she get results certainly. A policeman come in, all smiling, and we go in the court. The same magistrate, the same growing man sits below, and when I hear my fine in paid I want to ask who paid it, but he yells as me. 'Silence'

I think I will never understand the half of what happen, but they tell me I can go, and I understand that. The magistrate ask if I'm leaving the neighbourhood and I say yes, then I'm out on the streets again, and it's the same fine weather, same feeling I'm dreaming.

When I get to the house I see two men talking in the

garden. The front door and the door of the flat are both open. I go in, and the bedroom is empty, nothing but the glare streaming inside because they take the Venetian blinds away. As I'm wondering where my suitcase is, and the clothes I leave in the wardrobe, there's a knock and it's the old lady from upstairs caring my case packed, and my coat is over her arm. She says she sees me come in. 'I kept your things for you.' I start to thank her but she turn her back and walk away. They like that here, and better not expect too much. Too besides, I bet they tell her I'm a terrible person.

I go to the kitchen, and when I see they are cutting down the big tree at the back I don't stay to watch.

At the station I'm waiting for the train and the woman asks if I feel well. 'You look so tired,' she says. 'Have you come a long way?' I want to answer, 'I come so far I lose myself on that journey.' But I tell her, 'Yes, I am quite well. But I can't stand the heat.' She says she can't stand it either, and we talk about the weather till the train come in.

I'm not frightened of them any more – after all what else can they do? I know what to say and everything go like clock works.

I get a room near Victoria where the landlady accept one pound in advance, and next day I find a job in the kitchen of a private hotel close by. But I don't stay there long. I hear of another job going in a big store –

altering ladies' dresses and I get that. I lie and tell them I work in very expensive New York stop. I speak bold and smooth faced, and they never check up on me. I make a friend there – Clarice – very light coloured, very smart, she have a lot to do with the customers and she laugh at some of them behind their backs. But I say it's not their fault if the dress don't fit. Special dress for one person only – that's very expensive in London. So it's take in, or let out all the time. Clarice have two rooms not far from the store. She furnish them herself gradual and she give parties sometimes Saturday nights. It's there I start whistling the Holloway Song. A man comes up to me and says, 'Let's hear that again.' So I whistle it again (I never sing now) and he tells me 'Not bad'. Clarice have a old piano somebody give her store and he plays the tune, jazzing it up. I say, 'No, not like that,' but everybody else say the way he do it is first class. Well I think no more of this till I get a letter from him telling me he has sold the song and as I was quite a help he encloses five pounds with thanks.

I read the the letter and I could cry. For after all, that song was all I had. I don't belong nowhere really, and I haven't money to buy my way to belonging. I don't want to either.

But then the girl sing, she sing to me, and she sing for me. I was there because I was *meant* to be there. It was *meant* I should hear it – this I *know*.

Now I've let them play it wrong, and it will go from

me like all the other songs – like everything. Nothing left for me at all.

But then I tell myself all this is foolishness. Even if they played it on trumpets, even if they played it just right, like I wanted – no walls would all so soon. 'So let them call it jazz,' I think, and let them play it wrong. That won't make no difference to the song I heard.

I buy myself a dusty pink dress with the money. ♦

Dennis Severs' House

by *Charlie Dixon*

I arrive outside the black wooden door of Dennis Severs' House, knock gently on the door, and wait under the gas lantern which hangs outside. I had been told that visiting the red brick Georgian house at 18 Folgate was an experience like no other, that it was constructed in pieces over decades until it became a living, breathing piece of art in its own right, and that it had been described by the artist David Hockney as among the great opera experiences in the world (despite containing no opera in the traditional sense). I have to say, I was curious.

Dennis Severs' House is in current form was conceived by Dennis Severs (as one might imagine) in 1979, an eccentric artist who slowly turned the rooms of his eighteenth century house into a series of what he called "still life dramas". Imagine baroque paintings that you can step into, replete with the sounds and smells of a long-passed era, and you're getting close. Stepping into the house is like entering into an interior frozen in time, an interior that manages to tell the

story of the area of Spitalfields in East London – the historic identity of which is closely linked to the silk trade – through the story of a fictional family of Huguenot silk weavers from the 1700s.

Since the passing of Dennis Severs in 1999, the house has been dutifully maintained by a dedicated team of staff who replenish fresh food, fires, flowers, candles and other ephemera on a daily basis to ensure the provision of a truly visceral and authentic encounter with history. There is a sense, as one moves through the rooms of the house, that the family have only just left. At times they can be heard, but they are never seen. The arrangement of the objects in each of the rooms serves to spark the imagination of the viewer, as reflected in the motto of the house, *Aut Visum Aut Non* (You Either See it or You Don't). As the visitor moves from the cellar, up through the various rooms of the home, they traverse a narrative that plots the rise and fall of the locale, Spitalfields, from prosperous times, to a style of living perhaps best captured by Dickens' London.

Appearing central to the experiential nature of the still life, is the diffusion of scent throughout the building. The visitor is guided to the cellar to begin their tour of the space – the air hangs heavy with candle wax, accompanied by the sound of distant bells. The omission of barriers throughout the house enhances the authenticity of the experience. Climbing

the stairs from the cellar kitchen to the ground floor, there is a sense of transition. The dining room is resplendent in its decoration when compared to the more stripped back family kitchen. Arrangements of personal effects around portraits reflect figures from the family. There is a sweeter scent in the air, that suggests a move towards a more affluent lifestyle, tracing the rising wealth of the silk weavers. On the table one finds cut bone china, and claret in cut crystal goblets. There is cutlery propped precariously on the edge of plates, as if left in haste by the invisible family. The walls are richer green, still lit by the warm candle light.

Back through the hall, and up the stairs, to be greeted by the formal drawing room. The proportions of the space radiate from the hearth, demonstrating a sense of harmony central to late 18th century neo-classical ideals. The decoration of the room is distinctly opulent, with low slung velvet swags, gold, mirrors, and a marble fireplace, complete with mantle displaying porcelain figures. The ceiling is deeply coved, and decorated with floral cornicing. By the armchair in the corner of the room, there is a smashed teacup, knocked over as the family left the room. There are delectable piles of fruit and Turkish Delight. The eye becomes so enthralled, analysing each and every detail – as such, it is easily to become convinced as to the existence of the fictional family. The highly convincing nature of the

displays is enhanced by the ruled silence throughout. Such silence is fundamental to a true experience of the space, allowing each guest to become completely enthralled by the constructed history of the house. Dennis Severs himself utilised the imagery of period dramas and novels to bring together the displays, and as a result, there is a certain drama to the space, a fragility. The presentation of this invisible and imaginary family has become so convincing, that, at times, one feels like an intruder. The vow of silence taken upon entering the house becomes necessary, in case one is caught out.

The visitor is left to interpret the placement of the objects in their own way, however there are a number of prompts distributed throughout the rooms which encourage a second look. In another of the rooms, a Hogarth painting hangs on the wall, depicting a series of men around a punch bowl, falling off their chairs in inebriation. When your eyes leave the painting, you realise that you are stood in its aftermath – empty punch bowl, chairs, tobacco and smashed wine glasses all over the floor, and the musty, pan-century odor of the hangover of a party. It is a direct manifestation of the living “still life” concept which drives the mode of display in the house, carrying forward the aforementioned sense of theatricality which underlies the spirit of the house. The current curator, David Milne, has worked to maintain the creative vision of

Severs, while ensuring that the arrangements remain fresh, both conceptually, and literally.

The bedchamber on the second floor serves as a space of exhibition for an eclectic mix of objects. Countless trinkets draw the eye – the air infused with a homely spiced scent; ginger and rosemary. The richly decorated four-poster bed dominates the space, exuding a sense of elegance that is interrupted by the dishevelled bedsheets, swiftly pushed aside. On the dressing table sit a pair of earrings, the same as those which can be seen in the drawing room, bringing each space into conversation, linking them through an invisible character.

Moving up to the third floor, the circumstance of the dwelling begins to break down. The staircase is teeming with cobwebs – laundry hangs low, the floor rickety. The bedrooms of this floor are a stark contrast to the rich velvets and gilded mirrors of the lower floors – the year is 1837, and the house is filled with lodgers; whole families to one room. There are still traces of opulence long gone, but the fabrics are now worn, the walls greyed.

Dennis Severs' house provides a fascinating insight into the life of a family, however fictional, that reflects the changes in the local area and the development of modern London. Spitalfields has changed to a great degree since its conception as a medieval hospital outside of the City walls. It is an area in constant flux,

a small liberty which after the dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th century had its own by-laws and council of aldermen. This led the area to become, for generations, a natural place for not just the Huguenots, but also Russians, Irish, Jewish and Bengali immigrants to settle, along with a host of political dissidents. Despite the constant re-generation of London – the quite literal building upon history that you can experience around the corner by descending into a medieval charnel house – it is an area that retains its essence. Dennis Severs' House however, does not appear as a museum; instead, it is an intensely localised and personal exploration of city life itself, bridging the gap between fact and fiction, constantly reminding the visitor of the multiplicity of urban living through the ages. ♦

Side by...

Hajnali részegség

Kosztolányi Dezső

*Elmondanám ezt néked. Ha nem unnád.
Mult éjszaka – háromkor – abbahagytam
a munkát.*

*Le is feküdtem. Ám a gép az agyban
zörgött tovább, kattogva-zúgva nagyban,
csak forgolódtam dühösen az ágyon,
nem jött az álom.*

*Hívtam pedig, így és úgy, balga szókkal,
százig olvasva s mérges altatókkal.*

Az, amit írtam, lázasan meredt rám.

Izgatta szívem negyven cigarettám.

Meg más egyéb is. A fekete. Minden.

Hát fölkelek, nem bánom az egészet,

sétálgatok szobámba le-föl, ingben,

köröttem a családi fészek,

a szájakon lágy, álombeli mézek

s amint botorkálok itt, mint a részeg,

az ablakon kinézek.

...by side

Like a Drunk at Dawn

translated by Tárnok, Attila

I would tell you this, if you had time.

Upon finishing my work

at three last night

I went to bed. But the motor in my brain

kept on rattling, ticking in haste;

I tossed and turned

but sleep didn't come,

however I called her, in vain:

with silly words, with pills for migraine,

by counting to one hundred.

What I had written, gazed at me in temper,

two packs of cigarettes charged my nerves

and all. Coffee, for instance.

All right, I don't care, I'll get up.

I'm walking about in my room, in a shirt,

my family around me, with gentle sweets

of their dreams on their lips.

And as I stagger up and down here

Várj csak, hogy is kezdjem, hogy magyarázzam?

*Te ismered a házam,
s ha emlékezni tudsz a
hálószobámra, azt is tudhatod,
milyen szegényes, elhagyott
ilyenkor innen a Logodi-utca,
ahol lakom.*

Tárt otthonokba látsz az ablakon.

*Az emberek feldöntve és vakon
vízszintesen fekszenek
s megforduló szemük kancsítva néz szét
ködébe csalfán csillogó eszüknek,
mert a mindennapos agyvérsegyenység
borult rájuk.*

*Mellettük a cipőjük, a ruhájuk
s ők a szobába zárva, mint dobozba,
melyet ébren szépítnek álmodozva,
de – mondhatom – ha így rá meredhetsz,
minden lakás olyan, akár a ketrec.
Egy keltőóra átketyeg a csendből,
sántítva baktat, nyomba felcsörömpöl
és az alvóra szól a
harsány riasztó: "ébredj a valóra."
A ház is alszik, holtan és bután,
mint majd száz év után,*

like a drunk, I glance out at the street.

Wait, how should I explain? Where shall I start?

You know my house.

*If you remember my bedroom,
you will also imagine
how deserted and poor
must have been Logodi Street
where I live from up here.*

*One can see into homes
through open windows.*

*People lie blinded, supine,
off balance, and their turning eyes
look around blinking into the fog
of their false-glittering wits:
they commonly suffer
from cerebral anaemia.*

*With their clothes, their shoes
around them they are locked
as into boxes into their rooms
that they tidy up dreaming
when awake. But I can tell you
if you have the chance
to see them like this,
every suite looks like a cage.*

*An alarm clock is ticking
in the silence, it proceeds
limping and ready to blare*

*ha összeomlik, gyom virít alóla
s nem sejti senki róla,
hogy otthonunk volt-e vagy állat óla.*

*De fön, barátom, ott fön a derús ég,
valami tiszta, fényes nagyszerűség,
reszketve és szilárdul, mint a hűség.
Az égbolt,
egészen úgy, mint hajdanába rég volt,
mint az anyám paplanja, az a kék folt,
mint a vízfesték, mely irkámra szétfolyt,
s a csillagok
lélekző lelke csöndesen ragyog
a langyos őszi
éjjelbe, mely a hideget előzi,
kimondhatatlan messze s odaát,
ők, akik nézték Hannibál hadát
s most néznek engem, aki ide estem
és állok egy ablakba, Budapesten.*

*Én nem tudom, mi történt vélem akkor,
de úgy rémlett, egy szárny suhan felettem
s felém hajol az, amit eltemettem
rég, a gyerekkor.*

*Olyan sokáig
bámultam az égbolt gazdag csodáit,*

*warning people in slumber
to wake up to reality.
But now the whole house
is asleep, dead and dumb,
as if a hundred years from now
when it's long been knocked down,
when weed would bloom on its site
and no one will know whether it was
a pigsty or someone's home.
But up there, my friend, the cheerful sky
is some kind of clear, bright perfection.
It is trembling but solid like our faith.
The firmament, quite like it used to be
long ago, like my mother's quilt.
That blue patch is like the blotch
that has stained my writing
and the breathing souls of the stars,
in the silent, mild autumnal night
that precedes the approaching cold,
in an extreme distance, above me,
they are the same which saw Hannibal
and they watch me now, here,
standing at a window, in Budapest.
I am not sure what took hold of me then
but I felt as if a wing had flitted over me
and what I had buried long ago:
my childhood leaned in my direction.*

*hogy már pirkadt is keleten s a szélben
a csillagok szikrázva, észrevétlen
meg-meglibegtek és távolba roppant
fénycsóva lobbant,
egy menyei kastély kapuja tárult,
körötte láng gyult,
valami rebbent,
oszolni kezdett a vendégsereg fent,
a hajnali homály mély
árnyékai közé lengett a báléj,
künn az előcsarnok fényárban úszott,
a házigazda a lépcsőn bucsúzott,
előkelő úr, az ég óriása,
a bálterem hatalmas glóriása
s mozgás, riadt csilingelés, csodás,
halk női suttogás,
mint amikor már vége van a bálnak
s a kapusok kocsikért kiabálnak.*

*Egy csipkefátyol
látszott, amint a távol
homályból
gyémántosan aláfolly,
egy messze kéklő,
pazar belépő,
melyet magára ölt egy drága, szép nő
és rajt egy ékkő*

*I gazed so long at the rich wonders of the sky
that in the East the dawn was breaking,
and in the wind, invisibly sparkling,
the stars were floating around,
and afar the tail of a comet blazed
and the portals opened to an eternal palace
and flames started up all around.
A garment silently flapped
as guests began to disperse,
the night of the ball dissolved
into the deepest shadows of dawn,
the front hall was swimming in light,
the host was shaking hands on the stairs,
a distinguished nobleman,
the giant of the sky,
glorious and celebrated,
and rustles and frightened jingling
and the wonderful quiet whispers
of women when the ball is over
and only the butlers remained sober.
A lace shroud
appeared to descend
from the distant
gloom like a diamond.
An elegant blue opera-cloak
worn by a beautiful woman,
her jewellery spreading light*

*behintve fénnel ezt a tiszta békét,
a halovány ég túlvilági kékét,
vagy tán egy angyal, aki szűzi
szép mozdulattal csillogó fejékét
hajába tűzi
és az álomnál csendesebben
egy arra ringó
könnyücske hintó
mélyébe lebben
s tovább robog kacér mosollyal ebben,
aztán amíg vad paripái futnak
a farsangosan lángoló Tejutnak
arany konfetti-záporába sok száz
batár között, patkójuk fölsziporkáz.*

*Szájtátva álltam
s a boldogságtól föl-fölkiabáltam,
az égbe bál van, minden este bál van
és most világolt föl értelme ennek
a régi, nagy titoknak, hogy a mennynek
tündérei hajnalba hazamennek
fényes körútjain a végtelennek.*

*Virradtig
maradtam így és csak bámultam addig.
Egyszerre szóltam: hát te mit kerestél
ezen a földön, mily kopott regéket,*

*all over the dim, peaceful sky,
over the blue of eternity,
or perhaps an angel who,
with a virginal touch,
her glittering diadem fixed
in her hair was slipping inside
her chariot quietly, as in a dream,
and speeded by with a flirtacious smile
on her face and the untamable steeds
of the flaming Milky way trotted away
as in a carnival and in the shower
of golden confetti among more
than a hundred carriages
their horseshoes scintillate.
I stood there gaping
and in joyful bliss I cried:
there is a ball in the sky,
there is a ball every night.
And now I realised
the great ancient secret
that the fairies of heaven
march home at dawn
on endless, shiny boulevards.
I stayed and gazed out the window
until day-break and told myself:
what were you looking for here on earth?
What shabby fables or harlots*

*miféle ringyók rabságába estél,
mily kézirat volt fontosabb tenéked,
hogy annyi nyár múlt, annyi sok deres tél
és annyi rest éj
s csak most tűnik szemedbe ez az estély?*

*Ötven,
jaj, ötven éve – szívem visszadöbben –
halottjaim is itt-ott, egyre többen –
már ötven éve tündököl fölöttem
ez a sok élő, fényes égi szomszéd,
ki látja, hogy könnyem mint morzsolom szét.
Szóval bevallom néked, megtörötten
földig hajoltam s mindezt megköszöntem.*

*Nézd csak, tudom, hogy nincsen mibe hinnem
s azt is tudom, hogy el kell mennem innen,
de pattanó szívem feszítve húrnak
dalolni kezdtem ekkor az azúrnak,
annak, kiről nem tudja senki, hol van
annak, kit nem lelek se most, se holtan.
Bizony ma már, hogy izmaim lazulnak,
úgy érzem én, barátom, hogy a porban,
hol lelkek és göröngyök közt botoltam,
mégis csak egy nagy ismeretlen Úrnak
vendége voltam. ♦*

*have imprisoned you thus?
What manuscript took your time
so that now, so many summers gone,
many frosty days and restless nights,
only now you notice
the magnificence of the sky?
Fifty,
oh, fifty years, I am heart-broken,
my dead number more and more,
here and there, it's been already
for fifty years that all these radiant
celestial neighbours have blazed
above me, living and regarding
how I try and dry my tears.
I must confess it to you, sorrow-stricken
I bent my knees in gratitude.
Look. I know I have nothing to hope for,
and that one day I will have to depart.
Yet with my heart taut like a string
I praised the glory in the azure
whose abode no one will fathom,
which I cannot find dead or alive
and today, with slack sinews,
I have a feeling that in the dust
where among other souls I was lost,
my friend, that night I was the guest
of an unknown Lord. ♦*