

Q U A R T E R L Y
P R E S S R E V I E W
FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

WINTER 2019



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QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW is an electronic magazine consisting
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We Can Be Friends

by *Lauren Sarazen*

There was a cluster of coats and hats careening over the railing, and when I got closer I could see what they were looking at. The basin, which had been full of water the last time I'd passed, was drained to the dregs and men in coveralls and tall rubber boots were crawling around in the sludge. Bicycles lay in twisted heaps lining the quai. Algae, soft and fine, grew along the spokes of the wheels and over the metal lattice of an abandoned trolley. Lighters and left shoes were sprinkled like confetti, glinting half-exposed in the mud.

They're dredging the canal, I would say; that's how we would begin. There were scuffed black scooters, a dull silver boombox – did you see them? Should we climb in? You'd give me a look and carry on, and even though that's what I'd expected, you'd dip slightly in my regard.

We'd arranged to meet in one of the cafés where I liked to sit and pretend to be working. It was on a quiet residential street just too far from either métro in the

neighbourhood and entirely derived its custom from a combination of word of mouth and the self-consciously hip photos the baristas posted to Instagram. Velvety flourishes and soft swans drawn in thick foam. Heather in mismatched plant pots. That sort of thing. I hated that it worked, but low-level disdain didn't stop me. The lights glowed golden through the foggy windows and walking towards them, it was possible to imagine that life was softer in there, that we could self-select the good parts of our acquaintance and forget the rest.

It was already five past. Behind the counter, the barista looked up expectantly. Placating him with a *j'attend quelqu'un*, I unwound the scarf from my neck and took a table in the back corner. Staring out the back window at the damp courtyard, I watched the *gardienne* haul in the bins and arrange them against the back wall. Ten minutes in, I took out my book and tried to read. Waiting, but not waiting. It struck the right tone.

But all I could latch onto was the feeling of the paper beneath my thumbs, the way all the letters were thicker on one side of the page than the other. I liked smudges in second-hand books. Fingerprints, the odd crumb, could propel me to scrutinize what my predecessor had been eating. Sometimes there'd be a name I could lookup. There was less charm in mass-produced mistakes. I flipped through the book, jumping in time from the hairy middle to what I hoped was an

elegant denouement, focusing on the type. It was true. Half the book was essentially smudged, the letters uniformly but distinctly different, and no one at the publishing house apparently thought about it. I heard the scuff against the tiled floor then, and my face flew up from the page to watch another stranger walk through the door. 20 minutes late.

The barista started eyeing my barren table from behind the Marzocco. I thought about calling. Perhaps you'd noted the wrong address. Perhaps we'd bungled the timing. But that would erode the patina of nonchalance we'd carefully applied. That would ruin everything. Instead, I ordered an allongé. When it arrived, I shut the book. Nursing my cup, I made those slow sips last two hours until the coffee was acidic and cool and the café was closing. The phone in my pocket was a stone.

In the lift, I leaned my cheek against the cool mirrored wall. My skin looked greasy. Hairs sprang rowdily out of place. I felt red and raw by the time the narrow coffin, quivering on its cables, arrived at the sixth floor. Unlocking my door at the end of the hall, I scuttled inside, eyes trained on the floorboards as the door next to mine opened with a sick moan.

I poured a glass of wine before I kicked my shoes off. It was nice, five euros more than I'd normally spend, though not so nice I'd call it 'nice' to anyone else. I

sucked off two desperate gulps standing up over the sink, then set a pot of water to boil.

Slumping down onto the futon, I settled into the hollow encouraged by a series of broken slats. The street lamps across the street flickered on, and golden rectangles developed slowly across the plane of my hardwood floor. The burner was hissing when I realised I'd just been sitting there in my coat in the dark with the empty glass in my hand. I shucked off my outerwear and tripped towards the kitchen, banging my toe on one of the legs of the end table. I only had myself to blame. I'd started it; I always did.

Flicking the switch, the kitchen nook filled with shuddering light. Lowering the heat, I dumped in a handful of linguine and leaned against the counter to watch as the noodles softened slowly in the foaming water. The kids who lived above me thundered down their hallway, shaking my ceiling. I poured another glass of wine. My phone, screen dark, lay on the end table. I wrote texts in my head:

I'm so sorry! I forgot about today. Tomorrow?

Where were you? Are you alright?

I hate you. I hate you because you always do this. You go right up to the edge, and then you disappear.

Draining the pasta over the sink, I dumped it back into the pot. Mixing in a pat of butter, then another, I wove them through the linguine with counterfeit absorption. Fresh black pepper. A dusting of comté.

Overturning the pot into a bowl, I stabbed the nest with a fork. Turning on the overhead lights, I brought my meal back to the futon and took a bite. Balancing the bowl on my knees, I typed quickly.

They're dredging the canal, I wrote. 40 tonnes of waste. Sighted: an office chair, a suitcase, a toilet, two motorbikes, bottles, and bags. Catfish! You missed it. And me. I attached an article from The Guardian and hit send.

Our scenes were conducted in absence now. Shuttled back and forth in this in-between space, there was a particular heft to the words that was new. When they appeared. We said more when we weren't together, when there was no audience, no stakes other than the small grey checkmark and no immediate reply. It was nebulous and unsatisfying, but I didn't see why we should stop.

I was weighing parsnips when you replied. Carrefour was humming and my basket was laden with vegetables that required individual weighing and the application of a small sticker before checkout. It was repetitive and meaningless, but I ascribed the shiver of ritual to my movements. These are the things I do without you. I repeated it like a charm. I'd whispered it to the cartons of gazpacho, the rotisserie chickens held captive in their plastic bags.

We can be friends, it said. But I don't think that's the

best thing for you right now.

I slapped the sticker on the parsnips and dropped a small bottle of milk into the basket. I stalked through the aisles, considering things I didn't need or even like to eat. At the back of the checkout queue, I inched forward listening to the nasal drone of a woman arguing with the checker. I jettisoned a jar of capers on the closest shelf but went through with the sour Greek yoghurt. For a week, I stared at the container on the shelf in my fridge wondering what I'd been thinking.

Once, briefly, we'd settled into a rhythm. I didn't know you yet, but I thought I did. And then you came running through to the bedroom, eyes wild. You'd broken every dish in the kitchen, and none of them were mine. Just like that. The floor was overlaid with ceramic shards. I sprang up and went in barefoot like an idiot. I could see where you smashed them – there, on the edge of the counter where the point of impact was dusted with chalky powder. Taking up the push broom, I brushed the fragments into an untidy pile, heart bleating, while you slouched in the doorway. My toe caught on one of the bigger pieces, but I didn't notice until the next morning when you complained about the blood on the sheets. ♦

Walking with Sherlock Holmes

by *Alice Dunn*

If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on [...] it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable.

The concept of stale and unprofitable fiction must have been an unfamiliar one to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle when Sherlock Holmes uttered these words to Dr Watson in his short story, 'A Case of Identity'. Hot on the trail of *A Study in Scarlet*, the novel that first introduced Holmes to readers in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* in 1887 and proved so popular it was released in book form just six months later, the Sherlock Holmes stories were in high demand. Conan Doyle wrote *The Sign of Four* next in 1890, under commission and in serial form. It was published as a single volume later that year.

Conan Doyle drew more convincing observations from real life in his astute descriptions of London. He needed to demonstrate Holmes's 'exact knowledge' of

the city, after all. The relationship between Sherlock Holmes and the capital is a compelling one. Conan Doyle had just moved to London when he conceived the idea of Sherlock Holmes as a short story. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which celebrates the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication as a collection in October this year, was written entirely in London. The first five stories were written while he lived near the British Museum and the following seven were penned from his newly purchased home in South Norwood.

Conan Doyle described his London with admirable accuracy. For the most vivid images of busy and smoke-filled London streets we should, ironically, turn to 'The Blue Carbuncle', a story about the recovery of a beautiful blue stone 'of such purity and radiance.' Holmes initially dismisses the case as a simple incident that is bound to happen 'when you have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space of a few square miles.' He was almost right. Between 1890 and 1940 the population of Greater London is said to have increased by three million, from over 5.5 million to over 8.5 million. London resembled a tumultuous building site that struggled to accommodate its inhabitants and had to create space for modern transport.

In order to make way for new train tracks, railway companies purchased the properties of the poor (they

could not afford to buy from the rich). Historian Peter Ackroyd estimates that 100,000 people were displaced in the process. At every turn, London was changing, and always chaotically. The Building News and Engineering Journal of 1881 describes the lack of unified vision that resulted in clashes of architectural styles:

After trying to use the highest types of beauty everywhere, after putting Greek-temple details into London shop-fronts, and Gothic-church details into London houses, it has simply nauseated itself with both Greek and Gothic. Its search for beauty, just at present, is over.

London was ill-equipped for architecture designed to let in sunlight. Building News adds that it needed buildings for 'the dirt and filth ingrained by a London atmosphere.' Conditions surely better suited to literature than reality.

Indeed, walking through London with Sherlock Holmes does involve going 'through a zigzag of slums' and crossing a 'labyrinth of small streets'. Crowds populate the streets and so fill the stories. Holmes finds himself 'cut short by a loud hubbub,' and tackling 'knots of people'. In such claustrophobic and congested conditions, one cannot blame Holmes when, in pursuit of someone with the name of Henry Baker, he despairs that, 'There are some thousands of Bakers, and some hundreds of Henry Bakers in this city of ours.' The

hope of finding a particular person in London would dissolve into the mass of people. An inhabitant might feel part of a collective swarm, rather than an individual.

Feeling anonymous in a city of such magnitude may not be unusual. Although, if we were to believe the work of theorist Cesare Lombroso (the man credited as the father of criminology), then no criminal can be anonymous. In 1876 Lombroso wrote *L'uomo delinquente* or 'Criminal Man', a research study exploring what makes a criminal. In it, he suggests that criminal minds are a result of genetics and are identifiable in one's physical appearance: 'Nearly all criminals have jug ears, thick hair, thin beards, pronounced sinuses, protruding chins, and broad cheekbones,' he writes. Habitual murderers, meanwhile, 'have a cold, glassy stare and eyes that are sometimes bloodshot and filmy.'

How does a crime writer solve the problem of the so easily visible criminal? By casting a blanket of fog over the city. Fortunately for our fictional criminal, London's real-life weather offered the chance to hide. Fog was an intrinsic part of life in London. Henry Mayhew called fog London's 'native element'. Even as a subject, foggy weather was enough to warrant a small volume published in 1880 by R. Russell, simply titled *London Fogs*.

'Haziness', Russell writes, 'if not fog, prevails in

London on nearly every day in the year. [...] In the daytime, a sightseer on Primrose Hill or Hampstead Heath, even if he be a poet, will be fortunate if more than a small number of “distant spires” reveals itself to his gaze.’

Conan Doyle aptly clouds Holmes’s London too: fog obstructs views, imbues passages with rich smells of the earth and gives London a ‘smoke-laden and uncongenial atmosphere’. Not all writers enjoyed the potential fog had to offer, however. Henry James wrote in a letter to his mother in 1858, ‘But oh, the foggy Philistinism, the grimy ugliness, of London!’ For Henry James, London was populated enough without fog to crowd the air as well.

London, therefore, could often only be seen in short flashes, much like the Holmes stories themselves.

Indeed, the short story neatly complemented late nineteenth-century London. It fulfilled a requirement for quick reads. Readers, like Holmes, frequently found themselves dashing for the station, whether for ‘a train from Paddington’ as in ‘The Engineer’s Thumb’ or one ‘due at Winchester at 11.30’ (from ‘The Copper Beeches’). People found their days broken up into episodes. But did society always dictate what the author wrote, or did the writer produce and society react?

Serialisations in magazines certainly changed the shape of fiction, audience and market. In an interview

with *Tit-Bits* magazine on 15 December 1900, Conan Doyle explained his careful method of constructing the stories: he wanted to produce a serial ‘without appearing to do so’, so that each story could be read as a stand-alone piece of fiction while allowing regular connections to Holmes’s previous cases. For doing so Conan Doyle called himself a ‘revolutionist.’ He teases the reader with characters they may have missed, thereby only increasing their already ravenous appetite.

The short story represented a refreshing break away from the heady novels of the nineteenth century, which were famously described by Henry James as ‘large, loose, baggy monsters’. Short fiction lends itself particularly well to crime writing. The formal use of a mystery enables a sense of resolution for readers to untangle.

Conan Doyle pays close attention to small details through Holmes’s scientific observations. He was able to draw on his training as a physician in his stories. He took the opportunity to explore the triumph and progress of the material science of positivism – a system of philosophy recognizing only facts and observable phenomena. Science is welcome in literature as it helps to blur the boundary between fact and fiction, even if it’s at the cost of confusing readers. It is well documented that readers have always written to Sherlock Holmes and still continue to this day.

After finishing *The Adventures*, Doyle said he wanted to stop writing Sherlock Holmes altogether: 'I believe it is always better to give the public less than it wants rather than more'. Thankfully he did not act on his wish immediately, though I think no truism could be better attributed to thinking about the short story as a whole. ♦

Why You Never See Your Friends Anymore

by *Judith Shulevitz*

Just under a century ago, the Soviet Union embarked on one of the strangest attempts to reshape the common calendar that has ever been undertaken. As Joseph Stalin raced to turn an agricultural backwater into an industrialized nation, his government downsized the week from seven to five days. Saturday and Sunday were abolished.

In place of the weekend, a new system of respite was introduced in 1929. The government divided workers into five groups, and assigned each to a different day off. On any given day, four-fifths of the proletariat would show up to their factories and work while the other fifth rested. Each laborer received a colored slip of paper – yellow, orange, red, purple, or green – that signified his or her group. The staggered schedule was known as *nepreryvka*, or the “continuous workweek,” since production never stopped.

Socially, the *nepreryvka* was a disaster. People had no time to see friends; instead they associated by color:

purple people with purple people, orange with orange, and so on. Managers were supposed to assign husbands and wives to the same color but rarely did. The Communist Party saw these dislocations as a feature, not a bug, of the new system. The Party wanted to undermine the family, that bourgeois institution. “Lenin’s widow, in good Marxist fashion, regarded Sunday family reunions as a good enough reason to abolish that day,” according to E. G. Richards, the author of *Mapping Time*, a history of the calendar.

Workers, however, were upset. One of them openly complained to Pravda: “What are we to do at home if the wife is in the factory, the children in school, and no one can come to see us? What is left but to go to the public tea room? What kind of life is that – when holidays come in shifts and not for all workers together? That’s no holiday, if you have to celebrate by yourself.”

The staggered workweek didn’t last long. Officials worried that it affected attendance at workers’ meetings, which were essential for a Marxist education. In 1931, Stalin declared that the nepreryvka had been implemented “too hastily,” leading to a “depersonalized labor process” and the mass breakage of overtaxed machines. That year, the government added a day of collective rest. The seven-day week was not restored until 1940.

Experiments like this one have given social

engineering a bad name. Nevertheless, Americans are imposing a kind of nepreryvka on ourselves – not because a Communist tyrant thinks it’s a good idea but because the contemporary economy demands it. The hours in which we work, rest, and socialize are becoming ever more desynchronized.

Whereas we once shared the same temporal rhythms – five days on, two days off, federal holidays, thank-God-it’s-Fridays – our weeks are now shaped by the unpredictable dictates of our employers. Nearly a fifth of Americans hold jobs with nonstandard or variable hours. They may work seasonally, on rotating shifts, or in the gig economy driving for Uber or delivering for Postmates. Meanwhile, more people on the upper end of the pay scale are working long hours. Combine the people who have unpredictable workweeks with those who have prolonged ones, and you get a good third of the American labor force.

The personalization of time may seem like a petty concern, and indeed some people consider it liberating to set their own hours or spend their “free” time reaching for the brass ring. But the consequences could be debilitating for the U.S. in the same way they once were for the U.S.S.R. A calendar is more than the organization of days and months. It’s the blueprint for a shared life.

Remember the old 9-to-5, five-day-a-week grind? If you’re in your 30s or younger, maybe not. Maybe you

watched reruns of *Leave It to Beaver* and saw Ward Cleaver come home at the same time every evening. Today few of us have workdays nearly so consistent. On the lower end of the labor market, standing ready to serve has become virtually a prerequisite for employment. A 2018 review of the retail sector called the “Stable Scheduling Study” found that 80 percent of American workers paid by the hour have fluctuating schedules. Many employers now schedule hours using algorithms to calculate exactly how many sets of hands are required at a given time of day – a process known as on-demand scheduling. The algorithms are designed to keep labor costs down, but they also rob workers of set schedules.

The inability to plan even a week into the future exacts a heavy toll. For her recent book, *On the Clock*, the journalist Emily Guendelsberger took jobs at an Amazon warehouse, a call center, and a McDonald’s. All three companies demanded schedule flexibility – on their terms. The most explicit about the arrangement was Amazon. While filling out an online application, Guendelsberger found the following advisory: “Working nights, weekends, and holidays may be required ... Overtime is often required (sometimes on very short notice) ... Work schedules are subject to change without notice.”

One Amazon co-worker told Guendelsberger that she barely saw her husband anymore. He worked the night

shift as a school custodian and came home to sleep an hour before she woke up to go to work. “We have Sunday if I’m not working mandatory overtime, and occasionally we have Monday morning – if I don’t have to work Monday morning – to see each other, and that’s pretty much it,” she said.

On the other end of the labor force are the salaried high earners for whom the workday and workweek remain somewhat more predictable. But their days and weeks have grown exceedingly long. For her 2012 book, *Sleeping With Your Smartphone*, the Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow conducted a survey of 1,600 managers and professionals. Ninety-two percent reported putting in 50 or more hours of work a week, and a third of those logged 65 hours or more. And, she adds, “that doesn’t include the twenty to twenty-five hours per week most of them reported monitoring their work while not actually working.” In her 2016 book, *Finding Time: The Economics of Work-Life Conflict*, the economist Heather Boushey described the predicament in stark terms: “Professionals devote most of their waking hours to their careers.”

When so many people have long or unreliable work hours, or worse, long and unreliable work hours, the effects ripple far and wide. Families pay the steepest price. Erratic hours can push parents – usually mothers – out of the labor force. A body of research suggests that children whose parents work odd or long

hours are more likely to evince behavioral or cognitive problems, or be obese. Even parents who can afford nannies or extended day care are hard-pressed to provide thoughtful attention to their kids when work keeps them at their desks well past the dinner hour.

To make the most efficient use of their scant time at home, some parents have resorted to using the same enterprise software that organizes their office lives: Trello for chores, to-do lists, and homework; Slack to communicate with the kids or even to summon them to dinner. Anyone raising a teenager knows that nagging is more effective electronically than face-to-face.

Keeping up a social life with unreliable hours is no easy feat, either. My friends and I now resort to scheduling programs such as Doodle to plan group dinners. Committing to a far-off event – a wedding, a quinceañera – can be a source of anxiety when you don't know what your schedule will be next week, let alone next month. Forty percent of hourly employees get no more than seven days' notice about their upcoming schedules; 28 percent get three days or fewer.

What makes the changing cadences of labor most nepreryvka-like, however, is that they divide us not just at the micro level, within families and friend groups, but at the macro level, as a polity. Staggered and marathon work hours arguably make the nation materially richer – economists debate the point – but they certainly deprive us of what the late Supreme

Court Justice Felix Frankfurter described as a “cultural asset of importance”: an “atmosphere of entire community repose.”

I know this dates me, but I'm nostalgic for that atmosphere of repose – the extended family dinners, the spontaneous outings, the neighborly visits. We haven't completely lost these shared hours, of course. Time-use studies show that weekends continue to allow more socializing, civic activity, and religious worship than weekdays do. But Sundays are no longer a day of forced noncommerce – everything's open – or nonproductivity. Even if you aren't asked to pull a weekend shift, work intrudes upon those once-sacred hours. The previous week's unfinished business beckons when you open your laptop; urgent emails from a colleague await you in your inbox. A low-level sense of guilt attaches to those stretches of time not spent working.

As for the children, they're not off building forts; they're padding their college applications with extracurricular activities or playing organized sports. A soccer game ought to impose an ethos of not working on a parent, and offer a chance to chat with neighbors and friends. Lately, however, I've been seeing more adults checking their email on the sidelines.

Is there any hope for clawing back some shared time off? In *Sleeping With Your Smartphone*, Perlow describes how she developed a solution to white-collar

peonage at Boston Consulting Group. She called her strategy “PTO”: predictable time off. It didn’t seem like a big deal. Teams would pull together to arrange one weeknight off per member per week. Not at the same time – clients still expected someone to be on call at all hours – but on different nights.

PTO turned out to be surprisingly complicated. Schedules had to be repeatedly adjusted to ensure that all evenings were covered. Not everyone liked the new system. “Bob,” for instance, didn’t want to take his night off while he was on the road; he would have preferred to spend that time with his family.

Still, Perlow and Boston Consulting Group deemed PTO a success, and it has since been adopted elsewhere. Drill down on why, though, and the answer does more to confirm the problem than suggest a solution. PTO made people meet more frequently and talk frankly to one another. They had to explain why a particular night wouldn’t work for them. They bonded. It was the together time, not the nights off, that made employees happier and more effective.

The “opt out” movement comes at the problem from a different angle. Its proponents call for people to reject the cult of busyness, in part by rejecting the notion that, as Jenny Odell writes in *How to Do Nothing*, our every minute should be “captured, optimized, or appropriated as a financial resource by the technologies we use daily.” But it’s one thing to delete

Instagram from your phone so you can be more present for your wife and kids. It’s another to decide unilaterally that your boss’s emails can wait until morning.

And for those on the lower rungs of the economy, there’s no ignoring the scheduling algorithm – at least as long as the algorithm is king. In her 2014 book, *The Good Jobs Strategy*, the MIT business professor Zeynep Ton argues that on-demand scheduling may prove to have higher costs than benefits: Companies, especially ones that depend on customer service, lose money and market share when they desynchronize their labor force. She offers the example of Home Depot. When it opened in 1979, the company invested in full-time workers with home-improvement expertise. It quickly became the market leader. But then Home Depot began losing money, largely because of inefficient operations. In 2000, a new CEO imposed discipline in the company. However, seeking to cut labor costs, he also imposed “flexible” schedules. Home Depot started hiring more part-timers, most of them less knowledgeable than the full-timers. Customers couldn’t find anyone to help them navigate the store, and checkout lines became punishingly long. By 2005, Home Depot had plunged below beleaguered Kmart on the American Customer Satisfaction Index.

The Gap, IKEA, and a handful of other retailers have been trying to figure out how to mitigate the

damage of inconsistent shifts. They are testing fixes such as making start and end times more consistent and giving no less than two weeks' notice of upcoming schedules, among other things.

But it's naive to think that policies like this will become the norm. Wall Street demands improved quarterly earnings and encourages the kind of short-term thinking that drives executives to cut their most expensive line item: labor. If we want to alter the cadences of collective time, we have to act collectively, an effort that is itself undermined by the American nepreryvka. A presidential-campaign field organizer in a caucus state told me she can't get low-income workers to commit to coming to meetings or rallies, let alone a time-consuming caucus, because they don't know their schedules in advance.

Reform is possible, however. In Seattle, New York City, and San Francisco, "predictive scheduling" laws (also called "fair workweek" laws) require employers to give employees adequate notice of their schedules and to pay employees a penalty if they don't.

Then there's "right to disconnect" legislation, which mandates that employers negotiate a specific period when workers don't have to answer emails or texts off the clock. France and Italy have passed such laws.

It's a cliché among political philosophers that if you want to create the conditions for tyranny, you sever the bonds of intimate relationships and local community.

"Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals," Hannah Arendt famously wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She focused on the role of terror in breaking down social and family ties in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin. But we don't need a secret police to turn us into atomized, isolated souls. All it takes is for us to stand by while unbridled capitalism rips apart the temporal preserves that used to let us cultivate the seeds of civil society and nurture the sadly fragile shoots of affection, affinity, and solidarity. ♦

The Curtain Blown by the Breeze

by *Muriel Spark*

It is always when a curtain at an open window flutters in the breeze that I think of that frail white curtain, a piece of fine gauze, which was drawn across the bedroom windows of Mrs Van der Merwe. I never saw the original curtains, which were so carelessly arranged as to leave a gap through which that piccanin of twelve had peeped, one night three years before, and had watched Mrs Van der Merwe suckle her child, and been caught and shot dead by Jannie, her husband. The original curtains had now been replaced by this more delicate stuff, and the husband's sentence still had five years to run, and meanwhile Mrs Van der Merwe was changing her character.

She stopped slouching; she lost the lanky, sullen look of a smallholder's wife; she cleared the old petrol cans out of the yard, and that was only a start; she became a tall lighthouse sending out kindly beams which some took for welcome instead of warnings against the rocks. She bought the best china, stopped keeping pound notes stuffed in a stocking, called herself Sonia instead

of Sonji, and entertained.

This was a territory where you could not bathe in the gentlest stream but a germ from the water entered your kidneys and blighted your body for life; where you could not go for a walk before six in the evening without returning crazed by the sun; and in this remote part of the territory, largely occupied by poor whites amidst the overwhelming natural growth of natives, a young spinster could not keep a cat for a pet but it would be one day captured and pitifully shaved by the local white bachelors for fun; it was a place where the tall grass was dangerous from snakes and the floors dangerous from scorpions. The white people seized on the slightest word, Nature took the lightest footfall, with fanatical seriousness. The English nurses discovered that they could not sit next a man at dinner and be agreeable – perhaps asking him, so as to slice up the boredom, to tell them all the story of his life – without his taking it for a great flirtation and turning up next day after breakfast for the love affair; it was a place where there was never a breath of breeze except in the season of storms and where the curtains in the windows never moved in the breeze unless a storm was to follow.

The English nurses were often advised to put in for transfers to another district.

‘It’s so much brighter in the north. Towns, life. Civilization, shops. Much cooler – you see, it’s high up there in the north. The races.’

‘You would like it in the east – those orange-planters. Everything is greener, there’s a huge valley. Shooting.’

‘Why did they send you nurses to this unhealthy spot? You should go to a healthy spot.’

Some of the nurses left Fort Beit. But those of us who were doing tropical diseases had to stay on, because our clinic, the largest in the Colony, was also a research centre for tropical diseases. Those of us who had to stay on used sometimes to say to each other, ‘Isn’t it wonderful here? Heaps of servants. Cheap drinks. Birds, beasts, flowers.’

The place was not without its strange marvels. I never got used to its travel-film colours except in the dry season when the dust made everything real. The dust was thick in the great yard behind the clinic where the natives squatted and stood about, shouting or laughing – it came to the same thing – cooking and eating, while they awaited treatment, or the results of X-rays, or the results of an X-ray of a distant relative. They gave off a fierce smell and kicked up the dust. The sore eyes of the babies were always beset by flies, but the babies slept on regardless, slung on their mothers’ backs, and when they woke and cried the women suckled them.

The poor whites of Fort Beit and its area had a

reception room of their own inside the building, and here they ate the food they had brought, and lolled about in long silences, sometimes working up to a fight in a corner. The remainder of the society of Fort Beit did not visit the clinic.

The remainder comprised the chemist, the clergyman, the veterinary surgeon, the police and their families. These enjoyed a social life of a small and remote quality, only coming into contact with the poor white small-farmers for business purposes. They were anxious to entertain the clinic staff who mostly spent its free time elsewhere – miles and miles away, driving at weekends to the Capital, the north, or to one of the big dams on which it was possible to set up for a sailor. But sometimes the nurses and medical officers would, for a change, spend an evening in the village at the house of the chemist, the clergyman, the vet, or at the police quarters.

Into this society came Sonia Van der Merwe when her husband had been three years in prison. There was a certain slur attached to his sentence since it was generally felt he had gone too far in the heat of the moment, this sort of thing undermining the prestige of the Colony at Whitehall. But nobody held the incident against Sonia. The main difficulty she had to face in her efforts towards the company of the vet, the chemist and the clergyman was the fact that she had never yet been in their company.

The Van der Merwes' farm lay a few miles outside Fort Beit. It was one of the few farms in the district, for this was an area which had only been developed for the mines, and these had lately closed down. The Van der Merwes had lived the makeshift, toiling lives of Afrikaner settlers who had trekked up from the Union. I do not think it had ever before occurred to Sonia that her days could be spent otherwise than in rising and washing her face at the tub outside, baking bread, scrappily feeding her children, yelling at the natives, and retiring at night to her feather bed with Jannie. Her only outings had been to the Dutch Reformed gathering at Easter when the Afrikaners came in along the main street in their covered wagons and settled there for a week.

It was not till the lawyer came to arrange some affair between the farm and the Land Bank that she learned she could actually handle the fortune her father had left her, for she had imagined that only the pound notes she kept stuffed in the stocking were of real spending worth; her father in his time had never spent his money on visible things, but had invested it, and Sonia thought that money paid into the bank was a sort of tribute-money to the bank people which patriarchal farmers like her father were obliged to pay under the strict ethic of the Dutch Reformed Church. She now understood her cash value, and felt fiercely against her husband for failing to reveal it to her. She wrote a

letter to him, which was a difficult course. I saw the final draft, about which she called a conference of nurses from the clinic. We were wicked enough to let it go, but in fact I don't think we gave it much thought. I recall that on this occasion we talked far into the night about her possibilities – her tennis court, her two bathrooms, her black-and-white bedroom – all of which were as yet only a glimmer at the end of a tunnel. In any case, I do not think we could have succeeded in changing her mind about the letter which subsequently enjoyed a few inches in the local press as part of Jannie's evidence. It was as follows:

Dear Jannie there is going to be some changes I found out what pa left is cash to spend I only got to sine my name do you think I like to go on like this work work counting the mealies in the field By God like poor whites when did I get a dress you did not say a word that is your shame and you have landed in jale with your bad temper you shoud of amed at the legs. Mr Little came here to bring the papers to sine he said you get good cooking in jale the kids are well but Hannah got a bite but I will take them away from there now and send them to the convent and pay money. Your Loving Wife, S. Van der Merwe

There must have been many occasions on which I lay on my bed on summer afternoons in Worcestershire, because at that time I was convalescent. My schooldays had come to an end. My training as a radiotherapist

was not to begin till the autumn.

I do not know how many afternoons I lay on my bed listening to a litany of tennis noises from where my two brothers played on the court a little to the right below my window. Sometimes, to tell me it was time to get up, my elder brother Richard would send a tennis ball through the open window. The net curtain would stir and part very suddenly and somewhere in the room the ball would thud and then roll. I always thought one day he would break the glass of the window, or that he would land the ball on my face or break something in the room, but he never did. Perhaps my memory exaggerates the number of these occasions and really they only occurred once or twice.

But I am sure the curtains must have moved in the breeze as I lay taking in the calls and the to and fro of tennis on those unconcerned afternoons, and I suppose the sight was a pleasurable one. That a slight movement of the curtains should be the sign of a summer breeze seems somewhere near to truth, for to me truth has airy properties with buoyant and lyrical effects; and when anything drastic starts up from some light cause it only proves to me that something false has got into the world.

I do not actually remember the curtains of my room being touched by the summer wind although I am sure they were; whenever I try to bring to mind this detail of the afternoon sensations it disappears, and I have

knowledge of the image only as one who has swallowed some fruit of the Tree of Knowledge – its memory is usurped by the window of Mrs Van der Merwe's house and by the curtains disturbed, in the rainy season, by a trifling wind, unreasonably meaning a storm.

Sometimes, on those restful afternoons, I was anxious. There was some doubt about my acceptance for training as a radiotherapist because of my interrupted schooling. One day the letter of acceptance came by the late post. I read the letter with relief and delight, and at that same moment decided to turn down the offer. It was enough that I had received it. I am given to this sort of thing, and the reason that I am drawn to moderate and tranquil motives is that I lack them. I decided instead to become a hospital nurse and later to follow my brother Richard, who was then a medical student, to Africa, and specialize, with him, in tropical diseases.

It was about a year after my arrival at Fort Beit that I came across Sonji Van der Merwe and, together with the other nurses, read the letter which was about to be sent to her husband four hundred miles away in the Colony's prison. She posted the letter ritualistically the next afternoon, putting on her church-going gloves to do so. She did not expect, nor did she receive, a reply. Three weeks later she started calling herself Sonia.

Our visits to the farm began to take the place of evenings spent at the vet's, the chemist's and the clergyman's, to whose society Sonia now had good hopes of access. And every time we turned up something new had taken place. Sonia knew, or discovered as if by bush-telegraph, where to begin. She did not yet know how to travel by train and would have been afraid to make any excursion by herself far from the area, but through one nurse or another she obtained furnishings from the Union, catalogues, books about interior decoration and fashion magazines. Travel-stained furniture vans began to arrive at her bidding and our instigation. Her first move, however, was to join the Church of England, abandoning the Dutch Reformed persuasion of her forefathers; we had to hand it to her that she had thought this up for herself.

We egged her on from week to week. We taught her how not to be mean with her drinks, for she had ordered an exotic supply. At first she had locked the bottles in the pantry and poured them into glasses in the kitchen and watered them before getting the house-boy to serve them to her guests. We stopped all that. A contractor already had the extensions to the house in hand, and the rooms were being decorated and furnished one by one. It was I who had told her to have two bathrooms, not merely one, installed. She took time getting used to the indoor lavatories and we had to

keep reminding her to pull the chain. One of us brought back from the Capital a book of etiquette which was twenty-eight years old but which she read assiduously, following the words with her forefinger. I think it was I who had suggested the black-and-white bedroom, being a bit drunk at the time, and now it was a wonder to see it taking shape; it was done within a month – she had managed to obtain black wallpaper, and to put it up, although wallpaper was a thing unheard of in the Colony and she was warned by everyone that it would never stick to the walls. There was in this bedroom a white carpet and a chaise-longue covered with black-and-white candy-striped satin. It was less than a year before she got round to adding the Beardsley reproductions, but by that time she was entertaining, and had the benefit of the vet's counsel, he having once been a young man in London.

She told us one day – lying on the chaise-longue and looking very dramatic with her lanky hair newly piled up and her black chiffon dressing-gown – the story of the piccanin, which we already knew:

'It was through that window he was looking. Yere I was sitting yere on the bed feeding the baby and I look up at the window and so help me God it was a blerry nig standing outside with his face at the window. You should of heard me scream. So Jannie got the gun and caught the pic and I hear the bang. So he went too far in his blerry temper so what can you expect? Now I

won't have no more trouble from them boys. That's the very window, I was careless to leave the curtain aside. So we show them what's what and we get a new set of boys. We didn't have no boys on the farm, they all run away.'

There was a slight warm breeze floating in little gusts through the window. 'We'd better be getting back,' said one of the girls. 'There's going to be a storm.'

A storm in the Colony was such that before it broke the whole place was spasmodic like an exposed nerve, and after it was over the body of the world from horizon to horizon moved in a slow daze back into its place. Before it broke there was the little wind, then a pearly light, then an earthen smell; the birds screamed and suddenly stopped, and the insects disappeared. Afterwards the flying ants wriggled in a drugged condition out of the cracks in the walls, found their wings, and flew off in crazy directions, the more extreme colours of the storm faded out of the sky in a defeated sort of way, and the furniture felt clammy from the ordeal. One day I was caught at Sonia's house when a storm broke. This was when she had already settled in to her status, and the extensions to the house were completed, and the furniture all in place. Night fell soon after the storm was over, and we sat in her

very Europeanized drawing-room – for she had done away with the stoep – sipping pink gins; the drinks were served by a native with huge ape-like hands clutching the tray, his hands emerging from the cuffs of the green-and-white uniform which had lately glared in the light of the storm. Sonia kept saying, 'I feel I've made a corner of civilization for myself in doing up this house.' It was a version of one of the clergyman's chance compliments on one of his visits; she had seized on it as a verity, and made it known to all her visitors. 'I feel I must live up to it, man,' she said. I was always amazed at her rapid acquisition of new words and highly useful sayings.

Outside, the night sounds were coming back. One could hear the beasts finding each other again by their calls whenever Sonia stopped talking, and even further in the distance, the drum business, with news of which kraals had been swamped and wrecked, or perhaps no news, for all we understood of their purpose. Just outside the window there was an occasional squelch of bare feet on the wet gravel drive which Sonia had constructed. She rose and adjusted the light window curtains, then drew the big ones. She was better now. During the storm she had squatted with hunched shoulders on the carpet like a native in his but, letting the waves of sound and light break over her. It was generally thought she had some coloured blood. But this, now that she had begun to reveal such visible

proof of her glamorous fortune and character, was no bar to the society of the vet, the chemist and the clergyman. Many of the doctors from the clinic visited her and were enchanted by her eccentric grandeur, and much preferred her company to that of the tropical-skinned vet's wife and the watery-blonde chemist's wife and the music-loving clergyman's wife, at sultry sundowner times in the rainy season. My brother Richard was fascinated by Sonia.

We nurses were astonished that the men were so dazzled. She was our creature, our folly, our lark. We had lavished our imagination upon her eager mind and had ourselves designed the long voile 'afternoon' dresses, and had ourselves put it to her that she must have a path leading down to the river and a punt on the little river and a pink parasol to go with the punt. There was something in the air of the place that affected the men, even those newly out from England, with an overturn of discrimination. One of the research workers at the clinic had already married a brassy barmaid from Johannesburg, another had married a neurotic dressmaker from the Cape who seemed to have dozens of elbows, so much did she throw her long bony arms about. We too were subject to the influence of the place but we did not think of this when we were

engrossed in our bizarre cultivation of Sonia and our dressing her up to kill. At the time, we only saw the men taking our fantasy in earnest, and looked at each other, smiled and looked away.

In the year before Jannie Van der Merwe was due to be released from prison I spent much of my free time at Sonia's with my brother Richard. Her house was by now a general meeting-place for the district and she conducted quite a salon every late afternoon. About this time I became engaged to marry a research worker at the clinic.

I do not know if Richard slept with Sonia. He was very enamoured of her and would not let anyone make fun of her in his hearing.

She said one day: 'Why d'you want to marry that Frank? Man, he looks like your brother, you want to catch a fellow that doesn't look like one of the family. I could get you a fellow more your type.'

I was irritated by this. I kept Frank from seeing her as much as possible; but it was not possible; all our lives outside the clinic seemed to revolve round Sonia. When Frank began to ridicule Sonia I knew he was in some way, which he was afraid to admit, attracted by her.

She chattered incessantly, her voice accented in the

Afrikaans way. I had to admire her quick grasp of every situation, for now she was acquainted with the inner politics of the clinic, and managed to put in effective words here and there with visiting Government officials who took it for granted she had ruled the district for years and, being above the common run, pleased herself how she dressed and what she did.

I heard her discussing our disagreeable chief radiologist with an important member of the Medical Board: 'Man, he got high spirits I tell you, man. I see him dig the spurs into the horse when he pass my house every morning, he goes riding to work off those high spirits. But I tell one thing, he's good at his job. Man, he's first rate at the job.' Soon after this our ill-tempered radiologist, who did not ride very frequently, was transferred to another district. It was only when I heard that the important man from the Medical Board was a fanatical horse-lover that I realized the full force of Sonia's abilities.

'God, what have we done?' I said to my best friend.

She said, 'Leave well alone. She's getting us a new wing.'

Sonia made plans to obtain for Richard the job of Chief Medical Officer in the north. I suspected that Sonia meant to follow him to the north if he should be established there, for she had remarked one day that

she would have to get used to travel; it must be easy: 'Man, everyone does it. Drink up. Cheerio.'

Frank had also applied for the job. He said – looking at the distance with his short-sighted eyes, which gave to his utterances a suggestion of disinterestedness – 'I've got better qualifications for it than Richard.' So he had. 'Richard is the better research worker,' Frank said. This was true. 'Richard should stay here and I should go up north,' Frank said. 'You would like it up there,' he said. All this was undeniable.

It became apparent very soon that Frank was competing with Richard for Sonia's attention. He did this without appearing to notice it himself, as if it were some routine performance in the clinic, not the method but the results of which interested him. I could hardly believe the ridiculous carry-on of these two men.

'Do they think she will really have any influence in the question of that job?'

'Yes,' my best friend said, 'and so she will.'

That important member of the Medical Board – he who was passionate about horses – was in the district again. He had come for a long weekend's fishing. It was all mad. There was no big fishing at Fort Beit.

I began to want Richard to get the job. I cooled off where Frank was concerned; he did not notice, but I cooled off. Richard had become highly nervous. As soon as he had free time he raced off in his car to Sonia's. Frank, who was less scrupulous about taking free time,

was usually there first.

I was at the tea-party when the ageing, loose-mouthed, keen-eyed chief of the Medical Board turned up. Richard and Frank sat at opposite ends of a sofa. Richard looked embarrassed; I knew he was thinking of the job, and trying not to seem to be exploiting his attachment to Sonia. I sat near them. Sonia, reciting a long formula from her book of etiquette, introduced us to the important man. As she did so it struck me that this recitation might to some ears sound like a charming gesture against the encroaching slackness of the times. She sat the man between Richard and Frank, and clearly she meant business.

She stood by. She had a beautiful shape; we nurses had not provided that, we had only called it forth from the peasant slouch. She said to the old man, 'Richard yere wants to talk to you, Basil, man,' and touched Richard's shoulder. Frank was peering into the abstract distance. It occurred to me that Frank was the administrative type; none of the research workers I had known were dispassionate, they were vulnerable and nervous.

Richard was nervous. He did not look at the man, he was looking up at Sonia's face with its West End make-up.

'Applied for the job up north?' said this Basil to Richard.

'Yes,' Richard said, and smiled with relief.

'Want it?' said the man, casually, in his great importance.

'Oh, rather,' Richard said.

'Well, have it,' said the man, flicking away the invisible job with his forefinger as lightly as if it were a ping-pong ball.

'Well,' Richard said, 'no thank you.'

'What did you say?' said the man.

'What that you say?' said Sonia.

My brother and I are very unlike in most ways, but there are a few radical points of similarity between us. It must be something in the blood.

'No thank you,' Richard was saying. 'After all, I feel I ought to go on with research in tropical diseases.'

Sonia's fury only made a passing pattern on her face. Her first thought was for the old man, fussed and suddenly groundless as he was. 'Basil, man,' she said, bending over him with her breasts about his ears, 'you got the wrong chap. This yere Frank is the boy I was talking of to you. Frank, may I have the honour to introduce to you this yere distinguished –'

'Yes, we've met,' said the man, turning to Frank.

Frank returned from the middle distance. 'I've applied for the job,' he said, 'and my qualifications are, I think –'

'Married?' 'No, but hoping to be.' He turned duly to me and I smiled back most nastily.

'Want the job?'

'Oh, rather.'

'Sure?'

'Oh yes, quite sure.'

The old man was not going to be caught again. 'I hope you really want the job. There are a good many excellent applicants and we want a keen –'

'Yes, I want the job.'

Sonia said, 'Well, have it,' and I thought, then, she had really done for the whole thing and outrun her influence.

But the old man beamed up at her, took both her prettily restored hands in his, and I nearly saw his slack mouth water.

Other people were pressing round for a word with this Medical Board man. Sonia was treating Richard with ostentatious neglect. Frank was leaning against the wall, now, talking to her. Suddenly I did not want to lose Frank. I looked round the company and wondered what I was doing there, and said to Richard, 'Let's go.'

Richard was looking at Sonia's back. 'Why do you want to go?' Richard said. 'It's early yet. Why?'

Because the curtain was fluttering at the open window, letting in wafts of the savage territory beyond the absurd drawing room. The people were getting excited; I thought soon they might scream, once or

twice like the birds, and then be silent. I thought, even, that Richard might change his mind again about the job, and tell Sonia so, and leave it to her to sort it out for him. It was the pull of Sonia that made him reluctant to leave. She was adjusting Frank's tie and telling him he needed looking after, for all the world as if she had been brought up to that old line; we must tell her, I thought, not to do that sort of thing in public. And I would gladly have stayed on till sundowner time in order to jerk Frank back into a sense of my personality; but there was a storm coming, and it was no fun driving home through a storm.

Richard is stronger-willed than I am. After this party he kept away from Sonia's and stuck in to his work. I broke off my engagement. It was impossible to know whether Frank was relieved or not. There were still three months before he was to take up his appointment in the north. He spent most of his time with Sonia. I was not sure how things stood between them. I still drove over to Sonia's sometimes and found Frank there. I was dissatisfied and attracted by both of them and by their situation. In the dry spells they would often be down the river in the punt when I arrived, and I would wait for the sight of the returning pink parasol, and be glad of the sight. Once or twice when we met at the clinic Frank said to me, factually, 'We could still be married.' Once he said, 'Old Sonia's only a joke, you know.' But I thought he was afraid I

might take him at his word, or might do so too soon.

Sonia spoke again of travelling. She was learning to study road maps. She told one of the nurses, 'When Frank's settled up at the north I'll go up and settle him down nicer.' She told another of the nurses, 'My old husband's coming from gaol this month, next month, I don't know, man. He'll see some changes. He get used to them.'

One afternoon I drove over to the farm; I had not seen Sonia for six weeks because her children had been home for the holidays and I loathed her children. I had missed her, she was never boring. The house-boy said she was down the river with Dr Frank. I wandered down the path, but they were not in sight. I waited for about eight minutes and walked back. All the natives except the house-boy had gone to sleep in their huts. I did not see the house-boy for some time, and when I did I was frightened by the fear on his face.

I was coming round by the old ox-stalls, now deserted – since Sonia had abandoned farming, even with a tractor, far less a span of oxen. The house-boy appeared then, and whispered to me. 'Baas Van der Merwe is come. He looking in the window.'

I walked quietly round the stalls till I had a view of the house, and saw a man of about fifty, undernourished-looking, in khaki shorts and shirt. He was standing on a box by the drawing-room window. He had his hand on the curtain, parting it, and was

looking steadily into the empty room.

'Go down to the river and warn them,' I said to the boy.

He turned to go, but 'Boy!' shouted the man. The houseboy in his green-and-white clothes rapidly went towards the voice.

I got down to the river just as they were landing. Sonia was dressed in pale blue. Her new parasol was blue. She looked specially fabulous and I noticed her very white teeth, her round brown eyes and her story-book pose, as she stood dressed up in the middle of Africa under the blazing sun with the thick-leaved plants at her feet. Frank, looking nice in tropical suiting, was tying up the punt. 'Your husband has returned,' I said, and ran fearfully back to my car. I started it up and made off, and as I sped past the house over the gravel I saw Jannie Van der Merwe about to enter the house, followed by the servant. He turned to watch my car and spoke to the native, evidently asking who I was.

Afterwards the native deposed that Jannie went all through the house examining the changes and the new furniture. He used the lavatory and pulled the chain. He tried the taps in both bathrooms. In Sonia's room he put straight a pair of her shoes which were lying askew. He then tested all the furniture for dust, all through the house, touching the furniture with the middle finger of his right hand and turning up his finger to see

if it showed any dust. The house-boy followed, and when Jannie came to an old oak Dutch chest which was set away in a corner of one of the children's rooms – since Sonia had taken against all her father's old furniture – he found a little dust on it. He ordered the native to fetch a duster and remove the dust. When this was done Jannie proceeded on his tour, and when he had tried everything for dust he went out and down the path towards the river. He found Sonia and Frank at the ox-stalls arguing about what to do and where to go, and taking a revolver from his pocket, shot them. Sonia died immediately. Frank lingered for ten hours. This was a serious crime and Jannie was hanged.

I waited all the weeks ahead for Richard to make the first suggestion that we should move away. I was afraid to suggest it first lest he should resent the move all his life. Our long leave was not due for another year. Our annual leave was not due for some months. At last he said, 'I can't stand it here.'

I wanted to return to England. I had been thinking of nothing else.

'We can't stay here,' I said, as if it were a part in a play.

'Shall we pack up and go?' he said, and I felt a huge relief.

'No,' I said.

He said, 'It would be a pity to pack it all in when we've both gone so far in tropical diseases.'

In fact I left the following week. Since then, Richard has gone far in tropical diseases. 'It's a pity,' he said before I left, 'to let what's happened come between us.'

I packed up my things and departed for dear life, before the dry season should set in, and the rainy season should follow, and all things be predictable. ♦

Side by...

József Attila versei

Április 11

A talló kalászeit hányva
S a verebek közé belesvén
Nagy szél kapott föl egyszer engem
Hirtelen, áprilisi estén.

Gyerekeit kereste arra
S engem talált ott épp az utban.
Bömbölt, örült, s én mosolyogva
Rengeteg mellén elaludtam.

Vitt falvan, földeken keresztül,
Meghempergetett jó sárosra,
Cibálva és kacagva vitt egy
Pesti, csatagos külvárosba.

Az uccán vidám jasszok lógtak
S még vidámabban verekedtek,
Kiabáltak, kiabáltunk és
A jasszok végül berekedtek.

...by side

Poems by Attila József

April 11

Brushing along stubble-fields
and glancing into sparrows' nests
it happened that a massive wind
snatched me up in April on command.

She was looking for her children there
but found me rumbling in her way.
She was cheerful and I, smiling,
fell asleep in her enormous lap.

She carried me in villages and fields,
rolled me over well in mud,
tugging and laughing at me she took me
into a miry suburb in Budapest.

Thugs were hanging out on the streets,
cheerfully they were fighting,
they were shouting, we were shouting
till the thugs' voices finally got hoarse.

Mondom, valami nagy ünnep volt,
A hívek templomokba mentek
És reszketve, szomorú kézzel
Áldották őket meg a szentek.

S hogy a harangok búgtak, fölnőtt
A szívekben nagy, esti béke.
A gyilkos végzett emberével
S úgy menekült, kalaplevéve.

Reménységnek és tulipánnak
Kicsikis deszka alkotmányba
1905-ben ígyen
Iktattak be az alkotmányba.

A kártyás munkásnak fiúként,
S a szép, ifjú mosóasszonynak,
Ligetnek, sárnak, vágynak, célnak,
Fejkendőbe kötözött gondnak.

A szegényasszony rég halott már,
De fiát a szél el nem hagyja,
Együtt nyögünk az erdőn éjjel
S együtt alszunk el virradatra.

I tell you it was some sacred feast,
believers went to church
and the saints blessed them
with sad and shaking hands.

And as the bells were tolling
evening peace grew in people's hearts.
The murderer finished with his man
and fled away, taking off his hat.

As hope and as a tulip,
in a small wooden structure
in 1905 thus they entered
me into the social infrastucture.

To the gambling worker a son
and to the pretty, young laundry-girl
a grove, mud, desire and goal,
a burden lost and tied into her skirt.

The poor woman died long ago,
but the wind won't leave her son:
we groan together in the woods at night
and fall asleep with the morning light.

Istenem

Dolgaim elől rejtegetlek,
Istenem, én nagyon szeretlek.
Ha rikkancs volna mesterséged,
segítnék kiabálni néked.

Hogyha meg szántóvető lennél,
segítnék akkor is mindennél.
A lovaiddat is szeretném
és szépen, okosan vezetném.

Vagy inkább ekeszarvat fogva
szántanék én is a nyomodba,
a szikre figyelnék, hogy ottan
a vasat még mélyebbre nyomjam.

Ha csósz volnál, hogy óvd a sarjat,
én zavarnám a fele varjat.
S bármi efféle volna munkád,
velem azt soha meg nem unnád.

Ha nevetnél, én is örülnék,
vacsora után melléd ülnék,
pipámat egy kicsit elkérnéd
s én hosszan, mindent elbeszelnék.

My Lord

I hide you away from my things,
my Lord, I love you very much.
If you were a newsboy on the street,
I would help you to attract the crowd.

And if you were a ploughman,
I would help you anyway.
I would even love your mare
and would lead her nice and brave.

Or rather, guarding the plough,
I would follow you on the field.
I would fix my eyes on the ground
and push the share into the soil, deep.

If you were to safeguard the shoot,
I would chase for you the rooks.
If any such thing were your job,
You'd be happy to have me along.

When you laughed, I'd be glad too,
after dinner I'd sit beside you,
you would borrow my pipe for a while
and I would slowly tell you of my life.

Külvárosi éj

A mellékudvarból a fény
hálóját lassan emeli,
mint gödör a víz fenekén,
konyhánk már homállyal teli.

Csönd, - lomhán szinte lábrakap
s mászik a súroló kefe;
fölötte egy kis faldarab
azon tünődik, hulljon-e.

S olajos rongyokban az égen
megáll, sóhajt az éj;
leül a város szélénél.
Megindul ingón át a téren;
egy kevés holdat gyújt, hogy égjen.

Mint az omladék, úgy állnak
a gyárok, de még
készül bennük a tömörebb sötét,
a csönd talapzata.

S a szövőgyárok ablakán
kötegbe száll
a holdsugár,
a hold lágy fénye a fonál

Suburban Night

The light slowly lifts its web
over our backyard;
like the bottom of a puddle:
our kitchen is full of murk.

Silence. The scrubbing brush
gains ground and crawls sluggishly.
The plaster high on the wall
is about to fall.

The night stops and sighs,
dressed in oily rags in the sky,
sits down in the suburb
then spreads wobbling across a park
and lights up the moon to shine.

Factories are like piles of debris;
a denser darkness
is preparing:
the depth of silence.

Through the windows of textile
mills the moon beams
in shafts.
The gentle rays are

a bordás szövőszékeken
s reggelig, míg a munka áll,
a gépek mogorván szövik
szövőnők omló álmait.

S odébb, mint boltos temető,
vasgyár, cementgyár, csavargyár.
Visszhangzó családi kripták.
A komor föltámadás titkát
őrzik ezek az üzemek.

Egy macska kotor a palánkon
s a babonás éjjeli őr
lidércet lát, gyors fényjelet, -
a bogárhátú dinamók
hűvösen fénylenek.

Vonatfütty.

Nedvesség motoz a homályban,
a földre ledőlt fa lombjában
s megnehezíti
az út porát.

Az úton rendőr, motyogó munkás.
Röpcédulákkal egy-egy elvtárs
iramlik át.
Kutyaként szimatol előre

the threads on streaky looms
and before morning when work resumes,
machines sullenly weave
factory girls' collapsing dreams.

Further on, like vaulted graveyards,
a steel plant, ironworks and cement:
echoes of family crypts.
These plants safeguard
the secret cloud of resurrection.

A cat scrubs at the board-fence,
the stupefied nightwatch
sees a nightmare, a sudden flash.
Like glow-worms,
generators coldly shine.

A train whistles.

Moisture drips in the gloom,
in the crown of a fallen tree
and settles in the dust
on the road.

On the street a policeman, a mumbling
worker. With flyers a union-man
speeds by.
Dog-like he sniffs ahead

és mint a macska, fülel hátra;
kerülő útja minden lámpa.

Romlott fényt hány a kocsmá szája,
tócsát okádik ablaka;
benn fuldokolva leng a lámpa,
napszámos virraszt egymaga.
Szundít a kocsmáros, szuszog,
ő nekivicsorít a falnak,
búja lépcsőkön fölbuzog,
sír. Élteti a forradalmat.

Akár a hült érc, merevek
a csattogó vizek.
Kóbor kutyaként jár a szél,
nagy, lógó nyelve vizet ér
és nyeli a vizet.
Szalmazsákok, mint tutajok,
úsznak némán az éjjel árján.

A raktár megfeneklett bárka,
az öntőműhely vasladik
s piros kisdedet álmodik
a vasöntő az ércformákba.

Minden nedves, minden nehéz.
A nyomor országairól
térképet rajzol a penész.

and like a cat, all ears to his back:
he avoids every corner lamp.

The tavern's mouth vomits vile light;
its window throws up a stream.
Within, a flickering lamp is swinging,
the dozing bartender pants.
A wage-earner is awake alone,
he snarls at the wall,
his sorrow bubbles up the stairs,
he cries, he cheers on the revolution.

Like a cold iron casting,
clattering waters are solid.
The wind wanders as a stray dog,
its extended tongue
gulps the water down.
Straw mattresses like rafts
dumbly float the flood of the night.

The stockroom is a stranded barge,
the foundry is an iron pram
and the ironworker fancies he sees
a red child in the molted iron.

Everything is wet and heavy.
The mildew draws a map
of countries of distress.

S amott a kopár réteken
rongyok a rongyos füveken
s papír. Hogy' mászna! Mocarog
s indulni erőtlén...

Nedves, tapadós szeled mása
szennyes lepedők lobogása,
óh éj!
Csüngsz az egen, mint kötelen
foszló perkál s az életen
a bú, óh éj!
Szegények éje! Légy szemem,
füstölögj itt a szívemen,
olvaszd ki bennem a vasat,
álló üllöt, mely nem hasad,
kalapácsot, mely cikkan pengve,
- sikló pengét a győzelemre,
óh éj!

Az éj komoly, az éj nehéz.
Alszom hát én is, testvérek.
Ne üljön lelkünkre szenvedés.
Ne csipje testünket féreg.

Further on are barren fields,
paper and rags on ragged grass.
They would crawl! They stir
but to move are powerless.

A copy of your wet, clammy wind
is the fleet of unwashed sheets,
oh, night!
You cling to the sky as frayed
percale to rope and as sorrow
to life, oh, night!
Night of the poor! Be my coal,
burn here, right on my heart;
melt within me the ore,
cast an anvil that won't split,
a hammer that will chirp, jingling,
a gliding blade for victory,
oh, night!

The night is grave, the night is heavy.
Brothers, I will go and sleep now.
Let us guard our souls from misery
and do not let worms nibble our flesh.

Ime, hát megleltem hazámat

Ime, hát megleltem hazámat,
a földet, ahol nevemet
hibátlanul írják fölém,
ha eltemet, ki eltemet.

E föld befogad, mint a persely.
Mert nem kell (mily sajnálatos!)
a háborúból visszamaradt
húszfilléres, a vashatos.

Sem a vasgyűrű, melybe vésvé
a szép szó áll, hogy új világ,
jog, föld. - Törvényünk háborús még
s szebbek az arany karikák.

Egyedül voltam én sokáig.
Majd eljöttek hozzám sokan.
Magad vagy, mondták; bár velük
voltam volna én boldogan.

Igy éltem s voltam én hiába,
megállapíthatom magam.
Bolondot játszottak velem
s már halálom is hasztalan.

So, Here Now I Have Found My Home...

So, here now I have found my home,
the land where my name
will be spelled above me right
by him who buries me if buried I am.

This land receives me like a purse.
No one cares (what a pity!)
for the copper farthing,
a remnant from the war.

Nor for the iron ring into which
nice words are engraved: Liberty!
New World! Our laws reflect the war
and golden rings are worth more.

I was alone a long time
then visited me many.
You're by yourself, they said,
though with them I yearned to be.

Thus I was and lived, in vain,
I can be certain now.
They made a fool out of me
and now even my death is faked.

Winter 2019

Mióta éltem, forgószélben
próbáltam állni helyemen.
Nagy nevetség, hogy nem vétettem
többet, mint vétettek nekem.

Szép a tavasz és szép a nyár is,
de szebb az ősz s legszebb a tél,
annak, ki tűzhelyet, családot,
már végképp másoknak remél. ♦

All my life, in a whirlwind
I tried to stay on my feet.
Laugh now: I harmed less
than others harmed me.

Spring is fine and so is summer,
but autumn is better, and finest of all
is winter for one who hopes for
hearth and children only for the rest. ♦

Translation by *Tárnok, Attila*