

Radu Vancu

excerpts from *Kaddish* (2023), in Sean Cotter's translation

My love after you pulled my body from the common  
grave you found in my front coat pocket the notebook

with my last poems It was wet From the wet earth And from my body  
that rotted & soaked the paper You dried them in the sun You sat

by the notebook & you waited for it to dry to see if the  
poems could be read I thought you watched my body

evaporate from the notebook It evaporated from the poems And it was  
a little strange that poems could appear only if my body evaporated

from them It was springtime I evaporated quickly & the poems  
started to appear You read them & I watched you at the same time from

the air above where I had evaporated & from the common grave  
where I was left & from the poems You didn't cry But I did You were

surprised to see the notebook wet again You started to blow on  
it On me The more you blew the wetter the notebook got You put it

in your pocket The heat of your body made me evaporate much  
faster than the sun did The way sometimes I evaporated

from the sun & little death that rose together on your  
face when you came When you took it back out just a minute later perfectly

dry you didn't understand it I don't either my love I am  
looking at you from the common grave Or maybe from

the poems In fact from both The air around you is me If  
you feel the air & light suddenly make a kind of wet salt don't

be afraid It's just me It's just a poem

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(If the light cries at what I write  
it doesn't mean that I'm alive)

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I could avoid remembering you my love but  
simple things aren't worth doing Simple is a heart

when it dies it dies Simple is a brain  
when it stops it stops

But a common grave is never simple Here everything simmers  
even the blood Like in poetry Like in love You

were always our common grave my love In the first  
seconds we went even further than blood

\*

(Just because I write these poems  
doesn't mean that I'm alive)

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It's beautiful, the way hearts rise over our common  
grave says Miklós Shhh say the dead let's not scare them

And we forget how hearts slide past above us  
like fish of light Tight lines someone shouts from the

edge You scared them off you idiot shouts another  
They're not scared dummy Some hearts drift lower

nearer The dead fidget like orphans on an adoption visit  
I hear her says Miklós it's you Fanni Your heart is a salmon

of light It descends among the dead & starts to swim  
toward me

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My love when my flesh melted & saturated  
the notebook in my pocket I knew that I had never

betrayed you more horribly Only your flesh had I ever entered  
the way I did this paper No The opposite Only your flesh ever entered

me so deeply I soaked & waited for the  
pages to start singing right there in the grave

the common grave The way my flesh sang after you soaked into it  
The way it sang ceaselessly from when I saw you at the tram station

near Keleti & until the bullet went in my  
neck here at Abda near Győr You won't believe

me when I say the bullet passing through a brain soaked in  
you began to sing But the whole common grave will be

my witness it happened So there's this small problem  
the pages didn't sing here with the bones The song

would have made us forget we'd lost our flesh Like  
we did before to forget we had flesh After about 2 months

they took me out of the grave you were already back in Budapest on  
Pozsony in our bed You took out the notebook from which

I had evaporated & you put it beside you in bed & you  
opened it It started to sing like a music box You

lay there & listened carefully to ceaseless singing  
from then June 1946 to February 2014 when

you got up from the bed & closed the notebook & came down here  
beside me You embraced me & we started to soak into

each other quietly like into the ground Like into paper The common  
grave suddenly began to sing like a

music box

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The way you made Flammkuchen & got angry at the oven that  
always burnt the bottom Even though you loved crispy things

The way you poured me more coffee from the ibrik  
Even though you loved coffee The way you always gave me the

bigger share of crème brûlée Even though you loved that too The way  
you translated Nerval's *Aurélia* & you got angry that he killed himself

before finishing it Even though you loved suicides The way you tried  
to moan as little as possible when you came Even though you loved sex The

way you got angry when I came silently Even though  
you loved silence The way you got angry you were 3 years younger

than me I'm obviously the older one you said  
(You were right I would die at 35 & you at 102)

All this illuminates the common grave blindingly Almost as  
much as you on sad days illuminated the grave below the sky

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I know what you're wondering Yes they shot me here at Abda  
near Győr Yes here is our common grave next to the

memorial Yes Fanni found me here after 2 years & moved  
me to the Kerepesi cemetery in Budapest But I am

still in the common grave in Abda I still write in the common  
grave Impossible to write anywhere else I know what you're

wondering Yes And you are reading me in the common  
grave And the Starbucks where Vancu writes about

us is also the common grave And the pictures today from  
the Webb telescope are also in the common grave Our bones

here in Abda are no less colorful  
& sexy than the pictures of a universe that's been dead for 13

billion years Hi My name is Universe & I am a common  
grave Hi My name is Literature & I am a common

grave Hi My name is Radnóti We know We know the bones  
shout From the pyramids to Google Photos all we've done is

invent common graves for ourselves So yes That's how it is Beside  
these poems you lie beside a common grave

When you read them you disinter someone The bones in  
them were alive & will be alive again But don't be scared From

here no one can move us If you read these poems  
your bones & our bones will be happy & laugh together

in their grave We will watch together someone push  
*select all* for all the images in the world Including  
the ones from the Webb telescope & the first images of the universe  
We will then watch someone push *delete forever* We will

then listen carefully We will hear without much work how the bones  
yours & ours laugh together here in the common grave

\*

(Just because I write this  
doesn't mean that I'm alive)

[from the volume *Psalms*, Casa de editură Max Blecher, 2019; translated by the author]

Master of children's small fingers  
& of the indestructible hair of girls  
& of the transparent shields of the gendarmes -

today I saw videos of children with broken heads  
& fingers broken, I saw girls dragged by their shiny  
& indestructible hair by gendarmes with shields transparent

as your indestructible light, I saw  
indestructible teeth broken, indestructible bodies  
shattered, I saw the blood made by you

splattering in the world made by you  
& there was still so much beauty in it  
& it is exactly this that mashes me.

Any amount of beauty mashes me.  
An indestructible beauty in a world blown into pieces -  
your cynicism is divine, indeed.

I saw a dog licking the bleeding face  
of his mistress, collapsed under the boots of the gendarmes,  
careless to their blows which also crushed his ribs.

He wagged so happily his tail  
when she raised her grazed hand & patted him,  
there was so much indestructible light around him,

for him the evil only passed accidentally through the world.  
A cop with a high visor, a blond & pure child,  
came running & hit her again.

Master, I sometimes tell myself you only passed accidentally  
through the history of the world you made, just as we pass  
only accidentally through the poems we write.

And that it is of your indestructible & luminous beauty  
that the hardest transparent shields are made.  
And that the happiest of us are wagging our tails,

licking the bleeding faces of our loved ones. Mashed  
under the boots of the seraphim rapid intervention units.  
Terrorized by the anti-terrorist units of the angels.

Who to endure so much beauty  
- and until when  
- and why.

You unbelievably gentle master, if I wouldn't feel sometimes  
your harsh tongue licking my bleeding brain,  
if I wouldn't see your furry tail sometimes

wagging happily - everything would be easier  
& more unbearable. Don't worry, we're talking here  
between indestructibles.

[from the volume *4 A.M. Domestic Cantos*, Casa de editură Max Blecher, 2015< translated by the author]

Canto XXXVII

I had found with my brother Iuli  
behind the block  
a she-hedgehog with cubs.  
Look what this is about:

I took them in my arms,  
I was scared, but the hedgehog and the cubs  
were so scared that  
one could see the God of the hedgehogs  
hovering over them.

I took them in the laundry room,  
at the fourth floor, near our door.  
And when I put them in the carton box,  
with a thick coverlet beneath them  
and grass on the coverlet,  
with our little tea cups  
filled with water for them –  
they were so scared that one could see  
even the Holy Spirit of hedgehogs  
wrapping them like a coverlet  
of thick light  
with grass and little tin cups on it.

And we were so scared  
and happy, that our hearts  
were floating and twitching  
somewhere in front of our bodies,  
as only after I had cut  
the noose around dad's neck  
and I thought he was still breathing  
and God floated like  
a coverlet of breathing  
above him  
I have also seen.

I covered the carton box  
with a thin plywood. I closed the window  
of the laundry room so that  
they could not jump. I closed the door  
of the laundry room with the key.  
The next morning they were gone. The door  
closed, also closed the window, the plywood  
untouched. I was not too surprised,  
as I was also not too surprised  
when my father disappeared.

And my brother Iuli, in Kutna Hora,  
40 km from Prague, makes computer keyboards –  
and that does not surprise me  
too much. Not as much as the  
coverlet of light wrapping his

every gesture, leaving the rest of him untouched,  
untouched.

This was what it was actually about.