

**László GÉHER**

Poems

**The Star of Bethlehem**

The year at Christmas, attention, please,  
steps among the others, joins the fold,  
with no warmth of the pen though, rather the growing cold,  
like space among the stars. You too  
have put your hand in my hand so many times  
that it is so many hands – then we count.  
But there's the rub, in place of numbers  
there is but one. I do things one-handed,  
if this is a poem, this too. In my dream  
I had a daughter, I tried to set out, but she  
called me back always. The stars have space  
to turn – but at Bethlehem-time – untraceable.  
My daughter warned me. Father, if you go  
out to die, find something darker than my eyes,  
for I may lose you in it. Then take  
water and bread for resurrection. If I went  
out to die. If I went out. If I had a daughter.

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**I Only wake**

A flower has no such, the way I dragged you  
on the pavement, no such petal, the loose  
skin of your neck a petal of blood, I dragged  
you tenderly, so you don't get cut, your heels  
ploughed a track in the mud, puddles soon  
to quench the thirst of dogs, dragging  
you through the court – they say  
I only wake on a bad dream, my eyes get stuck  
in the peel of waking like a foul fruit  
stuck in time, I wake unpeeled,  
it's summer, dogdays. I seek the way  
to the tub. I'm glad you are not here  
with me, then glad that you are not, I'm glad,  
glad that you have never been, I say  
by the time I get out to the tub.

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## The Jungle

It was dark like the inside of a  
piano, the twanging of the instrument  
fills your eyes, I said you looked through  
octaves, the sound is made in the closed  
coffin, it comes to life in the depth  
of the grave, I never said, please, look  
somewhere else, the piano twanged,  
swelling on me, the promise  
dissolved my all. Now the dark –  
if it's good to the wood, why not to me?  
They say the sun, before stepping onto the sky,  
dwells in the jungle, gathers darkness,  
so I do from your eyes, for persistent burning.

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## Absolution

The blooming doesn't last, on the icing damask  
the beaked vase stands, the three flowers  
I put there droop, as if the petals  
withered out of a luke-warm handshake.  
So we lived for three years. On the woolly carpet,  
the downy surface of afternoons, we slid.  
There were always china saucers with morsels of cakes  
you mouthed, dropping from your fingers – on my pillow  
(you slept on it) I always found dandruff.  
Just tell me dear, I listen, pity is a mass of things.  
Evenings the air, as if we drank the cherry-wine  
from broken glasses, sweetened around you, your nose  
exhaled a wind of perfume. I blew your mouth,  
like blowing on hot soup, pooh-pooh, I spooned  
its brown surface, the loving glaze, from your face,  
but only your sin curdled, I took a sip,  
it went down my throat. There was some waltz, forgetting-music,  
your hands glided on ivory keys, I ought to  
watch now. There is no bitterness in me,  
only tonight the frieze of light on the cut glass,  
as if carved by your eyes, strikes me as jarring, never  
again shall I see you, but again I forgive.

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**Winding Sheet**

A wounded wing, it was your face,  
 no longer looking, a dove before  
 the accident, slipping off the sidewalk, creased  
 like a dustrag. Look dear, I brought this  
 to you. Some sentiment flutters  
 against your mouth, like a web moving  
 to breath. I never believed that one  
 wasn't made to lie. Of course, I need your hand,  
 a root, bulging the concrete, seeking soil,  
 a pressing tendril around me – to unwind  
 an afternoon won't be enough. Now fly  
 my dear, fly, let me alone, I told you, let  
 the wounded wing sweep, let me be touched  
 on the mouth by a white farewell-bidding vine.  
 I want my winding sheet, I told you,  
 only after my death, please, understand,  
 I care for no covering.

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**„To execute my anger” (Isaiah, 13.3)**

There is no word for anger. He was not angry.  
 He put his anger in future conditional.  
 Between two tree-trunks the remains of the heath,  
 a tired green patch, a parched future, where no  
 prophesy sounded over the place. A two inch  
 desert the only thing, a fault of beard  
 on the face of a prophet that clipped together  
 the rim of his eyes so that he had to  
 squint all the time. They say, the camels  
 swallow the water as if they dropped tears  
 inside, for need to drink. However, what gathers  
 some rain, must bring forth a dry sea  
 in the eye. Prevent the coming of the wind and  
 the weariness over the draught. Don't rip my land,  
 don't let he sky draw a furrow over the body.  
 Don't let the passion sear to the root.  
 Don't let me raise my anger.

*Translated from the Hungarian by István Géber*

### **Burger King**

As if their heads were so many conkers,  
 brown light-cracks muscling through their cells of pins,  
 the men are eating.  
 They are not thinking of women or of heaven,  
 but banging open greased-up wrappers  
 with mayo weeping through white napkins;  
 they bite off more than they can chew  
 while food-gauze comes like Velcro from its wounds.  
 With mouthfuls barging round their mouths  
 and pushing in along the tounge  
 as if by being swallowed they'd be *born*,  
 they are eating, all alone.

*Translated by Anthony Dunn*

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### **The Fishmonger**

This then, is the age of the fishmonger, not the fisherman –  
 his cap tipped as a sergeant's, unsteady on his quiffed head  
 as he sizes up punters, measuring their movements.

He reaches for a carp as easily as you or I  
 might dip our hand into a bucket of apples,  
 feels for the fish, his ingrown nail smarting in the salty water,

and lifts it out, understanding as only he can,  
 the foil disc of the silver eye, the wight of the blade,  
 the engine-stroke of his heart, finely tuned to this cruel kindness.

Understanding as only he can, the spot between the knuckles  
 where a nail might enter as if through butter,  
 how to slice flash as others cut celery,

how to pare his speech as he might men  
 were he hurt and pushed to fight.  
 But like a tree hit by lightening, there is no healing bark

about his struck heart and the wood and the trunk's centre  
 pulses and grasps for growth like a fish  
 struggling for its last breath as if biting the air for water.

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**For Psaltervoice**

Hide me in the shadow of your wings,  
 not to be seen in flight, when I  
 would fly with you, not for the eyes  
 is the wing, the eye breaks off the dove-  
 feather on the up-stretched muscles.  
 Dirty guano is all the flutter  
 on the square where tyres drive away  
 my jostling shame from the morsels,  
 for so much I long for you, with a split head,  
 with stupid dove-like motion, to be saved.  
 A bird's wing smeared on stone, the flesh is a road  
 to you, if it is, or isn't, at the end,  
 and it has no voice, it flops, the carcass of a dove.

*Translated by István Géber*

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**Mary**

On his foot a fly alighted, inching along  
 the wound. On top of his apple-shape  
 bigtoe-nail it rubbed its forehands, as if  
 mocking a prayer. After the drowning  
 the body unbends, cracking, from the cramp,  
 when the breath gets shortened and frozen, the time passed  
 is a split of ice. How long we watch this? The soldiers  
 look up from guffaw, they spy the relief  
 of their headache, like the soothsayer  
 sees the overcast sky, yet the word is born  
 in me, my son, for I need no conscience,  
 nothing conscious, for me you have taken  
 nothing on you, immaculate and alone  
 I stand. Just I. On the way home the dust  
 in the sandals rubbes red the sole, just I  
 think of myself always, not of you, even now,  
 even the taste of vinegar in my mouth gets mixed

with other spices, for the bereavement, the decay  
avoid me, they fear me like the living the carcass,  
the sea the moon, I watch your erosion,  
the void where your face was, like one  
who can become a statue, but never a human.

*Translated by István Géber*

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