Lajos Kassák

The Horse Dies
the Birds Fly Away
A ló meghal a madarak kirepülnek

Translated by Edwin Morgan

Now I heard time neighing I mean it parrotishly spread its wings
I say gapingwide red gate
with my lover black diamonds bricked into her face and
trailing 3 children
in desperation
we sat under factory chimneys
we knew tomorrow the winding lines
ho zhoop ho zhoop
and she said my Kashi i know you're going off and for me it's
shrivelling on the dais and modelling for mister nadler's
 cacocanvases
what else
what else
the lord god lets pretty women slip out of his mind
already the demichrist the woodcarver is here
young reeking with truth not to be put down
tomorrow we'll be over the hungarian border
well yes h'm yes
what else what else
the city flew past
squirted to and fro and then reared up
I saw my father's crumpled straw hat floating over the chemist's

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Edwin Morgan
(b. 1920), since 2004 the Scots Makar, or Poet Laureate of Scotland, has translated poetry from many language including more than two dozen poems by
Lajos Kassák
(1887–1967) the important writer, painter, critic, editor and theorist of the avant-garde. For his services to Hungarian literature Edwin Morgan has been decorated by the Hungarian government and awarded the Hungarian PEN Club's Gold Medal.

The Hungarian Quarterly
frosted glass

to the holy trinity statue and back
ah well the old man dreamed I'd be a chaplain at 21 in the
parish of érsekújtár

but just ten years earlier I fed on smoke in the workshop of
mister sporni the locksmith

and now the old man very seldom came home to us

and soon my well-planned future was soaked in and pissed out
with his beer

he fell in love with an old cleaner

his hair dropped out he had no friends but gypsies

25 April 1909

I was ready to walk to Paris with the woodcarver

the hick town squatted in its puddle and squeezed its accordéon

on saint Christopher I must take my sings off you you will
never be your father's son

a drunk sobbed crocodile tears

as I propped up the wall of the Golden Lion inn

I felt everything was at an end

a red railway-track ran through me and bells rang in the towers

pigeons tumbled above the roofs

no they galloped with the suncart

the new franciscan bell just about sang

he who prepared for sleep should brighten up the lead bars

the hours are specious on white sheepdogs

I felt everything was at an end

vintners and haberdashers shut up shop

good friend go back to your children go back now

the wheels have stopped turning back

man casts his milk-teeth and stares into the emptiness where life
devours its own tail

into the emptiness

oh jiramari

oh lebli

oh BOom BOomm

but the ship bobbed us along like a pregnant woman

and behind us there was at least someone manœuvring the
scenes into place

this was the first slashed-across day in my life
torches and bottomless pits flickered inside me

papagallum

oh fumigo

papagallum

The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away
coppery birds crowed in bands of twenty on the bank
the hanged were swaying from the trees and crowing too
now and again we got glances from the brooding corpses
in the river-bed
but we were 21
the woodcarver's chin sprouted an ugly frizz of pink
bristles
otherwise we lived all right
but for the diagonal of our bellies
it was useless though we tightened the screws the oxen
made off again and again into the stubble-fields
and it was all we could do the scrape our eyes off girls'
ankles
at times like these I always gave vent to cries like
cymbals
Vienna saw us sleeping rough 3 days
then finally we wrenched ourselves out of ourselves what
is civilization after all
you smear yourself with a glaze of enamel and start
shuddering
at the lice
well what are family ties
you eke out your umbilical cord with silk ribbon
well what's the worship of god
you take on fear to get shot of fear
we nailed the highways to our soles and the sun was with
us in space on his golden seven-league-feet
believe me the elephant is not bigger than the flea
red is not redder than white
and if we really went, we went
ahead only on kamaralogos if we set up the scales when
were we ever better off
and then our eyes were opened
and soon we were deep like the black wells in mining
country and so we continued
13 angels walked ahead of us
on foot too
and sang for us about our youth
we were already well-tried tramps with tame fleas in
our armpits
we enjoyed fruit from the roadside ditch
sour milk
and jewish community funds

The Hungarian Quarterly
and we had brothers round us oh from everywhere
wonderful skins like brick a world's languages on their
lips
each had his special smell
and some had been planed to the bone by kilometers and
others came with milky mouths from their mother's breast
the roads lay under us in white quilts
the telegraph-wires jerked tight and wrote
mantras on the sky
at night we glimpsed the flowers blooming between women's legs
but we were vegetarians and misogynis
and dragged ourselves through Passau
Aachen
Antwerp
the woodcarver grew splinter-thin and his beard pure ginger
poems and hajura forests began to spring up in my head and
swam twice across the light-rivers
in front of us the rats on their big rafts festooned with birds'
eggs and trouser-buttons
letters from my lovers were waiting for me in post-boxes
but I knew nights were worst for lice
so I got to work on my poems then and they streamed
from my head like some golden-fleeced flock of sheep
these are certainly the most timorous put-upon creatures
but let someone stick the slate behind his ear
the startled shutters roll down
this is our life
at all the stations customs-officers stamp our hearts and we only
swim further away to where
dawn is
in fact it would be more sensible if everybody dealt in
sweet tree-roots or glucose
ration the world you live in
no trouble for us to leave it behind 50 kilometers a day
in tunnels on hill-crests and in soundless german forests
we notice the fresh dung smell of the fields
the mountains swivel round at times and the trees shiver in the
wind like zithers
the trees what are they but pregnant girls
but look closely—the boundary—stone and they are pregnant girls too
in a low voice they confess to each other:
if he leaves me I'll kill myself
yesterday I was hemming nappies with gold thread all day

The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away
little angel she'll be christened I'll hang cherries of diamond
    in her ears
or perhaps all they say is:
every man's but a lame dog
the mountains are arched right over us now
and still the giant snake gulps down the sun with a smack
I'll come to be a poet someday
well then let's swing the rattles anyhow what's the cause
    of the fuss but miss anna's tantrums
yesterday I sent home a couple of poems to independent hungary
and again we dropped back to Stuttgart
we sat at the beggars' table ate jam tarts
and a styrian peasant's heart gleamed down from the rafters
mass was celebrated by the SALVATION ARMY in the courtyard next door
flutes and clarinets were shrill under the stars
we saw the young mothers bowed over by the yellow glass owls
o lamb of god who takest away the sins of the world
the demichrist began to get going again in the woodcarver
and was determined to speak at all costs
shut your great trap the styrian peasant shouted
as he shoved his heart under our very noses
look at it 7 rusty daggers went through it
7 lies my lover told me my dear brothers
see this green border here on the right
it's the last mark of my master's teeth my dear brothers
I am 26 and my life has been as pure as the morning dew
in winter I was all day sweeping the yard
in summer I brought in the happy crop
hey ai-yy man's fate is like the
all eyes were opened and behind the walls we saw the world
    change its cloak
budapest-paris-berlin-kamchatka-stpetersburg
the woodcarver was drunk by this time and sadness seeped from
his eyes like something from gutters
the cries kept making for the corners to snuff their flames
swear you'll put faith in nothing now except the magic
    power of neat long-john elastic
I demanded out of the blue
and I saw my voice approaching from the neighbouring courtyard
I am a poet
after all I know
the lanterns burn well because twice turatamo
and full of paraffin

The Hungarian Quarterly
what biting misery was in me I wanted to give something to
these wretched
people
but the stars had already left guard-duty
the 13 angels are probably snoring now with their mouths open
  on the attic stairs
my lord god
the bugs are marching down from the walls in red battalions
we should all rub salt on our nose
see how brief life is
but after all we'll be tomcats yet on the fire-walls of paris
hushaby baby hushaby so
the man falls asleep
so the verticals become horizontal
and vice versa
and ink-children skip down from the sky
come with me come through the garden
over there on the river-bank Mary rocks her son to sleep
we must all snap the bolts over our minds
my memories go phosphorescent on the floor in puddles of yellow
in the corners the rucksacks opened up and started barking at
  me like crazy things
I cradled the whole garden in my lap like
Mary with her son
and further down look
here are the good man-fridays with their 1 1/2 marks
sighs glaze
flowers flower
ah well here you are too
I and you
I
on you
won't you lock your knees over me
little woman my
own silver salamander
parrot
frogging of my life
fruit-tree
plucked-out star
ah no ah no
we should all twist the glass stoppers
the hours quit their starcoops
and the elephants swing towards the east with their long

The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away
corky trunks
the first sound I heard was a gramophone bawling from
the suburbs
the woodcarver had to stay in bed this morning
I think I've had it he said I think I've had it
the beggar-queen stood with an enormous washing-up basin
over her head
the bonehead cuckoo emerged from the clock with his humble
beck and bows
I think I've had it the woodcarver cried I think I've had it
and everyone saw death
passing twice through the room
but why must you leave us my brother
why
you have not yet driven the herd home from the meadows
you have not yet lit the lamps in your yellow hair
and in your eyes too the serpents all lie asleep
oh never mind the kitschy coffeepot that bit the housemaid's
navel
and now the two of them lie pregnant
I think I've had it the woodcarver shrieked I think I've had it
and the houses leaned towards the church in a long slow rhythm
a single creamy foal poked its head through the window
and whinnied
who'll buy my coat I also said
5 crowns going gone for 5 crowns
and suddenly the mountain roads began to rush down
so to go
once more to go
I have not seen the poor woodcarver since that time
for all that we were the best of friends and his nocturnal
beard glowed before me like the burning bush
2 weeks I wandered alone
I was sad as an old donkey and I
washed my head in every puddle
I would have washed away my memories which had sunk dreadful
claws in my brain
and it's true they brandished black banners down towards the
river-banks
but which bank which bank
I felt I shared banks with a headlong river
rich only in green frogs and stunted palms
because by then I was a poet incoperably

The Hungarian Quarterly
in regular correspondence with my lover
and I knew if I sliced my chest out would pour pure
gold from my heart
these belgian peasants what makes them such scruffs
these chauvinist brutes what do they know yet of the ways
of the world
I can stand in the midst of them to no end
not one of them can see my forehead star
I was like the 7 orphans
but for all that the winding lines met in me here
here I met szitya who arrived from zurich and was bound
for chile as a self-appointed guru
I really did think he would come to something
his ears had gone scabby in the strangest way
we sprawled about the antwerp quays and he harangued the
cotton-bales and
sprat-barrels
fellow-citizens he sang out fellow-citizens
rabbits are the most prolific fowl and the mills are
smuggling rat's-teeth in among the corn
still you know they grind just the same and this is not
pointless
what are you afraid of you useless creatures
my words were flaring already in the meadow flowers
an end to those who need a point of rest
in the morning we set off towards the sun we made for
god's wayside inn
lilies unfolded in my wretched mind
it is true in the morning we set off towards the sun for god's
wayside inn
in the thatched barn we shall drink lacrima christi and
plum brandy
oh but there's always one crocodile that slides down into
all good folks' fate
and he who came from the zurich hosiel and was bound for
chile as a self-appointed guru
got a dose of clap this night in the seamen's brothel in
the rue de rivoli
and the card-castles collapsed silently
fences rose around us like those you see in the zoo
21 times in succession I called up to the sky
latabagomar
o talatta

The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away
latabagmar and finfi
the discs rotated without interruption
craftsmen's black hands should be sawn off
the cabinetmakers thrust out every knot from its place
the locksmiths cannot fit their bolts
no surprise if our cages disintegrate one day
look how Isabel has lost one of her gloves too
oh well why on earth should anyone worry about us poor
miserable three-eyed things
birds flap over the houses and fly off to other countries
szitya forgot the key of the new religion left it in the
changing-room
and that first day he cried and cried for it like a child
then he spread vaseline on his ears and we went away towards
brussels
like people who had been robbed
we gave up everything in the knowledge that time alone
would understand us
oh it will never let us fall from its embrace
in the evening we were already sitting at the long tables of
the mansion du peuple
and we smoked straight belgian tobacco
saw vandervelde walking across the hall to the socialist
secretariat
other well-known leaders were dealing new playing-cards in
front of the cashier
the place was a gigantic reservoir brimming with a mush of
men
blue-eyed russians betrothed to the revolution
oil-rancid dutchmen
prussians
wiry montagnards
magyars with droopy moustaches
pathetic garibaldi-clansmen
everyone but everyone was here who was down and out and
whose home
had no bread
some shoulders held up the sleepless skyscrapers of new york
some eyes had hatred leaning redly out of them
look how the world's strongest energies move out from the
station
hurricanes are roaring
telephone wires are screeching from the heart of moscow
tovarishch smooth your dress at the piano
we are threaded by waiters with black soups
knots of proletarians are seen outside cinemas
the man in the cooperative hands out his tickets in tens
dogs scurry up the split-toothed walls and sing like old women
somebody said down with the oligarchy
and suddenly:
rome
paris
tiflis
stockholm
samarkand
and the mines of the ruhr
can you hear the little town-hall bells of munich
in florence the pigeons sleep on the apostles' shoulders
everybody knew god's hour must now be near
the skin of fanaticswitches faster than the seismograph
and every one of us is scratching
tovarishch smooth your dress at the piano
up
up
oh if I could now latch onto my lover's diamond eyes
the salamanders have set sail beside the central lamp
zsiitya was already lying in the red pools asleep
as beautiful now as a young bulldog
even in an hour there are many ways of getting rich
supposing we were sharp like say a camera
but man is always the hermetic one and worlds he never feels
wheel past over his skin
at midnight we went to the petit passage and the russian meeting
a blond tovarishch spoke he was just like a child
his lips bloomed with flames and his hands flew like red pigeons
are we not all descendants of dostoevsky's possessed
we bit off for ourselves the seventh head of sentimentality
and wanted to bring everything down in ruins
oh Russia land under a curse
who could see your helpless pain if your star-branded sons would not
europe spits at the asian in us
but for all that we are the ones to climb the peak
certainly the astrakhan baker girl or the st.petersburg whore

The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away
will one day give birth to the new man
russia is pregnant with revolution's red spring
but the steppes of russia are slow and loath to bloom
but russia is like the land that has never been cultivated
help then
brothers
luckless sons like us of europe
help help!
and we watched his head burst into flames beneath his old cap
we all set in his palm
three cheers for Russia! long live! zhivio! three cheers!
then a hump fell off from my back
frost-flowers blossomed on windows
and szititya who was to become police spy and agent-provocateur
kissed his russian coat
I'm as pure as a child
he said—if i didn't have the clap i'd go to tsarskoye selo
and kill the tsar
this was one night we kept off the brandy
we washed our feet and put love out of our minds
a hungarian printer who later got 12 years for revolt took
cards and told the
housemaid's fortune
and we sang softly sang far-sounding
at last then at last
the time has come and we are mature like grafted trees
and we thought the gold flags of march were deployed above us
the swans perched up on swings and gave a two-tone laugh
on edward square i yearned to offer myself for the table of
the poor
but dawn found the belgian police coming after us at very
first light
there were no baedekered strangers gathered at the pissing
statue
those squalid streets actually thought themselves in paris
the golden-scrolled town-hall mocked at us
as we took our chained hands in the pouring blue
down the steep stairs
in front of the iron-hooped potato-roasters
through tavern swill
through the morning stench of shumongers
miserable tramps herded together by the law and about to see
god die in them

The Hungarian Quarterly
in the rue mouffetard we met the whores
I was happy
it pleased me greatly that at daybreak they could look so
beautiful
their chignons leaned into the leaning whitewashed wind
a diamond veil hid the sun peering at them from the fire-walls
ours was a saintly vigil all through the night
and now their cigarettes made me wet my lips
wish I could scratch my back groaned szitty
who not so long ago was a messiah bound for chile
somebody waved a white sheet from a balcony
the blond russia came into our minds the one who
    lived on flames
like marinetti futurist god
and loved russia with more than a son’s love
now they throw him over the belgian frontier and one
    blue morning he’ll hang in front of the kremlin
help then
brothers
luckless sons like us of europe
help! help!
what am I but a plain-minded poet there’s an edge in
    my voice that’s all
what good is it to stick the tumaronian witch with a
    paper sword
12 days we sat in the vagrants’ detention-barracks which
    reeked of mice
105 of us in a single hall
day and night
night and day
at night we dreamed of highways and we squashed bugs
in the morning we got warm water at midday cold porridge
    and all day long we had to pray aloud
unintelligible belgian prayers with the bearded guard who
    was perched up on a high platform
like some idol
then we were driven to the french border in dark green wagons
I jound 9 sorts of birds’ eggs in the nests
my lord god
here comes paris
of which I have heard resounding wonders
and which is still unknown to me
I know the french coat-of-arms has a red cock in it

The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away
I know French soil is blessed with girls and arts
at crack of dawn Zola's peasants were swimming on silver
guitars
the Seine deposited its blue bodies on the grassy bank
szitty talked about Dunajec the hungarian teacher
violin virtuoso now in the chau noir
9 lovers he has alien French girls war-horses from
the franco-german war
I glanced through my notes I have now seen 3004 chirstpictures
I found 9 sorts of birds' eggs in the nests
I shooed off 2 cows at liège
therefore
I was 300 kilometers from paris
and above our heads parrots went about on crutches
O PARIS!
PARIS!
Endre Ády saw you naked and guillaume apollinaire
simultaneist poet was born over your bloody rubble
we felt pretty sure we had the smell of pilgrims
and every day we walked 60-70 kilometers
and approached the shadow of the iron tower
buy our blisters we called out to the people
buy our blisters kept in excellent condition
if you pierce it with a fine pin you don't get the aftertaste
of burning
The French all in all are not unlike the belgians
bavaria has the decentest of the dummkopf brigade
it could be good malt beer got them that way
it could be also that in fact christian philosophy set on sealing-wax
in them
our necks were forever burdened with the swollen lachrymal sacs
we had swinging there
like a brace of heavy salty cowbells
for days we lacked lodgings
oh why did our mothers give birth to us if they were unable
to set a house on our back at the start?
a jailer otherwise a shoemaker
pushed us half a day into the straw
out of yellow pipes with lances pliers and Russian pikes lice
paid us visits
but this was nothing
we slept on our faroff moonswing to flutemusic
somebody sang and sang above us
YOU ARE MY TWO INDEX FINGERS
and we had morning coffee round the skirt of the shoemaker's wife
who remarked I had very nice hair
and on closer look I was like a lad called Igor
who drowned himself in the seine 20 years ago all for love of her
that black coffee mulled about priestlike in our bellies and
I promised
I'd send her a picture postcard from Paris with
two clasped hands and a pigeon billing and cooing on it
PARIS O PARIS city of fine suicides
and who knows why
and I shall never forget her voice
she cried through the whistle of the customs-officers
and laughed through the electric horns of the city
laugh then you fool
can't you see you're snug in a gold-nest of life
Paris is dandling us boy said szitty and completely forgot his clap
once I even milked angels' blood from the stars here
compared to that my mother's milk was sodawater
pin up your wings
tomorrow we're going to GRIZETTE
tomorrow we'll be slipping oysters over on the boulevard italien and we'll take a look at the electric birds
tomorrow we'll try the tuileries
and the star-bar
ah yes
yes
sad sad feeling the nails growing on my sick legs
pain oh
pain
I'm reached by miracles bearded and plasterless
2 x 2 = 4
briars spread everywhere
but modern horses have teeth of iron
and he who starts off in the morning can never be sure
to get home in the evening
happiest of all is the reversible skin man
for who can look beyond himself
what we set up is set up
but what we set up has no meaning

The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away
the rivers will splinter in shreds if they have to hurry
gentlemen can hardly walk on two legs like sparrows
we know women leave their husbands
the monkeys examined their backsides in mister goldmann's
mirrors and have absolutely no complaints
say I could play chess
yet I'm really good at nothing
sliced pig-shanks sit on shopwindow merry-go-round
I saw paris I saw nothing
my lover waited for me pregnant at angyalföld station
my mother in her poverty was already a lemonhead
I could have laughed in front of them but embarrassment
took over
for I had two pairs of trousers on and no underpants
certainly the poet can either construct something that
pleases him
or he's at liberty to collect cigar-stubs
or
or
birds have devoured the voice
yet the trees went on singing
this is already a sign of old age
but it means nothing
I am LAJOS KASSÁK
and our heads twist up for the flight of the nickel
samovar.

(1922)