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ISTVÁN BAKA

POEMS

Translated by George Szirtes

FRANZ LISZT SPENDS A NIGHT ABOVE THE FISHMARKET

The candle-flame, a feminine blush, blows out
between the closing thighs of night. It's dark.
A discarded hassock soils the room like ink.
That glimmering is God's ceremonial buckler,
the Milky Way. It is now I should hear the Music
of the Spheres, but like root-crop left too long in tith,
autumnal-sodden, the heavenly host themselves
have mouldered away.

It is quiet. All Hungary
is sleeping. The horizon pouts her lips for a kiss,
makes smacking noises in her sleep and drools:
Be thankful you are one of us, dear boy.
I am thankful. But I hope you will not notice
how the gold-braid of my rhapsodies has faded
on your moth-eaten old ceremonial suit,
my poor country. I have scored you into
the Grand Hotel d'Europa and failed to note
your place has been prepared at the kitchen table.
It's all one now. Sleep on, and may your dreams
return the wide sky's kiss. I won't disturb you.
The piano is a sealed coffin; the tedious
flirtation of the candle is snuffed out.
I gaze dumbly at the Milky Way's corrosions,
and down on the square where traders' stalls grow brilliant
with constellations of scales and stink of fish,

This poem was given the 1985 Robert Graves Prize for Best Poem of the Year, an award given since 1970 by a committee appointed by Robert Graves. See also Miklós Vajda: "Robert Graves and his Hungarian Prize," *NHQ* 100. — The Editor.

a topsy-turvy world where heraldic angels
 serve as ingredients for starch or for pooten,
 and the red-white-green insignia we sport
 on our breast pockets for bull at target practice.

CIRCUMDEDERUNT

And twilight, a grey rat, appears
 with razor teeth to crack the sun
 and sweep the husks off with his tail
 the last stray straws of light are gone

and night is an enormous wardrobe
 with wide flung double doors, where God
 keeps his old discarded mantles
 and the Saviour's rags of blood

in the cellar of this world
 with God's and Satan's junk around me
 as I wait for timely rescue
 I seem to hear feet throbbing above me

in dreams I see my former flat,
 there's nothing else that I recall
 but rats and shadows, and the odd
 stripe of light along the cloud-webbed wall.

THE MIRROR HAS BROKEN

The mirror has broken. From its fragments we
 may piece together something like a view,
 but earth and sky will not be welded—see,
 the darkness comes before the night is due.

The view has broken, from its shards somehow
 the mirror may be put together yet,
 but earth and sky have changed positions now,

the dark has spilled over the day and set.
My shadow lies beside my wife in bed;
who squeezes through the needle's eye will find
himself in hell.

The mirror has broken, from its shards or fragments
some overview or map may yet be jiggled
as in a puzzle, where all things have frontiers
but get mixed up in between, in no-man's land,
where a pin-cushion turns St Sebastian,
the bronze bells melt into artillery
and we slurp a martial music in the pub
through trumpet-coloured beer. We cannot tell
the white-cloaked winter uniforms from snow.

The mirror has broken, the view has also broken,
and whoever tries to put these things together
confuses view with mirror, shard with fragment,
where days are soaked in darkness and low weather,
where women are impregnated by our shadows,
where from the clamour of bells they pour the sound
of long-range cannons with their distant grumbling,
where every season comes in camouflage,
and boots must be pulled on again. No strolling now
across the broken world with unshod feet,
no marching to the martial stench of beer,
the flames are bursting through the needle's eye.