

Sándor Márai : Funeral Oration

'With your very eyes, my brethren, see what in truth we are:
We are but dust and ashes.'
Like pieces of old cloth our memories fall apart.
Do you still have St. Margaret's Isle by heart?
It is all odds and ends now, splinters, fusty lumber.
The dead man's beard has grown, your name is just a number.
Our language, torn, frays too; the loved words we so trust
Under the roof of the mouth dry out, turn to dust.
'Butterfly', 'pearl' and 'heart' are not what they used to be
When the poet drew his language from his near family,
And his song was understood as the nurse's lullaby
Is by the drowsy child, who's fractious, ready to cry.
The heartbeat's a secret speech, dreams go the thieves' way,
You read *Toldi* to your child, who then responds: 'OK.'
And the priest will mumble in Spanish over your bier:
'There are the torments of death, and they surround me here!'
In the Ohio mine your hand slips, the pickaxe
Thuds down and your name loses its diacritical marks.
The Tyrrhenian Sea roars, we hear Babits' word and, hark,
That's Krúdy's harp that twangs in the Australasian dark.
They still communicate in astral voices, live
In your body's memory like distant relatives.
You exclaim: *It cannot be that consecrated will...*
But it can: you know it now... You get no mail
In the iron-mines of Thuringia. To write they are afraid.
With no *katorgas* marked, you cannot mourn the dead.
The Consul's chewing gum. Fed up, he wipes his glasses.
You can see that he's quite bored with papers, stamps and passes.
He gets a car and a thousand bucks a month. His child and wife
Are photos on his desk. What's Ady in his life?
What's a nation? A millenium? The arts that we inherit?
Rippl's colours? Arany's words? Bartók's restless spirit?
It can't be that so many hearts in vain... Be quiet. It can.
The great powers at great length talk on and on.
Be silent and keep watching. The jackal is alive
Whose ten small claws will scratch you from your African grave.
In Mexico there's already a cactus growing too
That will cover your tombstone, so none can look for you.
You think you're alive? Have you somewhere to live? If nowhere,
In your brethren's hearts...? Oh no, it's all just a nightmare.
You still hear the coarse complaint: *Brother has sold brother.*
A faint voice interrupts: *Keep your lips sealed together.*
A third voice sighs: *Lest those who lament us far away...*
And a fourth rattles: *...are forced to despise us day by day.*

So: Keep on smiling. Don't seek reasons. Do not ask, 'Was I
Worse than the others.' You were a Magyar, that is why.
And Estonian, Lithuanian, Romanian. Now keep silent and pay.
The Aztecs have gone as well. Let come what come may.
A scholar will dig your body out of the ground some day
Like an Avarian horse-skull. Nuclear ash will have buried all.
There you're no longer human: 'class-alien' you're called.
Here you're no longer human: a number in an equation.
Endure these things as God does; no wild conflagration
Is struck from the stormy firmament. Wisdom has its uses.
Smile when the gaoler tears your tongue out. Smile and be gracious:
Thankful, even in your coffin, that there's someone to bury you.
Desperately guard your dreams and your adjectives: keep them few.
Don't squeak when *the boss* counts your teeth like a horse's.
Hold onto your rags, your bundle, your wretched memories –
A lock of hair, a photograph, a poem –
For nothing else is left. You can still count the chestnut trees
On Mikó Street – like a miser, you grasp all seven of them.
And Jenő never brought me back the Shelley I had lent him.
And there is no one left to buy the hangman's rope,
And our nerves, blood and brains are all of them dried up.
With your very eyes, my brethren, see what in truth we are,
We are but dust and ashes.

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