

**The Parting**  
**Libretto By David Mason**

The set is simple: a table and two chairs, a black notebook and some sheets of paper on the table, a window with dark air raid curtain drawn. On a coat stand hangs an overcoat. MIK and FANNI, a couple in their thirties, are finishing packing his knapsack during the opening song. One object they tellingly leave on the table, for the time being, is the black notebook. Generally, DEATH is present in the shadows, but sometimes she enters the world of the living. The movements of MIK and FANNI are a sort of triangulated dance with death—separately, then at the end all together. At rise their apartment is dimly lit, and DEATH stands alone at a distance from them.

DEATH

I labor so hard, searching this age we're in,  
 and those I choose are all so wan.

They say that death is in love  
 with poetry. They say  
 in the dream of life  
 the hopeful are always with us.  
 I am the friend  
 who knows you will wake to the world.

If you live in a time of peace  
 where only the traffic and work  
 and the small disappointments of life  
 disturb your sleep,

you are lucky.  
 You have never to look far  
 to see that for some  
 evil is right next door.

MIK

The 19th of May, for example, 1944,

FANNI

an apartment in Budapest, and a

DEATH

a loving couple.

MIK and FANNI

A troubled, loving couple. . .

Their love has been tested.

DEATH

It will be tested more.

He is a poet, and some people believe that  
I am in love with poetry.  
Maybe so,  
but I am a fickle lover.

Look at this woman, his wife.  
She's a hard worker.  
It can't be easy living with a man  
for whom destiny is made of words.

I walk through the spaces between them,...

FANNI

I sense you near.

DEATH

Through the pauses, through the breaths.  
They can't help but know I'm here...

FANNI

(Holding the unpacked notebook, moving toward DEATH)  
It is night and I sense you near.

DEATH

They know I'm here,  
but they live in the dream.

FANNI

Why must there always be another?

DEATH

They hope.

FANNI

Why must there always be another?  
My husband is leaving tomorrow.  
I want to be with him, alone.  
Why must there always be another?  
Why always, why?

DEATH

(As if in her conscience)

I can be jealous too.

You wanted him, your poet.  
But you wanted happiness also.  
Often he turned away  
to his words.

He doesn't write them for me  
but for you.  
You and the future he will not see.

FANNI

It's night and I sense you near.

DEATH

I can be jealous too.

FANNI

I want to be with him, alone.  
Why must there always be another?

DEATH

There's only a little time.  
Go to him now.  
Use the time you've got.

The 19th of May  
must seem an eternity.

(She returns to the dim-lit apartment, placing the notebook on the table.)

I whisper his name:  
Radnóti the poet.  
Miklós. Mik.

MIK

Just give me a little more time.

DEATH

Use the time you've got.  
What would you like to know?

MIK  
(Angrily)

Why is the whole world dying?  
Is a man only the ember of a cigarette  
to be stubbed out and thrown away?

DEATH  
You already know what you think.  
It's May 19<sup>th</sup>,  
and a beautiful woman is with you.  
How will you use the time?

MIK  
(Calming)

I'll give her a love poem.

DEATH  
Which one?

MIK  
"After April Rain."

DEATH  
Yes.

MIK  
*As happy, with a woman on my chest,  
as when the sun shines after April rain,  
I shout! and straight away, clean-rinsed in light,  
My voice rings, like that bird's up to his middle,  
now, in the crystal puddle.*

DEATH  
You were young when you wrote that,  
and in love.

MIK  
I'm still in love.

DEATH  
Are you sure? You've given her cause to doubt.

MIK  
I'm over that.

DEATH

Nothing is over, Mik. Nothing is ever. Remember.

MIK

(Despairing)

This is the third time they've called me up.

It will be the last, I'm sure.

I've been ill. I've been dying to write.

I'm taking my notebook tomorrow.

If they catch me...

These guards. They don't care who they kill.

(MIK returns to the dim-lit apartment, the table, where he fingers his notebook and papers. FIFI has moved to the window, slightly opening the air raid curtain.)

DEATH

In the dream of life  
you are not lucky.

MIK

If they catch me,...

DEATH

You live in a time of hate  
and justice will never come.

MIK

This is the third time they've called me up.

I'm taking my notebook.

The third time...

It will be the last.

DEATH

How will you use the time?

(DEATH moves into the shadows. Lights rise on the apartment.)

It's May 19<sup>th</sup>.

FANNI

(Trying to be hopeful)

The night is ours.

MIK

(Also trying hard)

The night is ours.

FANNI

The only night we have.

MIK

All I've ever wanted was you.

FANNI

It's May. The birds are back.

MIK

All I've ever wanted  
was our life, our days of freedom  
to read and write and walk in the park.

FANNI

Today I walked by the Danube  
wishing you were there.

MIK

I should have gone.

TOGETHER

The night is ours, my love,  
The only night we have.

MIK

I should have gone with you.  
The Danube....  
Too many days I've hidden in these rooms  
as if I were a criminal.

FANNI

My love. . .

MIK

(Anger rising)

This world is a crime.  
This world is a perversity.  
It is what people do,

Hungarians and Germans,  
everyone who hates the Jews.

FANNI

Our savior was a Jew.

MIK

He loved the world.  
I've tried to follow him.

I hate the world.  
Sometimes I hate the world.  
Sometimes I see  
the labor battalions,  
men in rags, dead on their feet,  
parades of walking bones  
made to dig their graves  
before they lie in them.

(He calms)

I see these things  
and then I think of you  
and only want to live.  
I want to write love poems,  
Love poems to my loving wife.

FANNI

You will. The night is ours,  
the only night we have.

(They begin a duet of his poem "In Your Two Arms.")

FANNI

*In your two arms, back and forth, I rock  
silently.*

MIK

*In my two arms, back and forth, you rock  
silently.*

FANNI

*In your two arms I am a child,  
listening.*

MIK

*In my two arms you are a child  
I listen to.*

FANNI

*With your two arms around me, you embrace me  
when I'm afraid.*

MIK

*With my two arms around you I embrace you  
unafraid.*

TOGETHER

*In your two arms not even Death  
will frighten me,  
nor its great silence.  
In your two arms,  
as through a dream,  
I will pass through. . .*

(They linger, holding hands. FANNI is beginning to have difficulty staying in the moment. She's staring at the notebook on the table, pulling away from MIK.)

FANNI

I love that poem.  
Even if you wrote it for another.

(Pause. She tries to regain her composure)

Tomorrow you go to Vác.\*

MIK

Tomorrow...

FANNI

You'll write me,  
tell me where they send you.  
For now, my love,  
I've filled your little knapsack,  
rolled your blanket.  
I've sewn a button on your coat,  
darned your red pullover.

---

\* Vác is pronounced "Vahts."

The nightmare will begin  
and end. Somehow. . .

(Suddenly FANNI takes up the notebook and holds it in both hands. She breaks down, unable to go on. MIK sits in a chair and lowers his head to the table. KEK enters the scene and the lights change.)

DEATH

I walk through the spaces between them,

FANNI

What will happen to him?

DEATH

through the pauses, through the breaths.  
They can't help but know I'm here.

FANNI

What will happen to him?

DEATH

You can't know.

FANNI

You're like the other woman.  
You're always here, even when you're not.

DEATH

He does love you, my dear.

FANNI

What are we alive for?

DEATH

To learn about love.

FANNI

My body hungered for him  
and for days he wouldn't come.

I know he's a poet. I know he lives to write.  
I know he has no future—you don't have to tell me that—  
but he makes art for the future.

Is it you he loves?  
 Does he think he's a martyr?  
 What about me? Why do I live?

DEATH

To learn how to love. Go back to him now.  
 His betrayal is all in the past. Let it go.  
 It's May 19th. The only night you have.

(FANNI moves into the apartment, returning the notebook to the table. She stands behind MIK, a hand on his shoulder.)

It is more terrible than she can know.  
 The mercy is that she will learn it piece by piece.  
 She'll send him letters he will never answer.  
 I can see it like I see these hands.

(FANNI puts her face in her hands and turns away. MIK stands, moving toward DEATH.)

MIK

Her letters come to me.  
 I have no way of writing back,  
 only the notebook where I keep my poems.  
 The Communists are coming closer.  
 There is so little time when we're not bent  
 to the pick and shovel.  
 My body is weakening. I'm sick,  
 a walking skeleton. They beat me for writing poems  
 so I keep writing poems,  
 letters to my love.

FANNI

(Sitting at the table, writing a letter)

My love, the summer passes  
 and you have not written.  
 I think of our last night together.  
 How much I wanted to tell you.

MIK

(Turning away from KEK to face his wife, but at a distance)  
*I lie on the bed-board, a captive animal among worms; the fleas  
 renew their siege again, but the army of flies has calmed.  
 It's night, and look, all at once our captivity's one day shorter,  
 and life is one day shorter too. The camp sleeps.*

FANNI

The river is so beautiful in the summer...

MIK

*The moon shines on the hillside, the wires grow tense in its light,*

FANNI

The river is so beautiful in summer.  
Our friends are asking after you...

MIK

*and you can see through the window*

FANNI

and look away when I tell them

MIK

*the sentries' shadows  
thrown on the wall, pacing in the night.*

FANNI

and look away when I tell them  
I have not heard.

Are you still in Serbia?  
Are you working in the mines?  
The Communists are coming close—  
perhaps they will be better than the Reich.  
What do they feed you?  
And your pretty red jumper—do you wear it?

MIK

*Do you see, dear?—The camp is sleeping, dreams are moving:  
one startles awake with a snort, turns over in his bunk, and  
already  
he sleeps again, his face glimmering. Only I sit awake,  
tasting a half-smoked cigarette in my mouth instead of  
your kiss, and dreaming, relief never comes:  
I can no longer die or live without you.*

DEATH

Keep writing, Mik.  
The notebook close to your heart.

FANNI

Please send me your poems.

I miss them. I have your books  
 but it's not the same.  
 We could hold hands and walk by the river  
 and you could recite them to me  
 as you did when we were happy.

MIK  
 (To FANNI)

I can no longer either die or live without you.

FANNI

My body is hungry for you.

MIK  
 (To DEATH)

Our savior died for love.

DEATH

You are not Jesus.

MIK

I can die for my art.

DEATH

You are not Jesus. Learn!

You can die for nothing.  
 You can die because the world  
 is full of dying. Men kill for a sausage.  
 The earth is in ruins. Men kill for God  
 or the absence of God.

MIK

Then why do I live?

DEATH

To learn what love is. To love.  
 To make beautiful things. To die.  
 Go back to her now.  
 Go back to the dream of life.

(FANNI stands at the table. Slowly, cautiously, MIK and FANNI approach each other.)

I can give them one night.  
 The only night they have.

Mik? He won't last long.  
 He'll be dead on his feet  
 before they load him into the death cart.

The notebook will be in his pocket.  
 When he falls into the grave,  
 his skull blown apart by a bullet,  
 he will hold his hand to his heart  
 where the poems continue to live.

The last poem, the most dreadful of all,  
 as if it is already written,  
 as if he has foreseen it all.  
 In a year they will find the mass grave,  
 the songs from a dead man's coat.

Fif will arrive with her friends  
 and try to recognize the bones.  
 She will try to recognize the red jumper.

The last poem, the most dreadful of all  
 and closest to my heart.

(DEATH crosses to the table, touches the notebook and recites this poem rather than singing it.)

*I toppled next to him; his body flipped,  
 stiff already, as a gut string snaps.  
 Shot in the nape. "You'll end like this as well,"  
 I whispered to myself, "Lie still, relax.  
 Now, Death's the rose they say that patience makes."  
 "Der springt noch auf" rang out above me.  
 On my ear the muddied blood was caking.*

(Silence. DEATH lifts the hand from the notebook and steps away. MIK and FIF stand motionless in an embrace.)

They say I am in love with poetry.

(He or she points at MIK and FIF.)

That's what I love. That's what I envy.  
 The kiss of life.

(The lovers turn to face DEATH.)

How will you use the time?

MIK  
(To FANNI)

I'll write from Vác  
and tell you where they send me.  
For now, my love, keep all my poems.

(He lifts a worksheet from the table.)

This "Fragment" I will take with me—  
The one I'm trying to finish. Art against Death.

(FIF reads over his shoulder. She touches the notebook, then looks away from it deliberately. She takes the paper from his hands and sings the second stanza of "Fragment.")

FANNI

*I lived on earth in an era such as this:  
informers were honored, and the murderer,  
the stool pigeon, or the thief was hailed a hero—  
and one whose loyalty was never stated  
as if he carried the plague, already was hated.*

(She hands the paper to MIK, who sings the third stanza.)

MIK

*I lived on earth in an era such as this:  
when one who spoke frankly had to hide  
and chew on his fists in shame to stay alive—  
the nation ran amok, grinning, drunk on blood  
and its filthy fate washed over it in a flood.*

(He passes the paper back and FI sings the fourth stanza.)

FANNI

*I lived on earth in an era such as this:  
when a mother was a curse to her own children,  
and a woman was happy only when she aborted,  
the living envied the worm-eaten corpse, untroubled,  
and the poison on their table foamed and bubbled.*

(She turns, nodding to her husband.)

MIK

I've grown to hate the world,  
a sin. I must learn how to love again.

FANNI

(Begging him)

Live.  
Come back to me and love.

(Her eyes fall on the notebook.)

MIK

(Also seeing the notebook)

I promise.

(Fanni picks up the notebook as if seeing it for the first time, breathes deeply and lovingly hands it to Mik. He grips the notebook, also breathes deeply, then puts it in the pocket of his overcoat, turning back to FANNI.)

FANNI

It's midnight, love.  
There's no hot water for a bath  
and you have far to go tomorrow.  
Sleep now, my love.  
Sleep.

MIK

*In your two arms back and forth I rock...*

FANNI

Sleep now. Sleep.

MIK

You're the only one for me.  
Please believe me. I've always known.

TOGETHER

(A sort of lullaby, and a gift the lovers are trying to give to each other.)

We've always known.  
Before our life began,  
our souls met by a river.

It was in May, the birds were back.  
 We lived like blossoming.  
 And when I held your hands  
 I knew we had met before.  
 Not even Death could part us.

DEATH

They say  
 in the dream of life  
 the hopeful are always with us.  
 I am the friend  
 who knows you will wake to the world.

But that is tomorrow.  
 Tonight is the only night you have.  
 Sing with me now  
 before you sleep.

(Where before there was a separation between the world of the living and the dimension of KEK, the three figures on stage now see each other plainly and at the same time.)

MIK

What shall we sing?

FANNI

One of yours, my love. "Sky Flying Clouds."  
 It's all movement and smoke and life.

MIK  
 (To DEATH)

And you're in it too.

DEATH

I'll sing with you,  
 and then leave you  
 to your dream of life.

MIK  
 (Flinging open the air raid curtain.)  
*The moon sways in the sky flying clouds;  
 I wonder that I'm not yet gone.*

DEATH

*I labor so hard, searching this age we're in,  
 and those I choose are all so wan.*

*Sometimes the year looks around itself and screams,  
it looks around, then falls into a faint.  
What sort of autumn cowers behind my back,  
what sort of winter's coming, dull and pained!*

FANNI

*The forest bled, and in the season's turning  
Time bled each hour away.  
The wind scrawled numbers, large  
and darkling, on the snow all day.*

MIK

*I understand this, and I know that, too,  
the air I feel is as heavy as lead,  
a silence, then whispers surround me,  
as when I was born to the dead.*

FANNI

*I stop here by a tree,  
and the leaves buzz angrily.  
A branch bends down.*

MIK

*To hang me by the neck?  
I'm tired, and neither cowardly  
nor weak.*

FANNI

*Just silence. And the branch also  
frisks my hair noiselessly, afraid.*

MIK

*One should forget, but I have never yet  
forgotten anything I've seen or said.*

*Clouds flying over the moon; the poison draws  
so green,...*

FANNI

*then blue, a smear across the sky.*

MIK

*Carefully, I roll myself a cigarette,  
slowly. I'm alive.*

FANNI

*I'm alive.*

MIK and FANNI

*I'm...*

DEATH

*...alive.*

(They look at each other. MIK turns his back on DEATH, reaching out toward FIF.  
BLACKOUT.)

Note: Translations of Radnóti's verse are adapted from *All That Still Matters at All: Selected Poems of Miklós Radnóti*, Translated by John M. Ridland and Peter V. Czipott (New American Press, 2013). Used by permission.