15 Letters to Budapest

Egy: Meeting

Crossed a bridge today and saw the Duna undulating like
the curves of my own body,
sparkling in golden, late-August
sun. Despite this intimacy,
you and I part as strangers.

Kettő: Baptism

On Margaret Island, I splash in the fountain as
a small boy babbles in Hungarian.
We smile, sunlight melting holy waters.

Három: Sybil

I buy flowers from
an old woman, squinting,
an ancient Sybil to remind you
of your people’s miseries.
I hang the flowers upside-down to dry.
My hands smell of lilacs.
Her hands are withered.

Négy: October 23

Is it the wind or the whispers
of fallen heroes that sets your flag
to marching? Call
your men to arms. Today
I might join them.
Today, I want to be Magyar.

öt: Encounter

The black man bumps into you
on the metro and I catch
you staring, as if at some
strange tropical bird escaped from
far-off jungle, with wings
too gaudy for your tastes.
Hat: Another Café Afternoon
And I am reading Miklos Radnati,
words rich and dark as coffee, each one
leaping off the page, like burning
coals placed between Isaiah’s lips.
Your cafés are full of prophets, of men
driven mad from dangling too long
at the ends of the Fates’ strings.

Hét: In a Station of the Metro
The masses of the aged under rags,
trees cut down to fill your stomachs.

Nyolc: A Game of Numbers
Q: How many Magyars will it take to
find our identity back?
A: 10 million. And then some.
Q: How much territory must we reclaim?
A: All that was stolen. Especially the cradle.
Q: How many Roma does it take to ruin a country?
A: Just one.

Kilenc: Forralt Bor
to drink away the cold. Smoke
too many cigarettes. Stand still as Moricz
Szigmund Korter spins around me. Tram
47 always arrives late,
a poisonous yellow snake.
Giggle too loudly and watch the
people stare.

Tiz: Ghost-dreams
I am wandering
your riverbanks and the waters
churn with restless corpses.
They rise to meet me, hair uncut
since the 1940s, barefoot and wreathed
in plastic. I pull my sheets close.
Let the graves remain silent, like your people.

Tizenegy: Question
How long before you sew up the hole in your flag?

Tizenkettő: Nirvana
Icy winter streets sprout umbrellas
and discussions of the cold. Despite all this,
the cafes remain warm.
I head home, slide around in the tram.
Tell me, if I fall into a stranger’s lap, will
I awake shivering in communist block bed
next to unknown skin?
Today, I don’t want to be Magyar.

**Tizenhárom: Instructions for Departure**
In case of a future meeting:
I will arrive from the countryside by train
and see you swelling on the horizon.
I will not run into your arms, but will
press my face close to yours.
Will you kiss me in welcome?

**Tizennégy: Pilgrimage to Gellert**
Ascend. Breath winter air, take the city
into my lungs. Feel the rhythm of drums in my legs.
Look at the rippling graveyard below and
reach out to touch your guardian.
Descend backwards, keeping my gaze upwards.

**Tizenöt: Equation**
You are you and I am I.
For now, my cheek.
Let us part as equals.