

NEW
HUNGARIAN
FICTION

23

BOOKS

TWENTY TWENTY-THREE

*Complexes
Made
Complicated*

Petőfi
Cultural
Agency



123,

BOOKS

*Complexes
Made
Complicated*

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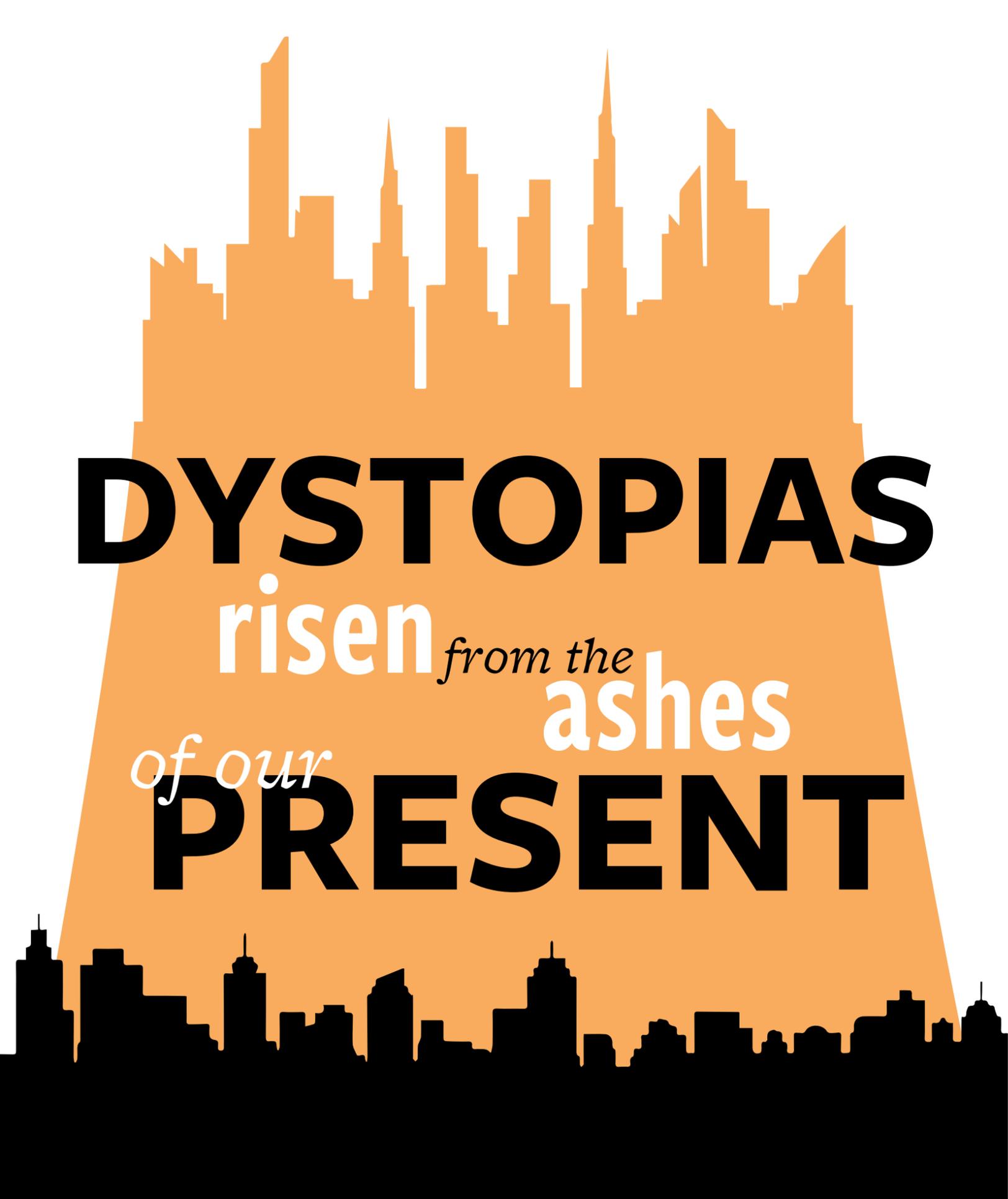
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DYSTOPIAS
risen from the
ashes
of our
PRESENT

Atlantis on the Rise

If dystopias tell us more about our present than our future, their potential can be measured based on how they prompt us to see contemporary affairs from a new angle. Unlike his first collection of short stories, the tales in Máté Makai's *Atlantis on the Rise* are not based on thought experiments that would show us how the world worked according to certain philosophical themes from the twentieth century. Instead, Makai's second book substitutes upcycling decisive elements from our everyday lives, from living in interlapping digital and social networks to searching for something meaningful in "burnout society," for manifesting thought figures.

The short story entitled *Vegan Sex* introduces an interface that combines the features of dating apps, Onlyfans, and escort services. The single-mother protagonist's side hustle is not intended to pay for rent. She decides to work as a call-girl so that she can pay for the services of men who make her feel good, and in those few hours, she can finally get away from her motherly duties. *Kutyatolvajok* ("Dog Poachers") also interconnects two contemporary issues, the kidnapping and reselling of purebred dogs and the migrating of definitive parts of life into virtual reality, framed by a neo(n)-noir syuzhet. And *Nagy villanás* ("The Big Flash") provides an innovative take on the COVID crisis without depicting a global pandemic. The story centers around the collapse of the multinational corporation Atlantis, which has had a monopoly on digital communication all over Europe and the US. The text thus executes a peculiar reversal with respect to our lockdown experience. Quarantine is presented not as exclusively connecting with the world over the internet, as happened in real life, but as a state of being cut off from it entirely and returning to analogue media.

Makai's short stories are edgy and critical without being too on-the-nose about contemporary events or parading as parables. All nine tales sketch their (shared) fictional world through institutes and technologies, and they make this world lively through the interactions among libertine yet relatable characters. All in all, *Atlantis on the Rise* can be labelled the Hungarian lovechild of DeLillo's and William Gibson's short prose.

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Máté MAKAI

was born in Veszprém in 1986. He currently lives in Szentendre. He is the manager of a showroom and café and the lead guitarist and song writer of a rock band. *Koriolán dala* (“Coriolan’s Melody”), his first collection of short stories, was published in 2016.

I put a scarf around my neck and went out, heading north, following the river. I soon reached the city center, and I kept going until I made it to the seashore. There was a tremulous light coming from the north, so bright you might well have thought it was daytime. Half the city was awake. And the light kept shifting, sometimes lilac, then greenish, then red, sometimes orange. A so-called coronal mass ejection, or CME. And that was when the internet as we knew it went mad.

They said AtlantisTech would launch a pair of sunglasses that would be more or less digital. They would show moods, but only with pre-programmed codes. But not the real-time faceplastics, as the tabloids had claimed. But that was all just rumors. Atlantis-Tech? The company that had lost everyone’s trust after the solar flare. They had had a monopoly, then one big flash and it was gone. The armored server parks and the highly complex cloud system, all destroyed. And since they had had a monopoly, the entire western network was down. The Russians and the Chinese allegedly had

their own, shared system, but according to the newspapers, Atlantis had managed to get them to sign a contract, and Rusnet and Sinoweb wouldn’t be online until Atlantis could restart. Rusnet had signed out of fear of western ethical hacker attacks, since all the geniuses in the hemisphere had suddenly become unemployed.

But these vaunted glasses had never been launched. And then it turned out that it wasn’t even Atlantis who designed, but some guy from the west coast who started developing them in his garage in California. Atlantis had tried to buy the rights, but he had messed things up by getting killed in a car accident.

At first, like everybody else, I had worn the classic mask, made out of gauze and textiles. Because at that moment, when God pulled out the global plug and the internet went down, people started wearing masks. The city of Shenzhen had just opened up again after having been under quarantine because of a virus episode, so they had piles of masks for the taking. Asian teenagers began to paint their masks, and then they paraded around on the streets like a bunch of manga figures. They were enthusiastic, even fanatical, as usual. The New Herald, one of the many newspapers that had risen from the ashes of the print media, published the first report on them. Back then, everyone was out in the streets, so this new fad spread damn quick here too. And then everyone started using textiles. Like a thin ski mask that slipped over your face tight enough that it wouldn’t hang loose but not so tight that it would itch all the time. You can print one, customized just for you, easy enough with a pocket laser printer. We made millions of them.

I bought two, a sad and a happy one. Usually, I wore the sad one. Not that I was trying to say anything. Mostly just out of laziness. And I didn’t want to stand out in the crowd. Better to look sad than indifferent, I figured. I actually cared a lot about everything that was going on, and I was quite moved by the spectacle of the CME, in part because I had seen the whole thing unravel live. But I was never the activist type. And you couldn’t find expressionless masks anywhere, though I hadn’t looked. But why wear one anyway? What with the internet going down, all the social media platforms are down too, so everyone has to find some way to make up for the loss of the all-to-convenient channels of communication. And it’s been a year and AtlantisTech still hasn’t managed

to get things up and running again. And they don’t breathe a word about anything, so no one really knows what will happen, or when.

The first few months passed without any encouraging signs, and I wore my sad mask as I strolled the streets. Back then, everyone thought the whole thing was some kind of bad joke. The whole mask fad would come and go like a flashmob, or like any of the little waves of retro. But not so. And then came the conspiracy theories. “They brought it down on purpose.” “It was the Russians (or the Chinese)! They fired an EMP on us, but they’re still using their network in secret.” “They’re lying! It’s all just a bunch of maintenance work, and they don’t want to let on.” You could hear these kinds of rumors on people’s masked lips or read them in the born-again print tabloids, the Monday editions of which always came with a free mask.

And people were slowly going mad. After a while, Cibel, my college roommate, also started acting bad. He was one of the first victims of the new world order.

I come into our apartment one day and see him sitting in front of the dark screen of his computer in a mask. A few days earlier, he’d gotten pretty mad at me. I’d had a laugh at his expense, because he’d stored all his notes and drafts in the cloud, and he’d lost everything. All the videos, photos, back-up porn, and the rough drafts of his thesis. I’d said nobody’s dumb enough to keep all their porn in the cloud when the internet can always go down. He was just sitting in front of his monitor, rocking forward and backward, and staring at me.

He was wearing my happy mask.

“That’s mine,” I said.

“Not like you need it,” he said furiously.

So I stopped wearing it. He would put on a different one every hour, even in the apartment, just to prove to me that he was taking the whole thing seriously. He had four, to be precise. One to communicate rage, one for anxiety, one for sadness, and now my happy one. One Thursday evening, he wore mine while he was waiting for his girlfriend to show up. They were crazy. Once, I accidentally opened the bathroom door on them and caught them fucking in masks.

Cibel was a math major. It kind of surprised me that he went crazy before I did.

SHOULD

I call him?

**WHAT
SHOULD**
I call him?

Callers in the Night

A seemingly casual, no-strings-attached relationship starts blossoming in a sleepy town in the Hungarian countryside between two forty-somethings, Béla, a man living separated from his wife, and Ani, a widower. After getting to know the day-to-day life of the town, which is full of nosy elderly people who give Ani unsolicited advice about how she should behave as a widow and how she should keep her love life in check, *Callers in the Night* branches into the story of a love affair, and as the identities of the characters become increasingly confused, the text takes on features of metafiction that seem at times to borrow from the workings of the novels by Paul Auster.

A chain of substitutions that calls into question the identities of the characters begins as Ani muses over affectionate names she might use to refer to Béla. She soon finds, however, that she had been substituted with another lover, with whom Béla has cheated on his wife. Béla is also wondering what kinds of cute affectionate words he might use for Ani, as he has had so many girlfriends that he can hardly find a cute term of affection that he hasn't already used on someone else.

The question of names is central to the life of the town, since many of the residents share the same name (three out of four of Ani's neighbors are named Péter Telki, which is also an apronym, as "telek" means plot of land in Hungarian), so they prefer to be called by different nicknames. Sometimes, names are taken as things that need to be deciphered. Béla, for instance, could be understood as meaning "little gut," and Veronika is understood as originating from the portrait of Jesus on the Shroud of Turin, referred to as "vera-icon," meaning "true icon."

According to Béla (a common name in Hungary), calling someone by an affectionate name is a form of commitment. And when it turns out that Ani's and Béla's mutual friend Vivien might be the fictive author of the text that tells their love story, this mise-en-abyme structure once again separates names and beings. Vivien renames the town and its inhabitants, even herself and Béla, but she lets Ani keep her name, because "no one would believe that Ani was a real name." Yet when we find precisely the same things in Vivien's pantry that are said to be in Ani's pantry, we cannot help but wonder if Vivien is in fact named Ani, and this Ani (or Vivien) created herself as both the protagonist and the author of the novel. *Callers in the Night* definitely gives several twists to the idea of name-calling.

author
Ildikó Szilágyi-Nagy

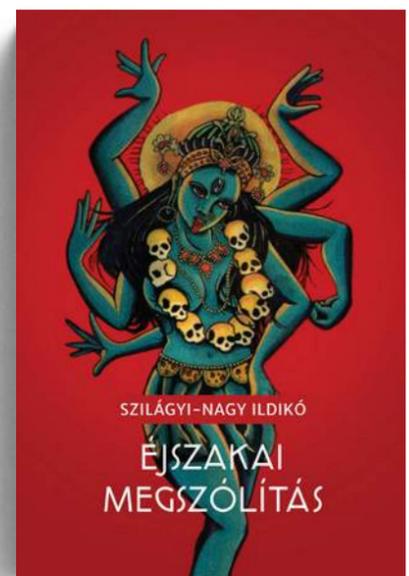
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Ildikó SZILÁGYI-NAGY

was born in Veszprém in 1978. She obtained her PhD in literary studies from the University of Pécs in 2008. *Changing Games*, a play based on her short stories, was put on stage at Trans Art Area Gallery in New York in 2011. She has been a yoga instructor for almost two decades. *Callers in the Night* is her fifth book.

As she lay in bed, Ani wrestled with the question. Should she try to calm down a little before falling asleep or should she try to digest the events of the day with a bit of free-associative self-recrimination. Nothing much had happened, but even a perfectly normal day offered plenty of opportunities for brooding and rumination. All of which usually proved fruitless, little more than a waste of precious time that would have been better spent sleeping. She hoped that if she could relax a bit, her fears would wane, but nothing so far. When it came to anxiety, she was a pro.

When she resolved to relax, she would lie on her back with her legs and arms spread wide. Same thing with free-associative self-recrimination, but her limbs always remained tense, and she would have to keep adjusting herself. She had been unable to fall asleep in the dark for some time now, so she had bought a night-light. Even on its lowest setting, however, it had proven too bright. And she hadn't thought much of the color of the glow it shed either. She had put some green tape over the blueish light, and

that had made it suitably pale. The greenish tint wasn't perfect, but she was at least able to fall asleep. Though it had taken a couple of days, because at first, she had worried about what would happen if the little bulb heated up the paper and set it on fire. This was among the least of her worries, however, and indeed it was almost a relief to toss and turn over such a minor concern. Life had given her plenty of other far more disquieting reasons to fret, after all.

Her worst fears didn't even have an object. If she tried, Ani could arrive at the most abstract explanations.

"I have been hit by cosmic loneliness."

"I suffer from existential anxiety."

"Compulsive obsession."

"A biochemical state. The workings of the body, set in motion by some event, and no way to free oneself from the hamster wheel."

Now too she felt very much like some miserable creature, a broken rodent chained to its wheel. She didn't hesitate to get out of bed when she saw her phone light up. Sleep was still little more than a distant mirage.

"Maybe a text from Béla," she thought, "which would be reassuring."

And indeed it was a text from Béla.

"Good night Ani."

"Good night," she tapped, and then she was stuck. Would have liked to have used some cutesy name, but that would have meant knowing who this Béla was, knowing enough about him to come up with a cutesy name that would fit. "Hon," that had been her favorite. But she'd already used it up on her late husband. After his death, she had given his suits to some charity. Not his shoes, though. Those she had thrown away. No one should be walking around in a dead man's shoes. And you don't use the cutesy name you had used with the dearly departed for someone else.

"Dearest"? The "dear" was ok, nice and casual but then given a little bit of a push with the "est." Still not right, though. What if this Béla wasn't all that great after all? What if he didn't quite merit the "est"?

What about something more playful? Classics that had survived the test of time, like baby or even babe? Except that Béla looked nothing like a baby. He was more like a heavyweight boxer. His job involved moving several thousand pounds of stuff a day by hand. He had a cutesy enough disposition for babe, but then again Ani didn't want a "babe." She wanted a man who... And here her train of thought again came to a screeching halt.

"Nowadays, the point of a relationship is to pool financial resources, have children, and gain social prestige, none of which

interests me," she mused. "So what would make my relationship with a man anything more than a friendship with benefits? That it entitles me to use cutesy names?"

So much brooding over a simple goodnight text message. If you put down roots in the soil of anxiety, you can always reap the fruits of fear.

Better half, the term men often use to describe their wives. The implication being that man and woman on their own are but fragments, halves. Though the woman is the better one (thanks for setting the expectations higher, guys). The word wife just meant woman way back when. Not so with husband. An old Norwegian word that meant master of the house. And they had a term for mistress of the house too in Norwegian, but that didn't make it into English. And then husband became a verb. You can husband the land and husband your wife. Why not? Land shouldn't be left fallow, fellas. And then you've got animal husbandry. Thanks again guys! Flattering. But maybe it's the wedding vows that say it best. You take the girl and the boy and pronounce them man and wife. So the boy goes from child to man, the girl from child to someone's wife. And all of this is still going on, even after the purges championed by the politically correct? And then the feminists and pioneers at the vanguard of male emancipation form an unlikely alliance to burn this interpretation at the stake, feeding the flames with data about hormones and biochemistry and the like. How difficult we find it to grasp that equality does not prevent each and every one of us from developing without any hindrances the abilities with which we were born, which were, let's admit it, forced on us. (You may now kiss the broad.)

Women and men are partners in that they face death together. Surely that's why marriage is until death do you part.

And these wandering thoughts always conclude with self-consolation.

"No wonder I suffer from anxiety in this society. Here, they'd ask Jesus Christ himself to show them his degree in theology, and the National Food Chain Safety Office would fine him for not having washed the fish baskets twice. Would not be wise at all for the Savior to pop up here, pop up now. I'm on my own, and I'll have to be my own savior."

And this chain of thought led her back to romantic relationships.

"Maybe the relationship between a man and a woman is more than just a friendship with some kind of biochemical attraction because the man and the woman can each be the other's best halves, each other's closet partners, allies of a sort."

Who's
playing

JESUS
now?

Making-Of

Like Péter Gerőcs's second novel, *Győztesek Köztársasága* ("Republic of Champions"), *Making-Of* focuses on group dynamics. This time, however, the novel does not tell the story of a carefully selected team of intellectuals who participate in an experiment to create the perfect society. Rather, it follows the shooting of a film about a group of friends who move from the capital to the countryside to start life anew. These two stories—the plot of the movie on the one hand and what is happening to the film crew on the other—intersect in the process of making the film, which the director would like to create as an independent film, in addition to the one on which the crew is working. After some time, however, the two films start to resemble each other as new romantic relationships begin to blossom, and jealousy rears its ugly head in both. Moreover, the actors begin to identify with their fictional counterparts a bit too much, and they reenact the conflict with the locals from the movie, with dire consequences. The indistinguishability between fiction and reality culminates in the character of the protagonist, László, who is played by János, the only actor in the crew who has no real experience and plays his role intuitively. From the outset, László/János is perceived as a messiah-like figure, similar to Jesus. On the one hand, he knows about certain events for which he was not present, and some members of the crew regard this as a miracle. On the other hand, he tries to keep the peace among the members of the crew and between the locals and the newcomers with his preaching. In the end, it turns out that it may be necessary to sacrifice him if the crew wants to wrap things up successfully...

With its double narrative framing and double irony, *Making-Of* presents clashes of stereotypes and disparate attitudes towards life, and it also shows what happens to wildly different communities when they are forced to interact with each other.

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Making-Of

“You mean László?”

“Yes, whatever! We start off from here,” he says, pointing at László’s house. “We’ll put the tracks here, on the far side. And we’ll have a fixed camera on the neighboring hill. With a good telescopic.”

“Ah ha.”

“And then the provider’s men come, and János.”

“You mean László.”

“Yes. And he’ll be splitting wood in the shed. But we only see this in the shot from a distance. Perfect, no?”

“I don’t know, András. I can’t see inside your head.”

“Then I’ll tell you! So, they stop beside him here, and the men go in the house and check the electric lines and everything, and then they come out, and they nod to the police, who’ve been standing next to János the whole time, and then they surround him, and they start off with him towards the police car. And we need an insert. We need our actors to start coming out of the doors of the houses, so we’ll have to be sure they’re ready, so they step out into the street, and they’re all shocked to see the cops dragging János off, and then...”

“László. Get it through your head, András! Your character’s name is László.”

“Right, right. So they’re dragging László off, and no one does anything. The street should be full of people standing on their doorsteps and staring mouths agape. Right? Right. A few shots of faces up close, and then a take from the top of the hill as the police car leaves the village. And done!”

András stares at Robi with a big grin on his face. He’s waiting for Robi to nod in agreement.

“Alright. But what do you want? What should I say?”

“Nothing, you don’t have to say nothing. It’ll be perfect, I’m certain. Just decide. Give it the thumbs up.”

“Sure, if you tell me who we’re going to use for László.”

András looks around. His gaze pauses on Ámbris, who is standing with his hands folded behind his back and chatting with Máté, his boss.

“Him!”

“Who?”

“Our best boy!”

“Ámbris?”

“Yes, Ámbris. Ámbris or no one.”

“Alright. And who are we going to get to stand in the doorways, mouth agape? We’ve got three or four actors who we’ve been shooting with for the whole film.”

András claps his hands together.

“Excellent! Wonderful! The whole crew can join in. We’ll talk to the people who live in the houses and get their permission to use

their front yards for twenty minutes or so. That’ll be our tribute to János. Everyone joins in. That’s quite an idea you gave me, pal!”

Robi thinks for a moment and then heaves a heavy sigh.

“I’ll need an hour.”

András glances at his watch. He then nods and turns and hurries off.

Robi goes in search of Andi to tell her all the details. Who will do what, who to prep first and how. No script, no dialogue, no text. A silent scene. Long cuts. Slow images. Mostly technical stuff. Everyone on set. All eyes on the makeup department.

Before they part, they kiss.

Andi goes first to Ámbris. She delicately nudges him to one side and tells him of András’ creative vision. Ámbris listens closely, his hands folded behind his back the whole time, and then casts a glance at the director, who is pacing back and forth, and then back at Andi. He nods.

A few minutes later, he is sitting in his chair in the makeup trailer, and Réka is working her magic. He has been given fake hair, a fake beard, and rough, dusty clothing. They have used all kinds of concoctions to darken his skin, put wrinkles on his face, make his eyebrows fluffier, his hair more disheveled. Ámbris sits in silence, buried deep in himself, as if waiting for the final judgment.

The guys on set are putting stickers on a white Astra to make it look like a police car. People from props are stacking big sacks of kindling in front of the lead’s house.

Robi rounds up the crew. He holds a quick pep talk on how important it is for everyone to show up for the farewell scene.

“Me too?” Imre asks, the pear-shaped bus driver who uses suspenders to hold his pants up.

“Imre will be the most important one there!”

The crew smiles.

Robi summons Kati and Janó. They ring the doorbell at each house and ask the residents for permission to use their doorsteps and front yards.

At some houses, no one’s home, but most of the time a neighbor has a key to the garden gate.

“Sure it won’t be a problem if we use the Gáspár family’s garden?”

“No problem at all,” the neighbor replies, fiddling with the lock. “Gáspár’s not a fussy guy. Just don’t tromp all over the raspberry bushes.”

There isn’t enough clothing to go around for everyone from set design and all the guys from props, so some of the members of the crew have to slip on some of their dirty clothes. But that means that some of them have to get Imre to take them back to their rooms in the little village of Kemence.

A half hour later, Andi speaks up through the walkie-talkie.

“Let’s everybody stay silent. Action in a minute!”

Péter GERŐCS

was born in Budapest in 1985. He is a writer, documentary filmmaker, and photographer. *Making-Of* is his seventh book

When morning comes, they’re standing dazed on the set. András is running back and forth, herding people, but he himself clearly doesn’t quite know exactly what he’s doing. A shepherd on the brink of despair and his confused, unmoving flock.

“What should I shine the light on, sir?” Ámbris asks the young cameraman, Péter, who is sitting on a makeshift wooden bench, part of the makeshift set.

“No idea.”

“Okay, then maybe I’ll wait too.”

András grabs Robi’s elbow and tugs him along at his side.

“We’ll use a car here, and then they get him there. We need a shot from a distance. No crane today, right?”

“No, András. We haven’t had a crane for a long time now.”

“Fuck. We need a crane for this scene! But whatever. We can do it using a car.”

“But what, András? Do what?”

“What do you mean what? The cops nab János.”

Women in- ter- rup- ted

When Things Cool Down

Ilka Papp-Zakor's first novel presents itself as a magical realist piece. On the one hand, people literally disappear into thin air after they have achieved their professional and personal goals, dinosaurs come to life, and dragons attack the city, while on the other, we are presented with day-to-day life at a multinational company, including endless small talk, nonsense posters intended to raise awareness of important social issues and motivate employees, and pizza parties at the workplace. When Things Cool Down oscillates between surrealism and realism by being polyphonic in the narrative sense too. Its protagonist is Anita, a woman in her late twenties who works at a multinational company. The second narrator is her husband, Norbert, who moves to France after getting a promotion. The third is Ivan, a Russian colleague from another branch who visits the office where Anita works. The two men's narratives are presented in the novel via letters addressed to Anita. Norbert pressures Anita to join him in France, while Ivan writes about nothing but himself, his achievements, and his feelings. The fourth narrator is Anita's uncle, Ervin, who used to be a successful artist and was famous for his dinosaur sculptures, which came to life.

Though Anita is the main character in the novel, her life is mediated by the narratives of the three men. The reader gains glimpses into her personal life through Norbert, her professional life through Ivan, and her childhood through Ervin. And we quickly realize that this narrative structure hints at the fact that Anita cannot give her own account of her life because men have always decided things for her. Her uncle treated her like a piece of artwork that needed to be perfected, her husband wants her to be a stay-at-home wife, and Ivan regards her as a mute companion whose only purpose in life is to listen to his melodramatic monologues. It is no surprise, then, that most of the time the reader has no access to Anita's replies to the men's discourse and rarely sees her act with real agency. One of the key moments in the novel comes when a mutual friend asks Anita if she is going to join her husband in France, to which she responds that yes, she will, when things cool down. Her reply suggests that she will go to France when winter comes, but it can also be understood as a quiet act of defiance, since metaphorically things will never cool down, and she has no intention of joining Norbert, but rather would prefer to take her life into her own hands.

author
Ilka Papp-Zakor

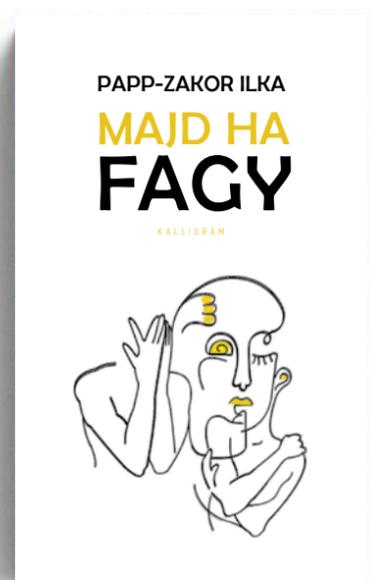
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Ilka PAPP-ZAKOR

was born in Cluj-Napoca in 1989. She made her literary debut with absurd short stories. She also translates works of Polish literature into Hungarian, for instance Mikołaj Grynberg's *Book of Exodus* (Księga Wyjścia). *When Things Cool Down* is her third book.

The office complex where Anita worked consisted of buildings surrounded by a garden and abutting one another to form a circle. There were evergreen trees and exotic shrubs huddling in scattered clusters, and the ground was covered with artificial grass, the corners of which had been pulled up by crows searching for insects. Gravel paths led to entrances A, B, C, D, and E, with little fountains resembling rock springs where they finally converged on the buildings. The water ran down from floor to floor, splashing over the little round stones in its path at every turn. The flowerbeds connecting the entrances were full of white, red, and orange roses in bloom. Little families of cheerful satyrs and chubby gnomes with puffy cheeks and jostling jowls stood among them in very clearly separated groups. In winter, when the vegetation thinned, you could see the plaster golden orioles among the shrubs pecking at the ground.

Each of the five five-story buildings had the same layout: open offices along internal walkways branching off from circular corri-

dors, bathrooms next to the walkways, and a kitchen with a coffee machine in the circular space opposite corridor A. With the single exception of the innermost building, where the circular corridors surrounded the offices from the outside and the kitchens were at the epicenter of the floors. Breakfasts were held with management on the third floors. Behind the desks, a balcony looked onto the courtyard. The lowest floor of the central building had a playroom for employees' children, and there was parking for cars and bicycles in the outermost underground lot.

The decorations in the corridors varied from floor to floor. In the hallway leading to Anita's spot, abstract shapes created a labyrinthine pattern on the walls and carpets. But the spiral staircase that led from the ground floor to the first floor in her building (building B), with its worn stone steps and robust handrail, could well have been the last surviving remnant of a former tenement. It always smelled of cigarette smoke and wet clay, and at lunch time of heavy food, because the cafeteria on the ground floor opened onto it. Anita had once watched as one of the cafeteria workers, leaning against the wall with little wet spots under her armpits after the line of hungry employees had finally dispersed, had let out a weary sigh and cast an expiatory glance at the slices of French toast in her hand before beginning to eat.

Their company was one of those jovial monstrosities that, if perhaps finely tuned and well-ordered in their early days, had grown into a mutant in the soils of Eastern Europe, with largely inscrutable goals, structures, and tasks, drawing in a dynamic,

youthful, international workforce. The values of acceptance and love of one's neighbor, which before had been handed down from father to son like some vestigial organ (like, say, the appendix), would soon be filled with meaning. The company would nurture the sense solidarity and belonging that was burgeoning among its employees by setting up clubs of all kinds. Clubs for animal lovers, lovers of literature, amateur jugglers, lovers of classical music and skydiving. A pleasant atmosphere motivates employees, so when a Bulgarian visionary was speaking of the extraterrestrial origins of the Hungarian people, they were discovering their own borders in the stars. Their love for their work overflowed, extending to everything with which they come into contact in their daily routine, from coffee machines to Excel spreadsheets and desk phones, the latter of which were available for both business and personal use. Since they worked for pleasure, they were comparatively unconcerned with the financial compensation for their labor. Anita seemed to be the only one who was there primarily for the money, even if at the interview she had pretended to be making the world a better place at a company renowned for its ethical behavior, environmental awareness, and customer focus. Salary was an incidental question, she had suggested hypocritically. Real satisfaction came from making things better on a global scale. She had hoped to be rewarded with a hefty salary in return for her pure intentions, but this was not to be. Her work would not make the world a better place. She now saw that her work for the company was every bit as superfluous as it seemed.

It's all
about
the

optics

I See You

Diána Vonnák's short stories have one main thing in common: they all employ first-person narration. And although the collection entitled *I See You* is divided into three parts, the difference between them is based not on themes but on how the optics get (re)calibrated. In the first part, the texts focus on the relationship between a certain character and the narrator. The second part concentrates on blood ties, and with these ties, the feeling of being close to home and being forced to leave one's homeland. The third part once again introduces the reader to peculiar characters, but instead of focusing on their relationship with the narrator, it tells stories that are associated with them. Sometimes the stories are embedded into contemporary events (e.g., the Maidan Uprising in 2013) or relate to contemporary issues (e.g., the controversies surrounding Ukrainian surrogate mothers). Other times, they unravel elementary truths about human relationships (e.g., two women who are reluctant to make their relationship public and blame the mother of one of them for this still refuse to take that step forward after the mother dies). Yet somehow all of Vonnák's stories center around the experience of otherness and being othered, often representing characters who are stigmatized by the Western mind, e.g., Muslims, the homeless, old people who are no longer able to take care of themselves, etc. Nevertheless, Vonnák's characters are alien to one another not so much because of their cultural or social differences, but because they strongly believe that every single one of their attempts to understand the other is destined to fail. In a paradoxical fashion, it is their unwillingness to get to know one another that leads to the preservation of the other in their otherness. This is why the reader can rightly suppose that the characters who are alien to one another can in fact also mirror one another in their struggles with their and the other's otherness.

I See You thus avoids becoming another piece of so-called "liberal kitsch," the main function of which would be to raise sympathy for the people depicted in its stories. Like the phrase "I see you," this collection of short stories is much more layered than that. In some of the stories, "I see you" could sound lethargic, while in others, it could be perceived as a threat or an expression of empathy and understanding, with the same modality as "I see."

author
Diána Vonnák

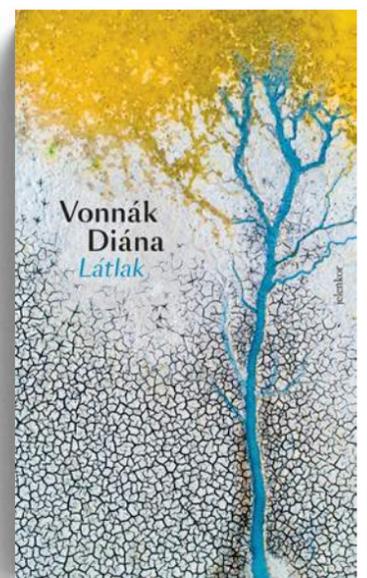
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Diána VONNÁK

was born in Budapest in 1990. She is a cultural anthropologist who obtained her PhD at Durham University with a focus on the cultural politics of Ukraine. *I See You* is her literary debut.

I'm sorry for talking so much, I don't want to keep you.

The rain would finally fall and wash off my face.

You asked me earlier when I came here, I thought I had told you, but now I'll tell you properly, the first time was after Yerevan.

The power plant on the Vorotan River was finished, I was an assistant engineer, I came home from work. The house on the other bank had been built, we went on holiday to Yevpatoria. Three of us, my brother came too. It all came together and then it all fell apart.

The country too. Should I hold the little glass bottles while you do the measuring?

So, that's when I started to come out here, only for a few days at a time at first, to the tip of the peninsula, where you can just about find a spot for a plastic chair, like sitting in the bow of a boat, with the gray fresh water to the right, all covered with poplar blossoms, and the warm turquoise sea to the left. From here you can't see the stretch where they merge, you'd have to fly over it. That's what you measure, isn't it, the way they merge?

I would swim a big circle in the morning, starting from the sea, round the top, across to the estuary, where the water is really fresh, you can even drink it. They say it's polluted, but you can't taste it. Autumn's almost here, if the heat breaks, the sunbathers will leave, but the water will still be warm.

So where was I? Everything had fallen apart, the fish processing plant was sold, someone took off with the cash register, and it was finally quiet here on the peninsula, we were on our way out of it all.

There was no reason for anyone to plough across the sand, you can't build a road here, you can see what the soil is like. There were no tourists yet, no jellyfish, at most an occasional villager. At the end of the headland there's only room for one person at a time, I came out, I caught fish, the days went by with nothing, you see, I'm acting all clever, rambling on again.

We were building a power station in the Caucasus, and then we blinked and the borders closed in on us, I'm not saying it was something I ever could have understood, but no one understood it, no one in the world. We took apples, grapes, dried fish to the city, it didn't matter, things didn't get better, we had food, but not much else, whether we did what we were supposed to or not. I was bored, lord, how bored I was. You're young, you don't know how doing nothing, getting nowhere day in, day out can wear on your nerves.

It's different here, the wind has blown everything out of my head, blown the will out of me. My wife and my brother planted chestnuts in the corner of the garden, lime and peach trees, and I went home less and less. Not because she had stopped loving me, not yet, but rather because of my restlessness.

I couldn't stand the way everything half backwards and upside down. I could have done some deals on the side, but I was an engineer, damn it all. Things should be done right, and if they're not being done right, then it's not wrong on my part if I let the whole thing go. Why bother paddling against the current?

What's the metro like now? Strange, but it doesn't haunt me anymore, I was only haunted by the big city back then, places announced in stations, the power station, going far. It ended too soon. Everything's just the same as it was in my parents' time. And their parents' time. We didn't change much.

How old are you exactly? If you don't mind me asking.

Now I don't even listen to the radio. War in the east, and here... Yevpatoria would have fallen if there had been battles. It's let itself go. We've let it go. The hell with the whole city leadership. Maybe it would be better, I don't know, if they'd annexed it, why should we pay for their electricity, their pensions, everything. I can't listen to that stuff anymore.

Maybe that's why the boat isn't coming, who knows, but what with this heat it might come any minute. I put the national flag out, you saw it, right? By my tent. Who knows what's happening, or what's going to happen. We pay for their electricity, though they're in another country, the power line goes over the border. They said on the radio that it's a different time zone. How is it possible that six months ago it was the same time zone and now it's later there?

Did they tell the sun to take a leap to the side, he'd fall on his face at the border patrol.

The football camp is here, Seryozha may have finally gone there, can you see if he's there?

All he does is read, the rest of them live their lives and don't give a damn about him. They run to the tip of the island three times a day, they run races, I think they're coming. Yesterday, they were chasing around each other with a jellyfish on a stick, shouting that it was a tentacle condom. There's something to that. Then when they fall on their faces, they come, they know I'll help them, I can smear them with lemon juice. Beggar priest they call me. Mother fuckers. I'm not a beggar. I live under a tarp of my own free will, as anyone can see, and I keep things clean.

I also trim my beard every week.

Don't laugh, instead tell me, you really can't see it? I'll comb it if I need to.

It's good that the boys are coming, I have nowhere to put so much milk, at best I could take it to the shop, they'll trade it for beer or eggs, but I won't go that far in this heat.

And did you know that there was an archaeologist here a few years ago in the summer, he said he was from some university, the park ranger said he was a stupid fraud, he claimed that thousands of years ago Greek heroes used to train their troops for war here. The kind of stuff that Seryozha reads. That it was an ancient Greek settlement. He was getting a sponsor for the dig, that's why he's come to look around.

The Dnieper was called the Hypanis back then, he wouldn't say it, but I saw the big excavation a few villages down, there was a town there, bigger than the village now, they found coins shaped like dolphins. The writing is so similar to ours that I can almost understand it on sight. It was the archaeologist who got Seryozha hooked on the Greeks, and he's been reading about them for three summers.

There's a rationale to it, of course, the river washes its sediment here, it carries peninsulas, bigger and bigger ones, who knows what the sand is full of. That much time passed will cover anything.

The
DARKEST
possible
WORLDS
 of
 all

Polar Lights

Zoltán Bene's novella balances on the edge of sci-fi, uchronia, and dystopia. The story takes place in an alternative reality where the two world wars and the Cold War never happened, though people do not seem to be any better off. One of the reasons for this is that nothing has interrupted the development of consumer capitalism, which simply peaked earlier than it did in the reality with which we are familiar. However, instead of multinational companies, sovereign nation states pioneered this process. Without any great wars to win, rather than pumping money into the military complex, the leaders of first-world countries could fully concentrate on exhausting natural resources. In the novel's fictional world, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy still exists, and the protagonist Szelevényi is sent to work on an oil rig in Franz Joseph Land, a colony at the North Pole. Since he is neither a scientist nor a worker, Szelevényi becomes responsible for culture and entertainment in the colony. At night, however, he studies the documents left to him by his father, which are full of conspiracy theories concerning the (not terribly) secret societies that played a huge part in shaping the history of the novel's alternative twentieth century. However fictional the setting is, one can still recognize symptoms of nepotism and crony capitalism, and one also notices that, as there was no Cold War, there was also no space race. Consequently, instead of aspiring to colonize the moon or Mars, humanity is eager to conquer every square inch of planet earth.

Alongside the alternative historical thread, *Polar Lights* also contains several metafictional gestures, sometimes explicitly alluding to the oeuvre of Franz Kafka, for instance when Szelevényi seems just as lost in the labyrinths of bureaucracy as Josef K. or when he dreams that he has undergone a metamorphosis similar to Gregor Samsa's. The more Szelevényi buries himself in his father's legacy, the more he suffers from the intertwining of fiction and reality, not unlike the protagonists of Phillip K. Dick's novella *The Man in the High Castle*. Bene's novel asks where one can find truth if the same structures, motivations, and causalities are seemingly at play in all possible worlds, and the only difference between them is that what can be proposed as fiction in one might be reality in the other, and vice versa.

author
Zoltán Bene

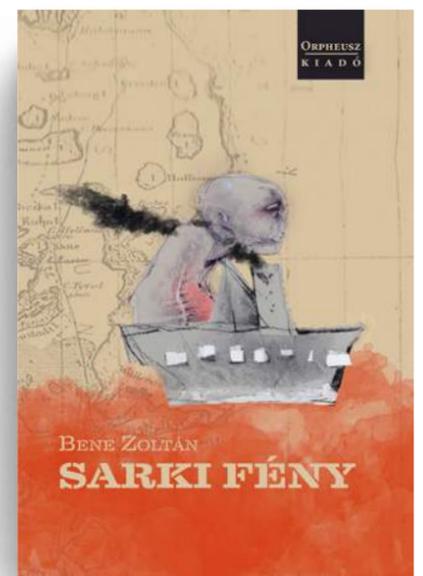
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Zoltán BENE

was born in Kecskemét in 1973. He is known for his historical fiction and short stories, which deal with contemporary issues in a manner that is both satirical and philosophical. *Polar Lights* is his sixteenth work of fiction.

In the summer of 1914, against the backdrop of Europe ready to burst into flame, Ulyanov sparked the uprising in Saint Petersburg to which historians refer as the Long Nights of Saint Petersburg and which has been characterized as an uprising driven by starvation. My father, however, is convinced that it could not have been a spontaneous rebellion caused by hunger. The famine at the time in the Czar's empire was no greater than the famines that the Russian people had long since grown accustomed to, and though it might well be an exaggeration to claim that they did not even notice the food shortages, it is quite certainly true that they hardly would have thought of making a fuss about it. It was not widespread starvation that stirred up discontent, but Ulyanov, who had the very effective help of the Germans. Thus, contrary to what is taught in history classes, it was not the Czar's sudden moment of enlightenment on 7 July 1914 that prompted German expeditionary forces to intervene in Russia, since it most certainly had not been Nicholas II who had summoned the Kaiser's armies.

Rather, it had been Ulyanov, whose mission was the following: capture the Romanovs and extort from the Czar the infamous letter that eventually arrived, after an "adventurous" trip, in Berlin. The letter, which can be seen and even read (if one reads French) in the Pergamon Museum, in which the Czar of all the Russians, in sentences penned with a trembling hand, asks the Teutonic Kaiser for help. In response to the request made in the letter, the Germans, taking advantage of the confused state of affairs created by Lenin and his men, landed with lightning speed and took Saint Petersburg overnight. Obeying the orders of the Czar, who now found himself backed into the corner of his study in the narrowest sense of the phrase, the Russian forces stood idly by as the Germans marched into the city. Nicholas II, in the meantime, signed a treaty of eternal friendship with his savior, Emperor Wilhelm. No one in his right mind would attack a German-Russian alliance. And indeed no one did.

This alliance later determined power relations on the entire planet, and indeed the events outlined above are still the basis for the world order today. The balance of political power has remained essentially unchanged since 1914. The German-Russian convention has frozen the historical moment, created a status quo that will last for centuries, and erected an obstacle to any significant change. Life has become as if God had taken a photograph of a single moment of creation and then created each day on the basis of this single photograph over and over again, until the end of time.

But that is only one side of the coin. My father believes that the world order became a fixed, petrified order because by the early 1900s, a situation had developed in which every event, every political move, every economic initiative was controlled by three gigantic secret services and two tiny ones. From the background, of course. Much as Ulyanov's machinations in Saint Petersburg were guided by mysterious and invisible German forces, and much as the consolidation of the internal crisis that had been raging since the mid-1910s in Russia was orchestrated by the same invisible hands, so everything else was shaped by shadowy organizations in the

background. And most certainly not exclusively by the Germans. The other great powers did not stand idly by and watch.

And things are hardly any different today. For roughly a hundred and ten years, real power on this humble earth has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon-French, German and Japanese, and Ottoman and Monarchy intelligence networks. And recently, the Russian Okhrana has been catching up with them and is claiming with increasing vehemence its slice of the global cake. These intelligence services have a decisive influence on the world economy. Their every move is intended to ensure stability and immobility. Their primary interest is to maintain the status quo that has existed since 1914 at all costs, and to this end, they are hampering technical progress and smothering mankind's creative imagination. In the end, over the course of the past century, the human race has been reduced to a petty, dull-witted mass. My father goes so far as to claim that humanity has not reached its full potential specifically because of mass manipulation by the secret services, and in his view, had we followed a different historical path, we would be more creative and more efficient in many areas. One of the examples he cites in support of this is space travel. He believed that, had our race not played from the score written by these people in the shadows, we would have conquered the final frontier long ago, and we would have bases on the moon. In his view, the only reason why spacecraft as a technical achievement have not been created was that there was nothing apart from dreams and fantasy to compel researchers to transform this idea into a reality, and there was certainly nothing that would have compelled states to fund it, since competition among them, which for millennia had always been fierce, had, in the course of roughly a century, become rather half-hearted (at least on the surface and in the minds of the masses). According to my father, competition is a fundamental prerequisite for technical progress. The more rivalry is reduced, the more technical progress is slowed down. Who cannot see the logic in this? Nature and millennia of history before 1914 provide millions of examples in support of this conclusion...

Un

BROKEN

father figures

So, These Were the Fathers...

The novel interweaves two parallel narratives. One tells the story of Bálint's divorce and how his life goes downhill after his marriage falls apart. The other is about how Bálint's daughter, Alexa tries to rekindle her relationship with her father ten years later. We learn Bálint's life story and the events leading up to the failure of his marriage through diary entries which he writes as part of his therapy sessions. From these stream-of-consciousness scribbles, we are informed that Bálint and his ex-wife, Barbara, had had very different family backgrounds, and their different upbringings had shaped their different views on life and their different aspirations. Apart from the class differences, there was also a cultural chasm between them. Bálint is perfectly content with his job as a site manager, but Barbara has a degree in international relations, and this makes Bálint feel pressured and unsuccessful whenever he is compelled to confront the cultural chasm that separates their friend groups.

Parallel to Bálint's struggle to take control of his life again after the divorce, Alexa is also on a quest to mend herself. Though she distances herself somewhat from her father, we also see her interactions with her mother, grandmother, and dance instructor, and we come to realize that, though Bálint blames himself for the fact that his daughter is the child of a broken home, it was in fact the women in Alexa's life who traumatized her and who therefore are present to her, even in their absence, as controlling inner voices that still influence her every decision. Furthermore, these women have managed to pass on their resentments and their senses of failure to Alexa, and this is where the origins of most of her problems lie.

Éva Veronika Kalapos's new novel takes the reader on two diverging journeys of self-discovery which ultimately reunite. It paints an engaging picture of the scars that are left behind in both parents and children after a divorce, and it reminds us how difficult it can be to reconnect with and forgive those who, even if unintentionally, have created a toxic environment around us.

author
Éva Veronika Kalapos

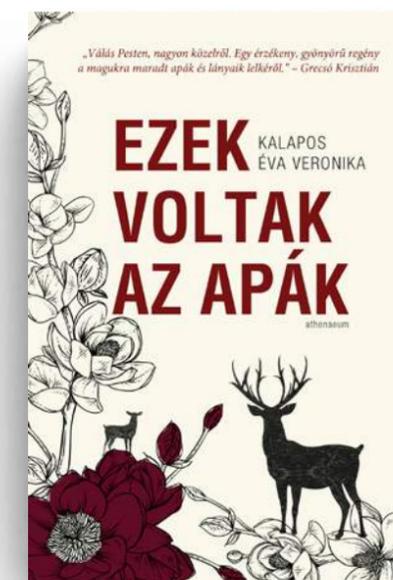
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Éva Veronika KALAPOŠ

was born in Nyíregyháza in 1983. She started her career as an author of young adult novels, but her last two books were written for an adult readership. She also works as a journalist and playwright.

Pop music on in the background all day long, even during dinner, which might as well be chicken wings, because why not? You're kidding, Bálint protested. For Christmas dinner? Alright dad, then we'll make some potato salad to go with it. They put plenty of onion in the salad, Bálint tried to save the evening with a cake shaped like a Christmas tree, but it tasted kind of like paper, the sugar frosting alone was sickeningly sweet. Alexa ate two slices, the dough was so thick and heavy that it didn't leave any traces on her lips, just a few stray crumbs on the plate, don't tell mom I ate two. It's all good, Bálint said, it's Christmastime, the sports doctor said you can lighten up a little at Christmastime. But mom's trying to get me to stick to my diet, she replied, wiping her fingers one by one with the napkins decorated with smiling Santas. We even made sugar-free gingerbread cookies. They were good, but I ate a few too many, and then I had a little diarrhea, she said, blushing. It occurred to Bálint that his daughter had just turned eleven. Soon, she would be twelve. Then thirteen, fourteen,

a teenager. Two years earlier, he had helped her clean her bottom up when she had gotten diarrhea from the artificial sweeteners, you shouldn't eat too much of that stuff either, the pediatricist had told them with a mildly reproachful tone. Alexa had nodded slowly, Bálint had wanted to give the good lady doctor a firm shake. Alexa couldn't eat hardly any of the stuff her peers were always wolfing down. She had more self-restraint than most adults. Let the poor kid act like a kid once in a while! They never figured out why her intestines were so sensitive, the tests didn't reveal anything, she just always felt sick to her stomach when she ate fatty stuff or sugary stuff. Bálint almost pushed the plate with the cake on it away from her out of habit, but then he pulled his hand back. The experts can all shut their fucking traps, it's Christmas, after all. Alexa noticed the gesture, her eyes brightened, and for a minute, it was as if the two of them were suddenly closer again, but then she shook her head, thanks, but I don't want more, two slices was plenty.

Neither one of them had any interest in the presents. Though Bálint had spent a lot of time tromping the sidewalks to get just the right thing, he had vaguely recalled that she had wanted some boardgame about empire building, but he hadn't been able to remember which one, so he had bought all three of the games in that genre. Alexa had let out some squeaks of excitement and then had diligently studied the rules for each of the three, but alas, all of them were for three players or more. As a show of thanks, she wrapped her arms around his neck and gave

him a kiss on both cheeks, and the scripted gesture tied Bálint's stomach up in knots, he took her head in his hands and kissed her brow several times. Ow, she said, laughing, and she pulled free of his embrace, crawled back to the other side of the rug, and sat down, leaving one leg stretched out, just the sock at the tip of her toes touching her father's foot. Bálint tried to concentrate on those few centimeters where their skin was touching, if through cotton socks, and he knew that later he would remember this moment of the evening, not the kisses. He examined the beautiful fountain pen she had given him. Alexa clearly had not enough money to buy something that fancy. Her mother must have given her the extra. You can use it to sign contracts, she said, clip it to your shirt pocket, oh wait, there's nothing on it you can use to clip it, and maybe you don't have a shirt pocket, then just put it in your bag, and all the while she continued folding up the shiny wrapping paper and tucking it under the tree. From afar, the paper looked as if there were still presents inside it. Bálint put the pen back in its black, velvet pouch, thank you, he said, but his voice sounded unfamiliar. Alexa looked up. Thank you, he said again, a big smile, it'll work nicely, it's really quite lovely. I didn't have anything inscribed in it, like "for you, dad," or anything like that, Alexa said in an uncertain voice, it would have looked sort of strange. No, no, Bálint said, shaking his head, it's perfect as is, would be silly to scribble something into such a lovely fountain pen. Alexa gave a relieved nod and then folded up the last piece of wrapping paper.



Infected Monstrum

The first half of Böszörményi Márton's novel is told by a first-person narrator who gives a first-hand account of the after-effects of a cell phone game that was wildly popular in a small town in rural Hungary. The game, *Infected Monstrum*, went viral on a special brand of phone that was sold on the black market, and it quickly divided the residents into gamers and non-player characters (NPCs). The former took photos of the latter and created their avatars. The stronger these avatars became in the game, the weaker the NPCs became in real life. Gamers are portrayed in the novel both as zombies, who are mindlessly taking pictures of strangers, and vampires who suck the life out their victims. Ultimately, the police issued a lockdown and shut the game down due to the large number of fatalities.

The second half of the novel is told by a third-person narrator who recounts the story of a writer named Baltazár who arrives in the town thirty years later to find out if the reports about the game were true. He soon realizes that the key to this mystery is the first narrator of the novel, so he starts investigating all the places he used to visit, from the old-school video rental store that has VHS recordings of how NPCs were tortured by the gamers to the pet shop of horrors where he worked. During his investigation, Baltazár meets the first narrator's neighbor, Gibraltar, who tells him the exact same story that he told Baltazar's person of interest thirty years ago. The novel utilizes Gibraltar as a metafictional figure, because whenever he appears, the rift between reality and weirdness in the novel shrinks.

Infected Monstrum offers a clever satire on video game addiction, pandemic lockdowns, and the newfound popularity of analog media in millennial and Gen-Z culture while also continuously alluding to horror classics from Steven King's novels to *The Ring* and *Twin Peaks*.

author
Márton Böszörményi

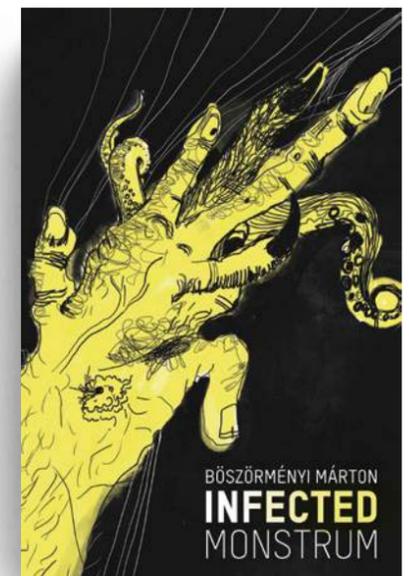
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Márton BÖSZÖRMÉNYI

was born in Dunaújváros in 1989. His style of writing was influenced by classic horror stories, South American postmodernism, and new weird fiction. *Infected Monstrum* is his second novel.

The pet shop was just a few streets down from Baltazár’s apartment. It took them no more than ten minutes to get there. When they walked in, they were immediately struck by the overwhelming smells of the animals. Pali quietly said something about how he would never be able to work in a place like that, because he had a really good sense of smell, and he wouldn’t be able to stand the stench for very long.

“Can I help you?” a salesgirl wearing glasses said, walking over to them. Her name, according to the plastic tag pinned to her chest, was Ivett.

“Thanks, we’re just looking around for the moment,” Pali replied.

“My wife’s name is Ivett,” Baltazár said, but he immediately regretted it when he saw the girl’s cheeks turn red and the smile suddenly vanish from her face.

“I’m so sorry,” he stammered. “I didn’t mean to be rude!”

“No problem,” the girl said with a forced laugh. “Just let me know if you need any help.”

She then quickly turned on her heels and disappeared somewhere at the back of the store.

“Fuck,” Baltazár said to Pali. “No idea why I said that.”

“What exactly are we doing here anyway?” Pali asked. His voice had a ring of impatience in it.

“You remember, the novel I was reading, about *Infected Monstrum*? The narrator worked in a place like this.”

“And?”

“Well maybe this is the place he worked!”

“I see. So then...”

Baltazár was watching the guinea pigs racing nervously around the terrarium when suddenly he noticed a few colorful sheets of paper with pictures on them under the wood shavings. He leaned closer to the glass to get a better look at them.

“Pali!”

“Yes?”

“Look!” He pointed at the photographs. “Do you think those pictures were taken here, in this store?”

“Wait,” Pali said, and he leaned closer to the glass too. “Well, maybe. I don’t know. But it certainly looks like they are pictures of a place like this. Not quite sure...”

Baltazár didn’t wait for him to finish. He rushed towards the back of the store, where Ivett had disappeared a few moments earlier. It didn’t take him long to find her. She was feeding the snakes.

“Excuse me, very sorry to bother you,” he said cautiously. He didn’t want to startle or alarm her.

“Yes, can I help?” Ivett said, turning slightly to one side when she saw him. Her face seemed stern.

“I have kind of a strange favor to ask. There are some sheets of paper with pictures on them in the guinea pig terrarium. Could you take them out for me?”

Ivett looked at him wide-eyed.

“I know it’s an odd thing to ask, I just want to look at the pictures a little. And I know that sounds pretty weird too, believe me.”

“I suppose there’s no reason I couldn’t,” Ivett replied after she had taken a moment or two to gather her thoughts. “Just give me a sec.”

She then walked over to the terrarium and took the wire top off and started digging around with her other hand in the wood shavings.

“Do you want to see all of them?”

“I only need the ones that have pictures on them,” Baltazár replied.

Ivett took them out one by one and handed them to Baltazár.

“Thank you very much,” Baltazár muttered as he examined the pictures. Ivett looked at Pali, who was holding his palms up in incomprehension, frowning, and shaking his head.

“Ivett,” Baltazár said, turning to the girl, “am I right that the pet shop in these pictures in this very pet shop that we are standing in right now?”

Ivett took a quick glance at the wrinkled sheets of paper, but she seemed to know the answer to the question before even looking.

“Yes,” she replied. “They are from an old catalogue. “One of the owners thought it would be good advertising for the store.”

“Then I was right,” Baltazár said, scratching his chin. “And do you perhaps know who this person is?”

He pointed at the image of a man standing behind the parrot cages in one of the pictures. From the way he was standing, you could tell that he had not intended to be in the picture, but you could clearly see part of his face. He was about thirty years old, pale, with a sunken face. He looked sad and a little startled.

“No,” Ivett said after studying the image. “Possibly a customer.”

“Yes,” Baltazár replied, “possibly, but he seems to be wearing the same gray shirt that you’re wearing. That’s the store uniform, isn’t it?”

“I see, yes, it might be. But I don’t really know. This catalogue was made thirty or forty years ago.”

“Is there by any chance anyone working here now who was working here back then?”

“The boss has been working here longer than anyone else,” Ivett replied. “Maybe she would know who he was. But I’m afraid she’s not in today.”

“I see,” Baltazár said, shaking his head with disappointment. “That’s too bad. Will she be in anytime in the next few days?”

“Yes, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. She always works on weekends. Frankly, I don’t know how she manages.”

“Do you mind if I take this page from the old catalogue?” Baltazár asked. “I’ll drop in sometime and ask your boss if maybe she knows who this man is.”

“Certainly, take it,” Ivett said with a laugh. “The guinea pigs should be alright without it.”

“Thank you very much,” Baltazár said. “Then I think my friend and I will be going.”

“Really?” Pali asked. “That’s why we came here?”

“Yes, Pali, that’s why. Goodbye, Ivett. Have a nice evening.”

“Goodbye.”

“I wanted to check out the spiders,” Pali grumbled, but he turned and ambled after his friend, who had already left the store.

One
man's
trash
...

Happy People

András Toroczky's novel introduces us to the everyday-life of garbage men. Mocking the fashionable genre of sociography in contemporary Hungarian literature, the book makes use of objective narration which mediates the characters' voices in free indirect speech, including the voice of its unnamed or, better put, misnamed protagonist (because all of his coworkers call him Jócó, even though he repeatedly explains that this is not his name). "Jócó," who as a typical twentysomething does not know what he wants to do with his life and revolts against his father by becoming a garbage man, is often focalized in the text, and we see his coworkers through his eyes. From his perspective, the other garbage men are characterized by their love for cars, booze, fishing, and oral sex. They speak to avoid the deafening noise that the garbage trucks make. It is therefore rather ironic that, in the end, the protagonist is hospitalized because of an ear infection...

On the one hand, *Happy People* is the story of how "Jócó," an obsessive germophobe, finds his place in the micro-society of garbage men. His coworkers seem to have a unique view on the world, since they deal with other people's trash day in, day out. They have their own special language and knowledge of things, and this is why "Jócó" has to look up most of the things that are discussed at work when he gets home. Furthermore, they also possess an idiosyncratic know-how, the cultural techniques of waste disposal. On the other hand, the novel presents the dynamics of a stigmatized group of people who react to stereotypes with stereotypes. The narrative suggests that garbage men frequently make misogynistic, racist, and antisemitic comments in part because of their internalized shame, a shame they suffer because the work they do is seen as one of the lowest in the hierarchy of social prestige. András Toroczky's novel twists the theme of the "superfluous man" when its protagonist decides that being a garbage man is not just a temporary gig, and the narrative shows how essential workers who might feel disposable are in fact indispensable.

author
András Toroczky

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Happy People

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Magvető

year of publication
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number of pages
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András TOROCZKAY

was born in Budapest in 1981. He is a writer, musician, and film critic. *Happy People* is his fourth book.

The boy leapt down from back of the garbage truck to guide the driver, but Gyugyu stopped him.

“Don’t leave enough space for a fucking ladybug to fit between the slate roof and the bottom of the truck,” he said, and all the while his dog growled quietly and ominously. But maybe the boy was just imagining it, what with the hunger pains and all. And then, when the boy tried to go, Gyugyu said it again.

“Not enough space for a single fucking ladybug. Got it?”

The boy stood with his back to the paper, looked at the iron grating, which was a little dented in (clearly this stunt had gone wrong a couple times before). He swallowed.

To guide someone driving a garbage truck you have to be a real man. Determined, ready to take on the world. This boy was neither.

Gyugyu started backing up. Old Bandi watched the boy lift his arm and gesture hesitantly, indicating to the driver that he could keep coming, keep coming. The back of the enormous truck was

getting ever closer to the bent metal grating. Just four centimeters left. Then three. Then hardly two before truck met iron. The boy’s nerves couldn’t stand it. He doubted his own strength, but he still shouted at the wild beast to stop, which as if by some miracle came to a halt at the wave of his hand. Gyugyu got out to inspect. The boy swallowed again and awaited the verdict. Gyugyu looked at him with a scornful glance. Old Bandi said not a word. Just lit up another vanilla Domingo.

Gyugyu, of course, was not satisfied. He wanted the truck closer. He got back in. He was not going to take a single superfluous step, he said. The boy later realized that Gyugyu was right. Very right. The truck was millimeters from the iron grating. They were almost touching, almost kissing. The boy shuddered as he thought of how cold the two pieces of cold iron must have been on that autumn morning when they almost clinked together. They did not like each other’s touch. It wouldn’t work.

Gyugyu again got out of the car. He was already putting on his work gloves. He gave a satisfied laugh.

A kid then showed up driving a forklift and wearing the store uniform. A cheerful klutz in a Real Madrid baseball cap.

“You’re not in the right spot,” he shouted.

The air froze. The smiles faded from everyone’s faces, only the klutz kept his self-assured grin. The disappointed Gyugyu debated with him for a minute or two, but he gave up quickly just for the sake of keeping the peace.

“We’re never in the right place,” Old Bandi said, shaking his head.

Gyugyu climbed back into the beast, took his seat at the steering wheel, and changed gears.

The boy later got used to it. The drivers for the trucks that brought the goods and the store managers were always changing things up. Gyugyu would grumble to himself about how they were all a bunch of idiot yokels, but he still did as he was told in the end. He parked, and he was much further away. Several centimeters. So it seemed the yokels were the bosses after all around here. And if they were idiot yokels, then who were the garbage men who had to take orders from them, the boy thought.

“Let’s grab some coffee,” Bandi said. “This’ll take at least two hours.”

When he had first come to Korall, the boy hadn’t realized that if Bandi said two hours, it would usually be two and a half or three. So much paper. You can never know. And he also hadn’t

realized that Gyugyu was right. Every centimeter counted.

How can such a dishearteningly ugly store be so popular? The boy was always amazed by that.

“In addition to all the various items one needs around the house, customers will also find a butcher’s shop, a clothing boutique, a textile store, a bakery, a vegetable stand, a newspaper stand with various toys and other items. Outside the building, a soft-serve ice cream stand has opened, where customers can also purchase chimney cakes, and there is a tobacconist’s by the main entrance. One often finds grandmas and grandpas selling seasonal things and wrestling with flowers, vegetables, or fruits. In December, customers will even find firewood for sale.

Sometimes, even people from smaller towns and villages will come here to do grocery shopping for the week because the prices are even lower than than at Tesco. They are careful about keeping things tidy and clean, though sometimes they are not successful, through no fault of their own.” The boy read all this on their website, for Korall had, in addition to its own beggar, its own website too. How can a store be so inhumanly boring and mean at the same time, the boy thought. Perhaps its meanness lay in its boringness. He thought of the little grocery store he had seen in flames as a child.

Old man Sándor, or the professor, as the boy thought of him, was sixty years old. Deep furrows in the skin on his face, like sand dunes. Life had crumpled him up, the boy thought, like a poorly done homework assignment. From day one, he had watched him closely, repeatedly while he stacked crates or drove or ate a pastry, and after a few hours, he knew every hair on the tip of his nose, every crater, every scar. He didn’t speak. He remained silent.

The boy thought for a whole day about who it was he resembled, and then he realized: Louis de Funès. Who still remembered Louis de Funès? The boy belonged to perhaps the last generation to whom the name might mean something, who wouldn’t think he was some obscure neo-Marxist philosopher. If the boy hadn’t watched so much television with his grandfather, perhaps he wouldn’t know either. He always remembered an interview with a journalist who had been lucky enough to talk with the famous actor. He had said that when they were on air, he kept playing the clown, he threw himself entirely into the role, but when the performance came to an end, his face changed, he grew stern, serious, and he fell into a state of deep depression.

Of
Social
and
MEDICAL
routines



ZSÓFIA CZAKÓ

41

Heartbeat

Zsófia Czakó's second book tells the story of a miscarriage. It does not, however, center on why the miscarriage took place. Rather, it contextualizes the traumatic experience of losing a baby. It paints a bleak picture of a hospital ward where the narrator is taken so that doctors can remove a dead fetus from her body and the rural town where her neighbors try to encourage her with trite clichés such as “time heals all wounds” and “the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.” All she sees, however, is that most of the women around her have it so much easier when it comes to having a baby, with the exception of her best friend, who is also struggling to get pregnant after several attempts at in vitro fertilization. Her perceptions shift, however, when she is scheduled for dilatation and evacuation and has to spend a few days in hospital room “G,” a designation used because of the large number of pregnant Roma or “Gypsy” women who come to the hospital. Here, she is the only patient with naturally blonde hair and white skin, and she is also “the only woman who can afford the luxury of crying.”

Though fundamentally a first-person narrative of personal trauma, *Heartbeat* also addresses social issues of race, gender, and loss with empathy and bitter (self-)irony. It portrays burnt-out nurses and doctors for whom apathy is a defense mechanism against the emotional responses they might have when dealing with patients who are hoping for healthy pregnancies or seeking abortions. It also offers moving if also troubling portraits of the fates of Roma girls and women, some of whom are almost regular visitors at the ward. For both groups, doctors and patients, the removal of a fetus has become a routine operation in every sense of the word. Hence the true horror of the narrator's experience. On top of losing a baby, she also realizes that the term slaughterhouse is not just a metaphor favored by religious discourse for wards like this. The patients in room “G” are indeed treated like animals waiting for the slaughter. Dilatation and evacuation are operations that seem as uncompassionate and routinized as meat processing.

author
Zsófia Czakó

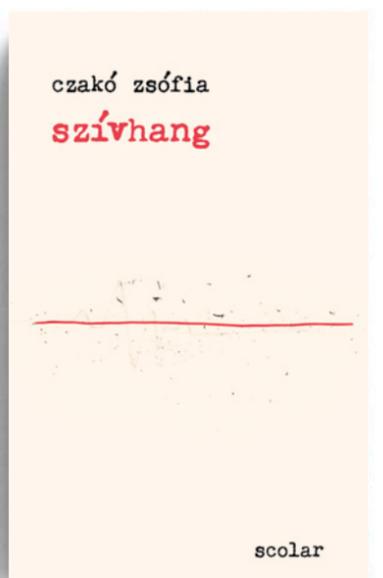
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Heartbeat

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Zsófia CZAKÓ

was born in Győr in 1987. She is a writer and tour guide. Her literary debut, *Not Polite to Work in the Garden on Good Friday*, came out in 2019.

On the first floor, I waited among big-bellied Gypsy girls while Lajos bought water from a vending machine, as Doctor Gábor had told him to do. When I looked down the corridor, I saw that none of the women had husbands, none of them had anyone accompanying them at all, I was the only one in such a privileged position, only I had a husband who enthusiastically hovered around me, then took a solemn seat next to me and asked what else he could bring. I stroked my belly. No visible sign of any pregnancy yet, but sitting in front of an ultrasound room, I felt entitled to this theatrical gesture. A rude woman suddenly threw open the door and called out names, five names, including mine. I jumped up and got ahead of three of the other girls, and then I had to wait in a tiny dressing room for the examination.

A fat Gypsy girl went in first. We could hear the baby's heartbeat from the dressing room. I got excited, incredibly excited. This is really happening. And it's happening to me, to me and my husband, my love, my best friend, the one I chose and am happy with.

Thirty-three years old, no cramps, no fears, everything at the right time, maybe a tad late, but I'm here now, and I adore Lajos, and soon I will hear our child's heartbeat. In a moment or two. Too bad he can't come in with me, because I have to go now, they're calling me. I get goose bumps when I lie down on the bed. It's going to be a bit cold, the doctor doing the exam said, and then she put the gel on my belly, the gel that I'd only seen on pregnant women's bellies in hospital shows when they go in for an ultrasound. The doctor, who I thought was quite nice and pretty, was sitting on my right, and I followed her gaze to the monitor. Good lord. I saw darkness and tiny white islands. The room was silent. I smiled and looked expectantly at the grayish-black spots, the woman's face, her beautiful blonde hair, her brown eyes, her hands, her wedding ring, my stomach, the machine. Which little island was my child on the black and white flickering screen, in my womb. I'd had several gynecologists tell me before during a vaginal ultrasound what I should be looking at, where my ovaries are, how thick the back wall of my uterus is, and how strangely large it all is. But I never actually knew what was what on that blotchy screen. I just waited to be told everything was fine, you can get dressed. Now for the first time I concentrated, for the first time I wanted to see my womb, to understand it, because now, for the first time, I would see my child, our child, something of this child, an early version, something alive. I vowed to give my pussy a good look when I got home. Réka and her fancy friends in the capital had told me that it was important so many times. To make a connection with my genitals, they said, and I had said right, right, but I hadn't cared, but now, with the ultrasound scanner looking at my uterus, everything seemed

important. I had to prepare for pregnancy, I had to take everything they said seriously, even if it was nonsense, I had to get to know my you-know-what up close, we had to become friends, like the pea and the pod, I'll get a mirror, spread my legs, and we'll talk, I'll tell it stories, and it will tell me that I have to push my child out here, or rather there. I'll be focused and strong, because I'm responsible for someone other than myself now, we'll be a family, we'll have a child. Is it a boy or a girl?

"So, am I pregnant?" I jokingly asked the doctor, who hadn't said a word in the meantime. I smiled at her to show her what a nice, sweet person I am, because as the slow and silent seconds passed, I was beginning to fear her. I was scared of her silence, her furrowed brow, and I felt the room getting colder, my arms were cold, though the summer heat outside was sweltering, but she was still moving the head of the ultrasound and staring at the screen. She had had her hand on the instrument for so long that it seemed as if an arm had grown out of my belly. I had to pee because of the pressure, and I no longer saw her as kind and beautiful, no longer blonde or brown-eyed, because her head and face had disappeared from the room, only the ultrasound remained, the blackness, the emptiness and the silence, and then I spoke again, quietly, much more quietly than before. I asked her to say something. It was a surprising voice, my own voice, which I hardly recognized, because it had lost all determination, it was the voice of someone I had never met before, a thin, tinkling voice, fearful and lost. She took the head of the ultrasound off my stomach and the monitor went black. I heard her speak.

"There's no heartbeat."

The Petőfi Literary Fund announces its renewed "literary export" application

Aimed at strengthening Hungarian literature and the presence of classical and contemporary Hungarian authors abroad, the application package of grants offers opportunities to Hungarian and international actors in eight different fields.

The Petőfi Literary Fund has opened a new round of calls for proposals for the first half of 2023 to support the creation of translations and presentations of Hungarian literature abroad. The eight different types of applications in the portfolio, which was developed several years ago, contribute to the presentation of Hungarian literature in foreign languages and beyond our borders. The new calls are aimed at both Hungarian and foreign players: in addition to Hungarian academic translators, fiction writers and literary figures, they also include Hungarian publishers and agencies, foreign book and magazine publishers, theatres, theatre companies and translators of Hungarian literature into foreign languages.

We hereby inform our applicants that in the year 2023, Petőfi Literary Fund (hereinafter: PLF) in cooperation with the Foundation for Hungarian Culture (hereinafter: MKA) has restructured its system of translation and production support for publishers for the following calls for proposals:

1. Translation grant for foreign publishing houses 2023/1,
2. Production grant for foreign publishing houses 2023/1,
3. Sample translation grant for agencies and Hungarian publishers 2023/1,
4. Translation grant for foreign theatres 2023.

The up-to-date application structure aims to establish a system of long-term cooperation between the MKA, the PLF and the applicant publishers. In a simplified system for publishers, a letter of support will be issued to the successful applicants, replacing the previous cooperation agreement together with the documents to be submitted. The simplification of the process will make the cooperation between PLF and the partners smoother.

A renewed application form, complete with declarations, and an online data request form had been created for these calls. The application form should now also be sent by post to the postal address indicated in the call for proposals. In accordance with the rules of the tender management system, applicants must also attach a 'de minimis' declaration as an annex to the call for proposals.

Foreign publishers can get help with the translation and publication of fiction or academic prose by Hungarian authors through the **Translation and Production Support Grants**. The Petőfi Literary Fund attaches particular importance to promoting the publication of illustrated books (storybooks, photo albums, comic books, etc.), and therefore has a special category for applicants with such works.

The calls for proposals are available at the following links:
<https://plf.hu/grants-calls>



Translation grant (2023/1),

Budget: EUR 70,000

Deadline for applications: 31.05.2023.

Production grant (2023/1),

Budget: EUR 14,000

Deadline for applications: 31.05.2023.

By translating longer excerpts of classic or contemporary literature, Hungarian publishers and agencies can expand their foreign language portfolio and make their foreign operations more efficient and successful.

Sample translation grant (2023/1),

Budget: HUF 5,000,000

Application deadline: 31.05.2023

One of the exciting elements of the scheme is to encourage the performance of gems of contemporary and classical Hungarian drama in foreign languages. Theatres, companies and performing groups based abroad or in Hungary but performing in a foreign language that apply with a translation of a Hungarian drama undertake to perform the translated play.

Translation grant for theatres (2023),

Budget: HUF 2,500,000

Application deadline: 31.05.2023

The structure of the following calls is based on the previous call structure:

1. Sample Translation Competition for Emerging Translators of Hungarian Literature 2023/1,
2. Sample Translation Call for Experienced Translators of Hungarian Literature 2023/1,
3. Showtime! - literary transfer competition 2023,
4. Valéria Dienes Non-Fiction Prose Translation competition 2023/1.

Participating in our sample translation tenders for translators helps literary translators find publishers more easily on the international stage by translating longer passages of classic or contemporary literature.

- <https://plf.hu/grants-calls/mintaforditasi-palyazat-a-magyar-irodalom-tapasztalt-forditoi-szamara-20231.html>,
Application deadline: 15 April 2023.

In addition to the texts, the PLF also helps authors and literary figures to present themselves internationally. - **Showtime! - literary transfer competition** helps authors, translators, literary figures and cultural actors who write in Hungarian and are invited to participate in an event, festival, book launch, writer-reader meeting, theatre performance, academic conference or promote Hungarian literature abroad through their own productions. In keeping with the practice of organising this type of event, the tender is open from the date of publication until 14 December 2023 and the evaluation process is ongoing.

- <https://plf.hu/grants-calls/mutasd-magad-irodalomi-transzfer-palyazat-2023.html>
Application deadline: continuous

The "Valéria Dienes Non-Fiction Prose Translation competition" supports high-quality academic translation from foreign languages into Hungarian. The Agency invites applications from talented young translators for the translation of a work in a foreign language that the translator considers to be important and popular, but which has not yet been published in Hungarian. The work to be translated can be a contemporary or classic non-fiction article, an excerpt of a work or a complete work, in any field of science.

- <https://plf.hu/grants-calls/dienes-valeria-ertekezo-proza-forditoi-palyazat-20231.html>,
Application deadline: 30 June 2023.

More information:

Web: www.plf.hu

Facebook: www.facebook.com/petofiliteraryfund

Email: sajto@petofugynokseg.hu, applications@plf.hu

“

*„No one should
be walking
around in a dead
man’s shoes.”*

Ildikó Szilágyi-Nagy

”