NEW HUNGARIAN

2025

FICTION

PETŐFI CULTURAL AGENCY

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fantasy

The Fall of Htrae

Imre Bartók is one of the most prominent Hungarian authors of his generation. His unique writing style combines erudition and stylistic complexity with a flair for popular genres. Given their metaphorical density, philosophical depth, frequent intertextual references, and narrative self-reflectivity, his novels definitely belong among works of so-called high literature, while they are also heavily influenced by speculative fiction. *The Fall of Htrae*, his first young adult novel, is a fantasy that borrows from the tradition of *The Lord of the Rings*, recounting the quest taken by an impudent, whimsical elf, an enigmatic female troll, and a kind-hearted gardener orc. The travel companions attempt to find the other members of their communities, who have been all taken away by a fearful, ungraspable alien power. Over the course of their journey, it becomes more and more clear that it is not only their villages that have been erased. The whole planet of Htrae is threatened by an apocalyptic force. Bartók builds a fantasy world in which life takes breathtakingly rich and diverse forms. Htrae (this name is simply "Earth" spelled backwards) is populated by odd and enchanting creatures, such as the dry snails, the hammerhead herons, and the fern buffalos, who all might disappear due to the impending catastrophe. The vivid description of the planet's imaginary flora and fauna display the poetic power of Bartók's prose, which manages to counterbalance the sense of loss and fragility with moments of humor, sometimes grotesque, sometimes gentle and soothing. The narrative, with its elusive tone and constant shifts in perspective, transcends genre boundaries and refuses to offer neatly wrapped solutions, leaving the travelers' fears and questions unresolved. What is the significance of the sign carved above the cave of the chronicler, the first human being they have ever met? How can "Gnothi seauton" mean "know your friends" in ancient elfish and "know yourself" in a human language? Is there, perhaps, a connection between the two interpretations, as Zgru, the orc suggests? *The Fall of Htrae* may be intended first and foremost for members of the younger generation, but it will still engage, haunt, and challenge readers who left their teenage years behind long ago.

AUTHOR
Imre Bartók

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The Fall of Htrae

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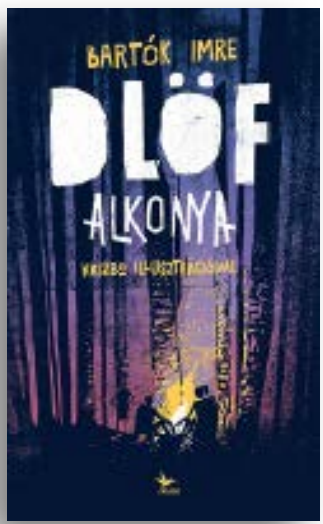

Fotó: Tibor Noé Kiss

IMRE BARTÓK

Imre Bartók was born in Budapest in 1985. He is a writer, translator, and essayist. He won the Baumgarten Prize and the Horváth Péter Literary Scholarship in 2020. He has published seven novels and several other books. *The Fall of Htrae* is his first young adult novel.

"What is it that is quite surprising, a little funny, and very alarming? Twelve quargs at the county ball."

Goblin riddle

Zgru gazed at the blackened branches drooping above his head. They seemed to be trying to tell him something about his fate while the cool breezes tickled the back of his neck. Through the little gaps in the fluttering foliage he could see egrets flying in formation above, their wings cutting sharp shapes against the blue sky, and as he watched them, the sudden flood of ordeals left him overwhelmed.

Who ever thought it was worth bothering to measure time when there is so much of it in the first place? He felt as if he had only closed his eyes for a moment or two, but when he had woken up, the sun had been shining differently above him, though it was true that in that mist-shrouded swamp it was impossible to tell what time of day it was. There was hardly any difference, deep in the heart of that dim, boggy marsh, between a sunny morning and a moonlit night.

"Onk?"

But there was now only a shallow print in the mud where Onk had been lying. The swamp had almost completely reclaimed the spot where the troll had rested his weary legs.

Zgru struggled to his feet. He was unsteady, shaking like the dreamcatchers that their neighbor Zabr had put in his window to protect against Jakku-Floigh, the beaver demon.

"Onk!"

The ground, the trees, even the air around him swallowed his voice, but the leaves in the canopy above were dry enough to echo his cry with their trembling. It is perhaps not at all a matter of

coincidence that trolls are given deep, sonorous names. They may well need them in those vast, cavernous halls. Zgru had always thought that there were similarities between the names given to orcs and the names given to trolls. They are short, and the sounds were similar, though when he thought about it, he realized that trolls names are always open, in contrast with the terseness of orc names. He thought of the orcs who lived on their street. Kvilh'ag, Huzzt, Dromm, M'kasz. All names that might be whispered by their bearers in narrow passageways in front of a secret door, or an altar. But what about his own name? With a name like that, was he perhaps an honorary troll? He would ask Onk. Once he found him.

"Where are you?"

Still no reply, but then he heard the sound of rippling water. Of course! There must be a stream or a creek nearby.

He started off, wondering if anyone back home would believe him if he told them what he had just seen. But what had he seen? And who would he tell? He searched for words, but how could he describe the horror, how could he find words to describe the whole thing if there was nothing to compare it with?

After a few minutes, the air had become a touch less damp. Soon, he was treading on solid ground instead of trudging through mud. He had finally left the swamp behind him and entered the neighboring forest. As he looked around, he saw what looked like burnt trees all around him, but how could a forest in the middle of a swamp catch fire? Soot everywhere, the etchings left by flames. The signs of the last judgment inscribed on the trees. Hollow trunks, and branches dried almost to dust.

The forest was dying.

On one branch, a pink millipede marched upward, its sticky legs leaving a little trail behind it.

Perhaps we all leave trails like this on the surface of Dlöf, Zgru thought. Perhaps we leave marks like this on the creatures we meet.

The sound of the flowing water grew stronger. Zgru turned away from the lake. If he was indeed getting closer to a stream or a creek, then surely he had the best chance of finding Onk somewhere on its banks. He was not worried, or at least not too worried.

There were several fallen trees in his way, and since he was plodding along at the base of a small sort of valley, he couldn't go around them, so he climbed over them. He had barely reached the top of the tangled branches when he finally caught sight of Onk.

The troll was soaking his tattered clothes in the strong current of the creek. The stream itself was hardly wider than a chicken's pen, but Onk had found a spot where the sharp rocks narrowed and the water raced by in a white froth. Zgru could only see his back and the soles of his feet, but he noticed the muscles rippling under his thick skin.

Indeed, Zgru was so hypnotized by the motion of Onk's bony, greenish-brown shoulder blades and his lanky shoulders that it took him a moment or two to realize what the troll was doing. It was not the dirt from the journey that Onk was trying to wash from his clothes. It was blood.

Zgru leapt from the top of the pile of fallen trees, but in his haste, his feet got caught between two tree trunks and he ended up falling to the ground below with a loud thump. But he quickly leapt back to his feet.

"Onk!" he shouted. "Didn't you hear me?"

Onk flinched at the sound of his name. He dropped the ragged shirt and turned to Zgru with such a fierce scowl on his face that for a moment Zgru felt as if perhaps he had been the cause of all their troubles.

"Leave me alone!"

Zgru had never heard him talk like that before.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

Onk didn't answer.

"This swamp is full of plants," Zgru said. "Plants that have healing properties. I could find some to..."

"I said leave me alone," Onk snapped, though his voice was a touch gentler now.

Literary

LIES...

It's My Recurring Dream that I Wake up on My Father's Shoulders

"I'm going to change my name." So begins Zsombor Aurél Biró's debut novel. This proclamation is made by the first-person narrator, an aspiring writer, to his father, a famous water polo coach. As it turns out, the protagonist's new name is the same as the author's, and the average Hungarian reader can easily identify the father as the actual sports legend, the former head coach of the women's national water polo team. As a work of autofiction, It's My Recurring Dream that I Wake up on My Father's Shoulder joins an increasingly popular trend in contemporary Hungarian literature, though Biró offers a unique, irresistibly entertaining and refreshing take on the genre. What makes it more imaginative than a typical autobiographic coming-of-age novel is the profoundly metareflective nature of the narrative. The three most important people in Zsombor's life are each given a distinct voice: the worldly yet conservative father, who is stiflingly assertive but also tender-hearted, the mother, who is an esoteric guru, a sex goddess, and also a former criminal, and the smart, sensitive ex-girlfriend. Stepping out of the fictional framework, they address Zsombor as readers of the passages he has written, reproaching him for the lies, the fabrications, and the wild exaggerations. The novel can be also read as a meditation on twenty-first century masculinity from the point of view of a young man, whose upbringing was characterized by contradictory forces: the testosterone-fueled atmosphere of the water polo team and the gentle, nurturing spirit of a Waldorf school. He portrays himself as a highly ambitious, overconfident Wunderkind of the literary world, who is also a sexually inexperienced, nerdy teenage boy, and also as a supportive, feminist boyfriend whose instinctive gestures still have a certain macho air. The clash between Zsombor's various images of himself is enhanced by the ironical tone of the narrative, which playfully combines locker room talk with the mannerisms of the literary scene. The protagonist dismisses his postmodern forefathers with scorn, but the book itself, with its inquiry into the complex relationship between truth and lie, fact and fiction, proves that the legacy of the art of Hungarian writer Péter Esterházy's art lives on.

AUTHOR
Zsombor Aurél Biró

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It's My Recurring Dream that I Wake up on My Father's Shoulders

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ZSOMBOR AURÉL BIRÓ

Zsombor Aurél Biró was born in Budapest in 1998. He graduated from the Filmakademie Wien. He is a writer, screenwriter, and playwright whose play Chewed Up, Spat Out premiered in the Katona József Theatre in 2024. He received the Arany Medáliák "Writer of the Year" prize that year. *It's My Recurring Dream that I Wake up on My Father's Shoulder* is his first book.

That was how the world worked. One miserable kid in each age group for the winners of the future to take out their daily stresses on, and this shared suffering made a team out of us. Boys can play well, but winning, that's for men. So Kenyeres said many times, and we really did beat everyone in the national championships twice. We didn't jump in the pool to play water polo, we jumped in to fight. And the old man knew perfectly well how it worked. He had been the miserable kid when he was a player, the one they dumped all the work on. My dad told me about it later, about how when they had played together on the Eger youth team, they had always made Kenyeres carry the ball bag, made him collect the caps at the end of the games, stuffed his clothes in some locker in the changing room so that he'd have to go buck naked and beg coach for a pair of underwear. So yeah, he started out as a wimp just like me, and then the swimming pool made a man out of him, or drained him of everything and anything human. Question of perspective. What was certain, however, was that after I had finished high school and had been admitted to the writing program and our new coach would criticize every line of everything we wrote week in, week out I was the only one in the class who didn't let anyone stomp on his soul. But I've had dreams about Kenyeres ever since. For me, he'll always be a devil with cloven hooves. Sure, I learned at university that there's no such thing as a one-dimensional character, and you can find little glints of malice and meanness in everyone. The old man's marriage was on the rocks at the time, for instance. His wife had cheated on him a dozen times with their couples therapist, and he was spending his nights on the sofa in the office at the pool. So life had fucked him over pretty good too. I'm terrified to this day that I'll end up like that. And I never even got bullied in the pool. Szolomájer let me be, and Kenyeres never shouted at me. People knew who my father was on Margaret Island, after all, and that meant I had protection. Good afternoon, sir. That's how they greeted him in the changing room. And since you could have gone so far as to say that my hair was

a little curly when I turned ten, they called me by his other name too. So I wasn't stuck being Biró. I could also be Kisbirge. I didn't know anything about any of this at the time. The only thing I noticed was that Kenyeres wasn't talking to me when he called me by my father's nickname. He was talking to the man I was supposed to become. Though I don't want to become anyone here. I don't want anything from the damn swimming pool. At most to dissolve in the water, like chlorine, and sting everyone's eyes, or to run away, escape, hide in the equipment room for a lifetime, where the only thing I'd have to put up with would be the smell of the deflated balls instead of the cigarette and coffee stench of Kenyeres' breath.

Where the seeds of love are sown, joy will blossom. In the mornings, as I trudged into the classroom, limping from muscle pain, I was always greeted by these words on the blackboard. Our teacher would write them in white chalk, and he would always add a little sketch, a Spartan soldier with a sixpack stomach in the pass of Thermopylae, da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, the planets of our solar system. I stared at these words every morning for eight years, and for a while, I thought they were true. But I sowed seeds of love in vain, nothing blossomed in the chlorinated water of the swimming pool, and the only time I ever found any joy during practice was when Kenyeres was throwing his sandals at someone else. They fooled me, I later thought when this little motto came to mind, and I laughed at the others for falling for this idiot talk. I nodded politely when the teachers spoke of tolerance and kindness during Advent, and I didn't have any trouble at all spitting it all back when they had me meet with the school psychologist, all the stuff about how we must never use violence to reach our goals. But I knew the world was not quite so peachy, that a real man has no reason to shed tears until he finds himself standing beside his mother's coffin, and that if I didn't beat a little respect into my teammates and my classmates, they'd beat it into me.

At Waldorf, the word blubbering wasn't even in the dictionary. Blubber is something you find on a whale, our teacher said. But crying, that was fine. It was a physical necessity, like peeing or having breakfast in the morning. Not a sign of weakness. There's nothing wrong with letting your feelings out from time to time. It's not good to keep them all bottled up, believe me. Sports meant something quite different in this school. In PE class, we did more yoga than soccer. Sure, sometimes we'd set up the volleyball net and play a few rounds, but we weren't allowed to keep score. There were no winners and no losers. No tough guys, no weaklings. In our class, even the losers deserved love. You had to find something of value even in them. We didn't know what a failing grade was, or a test for that matter. We didn't see a text book until we were in high school. Instead of analyzing poetry we learned to play the flute or juggle or carve wood, and we had more vacation days in a year than we had English classes. To this day we speak Hunglish. On December thirteenth, Saint Lucy's Day, we would go from building to building in the crumbling communist-built apartment blocks singing "Jing-gell bellz, jing-gell bellz" and telling the people in the apartments that we'd kidnap their daughters if they didn't give us candy. And they'd cancel all our classes the next day because they knew we had spent the night making everyone in the housing blocks miserable with our singing. I still remember the boxes of licorice flying towards me from the eighth floor, as if thrown from the heavens, and the Snickers minis and the bags of gummy bears raining down on my head. But I didn't care how many little bumps I got on my forehead, I was always at the front, holding my open bag on high and grinning I with my mouth stuffed with candy.


A festival of
grotesque secrets

The Fewer Christmases the Better

In his new novel *The Fewer Christmases the Better*, Péter Bognár uses the tone and structure of a crime story, but the tale itself unfolds within a very distinctive metanarrative framework and against the recognizable backdrop of smalltown Hungary today.

The novel's protagonist, who is also one of its narrators, is the leader of a community watch group in a small, unnamed village. As we are informed by the short texts with which the chapters begin, he is Octave, an independent vigilante (or rather, a retired old man) who is trying to catch the perpetrators of a brutal series of attacks on the pets of the village, while also striving to patch together his crumbling marriage and worrying incessantly about who will take his place when he departs this vale of tears. The novel can be read as comedy and crime story, made all the more colorful by Bognár's sometimes morbid language and grotesque imagery, such as the flickering lights of the approaching holiday, which have been arranged to create images of animals mating, as if to add a touch of excitement to dreary everyday life in an out-of-the-way village.

One of the bitterly amusing aspects of the novel is the way in which it touches on themes of recent affairs in Hungary, from widespread irrational distrust of foreigners to corruption in politics. The latter is a particularly interesting element of the novel, since it comes up not only in the plot that unfolds but also on the level of storytelling, as our author himself appears as a minor character in the story, using a brilliantly archaizing style to tell the frame story of writing the novel, in which we discover a wittily ironic satire of contemporary cultural politics in Hungary.

Thus, nothing in Bognár's novel is simple. The interweaving of narrative levels creates a complex text that can be read as detective story or metanarrative about the relationships between reality and fiction. Even in the crime story part of the novel, the focus is somehow not on the investigation of a crime so much as it is on Octave's image of himself and his hellish psychological journey, which is at times humorous and at times heartbreaking.

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Péter Bognár

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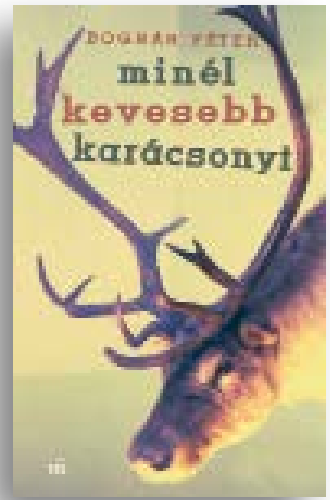

Fotó: Olivér Sin

PÉTER BOGNÁR

Péter Bognar is a poet and playwright. He was born in Budapest in 1982. He was a graduate student of the European and Hungarian Renaissance Doctoral Programme at the ELTE. He is currently a research assistant at the Department of Old Hungarian Literature and a lecturer at the Master's Degree in Renaissance Studies. He has been publishing poetry since 2003. His first volume was published in 2005.

After I had handed out the pepper spray and the troops had left the base, I grabbed a trash bag, drank a glass of water, and started stuffing everything I had bought at that godawful shopping mall into it, because I was so mad at myself for having let that little girl lead me around by the nose that I was about to explode, and because cooperation with the police had gotten me nowhere. First, I shoved in the shirts, then the ties, and then I emptied the pockets of the vest, and though my heart was breaking, I folded it up neatly and stuffed it into the bag too. Then I pulled the gun belt over my shoulder, took the pistol out of the holster and threw it all into the sack, and the shirt and tie I was wearing, and then I slipped off my shoes and put them into a separate nylon bag and threw them in with the rest of the stuff. I even took off my underwear and socks, just to get rid of anything that reminded me of the little girl and start with a clean slate. I had already screwed up once by trusting her.

And then I went over to the tap and washed up, washed off the perfume, and dried myself thoroughly with my towel, and only then did I start taking my old clothes out of my locker and getting dressed. My old undershorts were pretty stretched, but at least they weren't too tight. I put on an undershirt and then a button-down. They were both pretty faded from having gone through the wash so many times, but I took a little joy at the thought that not only would I not wear a tie, I would even leave the top buttons unbuttoned, like I used to do, I never used to button them up, cause it's always so annoying when you have something pressing against your neck, sooner or later you lose your cool. And then I put on my pants, my old vest and my old shoes, and with every gesture it was like hundred-pound weights were rolling off me, and when I was done, I stretched out my arms and took the bag with all the clothes I had just bought and put my knees on it and pressed out all the air and then tied the top in a knot. Cause a good man of the law always admits when he's is wrong, and when he is wrong, he faces up to

it and accepts the consequences. I sat down at the table and tried to catch my breath, because I was panting like a dog that the Jap had already covered in gasoline but somehow the mutt still manages to slip away at the last minute.

The chrome weapon looked lonely on the table. At first I figured I'd throw it in with all the other stuff, but then I changed my mind and took it in my hand and absentmindedly spun the cylinder. I knew perfectly well that I was in for some difficult days, and if the little girl sensed that I was on to them, I would have to prepare for the worst. When the cylinder stopped spinning, I opened it and checked to make sure all eight of the chambers in the cylinder had bullets in them. Then I flicked it back, took a deep breath, slipped the pistol into the torn pocket of my old vest, pressed the safety, and set off. My plan was, after the men had taken their posts and I had gotten the Jap under twenty-four hour watch, I would find Bakos, because I wanted to question him, I wanted to know what he was thinking, and why he had grabbed a pair of scissors and cut out the letters and put together that anonymous letter, that totally meaningless joke that had led nowhere, that the girl had grabbed hold of, the one he was using to throw suspicion on the boy, perhaps to save the Jap, perhaps because he didn't understand the connections.

Night had fallen. Lights were twinkling on most of the houses, plain white lights and colorful lights. Santa Clauses were clambering up the glowing ropes and ladders hanging from the balconies. Some of the houses glittered with thousands of slowly moving stars cast from projectors in the garden, and there were deer and mystical birds and images of the seven great Hungarian chieftains and the like. There were some houses that flickered in slow rhythm with the gardens below, some where the gutters were shimmering with light, some the balcony railings, even sometimes the trash cans. There were even some houses where the strings of lights and the glimmering globes had been set to flicker at the highest speed, as if the fuse were about to blow. In front of old man Hanak's house, I slammed on the brakes and pulled off the road and gave my head a shake. My good fellow citizen, I saw, had again summoned his strength and filled his garden with lights, again to annoy me and to express his view of the year that we had left behind and the year that now lay ahead. Only this time, he had not used the long strings of lights to craft an image of a donkey braying angrily as it pooped, as he had done last year. No, this year, he clearly had purchased another ten meters or so of lights, which he had then carefully woven into the branches of the hedges at the front of his yard, having also carefully harmonized the patterns according which they lit up, to form two deer peacefully grazing as if they had nothing better to do, except that then all of a sudden one of them bores with chewing the hedge, and he takes a deep breath and then resolutely mounts the other and starts humping it, slowly and even indifferently, until the other one starts to blink and flicker, and then the whole thing starts from the beginning again, the two of them grazing side by side, as if nothing at all unusual had happened.

I took out my notebook and recorded the incident, and then I took photos of the two deer with my phone so that later I would be able to confront Hanák, ask him what the hell he had been thinking, why the hell he always insisted on taking the freedom of expression to such extremes, and then I drove onward, because that kind of misdeed can easily disturb the peace, especially at Christmastime, when everyone is tense and everyone is on their own anyway, and everyone has to make do on their own and face the fact that soon enough there'll be a tree in the corner and everyone will have to celebrate, even if they don't really know why they are celebrating, or what.

Uncanny

tales

Hold a Mass for Me

Vera Hegedüs has become well-known to the Hungarian readers only recently with the unexpected success of her debut novel The Half-Wit, a fragmented first-person narrative of an illiterate woman. The tone of her writing remains uncanny and suffocating in Hold a Mass for Me, her new collection of short stories. Some of her stories conform to the rules of realism, while others operate with clearly fictional, Gothic, and dystopian elements, such as monstrous carnivore horses, a hole in the ground of a starlit forest, and an unknown creature that chews up the fingers that touch it. However, most of the tales balance on the edge of the impossible and the improbable, the familiar and the unfamiliar, calling attention to the presumptions behind our understandings of reality. The protagonists are lonely figures, often living in isolated places, but their individual paranoias often seem merely symptoms of a more general sense of fear and suspicion that permeates the whole society. Occasionally, these fears are explicitly linked to the twentieth-century history of Eastern Europe. “Somebody has to suffer it,” we read in an attempt by a Christian child to make sense of the deportation of Jews during the Holocaust. A carefully guarded lemon plantation in the story “The Fifth Sphere” offers an allegory for the forced agricultural experiments of Stalinism (and the ways in which collectivization has been understood in Hungarian popular culture). However, most of the short stories do not employ direct temporal or geographical references. They are sat in unnamed war-torn countries, border zones under totalitarian regimes, and dystopian and post-apocalyptic worlds the depictions of which are never so far-fetched that they cannot remind us of actual historical or contemporary events. Thus, Hegedüs’ collection resonates with the tensions and frustrations of our world at the present, while they also create a sense of a more perpetual anxiety. However, these dark, confusing, unsettling tales contain hints of beauty and humor: just like Chops, the magnificent crocodile in “The House of God,” they evoke fear, pleasure, and even laughter.

AUTHOR
Vera Hegedüs

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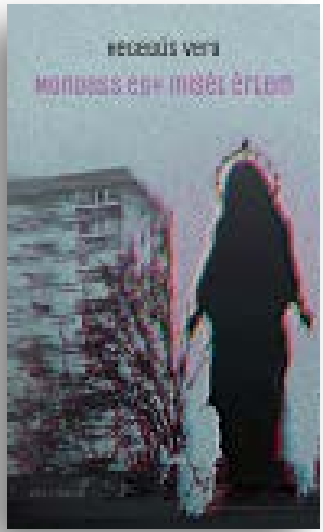

VERA HEGEDÜS

Vera Hegedüs was born in Kaposvár in 1991. She majored in American Studies at the Faculty of Humanities at Eötvös Loránd University. She published her first book, *The Half-Wit*, in 2021. In 2022, she won the Horváth Péter Literary Scholarship. *Hold a Mass for Me* is her first collection of short stories.

I cleaned the animal run and tossed the meat from the carcasses to the animals while I waited for Chops to arrive. I was not the caregiver for any of them, though I had offered several times. I was mainly interested in the marmosets, but the zoo administration always found someone else to do the job. But Chops' huge body, all covered with armor, reminded everybody else who worked at the place of a tank, so they were all terrified of him. They saw a merciless strength in him, and their own helplessness. It wasn't difficult to persuade the main caregiver for the reptiles to turn him over to me. Chops was proof as far as I was concerned, and he rekindled the flame inside me. When he looked at me, I could see the will of God in his eyes. His pupils were sacred chambers, and I was a mere guest, a pilgrim, a wayward wanderer. I saw myself in his golden, shimmering eyes, perfectly enclosed and yet infinite, like the body of Christ, encircled and served up on Sundays. He had been put back on the cross, I had come down.

It was roughly then that the food shortages started to become more and more common. The zoo felt the impact a little later than the general population, because, as became clear after the official sources had dried up, it had signed several semi-official agreements with the local butchers, farmers, and other suppliers. So for a while, Chops didn't notice anything of the world falling to pieces beyond the edges of his basin, even if he started getting slightly smaller portions. He basked as usual on the sandy patches that had been made for him, even in winter. He would lie motionless for hours, as if asleep, but he always kept one eye open, sometimes letting the third lid, the so-called blinking lid, droop closed. I figured he must be praying at such times. Mumbling psalms to the god of killing. Sometimes he would swim a little, but he spent most of his time in this one-eyed stupor. The visitors to the zoo didn't bother him, mostly because people were more interested in the mammals, but also because they closed the place just before the foreign soldiers arrived.

The animals had to be cared for, whether there were visitors to the zoo or not. Several times I caught the one-legged porter stealing a slice or two from the ever rarer deliveries of meat. We were staying in a workers' hostel next to the zoo, so I could see him frying up his modest plunder after work. He would light a fire in a metal bucket and eat outside in the snow. He didn't have to hide the meat he had filched for long, because soon almost all the zoo workers were eating from the animals' rations. One of the workers in the reptile section had allegedly taken fish from the small aquarium. With the ever-changing system of tickets in the city there was no access to fresh food, and people were desperately looking for anything to numb their hunger pains. Grass, snow, and a little soil was a three-course dinner. The birds in the zoo started to disappear, then the smaller mammals. It wasn't just the staff who butchered the animals. Everyday denizens of the city would climb the fence at dawn. After spending a night in one of the underground bomb shelters, I came back to find two strangers with a kangaroo that they had knocked out heading for the back exit. I tried to run after them, but I couldn't keep up, what with my hunched back.

There was no keeping track of the animals anymore. After the elephant building was bombed, any semblance of order was lost. No one was taking care of the animals with which they had been entrusted. They had all been left to the mercy of general staff, so most of them ended up in their rooms, in their ovens. Chops went wild at the sound of gunshots, swimming back and forth in his pool and slapping his tail against the water. He only gave up when he was weak from hunger. After the bomb hit, all the deliveries stopped, and it was harder and harder for poor Chops to bear his hunger. He would lie on the bank and shake his head and tail, making the sounds of an animal dying of starvation. He hadn't eaten properly for months. The sacred look in his eyes was fading. His huge, armored body was more and more scrunched up. It was a horrible sight to see this creature go without sustenance, this embodiment and sign of God's greatness and love.

As I sink into the water, I think of how even now I'm still utterly useless. Have been ever since I was born. I have no friends, no parents, no fellow human companions at all. These carcass-eating scavengers are no companions of mine. I am neither soldier nor priest nor peasant nor boy nor husband nor father nor sibling nor anything at all. I know it will never end. Not even in times of peace, for there is only one peace for me, and that is here, in front of me. It is slowly swimming towards me. Its yellow eyes peek at me from the surface of the water. I look into these eyes and see the flame, the mirror image of the flame in me. Only in those two yellow eyes am I somebody.

They echo with the monotone toll of hunger.

The everlasting taste of honey

The Fable of the Men

Zsolt Láng is an outstanding author of works of historical metafiction that are mainly concerned with the past of multicultural Transylvania. His elaborately layered, colourful, vibrant new novel steps away from his earlier works, as it is set in the 2010s and takes us to several corners of the world, including France, Budapest, Switzerland, Bolivia, and rural Romania, as we follow in the steps of an aging father and his estranged son. André Tavasz, the Hungarian immigrant, is a retired professor of communication theory from Paris, while his son, Zsombor, is a professional honey hunter employed by a Swiss company, who searches for high-quality honey producers on three continents. Independently, they both get involved in the investigation into the Chevaline killings (a true crime mystery that remains unresolved). Due to a series of curious coincidences, their lives intertwine again in a hidden and archaic Transylvanian village called Medard. During the heavy summer rains, the only thing that connects the village to the outside world is the old-fashioned telephone line, which is manned by André, who volunteers as a dispatcher and note-taker. From his perspective, we get glimpses into the life of the local Roma families, whose whims, secrets, and tragedies unfold in a beautifully crafted, sensual prose with a touch of magical realism. While André undergoes a dramatic transformation and is given a second chance for happiness in this little community, his son's first-person narrative sheds another, harsher light on his personality, revealing his previous neglectful behaviour. The book's title refers to the book *The Fable of the Bees* by eighteenth-century philosopher Bernard Mandeville. Like Mandeville, the narration draws frequent parallels between bees and humans, but instead of relying on the usual clichés of business and orderliness, it meditates on the role played by passion in both forms of life. In *The Fable of The Men*, Zsolt Láng develops a way of storytelling that is reminiscent of both Michel Hoeuellebecq and Gabriel García Márquez (an unusual combination) but still remains surprising, fresh, and unique.

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ZSOLT LÁNG

Zsolt Láng was born in Satu Mare, Romania in 1958, as a member of the local Hungarian minority. He graduated as an engineer and worked as a teacher in the beginning of his career. He is a novelist, playwright, essayist, and editor of the Hungarian literary journal *Látó*, which is based in Târgu Mureș, where he now lives. He has received several literary awards, such as the Libri Literary Prize. *The Fable of the Men* is his sixth novel.

It had been purely a matter of coincidence that the Romanian police had had Andrea brought out as their guide. She was supposed to have gone on vacation a week earlier, but one of her colleagues had gotten sick and she was filling in for her. It was also purely a matter of coincidence that when they arrived in the village, the locals were just burying Irén, who, it turned out, was Andrea's biological mother. And of course it was also purely a matter of coincidence that Andrea had gotten pregnant that night, though according to the calendar, it was not the fertile period of her cycle.

And the list of coincidences does not end there. If we go back in time, we stumble across more coincidences. At the entrance to Le Cosi, with one foot already over the edge of the doorway, André, who was looking forward to getting some lunch, happened to let his glance fall on a young woman, or more precisely on the bag slung at her side. He followed her with his gaze, and when he changed directions, he bumped into someone who was leaving. His phone went flying, and when he picked it up from the welcome mat, he noticed Eric's number on the screen. He had accidentally called Eric. He quickly cancelled the call, but before he had time to find a place to sit down in the cramped little place, Eric was calling him back. After chatting for a solid half hour, they bid farewell, and he said that he would travel to Transylvania as soon as possible and look around a little. His enthusiastic "yes" had surprised even him. Flustered, he broke off a piece of the aloe plant in the window and took a whimsical bite out of it.

The fact that Eric knew about his Transylvanian ancestors was just another link in the chain of coincidences. When, as a university student, he had knocked on the door to André's office, André had been speaking Hungarian with someone on the phone. Half sentences, interrupted gestures, as we tend to speak when we speak in our mother tongue.

Eric had not been a student of his, but Eric had still asked André to serve on his final exam committee. And André had agreed. Perhaps he had been tempted by a new feeling of fatherly duty, or perhaps he had simply been knocked off his feet by the fact that this young man who smiled at the world with snow-white teeth was the child of a family that had been prominent since the eleventh century. As he was not a Frenchman, André did everything he could to be mistaken for a Frenchman. It was just a touch ridiculous how, after Sarkozy came to power, a day after the election André had become so right-wing that he had actually started going to church, indeed, he had even confessed his sins to the father once. André, who had been baptized in the Reformed Church on Calvin Square.

But it probably would not have been enough, the mere fact that he had served on the committee during Eric's final exam and that a good decade after

their last meeting his phone had accidentally called Eric's number. It was probably also important that, just a few minutes before the call, Eric had been reading the report that had been put on his table, according to which on the day of the murder someone within twenty kilometers of the crime scene had called a Romanian number four times. The Romanian police had provided the GPS coordinates of the phone that had been used to make the call, and Eric had used Google maps to find the Transylvanian village with the post office that someone had tried so many times to call on the morning of 5 September, but in vain. In vain because, as the information given by the provider revealed, no one had answered. The report also noted that the telephone number of the party that made the call was also Romanian. Regrettably, however, the provider had no information concerning the individual who owned the number. And then Eric's phone had rung and immediately fallen silent. But he had seen André Tavasz's name on the screen. Eric suddenly remembered the moment when he had opened the door on André in the basement of the university building. André had been speaking Hungarian with someone on the phone, and he had immediately hung up, hurriedly, like someone caught in the act, and had leapt up from his chair. He had awkwardly extended his hand while mumbling something about how please excuse me, I was just talking to my son, and all the while he was visibly blushing.

The explanation for the blushing was perfectly simple. The words he had spoken, which Eric had hardly understood, violated the borders of propriety, which would have been unpleasant for André even if the person to whom had had been speaking had confronted him with them. Parents often chastise their unmannered children by rubbing their noses in what they have said. "Have you ever heard me use words like 'fuck it' and 'fuck off'," they ask. Other words had left his mouth, and as he had repeated them, the frustration and anger that he had roused with them in the party to whom he had been speaking had also infected him, and he had started to purse his lips and wrinkle his brow as he uttered these foul imprecations, twisting his countenance into the kinds of grimaces that he sometimes saw on his son's face.

They didn't really resemble each other. His son had inherited his mother's features. But now he had become like the father in Tutto suo padre. Which André clearly had sensed, and which made him even more enraged and confused. Which was way he had quite unintentionally informed the person barging into his office that he had been speaking to his son. He had sputtered it out, though there really had been no need whatsoever to reveal this detail. Perhaps that was why he had blushed. It would have been hard to explain exactly why, but one does not mention one's children except in the most intimate of circles. We spread out a scene from our intimate lives. We even make the very act itself a subject for public inspection. The act of conceiving a child. We invite a stranger into a world in which he does not belong. And this stranger can then make hypotheses concerning the kinds of lingerie we prefer. And what we do once we have shed this lingerie. Thankfully, in this case, things did not go this far. Eric was quite used to people blushing when he spoke to them. Eric Maillaud was a charming young man, an angelic beauty, an Alain Delon who had not gone to ruin.

"Monsieur le professeur Tavazs," he had begun. For a time, he had mispronounced the sz on the end of André's name, and André had not bothered to correct him. He was charmed by Eric's smile. Eric spoke with an spry, contagious enthusiasm.

A novel that

speaks from
the heart

The Ventriloquist Searches for an Echo

The opening scene of Ilka Papp-Zakor's second novel has all the absurdity that is so characteristic of her work: the ventriloquist Zoltán appears out of the blue in the apartment of Vera, a kindergarten teacher, with his autistic son Tomi and a "talking" cat. The novel is divided into five seasons. The strange visitors arrive and leave in the spring, taking Vera with them. Over the course of these seasons, we learn the backstory of how Zoltán became one of the international masters of his craft, and we also come to see how this unlikely quartet became a family.

Vera has always been a caring person who puts others first, but a certain sadness and despair overcome her when she reflects on the consequences of her general attitude towards others: all the missed opportunities and the fact that people never returned her kindness. Zoltán's mother thought it would be a good idea for her selfish son to learn ventriloquism because it might teach him some empathy, but it ultimately became the means by which he could assimilate into a multicultural, multiethnic society. And when his wife suddenly leaves him, ventriloquism remains the only way to somehow manage a life together with his son, since he brushes his teeth only when the toothbrush tells him to and he continues to walk around barefoot unless the slippers ask him nicely to put them on. And Tomi, who was born in Germany to two expats, rarely articulates anything meaningful. He tells people he loves them if they show the slightest understanding, and he throws tantrums at the slightest inconvenience.

Vera can only speak her mother tongue, Tomi cannot speak any language properly and switches back and forth between German and Hungarian, and Zoltán can only imitate other people's speech. Yet they all dance around taboos. Zoltán, for example, thinks that Vera is acting more and more like his ex-wife. They never admit to one another, furthermore, that they are now a real family, and sometimes it seems as if Tomi's tantrums could become so violent that he could even commit murder. Vera and Zoltán even find themselves wishing that the boy would drop dead. So ventriloquism becomes a metaphor for how things are left unsaid or only alluded to, and how we all expect someone else to speak our difficult truths. Complementing this, the echo is the motif of the reassuring hope that someone will hear you and help soothe your fears.

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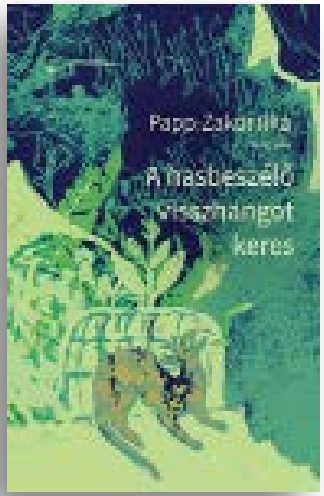

ILKA PAPP-ZAKOR

Ilka Papp-Zakor was born in 1989 in Cluj-Napoca. She made her literary debut with absurd short stories and has since published a collection of new, similarly strange tales. She also translates works of Polish literature into Hungarian, such as Mikołaj Grynberg's *Book of Exodus* (Księga Wyjścia). *The Ventriloquist Searches for an Echo* is her fourth book.

Zoltán followed all the advice in the book. He didn't just want to be better that Éva Kalocsay anymore. He was determined to invent a completely, fundamentally new style of ventriloquism with which he would be able to outdo everyone else in the world without arousing their dislike. He needed considerable inspiration to create this new style, although it was at times a bit difficult not to be at least a little suspicious of the assertions offered as fact in the *Practical Manual.*

There was, for instance, the matter of making prophecies. "Over the course of history," the Manual said, "ventriloquists have traditionally done their best service to their neighbors as fortune tellers." Zoltán, however, had not been raised to believe in the supernatural. "The crazier a prophecy, the more essential the knowledge it bears," but he could not imagine what "craziness" once had meant, nor for that matter what a crazy prophecy would have been. The more he pondered the secrets of times past, the more convinced he was that no one had been completely sane back then.

These questions concerning the truth or falseness of prophecies gave him no rest. Above his bed was a shelf that he had cluttered with red, blue and orange sailing barges made of peach pits and walnut shells. It was only then, on that day, when he had finally come to understand that the mad ventriloquist souls lived in this fleet of unseaworthy ships, traveling motionless across the surface of the pressed wood, carrying their forgotten truths from a grand past to an irrelevant, tiny future, that he had finally made peace with the clairvoyants.

Ventriloquism at that time had not been understood as the promise of a future profession. Rather, it had been seen as the future meaning of life. He turned the pages of the book with curiosity and passion. He felt that every individual had a duty to his own being, to his own essence to surpass his rivals.

The Practical Manual of Ventriloquism, a translation of a German tome that came to nearly four hundred pages, presented primarily German examples with the kind of stereotypical precision that would have justified giving it the title *The Good Book*. In Zoltán's mind, German culture, the German language were forever intertwined with his chosen profession. Thanks to the *Manual*, he became acquainted with the lives of many great ventriloquists, all of which were unsettling and mysterious and most of which had ended in tragedy. Had anyone asked, without thinking about it for so much as a passing breath, he would have named Max Blume as his favorite.

Blume had learned the craft from his father, and he himself had written a guidebook of sorts titled *Die Bauchrednerkunst* (with a lithograph of a Gothic-lettered book cover at the bottom of the relevant chapter), as well as a manual for hypnotists which was mentioned in the *Manual* only in passing. Blume

had been a decent ventriloquist, not an outstanding one, but he had had one brilliant idea.

After the First World War, there had been a sudden proliferation in the number of prosthetic arms and legs, and suddenly plastic surgery had also begun to blossom, which is to say the creation of prosthetic faces. The streets were bustling with veterans of the war who had been hastily stitched back together and who sometimes even wore metal masks to hide their faces. Had it not been for the intervention of an ingenious Parisian sculptor, many of these troubled souls might well simply have killed themselves. Yet in Anna Coleman-Ladd's studio, they were transformed into statues of their former selves, with a single expression on their faces of which they had said, "Yes, that's me." "The woman whom I love more than anyone else in the world is no longer terrified of me," one of these iron-faced men had written in his diary. "The person most dear to my heart is no longer disgusted. No. She is only afraid. She is afraid of the face which, no matter what she does, will always look on her with a smile, with love, with forgiveness." So another had written. This, Zoltán thought, could be another great step forward in giving crises of the soul the serious consideration that they merited. But he was no expert on the history of psychology. Perhaps he was wrong. "Dear Lord, let this not be forever." So had written a third.

The masks did nothing to hide speech impediments caused by injuries to the mouth. But Blume found a solution. A few days later, billboards across the country carried the advertisement: "Our famous studio extends an invitation to the heroes of our nation to ventriloquism lessons." The text was accompanied by explanatory illustrations.

Blume knew, of course, that sound did not claim the same status as spectacle. A stammer or a stutter uttered by a healthy, vivacious face will surprise no one, but when someone missing his jaw can still speak clearly, well, that's scary. Blume, thus, did not aspire to snatch the laurels from Coleman-Lass. The puppets he provided for his war veterans did not come from the best workshops in the country. They were only roughly approximations of the faces their owners once had had. But in return, they were capable of making a few meaningful facial expressions, if not many. Initially, the veterans found the puppets a bit strange, but once Blume had made it clear to them that the word strange had lost all meaning for them, they got used to their new wooden incarnations, and some of them found their quality of life much improved by this inventive solution.

Blume was patient and consistent. He even took on a patient who had injured his face not on the battlefield but merely in the course of a bar fight. The man had been hit so hard with a broken beer bottle that he had had to cover his face with a white handkerchief, as if he were some kind of figure from the crime underworld, and since he had bitten off half his tongue in the brawl, he now spoke with a lisp. He liked to imagine that he had gotten his injuries on the frontlines, and Blume didn't raise any objections.

"Our job is to give our client's soul a voice. If you feel like a war hero in your soul, I have no reason to object."

This "handkerchief-masked man" became Blume's most skillful pupil.

"Would you like to work in my workshop?" Blume asked him one fine day. "I am building a talking machine."

He wanted to build the machine from the blueprints drawn up by Wolfgang von Kempelen, the famous hoaxer who had fooled people with The Turk, his chess-playing machine which, all the signs suggested, had simply had a living man inside it that had made the moves. But Kempelen, Blume was certain, had been innocent, a true inventor, and the sketches Kempelen had made for his talking machine looked promising. The machine itself was held safe in a museum.

A village
outside of time,

They've Forgotten Themselves

Reading Sarnyai's debut short novel is like stepping into one of Ádám Bodor's "variations on the end of days," to play on the subtitle of his *The Birds of Verhovina*. In *They've Forgotten Themselves*, we are introduced to the everyday life of a (fictional) Hungarian village, Ernyicse, that almost everyone seems to have forgotten about. There is a change of power when the mayor, who has been the first person in the village for as long as people can remember, decides to retire. The village, which until now has been outside of time, cannot cope with such a radical change and the beginning of a new era, which also suggests a temporal movement forward.

The fictional reportage format of the novella introduces us to a variety of characters whose conflicting stories about how Ernyicse came to this crossroads simulate the discourse of micro-histories. Some say that the mayor was appointed by Miklós Horthy, the governor of the Hungarian Kingdom during the interwar period, while others argue that this is not possible, since his favorite white steed was only a foal at the time, so the mayor must have been in power before Horthy himself. This is one way of interpreting the title of the novella, i.e. that no two people remember the past the same way. The other is that everyone in the village forgets about themselves, but they take care of one another so that they can help one another remember who they are.

Sarnyai's debut short novel breaks with the two contemporary Hungarian traditions of depicting village life in literature: neither does it romanticize the village with a touch of magical realism, nor does it pretend to be cold factual literature, which often turns into poverty porn. Instead, *They've Forgotten Themselves* alludes to contemporary issues in Central Europe that define rural life: malicious gossip, lost faith in change, alcoholism, etc., but always makes the reader smile with its likeable characters, their idiosyncratic phrases, and the impossible situations they get themselves into. Sarnyai can be compared to the village priest, Reverend Hunya, because "sooner or later everyone knows everything about everyone else, but only Hunya can tell you if everything is really everything."

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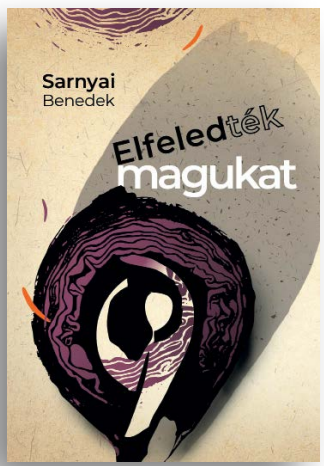

BENEDEK SARNYAI

Benedek Sarnyai was born in 1998 in Szeged. He studied sociology and works in market research. He is a member of the sociographical division of the Hungarian Association of Writers, from which he received the Debut Prize for Best Hungarian Prose for his novel *They’ve Forgotten Themselves* in 2024.

Song on the Outskirts

After Oscar Dill was elected mayor, John Chafford disappeared from Edgeton. A few people claimed to have seen him while the inaugural speech was being held. “Half the village was there in front of the office,” Andrew Filton recalled. “There must have been two thousand of us. Old man Johnny was biting his moustache, as custom dictates. The muscles on his face hardly moved. He just clenched his teeth over the strands of hair, all morose like.”

As far as the secretary in the mayor’s office could remember, Chafford had already set out for the edge of the village in the middle of the celebrations. “Was it difficult for him to accept that Mr. Dill was going to take his place? Who the hell knows! It was definitely a shock. He’d been mayor around here for as long as anyone can remember. Maybe as long as he himself can remember.”

According to the old people in the village, Chafford had indeed been the highest ranking member of the government in the village of Edgeton for who knows how long. “My father, mother, grandmother, and grandfather all tell me that they all had to call old man Johnny old man Johnny,” Oscar Dill admitted, confirming the statement made by the secretary. “As far as where one is born, well, you can be born wherever you want, but he’ll always be old man Johhny to everyone here, like it or not.”

Archie Armster, the biggest cabbage farmer in the village, did not make a big deal of Chafford’s disappearance. “Truth be told, everyone kind of expected it. We didn’t think he was going to resign or anything, but there was no real disagreement over the fact that, when it came to what he was doing up there, in the office, well, there wasn’t really any need for him. He could have talked to us, and his mind was no worse for wear. He could learn new songs alongside the old ones. It sounds a little hard if I put it like this, but let’s just say old man Johnny was kind of dead to us before actually having had the good manners to die.”

“We’ve been mourning him for at least a year,” Beauford Sandal added, as he knocked down a shot of schnapps at Archie Armster’s side. “Every day that we didn’t come down here, down to the Admiral’s Café, we’d pray in the hopes that the times we had under him would return. But didn’t work, so for lack of anything better to do, we just stayed at home.”

The end of John Chafford’s reign as elected mayor is usually associated with the cabbage moth invasion of Edgeton. “No one’s seen worms like that in human memory,” Oscar Dill said, and then he smiled. “And the locals used to say that they either came out of nowhere or from Romania.”

Some have claimed that Chafford’s time began with the Romanian occupation. “The people of Edgeton are pretty sloppy when it comes to the past,” Andrew

Filton noted. “They like legends. And for good reason. No matter how hard the village of Edgeton tried to get in the way, history always seemed to miss it. We know that at some point we were invaded by the Romanians, and then they cleared out. Rumor has it that Horthy himself chased them off. They say his white stallion was a little colt at the time. The mighty admiral, sitting atop his steed. They say his feet even touched the ground here.”

“There are things about us that no one can say for sure but everybody knows are true,” Armster explained in the Admiral’s Café. “For example, that old man Johnny got the position of mayor from Horthy himself. To protect the village from the Romanians. Some people even say that Horthy himself was Johnny’s son. And if the Romanians come again, he’ll call in the Admiral again.”

“That’s the kind of gossip no one believes, especially the person who spreads it,” Beauford Sandal said. “But we spread it because it catches out interest.”

Armster nodded and gave his table-mate a pat on the shoulder. Sandal sat still and firm, not so much as a twitch of a single muscle on his face.

“You’ve got Andrew Filton, for example,” Armster said, continuing his pal’s line of thought. “He often yammers on about stuff that we all take for true, because we don’t really have anything else to take for true. But what he says doesn’t really catch our interest.”

Andrew Filton very clearly wasn’t in the slightest bit interested in what either Sandal or Armster had to say.

“Horthy?” he said with a sigh. “Maybe he was here, maybe he wasn’t. I’m much more concerned about what’s going on now, or what was going on not too long ago. There was something in old man Johnny that would fascinate the mathematician. But as far as when his era began or when it ended, that’s not the important part. The important part is what his era was like.”

“I was one of the ones who had to look at Mayor Chafford’s documents,” his former secretary said. “The year of birth on his ID card changed every dozen years, and always so that he would be exactly ninety years old.”

At his desk, Oscar Dill tried to explain the phenomenon with a cool head.

“We can forestall any and all speculation if we can just accept that we didn’t really know anything about old man Johnny. We knew that he was old, and that, as he himself often said, he no longer trusted his own memory. Or in other words, we could be quite certain that we knew as much about him as he knew about himself.”

Dill cast him a sideways glance.

“And that was enough,” he continued. “The era of old man Johnny was the era of the village itself. Everyone was happy to know was much about everyone else as everyone else knew about them.”

“One just lived one’s life, whether in time or out of time,” Archie Armster admitted. “There was a kind if playfulness to it. I’d say we were all pretty much measuring ourselves up to old man Johnny. When he would walk down the sidewalk and sing on his way to work, we knew it was time to get up. And in the evening, everyone went to the Admiral’s to hear old man Johnny, who would drop in on his way home from work, sing his latest songs.”

Beauford Sandal gave a sour chuckle.

“My daughters Susan, Susie, and Sue used to say that he would sing them lullabies from the street.”

“Mr. Chafford did indeed make a habit of singing,” the mayor’s office secretary said. “He’d let the melodies slip out when he was in the mood, but never at the workplace! Though in the office, he never really went into great detail concerning who should do what or when. All he had to do was say hey Isabella, Bella, honey, and I knew I had to do something. After a while, we realized we’d have to do our best to figure out what. Most of the time we thought we were doing what he wanted us to do. I figured if not, then he’d honey Bella me until I got it right.”

“For a long time, I didn’t even know how I should campaign for the mayor’s job,” Dill admitted. “What could I possibly say to the people of the village when the mayor himself never said anything? They voted for him because he’s old man Johnny.”

The loneliness network

Let ʻEm All Rot

In her debut novel, Gyöngyvér Schillinger delivers, as noted on book cover, “everything that makes a so-called unputdownable book: strong characters, twists, sex, embezzlement, and scandal.” While this might suggest something resembling a Harlequin romance novel, one of the main characters, Olga, who is in the process of becoming a writer herself, at one point specifies that “this does not belong to that genre.”

The alternating narrative perspective places Olga and Balázs at the center of the story. They can be described as opposites in many ways. Olga is a sensitive, uncertain, meticulous, timid young woman, whereas Balázs is a self-assured, success-driven, arrogant middle-aged man. However, this hierarchical dynamic is reflected both in their personalities and in the plot structure. Both of the novel’s central storylines are dominated by Balázs’s character. He handles the inheritance process and family disputes following his mother’s death, and his law firm is orchestrating a fraudulent bankruptcy. Olga, by contrast, mostly drifts along with events, or is present only indirectly, through Balázs’s thoughts.

One of Schillinger’s greatest narrative achievements is that she not only makes this hierarchical relationship nearly invisible through her minimalist yet highly complex storytelling technique. She also shifts the reader’s attention away from the plot twists to the intricate web of relationships surrounding the protagonists, where these dichotomies no longer hold.

The deepest tragedy of the novel lies in the fact that, while the complexity of the characters is revealed primarily through their relationships with one another, the only truly universal trait is dysfunctionality in human connections. As a result, loneliness emerges as one of the book’s central themes. However, it is not so much through identification with the characters that this solitude becomes palpable, but rather through Schillinger’s fast-paced, cinematic narrative technique. By seamlessly weaving together action, emotions, thoughts, physical sensations, and memories, sometimes within a single sentence, Schillinger instills a sense of restlessness in the reader. Although the novel offers no clear escape from this distress, it at least provides an explanation for the underlying anxiety that defines the lives of its characters.

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Gyöngyvér Schillinger

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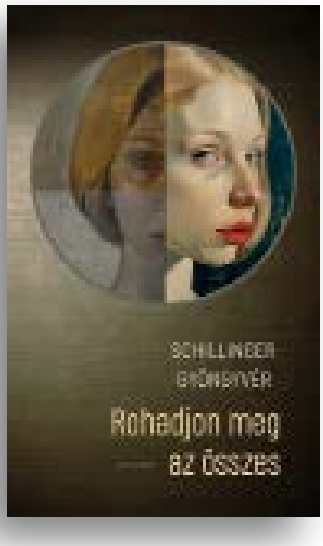


Fotó: Niki Bolega

GYÖNGYVÉR SCHILLINGER

Gyöngyvér Schillinger was born in 1983 in Dunaújváros. She graduated as a lawyer and started her studies in screenwriting and playwriting at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Pécs. She works as an assistant notary. She writes mainly short stories and longer narratives. *Let them all rot* is her first novel.

Balázs pulled up his pants. He had lost wait. He should start going to the gym again, put on some muscle to make up for it. Or swim, like before. Lizi would be doing laps in the indoor pool, while he would be outside, watching the tanned girls spread sunscreen on their thighs. Or he could go with Olga, rub lotion on her thighs, her stomach, her breasts. His cock stirred a little in his underwear. He took out a cigarette, then put it back. Didn’t want to smell like smoke. And Olga was already coming, waving the contract with a smile, shouting that she’d signed it. He should pick her up in his arms, right now, if she were his, that was the kind of thing he would do. He would fuck her ragged, obviously, but at the same time, he imagined things like her lying next to him, her blonde hair brushing his face, and Olga telling him some secret, because she clearly had secrets. Some old love story that had ended badly. Someone she’d lost someone close to her. Maybe she was an orphan. Maybe someone was following her, harassing her. Or maybe her fiancé was a jerk. There must be some sorrow in her life, and she would tell share it with him.

“You’re incredible. My God, that woman. But I told you, you’d be the best. Didn’t I tell you?”

Olga blushed faintly, lowering her head as she always did.

“Come on, I’ll drop you off at your place. Your fiancé must be waiting. Or no? Because if you’re not in a hurry, we can celebrate having gotten that shrew to sign.”

Olga smiled at the word shrew.

“The apartment reminded me of someone’s place from my childhood, but I couldn’t remember whose. All the porcelain and glossy furniture.”

“Every well-to-do old woman’s apartment looks like that. So, what now?”

Olga hesitated.

“Come on, I’ll take you to Kelet Café. Half of the crowd on Bartók Street hangs out there, they must know something.”

Olga got into the car. She unexpectedly fell silent and just stared out the window. There was a traffic jam on

Dózsa György Street, the cars weren't moving for minutes on end. Olga fidgeted with the ring on her finger.

"When's the big day?"

She acted like she hadn't heard the question. Sometimes, she would get lost in thought. She wasn't really suited to be a lawyer. But that was fine, she could handle the background work. She could get her own office, though there wasn't enough space. He'd get rid of the big kitchen, and everyone would eat at their desks. No need to waste square meters on a place to eat.

Finally, the traffic started moving. They wove through the downtown streets, good for moments of nostalgia, but he could never live there again. Not in that two-room, semi-basement apartment where he and Lizi had started it all.

"We lived here," Balázs said, pointing out the window. " I worked for the municipal government office. It felt so good to leave. A pensioner's job, most people would have loved it. Once you get into the state system, you can hop from institution to institution for the rest of your life."

Olga just hummed. She didn't really understand what he was saying.

Kelet Café was packed, as usual. At the counter, Balázs ordered a beer and a shot of Unicum.

"Let's have some drinks," he said to Olga. "We'll take a cab home. Cheers! To the shrew!"

They squeezed between the tables. It was hot. Olga fanned herself with the drink menu. She was wearing a white dress, no makeup, or it had worn off. She was wearing an old, bulky Casio watch on her wrist that didn't match her dress, her small earrings, or anything about her. Balázs got another round of Unicum.

"Not bad," Olga said, lifting her dress slightly to fan her legs. She closed her eyes. Balázs felt his cock twitch.

"Where'd you get that watch?"

Olga opened her eyes and looked at her watch as if seeing it for the first time.

"My dad gave it to me," she replied after a short delay. "It doesn't have any real sentimental value. I just like old things."

The Unicum, the beer, the heat, and the fact that he hadn't eaten anything since that celery.

Balázs leaned forward as if to catch Olga's scent.

"That celery, dear god. Who even buys stuff like that? It scraped my throat. I thought I was going to choke."

Olga burst out laughing.

"Yes, yes! And that cat!"

She tried to mimic the woman's sharp voice. "She doesn't seem to like you!"

They laughed. Olga covered her face with her hands.

"And what happened after I left?"

"She said that she felt sorry for me that I had to work for such a boss. And she was like, what kind of job is that, anyway!"

Balázs grinned.

"Well, at least you're not frying celery. I still can't believe they ordered two hundred thousand forints' worth."

Olga tossed her hair back, something she never did.

"We talked about her husband, the cat, how I also like cats, and then she took the contract and signed it. She said she was doing it for me, and that the attorney at law could choke on his money."

"Wow, that's pretty harsh."

Balázs slid his chair closer to Olga. His face was tingling, it felt good. Olga was good. And beautiful. She had small, natural breasts. Even through her blouse, you could tell she wore a simple bra, no need for padding. He could distinctly smell her warm, slightly damp skin and whatever perfume she used. No, not perfume, maybe face cream or body lotion.

"What you said about the watch, no sentimental value. What did you mean?"

Olga's eyes sparkled. The Unicum was clearly hitting her too.

"My dad, he's not in the picture. And he didn't even give me the watch. It was just left behind. He has a new family in Slovakia. My mom said things were getting too tough here, it was harder to find work. I hadn't even turned three. But I remember a few things. And he called me once when I was at university. He had some legal problem. Not that

I could help him. I don’t know the law in Slovakia. He hasn’t called since.”

“Must have been tough on your mom.”

“Whatever, I don’t know why I’m even talking about him.”

Sweat beads shone on her upper lip. Up close, a faint purple vein was visible under her eye. Her skin was smooth, glowing. Balázs slid his chair even closer. His cock was aching like it had in his youth, when he had been able to go at it all weekend long.

“Every family is messy. I could tell you stories. I don’t talk to my brother anymore. Do you have siblings? No? That’s good. You have to leave that stuff behind. Life is ahead of you. But really, Olga, you’re beautiful, smart, it would just hold you back. To expect too much from family. Fuck them, to put it simply.”

Olga raised her glass.

“I’ll drink to that.”

Balázs gripped his beer mug tightly. You’re something else. His hand slipped, the mug clunked against the table. He wiped his palm on his pants, okay, one more time. Their eyes locked. Olga looked serious. Would be nice to know what she’s thinking.

How much had they had to drink? Her phone rang, an unknown number. A client, probably. She declined the call and then leaned back in her chair, looking at her hand, at the ring.

“Is your mom excited about the wedding?”

Olga raised an eyebrow. She was drunk, and her gestures are exaggerated.

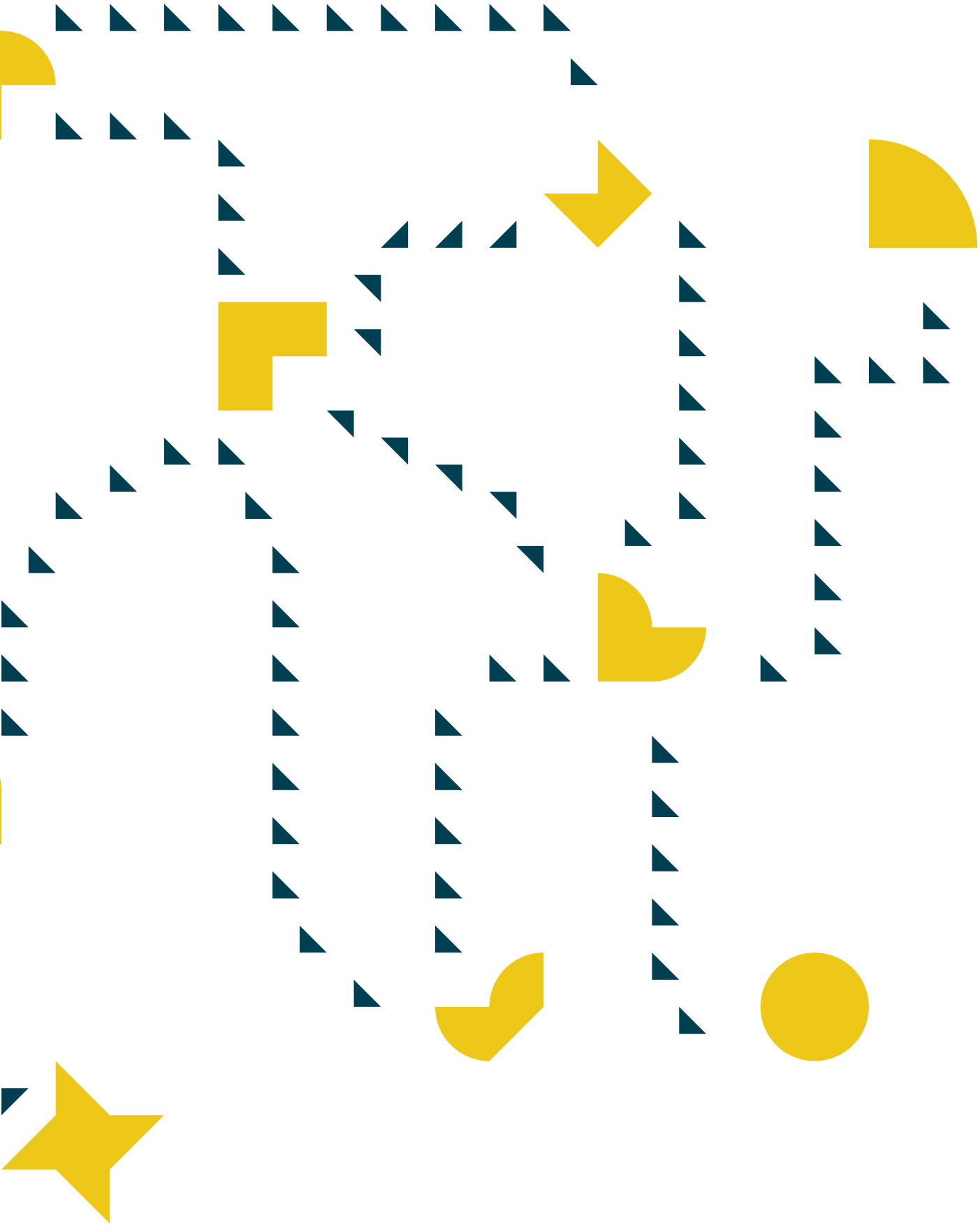
“My mom’s an alcoholic.”

That was all she said. Then she looked at her watch.

“I can’t see what time it is.”

Her phone rang again. Another unknown number. She declined the call. She was annoyed, but it rang again, almost immediately. She picked up.

“Yes?” she snapped.



Rebellious youth

in revolting times

Damn Those Summers

Unlike Miklós György Száraz's previous collection of short stories, which fused Latin American magical realism with Central European grotesque, *Damn Those Summers* can be considered realistic prose. It takes us back to the 1970s and the world behind the Iron Curtain, telling stories of boyhood and coming-of-age. The tales consist of episodes from a teenager's everyday life, but they are constantly intertwined with the fantasies in which he indulges, which are based on the books he has read and the movies he has seen. This interweaving is evident in the way in which the boy learns about death from two sources: poets and the execution of Hungary's martyred prime minister, Imre Nagy, after the failed revolution of 1956. The oscillation between fiction and reality underscores the description of social problems and the question of a young man's identity in turbulent times. His first experiences with the other sex, for example, make him realize that although the girls with whom he spends time are only a few years older than he, they are much more mature. These girls are also stigmatized and marginalized, but in the eyes of the narrator-protagonist, their difference from the majority gives them a kind of transcendental aura, both the teenage Roma prostitute who nearly bleeds to death after an affair in a place called Calvary Hill and the girl who is fascinated by the macabre and who takes him up on a dare and leads him into the secret passages of a hospital.

Száraz tells stories of outcasts, from orphans to widowers and alcoholics. He sketches their characters based on literary figures and the protagonists of spaghetti westerns or New Wave cinema. But in the end, the discrepancy between the magical world of Homer or Lazarillo de Tormes, full of adventures and heroes, and that of the townspeople always becomes apparent.

It is a recurring element in the short stories that the protagonist crawls into confined spaces, hoping to find something magical (from the past), but the discovery always turns out to be mundane. Apart from the tragedy of death, which is always relegated to the realm of the imagination. Neighbors and relatives die in fictional situations, in a face-off or because a flying angel hits their head and smashes it. The sudden awareness of the mundane seems to be the real tragedy of the book.

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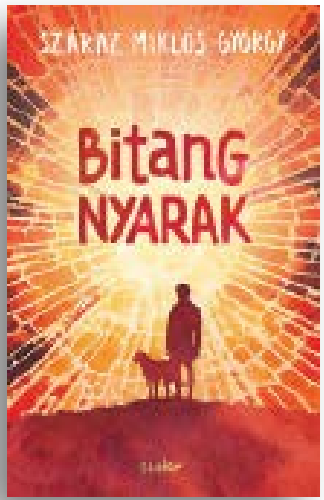

Fotó: Tibor Zátonyi

MIKLÓS GYÖRGY SZÁRAZ

Miklós György Száraz was born in Budapest in 1958. He has been part of the Hungarian literary scene for three decades, working as an editor at various literary journals and publishing houses, and he has published novels, short story collections, and photo albums of Hungary that also include essays. One of his main themes is how history affects the lives of everyday people, whether their own family history or the history of their home country. His writings have been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, German, and English.

Your grandmother offered me some bread rolls, and then she asked me if I knew anything about what the prisons in Romania are like. I promised her I'd see if I could find anything on the subject, and if I did, I'd let her know.

I couldn't sleep, just spent the whole night tossing and turning. I was thinking about something I'd never really thought about before. Who my grandmother really was. And that maybe by now she was so old that she no longer really had anything in common with the person whose name we used when we spoke to her. I felt helpless and ignorant. I admired Indian, not because of Caporal, but because his girlfriend's jerk father had hanged her dog, and he was the one who had had bury it. Because things like that happened to him. And because he had no father. And because he used fancy words like "however," "indeed," and "anything on the subject." And because he would wander around in the rain at night whenever he felt like it, waiting for me. And because of all this, his life somehow seemed more real than mine. And there was something else. Just as important as everything else. I was surprised, no, shaken that he had been able to talk to my grandmother, someone I had never really thought about. I had accepted her as she was, just like I had accepted the hospital fence and the tall poplars without ever really thinking about them. But the fact that Indian had eaten bread rolls with my grandmother and then had promised to find out about conditions in Romanian prisons and report back to her, that made me think. I think it was kind of shocking to wonder if perhaps my grandmother might now be the same person as she was before in name only, that maybe people should change their names when they've reached a certain age, when they no longer have anything in common with the person they once were. And yet, I also understood that there are people, I'd known quite a few, who it would be hard to imagine changing even in the slightest, even if they lived to be a hundred and twenty.

This question about who my grandmother was and is upset me so much that I couldn't sleep at all. The more I wanted to fall asleep, the more awake I was. Indian and the Cenk Villa drifters calmed me down a little, but he couldn't give a satisfying explanation for the hellish noises, and then there was the dog that had been hanged too. But maybe the worst thing was just the thought that my grandmother was so old she might not even know who she was anymore. Not because she was senile or crazy, but because she had been alive for so long that she no longer remembered who she once was or what she had once wanted.

I lay in bed, listening to my grandmother pacing back and forth in the living room. Then I heard her

open the bathroom door and turn on the bathtub faucet. There was nothing unusual about this. My grandmother lived in a different time than most people. She had her own time. She woke up and went to bed, stayed awake and slept whenever she felt like it. She didn't care about time. If she was tired or sleepy, she would crawl into bed in broad daylight, but if she didn't feel like it, she wouldn't sleep a wink all night, marching back and forth in the apartment, the wood floor creaking eerily beneath her feet. I almost never saw her sitting down. She would only sit when she ate, and even then not always. She never cooked, never knitted, never read. I never saw her with a book or a newspaper. She listened to the radio all day long.

She had a little radio that she pressed to her ear while marching back and forth. And it wasn't local gossip or radio plays or the weather forecast that caught her interest. My grandmother specialized in international politics, and she cared about the tangled foreign policies of the USA and the Soviet Union only in terms of how they might affect Romanian domestic politics. Because her older daughter, my mother's sister, lived in Transylvania. My grandmother was up to date on diplomacy. She was the first to know when an English or French foreign minister got caught in a sex scandal and resigned, or when one state launched an armed attack on another. She spent all day rushing around the apartment, listening to her little radio. If she got hungry, she ate something, it didn't matter what or when. If she got tired or sleepy or if my father snapped at her ("for God's sake, woman, stop pacing back and forth and making the floor creak, I'm trying to work!"), she would go to bed, whether it was night or day. And she was always thinking. Imagining things. I couldn't even begin to guess what was going through her head, but then she would suddenly burst out with it, something she gotten all figured out, usually some terrible premonition of disaster that would befall our relatives in Romania.

When she turned on the faucet, I climbed out of bed, sneaked out of my room, crawled under the table in the hallway, and spied on her as she showered. She was a frail old woman, almost a skeleton. Her skin hung down in folds, wrinkled, white flaps. And I was surprised to realize that the kid I was found nothing repulsive about the sight. Instead, seeing his grandmother naked made him understand that every person, even the oldest, has their own world, and that every person, strangers, distant relatives, the young and the oldest, exists, always exists, even when you don't see them, until they no longer exist, until they die. And then something else occurred to me. Maybe I had known it before but had never put it into words. Thinking about it now, it was surprising, or at least something to ponder: that her parents' lives were not his. They were separate lives. They were her parents' lives. Theirs and theirs only. And that separated them, separated them from her. That separation was partly good, but also unsettling. She could never know, after all, who her father really had been in that separate life of his, in that part of her father's life that had existed before she had even been born. Had he been the same person that she had known him to be?

"Killer story," Titi said when I told him about that seemingly endless night. We were lying on the carpet in my father's room. We could have been wandering somewhere in the forest, but we liked that huge carpet in front of my father's desk. And when he wasn't home, which happened often after he finished a big job, a play, or a translation and then had disappeared into the city to, in my mother's words, "go save the world with his drinking buddies," we would flop down on that gigantic carpet. We would dump out our boxes of toy soldiers, Roman legionnaires, lasso-wielding cowboys, tomahawk-wielding Indians, knights with carved crosses, French Foreign Legionnaires with neck guards, World War II American and German soldiers, and spend hours dividing them up and arranging our different armies.

"You're a bastard," Titi said reproachfully. "A real bastard, but that's still a killer story. They probably raped someone. And you scared the hell out of them. So bad that they're still running in blind panic."

In the prison of the

Phobia

Mátyás Szöllősi's novel *Phobia*, originally envisioned as a two-volume work, centers around a physicist of international renown who travels from the capital to the countryside to visit relatives. However, due to a tragic event and a series of shocking coincidences, she is forced not only to confront her own limitations but also to face the darkest secrets of her family's past.

Although the story is set during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, this remains merely part of the backdrop. The narrator deliberately avoids mentioning the virus directly, just as the protagonist's first name is only revealed in the final third of the novel, and even then, it is her middle name, the one she does not use. The focus is not on the public health aspects of the pandemic but rather on its impact on human relationships.

Phobia masterfully blends the genre conventions of family sagas, psychological drama, and crime fiction. It paints a nuanced and sensitive portrait of its protagonist, a talented yet emotionally burdened young woman—while also providing a keenly observed depiction of atypical yet familiar figures in rural Hungary and the damaged relationships between generations.

The novel's dark tone is established from the first scene, which begins in medias res. The protagonist wakes up in the intensive care unit of a hospital following a suicide attempt. She is accompanied by an unsympathetic doctor, whose help she reluctantly relies on to piece together the events of the past few days, though with little success. This is followed by a sharp narrative shift, recounting the family visit for a brief period of only a day and a half, which relentlessly drives toward an impending tragedy.

However, the suffocating tension is not merely the result of the events unfolding and the protagonist-narrator's painful confrontation with the past. Thanks to Szöllősi's brilliant narrative technique, the novel also maintains an eerie ambiguity. Is all of this simply happening inside the mind of a woman confined to a psychiatric ward? The ending offers no reassuring answer to this question.

Phobia does not provide easy answers, but it tells a deeply human story free of stereotypes, a story about self-discovery and human relationships, about the inextricable connection between past and present. In doing so, it reflects in a strikingly relevant way on the fundamental questions of human existence.

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MÁTYÁS SZÖLLŐSI

Mátyás Szöllősi was born in 1984 in Budapest. He is a writer, poet, editor, and photojournalist. He graduated from Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in 2010. His first poetry collection, *Aktív kórterem* (Active Ward), was published in the same year. In 2017, he was awarded the Margó Prize for his first prose book, Váltóáram (Alternating Current).

I walked back to the central part of the main building. There were a lot of people standing in the hallway. The number of people waiting there seemed to have doubled or even tripled in the meantime. Most of them were wearing masks. But there were two young girls and a few children staring naked-faced into the neon-lit nothingness. They were probably waiting for their parents or some other relatives. There was still a lot of coming and going. The chaotic sight gave me a headache, and I had no clue who I should ask about my grandmother's whereabouts.

From the far end of the hallway, I could see all the way to the nurses' station. There were six or seven people standing there, all of them clearly struggling with similar problems as I was, but it was completely unattended, just like the desk at the front of the nursing department. I just wanted to get outside and get some fresh air, but I tried to contain my frustration and the increasingly irresistible urge to flee, which often overcomes me in these kinds of situations. I leaned closer to the pale green wall, as if I could feel something soft and comforting on it. I tried to breathe evenly. I looked around. No one was looking at me. For a moment, I felt as if I weren't even there. I pulled my mask down slightly so that it only covered my mouth.

At one side, I could see into one of the hospital rooms. The beds were crammed together side by side, and as far as I could make out between the nurses and paramedics moving back and forth, it looked as if there were only old people in the beds. They had IV drips attached to their arms, and they weren't moving. Their stiffness frightened me, as if they were already dead. That was the first thought that came to mind, though I knew they weren't. That there was still life in them, but buried so deep that you would needed more time to discern any sign of it. In those few minutes, as I watched from a distance, I truly faced, for the first time, the stark emptiness that gaped around the oldest patients in the hospital wards, those who were already close to the end. Everything was mechanical. The staff was rushed and hurried, especially the nurs-

es and caregivers, who more than anyone else should have been focused on being careful and attentive. It felt as if they were merely shifting bodies from place to place or administering medications and providing food, and that was far too simple, or rather far less than enough. Everything had been simplified to cope with the clear lack of time, simple and mechanical. Almost every gesture radiated the desire and intention to conceal the simplest, most undeniable reality, a reality free of any and all intimacy: death.

Suddenly, one of the old women began to convulse, as if she had been electrocuted. The spasms didn't stop, just slowed down a little, until three caregivers in light blue coats rushed to her bedside and held down her frail little body. Two of them pressed her against the bed, grabbing the bony old woman by her shoulders and legs. She was lying near the edge, so the tension pushed part of her back against the metal frame. It must have been outright painful to convulse in that position for minutes on end. The third caregiver ran to the door, shouting into the hallway, but the surrounding noise was so loud that I couldn't understand what he was saying. Then two more people arrived, a doctor and a nurse, I think, to intubate the old woman.

In the meantime, a young paramedic had wheeled a metal bed up against the wall next to me. A middle-aged woman was lying on it, all tightly wrapped up. Only a narrow strip of her face was visible under the hospital blanket. Her eyes were shut, but I could tell that she wasn't asleep. Maybe she simply didn't want to see the growing chaos or all the suffering, the same suffering that had terrified me.

The paramedic asked me to step aside and, after securing the bed, turned to me, glancing at me for maybe a fraction of a second, and said that if I knew what was good for me, I would leave the building immediately. Then, before I could react, he turned and walked briskly toward the far end of the hallway. He had essentially told me the exactly what the doctor had told me earlier, only with a greater sense of urgency in his voice. A cold shiver ran through me from the look in his eyes. I took a step toward him, but by the time my foot touched the ground, I could only see his back moving further away. It had all happened so suddenly that I had only half-processed his words. I couldn't focus on their meaning, on the clear instructions they carried, I could only focus on what I was seeing. I was unable to cross the usually insignificant phases that are easy to bypass at other times. I vividly remember the man's gaze, how resolutely he had looked at me. It was striking in part because the only thing I had seen of his face was the depth of his eyes, and only for a brief moment. It wasn't the words or the commanding tone that had pierced my chest so intensely, but rather his look, sharp, like a needle, with an icy, disciplined sense of control, and something almost challenging in it. I immediately desired him. Even though, in reality, I had barely seen anything of him. I wanted to look into his eyes once more, though at the same time I most certainly did not want him to turn back and stand in front of me again. As close to me as he had been before. I am in a hospital, after all, I thought. I felt the blood rush to my face. I couldn't tell if it was from shame or from the sudden surge of excitement that filled me. But I had a hunch that my sense of desire was born of surprise, and that I needn't bother to wait for it to hit me again, because if it did, it would only frighten me.

A tale
of a man

of many names and qualities.

No-Man's Town. A Transylvanian Midcult

No-Man's Town fills the temporal gap in Vida's fictional portrayal of twentieth-century Transylvania between his *Where His Soul Resides*, which followed the events of the First World War, and *The Story of a Stuttering*, which focused on the second half of the twentieth century. The novel's main aim is to show how the region's multiculturalism defined everyday life under the military dictatorship that followed the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, in a kind of classical narrative discourse (hence the word *midcult* in the subtitle) that incorporates dialects and mixes words from Hungarian, Romanian, and German.

The protagonist of the novel is an engineer, Máté Kalagor, whose name appears in different forms depending on the nationality of those who pronounce it: Matei Călugăru or Mathias Cologor. He arrives from the capital, Bucharest, to the fictional small town of Namajd (the two words with which one says "leave it for later" in Hungarian, crushed into one) to start a new life on his estate and to restart the water turbine to revive the industrial development of the town. His efforts are met with passivity among the locals, and he escapes into a marriage that ultimately fails but produces a child that arouses far more interest among the townspeople than Maté's work on the turbine. The narrative plays with the conflation of the two, the child and Máté's brainchild, which makes his rude awakening even more dramatic and alludes to the theme of realist prose, where the innovative urban intellectual fails to fit into the conservative rural society. One the one hand, the novel's title alludes to Máté as someone from a no-man's town (a Hungarian idiom): he is seen by the locals as untethered, without roots, a fraud, or a conman.

On the other hand, the titular no-man's town is Namajd, where one must decide which ethnicity to swear an oath to and represent. Namajd is populated by Hungarians, Székelys, Jews, Armenians, Roma, Romanians, and Saxons, all fighting for control of the town. The novel's conclusion does not erase the differences between the groups, but it does make clear that one's identity does not have to be in the service of the state or nationalist ideas, since deep down, everyone is struggling with the same insecurities and issues of not belonging. Ultimately, the title of the novel refers to displacement without movement: never feeling at home in a country one still inhabits but no longer recognizes as home.

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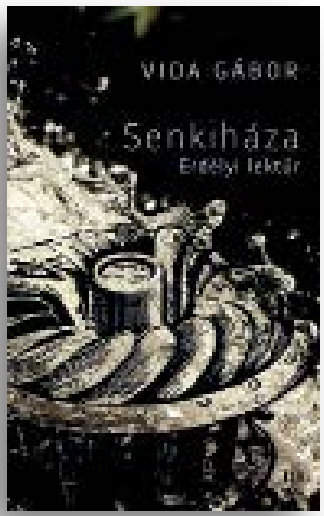

Fotó: Zoltán Balla

GÁBOR VIDA

Gábor Vida was born in 1968 in a small town in the area historically known as Partium, now western Romania. He has been publishing short stories and novels for more than three decades, and since 2019 he has been the editor-in-chief of the Transylvanian literary journal *Látó*. He was awarded the Prize of the Society of Hungarian Authors for his novel "No-Man's Town" in 2024.

The Turbine

News soon spread that the man from the Romanian lands man was going to buy the hydropower plant. Some people dismissed the whole thing with a wave of the hand, while others realized that prices would go up again. The place had been out of use, since the flood of ice in the spring of '34 had brought a bigger chunk than anyone ever could have imagined. It had busted the crown of the dam, broken the sluice gate, and there simply hadn't been any money to rebuild, and not enough resolve either, or interest, there was already too much debt on the place, and someone claimed that it had been no accident that that chunk of ice had broken loose, and not just one chunk of ice, two, and they had been tied together by a chain. There were two rickety dynamos in the Szombath mill, and the electricity they make, that's all the electricity there is. The belt gives off a terrible rattle, and that lets you know you can turn on the light, it's yellow, and it flickers terribly, and the price, well, it's as much as they say it is, the notary, the gendarmes, and the Romanian school, they get it for free. Why does a Romanian school need electricity, many people asked, when the kids are all there during the day anyway? Didn't occur to anyone that the teacher reads at night too, since he doesn't really have much else to do. On a bad day, he writes letters asking them to find a place for him somewhere else, the kids are all so dumb, as if they were all retards, you can't teach them a thing, you can make them stand in the corner or wash the blackboard, but it doesn't help, they can't even sing the national anthem, especially the boys, they'll never amount to anything.

Since the man from the Romanian lands didn't come and didn't come and didn't come people's curiosity slowly subsided, and people didn't really even care if the king really had paid a visit to the national market, as some had said, the newspaper didn't write anything about it, just that the pilot resembled him, King Matthias definitely would have come, ah, but that was yesteryear! Ungrateful posterity knew that the Romanian air force had put the Namajd meadow, where they held the national market and, a long time ago, even horse races, on the list of reserve airports (pista Namaïd) where a plane would be able to land safely, because the craggy, hilly area was dangerous, the landlords filed suits because of the sheaves of wheat, there was even one pilot who they almost lynched, the corn and the sunflowers tear up the plane as bad as sleet. Moldovan even got a secret message that it was forbidden to parcel up the meadow or plant trees or build any buildings, he didn't really understand why the place was so important either. The enemy powers didn't have much to fear from

the Romanian air force at the time, as we know, but Moldovan could strut around with his head held high. The airmail stamp was no side gig, or the other taxes and fees, the tolls, as everyone calls them, everyone should have gotten it through their heads by now.

But Karagor was compelled to accept the fact that Endza Sahaghian had a new lover. Not unexpected, not much of a surprise, but it still tore at his heart that it was that Costel, and the little slip of paper, what need was there for him to keep anything secret? Everyone saw them anyway. A scandal was brewing, the pilot resembled the king, who's crazy about airplanes and mostly women. They say he's got a lot of doubles out there, the Iron Guard men have threatened his life, the general staff probably wouldn't let him fly alone, but he's crazy and reckless, never thinks about anyone but himself, certainly not about the country or its people, he abdicated on paper and then came back by plane. Mr. Sahaghian disdained and despised the big industrialists and speculators who were always coming and going in the court, Malaxa, Auschnitt, Blank, Urdareanu, a bunch of drifters and newcomers, Greeks and Jews, but he knew all too well that you couldn't get anything done without them, without the inner cabal you couldn't do business, couldn't get any compromises, or only in the smaller towns, and only for small stakes. There were assassins everywhere, and detectives, they'd put you six feet under at the drop of a hat, there were financial interests behind most of the political assassinations, what's the difference, after all, between the policeman and the criminal except for who pays their wages? Mr. Sahaghian knew the world, and he was disappointed, people had gone mad, they believed in ideals and philosophies, and everything was driven by money and the thirst for wealth. His adopted daughter would preach about how the workers should get more money for less work, so tell me, then, Kalagor, were you not paid a proper wage here, you and your father? Máté didn't know what to say to that, he had been paid a proper wage, and he had no interest in Marxism or the republic or democracy. He only cared about Endza. There was not a woman in the world who compared to her.

Mr. Sahaghian did not agree with him on that. Women were all the same, just different faces, he would say, dismissing kids today with a wave of his hand. Find yourself a decent woman among your people, he said late one evening in the secret room into which he let very few people step, and only very rarely. The pavilion leaned against the thick wall of the fortress, there was a safe in the wall, bundles of banknotes stacked one on top of the other, take as many as you need, he said, a lot of money makes a man cheerful for a little while, if not happy. There was a revolver just behind the stacks of banknotes, Máté stared at it for a moment and then stuffed some of the bundles of money into his pocket. It's loaded, so careful what you think of, Sahaghian said ominously, can't let a gun end up in the hands of an insecure, unstable young man. He was sorry that he was leaving, his sons were clever, resourceful men, they'd stand on their own two feet, but Máté was smarter than they were, he could have become a real engineer, and it wasn't too late. It's not worth taking an interest in these kinds of animals, her grandfather was from Georgia, that's why her skin is so ashy. Like the most delectable café au lait, Máté thought. A predator, Mr. Sahaghian said, you'll get over her. Never, Máté thought. And he meant it.

The burdens of the past

Cinders and Grass

In Pál Závada's newest novel, in the late 1980s, a team of documentary filmmakers investigates a group of farmers convicted of arson in the 1950s. The team of intellectuals from Budapest travels to rural communities to gather information for the film. They try to get various people to share their memories of the events and speak in front of the camera, including the victims' relatives, the people who had been called as witnesses, and the judges, prosecutors, and journalists who had reported on the case.

The novel offers glimpses into the social structures of rural Hungary in the 1950s and the late 1980s, including, for instance, the devastating political show trials, the violent methods used by the Hungarian Workers' Party, and the network of informants created by the regime. In other words, it offers sketches of the ways in which people's lives were ruined in the roughly five years before the death of Stalin, the so-called Rákosi era, named after the leader of the Hungarian communist party at the time, Mátyás Rákosi.

Cinders und Grass, which at times seems to don the garb of the documentary novel, sheds light on some of the buried, dark episodes of the twentieth-century history of rural Hungary. It reminds us that if we make no effort to understand the past, we have little hope of grasping the present. It is particularly telling that, as the members of the documentary team work to uncover events which took place some forty years earlier, they are, almost inexplicably, hardly aware of the events around them in the runup to the fall of the socialist regime in 1989. However, as the retrospective nature of the novel reveals, very personal questions are often at stake when we find ourselves compelled to stare history face to face. The traumas of the past are passed on from generation to generation, creating seemingly irresolvable divisions even among the best of friends.

Závada's latest book reads as a fictional historical novel that explores the circumstances and results of the investigation. Ultimately, it seeks answers to questions concerning the responsibilities of the individual in the face of an oppressive regime. But it is also very much about the work of remembrance and retelling, or in other words about how we can offer genuine retellings of the past when the very tools of retelling have been cast into doubt.

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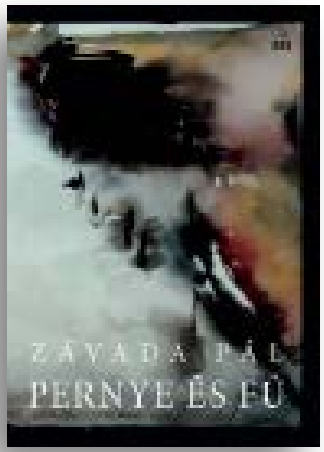

Fotó: Lenke Szilágyi

PÁL ZÁVADA

Pál Závada is a Kossuth Prize-winning writer and a sociologist. He was born in 1954 in Tótkomlós. He is one of the leading figures in contemporary literature. His first major success was the novel *The Pillow of Jadviga*, published by Magvető Publishing House. In 1999 it was made into a multi-award-winning film. In 2002, his family novel *Milota* was published for the Budapest International Book Festival. The main theme of his third novel is again loyalty, with *The Photographer's Descendant* forming a trilogy of novels together with *Jadviga's Pillow* and *Milota*.

For him, the most memorable moment of the whole day under the tent, indeed, the only moment worth recalling, was the speech given by György Konrád. Who greeted those assembled in the name of the democratic opposition, who were not in attendance. As it turned out later, it was hardly by chance that they had been left out. The organizers had managed to get Imre Pozsgay as the keynote speaker, and this had been one of his stipulations. The previous evening, however, Pozsgay had gotten into a fierce argument on the street with a member of the hard core, who was upset about the opposition's absence from the events. Pozsgay had assured him this was hardly a matter of excluding anyone. The whole thing was really just a piecemeal gathering of sorts, which, of course, would be followed by a genuine coalition. I used this nonsense to placate the man, who kept accusing the people who were defending Pozsgay of having betrayed the former hard-won unity.

So Konrád made this regrettably one-sided stance clear in the tent, not as a reproachful rebuke, but simply by addressing those gathered with dignity and decorum in his velvety baritone voice, speaking in flawlessly eloquent prose with an elegance completely absent from the public discourse in Hungary, indeed, even strikingly distinct from the talk under the tent. And while he was witty and clever in his sketch of the state of affairs, he was at the same time firm in his dissent and fair in his attitude toward the initiators and supporters of the event. And then he turned to those gathered (to us?) and encouraged them (us?) to discuss and declare our aims, to stand up for our values, to make clear and openly commit ourselves to who we are and what we want. He extended his sincerest hopes, from the bottom of his heart, that we would prevail in this, and he expressed his great appreciation, respect, and support for us, both on behalf of himself and on behalf of his comrades.

But this dignified, elegant speech, this gracious expression of respect for his audience maybe went just a little bit too far. He couldn't escape the impression that this rhetorical self-assurance, this elegance and eloquence had prompted one or two weary sighs and grunts, and the expression on the face of the chairman, Gyula Fekete, seemed more and more suspicious, even foreboding as he listened to the speech. Until finally he himself began to squirm awkwardly as he came to realize...

As I came to realize that when Konrád was speaking about us, about those gathered before him, he used the word "you." And in doing so, he removed the only thing that was actually of any interest, any appeal to me in the group of people assembled

under the tent: himself. But then I didn't really feel like I was in the right place. Or maybe I had started feeling that way long before he had started speaking. And then I started feeling like I want to get out of there, but of course I didn't, I waited till the end. Out of politeness. And cowardice.

"I get it," Pfeifer says, interrupting me, "but you left out the part about how they threw Andor and Edit out of the yurt."

Yes, so to go back from last year's tent to the guy who actually pitched tent, Andor Fényes knew him personally from various talks among the opposition. They had even attended the previous meeting together, but then Andor hadn't been invited to the next one, the one under the tent. So they both knew perfectly well where the other one stood. Which was why Andor was pretty taken aback to see him there, at the entrance to the Yurt Theater on that Sunday in March 1988, and to have him tell him, as the commander of the communist party national guard, to write his name on the Hungarian Democratic Forum card with a marker and pin it to his chest, because otherwise, he wouldn't let him in.

"I don't like nametags, and I'm not part of the Democratic forum, so drop it!"

"But you'll use a nametag, because otherwise no one knows who you are."

"But you know perfectly well who I am," Andor said with a smile.

"Doesn't matter, you could be a mole."

"What the hell are you talking about? I paid the entrance fee, and the event is open to the public, moles or otherwise."

"Put on a nametag."

"No."

"Then throw him out."

And the security guys with the armbands leapt to obey the order, just as their predecessors had done in this decade or that decade of the past, and he even wrote the tent-pitcher of yore of all the striking similarities he was thinking of for the greater glory of the political momentum of our nascent democracy seeking to take power: you are still taking but the first steps and yet see what you have already become!

True, Pfeifer mutters, as he is about to go to bed, he heard something about several people writing something like that in letters of protest to the Democratic Forum leaders.

He glanced at his notebook, but he wasn't going to say anything about the days that followed. That in the second week of March he moved back in with his little son, but on the fifteenth he dropped in on Fényes and learned from the well-informed witnesses, Edit and Andor, about what had happened at the demonstration that day. That Demsky had been arrested in the morning, and that his speech had been read out by Rozi Hodosán on Batthyány Square, and that Tamás Gazsi had called on Kádár to resign.

And he wondered why he hadn't gone in the end. And why he had never gone when anything important had actually happened.

Obviously because of the kid. A parent with a young child is only free when the kid's in school. Or in other words, doesn't really have any free time at all.

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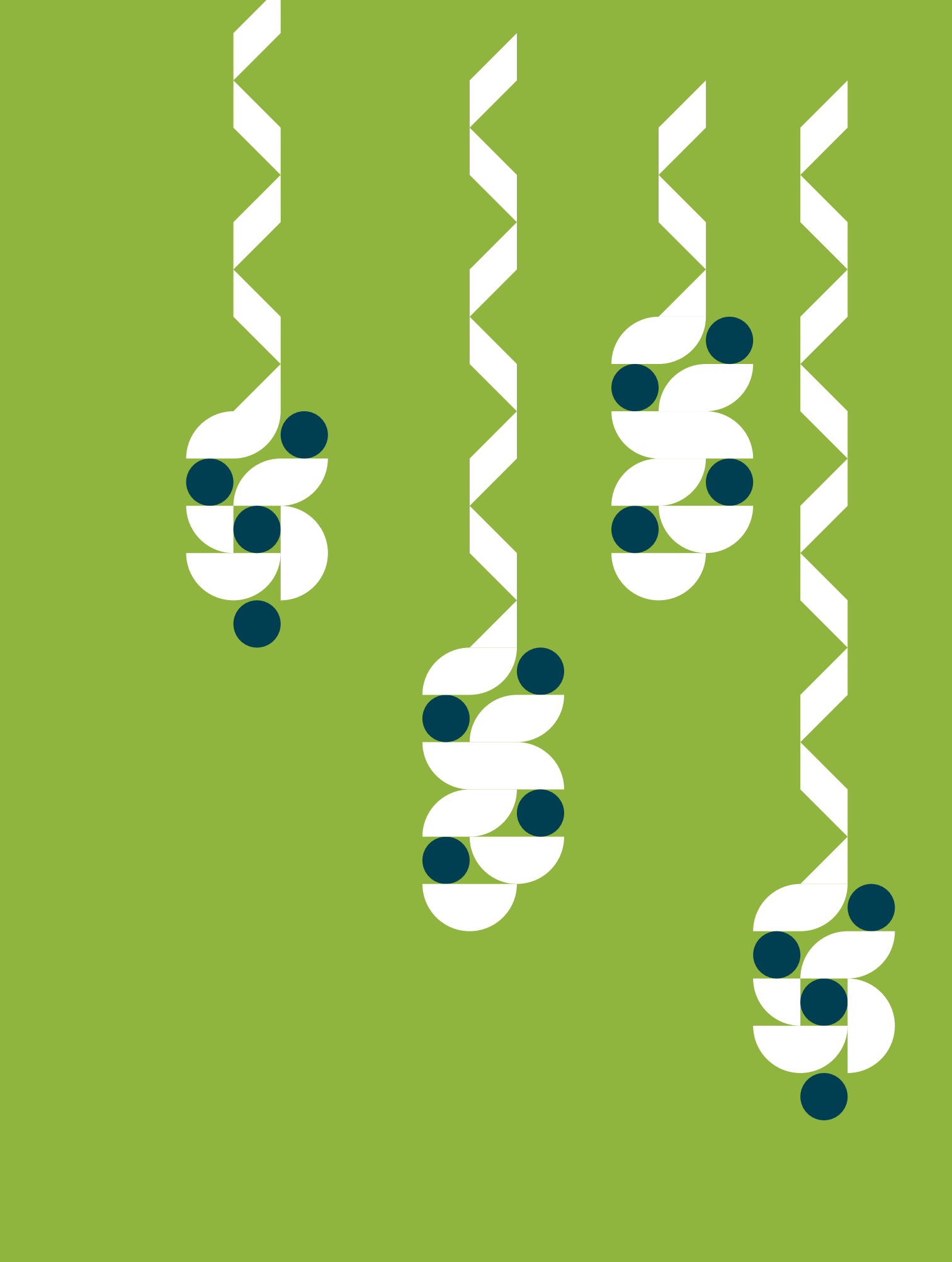

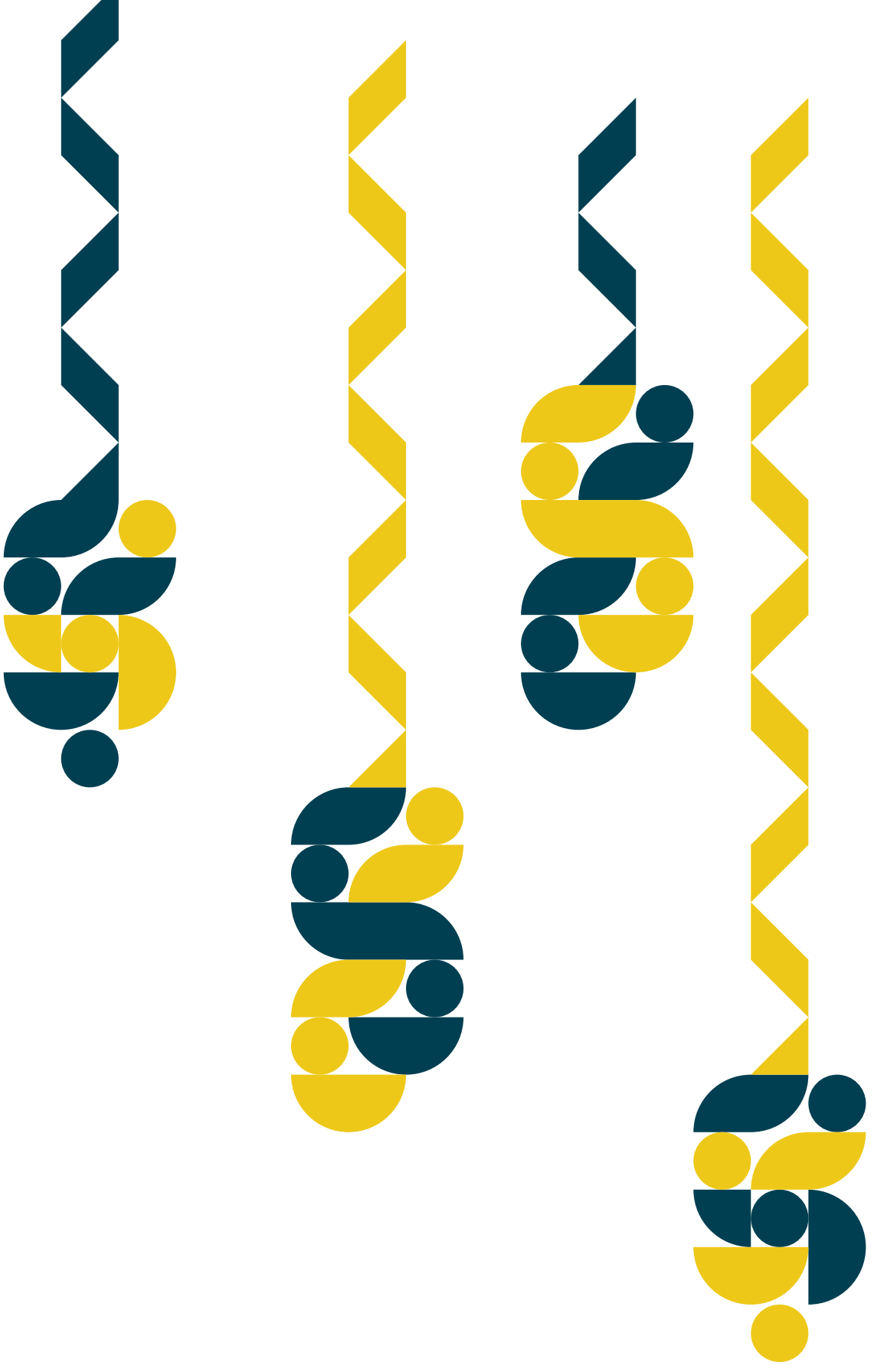

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