NEW HUNGARIAN

2024

FICTION

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Always Have to Think About Someone

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"I don't look at his green sweater, I don't look at his dark brown hair, (…) I don't even think about him." So one of the narrators of Anita Harag's new book repeats over and over again to herself, and yet there is a certain man she simply cannot stop thinking about. The short stories in *Always Have to Think About Someone* guide us through labyrinths of everyday compulsions and daydreams, forcing us all the while to confront unsettlingly familiar feelings, including biting jealousy, loneliness, and the sense of regret that we feel when we have missed a chance to connect with someone.

Critics noted the starkness and polished phrasing of Harag's stories when her earlier collection came out, but in the stories in her new book, language has emerged as one of the key organizing elements. The characters in "Nils and Agnieszka," for example, can only communicate with each other using the words and verb tenses they have already mastered in the foreign language course they are taking.

In "Are You Bringing Sunscreen," however, language is not simply a barrier. It is, rather, a tool with which to create reality. A mother and daughter embark on an imagined trip to Sarti, and as they recount their fictional experiences, they reveal more and more about their personalities. Fantasy comes to displace reality as the characters imagine that they are other people, that they too are the slender women who "who look good in anything, who fit perfectly in skinny jeans," and who would never be cheated on by their husbands. Behind the maniacal obsession with beauty and appearances lie very real wounds and the many errant desires that often shape our decisions, sometimes against our own will. Alongside obsessive, unrequited, and even ephemeral love, ageing is also an important theme in the collection, sometimes in the form of humorous moments but mostly in heartrending tales.

Harag crafts her stories with remarkable attention to detail and plot, and she often toys with her reader's expectations. We come to understand the dynamics of the relationships among the characters only one step at a time from bits of dialogue and haphazard remarks, but the larger picture remains murky, and we can decipher only a mood at best. We find ourselves pulled into disturbing, even unsettling conversations and situations, but we feel compelled to read on, for the obsessions that burden Harag's characters are all too familiar to us.

PHOTO: **DÓRA BARANYAI**

Anita HARAG

was born in 1988 in Budapest, Hungary. She graduated from Eötvös Loránd University in 2014. In 2018, she won the György Petri Prize and in 2019 the Péter Horváth Literary Scholarship. In 2020, the won the Margó Prize for the best first prose book for her collection of stories *Évszakhoz képest hűvösebb* (“Cooler for the Season”). Her new book is her second collection of short stories.

We were the first to move into the building. We pressed the elevator button for the third floor, the buttons were smooth, no one had yet carved their names or phrases on the elevator door. We looked at ourselves in the mirror, we were also smooth, two people, a man and a woman, we tried to see if they suited each other. The man is somewhat taller than the woman, his hair darker, his eyes darker, he looks like an engineer, someone comfortably off; the woman is pale, has good posture, she is, perhaps, a tired lawyer. We stop on the third floor and go to apartment 34. It is larger than we remembered, the walls are glaringly white, our heels clatter against the tiles. We enter each room, the doorknobs feel strange in our hands, the doors open differently from what we expect. We turn on the tap, the water splatters as it comes out. We go out on the balcony, look at the fenced off yard, at the red swings, the wooden playground climbers, at the garden with its multi-colored flowers, at the empty windows of the apartments in the other wing of the building across from us, there are no clothes drying on the balconies nor chairs with tables holding ashtrays. We like the balconies and the idea that we will be sitting here in the evenings, light up and watch the people behind the windows. We go back to the bedroom and lie down, start kissing but the floor is too cold and hard. We brush our hands over the floor’s pattern, a slight coating of dust remains on our fingers. We don’t lock the door but then, out of habit, go back and lock it anyway.

The dog didn’t find his place for weeks. We put his bed beside the sofa, then beside the dresser, then at the kitchen door. He didn’t lie down in it even once. He stood beside the entrance door, then got tired and lay down, got up again and stared at the door. We thought he wanted to go for a walk but once downstairs in front of the building he didn’t move. We carried him to the park in our arms, there he sniffed at the ground, he sensed the familiar smells and ran around in the grass. He’ll get used to it, we kept saying. .... The plants suddenly started to grow, their stems got tangled; the day after watering them, new shoots appeared. Every week we brought new pots and on the balcony we transplanted the plants into them, sweeping the leftover soil down into the yard. Even the first plant we bought together showed new life, although for years its leaves were yellow and we never knew whether it needed more water or less.

When we arrive home one day we find the apartment empty, our furniture has disappeared, so have the plants that covered the balcony door, and the dresser, the small chest beside the entrance, and the bowl we bought by the ocean. We call for the dog, he doesn’t dash out from the bedroom where he was sleeping on the bed even though that was forbidden. The apartment echoes with our steps, neither of us says how relieved we are. There are no picture holes on the walls, the protective film is still on the windows. Everything is exactly as it was on the first day. We finally figure out that this is the fourth floor. We close the door, look at each other and go to the next door. Our key opens four more apartments.

... Apartment 46 is five square meters larger but only has two rooms. The living room is like ours, with windows all around. We open the balcony door, the balcony is larger, a hibachi could fit in it. We would barbecue here, one of says, there could be a hammock here, the other says. Once a month we would invite the neighbors over, if we run out of barbecue spice, the neighbor can hand it over the balcony railing. I would have an affair, one of us says. What do you mean? Here, I would have an affair, it’s that sort of apartment. Would you have an affair here? Not here. Then where? Somewhere else. I would have an inkling but I wouldn’t dare ask about it. We go back to our apartment. The dog is so happy to see us as if we had been gone for several days.

We remember less and less what our life was like before this building. We couldn’t tell what the entrance to our old apartment was like, whether we put a pine wreath on the door at Christmas time, what the view was like from the bedroom window, there must have been a draft by the window, we don’t know if the light in the bathroom was the cool or the warm type. We had a lot of neighbors, two per floor, we saw them often, talked to them, asked how they were doing We had a lot of neighbors, two per floor, we saw them often, talked to them, asked how they were doing; on the day for that we helped them carry down their heavy furniture they wanted to get rid of. Yet we couldn’t recall their names. We seemed that we talked to each other differently in that apartment, we touched each other differently, and coming home we often focused on the other person, slicing tomatoes or reading the newspaper on the sofa, we lived in a bachelor apartment at the time but were uncertain whether there was another room in it somewhere, for example a bedroom, perhaps by the bathroom.

Everybody Grieves Differently

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Sándor Jászberényi

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Sándor Jászberényi's novel is a collection of stories the recurring character of which, Dániel Maros, is a war correspondent. Maros is traveling through the various theaters of the ongoing Ukrainian war, but the frame for the narratives is an in-patient psychiatric institution, where Maros is struggling to recover from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Perhaps the most important moment in *Everybody Grieves Differently* comes when Maros realizes, as he looks back on the events to which he has borne witness, that you can never go home from war. Even if you survive, even if you return, you still cannot go home. War is a condition of existence that makes it impossible to determine or define what is normal anymore. It is paradoxical and unsettling to think that, from the perspective of the experiences of war, what we otherwise would have thought of as peaceful, everyday life is more like delusion or lunacy, for it unfolds against a thinly veiled backdrop of bridled but ever-present madness.

In Jászberényi's novel, simple peasant boys, kids who had worked at corner stands frying fish, and young men just about to start their careers and lives as adults go to the front to face the sulfurous hell of the battlefield. Women, children, and the elderly are forced into shelters as they try to find food and medicine in the cold, shattered cities, and even, if possible, a memory or two of their former lives. They are making plans for what they will do once it is all over without knowing whether it ever will be over. Generations are being crushed by unthinkable trauma, and all for the world to see. Beneath Jászberényi's short, almost minimalist sentences, the taut structure of his narratives, and the stark, unrelenting style emotions smolder and flare. The rapidly shifting scenes present tragedies both harrowing and abrupt. We see, because we must, how soldiers and civilians adapt to war, how war becomes part of everyday life, and how nothing will ever be the same again. Through the fates of individuals, Sándor Jászberényi's novel reveals all too chillingly how what should be unimaginable can become commonplace.

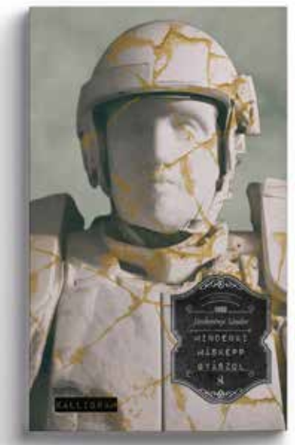

PHOTO: **ESZTER JÁSZBERÉNYI**

Sándor JÁSZBERÉNYI

was born in 1980 in Sopron. He is a writer, journalist, and war correspondent who has worked in several war and conflict zones. *Everybody Grives Differently* is his seventh book.

The Ukrainians were remarkably disciplined. They didn't desecrate the bodies, didn't spit on them, didn't strip them naked. They just carried them into one of the houses that was still standing in the village after the shelling.

Except for one blond kid in his twenties, who had written "Buryats for sale" in chalk on the wooden door of the house.

As always over the course of its history, Russia was sending its minorities to war. Starving wretches from the edges of the empire, Buryats, Chechens, Dagestanis. The men who had been taken prisoner had been Buryats.

The kid's joke had met with general amusement among the soldiers until the commander had seen it. He was in his fifties, graying, and had lips as thin as razorblades. He smacked the private so hard that his nose bled. Maros watched him make the kid erase the whimsical little sign.

When the private had finished, the commander walked over to Maros and began to speak in terrible English. Maros knew he was talking first and foremost to his Kevlar helmet and his international ID.

Without help from the West, the Ukrainians would have lost the war, but thanks to the influx of arms, they had not only stopped the Russian invasion, they had even managed to launch a successful counterattack. So successful that the enemy had left everything behind and fled the eastern front. The Western shoulder-launched surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles had become so popular that people were naming their kids after them, and sometimes you could see them in the hands of the saints on icons.

As a Western journalist, Maros was treated like an uncle from abroad whose family lived off the money he sent. It mattered to them what he thought about the resistance the Ukrainians had put up.

He didn't understand much of what the commander said. All he could manage to decipher was that the commander had ordered the execution of the prisoners of war because the Russians were expected to counterattack in a matter of minutes, and he simply didn't have enough men to secure the village and guard the prisoners.

This was also clear from the fact that the commander had said something to the sergeant in charge of accompanying Maros, and the sergeant had then turned to Maros and said, "we must go."

The outlines of acacia trees shimmered in the distance. They were close to the Ukrainian base. The Ukrainians were moving from house to house every other day because of Russian missile attacks. Maros had no idea where he was going to sleep, but he wasn't counting on anything luxurious. He'd been sleeping on various bunks next to NLAW missiles for a week, using latrines built out of empty ammunition crates to piss and shit, like everyone else in the detachment.

The sergeant clearly still felt he had to explain himself. He spoke with tears in his eyes.

"We're defending our country, you know. We are not animals. Everyone in the detachment's a teacher or an engineer or a doctor or a farmer."

"I know, Petya," Maros said. The sergeant was bald, hefty, with a 1970s porn moustache. Came from somewhere near Ternopil. He had been assigned to Maros because he spoke English.

"These beasts are just in it for the kill. We do it so we can go home at last and get on with our lives."

"What did you do before the war?"

"I had a little stand where I sold fried fish."

"You going back to it when the war's over?"

"I don't know. I guess so, if I ever get back home."

"The Russians are fleeing."

"Yeah. But the war's not over yet. As long as the invaders still have one scrap of our land in their hands."

They fell silent. They were both thinking the same thing, but neither one of them said it. That officially, Russia was not yet at war with Ukraine. The collapse of the front did not mean that peace was any closer. The Ukrainians had only won a month or two while the Russians conscripted another quarter million soldiers. Everyone knew they were coming. The war had been going on for eight years now.

They got out of the fields and drove down a white dirt road in the evening light. There were acacia trees on either side of the road with Ukrainian T-64 tanks behind them. Their crews were sitting on the turrets, smoking, waiting for orders over the radio, and waving as they passed by.

"So you're not angry that you couldn't take pictures?"

"No. I know why you took the camera, and besides, you gave it back."

"I was following orders."

"Petya, stop explaining. The Russians got what they deserved. Why did they come here in the first place?"

"You're a good man. I'm glad you understand."

As he watched the shadows of the trees dancing on the dirt road, Maros thought of the psychologist back in Budapest. They had had a little fling, which ruled out a doctor-patient relationship, but they were fond of each other. They always got together for a drink when Maros was back home in the capital.

She was the only person he would put up with that gibberish from, the psychoanalysis talk that he figured you ran into with every shrink.

What would she say, he wondered, if he were to tell her that he had felt nothing when the Russians had been executed in front of him. He imagined her eyes widening and the pace of her breathing shifting nervously as she tried to appear calm. He remembered the expression she had had on her face two weeks earlier, holding a glass of wine in one hand and earnestly explaining.

"What exactly are you trying to prove?" she had asked.

"Nothing."

"How long do you think you'll survive with your skin intact?"

"I've always managed to pull through so far."

"I meant how long do you think you'll stay the same man?"

"Been doing it for eleven years."

"That's quite a big ego you've got."

"Yeah, not just my ego."

She smiled for a moment but then her face grew stern again.

"If you dance with the devil people will mistake you for the devil."

"That's a cliché."

"Doesn't mean it's not true. No one comes home from a war. The people who come home aren't the people who went."

"What film did you get that from?"

"I don't know. But you didn't answer the question. Why are you going back again."

"For the money."

Maros had no intention of lecturing Marti about how he'd rather be in the middle of a patriotic war surrounded by heavy shelling than feeling sorry for himself on the terrace of some bar with craft beers, sipping a sparkling rosé with hints of almond and frittering away his remaining days.

He wanted to be where history was being made, not yammering on about stirring depictions of violence from behind a lectern at some smalltown college.

In Ukraine, a new nation was being born, with new myths. The Ukrainians were standing up to an empire, and the empire had begun to crack. They were all fucking heroes as far as Maros was concerned, heroes from the novels of yesteryear. And his place was there, with them.

"The SUN still hasn't come up in HERE"

Bipolar Hell-Ride

"I can't tell anyone, so I'll tell everyone." Famous twentieth-century Hungarian poet and novelist Frigyes Karinthy wrote these lines in one of his poems. In his latest novel, Zsolt Kácsor does exactly this. What he refused ever to tell any psychologist he now reveals to the reader, and he does not hesitate to touch on even the most unsettling subjects. *Bipolar Hell-Ride* is a novel, not an autobiography, but Kácsor has nonetheless drawn quite openly on autobiographical events. He guides us into the darkest corners of his soul, where we are confronted with the devastatingly destructive power of feelings of shame and self-loathing, and we find ourselves compelled to consider how we manageto survive in this "indifferent, unforgiving" world.

"Bipolar depression is not dejection or melancholy, bipolarism is actually two lives in same body: both are real, but neither is right." the narrator-protagonist tells us. It is not a state of despondency that will pass in time. Our troubled protagonist speaks to us as he takes the last few steps in preparation for his own suicide. He no longer wants to yearn for anything, to crave or covet anything. He wants, simply, no longer to exist. Life is racing along outside, but in vain. His soul is lost in eternal night. And yet as he wanders through his recollections, he does not speak solely in the voice of pain. The pages of the book also contain heartrendingly beautiful passages and moments of masterful humor which offer a fascinating counterpoint to the absurdities of this troubled man's ways of functioning and the solemn gravity of his confessions and revelations. The reader also finds fascinating, almost obsessive ideas concerning letters and numbers. The titles of the chapters, modelled on Hebrew, are made up of consonants only and thus can form different words depending on the vowels one chooses to add. As we wander around in the inferno of bipolarity, we come ever closer to the everyday life of a writer and to Jewish identity, as slowly light is cast on the traumas of the past. We get to know Ádám, the narrator's mentally handicapped brother, and gradually the outlines of a poisonous and yet very deep love are revealed.

Zsolt Kácsor's novel is perhaps the most boldly honest book I have ever read. He invites his reader on an incredibly sad yet uplifting journey that continues in our own minds as we seek answers to the questions he raises. Why do we constantly punish ourselves? Why don't we believe that we deserve recognition? And how many times can our hearts break before we finally tire of the struggle?

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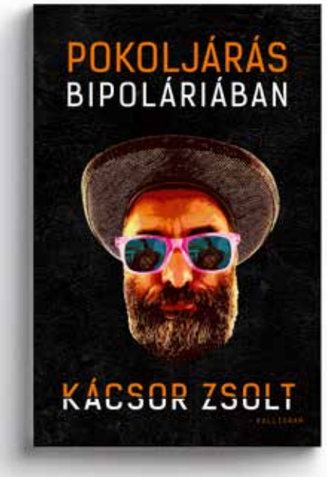


PHOTO: **ZSOLT KÁCSOR**

Zsolt KÁCSOR

was born in 1972 in Eger, Hungary and currently lives in Budapest. Since 1990, he has published in daily and weekly newspapers and cultural and literary magazines. He has worked for almost 20 years for *Népszabadság*, one of the most widely read Hungarian periodicals of its time, which was shut down in 2016. *Pokoljárás Bipolária* ("Bipolar Hell-Ride") is his sixth novel. It focuses on the protagonist's struggles with bipolar depression.

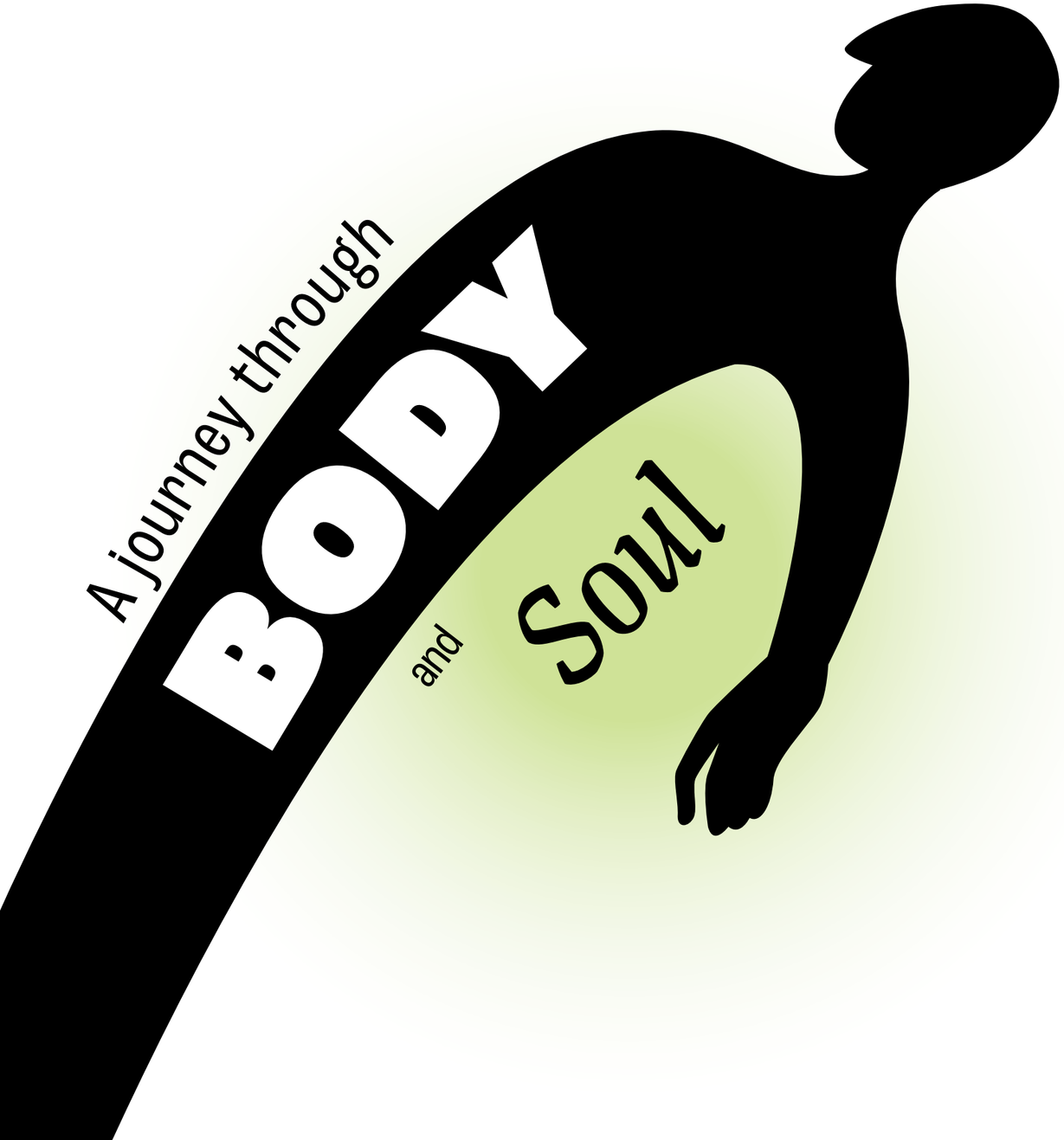
In those last moments, my head was as clear as a cloudless, moonlit night. A few days earlier, I had googled hanging and had read everything that might be good to know. I didn't want to experiment with medications. Tried that once and it didn't work. Rope. My time had come. I tidied up the room, swept and mopped. I was pretty lucky to live in such a small apartment. Didn't take long to straighten the place up. Took the trash to the trash chute by the elevator. Didn't run into anyone in the hallway, thankfully. But I did put on a kippah. You never know. Shouldn't be seen with a bare head on my last day. Took care not to leave the key in the lock. The porter had a spare key. They'd be able to get in. They wouldn't have to break the door down or anything. I hope they'll be relieved. Don't want to cause unnecessary bother. That was why, after long and careful consideration, I had decided against using a knife. I didn't want the bathroom to look like a butcher's place. I didn't want the guy who would have to come clean all the blood to heap imprecations on me under his breath. I didn't deserve that. I've made a lot of mistakes in life, my conscience is hardly snow white, but I never, ever wanted to harm anyone on purpose, out of malice or ill-will. I may have made mistakes and blunders, though not too many, since as a newspaper writer I always tried to be thorough and circumspect. But sometimes I even felt sorry for that politician I described as a corrupt thieving scoundrel. I thought about how his mother must have loved him when he was a little kid in kindergarten. And my heart softened. And I think about that little kid I once was in kindergarten, who wanted to please everyone and everything. All my life I've been busting my ass, busting my ass for my crazy brother, because I didn't want them to kill him, and I didn't want them to kill me because of him either. I was always the model overachiever, and I always took on way too much. I shouldn't have, but when I was a kid, I was convinced that if we weren't good, they'd kill us. I was so desperate to please that I got two degrees, one just because of my stupid brother. Did two doctoral programs, one just because of my stupid bother. I learned English, French, Spanish, Latin, Hebrew, and I'm not saying it to complain, I had a pretty decent childhood in the end, brought up in a loving, caring family, just kinda seems like I didn't actually have a real childhood. I didn't like being a child, I was afraid, terrified that as long as I was a child, they might kill me. Me and my brother. I had horrible nightmares. When I was ten or eleven, I used to dream that I was running from German soldiers in some concrete maze underground. I couldn't find the way out, all I could see was a dim, gray shimmering everywhere, and somewhere behind me people were shouting commands in German and dogs were barking. Maybe that's why there are dogs in all my novels. Not that anybody ever read them, doggone it. Sorry, terrible pun.

So I decided in favor hanging. The main point in favor of this method was that it would leave a relatively clean workspace. Were I to try mixing medications and alcohol I might barf all over the bed, and if I were to slit my wrists, the blood might spatter as high as the ceiling. Would make for a pretty ugly sight, and someone would have to do the cleanup.

While I was doing all the preparatory work for the main event, I decided not to write a farewell letter. Didn't really have anyone to write one for. Just my daughter, but she's still very young, I shouldn't put her through anything like that. And she'll hate me when she grows up anyway and won't want to hear a single word of anything I might have had to say. And she'll be right to hate me. A father has no right to kill himself if he has a daughter. Or at least so people say, but they're wrong. There are extenuating circumstances, even justifications. And I've absolved myself. I've absolved myself because I don't want my daughter to see me as this big heap of misery. I've got a clear head, and I've thought it through, andI know that my condition is only going to get worse. Bipolar depression can't be cured, it can only be treated. But I'm so exhausted with it all. I don't want to be a burden on people. I don't want my daughter to feel sorry for me.

I don't want people to say it'd be better for him not to be. Not to be would be better for him. For him, would be better not to be. Or something like that. But I want to be very clear, very precise, so that they understand: I'm not letting my daughter down, I'm saving her from the unbearable person I will be. The person I am. I myself cannot stand myself. I don't know why. I've thought about it a lot. Hanging, that's the answer. That's the solution I've come to.

It's ten o'clock at night, it's completely dark outside. I won't turn on the light, because I don't want it to be on all night for no reason. I don't want to die in a well-lit room. I love light so much. I don't want to see. How wondrous the light was when I was a child! I haven't seen lights like that since. I don't mean the light that poured in from outside, I mean the light from the future. Life shimmered with a promising light. It was so beautiful. But now the rope.



They Should Have Cut It Off

Ever since she was a child, Zsófi has hated being touched. At twenty-one years of age, she desperately yearns for intimacy but is incapable of making physical contact. A gentle caress feels to her like the sting of an electric current or the scrape of barbed wire on her skin. Bálint Kovács's debut novel portrays the young woman's struggles and haunting memories with astounding psychological depth, confronting the reader with his protagonist's harrowing sense of shame, guilt, and loneliness while maintaining a lighthearted, humorous tone.

When the story begins, little Zsófi is sitting in her dark room listening to her parents shout at each other. Or more precisely, to her mother shout at her father, for her father is usually passive during their fights. He speaks up neither for himself nor for his daughter. As a university student, Zsófi turns to a psychologist for help, and the psychologist sums up her childhood in rather blunt terms: "Your mother pushed you away, and your father let you fall." Zsófi continues to see the psychologist in the hopes of finding a solution to the phobia that is ruining her life. Initially, the puzzle pieces of the past fall apart over and over again, but eventually hypnosis helps Zsófi uncover a long-forgotten memory of an experience that has held her in its icy grip. We learn about everything leading up to the trauma she suffered and the challenges she now faces in her present. The non-linear structure of the novel keeps us eagerly yearning to learn more and requires that we read attentively until the very last page of the tale. Although the focus of the novel is on Zsófi, Kovács also offers insights into the motivations and experiences of the other members of the cast, thus creating complex characters, who at times completely misunderstand one other's reactions and struggle against the habits and reflexes they have inherited and also their own compulsions to conform.

Kovács takes the reader on a journey through the body and soul of a troubled young woman. He prompts us to reflect on the extraordinary relationship between humans and animals, the transition to adulthood, and the importance of empathy. Each line of *They Should Have Cut It Off* is rich with stifled tensions and the throbbing longings of youth, as well as hope, disillusionment, insight, and uncertainty. If suddenly we pull everything that we have kept behind closed doors out into the open, do we still have any chance of finding happiness?

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PHOTO: **ESZTER ASSZONYI**

Bálint KOVÁCS

was born in Budapest in 1987. He completed a degree in sociology at Corvinus University of Budapest. His short story collection *Could We Just Sleep?* was published in 2021. Kovács is a Junior Prima Award-winning cultural journalist who currently works for hvg.hu. *They Should Have Cut It Off* is his first novel. He is also raising three cats, with little success, he says.

If she could have, she would have poured all her thoughts, memories, and feelings into a large glass bowl, put a small paper umbrella and a cocktail cherry in it, and handed it over to the experts so that they could fish out everything that needed to be fished out and help her get to the bottom of things. The reason she had come here in the first place was bad enough. The fear that, heaven forfend, because of some deed she had done in her past or some feeling she was experiencing now, her psychologist would judge her too. Compared to that, nothing else mattered, and besides, under the circumstances, wasn't it the psychologist's professional obligation not to judge anyone? Though she wasn't quite sure of that. But none of this really mattered, nothing on god's green earth mattered compared to the need to find some solution to her problems. Here she was, twenty-one years old, and it wasn't that she didn't have and never had had a sex life, she had never had any kind of romantic relationship at all. There was no one, no one with whom she had gone out for more than one or two dates, no one with whom she could have claimed to have had a frivolous fling or one of those one-night stands one has in one's teens, no one whose presence in her life might have prompted her just once to use the first-person plural when talking about herself.

Not that it troubled her too terribly not to have notches on the bedpost. Sure, it would have been nice to have been able to carve one or two into the wood with her fingernails, but what she missed most was not having someone to have breakfast with, and lunch, and dinner. Because she felt terribly alone, you see, agonizingly, hopelessly, numbingly alone, even when she never really was alone, except sometimes on a Friday or Saturday night, when the other girls from the dorm were either with their boyfriends or at some party, or most often with their boyfriends at some party. The splitting pain was like a migraine, except that she didn't feel it in her head, she felt it everywhere in her body, starting in her chest and then spreading to her lungs, her throat, even in the heaviness of her limbs, and it didn't start when she found herself left alone. She could feel it coming already on Friday morning, sometimes Thursday bedtime. Friday was pretty much like a weekend day anyway that somehow had gotten grouped with the weekdays because of some administrative error. People attended the lectures half-heartedly at best, and some of the kids had even had the foresight and good fortune not to sign up for a single class on Fridays. The students who didn't go to their parents' place for the weekend were buzzing with a different kind of energy all day. Even sitting in the lecture halls, you could sense the tremors of excitement in their bodies, the anticipation that you usually feel when you're in front of the mirror getting ready for a party, the yearning to move, the eager sense that finally something exciting is going to happen, something different. And that's what Zsófi missed most of all, the feeling that something different was coming, because she knew that it wouldn't be any different. She hadn't been going to parties for some time now, ever since what had happened in February two years ago. She could feel the excitement in the others, but her body didn't pick up the waves. They bounced off her like someone knocking on a closed door, and it made her more and more despondent. Not that she showed it, of course. She tucked it away inside her, as if closing it up in a little box, and she smiled at everyone, but if she could, she would have skipped the next few days entirely, closed her eyes, and then next thing she knew, it would be Monday, and the weekend would be behind her, gone, like the darkness when someone flips on the light.

Because she knew those Friday and Saturday evenings, when the door closed behind her roommate and the smile lingered on her face for a few minutes after they had said goodbye. Though it was perfectly sincere. She really did want her friends to have a fun evening, and if they happened to have boyfriends, she really did want them to have a fun evening with their boyfriends. For her part, she would lie back in her bed, take the book out from under her pillow, and listen to the echoes of silence as they bounced off the walls of her room. And her body would start to go numb as she read, as she sank one more millimeter into the mattress with every turn of the page.

As she began to have more and more of these nights, she began to feel more and more as if some part of her body, some appendage were missing. Not because she had lost it. Rather because, in contrast with all the bodies around her, in her case, it had never grown out in the first place. She looked herself up and down and saw this absence, this missing thing. Everyone else presumably saw it too, just as even the most discrete person cannot help but notice if someone happens to be missing a hand or a foot. They notice that he's different, and that no matter how hard he were to struggle, he would never be able to be like everyone else.

She was perfectly able to talk about all this with the psychologist. She had always been good at listing the events of her life and her feelings, as if that was really all she were doing, reading a list out loud, as if she were speaking about someone else, anyone else. And yet the only accomplishment they had been able to achieve in therapy was to identify the direct cause of her problems: touch.

More precisely, that she could not stand to be touched. It wasn't the emotions that troubled her, not even commitment. It wasn't that she couldn't open up to anyone. It was just that she could not stand to be touched.

Our VANISHING universe

Cosmos Devoured

Botond Markovics started publishing novels under the pseudonym Brandon Hackett in the early 2000s and soon became one of the most successful science fiction writers in Hungary. After the end of the communist regime, speculative fiction and various genres began to flourish in Hungary, due in no small part to Western influence, but in the early years, the Hungarian audience had reservations about Hungarian authors, so many authors opted to use English pseudonyms. By now, this trend has changed, and Botond Markovics' latest work, *Cosmos Devoured*, was published under his real name.

Although at home in various subgenres of speculative fiction and science fiction, Markovics predominantly writes in the spirit of transhumanism. This approach is characterized by faith in technology and a positive attitude towards the potential of ever more advanced scientific tools and technologies with which we can overcome major crises. *Cosmos Devoured*, however, also reveals the darker sides of transhumanism. Having dealt with the climate crisis, humanity is divided into green superpowers which invest in and rely on green technologies, but which also increasingly become hardcore authoritarian regimes. In this twenty-fifth-century political-economic climate, following the colonization of several distant planets, scientists, politicians, religious leaders, and ordinary people face a strange, seemingly overwhelming threat, much like the climate crisis of an earlier era: a distant, mysterious light, which is both constantly expanding and constantly getting closer to our solar system. Schroeder's eye, which was named after the scientist who discovered it, will reach the edges of our galaxy, our solar system, and then our home, earth, within a few decades, and when it does, it will devour them.

Doubts, dread, denial, religious fanaticism, and the question of free will shape the narrative, in which a parallel universe which works according to completely laws of physics threatens to devour our universe. Like his earlier novel Xeno, in which Markovics reflects on the migration crisis and xenophobia of the 2010s through the story of alien civilizations forced to relocate to Earth, *Cosmos Devoured* highlights the nature of the threats and uncertainties of our time through an engaging, fast-paced story full of memorable characters.

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PHOTO: **BOTOND MARKOVICS**

Botond MARKOVICS

Botond Markovics was born in Budapest in 1975. He is an economist and has won the Péter Zsoldos and Monolit prizes multiple times. His previous science fiction works were published under the pseudonym Brandon Hackett. *Cosmos Devoured* is his sixteenth book.

The message flashed on the screen. Emily took a pic of her face from up close, then took a few steps back and sat down Indian style on the soft, orange Tanzer soil. In the background, a geyser was shooting water and steam into the sky, and a bit further back, the light of Schroeder's eye shimmered on the obsidian lava ground.

"Hey everybody, I decided to take a trip to our old spot.
At least I'll have a little peace and quiet here before they find me. This'll probably be my last message for a while, cause..."

She bit her lip.

"I did something stupid. No, not stupid. Important. It was important. We wanted everyone to know. About Schroeder's eye. We managed to figure out how far away it is."

She took a few deep breaths, pulled her mask over her face, and took a puff or two of the enriched oxygen.

"Remember Tiktak, the star? That we wanted to use to measure how fast Schroeder's eye was expanding? We figured at best we still had a few decades before the event, but then Schroeder's eye devoured Tiktak two months ago.
A little less than three years and eighty-nine days have passed. In that time, it has traveled 3.21 lightyears. You know what that means? That it's expanding at a rate of ninety-nine percent the speed of light. Ninety-nine percent!"

"That's impossible," their father whispered.

Diali knew that starships could accelerate to seventy percent of the speed of light, and that it was impossible to reach or exceed the speed of light, but this meant that Schroeder's eye had gotten damn close. And it was perfectly clear from Emily's agitated voice that this was not a good thing.

"Witches' Nebula and Tiktak are a little over seven thousand one hundred light-years from earth, but Schroeder's eye is expanding at a rate almost as fast as the its own light. Everything that we see of it happened a long time ago. You know what that means, don't you, dad? Schroeder's eye will reach Tanzer in early 2502.
And Earth in 2512. Seventy-one years from now! And it will swallow everything. Tanzer, earth, the whole solar system. All of human civilization."

She cast a worried look at the sky.

"Tamara Orlov, head of the Tiktak observation team, immediately sent the measurement data to earth on tachyon-com.
And you know what happened? Nothing! Two months passed, one month there, one month back, and nothing, no reply. The Alpha Federation encrypted the message. The Institute of Cosmology was overrun by government guards, and they assigned a colonel to keep watch over us. We report directly to him and Governor Wilford. I asked what the hell's going on, but even Professor Ilyakin told me to shut up if I didn't want to get arrested."

Diali noticed that Emily's hands were shaking.

"The tachyon-com lines between Tanzer and Earth are monitored by Alpha Federation algorithms. They scan all the data, and only information that has been authorized by the Alpha government gets through. They censor anything and everything concerning Schroeder's eye. But why? To keep people from panicking? Why the secrecy? I... I couldn't just drop it. We couldn't just drop it. We had to do it. We didn't have any other choice."

"What did you do?" her father blurted out, as if Emily could actually hear him.

Suddenly, you could hear a distant siren in the video.
Emily flinched and then bit her lip.

"I have just enough time to finish. My earlier messages were allegedly deleted, but I hope you get this one at least. They won't be able to keep it secret anymore. So... I broke into the old Drake antenna with two of my colleagues, Stefan and Jolanda. You remember it, twenty kilometers from Prospero, that big concrete dish overgrown with weeds on Sorcerer's Plateau that they used to use back before tachyon-com. We were able to get it running, and we sent all the data that Tamara and the others had gathered to earth, everything. Clear proof! They won't be able to keep it all hushed up anymore. Thousands and thousands of amateur radio astronomers all over the earth will get the message. True, it won't get there for another ten years, but we've still managed to force Alpha's hand. Now, they'll have to tell everyone."

Emily gazed into the camera with a look of determination.

"I had to do it. I had to."

She looked up at the sky again. The flashing red lights of a law-enforcement heliquadra flickered on her face. She leaned closer to the camera, blew them all a quick kiss, and then the message ended.

Her last, sad smile hung, fading, in the middle of the room.
Diali could see the fear in her eyes.

"Dad," she whispered, "what happened to her? Did they really arrest her?"

"I don't know," their father said, "but I'm going to find out."

He stood up and paced around the apartment for a while. He then went out onto the huge balcony surrounded by trees and bushes. He was probably calling Vanida Winter.

Diali shuddered. She stepped over to the window. It was starting to get light outside. Beyond the city towers, the pearly light of Shroeder's eye was just beginning to shimmer on the ocean waters on the horizon. Kaito stepped over and stood beside her, and together they stared at the ever stronger glow.

Their father came back from the balcony with a grave look on his face.

"I've spoken to Vanida Winter. The Alpha Federation did indeed make the data gathered on Tanzer public shortly afterwards, and there was mass hysteria. Emily, however, was arrested. She spent four months in a prison in Prospero."

"A prison?" Kaito sputtered. "But she's not a criminal."

"She broke into a government institution and committed an act of terrorism by leaking classified information to the public. And Governor Wilford recently banished her from Tanzer. The governor may have been ordered to do so, I don't know. Emily departed for earth a month ago on the Starship Ragtime. She'll arrive in fifteen years. Her trial has already been held on earth."

He grimaced in pain.

"They've sentenced her to forty-nine years in prison for conspiracy against the Alpha Federation and for having committed acts of terrorism against the state. She will begin serving her sentence upon arrival."

His face was somber, and tears were streaming down his cheeks. Diali's throat tightened. Emily would be thrown in prison. Just as their mother had been.

"I tried to get as much information out of Vanida Winter as I could," their father continued in a hoarse voice, "but as soon as I started asking about Emily, she told me I would do better to drop it. Otherwise, I might anger the Bekinses.
There's nothing we can do."

"Fuck the Bekinses!" Diali shouted. "We can't just let them lock her up!"

"Darling, you must watch what you say," he replied, stretching out one arm towards her, but Diali pulled back.

"I don't care! Fuck them all!"

"And is it true? What Emily said," Kaito asked. His gaze was still fixed on the glow rising on the horizon. "World will end in seventy-one days?"

"I don't know. We'll focus on learning everything we can about Schroeder's eye and finding some way to prevent it from devouring the earth. Seventy years is a long time."

"And Emily?" Diali asked, choking back her sobs. "What about her?"

Her father didn't reply.

Theses of Lying

“putting up with the *is hard enough,* **LYING** but **TELLING** the **LIES** *isn’t any easier.*”

Anita Moskát’s prose could best be described as speculative fiction, though even in her earliest works, the fantasy novels *Bábel fiai* (“Sons of Babel,” 2014) and *Horgonyhely* (“Anchor Site,” 2015), she pushed the boundaries of the genre, ultimately breaking them down entirely with her monumental 2019 novel *Irha és bőr* (“Skin and Hide”). Like this novel, *Theses of Lying*, her recent collection of short stories, has also met with enthusiasm and praise in the most prominent literary journals in Hungary, and Moskát regularly takes part in prestigious literary festivals and events.

As an attempt to portray the anthropocene and post-human condition, *Irha és bőr* immediately grabbed the attention of wide readership in Hungary, because the dystopian world of the novel resonated with the social and political tensions of the 2010s and 2020s. At the same time, Moskát also created a convincing fictional backdrop for her narrative. The narrative masterfully constructs a complex world of confused beliefs and strategic delusions that determine acts of oppression and exclusion that have become part of political practice.

Worlds created out of intricately interwoven lies are at the center of the stories in the collection *Theses of Lying*. These lies are an ever-present part of our everyday lives, from the deceptively reassuring comforts offered by technology to the daily anxieties we suffer in our private lives and the countless injustices that compel us to reimagine and reevaluate what we accept as the truth and as “right.” In the short story “The Master Lie,” for instance, the world is built through lies and destroyed by the act of telling the truth out loud. People are thus forced to create a system of communication and social coexistence based on lies. In the almost book-length story “Contractual Freedom,” lawyers use contracts to manipulate the laws of physics, and in “Black Monitor,” a reader must get through a day at work at a multinational company by choosing at the end of each chapter how the story will continue and thus essentially creating the story themselves.

In Anita Moskát’s haunting and at times cruel narratives, the surreal elements make us more aware of our own reality. Her refined sense of the problematic and her complex vision, which plays with the rules of genres and also with her reader’s expectations, make her one of the most unique contemporary Hungarian writers.

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PHOTO: **ANITA MOSKÁT**

Anita MOSKÁT

was born in 1989. She graduated as a biologist and now works as an editor and novelist, writing mainly speculative fiction. Her novel *Irha és bőr* ("Skin and Hide," 2019) won the Péter Zsoldos Prize for best science fiction, fantasy, horror, and weird fiction. *Theses of Lying* is her fourth book.

I used to lie five or six times before breakfast. I would roll over to Khao's side of the bed and started mumbling into the locks around his ears.

"Sleep a little, it's still early."

Sometimes I would hide his slippers in the pantry, and when he started looking for them and silently muttering swear words, I would say something in an unwavering voice, "last I saw they were under the kitchen table."

Sometimes, when necessary, I'd give him a cup of milk that had gone bad and say, "it's fine, I just had a glass."

I could tell five hundred fibs a day. Five hundred times a day, I could press my palm against the wall to keep the mortar between the bricks from falling to the ground like powdered sugar. Five hundred rotten stairsteps which easily could have collapsed at any moment survived just a little bit longer because of me. And if I managed to come up with a few real lies that made Khao's eyebrows twitch in genuine pain, I could fool myself into thinking I had held back the imminent disintegration of the city by a few fingerbreadths.

"If only you wouldn't work for a day," Khao signed with precise, graceful flicks of his fingers, which made the word work, two fists bumped together, seem ridiculous.

"You knew what I was like." I switched to sign language too, because what I was saying was completely true. I saved my voice for lies, as we had learned to do as babes in arms.

My mother had often taken me to the highest tower on the city wall to show me why we do it. You could see disintegration trembling over the fields of wheat, thick and black like a swarm of starlings.

"Fear it," she would sign, with slow movements of her hands to be sure I understood. "If you wish to live, fear it. It is getting closer day by day."

As a child, I thought it was harmless. It trembled on the horizon, so far away I thought it would never reach us, that I would never have to shake soot from my hair or the folds of my clothes, that ashes would never settle on food that had been left out, that the water we drew from the well would be black, and I never thought about how all life beyond the city walls had already been devoured. Though my mother warned me. One day, we will wake up to the sound of our bed creaking and shattering underneath us, our blankets unraveling before our very eyes, and then it would be our turn, our hair, our skin, our teeth, dark as coal, and the rosy lips of all the girls like me, gone without leaving us even a moment to scream.

On the day of my last architecture exam, the masters introduced me to Khao. The first thing I noticed was the curly locks of hair on his head. How much more beautiful they would have looked on a girl, I thought. Only then did I realize that he was mute. The white scars on his throat suggested that he probably been but a child when they removed his vocal chords.

"I'm fine on my own," I signed to the masters. I drew a circle around my heart with my fist, as if locking it behind a wall.

"We cannot waste your strength. You need someone you can lie to."

Khao cautiously sized me up, moving only his eyes. His face twitched when he saw the recently earned architect's bell hanging around my neck. As a mute, he hardly could have hoped for better. If he didn't want to end up on the far side of the wall, he would have to work in the service of an architect. I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was afraid. My family's reputation had preceded me. My grandmother's master lie had built the west wall, my mother's the city warehouse. For that kind of power, it took real evil.

"If you don't want a husband, he can be a child," one of the masters signed with a shrug. When he signed the word child, he rocked an imaginary baby in his arms.

"No!" I struck the table. I remembered my mother. Her narrow lips as she pressed her palm to the foundation stone, and I shuddered. "I won't lie to a child."

The master nodded indifferently and then motioned to Khao.

"I wish you much happiness, then."

It was strange going home together for the first time. He had thought an architect's home would be more stable, but the plaster was falling off in my house too. He ran his fingers over the bare bricks. His shoulders were tense when he walked, as if he feared he would be struck. I had to lie to him. It's what I was trained to do. It was in the interests of the city. I shouldn't have felt even the slightest tinge of pity for him. But I couldn't do it. I wanted him to relax, as if to prove to him he didn't have to fear me. Which was itself a lie. The biggest lie of all.

I started asking him about himself, Khao, my husband. He told me about how he lost his voice.

It is the responsibility of every parent to get talkative children to shut their mouths. I can still feel the smack of my mother's palm on my lips every time I wanted to speak the truth out loud. Khao's parents had not been as attentive as caregivers. They had tolerated his chatter. It hadn't bothered them that the words he spoke made the pitcher leak and spill hot tea everywhere, or that by the time he came ambling home, his shoes were riddled with holes from his continuous yammering and the heels were in tatters from the truth. He must have been about five years old when he got so lost in some story that the gutter on the roof above him snapped off. He got off light, just a little startled, but the little girl standing next to him, her skull cracked like the shell of a soft-boiled egg.

His parents hadn't had any other choice. Khao was a threat to the city. The judges never reached a ruling based on anger. As the doctor disinfected the scalpel, they mourned the man he could have become, the man, as an adult, would have been able to hold off disintegration with thousands and thousands of lies. Every voice counted, even the voices of those who did not have the determination to become architects.

"I'm no good for anything else," he signed at my desk. He held out his palm to me, as if telling me to do whatever was necessary with him "It's your duty."

"I know," I nodded, but I was reminded of what my mother used to say: "putting up with the lying is hard enough, but telling the lies isn't any easier."

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said, telling the first lie. Though it came easily enough, as if I were just shrugging my shoulders.

"I'm glad you're here."

"It's better for everyone."

"I'm afraid of disintegration, too."

"I'm only doing it for the city. I didn't want to be an architect. It wasn't my decision."

Ah, but it was. The lies streamed from me with an intoxicating flow, and the power released vibrated at my fingertips like sparks about to burst into flame. Once I started, I could barely contain myself. At the academy, they were amazed by the deftness with which I recited the intertwining, serpentine lies like a hymn, almost without pausing to breathe, unstoppable, as if I wanted to prove to my mother that it was easy, as easy as taking a breath. Khao just watched. I could see in his tense lips, his frightened eyes that the masters had chosen well. Every sentence cut into him, though he knew perfectly well that he would never hear an honest word from me. He was too sensitive. Which was why he had lost his voice. Because his soft-hearted mother had not smacked him across the face when he had spoken the truth, and this weakness made him the perfect raw material out of which I would someday create my master lie.

FATAL love

I'll Take You to America

In the spring of 1916, life in a district on the outskirts of Budapest is in turmoil when corpses of women are found hidden in tin barrels in the yard of a seemingly tidy house. The people of the neighborhood had regarded the former tenant, Béla Kiss, as a respectable, even educated worker. Little did they know that behind his charming façade lay a serial killer. "A horrifying case," they say. "Something no one should ever breathe a word of to anyone." As the events unfold in Gabriella Nagy's novel, we face feelings and fates that are alienating yet disturbingly familiar. *I'll Take You to America* explores several questions. Where do the boundaries of madness lie? What could make someone so horrifyingly cruel? Can someone be born a victim, or do circumstances make you one?

The book, which consists of three chapters, begins with the investigation of the crimes. The vivid descriptions make us feel as if we were actually looking at the neatly arranged tools and could actually smell the nauseating stench of rotting bodies. The locals try to put the puzzle pieces of the murders together based on personal experiences, anecdotes, or confused memories half of which they may well may have dreamed up, and as they do, they sometimes reveal, in an unguarded moment, a great deal about their own prejudices and their penchant for victim blaming. The second chapter is set in a mental hospital of the time, where Dr. Ernő Morvay examines the anatomy of criminals while his morphine-addict student cruelly takes advantage of a severely traumatized patient. Everyone is vulnerable in some way. Complete strangers make essential decisions concerning the bodies of women, and the soul can hardly break free from its prison cell. In the final chapter, we get a closer look at a victim who survived and who, in spite of the many ominous omens, walks right into the predator's trap in the hope of a better future. Our throat tightens as the tension builds, and our blood freezes as we read the brutal details.

There were occasional rumors that the missing girls had left for America, but their yearning to discover the New World actually led to their deaths. Nagy draws on a wealth of knowledge in her portrayal of these horrors, which are based on real events, yet she leaves room for the reader's imaginative engagement with the tale. We search for possible links between the fates retold, and we learn about lives that ended in tragedy. Ultimately, we are left with a story so unspeakably horrible that we are unlikely ever to forget it.

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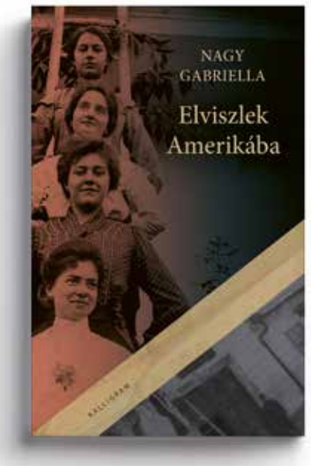


PHOTO: **GÁBOR VALUSKA**

Gabriella NAGY

was born in Budapest in 1964. She studied Hungarian and Aesthetics at the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University. She is a writer. Since the founding of the Litera literary portal in 2002, she has been its editor and since 2015 editor-in-chief. Nagy was awarded the Sándor Bródy Prize for her first collection of prose and the Ernő Osvát Prize for her editorial work. In 2023, she won Tibor Déry prize which is awarded to outstanding literary figures. *I'll Take You to America* is her fourth book.

From the door opening onto the yard, you can see a whitewashed house. It has six windows and a dark door at the far end. The windows, painted olive green, are latched shut. There are no shutters, and the groundwater has drawn a map of sorts on the wall. There are thistles running along the edge of the house and to the left of the door, the bare branches of a scraggly tree waving in the wind. The roof is immaculate. A little further down, there's a hutch and a rickety wooden bodega. Across from the house is a woodshed, about the same height as the hutch, same roof and general structure, just doesn't stick out quite as far into the yard, about half as much as the hutch. A tree next to it, then something that looks like a greenhouse with a low wooden fence. The yard is empty. It looks tidy, despite the weeds.

They used something made of iron to smash the lock of the woodshed. In the faint light that streamed in through the door, a few dirty chests and a barrel-shaped container were visible beside the stove. There was an old bench in the corner and a mouse-chewed straw sack covered with a blanket. They tried to smash open the barrel, but it stubbornly resisted. The top had been soldered shut airtight with zinc by an expert hand. They turned the place upside down looking for a crowbar or something they could use to pry it open, but there was nothing but a heap of nails and rivets, an anvil, a worn pair of shears, some iron tongs, and a solder leaning against the Barthel-Kemnicz furnace by the door.

They tried to pry the lid off, but in vain, the soldering held. They whacked it with a hammer, but to no avail. All they managed to do was dent the side and rouse everyone in the neighborhood with the earthshattering racket they were making. Whatever they used, it splintered, cracked, or broke in two. They tried to find a carpenter or craftsman in the neighborhood, but in vain, there was no one around. They considered looking for a locksmith or a blacksmith, someone even remembered having seen a burglar and the local constable, but in the end, they fetched old masonBauer's apprentice, the thirteen-year-old Jóska Jakubek, a pretty stocky kid, and he smashed one side of the barrel in with a hatchet. Didn't show much mastery of technique or even much in the way of effort, but with his youthful, almost brutish strength, he got the job done in the blink of an eye. Put a gash the size of a man's head in the side of the barrel. They immediately noticed the hideous stench, but even so, they didn't suspect anything unusual. They didn't really dare think it was anything other than old gas or rotting wood or just shoddy storage work. It took two of them to get the lid off. Their hands slick with sweat when they noticed a blond lock of hair peeking out of the side of the barrel.

Could have been anything. Could have been animal hair, a wig, a bit of straw. You can't jump to conclusions at a moment like that. Could have been a braid that had been cut off or ringlets snipped from a baby's head. Maybe strands of hair from a horse's tail. Or just sheep's wool. If only the stench hadn't been so insufferable. They got dizzy. They stopped trying to tear the thing open. How could anyone know that smell? Anyone who'd never seen decaying bodies, decomposing organic matter. Anyone who's never smelled a dead body, who's never had the foul stench of carcasses blown into his nostrils by the wind.

As the authorities started to arrive, they searched the yard, checking every nook and cranny. They were frantic, they were frightened. Were there any other suspicious containers? There were. The gendarmes didn't let them open them. They took all seven to the nearby cemetery in a cart, and the next day, they opened them all in the presence of a large assembly of public figures, officials, notaries, journalists, witnesses, and locals who were just curious to see what was up. A huge crowd had gathered. You could hardly catch a glimpse of what was going on.

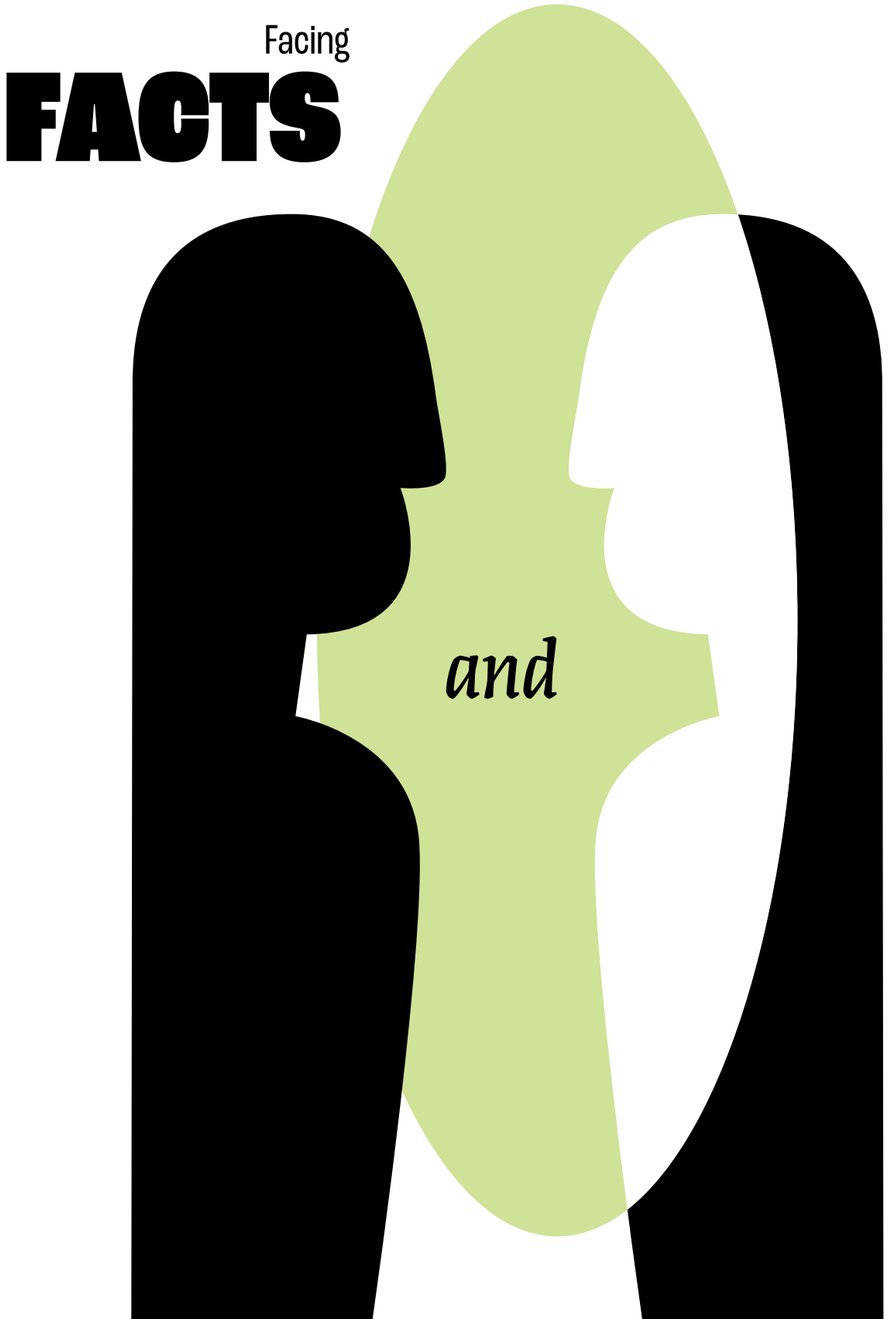
It was there, at the site where the horrors were revealed, that the first rumors were whispered and the wildest tales took wing. The authorities did not impose a news blackout. Journalists snooped around alongside the investigators in search of the culprit, but for the moment, they only got information concerning the victims, more and more victims, and an unexpectedly detailed, not entirely reliable confession. The newspapers reported on developments in the investigation every day. The French suffered a bloody defeat on the Verdun front, and the papers published the latest lists of the names of the fallen and wounded, as well as the most recent news about other losses, but in vain. The horrifying discovery caused the greatest stir.

The first woman has a cord around her neck and an embroidered handkerchief in her mouth. Her knees were pulled up to her chest, her head tipped to the left to make room for her legs. The corpses were mummified. The tenant, Béla Kiss by name, who from then on was called the woman-slayer, had done very precise work. He had attentively soldered the lids of the barrels and the rectangular tin coffins shut to ensure that not even a breath of fresh air touch the women and spoil their beauty. The blond hair was a tangle of dry strands, stuck together. No worms had touched or could have touched the bodies, yet the smell was sickening, pungent and sweet.

It was a horrifying case. Something no one should ever breathe a word of to anyone.

On the eleventh day of May in the year one thousand nine hundred and sixteen, what everyone thereabout had thought of life, morality, and fate was suddenly undone. The shock, which soon reached almost the whole population of the country through the press, left them frozen, and then the terror took hold of them so strongly that they began to invent ever wilder tales. Whether they actually remembered the events clearly or there was some element of imagination at play no one on earth could say for sure.

They spoke of how, in the area bordering the Szilas stream, the beech forest, and the cemetery, there were more and more dubious figures who had strayed from the city and were looking for a place to lie low. No one knew anything about them. They arrived with no past, the long arm of the law did not quite reach that far, and their identities were lost in the mist. Who knows where that wretch came from, that disgrace to his mother, they whispered. He's not even human, he's a devil, and the harder you try to hunt him down, the more spryly he will slip through your fingers. Though his deeds had made very plain that he was here.



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Saving Someone, Anyone

Panni Puskás' debut novel follows the life of three women, a mother and her two daughters, told through three different, alternating yet intertwining narrative threads. The first narrator is Gréta, a young drug addict and alcoholic. During the day, she works like a slave for a multinational company in Budapest. At night, she broods over her longing to stand up to the capitalist system and the hypocritical political establishment of our times. Her winding, overflowing sentences seem almost a symptom of her hectic life, in which burnout is a fundamental experience for members of the younger generation.

The second voice in this three-part fugue is that of a Hungarian girl who has moved to Sicily and leads a seemingly idyllic life by the sea. Her narrative style differs greatly from that of Greta. Her tone, like her approach to life, is sensible and down-to-earth, and she thus represents a different dynamic and perspective. There is a ship full of refugees waiting for permission to dock in the harbor, however, and our narrator becomes increasingly consumed by her desire to do something to help them, so the focus of the tale gradually shifts to the city of Syracuse itself. The growing humanitarian crisis, which presents Europe with ever greater challenges, raises burning questions concerning solidarity, sacrifice, and the responsibilities which fall on us when we are confronted with strangers in need. None of the characters in the story can afford to ignore these questions.

The third voice is that of the single mother, who addresses her younger daughter in letters and seeks to explain to her the financial difficulties and existential challenges she faced as a young woman. She reveals the motivations that shaped her decisions and thus sheds some light on the origins of traumas which have been passed down from parents to children across generations. In post-communist Hungary, everyone wants to achieve some level of financial and personal security, but people strive to do this in different ways. Some leave the country, while others try to find their own boundaries and then redraw them.

Much as she did in her earlier collection of short stories, *A rezervátum visszafoglalása* ("Recapturing the Reservation"), Panni Puskás has created a fast-paced, dynamic, action-packed narrative consisting of lies and truths, in which struggles with childhood and young adult crises, family heritage, and social tensions are intertwined with the fundamental desire to be of use to the world. To take responsibility for ourselves and others.
To save someone, anyone.

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Panni Puskás

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PHOTO: **GÁBOR VALUSKA**

Panni PUSKÁS

was born in Győr in 1987. She is a writer, theater critic, and editor-journalist for the critical portal Revizor. She is also an activist who fights for the rights of those in need. *Saving Someone, Anyone* is her first novel.

I have been cleaning black ash from the terrace for two days. Maria says I'm tilting at windmills. I should wait. I should be patient. We said goodbye to Peter and Irene yesterday. Everyone on this island is just passing through. Except our neighbor, Sebastiano. He was born here. It used to be a peaceful place, he says. Now, he can't sleep because of all the noise. Everyone's abuzz with excitement. I tell him that's exactly why we came. When your vision's messed up, you need sound. Sebastiano's vision is fine, and his hearing. He can see, he can hear, but he can't sleep. Neither can I. Not like it's something I'm going to tell anybody. I stare at the ceiling until 6:00 in the morning. Plenty of time to sleep in the grave, I tell him, grinning as I sweep the terrace.

There's a thick, black layer of ash covering everything. The plastic outdoor table and chairs, the patio umbrella, the stone surface of the terrace. The smaller crevices are hard to clean with the sponge, and you can't get the dark layer off the umbrella entirely. I wipe it off one day, go to bed, can't sleep because of the noise, go out in the morning, and everything's black again. This must be what hell is like. A constant series of minor inconveniences. Every day you feel like you've solved some problem, then the devil comes along, casts a layer of dark ash over everything, blackens it up, and you start all over again. I should be patient. Maria says volcanic eruptions are one of the wonders of the world, proof of the irrepressible power of nature. As for me, I think it's annoying that I can't hang my laundry out on the terrace.

Peter and Irene were heartbroken to bid us and the island farewell. They would have loved to stay. They will visit us again next year. After their bus leaves for the airport, we walk down to the beach. The refugee boat is still there. Open arms. That's what's written on the side of the boat. It reminds me of the homeless man who stood in the square with a sign saying, "free hugs." Everybody kept their distance. We should tell them something reassuring. We should tell them how long they're going to have to wait, and what they're waiting for. So that they can decide if this is how they want to spend their precious time. In case there's something they'd rather be doing. Like sending their kids to school. Or maybe playing soccer or volleyball or who knows. Or going to a concert. Or the hairdresser. Or building their careers, planning their summer vacations, doing the shopping for a weekend cookout.

The refugees' faces look weary, but their eyes sparkle with hope. Soon, they will start a new life. Their friends and relatives who were not shot, were not blown up, did not drown in the sea have already done so. The ones here will have to wait a little longer, but not much longer now. They'll learn German, French, Italian, Spanish, or English. They've already started. They're on Duolingo dawn to dusk out there on the boat, at least when the wifi's working. First, they'll take jobs bussing tables and washing dishes in restaurants, which doesn't require much in the way of language proficiency. They'll be prep cooks or they're wash the pots and pans. They'll work as bus drivers on double-decker buses in London or find jobs in cafés in Naples, bakeries in Paris, and small shops in Düsseldorf. The more fortunate ones will get jobs they've trained or studied for. They'll have to put up with a lot of unkind remarks about their skin color, their religion, their language skills. And they'll constantly have to answer questions about why they didn't stay in their countries of origin. And no one will ever be satisfied with the answers they give. But they won't mind. They know that their children will be better off, and their children's children will be even better off, and their children, who will be the great-grandchildren of the people waiting on the boat, will have very good lives indeed. And maybe they will. We should tell them how long they'll have to wait.

Maria has more things that she wants to see. Every day she finds some new sight to check out. We did scuba diving one day, going down into the depths with divers to see the colorful fish against the blue backdrop. On another day, she used her high-powered lamp and a magnifying glass to study the textures of things of various shapes and sizes. She put all kinds of things under the magnifying glass: a lace rug, a Murano glass necklace, an olive leaf, a cracker. The next day, she says we should look at Caravaggio's famous painting The Burial of Santa Lucia in Syracuse. We head to Palazzo Bellomo, where the painting is located according to a travel blog. We check every room in the place, but we can't find it. We ask the security guards, but they have never seen the Caravaggio painting here.

We set off for Santa Lucia al Sepolcro, where the painting is actually found, as Wikipedia has informed us. Maria was moved by the story of Santa Lucia, who cut out her own eyes and sent them to her suitor. This was her way of informing him that she was renouncing her intention to marry and would remain innocent forever. In retaliation, the man accused the poor, blind Lucia of being Christian, and in the end, she was stabbed in the throat by an executioner. Lucia is the patron saint of the city. She has a dagger sticking out of her neck and a plate in her hand with two eyeballs on it. Seems the Italians think there's nothing wrong with that. Suffering is a sublime act. Indeed, the sublimity of the act increases proportionally with the degree of suffering. Lucia's suffering is very, very sublime. The suffering of the refugees on the boat is not. Anyone can wait, after all. One must be patient.

In the church of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro, which is a bit on the outskirts of the city, we find only a reproduction of the painting. A large canvas, a low-quality reproduction. An article tells us that the original painting was moved to the church of Santa Lucia alla Badia in the center of the old city in 2009, so we head there. But we don't find it there either. The security guard says the original is in Santa Lucia al Sepolcro. We inform him that we have just come from there. Then we have seen the original, he tells us, a little irritated, a little condescendingly. I look at Maria. She's about to cry. We exit the church. I give her a hug. She starts crying bitterly. It's as if she expected the painting to be some kind of fairytale cure. Santa Lucia's eyes, after all, had grown back, and according to the story, they had shone even more beautifully than before. Maria will not be cured. Now I grasp this too. The realization hits me hard, like a knife to the gut.

Message in a bottle

FOR THE **FUTURE**

Forbidden Territory

In his most recent novel, Iván Sándor asks what human nature is capable of. Interweaving past, present, and future, *Forbidden Territory* demonstrates the ways in which destructive power still has a profound impact on our reality today and prompts the reader to contemplate the value of intellectual exploration and introspection in an age of falsified memories. The 94-year-old author draws on a wealth of knowledge, revealing the historical cataclysms that lie behind individual fates and exploring several issues in the philosophy of art and language.

The plot unfolds through the voices of three men. The paragraphs of the narrative do not begin with capital letters and do not end with a full stop, offering the reader a continuous flow of experience interrupted occasionally by a blunt remark. First, we encounter the local historian, who discovers the building of he Sunshine Retreat as part of a summer camp and returns to the lakeside spot as a university student to explore the history of the building for a research essay. He stumbles across a box containing the diary of a Jewish girl after whom the villa had once been named, as well as several other documents that help him find the points where all the threads meet. Similar riddles await the reader, for as the other two protagonists arrive, we increasingly see the ways in which their work overlaps. One of them, an art historian, ponders how the rebels waiting to be executed and soldiers waiting for the order to fire in Goya's The Third of May 1808 must have felt. The other, a war correspondent returning from the Russian-Ukrainian front, has a first-hand experience of these feelings. With a candor and bluntness that sometimes seem missing from the wealth of accounts in the media, he reveals all that lies beyond the narratives found in the fake news and propaganda: the unburied dead lying by the roadside, and mothers mourning their sons.

Sándor is not afraid to write openly about pressing issues of our times. With a cast of characters who at times resemble figures from the works of, for instance, Samuel Beckett, he confronts the simple question of whether it is worth trying to foster any sense of hope in this world. At the end of the novel, the local historian is surprised to see a sign on the fence of the villa the history of which he has been exploring: "Forbidden territory." His thesis advisor cautions him to remove passages from his budding essay that might be damning for the society in which he lives, but he does not give in. He must finish writing his message in a bottle.

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Iván Sándor

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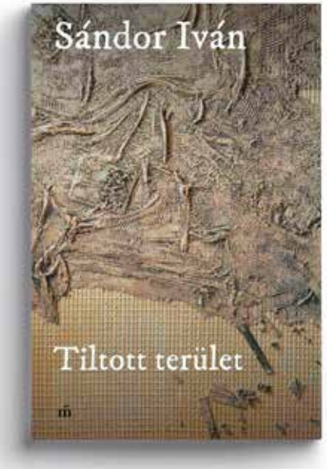

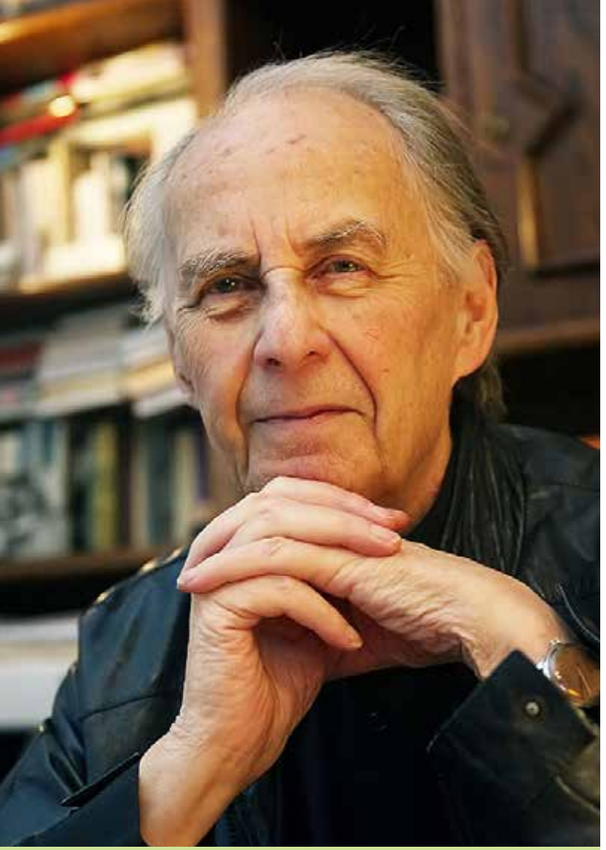

PHOTO: **IVÁN SÁNDOR**

Iván SÁNDOR

was born in Budapest in 1930. He has published more than forty volumes, and many of his novels have been translated into German, English, and French. He was awarded the Attila József Prize (1985), the Sándor Márai Prize (2000), and the Kossuth Prize (2005) for his outstanding work. Showcasing how past, present, and future intertwine, his works reveal the impact of history on the human soul.

we left the city

as if we were somewhere in the past, the repeating landscapes behind us, fallen walls, smoldering roofs, heaps of rubble, abandoned villages, empty town squares with not a soul in sight, and what we had left behind was waiting down the road for us, the dead lying, unburied, by the roadside, stray cats among the ruins, I had seen similar things on the photographs of war hung on the walls of our homeroom and the hallways in high school, copies of old prints of cavalrymen galloping, swords held high, bows drawn, shields ready, and artillerymen waiting for orders beside cannons

My Guide spoke not a word as we walked. He held the map of the route on his knee. Refugees were coming in the other direction, fleeing their uncertain past for an uncertain future

the new group was obscured by the mist. In the dimness, they moved towards us like one big blob. You could only see their feet

we stopped.

gradually, you could make out their waists and torsos. They clung to one another as they plodded forward. Some of them were being carried on someone else's back. There were machine guns pointing at them from both sides

at the front, an officer was walking with brisk, firm strides. There was a bloody bandage on his forehead

Russian prisoners of war, my Guide said

we got out of the car

the commander of the group pointed his machine gun at us

my Guide pinned a small Ukrainian flag to the windshield of the jeep

the prisoners looked like young men, boys

their armed escorts looked like young men, boys

there was something similar in their gazes

I showed my permit to the commander. I would like to speak to the officer of the troops taken prisoner, I said

he waved no

that's my job

I'll give you three minutes

I started walking towards the Officer

the guards surrounded the prisoners, I could feel their guns pointed at my back

I looked back

my Guide had his gun trained on me

I stopped in front of the Officer

he looked me up and down, turned away

I didn't know what to ask

a strong wind started to blow

the soldiers guarding them walked around us

I walked around him too

one minute of the three I had been granted had passed

the Officer looked me up and down. He smiled

he was surrounded, I was surrounded. I'm part of something, I thought

the mist was scattered by the wind

the boys held prisoner and the boys with machine guns holding them prisoner had a similar look in their eyes

was it worth it, I asked the officer

he kept smiling. He could tell I was at a loss

was it worth it? I pointed at his forehead.

they started it. We had to defend ourselves

the dead, the ruins, people taken captive

war is war, he said

the second minute had passed

I didn't say anything

No one has ever defeated Russia, he said, without me asking. Napoleon died on the island of St. Helena. Hitler committed suicide in his bunker

the commander of the forces escorting the prisoners pointed his machine gun at the sky and fired a round of shots

onward, he shouted

he took a step towards me

we have to reach the assembly site before it gets dark

my Guide slung his gun back over his shoulder

the wind grew stronger

the soldiers formed two lines again

the Officer lifted his right hand, as if he were the commander. He gestured to the prisoners who shared his fate. He set out, three steps ahead of the others

they departed, plodding in much the same fashion as they had been plodding when they approached. Clinging to one another. Some of them carried on someone else's back

which way now, I asked my Guide

he looked at the map

we set out

there was a haughtiness to the Officer's smile. The knowledge of his superiority. Made me feel as if I were surrounded too. For those three minutes, I was one of them. The Officer did not answer my questions. My questions were not legitimate questions. As if he were asking me questions with a few sparse words. And his haughty smile

everything was far away. What we had left behind. What was ahead of us. In a haze on the edge of nothing. That's how I felt. Perhaps my Guide felt that way too. He was silent. What would be next? I was fed up with new experiences. It's over, I thought. Nothing is ever over, I thought. We slid into a ditch in the muddy road. I pushed the car. My Guide gave car a little gas. More, he shouted. On the umpteenth push we got it out. Onward, through the hills. We're getting closer, my Guide said. I had seen nothing in the prisoners or the soldiers guarding them that would have given them away as little more than kids. Big kids. That's what they were. They stuck together, ready to see one another die. They had learned early. Graves by the side of the road. They were expecting guests. And people came, bringing guests. Mostly old people. Some lifted the dead by their feet, some by their arms. They carefully laid them in the graves.

we got out

a small group of people was doing the burying. They used shovels to throw muddy chunks of earth on the dead

they waved, put a shovel in my hand. My Guide's hand too. One dead body on top of another. Face down. A strong wind came up. It blew the clouds away. The red ball came out. Everything was bathed in light

That's when I saw the kid among the dead. Looking up. I leaned over him. As if he were still alive. He wasn't. But it was as if he were looking at me. I put the shovel down. I couldn't free myself from his gaze. He didn't have a gaze, he was dead. A small child, dead. My Guide stood next to me. Maybe all the better for him, he said, he doesn't have to live through what's coming, doesn't have to take part in it. We threw clumps of mud on him

I didn't sleep much, I told the Correspondent at the breakfast table. It's part of my job

part of our job, he said, he was at the point in his account where the events left him no peace, in his dreams he wept at the edge of a mass grave, and he would wake up screaming, he hadn't slept for more than two or three hours

he suggested taking a walk

probably wanted to talk, get it out, I thought

we went down to the lake

there was a little boy among the people who had been massacred, he said, the bodies they had covered in clumps of mud, and he couldn't free himself of the kid's gaze

Many Times, We Don't Die

Andrea Tompa's new novel is a heart-wrenching tale of the challenges of adoption in a time of historical upheaval as well as a memorial to all those from whom the Holocaust took their names, their lives, and even the chance to have a dignified death. Tompa takes her reader through devastating depths and soul-stirring heights, offering glimpses into the world of mid-century Transylvania, where political transformations force people to reconsider and reinterpret their identities.

The story begins in 1944, when the Jewish ghetto is being created in the ethnically mixed Transylvanian city of Cluj. A doctor has left her infant son in the care of others in order to save the boy from almost certain death. The boy grows up with Erzsi, who had worked as the physician's maid, and her husband, Feri. As the opening page of the novel reveals, "by the time he had reached the age of four, he had forgotten everything. The reader, of course, realizes that our earliest impressions leave indelible marks on our personalities, even if only as blind spots. We follow the story of Matild, who we first meet as a little girl known by the affection name Matyi, as she grows into and adult and is confronted over and over again, as a professional actress, with her past and her identity. In the role of Antigone, she comes to grasp who difficult it is to bid farewell in our hearts to our loved ones when we have been unable to perform the usual rituals of mourning, and she realizes that humankind can be both wondrous and monstrous. As Oedipus the King, she realizes that we will indeed face dire consequences if we do not know our roots. One of the most heartrending moments in the tales comes with a monodrama written in one of the concentration camps by a woman named Ágnes Rózsa, which unfolds before us as if we were sitting in the audience.

A great deal of literature has been written about the Holocaust and the immediate postwar years, but very little of this literature touches on the lives of those who did not suffer the horrors of genocide firsthand. Where is the truth in the murk of so many taboo subjects, and how can we make sense out of the incomprehensible? How can one choose life despite the horrors one has experienced? *Many Times, We Don't Die* invites us to embark on a journey of pain and indestructible love, though the greatest distances to be bridged often lie within us. "Read, my dear," the theater's dramaturg says to Matild. "If you want to save your soul, read." Tompa's novel is proof that we would do well to heed this advice.

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Andrea Tompa

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PHOTO: **PÉTER MÁTÉ**

Andrea TOMPA

was born in Cluj in 1971. Tompa graduated with a degree in Russian studies from Eötvös Loránd University. In 2004, she completed her doctorate. She is a writer and theater critic. In 2015–2020, she served as the editor-in-chief of *Színház* ("Theater"), and since 2008, she has been teaching at the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj. She has won numerous prizes, including the Sándor Márai Prize, the Libri Literary Prize, the Immersion Prize, and the Natalie Gorbaniewska Prize in Poland. She is currently based in Budapest. *Many Times, We Don't Die* is her fifth book.

"Look, says here that they're going to build a hospital in the Peter-Paul villa for three hundred people, an emergency hospital where they can put the people up who are coming back. Or in their apartments. Maybe we should go. Ask questions and see what's going on."

Erzsi says this all in a rapid flutter when Feri comes home for the day.

"Says it in the newspaper. I read every page, top to bottom. We should do it. And the others of their kind are gathering at the county hall and starting to see to things, arranging for the trains to go out and pick them all up, and the trucks from the Soviets. And make sure they have a way to get back from the liberated territories."

"If you can give me a moment to put my bag down, good woman," Feri says. "And had we not agreed not to talk of such things in front of Matyi?"

Erzsi shrugs.

"She doesn't understand any of it anyway. How could she? I taught her so many words today. She just doesn't want to talk, do you, little lady?" she says, turning to the little girl. Then she and Feri kiss.

"Where is the Peter-Paul villa?" Erzsi asks. "I'll warm up the soup. And it says in the paper that there were those people who entrusted their things to others for safekeeping and now they have to get them back. We can't let ourselves be thought of like that. Like people who were entrusted with something and then did something like that, something wrong. Listen, Feri, we have to clear ourselves of any suspicion. Because what do we do if people start accusing us? You didn't even get one of those radios when they were passing them out. Or one of the sewing machines. We're both such twits."

Feri eats his soup and then puts a little water in some dried jam and mixes it up. He'd love to have something sweet.

"Want some?" he says, offering it to the girl.

"Don't give her that!" Erzsi says.

"Why not? It won't hurt her. It's thoroughly cooked, even if it's old. Besides, we'll all just poop better anyway!"

Feri picks the little girl up and gives her a bite to eat.

"You're staying right here until they come for you. End of story. We're not going anywhere. We don't have any papers, we don't have anything. We don't go making any noise, and we don't go sticking our noses into other people's business. If anybody's looking for us, they'll find us here, right?"

He gives little Matyi a wink.

"And I brought you something."

He takes a paper bag from his briefcase.

"For your name day."

He turns to Erzsi.

"When's her name day?"

"Totally slipped my mind," Erzsi says. She goes into the living room and comes back with an old worker's calendar which she had tucked away because it had some beautiful writings in it. She starts checking the dates. Feri puts the paper bag in the little girl's lap.

"Open it," he says. Matyi can't get it open. Feri opens it and takes out one smoothly sanded wooden ball and then another.

"Where did you get those from?" Erzsi asks. "Did you buy them?"

"No, we were just emptying out the shops that have been closed, and there was a little workshop in the back of a toymaker's store, you know the one, in Könyök Street. I happened across them there. They've been drilled hollow. I wonder what he was making out of them."

Feri brings a copy of the newspaper every day. There are even articles about them in it too, the Social Democrats. Erzsi reads it every night, first page to last. They publish lists of the names of the people who were deported and who are now returning home. They write about who's on the way, when the trains will leave, and how the Red Army is advancing. They write about a little girl. Don't give her name. Two of her siblings have already returned.

Erzsi cuts out the lists of names and puts them in a big envelope. She doesn't look for anything else in the newspapers, just the lists. But one title catches her attention: "Organized madness." She reads the article twice. She then goes outside and takes a seat on the bench in her negligee. It's a chilly evening. She gets a scarf and sits in the dark. The courtyard of the building is dark and silent as the grave. The first apartment, the fancy one, is still empty. She's got a pen and some paper, but she doesn't write anything. Just sits quietly in the dark.

She goes to bed late that night. The bed is cold. Her feet are cold. Her nose is cold. She can't fall asleep. Feri rolls over, the girl murmurs a bit, as if she were about to wake up, but then sleeps on with her mouth open, lying on her back. She tries to warm her feet under the quilt, but they are dry and cold. Usually, wwshe puts them between Feri's legs and warms them, but she doesn't want to wake him up tonight.

Her eyes are burning in the morning. She hasn't slept a wink. The girl is still asleep when they get up. Erzsi whispers that she has read something alarming. Madness. Pure madness.

"Read it to me," Feri says.

"No, I'm not reading that out loud. It's unbelievable. Fifty thousand people in Romania, they say."

Erzsi shows him the article about how the people were shot, how they were kept in sealed train cars for days.

"Fifty thousand. Unbelievable. Back in 1941. How is it possible that no one knew about it, no one wrote about it? How? So many wild exaggerations, it boggles the mind. I don't know what to believe anymore. And this girl is saying that she was so hungry she had to eat grass. Grass! She weighed nineteen kilos when she got out. How can you weigh nineteen kilos and still be alive? That hell is nothing compared to what they lived through. The German vermin killed everything. It was hell. But how do they know? Who's really knows what hell is like? The things they write, you go crazy reading them!"

Erzsi was screaming in whispers.

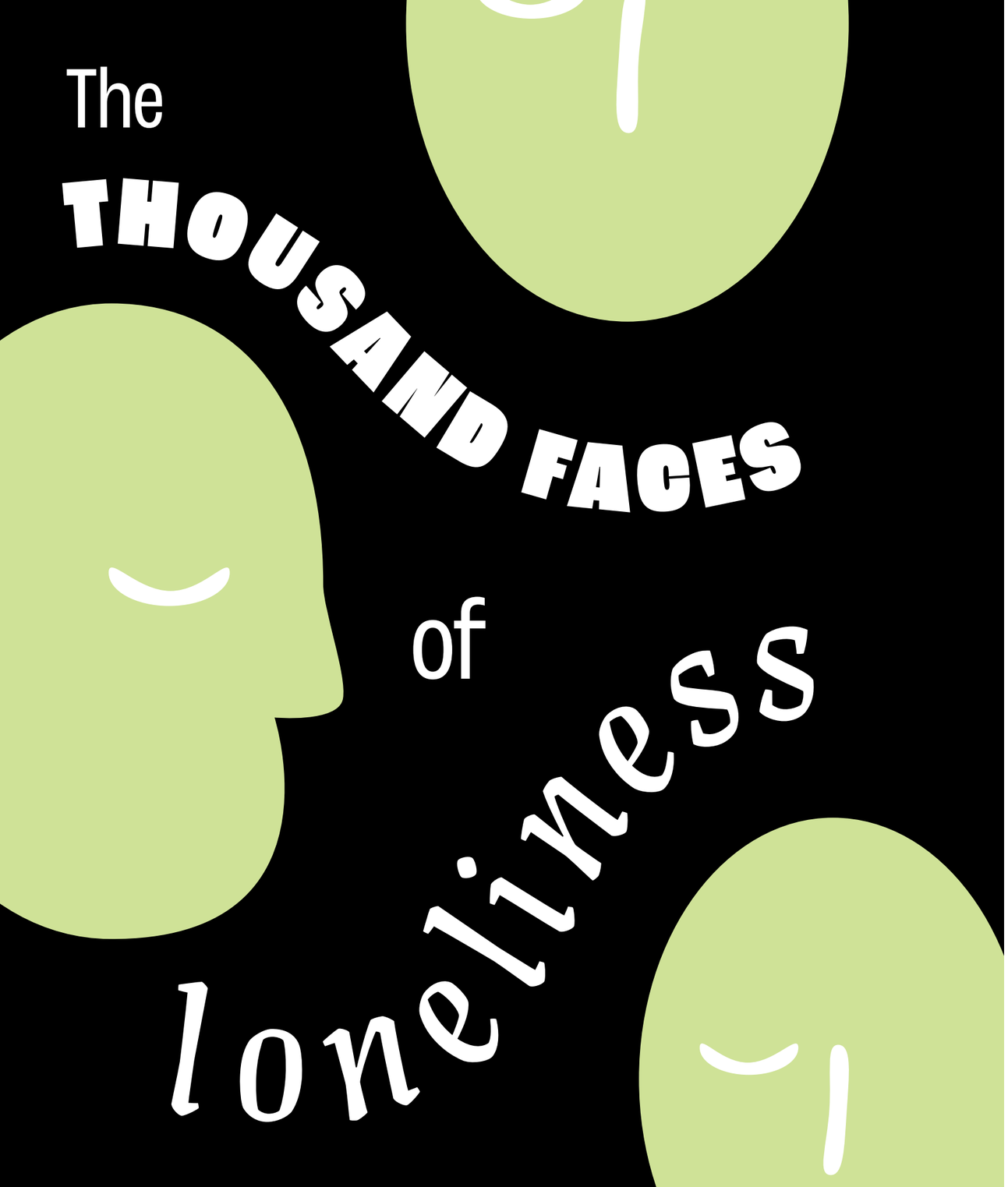
"What's going to happen? What about us?"

Feri embraces her.

"Don't read so much. It's all over now."

Erzsi wipes the tears from her eyes. She's going to look for the four doctors who have come back. Their names are in the newspaper. They must know one another. They worked in the same hospital.

"Don't look for anybody," Feri says. "Just wait a little. They're coming, they'll be back. Just wait a little."



The Transparent Women

In the world we live in today, almost nothing remains unseen. Our screens are constantly inundated with images from the news of daily disasters and human horrors, not to mention images of the lives of the rich and famous. Even our everyday lives are continuously documented. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and an array of other social media platforms allow us to see the world and to put ourselves on display, usually to show ourselves at our best and most beautiful.

But what about the everyday people, women young, middle-aged, and old, who somehow seem to remain unseen? Those who do their jobs, go to work, look after their families, strive to please their partners, keep their heads above water, and find something interesting or at least entertaining in their everyday lives? The protagonists of Szabina Ughy's collection of short stories are all women struggling day and night with a sense of their own insignificance. They are fighting in the hopes of perhaps being seen, of not being transparent or well-nigh non-existent, both in their private lives and in public spaces. They yearn to be beautiful and healthy, but to achieve this they need to rediscover their bodies, their minds, and the challenges they face within, and also to get to know their own needs and desires.

In the narratives of *The Transparent Woman*, change cannot happen without crisis. The protagonist of the story which gives the collection its title has to face the hopelessness of her life during a tram ride, only to realize that her determination and desire for a new beginning perhaps can help her overcome the constant sense of burnout in an alienated metropolis. In "Mother's Day," "Night Shift," and "The Bequest," the female characters confront the losses they have endured and the sense of powerlessness with which we all must grapple as we age. "Csucsó," "The Cut Mark," and "How Many Liters of Water Are There in the Ocean?" tell stories of female trauma and the diversity of experiences of loneliness, but at the same time, they also offer the characters a way out by giving them opportunities to gain perspective.

With admirable attention to detail and moving sensitivity, Szabina Ughy's short stories portray women, young and old, who wish to be seen, wish to mean something to this world. The narratives are characterized by an analytical depth mixed with measured doses of irony and humor.

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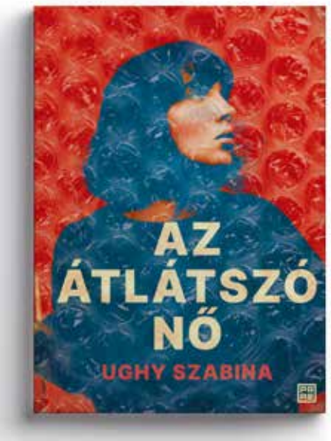

PHOTO: **MÁTÉ BACH**

Szabina UGHY

was born in 1985 in Ajka. She is a writer, editor, and literary therapist. She has published two books of poetry and a novel.

Excerpt from the short story Csucsó

"Your mother was the most beautiful girl in the village at the time. By the time she turned sixteen, she had gone from ugly duckling to beautiful swam. Till then, she had done nothing but read, but suddenly she started to take an interest in boys. We often snuck out and went to parties. We were terrified that our mom would catch us."

"Children are better seen than heard, yeah, I know," I say, laughing. "I think she was the only person I've ever known who actually kept the Ten Commandments."

I can see grandma putting her hands together to show me how to pray. "Now I lay me down to sleep..."

"She started being less strict with us when we finished the trade school. We still had to tell her where we were going, of course, and we had to be home by midnight. She was always telling us about how every man is a pig, we just don't know it yet. We didn't really know what she feared was going to happen to us. Everybody knew everybody in the village. If new kids showed up at some party or dance the local boys always kept an eye on us."

"Even Csucsó?"

"Csucsó was the cool kid in the neighboring village. We'd all seen him. We knew he'd been after your mom for a long time, but she was just toying with him. She was still a virgin, I knew that, even if she flirted with all the boys. And she told everybody about how she had some boyfriend in Budapest. And then there was a dance on Saint Ivan's Day, and your mom vanished. I figured she was making out with someone somewhere. By dawn, I was worried. I told the others. The sun came up, but we couldn't find her anywhere. I set out for home. Maybe she'd just gotten upset about something and had gone home and gone to bed. But when I got out to the street I heard this whimpering sound coming from the ditch, from under a big briar bush. I'll never forget the sound of her voice when she said my name. 'Kati!' She was completely naked, and her thighs and hands were covered with blood and mud. I helped her up and wrapped my sweater over her shoulders. We started looking for her clothes, but by then, the others, who were smoking on the corner, had noticed us. They didn't come any closer. They could tell what was going on. They got in a car and set out to find Csucsó. One of the kids who was crazy in love with your mom was yelling about how he was going to kill him. But they didn't find him, and to be honest, I don't know what became of him. Your mom and I never spoke about that night again. Two years later, she met your father and got married. Then you were born, and we just forgot the whole thing."

Rozi is sleeping peacefully in her stroller. Fortunately, she doesn't understand a word of what we have been talking about. I take comfort in the fact that she can't see me or hear me, as if I could somehow spare her from the burden of my feelings. I want to scream, but instead I start to shake with sobs.

Kati gives me a tissue and looks out the window for a long time. In the end, she brings me a mug of lemongrass tea and smiles at me with tears in her eyes.

"Maybe I shouldn't have told you. Just don't say anything to your mother about it."

"How old was she at the time?"

"Nineteen."

I'm so shocked I can't speak. I feel as if someone has poured a bucket of scalding water on me.

I'm not sure how I'm going to get home.

"Good thing I came on foot and not by car."

I remember this thought flitting through my head. The next thing I know, we're sitting at the dining room table. They're ringing the bells in the village, but you can't really hear it, because my dad has turned on the radio, as he always does. My mother brings in the soup without a potholder or anything. She hastily puts it on the table and then gives her hand a quick shake.

"Doesn't hurt," she says with a smile. "I'm made of asbestos."

My father begins to slurp down the hot soup. How many times have I relived this scene? Three hundred, five hundred, a thousand lunches like this behind us? And we still can't talk to one another. Instead, I stir the soup, half asleep, and don't look either of them in the eye.

That night, I can't fall asleep. I try to pray, as my mother taught me, and my grandmother. "If I should die before I wake..." But all I can see in mind's eye is me throwing up in the toilet at the salsa club in Marseille, and then when I go to wash my face off, I see the two guys I had been dancing with smiling in the mirror and holding the key to the bathroom.

I know exactly why my mother decided to forget the whole thing, why she didn't press charges. It would have been her fault in the end. My college roommate said the exact same thing. C'est ta faute! She was the only one I had told, I had had to tell her, because her father was a gynecologist, and I had to get a morning-after pill from somewhere. She gave me hell. She said I deserved it, that I should have to carry the baby to term. Because I had been doing drugs and I had dressed like a slut. The next day she had tossed the pill on the table as if she were doing me some huge favor. I finished my internship abroad and never breathed a word of it to anyone again. News like that in a Hungarian village in the 1970s would have been even more of a disgrace. If grandma had found out, she would have been crushed by shame.

The next morning, my mother asks me to drive her to the cemetery. There'll be a memorial service soon to mark the fifth anniversary of grandma's passing. In the village, they talk about her as if she were a saint. She always went to Pentecost mass, had a front row seat, always rang the bell during the service, and then one day, the bell didn't ring during the Lord's Supper. Grandma was kneeling with her face pressed to the prayer bench. Embolism. Not a bad way to go.

I strap Rozi up in baby carrier and sling her over my back. That way I can help too, though there's not much to do, since grandma had already chosen a headstone she liked when grandpa died. She would proudly tell everyone about how she was going to have a black granite headstone. Wouldn't be a lot of work for the family, she would say. She had kept the money she had got from the government in compensation to cover the cost, and she always set aside a little of her thirteenth month's pension too.

There are some perennials in the two cement frames on either side, but otherwise, the whole really is just straight-up stone. I look at the line between my grandmother's birth date and death date. It looks like my mother's mouth. A big, clenched silence.

TERRIBLE and Beautiful

Deportation

At the beginning of András Visky's recent novel, we find the following proclamation: "The author declares that this book is fiction." *Deportation*, nonetheless, seems very much to draw on at least some of the author's childhood experiences of the Gulag. It is a story that is both harrowing and uplifting which asks the eternal question, made very much a part of the present for the characters in the tale, of where God is when innocent people are suffering gnawing hunger and bitter cold. Can we talk of happiness in a world of constant fear? And how can we preserve any sense of our own freedom?

The fate of Visky's own family was both terrible and beautiful, and these two qualifiers might not be as far apart as they seem at first, since "both words are born of love, God dies and is resurrected in them."
The novel is set in Romania after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The family father, a Reformed minister, has been declared an enemy by the regime and is sentenced to 22 years in prison. His wife and children are sent to a prison camp in the Danube Delta. They are accompanied by the warm-hearted and dauntless Márika, or Nényu to them, who was supposed to spend only two weeks in their house but came to love them so much that she was voluntarily deported with the mother and the seven children to take care of them. Amidst their tribulations, they find some comfort in the Bible, the only book they have with them all the time. They can see themselves in the Scriptures. They imagine the Danube parting before them like the Red Sea, and their daily readings offer an opportunity to have dialogues with God. One of the most bold and interesting features of the novel is its courage to question our assumptions about faith: even God Almighty makes mistakes, it seems, and sometimes, he seems to need some encouragement to show his almighty power.

Deportation is also reminiscent of the Scriptures in its form, with chapters consisting of short, numbered passages. The events are portrayed from the point of view of the two-year-old András and filtered through the recollections of the narrator, creating a reality shaped with both heart-wrenching naivety and mature reflection. The reader also gains insights into the fates of the other inhabitants of the camp, Romanian political prisoners who are painted as complex characters who merit compassion and understanding. *Deportation* is indeed an unsettling story, but it nonetheless radiates serenity. The reader is invited to interpret the ultimate message of the novel. Can hope endure or does the human soul gradually perish as people are moved from one internment to another?

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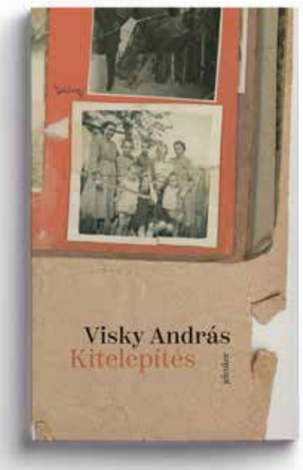

PHOTO: **MÁTÉ BACH**

András VISKY

was born in Târgu Mures, Romania in 1957. He completed a degree in engineering but later changed his career. He was director and editor-in-chief of Koinonia Publishing House between 1999 and 2009, and he received a doctoral degree from the Department of Aesthetics at Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest. Visky is a writer, poet, dramaturg, university professor, and artistic director of the Hungarian Theater of Cluj. He has published several works, but *Deportation* is his first novel. It won the Margó Prize for best debut prose fiction in 2023.

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our Mother left her children, every last one of them, to Nényu in a legal will, and as soon as she had scribbled her signature on the official Romanian-language declaration in her loopy, adolescent handwriting, a great sense of peace descended over her again, now there was nothing, nothing at all to tie her to this place or to this life, no light, no light, it still seems like something of a solution, if even the Almighty seems uncertain about the fate of the world, there are small signs suggesting that perhaps He will take pity on her, on the world, nowadays for some reason the Almighty cannot flare up in a burst of God-like rage, descend on them like a mother bear who had lost her cubs, rage like a sea, set loose floods, no wonder the demons are just chuckling at sunrise, the flapping of their wings echoing across the wastes

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poor, beautiful mother, her strength so exhausted that she can't bring herself to die, just like our god, almost a hundred years now since his death was proclaimed, but he still can't die, but in the case of our mother it's just her two lightless eyeballs moving back and forth, following our every move, the firstborn, brother Ferenc and sister Lídia took the fate of the family in their hands, military order reigned in the barracks, the two little ones, brother Péter and I, guarded our dying Mother, Máriamagdolna in charge of cleaning her, the older ones preparing for a foraging expedition, the earth brought forth her fruit, as the Bible says, now the only question was how to snatch it away from her, and the determined team had trouble answering this question

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the holy phony, brother István, the most pious, used weighty ethical objections whenever he could, he spoke of the book he had gotten from Father Pătraşcu, The Garden of Curiosity (may the light of our merits shelter and shield us!), which warned of the dangers of every forbidden fruit, one of the more memorable engravings, for instance, depicted the moment of judgment when a nameless adolescent boy lifts the lid to the well in the garden that's shaped like the body of a naked woman and a tangle of angry snakes slither up from the depths, fix their burning eyes on the curious boy, one of them coils around his arm, which is holding the stone lid, another, with its forked tongue pointed at the boy's bare chest, strikes him right in the direction of his heart, and nothing more, the author has left the terrifying ending, which foreshadows enduring sufferings, to the imagination of the reader, thou thalt not steal, brother István concludes, how could the Almighty cure our Mother with stolen fruit…?!

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nonsense, Ferenc, the first-born, interjected angrily, but brother István persisted, I would sooner leave the task of feeding our Mother to the ravens, he said, and he noted what Father Pătraşcu had said but a few days earlier about the prophet Elijah, who was fed by merciful ravens during his flight, let us wait for the ravens to come, that is the solution, thou shalt not steal means do not steal, brother István continued without pause, you want us to be shot full of holes before our Mother dies, it's happened here before, more than once, and it wouldn't hurt if Nényu would take the Commandments to heart, he added, though it may already be too late, she may have been shot somewhere, how else can you explain why she didn't come home last night, in the end, that's what will do our Mother in, that will be the final, merciful blow, if we suffer the same fate as she, let the Almighty work his miracles with us, it's up to him now, here we are, helpless, he can do as he pleases, let him send ravens to save our Mother

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silence, deafening silence, as if the shutters of heaven had closed over our heads, sister Lídia broke the silence, she showed us the engraving, look closely at the picture, the foolhardy boy's right hand is resting on the shapely breast of the naked woman adorning the well, she says this is the real meaning of the picture, the naked woman and the boy's hand, trembling with desire, no need to blabber on about the prophet Elijah and the ravens, come to your senses, you cowards, we're our Mother's ravens, no one else

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come, Ferenc the first-born ordered, brooking no contradiction, but only the brave, he added, sister Lídia and Brother Pál, as if angels had rolled stones from their shoulders, took their places beside brother Ferenc, and they set off resolutely towards the orchard, their bodies suddenly becoming light as feathers, brother István took care to ensure that they didn't leave any footprints in the dirt, which was shimmering in the light of dawn, yes, all three of them were walking a hair's breadth above the ground, though they were unaware of this, they just continued onward, onward, towards the Danube, suddenly brother István felt himself possessed of great strength, his chest filled with confidence, he grabbed a raffia sack and ran after them, his body too felt lighter than ever before

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Mother summoned all her strength, pulled herself up to the window ledge, looked at her children as they grew ever more distant, she felt neither fear nor despair, their determination filled her heart with sudden joy, they were farther and farther away, but she could still see them, and the four of them felt the touch of a ray of light, different from the rays of the rising sun, more delicate and tender, they knew that it was our Mother's gaze, the light from our Mother's eyes scratching under their left shoulder blades, soon it would reach their hearts, but they didn't look back lest they turn into salt statues, soon they reached horizon, where sky, steppe, and Danube meet, there all four of them stepped across the boundary of childhood, and they vanished from our Mother's gaze, headed in the direction of the closely watched gardens

ABOUT
this catalogue

The volume you hold in your hands contains excerpts in English translation from works by thirteen contemporary Hungarian authors: ten novels and three collections of short stories which have captured the interests of readers and critics alike over the course of the past year and a half. Our primary goal in compiling this selection was offer our readers an opportunity to sample the rich array of colors and shades on the palette of contemporary Hungarian prose. The readings include excerpts from works that touch on historical themes and stories that reflect on society today. They offer distinctive visions of the world from unique perspectives, as well as a complex cast of diverse characters, subtly crafted language, and sophisticated, seductive, and at times jarring tales.

Several of the excerpts are taken from ambitious contemporary novels which dare confront the history of the region, a history punctuated by an array of tragic upheavals. They wrestle with the task of coming to terms with these upheavals while also capturing the fates of the individuals involved. András Visky's award-winning novel *Deportation* is the devastating yet uplifting narrative of a family's experience in a prison camp under the dictatorial regime in communist Romania in which themes of faith, hope, and inner freedom play a central role. Andrea Tompa's *Many Times, We Don't Die* explores the complexity of family ties in a story of adoption set against the backdrop of the Holocaust and the history of postwar Transylvania. Both books venture tentative answers to the questions of how to cope with unimaginable loss and how to manage memories of trauma.

Everybody Mourns Differently, an unsettling work by novelist and war correspondent Sándor Jászberényi, offers an account of experiences on the battlefields in the ongoing war in Ukraine. Jászberényi touches, ultimately, on the impossibility of returning from the frontlines unscathed. He also shows the impact history can have on the creation of what could be described as a new nation on the global stage, not to mention on individual lives. Iván Sándor touches on similar themes in *Forbidden Territory*, which uses the cataclysms of the past and current social crises to examine the ways in which the falsification of memory can be used as a tool of power. The passages on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict remind us with startling bluntness that there are real fates behind the numbers we read in the news.

Gabriella Nagy's novel *I'll Take You to America* tells a similarly harrowing story. Nagy confronts the vulnerability of women's bodies and souls through the tale of a twentieth-century serial killer. Bálint Kovács's *They Should Have Cut It Off* focuses on psychological traumas and scars by offering insights into the fears and desires of Zsófi, a twenty-one-year-old woman who is crippled by her anxieties and her fear of touch. Panni Puskás's debut novel *Saving Someone, Anyone* depicts the everyday lives of three women, a mother and her two daughters, in Hungary and Europe of the past and present. Their story is an intertwining of political tensions, the dilemmas of migration, addiction, transgenerational traumas, and, finally, the burdens and blessings of solidarity and responsibility.

Anita Harag's *Always Have to Think About Someone* and Szabina Ughy's collection of short stories *The Transparent Woman* focus on loneliness, isolation, and some of the cravings and joys of women living on their own. The complex characters, who are wrestling with innumerable and often contradictory desires and concerns, and the analytical yet at the same time humorous and frequently ironic language of the narratives make these two books stand out among contemporary works of short prose. In Zsolt Kácsor's *Bipolar Hell-Ride*, the reader dives into the depths of manic depression. The essential question at stake is whether a person can rebuild himself in our chaotic, threatening world. *Theses of Lying*, Anita Moskát's collection of highly speculative narratives, and Botond Markovics' ambitious novel *Cosmos Devoured* are among the most outstanding works of contemporary Hungarian science fiction, though they both go beyond the borders of the genre, prompting questions on current trends and events through their compelling, provocative stories.

With this selection, we have endeavored to offer a rich sample of contemporary Hungarian literature with excerpts from an array of distinctive works. We invite our readers to explore the sometimes fantastic, sometimes familiar, sometimes distant, and sometimes delicately intimate worlds of these stories. As András Visky suggests towards the end of *Deportation*, "we must strive to know and accept one another's realities. It is our determination to do this that makes us human." We hope this selection offers glimpses into some of these realities.

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