

NEW
HUNGARIAN
FICTION

NEW
HUNGARIAN
FICTION

BOOKS

TWENTY TWENTY | *spring*

*our
stories
make
histories*

Petőfi
Cultural
Agency



T25 '5 BOOKS

*our
stories
make
histories*

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TWENTY TWENTY | *spring*

CONTENTS

6

Ferenc Barnás

Until the End of
Our Lives

10

Zsófia Czakó

Not Polite to Work
in the Garden
on Good Friday

14

Éva Cserhádi

The Mermaid's
Secret

18

Boldizsár Fehér

Blind Monkey

22

Tamás Gyurkovics

Migraine

26

László Imre Horváth

Shorty's Righthand
Man

30

Éva Kalapos

F, As In

34

Zsolt Láng

Bolyai

38

Réka Mán-Várhegyi

Magnet Hill

42

Péter Moesko

We're Going Home

46

Gergely Péterfy

The Bullet that Killed
Pushkin

50

Gábor T. Szántó

Europa Symphony

54

László Végel

Unburied Past

58

Petőfi Literary Fund

climb

**YOUR
FAMILY
TREE...**

OR RUN!

This book is a work of fiction. The reader comes across these words on the first page of the novel, but as if to toy with our expectations, Ferenc Barnás then dedicates the book to “Lil,” one of the most important characters in the novel. The paratext suggests that this is not an ordinary story, and this form of “mental provocation” (to borrow

*Until
the End of
Our Lives*

a phrase from a Hungarian literary critic) remains a recurring element of Barnás’s latest novel. Sepi, our protagonist, is a philosopher who, after a nervous breakdown, is trying to live his life again. The narrative, which is essentially linear, is intertwined with monologues, jumps in time, precise descriptions of sensations and sentiments, and tense dialogues in which the language, in a departure from Barnás’s familiar style, becomes increasingly simple and thereby offers more interpretative space to the reader. Sepi’s crises become subjects of scrutiny with the introduction of his lover Lil’s family. The novel offers an engaging portrait of how, stereotypes notwithstanding, family members relate to one another in innumerable ways, or, in other words, of how there is no single blueprint for the story of a family. Sepi’s unfortunate family, which numbers at least 42 members who are torn apart by conflicts, tries to survive the vicissitudes of everyday life, while Lil, Sepi’s beloved, who comes from an educated milieu, seems to herald the possibility of a better life. Yet it is she who appreciates and who can handle the vibrance and vitality of Sepi’s family. As the years have unraveled, Sepi has turned to literature and written a family novel (again, fictional and autobiographical elements blur), complicating the already tense relationships in the family. However, when Lil is given a new position in her career, Sepi ends up in Indonesia, where he comes to a new level of intimacy and interpersonal understanding.

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Ferenc Barnás

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Until the End of Our Lives

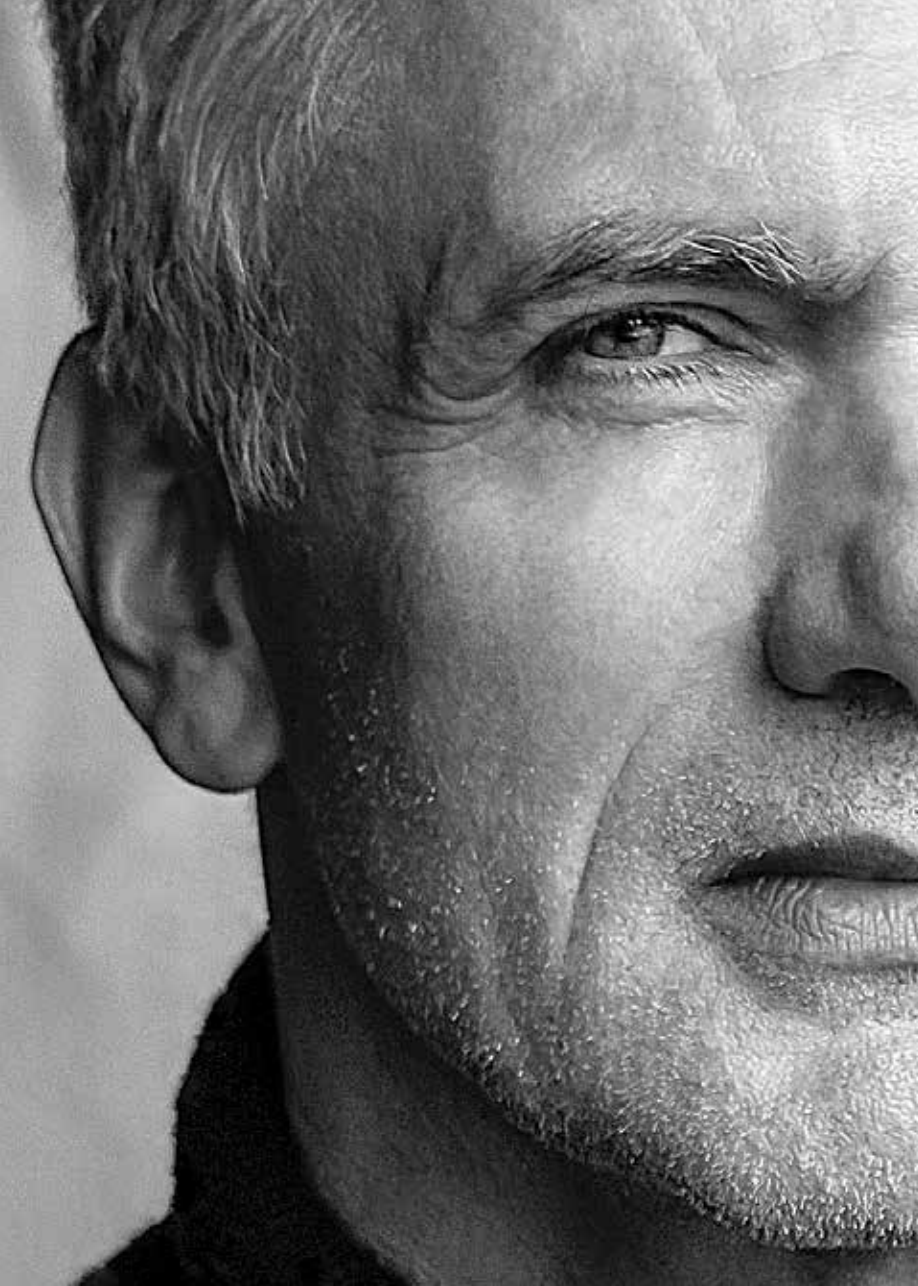
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FERENC BARNÁS

Ferenc Barnás was born in Debrecen in 1959. He has taught in secondary schools and also served as an instructor of music aesthetics and a museum attendant. His works have been translated into English, French, German, Czech, Croatian, Serbian, and Bahasa Indonesian.

I want to be free of it. I can't. The pain is so strong I can't stand up and walk out of the ward, walk down the corridor, go down to the first floor, then to the ground floor, go out the entrance, and cross the hospital courtyard – the only way I can get to the main entrance anyway is if I first enter the main building via the security door opposite the side building. It must be three in the morning. If the security door is open, then I come to a narrow corridor, I have to go the whole way along this towards the porter's desk. The whole place is under camera surveillance; it doesn't matter; if I get

that far, then not even the porter will be able to hold me back – at worst I'll break the glass door with my own body. I wouldn't be seriously injured, so I could continue on my way towards the housing blocks. To move in any way whatsoever, I need the nurse's help. "Nurse!" I shout. She can't hear me, I know she can't hear me, maybe she lay down to rest or she was called to a patient. I shout again, a good deal louder this time: "Nurse!" Pressure and tightness in my lower gut, in my bladder, in the area above it – the pain radiates throughout my body. My urine is blocked again. Let it be over already! I shouldn't feel so tight! The pressure isn't in my lower gut anymore, it's in my head. But no, it's all happening around my bladder. I discipline myself, but it's no use, what I'm being submitted to is much stronger than my own will. I moan. No. I refuse to moan at three in the morning in a hospital ward, where there are other patients besides me, who I assume are asleep. My body produces a sound: the cell walls, ready to pop, squeeze the sound out of my throat, out of the cracks below my throat. If these get any stronger than they are now, then all I can focus on is getting out, that compared to this state, non-existence would be breaking free, liberation.

I shout again. No use. I don't know how much time passes before the nurse appears beside my bed. I tell her my urine is blocked again. At which point she leans over my bare lower body, and pulls the catheter bag's plastic

pipe out of the pipe which is hanging out of my penis; she has to do it this way, otherwise she can't determine where it's blocked. She immediately notices the bits of blood clogging the plastic pipe, I can see it in the half-light because I'm lying in the bed closest to the corridor, and one section of the corridor's neon lights are still on. I lift my upper body as much as I can; all that moves inside me is pain and helplessness. A few seconds later, carrying the catheter bag, the nurse goes into the bathroom attached to our ward where there's a toilet; I hear her empty the contents of the plastic bag. I also hear her turn on the tap and wash out the catheter pipe; I don't hear that, but I know that's what she did, that's what she was supposed to do. Then she comes back to my bed, and she reinserts the bag's pipe into the pipe sticking out of my penis: I can feel her push the two pipes into one another, I've got used to the sensation caused by this reinsertion, compared to the tightness this is nothing. Meanwhile my urine slowly passes through the pipe into the plastic bag. Over the last fifteen hours I have experienced how my body is able to gather energy to go on enduring suffering. Not me, my body is preparing for what's to come. Just let it be over! Let this be the end of it! Let me lose knowledge of myself! Let me stop knowing I am! Pain experienced in a state beyond consciousness is not the pain I know, though there is consciousness in unconsciousness, it sifts through. In Dr Csető's hospital I was able to partly follow what was happening

to me, this was true. Only at the point of complete detachment, at the point of complete dissolution does what binds us to our perception and through that to our senses fray away, that's how I remember it.

Half an hour later everything starts over.

There's no one beside me. From that alone I muster strength. There are others in the ward, but they're strangers, though when the pain gets stronger, they're gone too, everything and everyone is gone, apart from the pain which fills me in its entirety. And the desire.

I lay in the bed, and I focused on one thing and one thing only: disappearing. This desire was stronger in me than anything else, in certain moments even than the pain. If I don't exist, then nor does the pain. I had a single question, a single technical question: how to get to the housing blocks. For me to get to the blocks, I have to go around the undertaker's house, I thought, or rather I have to go along Sörgyár Street until Lavotta Street, then at Lavotta I turn left, I carry on along it towards the main road, which must be four or five minutes from the hospital. On the far side of the main road are the tower blocks. I have to go on another hundred metres maybe, and I'm at the first building. What if I get into the first ten-storey, I thought, what if they don't lock it, or if they do lock it, what if tonight someone forgot to shut the entrance door.

a **YOUNG
WOMAN'S
STORY:**

FREE *from*
**POINTLESS
BOUNDARIES?**

Happiness is not divvied out on the basis of the expectations of others. If you're a good little girl, you do as you are told and sit quietly until Mass or the film about history is over, and you are not bored by either. When you are a big girl, you find your life partner and live happily at his side forever and ever, surely. The narrator of this book is a young woman who is living in Milan with her wonderful Italian boyfriend. She goes to IKEA with his wonderful parents, and she strives to make peace with her wonderful boyfriend's wonderful aunt, Rosaria. The

*Not Polite to Work
in the Garden
on Good Friday*

book takes place in two different phases of the narrator's life, her childhood in rural Hungary and the adult woman's everyday life in Milan. The two temporal planes are connected by the narrative perspective, which is bold but which also strikes a naïve tone. The narrator's experiences at times leave her indifferent and often make her (endearingly) angry. She wants to pursue her own desires, but she is continuously bound by the expectations of others. The texts create an impressive arch only to bid farewell, in the end, to love, grandfather, and expectations. But we do not find melancholic brooding or fretting. The prose is humorous and self-reflexive, and the voice of childish amazement sheds light on the many incomprehensible expectations placed on someone by the adult world, bringing to the fore, in turn, the perception of life shared by the generation born in the 1980s. Should we cling stubbornly to anachronistic traditions? Can we blame anyone, our parents or grandparents, for our own unhappiness? The interpretive horizon is provided in part by the contrasts between life in Italy and life in Hungary, and the evocative descriptions offer humorous comparisons. (The novel was published as part of the Scholar Live series of Scholar Publishing House, which focuses on works by young, innovative authors.)

author
Zsófia Czakó

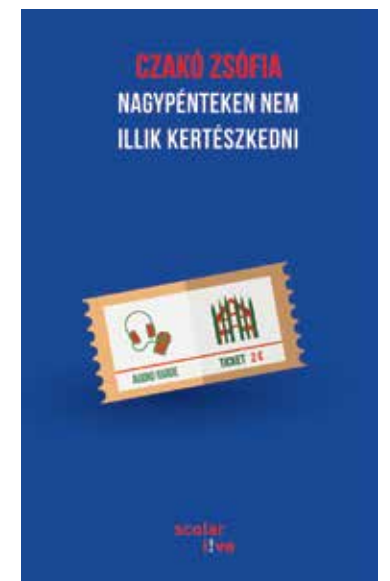
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ZSÓFIA CZAKÓ

Zsófia Czakó was born in Győr in 1987. She currently lives in Budapest. Nagypénteken nem illik kertészkedni (“Not Polite to Work in the Garden on Good Friday”) is her first published work.



Rosaria had been living alone for years. She had lost her husband relatively young after long illness and her little sister, Paolo’s wife. While she was still young, life had fashioned her into an experienced caregiver for the sick. She spent her early mornings, mid-mornings, and afternoons in the hospital. When I happened to find her at home in her black dress, I always knew that she had either just come from the hospital or was just about to leave for it. When Paolo was in the hospital dying, she began to stoop and walk with a shuffle. In the early mornings, you could see her plodding towards the tram stop, taking slow steps, all hunched over,

as if she were going to work, dutiful, disciplined. In the evenings, she would arrive even wearier, ring the bell, and then recount in a voice enthusiastic and loud what had happened with the catheters, who had died that day in the corridor or in the neighbouring room or on the neighbouring bed. Cause many people died in the corridor, often young people. And she told me I shouldn’t smoke. That’s what’s taking Paolo from us, the red Marlboros, and that young woman, the one who lost her thirty-year-old fiancé, she cried today. (...)

On the tram to the hospital, I wrapped myself in a black curtain, and by the time I got off, I was exuding sorrow and compassion, silence and stern serenity, so that when I made it to Paolo’s room, the dying man’s room, which Rosaria had basically moved into, I could be solemn and compassionate in the silence, the exaltedness, the sadness. I went to the reception desk and asked, shaken, where I would find Paolo’s room, the man suffering from throat cancer, and then I went, walking with a dignified gait, up to the corridor on the second floor and quietly opened the door to the room. I was ready to embrace Rosaria and cry, to share everyone’s grief.

When I opened the door, I thought I had got the wrong room. Yes, I saw Paolo’s son, with his red hair, and I recognized the timbre and treble of Rosaria’s loud chatter and my boyfriend’s laughter, and I saw old Paolo’s catheterized, emaciated body and his swollen

face, but still, this was not a room in which a dying man was being mourned. Rosaria, who was standing beside the machine beeping above Paolo’s head, was talking about how you have to put pine nuts in spinach lasagna. Francesca, a relative from Sicily, was the first person who noticed me. She leapt up and welcomed me with loud, cheerful kisses, and someone else passed me a glass of almond milk. The room was full of relatives and friends, and they greeted me cheerfully, as if we had bumped into one another at a birthday party. How am I? So good to see me again! My boyfriend was glad that I had made it, and then, when Paolo suddenly coughed and lifted his head, everyone except the people standing closest to the bed sat back down. Francesca went over to his bedside, bent down, and took his outstretched, emaciated hand, which was feebly grabbing at the empty air. She held the dying man’s elbow firm in her grasp and, with her other hand, she pressed his fingers to her elbow. She leaned over, her face close to his ear, caressed his head, and whispered, “I’m here Paolo, I’m here.” She stood next to Paolo while the pain of the spasm wracked his body. She held his arm and whispered into his ear, and she only let go of it, slowly, gently, when the pain had released him. Francesca then arranged the pillow and kissed Paolo’s grey, lifeless face and said that the idea of putting pine nuts in lasagna was just utterly ridiculous.

She didn’t like pine nuts. They give her the runs! And Rosaria puts pine nuts in everything, but lasagna is really taking it too far,

to which Rosaria said that you could murder someone with the lasagna Francesca made, and as she said this, in order to indicate that Rosaria’s lasagna is as hard as a rock, she tapped her forehead with her fingers, at which the whole bunch of them burst out laughing, Francesca included. Sometimes one of the relatives would leave the pleasant semi-darkness of the room, where everything smelled of coffee and oranges, and someone would arrive and replace them. The recipes changed, the subjects of conversation changed, only Paolo and his suffering remained unchanged, and when his body again was wracked with spasms, Francesca was relieved by another in-law or a sibling or a cousin or my boyfriend. Someone was always on hand to help the dying man, to talk to him gently, to caress his face, to reassure him that they were there, they were all there, no need to fear, and they squeezed his hand and sat down at his bedside and continued chatting about goings-on at work, about cars, about the kids, or about recipes, while sitting on a chair in the corner, I thought about the hospital rooms I hadn’t seen, about my dead, whom I hadn’t known, whose illnesses and deaths had been distant, sad, and sorrowful, illnesses and deaths in which there had been neither life nor school nor kids nor lasagna recipes nor me, just silence, loneliness, and death, unknown, empty, and terrifying death.



from the
**GREEK
 CIVIL
 WAR**
to a
**SERIAL
 KILLER**
in
**BUDA-
 PEST**

Éva Cserhádi's novel is one of the most exciting Hungarian crime fictions of recent years, the first volume of a series. Team C, which is made up of novices and people close to retirement age, proves, in the course of an investigation into a serial killing, that it is far more capable than anyone had thought. We are introduced to a tough, determined detective, a woman who must forge the members of this ragtag group into an effective team. Not an easy

*The Mermaid's
 Secret*

task, given the idiosyncrasies of the outstanding ballistics expert, who has formed a close bond with alcohol. Neither does the father of twins, whom the boss is pushing to take paternity leave, make her life any easier. And if this weren't enough, she has to deal with the expert on human rights, an eager young woman who for some reason always wraps her head in a shawl. And then there's Data, the most reliable character, whose name clearly indicates that her talents and passions lie in informatics. They are investigating a serial murder, and as they gradually form a strong team, they also learn a great deal about one another and themselves, though they often clash, as every team which has at least one feminist and one conservative male. The novel ushers us into an exciting moment of history. During the last years and the aftermath of the Greek Civil War in 1948–1949, Greek children and supporters of the Democratic Army of Greece were evacuated to Hungary. But were they all ethnic Greeks? And what does this have to do with the murders? Was the murderer motivated by a personal grudge or a desire to right a historical wrong? And what does any of this have to do with the Fountain of the Mermaid on one of the main squares of Budapest, created by the Greek sculptor Memos Makris and his wife, the artist Zizi Makri? The novel answers these questions as it guides us through one of the most mysterious periods of the twentieth century.

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ÉVA CSERHÁTI

Éva Cserhádi was born in Budapest in 1975. After completing her university studies, she taught Spanish. She lived on a sailboat on the Mediterranean Sea for years, where she worked as a literary translator. Cserhádi is the editor-in-chief of Literatura Húngara Online.

Interview with Mitre Todorovski, Part 1 – Digital sound archive of the Hungarian daily Népszabadság, September 2015 (Transcription of the covert recording made at the police station)

‘You insisted on making a statement again. I told you it was not necessary. Would you like to have a lawyer to be present?’

‘Why? Am I accused of something?’

‘At this stage, we don’t yet know.’

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘No, I’m not. I’m only warning you. This is a long and complicated case.’

‘You just said everything was crystal clear. The guy didn’t like our looks and...’

‘No, I didn’t say that. First of all, your people killed his brother.’

‘My people? We are not murderers. How dare you?’

‘Look, his anger is understandable. He lost his brother and...’

‘I lost my brother too, my mother, and then all my family, my home.

Is that nothing? But I didn’t murder innocent people. But the way this country is going, anything can happen here!’

‘Let’s skip the politics. We have all the evidence to press charges, and we have identified the perpetrator. The motive of the killings is clear.’

‘Which perpetrator? Which murder?’

‘Don’t act as if you didn’t know. We are talking about the same case.’

(...) ‘I see... I am too old for this, but I know the kind of people you are. We fought against you and your lot in the war. You demonized and discredited communism! And now you just want us to shut up!’ (Noise of furniture being moved.)

‘Sit down, and stop shouting! If you don’t stop acting up, I won’t take your statement.’

‘I don’t want this anymore. I will make no statement. I will not share a table with fascists!’

‘Let me warn you that you can be fined for defamation of an officer of the state. With your past that will not be a problem. It is going to be an excellent front page for the tabloid press: “The Greek Commie Strikes Again”.’

17 July 2015, Friday, from midnight to dawn

‘Don’t worry, you won’t have to catch murderers.’ She kept repeating that casual remark to herself over and over. It was past midnight but she still couldn’t get to sleep. Perhaps it was not because of that remark but because she had gone to bed too early to make sure not to be late the next day, the first one in her new job. This was what the personnel woman had to say at the end of their conversation. Data put the patronizing tone down to two factors: her own age and weight. The personnel woman was in her late twenties and gathered her dyed hair into a coil that radiated meticulousness. She was slim and honey blonde: efficiency personified. Her title wasn’t, of course, personnel woman as in the old socialist times but HR assistant. That is to say, she wasn’t in charge of granting package holidays on behalf of the national council of trade unions, arm in arm with the shop steward under strict state control – rather, she was responsible for “human capital management at the Hungarian National Police

Headquarters.” If human capital was to be measured by weight, Data thought when she saw the label on her door, she will surely get the job.

‘So, what will be my job exactly?’ she had asked when she was finally called in to sign the contract. ‘We are looking for an administrative assistant who holds a degree in computer science. And because you worked with the police during the 1990s, when you were involved in the development of the Robot-Cop...,’ the HR assistant looked into her folder and her voice tailed off. ‘I was a data recorder in the software developer team. At least that was my job description,’ said Data recalling the long hours in front of the computer, strictly after work, when she was eventually allowed to do some programming. ‘The job is a complex one, far more challenging than the usual office work,’ said the HR assistant. ‘We need a person who is familiar with the world of programming and is capable of applying her knowledge creatively.’ And the young woman squared her shoulders to make it clear to Data that she, for one, was indeed one of those creative minds who were ready to take on such complex tasks. ‘So’, said Data, ‘officially, you are looking for an administrative assistant for one of the teams in the homicide department, but what you actually want is an IT geek who is not put off by the wage scale in the public service or by the fixed-term contract?’ She could see that the human capital manager was taken aback. Data was convinced that what the guys at the police headquarters actually wanted was to hire cheap labour close to retirement age, taking full advantage of the government’s Women 40+ programme. And that the HR assistant firmly believed that the state, on whose behalf she was acting, was doing a favour to overweight old bags such as Data. The last time she worked for the police she was twenty years younger and three stones lighter. Well, maybe three and a half, said the scales in the mornings. Lately the needle stopped well above thirteen stones. Data had tried to overcome her disappointment by telling herself that in the past it had been more than that. And anyway, she hadn’t been to the loo yet, besides, there’s a heatwave, so her body retains more water, oh, and the scale needed calibration, and so on. She had already laid out her clothes for the next morning. She had wondered long and hard if she should choose the striped top instead of the black spotted one. Not that wearing stripes made her look slimmer, she had long ago given up believing in the magic a pattern could work on her figure. She finally decided in favour of the spotted tunic because it brought her good luck. But she also made up her mind about the diet. She would stop putting it off and start the next day. Everything clicked: new diet, new job, new people. Except for one person.

A BIZARRE HUMAN EXPERIMENT

on a **YOUNG**
BILLIONAIRE

Boldizsár Fehér's most recent novel offers a humorous variation on the Bildungsroman. We all have a few images from our childhoods which, at decisive moments of our adult lives, suddenly flash before our mind's eye. The familiar depiction of the three wise monkeys, one plugging his ears, one clapping his hand over his mouth, and one covering his eyes, is one such image for the protagonist of this novel. The story is an intertwining of wisdom, naivety, and helplessness as the hero grows from an indecisive youth into an adult. As a young man, he fears he has lost everything, because his father first

Blind Monkey

loses his mind and then dies, but he then learns that the man he had thought of as his dad was not his biological father. Having waited for her son to reach the age of majority, his mother takes off with a dapper Greek billionaire. When he discovers that he has an heir, the boy's real father, a powerful figure in the media, leaves his son his fortune. The listless kid suddenly becomes a wealthy playboy, but alas, he doesn't bother to manage his wealth. Others use and bamboozle him, and as he strives to extricate himself from their schemes, he finally grasps that he must take responsibility for his acts. As he confronts the past (his relationship with his mother, his short marriage, his father's madness), he comes into contact in a hotel in Paris with two Nobel Prize-winning scientists who are in the middle of an odd experiment. He gets mixed up in another adventure and ends up spending most of his time with eccentrics. The stories, intertwined with memories of the past, move at an exciting pace, and they resemble at times the surreal yet carefully structured images of Wes Anderson films. The humour never wanes, even as the conclusion becomes increasingly clear: true freedom is but the freedom to choose, and the reader must decide whether the protagonist has chosen well.

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BOLDIZSÁR FEHÉR

Boldizsár Fehér was born in Budapest in 1992. He graduated from ELTE University in 2018, where he studied art history and philosophy. Fehér has written dramas and screenplays. His first novel, Vak majom (“Blind Monkey”), came out in 2019 and won the prestigious Margó Prize.



My mother, wrapped in a white veil, welcomed us into her home on one of the terraces. (...) I could hardly believe that I was looking at the same woman who had taken me to school every morning back then, who had helped dad put his ice cream vendor uniform on. Her hair was fluttering free in the wind. She was looking directly at me.

“Hi mom.”

“I thought I’d never see you again,” she said.

“You mean you hoped,” I replied.

“Who’s the girl?” she asked, ignoring my remark. Lili and I only got engaged after the trip, so I just introduced her as my girlfriend.

“I would have come, but you never invited me,” I said.

“What made you think you needed an invitation?” she asked.

“I thought you weren’t particularly eager to have me as your son anymore,” I said. She threw her head back and looked up at the sky, as if to tell me that I had said something appallingly stupid.

“You’re wrong,” she said. “I wasn’t eager to be a mother anymore. That’s not the same thing.”

“Result’s the same.”

“I was looking forward to seeing you today. I hope you didn’t come all this way to reproach me for not having been a good mother,” she said.

“Cause if so, it was a waste of energy. Especially dragging that poor girl along with you.”

Lili was visibly embarrassed, which was understandable. I hadn’t prepared her for this. (...)

“I’m going to take a look at that lovely boat,” she said.

“The Narkyssos,” my mother said. “Feel free to go aboard if you want.”

Lili went down the stone stairs to the shore, leaving me and mom alone.

“Why am I not surprised that you named your boat after a famous egoist?” I asked. (...)

“I’m sorry that you are so bitter,” my mother said. “That’s not how I remember you.”

“I’m amazed you remember me at all.”

“I regularly sent money. To you and your father.”

“Oh, I’m going to cry!” I said. “What devotion!”

There was a table in the middle of the terrace with fruit and a carafe. My mother poured herself a glass of water and squeezed a few drops of juice in it from a slice of lemon.

“You come here stuffed with money,” she said, “with a gorgeous girl at your side. You’ve got the world at your feet. I can’t quite tell where I failed you as a mother.”

“Oh please,” I said. “Don’t act like you had anything to do with what I’ve managed to achieve. Even you can’t be that smug.”

“Fine,” she replied. “But then don’t you act like you had anything to do with it either! Wealth and success basically dropped in your lap as if you’d won the lottery.”

“Fortunately, for you,” I said.

“For me?”

“That way you didn’t have to confront the fact that you’re a coward. You hated your work, you hated dad, and you clearly hated me too, cause you ran away.”

“Don’t think it was easy for me to leave.”

“Oh, come on! You almost burst out singing when you were getting me to lug your suitcases out. You didn’t even notice that I was crying. You looked down on dad. You were never home, you were always messing around with strange men, and you didn’t give damn about me. You went on and on about how I should become a journalist, and it took me a while to realize that you were actually doing something about it. Cause if you had seen me playing the harmonica in the underpass with an empty tin can in one hand you would have walked right past me.”

“You don’t know anything,” she said. “And you’re mean.”

“I know that the minute I turned eighteen, you threw off your responsibilities as a mother as if your prison sentence had come to an end.”

“My responsibilities as a mother? Did I understand you correctly?”

“Yes, exactly,” I replied. I was finally in the saddle, and it felt good.

I showed her the watch on my wrist, and I reminded her of what she had said when she had given it to me. “You said you hadn’t used your time wisely, and you had already spent too much time with me and dad.”

“I didn’t mean it as an insult.”

“So it was a compliment?”

She turned her back on me and walked over to the railing of the terrace. Her silhouette stood out against the otherworldly blue of the Aegean Sea. For a moment, I thought she might jump.

“Twenty-five years ago, I was a beautiful woman,” she said. “Do you have any idea how many men wanted to get me in bed?”

“I don’t want to know.” (...)

“When your father first met my family, he introduced himself to my parents as Jesus Christ. What do you have to say to that?”

“Dad was sick,” I said.

“He warned me from the start that he would go mad. Every man in his family had gone mad. He was certain that he had inherited it.”

“Then why did you marry him?”

“Unbelievable as it may seem to you, I fell in love with him,” she replied.

“You don’t know what kind of man he was. You never even knew him. You never knew the man I knew.”

She turned around and faced me again.

“But I didn’t want to punish my child and make him suffer the consequences of my decision. Do you know how likely it was that you would have gone mad too? But I was young enough and attractive enough, the men were lining up to see me, so I was able to choose the best possible biological mate I could find. Tell me, what mother would do that for her child?”



GUILT

of MENGELE'S

ZWILLINGSVATER

This novel is part of the continuing effort to understand the traumas of the Holocaust. It approaches this task from an unusual perspective. Though the protagonist, Ernő Spielmann, is a fictional character, his story is comparable to the story of Zvi Spiegel, who was the kapo for twins (“Zwillingsvater”) in Auschwitz-Birkenau and who brought forty children home from the extermination camp. The novel, which draws on materials which Gyurkovics discovered when writing his previous book, *Mengele böröndje* (“*Mengele’s Suitcase*”), offers a moving portrayal of the protagonist’s many struggles, which the passage of time does not make any easier. When we are

Migraine

introduced to Spielmann, he is already living in Israel. We are introduced to his family and the lively world which surrounds him. We find ourselves in the middle of the birth of the Jewish state, which is hardly free of conflict, but Spielmann’s anxiety is palpable, and it causes increasingly unbearable migraines. The subtitle of the novel, “The Story of a Guilty Conscience,” is painfully fitting. Spielmann is grappling with pangs of conscience, even though he often gets letters of thanks from twins whose lives he saved. Nonetheless, he is continuously confronted with the view according to which every survivor was somehow among the guilty. Spielmann’s migraines get worse, but eventually he is able to speak of his sense of compunction, and his wife’s and children’s reactions offer good examples of the ways in which the different generations deal with the traumas in question. The death camps, the communities of survivors, a short, exciting section on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and Spielmann’s daughter’s insistence on working through the past all suggest that silence is debilitating, while communication and even confession offer hope.

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TAMÁS GYURKOVICS

Tamás Gyurkovics was born in 1974. After graduating from ELTE University, he worked as a communication specialist for various magazines, TV channels, and state ministries. In 2010, he began working as a freelance writer. Gyurkovics is married and a father of two.



Did you say something, dad?" Judit asks. Spielmann sometimes has the feeling that Judit understands not only the words he utters, but also the thoughts flitting through his head.

"Nothing, my dear. Play! And study. Dinner will be ready soon."

A vein throbs in Spielmann's head. He starts pressing his hand to his forehead awkwardly, but he's got more faith in Nitza's thick, juicy stew. That it will help this bout pass too. Maybe I'm just hungry, he consoles himself, I haven't had anything to eat since noon. His gaze slips to the newspaper in his lap. (...) Spielmann never gets embroiled in political debates, but

he agrees with Ben Gurion. The task of the young state is not to tear at its clothes and curse the Germans, but to build. And you need money to build. You need machines, raw materials, steel wire, coal, wood, and bricks, and three billion Deutschmarks is not the price of forgiveness, no, there is no talk of reparations here, the General is right about that. This is an installment plan. No, Spielmann rubbed his temples, no, that's not right either. You use installment plans to pay off debts, and there was most certainly no talk of a loan here either. Besides, mere money had never been the issue. If it had been about money, then not a single hair on a single head of the Spielmanns of Munkács should have been harmed. The seventy or eighty relatives, his father, his mother, Smúel, put together they hadn't had enough wealth to their names to be worth sending trains for them, worth building and manning those enormous facilities, just for their sakes?

I'm an accountant. I understand numbers.

Smúel was his twin sister Magda's son. My firstborn, as Magda still calls him. Spielmann often thinks of the boy. Perhaps because he resembled Jisráel, or, more precisely, his son resembles Smúel, since Smúel had been the older of the two. Still is the older of the two, he corrects himself. Jisráel was born yesterday, but Smúel had been in elementary school at the time. True, the distance between the two of them is continuously getting smaller. My son is growing like a toadstool,

soon enough he'll join the army, but Smúel will always be seven years old. He will never age, not a day.

When the doctor had learned that Spielmann and Magda were twins, he had taken Spielmann's sister out of the line. He put her next to Spielmann, but they were not allowed to speak. He pointed at Smúel and said, "the little boy," those were his words, "will be better off with his grandmother." He even stroked his face. Months had passed before Spielmann had seen his sister again. She seemed to have gone completely mad. She didn't recognize him. Sometimes she mistook him for their father, sometimes for her dead son. After the liberation, though, when they saw each other again in Munkács, she was herself again. At least her mind, because her body had changed. She had a beard, and not just a little downy moustache, like many of the Sephardic women from the city, but a real beard. Little tufts of hair on her chin and cheeks. And her back was hunched and her skin splotched. Magda had become ugly, but only temporarily, because she slowly changed back, even if she was never quite the way she had been before the war. But she was more herself. She was even able to become a mother again, she had just had to leave that land. She and her husband Nahman had emigrated long before he and Nitza had. Spielmann had insisted on waiting in Prague for the declaration of the independent Jewish state. Everything has a logic of its own, he would say. You can't emigrate to a country that doesn't exist, you have to hold on to your passport, your

citizenship until the very end! Well, Magda and Nahman, they had had no intention of holding on to anything.

They had had enough of it all by '47, the familiar houses with strangers living in them, the new borders, the new passports, the Soviets, the Slovaks, the Romanians, and the Hungarians too. (...) She had fled to Palestine on a Cyprian smuggling ship. They say that when she first set foot on Israeli soil, it was smack in front of a British patrol. (...) They had celebrated the foundation of the state here, Magda and Nahman, "and with a wine from Mount Carmel," she always added, as if the wine produced here meant the fulfillment of the prophecy that promised this land to the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

"Dinner!" Nitza shouted from the kitchen.

The head of the family takes his hands from his forehead. He knows that time has proven him right. What he sought when he emigrated this country has given him. Life here is not without its troubles or fears either, but it can be calculated more precisely. Here, there is even a sort of logic to the tension: Sabras against Oleks, those who had resisted against those who had survived, nationalists against communists, Palestinians against Jews, and so on. This gives a regular swing of the pendulum to everyday life, at least until these conflicts break the familiar span of their swing, because then they make life here uncertain too.



Smuggling SPIES REGIME

At first glance, László Imre Horváth seems to have written a traditional historical novel into which he has woven a brutal proclamation: “history is the story of criminals.” This novel, however, is made increasingly gripping by the historical proximity of the real figures. After the Second World War, Hungarian communist politician Gábor Péter became the head of the State Protection Authority. He was

Shorty's Righthand Man

in charge of the political police, which meant that he decided over life and death. After the show trials, the intimidation, and the executions, he himself became a victim of the regime. An account given by one of his collaborators offers insights into this brutal system, which was founded on distrust. The narrator's unusual perspective offers a new approach to the story. “Little Man” or, as Gábor Péter's (a.k.a Shorty) agent, “Utisz” (nobody) serves whatever government happens to be in power. His account acquaints us with his life and profession, which resembles the career of a mafioso. The prevailing ideology notwithstanding, he prospered under communism. As a young man, he treks to Budapest after the First World War, fleeing his alcoholic father, who has returned from the front. When he arrives in the capital, the head of the Circe Club takes him under his wing, and soon he becomes heir to the spirit and role of the place. But history continues its relentless march, and the bar which had been frequented by the well-to-do becomes a dive for Soviet officers. The characters struggle to stay afloat in a world of smuggled cigarettes, cocaine, forged passports, and human fates discarded, in short, in the world of legal criminal behavior. Many of them vanish, then reappear, then vanish again for good, people whose names will be forgotten by history, though no one will ever know just how many “Utisz” how many Nobodies took the secrets of the Communist Party with them to the grave.

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LÁSZLÓ IMRE HORVÁTH

László Imre Horváth was born in Budapest in 1981. He studied Hungarian literature and history at Pázmány Péter Catholic University. He regularly publishes poems and other writings in Hungarian literary journals. He lives in Budapest.

“**A**fter Medák picked me up off the streets like a grubby little kitten, everything went pretty much problem-free at the Club, the Island of the Happy Souls, or Circe’s Empire, depending on who you asked, for another fifteen years, just as the old headwaiter had dreamed it would, and had done his best to see would happen. He had reared his successor, me, with dutiful attentiveness, but around the time of his death, we realized it had probably been completely pointless. The waves from the world outside were rolling across the country and destroying everything. By the time the war

had come to an end, nothing was left of the Club, of Gedeon Medák’s lifework. And the way it later rose from the ashes, I was always ashamed of that when I thought of him. After the Anschluss, the number of members really started to dwindle. Though there were many who hoped that the war might be of some use, especially the owners of the old fortunes, more and more people were choosing the wiser path, emigration. The revels and drinking sprees became more extreme in scale and character. The danse macabre began far sooner among circles who were better informed about the coming catastrophe, and the members of the club all belonged to these circles. Two years later, Hungary joined the war too. Most of the officers were sent to the front. The club’s revenues dwindled, but expenses grew, since I was forced to get more and more products on the black market. More and more often, I had to swap things with criminals, and soon I was spending more of my time dealing with them than I was spending in the Club. The gangs around Teleki Square and the smuggler clans by the wharfs all made good money off me and the terrified middle class. The wartime blockades, Romania and Bulgaria, who were our allies, and Turkey, which was neutral, to the smugglers the whole thing was like an amazing, blessed constellation for which astrologists had been waiting for centuries. Using the detours and bypasses, they could get anything, and they could sell anything to the wealthy, who sensed that death was nigh,

at ever higher prices. There were a few smugglers who wanted to get even more out of the situation. Particularly when the war really got rough. The Hungarian army that had been sent to the front had been decimated, and the Germans had been defeated at Stalingrad. Lots of people deluded themselves with the thought that the front would never reach Budapest, would never even cross the border into Hungary. The criminals were not so naïve. They figured it was only a question of time before the city fell under siege. They were not wearied middle-class scribblers, attorneys or merchants whose prosperity had made them callous. No, they were old-school businessmen through and through. (...) Their instincts, in any event, were working just fine, while it seemed that in everyone around them, these instincts were failing utterly. The blackouts, the shortages, the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had died, the Jewish men who had been sent to the labor battalions, and the blundering indecision of the leaders, especially the pathetic, powerless aging Horthy all failed to sharpen people’s instincts. Maybe they just found the whole thing unbelievable. I remember this myself, the last lesson, cause this all had an influence on me too, and I wasn’t willing to believe it either. In retrospect, I see these years like some kind of protracted drunken stupor and hangover melted together, cause in the end, when I think about it, that state of affairs lasted for years. The smugglers didn’t work like that, though. They knew that if or, rather, when the city was surrounded, people would go hungry,

and they would be able to trade potatoes for gold and smoked meat for diamonds. Kornis had died a long time before all this, before Gedeon Medák, of stomach cancer, but he had a nephew everybody called Bors. By the end of the war, Bors was the most powerful player in the underground world. He had “occupied” an enormous system of cellars, which covered most of the old city like a spiderweb. He piled up foodstuffs in this labyrinth of his, in its innumerable passageways, provisions he had been setting aside ever since the country entered the war. When the siege of the city began, they say there was a Hungarian officer who wasn’t willing to send a whole train full of chickpeas to Germany. He was executed, but for six months Budapest ate chickpeas, which everyone hated, but at least there was something to hate, and a million and a half people didn’t die of starvation. (...) After Medák died, Bors became the main supplier for the Club. (...) In March of ’44, the Germans occupied the country. The Hungarian army let them in without firing a shot, and we knew it was all over. In the rest of the country, with the help of the gendarmerie and the Arrow Cross rabble, the SS needed only a few weeks to put half a million Jews onto cattle cars and send them straight to Auschwitz. They created a ghetto in Budapest and the Gestapo moved into the city.

And the Circe Club closed too.



The Mysterious Hoodie

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Éva Kalapos's novel offers snapshots of a social class which only rarely makes an appearance in literature. Her early works were young adult novels, so she is familiar with the harsher tones of everyday language. Fema, the protagonist of the novel, is a cashier in a small store. She introduces us to the people who come to the store, her husband, who is fond of playing pranks, her mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's, and her past, which is full

F, As In

of wounds, and we bear witness to a tale which is almost dystopic. Fema is not willing to recognize the affronts she has suffered. She recounts events in an almost emotionless voice, but her simple, everyday style still makes her a compelling character. The tension in the relationships among the characters is palpable. Fema's husband, who is fond of making threats, her mother, who is in a state of serious mental decline, and her boss, who loves to grab her ass, are all incapable of forming deeper bonds. In this dull world, a hooded man pops up who picks people out of the crowd and starts taking pictures of them like some paparazzi photographer. An attorney, a woman who often comes to the store, is one of his victims, and she suffers a nervous breakdown because of his stalking. Her collapse creates a bond between her and Fema, members of two distant social classes who, apart from happening across each other in the store, would otherwise never meet. They begin to form a friendship until one day, the attorney suddenly disappears. In the meantime, Fema has developed a closer relationship with a new coworker, a mentally handicapped boy who, odd though he is, approaches her sensitively. Though the introductions to the individual chapters indicate that the story well not end well, predictability takes the place of trust, and this offers a vision of the emergence of an entirely new order.

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ÉVA KALAPÓS

Éva Kalapos was born in Nyíregyháza in 1983. She graduated from Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church. In 2008, she began publishing short stories and poems. She also works as a journalist for various magazines.



The lawyer lady hadn't come in for days. That hadn't ever happened, at least not since I've been working here. I told Zoki, but he just shrugged and grunted something about how he never chitchats with the customers.

(...)

I've been nagging Zoki for years about how we should sell lightbulbs, cause people are always looking for them, but he won't. He always repeats that super exciting story about how,

at his old workplace, the boss bought three different kinds of lightbulb and then they just sat on the shelves for months, no one touched them. I tell him that at our place the customers are asking for them, but no point, he just shoos me away. He's not into new stuff.

But now I needed a lightbulb, cause mom busted the one in the bathroom. Just good luck that my favourite Chinese storeowner had already opened up. He was standing in the doorway and watching people walk by, like he always does when there are no customers. (...) Chepan, that's his name, stepped to one side and let me in, bowing a little as I passed by. I haven't ever seen a Chinese person stand up straight. They're all hunched over all the time, as if it were an honour that someone was just looking at them. The guy's name is more complicated than Chepan, but when he introduced himself, that's what I heard, so it stayed Chepan. My name's pretty simple. Fema. Even a Chinaman can get that right.

He found a lightbulb in under thirty seconds and handed it to me. Then he put his elbows on the countertop, propped his chin on his hands, and smiled at me. It always starts like this.

'You know joke about sick employee?'

'I don't,' I said. Every time we talk, he tells another joke, cause when they came here, someone told him that in this country he could knock people off their feet if he just told them a good joke. So he's always telling his Chinese jokes, and he always insists that I tell jokes from here. I already told him Bitá's joke, the dragon joke, course I didn't tell it as good as

Bitá. I can't tell jokes. I always mess something up, but Chepan doesn't care. He giggles like an idiot at anything.

'Sick employee tells boss that he cannot go work,' he began, all excited, and he stood up straight, as if he were on stage. He acts out the jokes. Like this time, he started talking with a hoarse voice. I figured the sick employee had a sore throat.

"Sorry I have to stay at home, take sick day." Boss say nonsense!' He used a deeper voice for that, clearly the strict boss. 'When I sick, I climb into bed with my wife, and I always feel better. You try!'

I began to chuckle, not because of the joke, because Chepan's wife had just appeared behind him. I've never once heard that woman say a thing. She just stands there smiling, her hands on her waist, like a life-sized doll. She sometimes says something to her husband, but you can't figure out what they're talking about, like not even in general, cause the whole time their faces are blank, not even a twitch. Like as if they had no facial expressions apart from totally cheerful and totally blank.

'Next day employee go to work. Boss ask, "it help, what I tell you, no?'" Chepan continued, and he was bowing a little again, so I knew that the joke would be over soon. He always assumed this pose before telling the punchline. 'Employee say, "yes, boss sir, thank you! I feel much better. And you have very beautiful home!'"

I smiled, cause I knew he was expecting me to smile, though I didn't get it at first. These Chinese jokes are weird, they're all about cheating on your spouse. Makes you think China can't be

too interesting a place, though Chepan's always talking about it as if it were the land of milk and honey. Sure, guess that's why they left. Though everything looks better when you're looking back on it. Then he pestered me to tell him a joke too, so I muttered out the one about the kid sitting by the pool, but of course I messed up and started by saying, 'shitting by the pool,' and the whole point is that you mix up 'sitting' and 'shitting,' and that's the joke. Not that it mattered, cause Chepan would have laughed if I had been reading the obituaries in today's paper. He'd wrapped the lightbulb up in tissue paper, though I always tell him not to, but I think wrapping stuff up is pretty much like breathing for him. He accompanied me to the door and bowed again, and I suddenly wanted to give him a tug on the ear just to see if he would make a face. I didn't, of course. I just waved, and he grinned. So, either a grin or a blank face. Then I guess you really can live life like that.

By the time I got to the store, Derel had come in. We hadn't seen him in a long time. He must have come down with something, he looked like shit, but he'd brought some new kind of Ukrainian cigarettes, fucking strong, but at least they'll wake me up. The nice thing about Derel is that I don't have to talk much, he talks enough for both of us. I just nod. Like this time, he was explaining something for minutes on end, and I put my cigarette out on the wall and was about to go inside when suddenly I saw the lawyer lady.



Hungarian literary historian Mihály Szegedy-Maszák entitled one of his collections of essays *The Novel as it Writes Itself*. This title seems to permeate the most recent novel by Zsolt Láng, a major figure of Transylvanian literature. The title of the novel suggests that it is about the life of János Bolyai, but one soon realizes that it is a complex game between competing narratives. One of the narrators is first-person singular, a writer writing

Bolyai

a book on Bolyai, a pioneer in non-Euclidean geometry who went largely unrecognized in his lifetime. Every second chapter, however, has a third-person singular narrator who creates the illusion of the novel about Bolyai. The language of the novel is sensual and intellectual, precise and unsystematic, and the double game played with the biographical narrative distances the chapters from one another while also binding them together more closely. Bolyai's world, which is very closed off, is tied to the world outside by sensations, and it creates a distinctive contrast with the perspective of the writer, who fastidiously observes the world around him and indeed is almost incapable of closing it off. The writer struggles with his material, and thanks to a Swiss scholarship, he is able to share his findings with other scholarship recipients and his wife. Like a detective, he studies Bolyai, who was often oppressed by his father and who had an undeserved fate. In the meantime, he struggles with his material and with the universe around him. He gets caught up in the lives of people who embrace relativity, and he also gets mixed up in an unusual crime story. The fates of Bolyai, Bolyai's father, *Herr Láng*, and *Herr Láng's* father are then all inextricably intertwined. Finally, when we see the stories from the perspective of Éva, the writer's beloved, we are brought closer to the ultimate conclusion: "We are made of stardust."

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author
Zsolt Láng

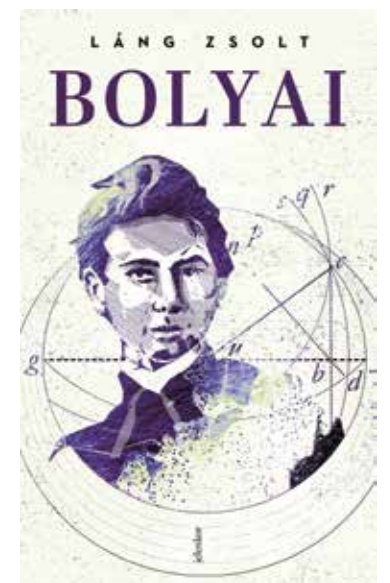
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ZSOLT LÁNG

Zsolt Láng was born in Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare, Romania) in 1958. He completed his Master's Degree in engineering at the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca. He served as a teacher in several villages in Satu Mare County. His recent novel Bolyai has been nominated for the AEGON Prize.



His father got a copy of the book from the usual place, the Feuerbach bookshop, and sent it to him without bothering much to sink into it himself. János made note of the day, because he considered it that important. His father's servant arrived with the book on October 17, but János was only able to dig into it much later, after the uncertain political situation had passed. He was worried that he would come upon something devastating in it, but there was nothing to fear, the book had nothing to do with the new science of space, with absolute space. Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky's treatise, *Imaginary Geometry*, was essentially a textbook. As such, it was useful. And as such, it was a compendium of earlier textbooks. No, he couldn't

even say it offered a comprehensive summary. It dealt only with Euclid's theory of parallel lines. It disproved it. Work half-done.

It was useful because it confirmed that his *Appendix* was an appendix in name only. His theory of space was indeed an introduction to a new view of the world. Lobachevsky was unable to accept the possibility that two formations which were mutually exclusive could exist at the same time.

He was also glad to have got a copy of the book because it meant he could withdraw from the hubbub that everyone was calling a revolution. The strange characters who had come to the fore were astounding. Not for a minute would he have thought them capable of governing a country until next Monday, let alone permanently. With their hands, which were accustomed to the most revolting things, they sliced history up into the story of their egotism. When he had once explained how to reshape the administration of the land effectively, neither government commissioner Berzenczey nor Dorschner, who at the time had been commander of a Székely brigade, had understood a word. Or perhaps they had both thought him a fool, because when he had finished, neither had asked a single question.

He was thinking about the girl, daydreaming about her. Why hadn't she come back? The threads of light lingering in the clearing conjured his lanky shape. Had his coldness alarmed her? His awkward gestures? His

cumbersomeness? Never in his life had he been as clever, as clear, as fresh, as graceful as she. Sense is not the same thing as system. Newtonian mechanics, that's a system, as is Aristotelian logic and Euclidean geometry. Sense is relative. Non-Euclidean geometry demands non-Newtonian mechanics and non-Aristotelian logic. And a new language. How pitiful the attempts he had made to write down this new world! I created a new, different world from nothing – the very sentence was like the chatter of an old man, unctuous and trite. Poetry had infected him too. Lobachevsky ripped through the proofs too, teased apart something that had force when stuck together, when pulled tight like a string. The girl had explained, without words, what he had discovered. The demonstration was the description, the language plucked from among the fallacies. The experience she had bestowed on him was staggering. And she had awoken him to the biggest contradiction in Lobachevsky's book: it strove for perfection. It contained no contradictions. The dimension of fissure, which, however, was in his *Appendix*, was missing. It was difficult to spot, but it was there. Between the big "S" and the little "s" was the unfamiliar distance between the two worlds, but it could not be called a distance, because there was no ruler with which it could be measured. Counselor Lobachevsky had politely, all-knowingly eliminated every contradiction from his work. Geometry for him was a kind of bureau where the essential rule was that no affairs ever be left

unfinished. At the same time, one could not help but wonder how someone could know everything but understand nothing. What sort of dread held this man in its clutches?

A light shimmered in the depths of the lake. Apparently, someone was still sitting on the rock. His heart leapt, but there was no one. He eyed the dam which blocked the water's path. Had the girl really erected it by herself? It had been built in layers, a wall at the bottom made of stone, the knots of grass, and then more rocks. On the outside, on the far side of the swelling waters, branches about arm-thick or thinner, along with some thick logs standing up straight. From there, the wall of the dam resembled a woven basket. The branches that were thinner and more flexible intertwined beside the logs, which served as ribs, forming bindings which held back the pressure against them from both sides. The builder had even taken care to be sure that the water which spilled over not wash away the pebbly mud stuck between the branches, but rather flow down in a shaft of bark roughly the width of two palms into the channel. He decided he would make a sketch of this remarkable construction, but in the meantime, the sun had set, and it was already quite dark beneath the canopy of boughs. By the time he decided to return to the house, the late-summer evening had wrapped the garden in darkness.





CLIMBING

TO THE TOP

*of the Academic
Food Chain*

Réka Mán-Várhegyi's novel *Magnet Hill* is innovative and exciting both in its subject matter and its poetics. It is hardly surprising that it won the 2019 European Union Prize for Literature. The book is a tapestry of narrative games. A third-person narrator tells us the

Magnet Hill

story of Enikő Börönd, who has just returned to Hungary from the United States to take her place in the world of sociology in Hungary. The story is not a linear narrative, but the fragments never leave the reader in doubt. The other voice belongs to Réka, a student of sociology, who recounts events in the first-person. Réka is working on a novel, and one of the problems with which she is grappling is whether to use a first-person or third-person narrator. Thus, her character offers insights into the complexities of the process of writing. The painfully funny descriptions offer an excruciatingly precise introduction to everyday life at Hungarian universities, including the chauvinism of this world, but we are also introduced to serious characters who indeed represent something more general. Enikő is the child of a highly educated family in which the women's strange family bonds make it almost impossible for them to live as girlfriends or wives. Yet for Réka, who is the first member of her family to move in these circles, this world is what she has longed for. Tamás Bogdán, Enikő's ex and Réka's current lover and also a first-generation scholar, brings a new shade of colour to this world through his research. Békásmegyér, a neighbourhood on northern fringes of Budapest full of housing projects and skinheads, appears in the novel as a land thronging with peripheral figures, and a sort of magic thread is gradually woven into the novel as Réka is compelled to ask whether she will be capable of escaping the mythical force of Magnet Hill in Békásmegyér and entering the world of the intellectual elite.

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RÉKA MÁN-VÁRHEGYI

Réka Mán-Várhegyi is a Hungarian writer who was born in Romania in 1979. She grew up in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș), Romania. Her recent novel Magnet Hill won the prestigious European Union Prize For Literature in 2019. Mán-Várhegyi lives in Budapest, where she works as a book editor.

In the summer of 1999 Enikő Börönd arrived in Budapest for the first time after her move to New York, even though back then she had sworn never again to set foot in Hungary. What made her change her mind? News of her arrival spread like wildfire even among her more distant acquaintances and, according to some, the indications were that this was no mere visit but a permanent return home. The reason for this was, it was conjectured, that her marriage had broken down. And if that was the case, if her New York-based husband had indeed thrown her out, then that meant it was also curtains for Enikő Börönd's overseas career.

No way, the distant acquaintances said, pooh-poohing the notion. Her kind can turn even the most desperate of situations to their advantage. She could have spent two years doing nothing but smoking cigarettes on the balcony and filing her nails and she'd still come up smelling of roses. She'd surprise everyone by putting her carefully distilled thoughts down on paper, in the form of an essay or perhaps a slim volume, and in two shakes it would be out in an English translation. There might be reservations about the work's quality and those distant acquaintances wouldn't put hand on heart and claim that, had it been written by someone else, it would have been hailed as such a success.

It's in such people's DNA. The grandmother made a pile back under socialism writing novels for little girls, her father teaches philosophy in Berlin, and there was said to be a Börönd who was a pianist, and another who was an internationally acclaimed physiotherapist. Enikő herself had, of course, been an outstanding student, winning prizes in secondary school, gaining her doctorate at 27 and, in the blink of an eye, making it to assistant professor. Who cared that an ageing full professor might have had a finger in that pie, as a gift to his would-be lover. Not that it did him much good.

Then the American came on the scene, a performance artist, hardly a decade younger than the professor but, thanks to the athletic lifestyle long popular over the pond and in tandem with a diet rich in fibre, looking rather

better than most men in their thirties on this side of the water. Enikő moved to New York, landed a postdoc at Columbia, and within a couple of years was leading a seminar at the New School and publishing in prestigious social science journals on anti-Semitic motifs in journalistic writing and on the possible points of contact between performance art and the social sciences. Of these, none were published in Hungarian.

Then, in the summer of 1999, she returned home. This didn't come as all that much of a surprise to the distant acquaintances. The heartwarming *schadenfreude* they felt about the failure of the marriage with the American was somewhat tempered by the news that Enikő managed to get a job at the university and was writing a book about her research. In short order she was there at every important professional event, popping up at the soirées of intellectual opinion-formers and volunteering for a few weeks' teaching in a camp for disadvantaged Roma children. In the course of the autumn she published a series of *feuilletons* about her experiences. "I thought she was a proper sociologist," says Regina Horváth, a colleague from the provinces, long languishing as an assistant lecturer at the University of Debrecen, throwing the newspaper down on the bedside table. "If someone is up to writing decent scholarly articles, why does she waste her time on such piddling little whinings?"

"Perhaps she has a wider public in her sights," replied Kornél Ivánka, Regina's lover, likewise a newly appointed assistant lecturer

at Debrecen University. "What's so wrong with that? Later she'll write it up for the profession, too." Kornél Ivánka, barely five foot two but already bald as a coot, was once in Enikő Börönd's cohort, which was why he still carried something of a torch for her. Though they hadn't known each other well, it would be idle to deny that Enikő brightened up the class, regularly commenting on the lectures, asking questions, and not just sitting on her backside like most of the students.

"But what's the point of writing so superficially, it's just misleading," Regina goes on, and although she doesn't intend it to, her voice is shaking. Why couldn't Kornél and the others see that what this woman was doing was pure window-dressing? She would so much like to tell them, listing point by point just what was so infuriating about such people, she's just afraid that Kornél would misunderstand and think it was jealousy talking.

Regina isn't jealous, she rejects that notion out of hand.

"Don't get me wrong, it's not jealousy talking."

"Of course not, that's obvious," replied Kornél, pouring them a couple of glasses of apple juice and pushing the bigger one towards Regina.

"I just don't regard these successes as justified, this..." Regina searches for the right words, "this showy earnestness."

Small People

BIG BURDENS

The bizarre stories of Péter Moesko's *Megyünk haza* ("We're Going Home") are peopled by shadow-like figures who seem out of place even when moving on familiar if lonely ground. This world is exactly like the one in which we live. Families, half-families, lovers, and other relationships and bonds, traumas, affronts, resignation, and people living in the crosshairs of everyday life, people who somehow manage to survive. For the most part, they accept whatever fate has given them without protest, and though each story deals with a clearly circumscribed problem, the narrative is nonetheless not another "problem book." The melancholy, passive voice of the narrator enmeshes the characters, who because of their various traumas form a collective universe, in a shared web: a boy who keeps his disturbed mother company, a homosexual father whose teenage son comes out, a father who only rarely sees his son and who shows him how to suffer for not having bothered with his loved ones, the odd relationship between

We're Going Home

a man who is trying to start his life again and his landlord's injured child. All familiar scenes which seem to suggest that if we look more deeply into the individual stories, we may discover very disquieting things. The dialogues seem to take place in parallel worlds in which mutual understanding is hopeless. In these stories, the return home, which would seem to promise at the least the possibility of solace or peace, is more a matter of resignation after an attempt to grapple with the effects of trauma. Even the stories which take place in sunny lands are shrouded in November mists and rain, and almost every story reminds the reader to pause before opening a new door, for one never quite knows what lies behind it.

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PÉTER MOESKO

Péter Moesko was born in Esztergom in 1990. Megyünk haza (“Going Home”), a collection of short stories, is his first published work of fiction. It was nominated for the Margó Prize in 2019 and was added to the top 10 shortlist.



The doctor is filling out the papers at a leisurely pace. There are so many papers in front of him that he may as well have been working on a dissertation. In the meantime, he occasionally looks up, at times at me, at times at my mother. Mother is sitting in an armchair staring at her lap. I am just standing around with nothing to do. I try not to look impatient. The doctor glances at us again. Where are you going to live? At first my mother does not realize that the question is addressed to her. She huddles motionlessly, concentrating on her limp hands in her lap. A tress of her hair falls over her face and her eyes are not visible. Could it be that she has fallen asleep? At home, I answer finally. The

doctor gives a lopsided smile. Then I am going to ask it differently: with whom is she going to live? Your mother cannot live on her own for a while. For how long? Well, for ... I cannot tell you just yet. At least for a month. She will have to return once a week for assessment. If she feels the need she can come more often but it is recommended at least once a week. The doctor no longer talks to my mother but to me.

He turns straight toward me. So, with whom is she going to live? I don't know. You don't know? I stare at the floor. After all what could I say? It is not my job to solve this. I don't live at home. I don't live at home, I finally say it out loud. Then, where do you live? In residence. Are you already a university student? No, not yet. The doctor starts thinking. In the meantime he sizes up my mother and then me. Finally he fixes his eyes on the empty space between us and sits there for a while without saying anything. If there is no one to take care of your mother she cannot go home. I don't know what to reply to this. Paralyzed, I look at the wallpaper and wait for the situation to sort itself out. My coat and scarf feel tighter, I am sweating like a horse. I didn't bother to take my coat off and thought that we could go home right away. In fact, I have something planned for the afternoon. My idea was to return to the residence in the evening. The silence in the room becomes more and more uncomfortable. It was my turn to say

something but what should it be? That I've my own life to live? That my mother had hers too but she had given up on it. Unexpectedly my mother lifts her head and looking at the doctor she says, we can go now. The doctor smiles at her condescendingly but my mother's expressionless face makes his smile freeze. This doctor is a pushover. I can hardly wait to be rid of him. He tries to answer but my mother interrupts him. I don't want to stay here. She is already getting up from the armchair, steps over to the doctor, extends her hand ready to shake his and thank him for his help. The old man is helpless. We set off toward the hospital exit. The doctor tags along after us like a stray dog. Fine. Then every week, right? Once a week ... The door closes quietly behind us and then it opens again, the doctor lights a cigarette and follows us some more but doesn't say anything.

My mother sits down in the driver's seat and waits for me to take the passenger's seat. I shake hands with the doctor, whose face looks more and more like dough. Then I get in. Silence at last. For a while we sit in the car motionless enjoying how the world is blocked out. We can hear each other's breath. My mother and I have a characteristic way of breathing, making a sound somewhere between the nose and the throat. I remember how my mother used to calm me down when I was small. If I got upset or was afraid of something, she would seat me in her lap and push her hands against my

ears. She sometimes pushed so hard it hurt, yet it calmed me down and the effect became a soothing tingle. Do you remember? I look at my mother without a word and I push my hands against my own ears. To this she starts laughing, her face changes completely and, as if this was all she needed, she starts the engine. The radio turns on automatically which she turns off automatically. She steers onto the main street. She drives slowly and carefully. There is not much traffic and when we leave the city behind, there are no other cars on the road at all. For a while I have the unpleasant compulsion to say something. But, then it passes. I have nothing to say. The car's drone is sufficient. We both listen to it in communion. It is an old car. We have had it ever since I was born. We always liked it a lot, both of us. In the past many of my classmates at school had a dog or a cat. I am allergic to their hair so our car took over the role of a pet, for better or worse. We used to go on rides just for the fun of it. We took off and ended up somewhere. We stopped there, sized the place up and ambled about for an hour or two. We collected plants or stones and then somehow made it home. This must be the aim this time as well, because my mother turns off from the road home. We keep changing direction. There had been a light snowfall yesterday that had not yet melted in the fields on either side.



in **RUST
PEACE**
INTELLECTUALS
AND COMMUNISM

Gergely Péterfy's latest novel tells a tale of survival among the ruins of the dictatorships of the twentieth century by leading us through the collapse of a family and a very unusual love story. Péter's story begins in the city of Košice, a comfortable world in which Péter is content to indulge in intellectual pursuits, but history is making it increasingly difficult for him to withdraw. He then finds himself suffering the pangs of love, which he had hoped to keep at least as distant as the storms of history. He escapes neither, of course, and soon his daughter is born, Olga, the protagonist of the novel. Through Olga's story, we are told a complex family history in the course of which we bear witness to the painful loss of a value system. Olga is happy in her marriage. She lives near the Danube Bend with her father, her husband, and her son, until one day her husband suffers an accident and dies. She then falls under the influence of another

*The Bullet
that Killed
Pushkin*

man, Áron, who is driven by vanity and an obsession with ludicrous myths about Hungarian history. Olga, however, spends most of his days drinking or sunk into a depressed stupor. One of the most brilliant elements of the novel is the narrator's voice and role. The narrator, an overweight boy who is ridiculed by everyone, goes to the Danube Bend with his father for summer vacations, and he gets to know Olga when he is still a child and grows up alongside Olga's son. Having fallen in love with Olga, he watches the family and the ways in which the stepfather abuses his wife and stepson. The novel thus offers a splendid if sad tableau of a moment of history. It also resembles the family novel and Bildungsroman at times, acquainting the reader with an array of nuanced characters whose portraits are presented in the complexly intertwining, intricately crafted tale. It is a very Central European story of survival and loss.

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GERGELY PÉTERFY

Gergely Péterfy was born in Budapest in 1966. He graduated from ELTE University with a degree in Classical Philology and completed his PhD in 2007. Péterfy was awarded with the AEGON Prize for his novel Kitömött barbár (“The Stuffed Barbarian”) in 2015.



Kristóf had soccer practice for an hour every day, then mornings and afternoons on weekends, and then came woodcarving and how to use all the different tools. The old curse came back. He couldn't pick up any of the tools without cutting himself. But Áron was merciless. Every time Kristóf stabbed himself with the chisel, grated his fingernails with the wood rasp, or pinched his skin with the pliers he had to take the offending tool in hand again and carve a new notch on the shepherd's crook. When he had finished obligatory soccer practice and tool time, he still wasn't free to do as he pleased. He had to clean up his room, make the bed, and fold up

his clothes. Áron would go in after a half hour to check up on him, and he always found something wrong. Or if he didn't, he'd make a mess himself. He'd rummage through the clothes, wrinkle the bedsheet, or dump the contents of the drawers onto the rug.

“So, you feel shitty enough now?”

Kristóf didn't dare speak or even look up.

“A man should be made to tremble. Makes him strong,” Áron would say, switching to general words of wisdom, perhaps to avoid giving himself away.

Kristóf would put everything back in the drawers, make his bed again, and fold up all the clothes in his closet.

I often arrived right in the middle of the oppressive silence that filled the house after one of these moments of child-rearing. While I was thinking about Olga and how badly I longed to see her or at least hear her footsteps upstairs, this icy dread would tighten around my throat. It was a kind of silence, the silence in the Waldstein house, when everyone is quiet cause they know they have to be, not because they want to be. It was numbing from the first breath, as if there were poisons in the air. Áron forbade Kristóf from coming out of his room. (...) I sat down on the stairs and waited for Kristóf's prison sentence to be over. After a while, I had to give up on the idea of seeing Olga. The hour was rarely just an hour. Áron loved to throw on another fifteen minutes or even a half hour. He might have been inspired by the thought that I was there, waiting for my friend, and he enjoyed stealing time from both of us at once, making a show of his power over both of us at once. From my spot on the stairs, I could hear him stopping in front of Kristóf's room.

“If you think you can come out now, you're wrong.”

“When can I come out?”

“When I tell you.”

Those were the most nerve-racking minutes at the Waldstein house. And it took a while for me to realize what was going on right in front of me. My dad lost his temper from time to time, once or twice a year he would make a big fuss about something and send me to my room, but I knew once he'd blown off some steam his anger would subside. I'd sit in my

room for a quarter of an hour just to be polite, and then, as if nothing in particular had happened, I'd just go about my business. But I had never seen anything like this methodical show of despotic power, which he used with relish. I thought it only existed in novels. I would sit on the stairs counting the minutes, and a feeling of rage at tyranny and injustice would boil inside me, but there was nothing I could do. I could have just done what my instincts were whispering at me to do, just scrambled, but every time I decided that ok, I'm getting out of here, and grabbed the door handle, I always had a pang of conscience because of Olga and Kristóf. If I couldn't be an active character in their story, then at least I should be a witness, I thought, and I would just keep waiting on the stairs for Kristóf to be released.

By the end of the 1970s, I was going to the resort less and less. People were building summer vacation homes by the dozens and swarming the bank of the Danube. Wherever there was a clear spot of grass, it was taken by motorhomes and tents, and there was trash everywhere and a terrible stench. The motorboat engines rumbled all summer long, and the water was muddy, with a thin layer of oil on the surface that shimmered with all the colours of the rainbow. (...) Olga rarely came to the riverbank her new husband, Áron. Kristóf almost never went beyond the dam. Péter and my dad were the only ones who insisted on the evening walks, which they had got used to over the course of the few years which had passed. They found in each other the kind of antagonism that makes a conversation engaging but not impossible. It gradually became a kind of passion for each of them to look at his life in the mirror of the other's. I went up to the Waldstein house in the summer and on weekends, and I came more and more under its spell. By then, Olga must have simply faced the fact that she didn't have the strength to do battle with the tremendous forces of this world, so she had entrusted this battle and everything else to her stern and solemn husband, who stubbornly and uncompromisingly crushed the universe around him, always certain that he was the anointed warrior of the forces of Good, selected, predestined, and it was hardly mere coincidence that the world of spirits whispered its secrets into his ear.



REBELS LOVERS *and* *the* SECURITATE

Family members and friends have gathered around a table in 1954 in Cluj, Romania to congratulate Gheorghe, the Romanian head of the family, for having been named deputy party secretary. Gheorghe's son András, the child of a Romanian-Hungarian marriage, sometimes speaks to his mother in Hungarian, which the rest of the group frowns on. András's other shared language with his mother is a love

Europa Symphony

of classical music, a love which prompts him to take up the violin, and this completely changes his life. It soon becomes clear that this family is rent by serious tensions. András's father grows distant from his wife and son, while András prepares zealously for a career as a musician. While he enjoys professional successes, András struggles in his relationships with the people around him. The narrative offers glimpses of the relationships between interpersonal problems and family bonds. As András becomes increasingly close to Maia, a student at the music school, his smothered feelings come to the surface and a love begins to swell which will sweep away everything in its path. The novel offers a stunningly precise depiction of the workings and absurdities of the communist system. Maia suddenly defects, and András gradually falls apart. An invitation to West Berlin for the Cluj musicians offers András a chance to see his beloved again, but he must face troubling surprises. He discovers an explanation for his mother's unhappiness in Wilhelm Kerr, a Berlin composer to whom András bears a striking resemblance. Kerr presents a disquieting composition entitled Europa Symphony. Before the journey begins, however, the communist system does its job, and the rebellious András is forced to make a difficult decision. How can he free himself from this situation? Can he accept the secrets and lies on which his family is based and begin a new life? And at what price?

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GÁBOR T. SZÁNTÓ

Gábor T. Szántó was born in Budapest in 1966. He studied law and political science and graduated from ELTE University. Szántó is the editor-in-chief of the Hungarian-Jewish monthly Szombat ("Saturday").



AT THE LANTERN-LIT COLLEGE GARDEN PARTY held on the riverfront, after a bottle of red wine, András is noticeably avoiding Maia, he's spending his time with a different girl. Now and then he glances over, he can see the veiled disappointment, and when Maia can't bear it any longer, she grabs her bag and sets off home, he runs after her. He catches up with her in the street, turns on her and bursts out, he can't take it anymore, he wants her. The girl blushes, she kisses him. Two days later they skip school, and in Maia's empty flat they go to bed together. It's her first time, yet it's as if she were more prepared, more experienced

as she guided him into her body. Maia is the first love of András's mature life, the first real sensual fulfilment. Most of the time they meet in Maia's flat downtown, in Bolyai Street where during the day hardly anyone disturbs them: Maia's mother works fixed hours at an architectural engineering company. Between making love they desperately try to remember their meeting ten years ago. They see a sign in their both having bought their first violins in the instrument shop on March 6th Street, but of course they know lovers search for signs in everything and find them too, and there are only two instrument shops in the city. They spend their every minute together in those weeks, they put off school and practice too. Once after a session of lovemaking which ends in a particularly rousing, swooning orgasm, Maia bursts into tears, she pulls away, and she starts speaking about her childhood. Her father, she explains, was deported to the Danube Delta for a careless political remark. There at the labour camp he was lost to an epidemic, that's all they know. She can barely remember him, but she can remember, she weeps uncontrollably, that during her childhood it had been instilled into her by her mother that she was to talk to no one about the circumstances of her father's death, at all, she was not to talk about any family matters to anyone, or about any of her northern Transylvanian relatives who had been taken to Auschwitz. It wasn't so much the absence of her father that pained her, after all she barely knew him, but that she had to keep a distance from everyone, that she couldn't get close to anyone. (...) Maia

breaks her silence suddenly, it's not because of her father, or her past that she's upset, this just came out somehow. For months she hasn't been able to say that by right of her father she and her widowed mother are eligible for German citizenship. They applied a long time ago, recently they received permission and soon they'll leave the country. András's breath catches in his throat. She couldn't tell him as long as it was still uncertain. He should understand, Maia explains through tears, the reason she didn't want there to be any feelings was because she didn't want to cause any pain, or feel any pain herself. But then she still couldn't resist. She's sorry, she's really sorry, but that's not true either, she doesn't know what she wanted, because when she was in it, she wasn't sorry, then she did want it. She knows that at the time, even before then she ought to have said for them not to go any deeper, so as to avoid any illusions, but then it was already too late, she couldn't do it, and she feels horrible, because she loves him too. András can't grasp the gravity of her declaration. He's in love, he feels no limits, all he sees is the other's finally naked, alluring, goose-pimpled body, which he feels to be one with his one, and which he doesn't believe could disappear, after all it was only a few weeks ago he could get close to it. In this moment Maia's moving away is unimaginable to him. (...) Germany of all places. Does he mean, as a Jew, Maia asks confused. She wipes away her tears. Is that really what's most important, she shakes her head uncomprehending. Does it make any difference where we go. Doesn't he understand they have to separate. Who knows when they'll see each other again.

Then she shouldn't go. She can't do that, for her mother's sake too. She can't leave her on her own. And if they miss this chance, they'll never get another. She didn't think András would mean so much to her, and she wasn't sure at all if they would get the passports. Since she found out, all she's been able to think of is how they'll be able to keep up the relationship. And Israel, asks András instinctively. Did they not think of Israel. He's still distancing himself from the shock.

A lot of people have got permission to go there in the last while, so he heard. How is that important, Maia asks irritated, drawing up her knees and sniffing back her tears. She doesn't understand his reaction. Why would he send her to Israel. Should she take it as him calling her a Jew? Or is he saying that for Jews it's the only place, they should go there? She'd rather they thought about how they'd be able to meet. Why isn't he saying anything. Why won't he say what he feels. Can he say something already. Shout even. Anyway, they did have doubts about Germany, and yes, they had considered Israel. Their relatives are there, but her mother's afraid of wars, so she'd rather stay in Europe. It might be absurd that a Jew would be seeking safety in Germany, but this way they'll still be closer. But how the hell could she keep this quiet for months, András blurts out. How could she do this. How could she even think it. She's sorry, the girl starts to weep again, she reaches for him to console him, but András pulls his face away.



MIGRANTS *in*
a HUNGARIAN
 SELF-
 HISTORY

Every word that is used to fashion an ideology acquires meanings that are too strong and too deliberately crafted. In time, these words beg reexamination. Place in László Végel's autobiographical novel is not simply a matter of roots or ancestry. The setting, rather, is the multinational region known as the Balkans, which on the international stage is often presented as a land of conflicts among the nationalities which live there. What is it like to live as a member of a minority community in such a land? How quickly do terms like nation, liberty, and identity depreciate? And how does this shape the approach of the writer? Végel does not indulge in ambiguous phrasing. He describes the book as an autobiographical novel, and it is hardly coincidental that he cites Sándor Márai, a Hungarian writer who, with his Diaries, reinvigorated the genre of the autobiography. Though this story is told against the back-

*Unburied
 Past*

drop of history, the power of the narrative is given by the very distinctive perspective from which it is told. The story conjures the cultural diversity of Yugoslavia at the time, and instead of a mannered pathos, we are treated to a generous serving of humour and self-reflexive irony. The narrator even seems at times to speak condescendingly to the reader and to confess that he understands our expectations. Yes, it would be lovely to speak of heroes, for instance to write about his father as a zealous soldier who could hardly wait for the war, but Végel's book interrogates not only terms like nation, homeland, and minority, but also heroism and, in particular, heroism in its everyday uses. In the meantime, Yugoslavia, which is falling apart in the background, comes more and more to resemble a medusa which hides its organs. From this perspective, the dedication of the book is particularly rich with meaning: "To my wife, Anikó, with whom we survived it all."

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LÁSZLÓ VÉGEL

László Végel was born in Szenttamás (Srbobran, Serbia) in 1941. After graduating from the University of Novi Sad and the University of Belgrade, he served as a member of the editorial staff of several literary journals. His works have been translated into English, German, Dutch, Serbian, Slovenian, and Albanian.



They walked in single file down the slippery road, my father first, my mother behind him with me in her arms, and my godfather, Sándor Szlimák, behind her. My granddad, Mihály Paksi, lagging a bit at the back of the line with my grandmother, Verona Vörös. There were only a few other people loitering in the street. In the wintertime, the people of the city retreat inside and stare out the window at the muddy road, as if waiting for some secret sign or the first rays of spring. (...)

I asked my father many times what he was thinking as he stumbled down the streets of

Begluk in the drizzling rain, though he never gave me a straight answer. He didn't speak about the war. He mentioned only the house he had built with his own hands. He had not waited for Miklós Horthy de Nagybánya of the Order of Vitéz to march into the land, he did not talk about the great sacrifice he had made for the Hungarian nation in those days, so full of hope and promise, he had simply nodded without saying a word when, on the eve of war, our Serbian neighbour had assured him that there would be no fighting in Serbia, because Hitler would protect the Serbs: he had proclaimed that the borders of Yugoslavia were definitive, final. So there was nothing to fight over. (...)

There was one man who had spat on the ground when he heard news of the coming disaster. Let the bigwigs wage war against each other, he said. In his wildest dreams he never imagined how many corpses there would be if the rabble started going for each other's throats. The dayworkers didn't want to get mixed up in any war. They knew instinctively that if guns started going off near their homes, they would go wild, would become brutes and murderers who knew neither man nor god nor neighbour nor friend. There is no more brutal killer than a man with bloodshot eyes who has lived a life of poverty.

The lonely man who often wandered the roads in rags and prayed in front of the crucifix on the corner of the street that led to the Calvary Chapel thought of abject peace. Many people in the village said he was crazy. Chant-

ing and bellowing, he would proclaim that the war would never, ever reach us, impossible, for the regent only cared about the Transylvanian Hungarians and the Hungarians in Upper Hungary. He had ridden into Kassa on a white horse, after all, and in Transylvania he had kissed the soil of the motherland, but he cared nothing for Bácska. He would not come marching in with his brigades, however desperately we might long to see Hungarian soldiers on the horizon, so we would be wise simply to lay low. He swore that, in deference to Hitler's wishes, the Hungarian bigwigs were sacrificing us to the Serbian bigwigs. A few months later, after the Hungarian army had come marching in after all, he had stopped in front of the crucifix and bellowed, "I will be one of Miklós Horthy's soldiers." He was among the first to sign up for conscription, but they turned him down because of his mental state. He took offense at this, repeating over and over that the women refused to talk to him because he had been declared unfit for service. No doubt that was why we saw him ambling around the crucifix less and less often. In the autumn of 1944, he vanished. Some people said the partisans had taken him to Óbecse, where the military tribunal had sentenced him to death by firing squad as a war criminal. (...)

His was the only death that anyone actually remembered, even if only in whispers. When it came to the rest of the victims who had been shot dead, all anyone knew was that they had disappeared in the war, or maybe not even that. (...)

Dejan, our neighbour, often dropped by in the evenings. My father said that he had not been worried either. He had thought that, in the worse case scenario, Horthy would march into our little city with a great deal of pomp and circumstance and then would stop in front of the canal. Hitler would only let him go as far as Szenttamás. They would draw the new Hungarian-Serbian border at the Franz Joseph Canal, so on the far side of the bridge, we would be in Serbia. (...)

At most, the crowd in the tavern on the corner of Svaštar murmured and mumbled about the chances of war breaking out. The owner of the place had a raspy little radio, so he was the most informed person in the area. He told people the news in confidence, the Germans had overrun Belgium a long time ago and hadn't stopped till they reached Paris. Paris is far away, he would say, consoling his guests, and then he would fill their glasses with more palinka.

As my father's stories made clear, in February 1941, the fear people were starting to feel in their gut was hidden, because people of modest means, dayworkers, wage-laborers, had instinctively known that, if the gates of terror were to open, a brutal time would begin for us. In those February days, the fear of fear spread, and the poor families of the area didn't want to believe that war had broken out because they sensed the evil awakening in their souls, and deceiving even themselves, they were more obliging and courteous with one another.



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