

KRISZTINA TÓTH was born in 1967. She has written three books in prose and is one of Hungary's most highly acclaimed young poets. She has won several awards, and her poetry has been translated into many languages.

She lives in Budapest where, apart from writing, translating (from French) and leading seminars on writing prose, poetry and criticism, she designs stained-glass windows.

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BARCODE (VONALKÓD)

Short Stories, 2006, 186 pages

Information and excerpt from the book:

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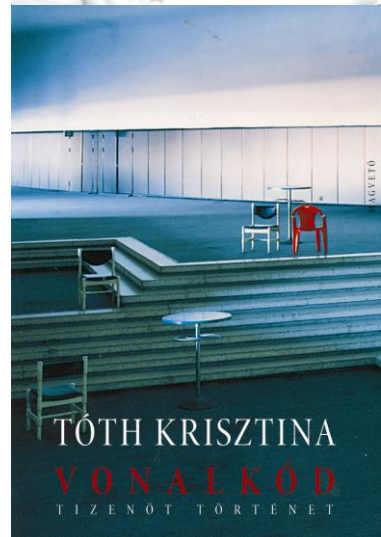
BULGARIA, Ergo; **CZECH REPUBLIC**, Agite/Fra; **CZECH REPUBLIC**, Tympanum (audio book); **FINLAND**, Avain; **SERBIA**, B92

*"If Péter Nádas in his afterword (to the German edition of Barcode) says that it has been a very long time since such a narrative talent made an appearance on the scene of Hungarian literature, we might continue his thought by saying this: not only Hungarian literature."
(Frank Riedel on the German edition of Barcode, literaturkritik.de)*

This is the first work in prose from a remarkable poet. It contains fifteen short stories, each with a subtitle containing the expression *line/bar*.

The seventh story, Warm Milk, has the subtitle "Barcode" – it is about an American girl, Kathy, who visits her friend in Budapest in the early eighties. Kathy disrupts her host's life, edges her out of her room, and unravels her relationship with her boyfriend, Robi. The young girl eventually begins to consider suicide. Barcode acts as a metaphor for Western goods and therefore symbolises an unreachable world far away from Hungary.

The narrator of the stories is either a young girl or a young woman, depending on the reader's interpretation of each story and some may see her as the same person all the way through. However, every action is seen from a woman's point of view: childhood acquaintances, school camps, love, children, deceit, and journeys set against the backdrop of the "socialist" era towards its close.



The body, especially the body in pain, carries a central position in the work. Tóth often links the ailing human body to the wounded bodies of animals and the structures of buildings. And she also does a fair share of humoring the body. Directly alongside moments of the absurd, Tóth peppers her stories with the brutal and the grotesque. She builds a narrative world which is both tragic and comic. Her world is at once unsettling and invigorating as she leads the readers on a romp through everyday existence distilled to its extremes, with all of its attendant traumas, serendipities and vagaries in the spotlight.

FROM THE PRESS

„A mature, sensitive, incredibly nuanced and original voice... Feminist literature 'fighting' for its rights should feel soothed in the presence of Krisztina Tóth's Vonalkód: the author's voice is autonomous in every way, granting a permanent place for her on the contemporary literary scene.”

<http://www.litera.hu/hirek/valasztovonal>

„This book, conveying a vision, is great, thrilling, and uplifting at the same time. It is the work of an extremely talented writer of fiction, already deserving a place beside the best works of Ágnes Gergely and Zsuzsa Rakovszky as equally valuable reading.”

<http://mozgovilag.com/?p=2622>

„Krisztina Tóth, like in her poems, dedicates her efforts to the tiny rules of the world and the questions hidden behind them. Sensitively, beautifully.”

<http://www.kortaronline.hu/0903/chovan.htm>

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EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK:



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Cold Floor: Standards

We shall be in flight for thirteen hours. I unpack the red blanket and earphones that have been set out on the seat. Meanwhile the Japanese gentleman next to me is also settling in; with practised fluency, he kicks off his shoes and sets the linen eye-shield in place. He wriggles around a bit more but is then off in the land of Nod. I start reading David Scott's guidebook: "Japan is an exorbitant country, but standards of provision everywhere are so high that even when staying at the most modest of hotels, eating in restaurants that the Japanese frequent on a daily basis, and travelling solely by public transport, one will receive nothing less than impeccable service." Perhaps not. I close the book and take a look at what films are on offer, flicking back and forth through the menu. The sleeping foreign body right beside me makes me a trifle uneasy: it's as though I were lying in a marriage bed and my temporary husband were signalling with his tiny snores that he is not best pleased that I am watching the night-time TV channel. Outside it is growing ever darker; we are leaving behind the layer of fluffy cloud that from here, inside, looks like an endless, solid snow-cover.

I keep switching and finally plump for *The Island*. Scarlett Johansson, in white overall, races around a futuristic interior space, then we see a swimming pool, with perfect young

bodies lounging by its sides. Why not *Lost in Translation* for preference, it crosses my mind; that would have been much more apt for this flight. I recall Bill Murray and the clips that he has forgotten to take off the back of his jacket, which makes me laugh out loud, whereupon my neighbour stirs, grimaces, then composes his face.

I envy him. I try to get to sleep, my head turned towards the window, my temple resting on the edge of the seat. I stroll on the fluffy, grey snow-cover; I am moving away from the aircraft, rather as if I were emulating a moon landing. There are lights flashing far off: perhaps the illuminated windows of a space city towards which the winking little blue lights of the dream walk are drawn. I repeatedly kick off from the candyfloss terrain and fly, letting my weightless body to be carried on outstretched wings by the air currents. The pilot's voice rouses me: we have reached our final flying altitude, the outside temperature is -74°C . My feet are freezing, whatever I do to rearrange the blanket around them. I plug the earphone back and again begin to watch the film. We step into an enormous room in which bodies are lying in rows that stretch further than the eye can see.

They seem to be sleeping at attention, with open eyes, their impassive faces staring at a screen floating directly above them. Clones, untouched bodies without any history, serially manufactured humanoid vessels who are storing away the multitude of images that tumble in through their pupils: their future memories. The sleeping pill I took useless, I am unable to find my way back to the dream I was in before. I lie supine on the tipped-back seat and play at being a clone myself, a body without future or past, that a moving vehicle is hurling towards the unknown through a black emptiness. I don't think, I have no feelings or pains, I forget about the rolled-up pullover under the nape of my neck and the man snuffling beside me, and gradually, by taking deep breaths, I manage to find my way back to that padded inner path.

It is hard coming to: the blanket has slipped, my feet have gone totally numb. I need to collect my belongings. There's a long queue in the corridor at Narita airport. I search for my passport, now there are just two in front of me. I put it in the travel guide, next to the foreign currency and the tickets. I now have to unpack everything onto the ground; a hairbrush drops out and I can see now that I have taken with me the earphones from the plane. Never mind. A woman with a low brow is sitting behind the glass. She glances at the passport, then into my face, right between the eyes: a minute area in my brain glows warmer as a signal of how far her gaze penetrates. A fraction of a second, an immeasurably tiny scrap of time is enough for the seismograph that functions in my guts, at the lowest level of my consciousness, to switch on, for a slow, cramping sensation, originating in the gastric region, to signal that something is going to happen. Precisely what, I don't know, and it doesn't even matter: the same thing that has happened a hundred thousand, a million times over, I know the final words as if one were hesitantly rehearsing the same few lines of a role that has been done to death it is so familiar, each time taking another run at saying it in varying circumstances, in the well or badly fitting costumes of one's periodically changing fate.

“Step out of the line.”

“Come with me.”

“Put that down.”

“Go over there.”

I am now sitting, since who knows how long, in a completely transparent room with walls of wire glass. An armed female droid is standing before the door. She won't answer my question, won't open the door and doesn't even turn round in response to my occasional knocking. I need to pee, I'm hungry, my head is aching, I don't know the hotel's address and I want to get the woman on sentry duty at the door to ring the embassy, to have returned my handbag to me, to inform the Japanese man who has been delegated to welcome me and may still be waiting, and I would like to secure an apology from them and get the whole implausible, dream-like misunderstanding cleared up. I don't know how much time can have passed: my mobile phone is in my hand luggage.

“Please. Please! Please!!”

My rattling is to no avail, the armed silhouette does not budge. Someone outside walks past, and I try to rattle to him too, but he doesn't so much as glance at me. It suddenly occurs to me that I ought simply to squat in the middle and have a pee. Or maybe ease my bowels. Or both—yes, that's it, take a shit and have a pee. But I lack the courage: I get up then awkwardly stretch myself out at full length on the curved plexiglass bench as a way of demonstrating that this tired, imprisoned body, straining as it is from having to retain its urine, has no wish to sit and wait in a disciplined fashion. The bench is uncomfortable, my side is aching. The female droid, who seemingly has eyes in the back of her head, immediately wheels round and enters:

“Wake up, please. Sit on the bench.”

I lose nerve at the mechanical sound of the voice and sit up with a feeling of nausea. I meanwhile spot two other people being escorted towards the glass room. As soon as the door has closed behind them, they introduce themselves. They also don't know why they have been brought here, but they don't seem particularly bothered or surprised by it either. They tell me it's one-thirty, which means I have been sitting here for more than two hours. The Portuguese woman starts nibbling on something from out of a bag in her pocket, and between bites lobs short, pithy English sentences over at us. I nod coolly back as I sense that it would exhaust the last scraps of my dignity to allow myself to utter a word, for then I shall only be indignant and gripe away, possibly even cry; yes, that was what I feared most of all—that I would burst into tears before these two strangers. They had not taken the bag from the man from Cameroon: he produced a book and started to read. All of a sudden, he stands out among us, invested by a transparent carapace of freedom, like a glass cube within a glass cube. Every now and then, he looks up, glances at his watch then reimmerses himself in his book. Having finished her bread roll, the Portuguese woman is now reapplying her lipstick. I start blurting out daft sentences, stuff about how my work is to do with literature, and I've come for a conference. I can hear myself speaking, and I'm ashamed, but I go on all the

same: “I am a tourist, I write poems. I am invited... to a... congress...to a literary congress.” The Portuguese woman gives a sympathetic smile. My bladder is aching.

After three and a quarter hours have passed, in comes the droid and asks me to accompany her. She escorts me to a table upon which stands my zipped-up hand baggage. They don’t open it, they ask nothing and they explain nothing, just hand over my passport.

“Enjoy your time in Japan!”

I don’t give the droids an answer but hunt around with my eyes for a toilet. Two of them, with suspicious alacrity, poke a finger in the direction of the far corner of the immense hall. I have a feeling that it may be too late, that I’ve already peed myself and maybe just don’t realise the back of my skirt is showing a dark urine patch.

I now have to search for my suitcase, via my baggage slip, from the luggage office. “Yes, yes. We have it.” I set off for the exit. My gait is alarmingly easy; maybe I’m not even here. Maybe it’s a dream, after all. Almost certainly, in fact: the hunger’s gone, the pain’s gone, time too has gone—there is no clock in sight on the gleaming marble walls. I drift around, *lost in translation*. I am asked to step aside by a customs officer at the checkpoint. He hauls my suitcase aside then signals to the armed guard waiting further off. They indicate that I should follow them.

We now trudge the entire length of the sodding airport, and it gradually dawns on me that we are heading straight for the point where they let me through barely ten minutes ago.

Indeed: the two previous uniformed figures are still standing there at the table. They nod, lift up my suitcase and lean over it as if they were physicians having an exploratory look at a bloated stomach. I am suddenly struck by what seems a brilliant idea. I turn politely, with a wan, phoney smile, towards one of the dark-uniformed figures—the one who had handed back my passport:

“Excuse me, sir, does anyone here speak French?”

The other glances from behind the opened lid, and for a flash of a second the colourfully writhing innards are on view; he looks at me and politely replies in perfect French:

“Non, Madame, je suis désolé. Ici personne ne parle français.”

He achieves what he was after. All of a sudden, before I know it, I dissolve in tears. I don’t have a handkerchief. I notice that my nose is running, and I can’t wipe it. I watch them as they pull the stiffeners out, one by one, from my bras. Crush the effervescent vitamin C tablets on the table. Slit open the artificial silk lining all round inside of the suitcase. As they paw, sniff, pry, frisk, pluck, tug, scratch, scrabble, and generally turn things inside-out. Over. It will soon be over; this is now the end of the scene. My mascara is rattling, my nose is

running. That was it. But no, hang on: I still have a brief two-line role. One of them discovers in an outside pocket a bag containing red plastic hair rollers. He takes them out and looks cluelessly at me. I can't imagine why the hell I brought them, what I was thinking at home when I was packing, but it does me good to get my own back for the crying, the tears I shed in front of them. I daintily pick up a roller and demonstrate to him, almost gleefully, that he can slide it onto his willie, like this, very carefully—that's what it's for. It seems the droids haven't been constructed with an in-built joke sensor unit; the uniformed man's expression remains impassive, but he takes out all the little cylinders from the bag and peeks into each of them, one by one.

But then they bring this too to an end, and the previous farewell is repeated:

“Enjoy your time in Japan!”

Here I am again, heading for the customs gate, hauling after me the suitcase now it has been eviscerated, tortured and stitched together again, its maw full of tamped-down clothes and books with spines sore from being pried apart. I step out into the sunshine; it has gone noon and the traffic in the street is roaring so loudly it's as if I had stepped out from the silence of a crypt into the swifter, pulsating world of the living. Standing opposite the exit is the man delegated to welcome me, implausibly holding up a sign the size of a transparency on which my name is blazoned.

They are waiting ergo I am. He bows deeply and beams at me. He has been standing there, on the pavement, for four and a half hours, and by now he is probably not going to be able to straighten his right arm again today and put it down by his side. He asks if there was a problem. I shake my head: no, nothing serious, but it moves so smoothly on my neck that I opt to quit the wagging and just grin like an imbecile. One of my vertebrae is missing, I now notice.

“I'd like to change some money,” I say quietly.

“Of course.”

We stroll over to a distant tiny window set in the wall, where one has to ring a bell. A woman with a low brow appears and asks for my ID. I slot the passport through the tiny window then start to rummage in my handbag. David Scott's guidebook is in there (“Japan is an exorbitant country, but standards of provision everywhere are so high that even when staying at the most modest of hotels, eating in restaurants that the Japanese frequent on a daily basis, and travelling solely by public transport, one will receive nothing less than impeccable service”) The return ticket is there in the guidebook, and of course there is that opened packet of paper handkerchiefs—how come I couldn't find that beforehand. Well, never mind. I take out the envelope labelled currency, in which there are three hundred euros—money put aside from past journeys.

From three years ago, when we were still in love and we went to Italy. At the sight of the envelope, I am reminded of the whole trip to Italy, reminded of the person I loved, with

whom we invented the most amorous game of my life, reminded of the dozen slips of paper spread out on the hotel table that we turned over one by one—one wish for each night.

It's been three years since all that occurred, and how quickly it has passed; most of the slips stayed face down. Confused images bubble up within me of the arguments, the shouting by the dark and misty bank of the Arno, and the last evening of bitter altercation that went on into daybreak.

I fill in the form: three hundred euros, yes, in denominations of one hundred. I tear up the envelope. In the envelope are lurking slips of paper instead of money: home-made bank notes of our uncashed love that have been withdrawn from circulation. On the first, which in the end, for some reason, I don't push in the tiny window in front of the low-browed woman, is written *Lick my bellybutton!*

We're driving into town; I'm looking at the tiny houses by the roadside, every now and then I nod off for a few minutes. From every airport there is a sleep-inducing multilane highway that links the no-man's-land of outer suburbs like this with the throbbing centre and is bordered by poky, densely-packed, single-story buildings with clothes hanging out to dry, mysterious windows, the ornaments of alien lives. With a weary look, I photograph their strange roofs, the tiny bamboo-shuttered windows.

We quickly reach the hotel. The huge tower block is entirely surrounded by similar shafts; I am immediately lost. While my escort and the receptionist busy themselves with checking me in, I buy a sandwich at the buffet bar: I simply don't have the strength to take a place in the restaurant.

I am given one of the rooms on the nineteenth floor; my sound-insulated and unopenable window looks out onto an identical building. I stare at the buttons set into the wall and dubiously press one of them. The electric shutter descends and the room is plunged into darkness. My name appears on the TV screen in greeting. I'm glad, too, since it means that at least it's not pitch-black. I press another button: music strikes up. I come to my senses and insert the door card into its place; now I can at least switch the lights on. With brightness back again, I confidently press the previous button again, but instead of the shutters rising some soft atmospheric lighting built into the wall comes on. All right then, one more time, on the row below. The shutter slips up with a hum. Got it now, no sweat: I can make light and dark, though the order is down to chance. So, how about the temperature. There are two buttons; I touch one of them twice, then kick off my shoes and stretch out on the bed.

I wake up to find I'm absolutely freezing. It is bitingly cold in the room, while outside is an evening darkness shot through with lights. My hands are implausibly stiff; I must have set the air conditioning to roughly freezing point. I have a quick wash under the shower, which runs alternately hot-and-cold in accordance with some recondite logic, then go down to reception, though not before doing a bit of racing between the four lifts because the one I am just about to step into is always going up.

Behind the desk, down on the ground floor, a man wearing spectacles bows courteously and wants to take the magnetic card off me at all costs, but I'm not willing to yield it to him. He smiles resolutely.

"I'm sorry, I don't know how the air conditioner works. I did... something wrong... and... it turned too cold in the room." I rub my arms to make it even clearer what the problem is. The bespectacled man instantly asks someone to take his place and accompanies me up to my room. As soon as we enter he starts to grin unabashedly: evidently I'm not the first tourist to have deep-frozen herself. He pushes twice on the button in the wall, then bowing profusely backs out, whereas I, instead of seeing to my suitcase, start to order the newly rediscovered slips of paper.

As though I had come all this way to do that. I had dimly felt for weeks and months that I would be troubled by this feeling; that it would pop up in the most unexpected, most preposterous situations; that one cannot just ditch a relationship; that I was going to have work to do if the still present, haunting, unconcluded period that I had put behind me was to become past history.

Looking in broad outline at the twelve requests, I would have to conclude that while my lover's sentences, with one exception, expressed very concrete wishes, my messages intimated more in the way of an unspecified, unfulfillable lack: as if I had imposed on him no lesser a task than filling in all the cracks that had opened up on the fabric of my existence. After the event, sitting on a double bed on the far side of the world, I suddenly understand why he had always talked about exchangeability, why he believed that his personality was actually being lost in the circle of insane love that was drawing in his being. It dawns on me that this intensity of passion actually depersonalizes; that the person from whom everything is wanted is, in the end, capable of giving nothing, because he is no longer capable of knowing whether it is really he who is reflected on the swirling surface of another soul's.

Stay with me forever.

What garbage. It was me who wrote it, of course. I slump back, as if I couldn't take any more, then sit up and divide the slips into two parts. *May it never be this good with anyone else* is placed at the very top—that is at least as lunatic as mine: more a curse than a wish, more desperation than desire. Two piles of six paper strips are placed front down on the bed. It can't be an accident that these chits have accompanied me here. I turn them back over again, one by one. I need to find a place for these words that were once committed to writing—a final resting place.

The next morning, I stand before the gate to a nearby Shinto shrine. In my hand is a map of the city, in my pocket the slips. First of all I want to place the most ardent of my ex-lover's notes—that's what I have set as my task for this morning. I am at a loss as I look around. The request is outspoken and passionate, yet also charmingly clumsy when written down. I intend a special, ever so secret place for it. A warm, safe, permanent nook. I stroll into the shrine's park. Its entrance is guarded by two lions; the right-hand one with its mouth agape,

symbolising life, the other's shut, the lion of death. I mooch around in the park, watching the locals. They come in, rinse their hands, enter the shrine, their every gesture reflecting some industrious haste: maybe they really have only popped in for a couple of minutes. I am just in the process of photoing the golden-hued leaves of a gingko-tree when a flock of white pigeons takes roost among the boughs. Pigeons! I ponder at length on how it might be possible to entrust the most ardent of my slips of paper to a white pigeon in such a way that a surprised monk might take delivery of a now invalid message written in a foreign tongue. That's daft: a simpler way has to be found. The solution suddenly hits me: I shall tuck it away in the mouth of the lion symbolising life, so that tomorrow it may breathe fire and startle those who pass by with its redly blazing eyes. I have already set off back when I suddenly stop short. Over the way, I see a multitude of white paper scraps fluttering on lengths of twine stretched between poles. It's as if those were relatives of my chits shivering there on the line—lily-white strips as yet unwritten upon. The purity of being without desire. I step across there and, without thinking, string up one of my sentences: *Stroke my beasts*.

I sense that what I am doing is, in some sense, improper, yet at the same time I am clear about the cultic connotations of my action, so I don't allow the doubts that are simmering in my consciousness to get a word in.

On the way out, I look back once and take my leave of the desire from three years ago. The minutely printed slip of paper is lost among its unmarked fellows; maybe I would no longer even be able to find it if I suddenly wished to take it down.

I arrive back at the entrance: like this, close-up, the stone lion looks an exceedingly tough nut. Its splendid, big, open mouth is at a height of at least six foot six, so I'm going to have to clamber up somehow in order to be able to place my paper slip in it. I start awkwardly taking photos and meanwhile spy out whether there are any suitable protrusions on it. An unusual number of passers-by on are crowding on the street; it's lunchtime and growing numbers of office workers are emerging from the surrounding buildings.

I have been photographing the lion so long that it is starting to become conspicuous, or so I imagine. If someone asks, I'll say that I just want to see if it has a tongue. After all, there are stupid tourists everywhere: I make a habit of being interested specifically in lions' tongues—that in itself is surely not yet a crime. I picture to myself a Japanese tourist working his way up onto one of the Chain Bridge's stone lions back in Budapest, but then I realize that this isn't quite the same thing, it's more like wanting to take a look inside the head of a statue of the Virgin Mary.

I suddenly make my mind up, stow the camera in my pocket and start to climb. No one pays any heed, and I'm standing face to face with the dragon-like physiognomy before it occurs to me that, clinging on with my two hands like this, I'm not going to be able to get out the envelope, and even if I were, I would at best only be able to pull out the most ardent of the slips of paper with my lips, which—let me see—would not intrinsically run counter to the spirit of the wish that is to be placed there, but does seem impossible to accomplish in practice. But then I am a great idiot. I shin down, get the slip of paper ready and clamber

back up. Down below, a little girl comes to a standstill and, holding her mother's hand, gazes up at me. She is obviously now going to be told that one shouldn't do that sort of thing, but I can't turn back: I've almost attained my goal, stretch a little bit further and I'm touching the smooth in-curved tongue with my finger. It's in, done! I jump down and smile reassuringly at the little girl, even though my knees are hurting: I shouldn't have pushed off from that height. The mother drags her away while I suddenly feel very tired. I leave the lion with the sentence's tangy, burning foreignness: I hope it savours it. A nice piece of work, that was, quick work, grieving work.

The next day, in the morning, I make a pilgrimage out to the Asakusa Kannon temple. By the main entrance are two statues standing in kiosks, barbed wire in front of them. I decide on the statue of Lightning and shove one of the strips at its feet: *Kiss all along my spine*. I subsequently regret that choice, as Lightning would have deserved another sentence, but then I summon up the sensation, summon up how it was when he slowly kissed all along my spine and latch on that the paper lying between the feet of Lightning and Thunder is in a good place, after all.

I need to buy a present for my child; I would do better to have a look around today. I travel aimlessly and wearily on the subway, then at Takebashi station I suddenly flick in front of a train one of the balled-up strips that I took out at the temple. I act quickly, like a suicide: *May it never be this good with anyone else* is already vanishing under the train as it pulls in. A diminutive old lady gives me a dirty look as we board: she takes me for a tourist litter-lout.

A few stops further on and I then look in on the toy department of a gigantic store. I pass in front of a phalanx of battery-driven, remote-controlled robots: shooting, flashing, gesticulating. My shoes have blistered my feet; I need to buy some sticking-plasters. I don't see any sensible present and wander ever-more listlessly among the horrific figures. There's a line of money-boxes ranged on a shelf across the way.

Suddenly I have marvellous inspiration. I toy with the idea of a Japanese boy who is turning thirteen and on his birthday goes into his room to break open his money-box. Why thirteen, I don't know, but for some reason I insist on this touch, and it doesn't so much as cross my mind that the money-box might equally be a girl's. But then, I never had a money-box myself; saving was somehow something that boys did—for a bike or roller-skates, that sort of thing. A thirteen-year-old boy will find my slip of paper, I am absurdly sure of that.

Stepping over to the money-boxes, I picture how, at a ceremonial hour of that remote day, a strange strip of paper, inscribed in a foreign language, will turn up among the money that is to be counted:

Talk about your secret desires.

A piebald pottery cow is what I plump for. I furtively look around, as if I were perpetrating some illicit act, slip the chit in, then steal out of the toy department. It occurs to me later on

that the security men may well be perplexed on viewing the CCTV recordings and will never know what the limping European female was up to.

I need to go back to the hotel to change shoes and think my action plan over: I have seven slips of paper left, but tomorrow will be the midpoint of my stay here, a dividing-line, a watershed. I turn the saddest of the sentences over in my mind: that will be tomorrow's task, I shall have to bury that somewhere in order to be able finally to lay it to rest within myself as well.

At the hotel, I carefully split up what has to be done and plan the further localities, making allowance for impromptu opportunities as well. The sentence *Caress me with your hair* touches me. It is a little bit like my own wishes, a gentle, loving sigh from another evening. I decide to release it to the winds, assuming there will be any, for up till now the air warmed by equable, languid sunlight, has been still.

The next morning, I am already up from the breakfast table by eight-thirty. I wait for the Americans, ordering taxis with much hand-waving, to clear out of the way, and then inquire in a muted voice at reception:

“Sorry, does the wind blow here? I mean... is here any... wind?”

The same bespectacled man is on duty as on the first day. He is surprised by the question at first but then looks up and identifies with a smile: the woman with the temperature problems. He clearly believes I must have an immune deficiency or asthma or something of the kind: so many people have allergies nowadays. Carefully enunciating, he replies with a smile:

“We have a nice day. So the weather is pleasant today. I can assure you that the wind is not blowing today.”

Well, that leaves the sad paper-slip for today. The saddest. And the bath one, but that'll be a doddle.

I'll make my way first to the riverbank, then go by foot to the bridge leading the Imperial Palace. I would like to get closer to the water but there are barriers everywhere that keep it apart from the banks. It's a somewhat banal option, but I want simply to toss the *Let's take a bath together* note into water. The paper is too light. I ought to tie it to something, but I have neither twine nor an elastic hair band on me. I finally search for a stick in some bushes and step on one. That's the thing! One end is split, so I can use that to nip my bit of paper, and then I lob it as vigorously as I can into the seemingly stationary river. It doesn't float off in any direction, just rotates with immense slowness on the water's surface before coming to a complete stop.

How hard it is to be freed of desires.

I turn my back on the barrier and stroll back past the bushes that fringe the main road. The crows in this part of the world are odd: the plumage on the tops of their heads is short,

which makes them look all like they've been given a crew cut. They hop along curiously beside me. I am becoming more and more excited, my heart beating fast in anticipation of the task in store. Finally, I drag it out no further but squat down by a crater that has formed around one of the trees and start to grub in the soil. Though I make use of a twig, the ground is compact and I have trouble digging a shallow hole. Joggers in trainers and wearing headphones are running past me; this seems to be a regular path for them. I suddenly have the feeling that someone is watching me: a man walking his dog is staring, even stooping his upper body over and gazing, head cocked to one side, at the grubbing. I have a feeling he wants to help; no doubt he thinks I have lost something. I look up with a sweet smile to signal that everything's fine, would they just carry on as they are disturbing me in my mourning. When they finally set off and I glance at their backs, I notice the man is wearing exactly the same blue pully as his pooch. It suddenly flashes through my mind that the doggie quite likely wanted to see to it's business, that this is perhaps its favourite spot and I have plonked myself down right here. I walk round the tree and am reassured not to see a dog turd anywhere, after which I make a pile of pebbles over the buried paper-slip.

I've done. I walk off. From a few yards away one can barely notice the little mound under which rests the saddest of my paper-slips: *I want to bear you a child.*

Late that evening I take a seat in a cramped restaurant in a shopping centre. The trays of the noisy youngsters who dined before me are being taken away while I listlessly cast my eyes over the beautifully formed bowls and little dishes. I am the sole late-night customer; I can see the staff in the corridor, leaving the kitchen one by one. All the same, the service shows no trace of hurrying me up; the dishes that I ordered at random are brought out cordially and in a steady rhythm. When I've finished I place one of the wishes on the tray as a quite special tip. This is my lover's second most impassioned sentence, though it may well be that others would settle on a different order and would not rank tonight's behind the lion one. It also runs through my mind that Hungarians are to be found everywhere, that my fellow-countrymen are quite capable of turning up in the most surprising and unlikely places in the world; and I imagine an enraged employee coming back to the table and slapping down the message on that tray. But no, that's absurd: the person who brought the food most certainly cannot understand the words written on that strip of paper; indeed, judging from the chest size, would be hard put to accomplish the lubricious task. I am musing on this when the tray is unexpectedly taken away. All my worries were unnecessary: the young lad gives the slip of paper, nor indeed me, nary a second glance. I am left with enough money for two more days and four sentences.

It is not quite as easy to get to the volcano of Mount Fuji as I had supposed. In the morning, the lady down at reception explains how many times I have to transfer lines on the subway before I reach the railway station. In four hours, she says, you can get quite close to the mountain. But I don't want to get close: I want to get there. Maybe that's the trouble, this wanting it all: it would be enough to get close to things, but no, for me nothing but the volcano, the crater, will do.

I thereby always spoil everything. By the time she has finished marking all the stations on a photocopied sheet I have lost heart. It may be that *Stay with me forever* can only be put to rest in the volcano's soil, but if I am unable to go right to mountain, then why set off at all. I thank her politely for the sheet of paper, bow and turn out of the lobby like someone who is setting off for Fuji right away: I wouldn't like the lady to feel let down. On reaching the bustling street, however, I turn and head instead for a nearby playground.

A mother is teaching her little boy how to walk; the child is tottering happily, with unsteady gait, towards her, and the stocky woman keeps reiterating a short word over and over again. I watch them for a long time, scan the benches and the toy castle. To be truthful, I am searching for a spot for the *Dance for me* note, but nothing springs to mind. That afternoon, I discover a strange carved panda statue in the garden of a small Buddhist shrine. The wooden statue is hollow at the back, having been gouged out, a bit like a bathtub. *Lick my belly-button*, rolled up like a cigarette, finds its way into the panda's mouth. Not the most dazzling solution, even I will admit, but then acceptable for all that. The wish was fairly startling by the way: what on earth could have got into me that evening in Italy, given that my belly has been ticklish all my life long. I have no idea how pandas feel about it, but I would never have found an ideal spot for this sentence. *Dance for me* finally ends up in a tree cavity—a message to the motionless bough, sender not known.

The next day I spend at the Tokyo National Museum and that evening am lounging exhausted on the bed, flicking through channel on the TV. I am tired; the place of the rapidly shifting scenes is continually being taken by scenes from my past life, while from time to time I am haunted by the statuettes seen earlier that day, until at last I gradually drift off to the sound of a newsreader gabbling in English. I placed the envelope, still containing two slips of paper, face down on the upholstered shelf over the head of the bed, next to the paper handkerchiefs and my guidebook: "Japan is an exorbitant country, but standards of provision everywhere are so high that even when staying at the most modest of hotels, eating in restaurants that the Japanese frequent on a daily basis, and travelling solely by public transport, one will receive nothing less than impeccable service."

I fall asleep with my clothes still on; I only wriggle out of my jeans at daybreak. I wake up in the morning to see, with astonishment, that the envelope is not in its place. I have just quarter of an hour left to get breakfast, so I elect to dress hurriedly and dash down to the dining room: I'll track it down after ten o'clock. On getting back to my room, I change the battery in my camera and then I probe all around the bed. While I'm doing that, a cleaning lady knocks on the door, her arms full of clean towels. It is hard to deflect her from her aim, but after I have demonstrated that I would like to sleep she departs with head nodding.

The envelope is nowhere to be seen; it has simply disappeared. All at once, I notice that there is a gap between the wall and the little shelf: it has slipped in there, and head-down at that. I try to haul the bed away but the shelf and the upholstered ledge are in one piece, and I would have to rip it out of the wall. Most probably that is where the wires to the built-in lights run, those are what the velvet-covered panel is hiding. The envelope will now stay

there, and inside it the two slips of paper, perhaps to be found by an electrician one day when he comes to renovate it or repair an short circuit. *Stay with me forever. Caress me with your hair.* Come to think of it, it's not such a bad place, there, behind the bed. Two Japanese electricians will shrug their shoulders on seeing my envelope; indeed, they may even hand it in at reception, or maybe a cleaning woman will attempt to detach a piece of paper that has been sucked into the screaming vacuum cleaner's head.

There is know way of knowing when all this will take place. Whether the crumpled envelope, with the foreign sentences that have no meaning for them, comes into their hands in the distant future, even years from now, or next week, I shall just have to wait. That is when the mourning will be at an end. I shall sense the moment when the very last sentence fades within me, like the anger that I felt at the airport. The pain will subside, the mortification, and only the white space of the wishes will throw light on it, like the shrine's unwritten scraps of paper.

On my last day it is pouring with rain. The wind gets up as well, but to what purpose now, as I've already done what I have to do, accomplished my coincidental mission. While struggling with an umbrella that has been blown inside-out on my way to the subway station, I wonder whether anything might have been left for the rain.

What comes to mind is the depression around the tree and the message that must slowly be turning to pulp under the pile of stones. It's better this way; the rain was well-timed, the wind too.

That evening I get back to my room soaked through and absolutely whacked. I undress and, shivering with cold, slip under the bedcover but am unable to warm up. I press a button: I would like to turn the heating on for at least a short while before I go to sleep.

On the morning of departure I wake up to find myself gasping for air. It is stifling, unbearably hot, and outdoors there is implausibly bright sunshine. I don't know when I must have climbed down from the bed: I am lying on back, my kimono open, on the cold floor.

I am a clone: wounds, pains, a timeless empty body, a perfect copy of my historyless self. Someone from up above, from the twentieth floor, is projecting on the ceiling, into my wide-open eyes, scenes of my life to date, my future memories.

Translated by Tim Wilkinson

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

PIXEL (BODY OF TEXT)

A novel in short stories, 2011, 168 pages

In her highly anticipated second book of short stories after the successful *Barcode (Vonalkód, 2006)*, Krisztina Tóth goes further and further in exploring the invisible threads that connect relatives and strangers alike, determining our lives in dramatic, comic or tragic ways without our knowing. Each one of the thirty chapters can be read as an individual short story, telling tales of love, loss, failed attempts at communication or self-determination, in a snapshot that reveals a decisive moment in someone's life when his or her destiny is forever changed – or the moment when it is decided that it is never, ever going to change...

