



# P A N E L

March 2019 / Issue #3

*Contemporary writing & art from Central Eastern Europe*

Translations  
of Hungarian  
poetry

Winners of our art  
contest and their  
works

An interview with  
István Orosz and an  
excerpt from his new  
novel

An exclusive translation  
from Alberts Bels's novel  
*Insomnia*

Illustration by Lyuda Martynova

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## *Editorial note*

What is it about winter months in Budapest that makes one want to hurl oneself into the icy blackness of the Danube so that the last anyone sees of one is a ghost-white hand clawing the air, unable to find purchase upon the river's tessellated surface before sinking into frigid oblivion? Probably the weather.

Well, we at Panel are pleased to note that winter is squarely in the rear-view, and fading fast. We have entered that special season in which even speculating aloud about the possibility of winter's return is likely to result in whatever is near at hand being balled up and pitched at your head.

Yes, springtime is for denial, procreation, and the slow but inexorable march toward days and nights spent outdoors at bars and music festivals, as well as toward smelling like you've spent days and nights outdoors at bars and music festivals. That's why we are pleased to introduce our third issue: a little thicker, a little more polished, a few more of the bugs worked out in the process that brings you, our faithful customers, the finest art and English language literature Central and Eastern Europe has to offer. It is our hope that, as you set out on your spring adventures, you will do so with Panel tucked neatly into your rucksack or back pocket, to be read on the trail or on the patio of a cafe.

Over the last four months we've continued our mission to expand Panel, both to showcase a wider swathe of the art and literature this diverse region has to offer, and to reach new and larger audiences. We're happy to announce the foundation of a creative association, the Panel Irodalmi Egyesület (Panel Literary Association), which will help us to further our creative goals and our goal of being mistaken for a real magazine from a distance on a hazy day if you sort of squint your eyes.

Our delightful and infectious sense of humor aside, this issue wouldn't exist without the hard work of the committed and generous people that have donated their time and energy to making it a reality. We have some brilliant pieces this time around, from contributors in parts as varied as Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, and, of course, from contributors right here in Budapest.

We'd like to extend our special thanks to the talented people at Painter's Palace, who orchestrated the competition for this issue's cover art, to Vad art kiállítás for their cooperation and to Jancsó Art Gallery, which provided a space where those pieces could be exhibited.

Last of all, we'd like to thank you, the reader. Without an audience, Panel would be meaningless. We're grateful you've given us this opportunity to expose you to the talented artists and writers that lurk between issue three's covers.

We're glad you're reading; we're reading, too.

The editors of Panel



Illustration by Sandor Sipos

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## Glory and Bitter

István Orosz

An excerpt from the novel *Chess on the Island*

Translated by Patrick Mullaney

*Istvan Orosz's novel Chess on The Island has not yet been translated into English, though it's available in Russian, and soon in Slovakian and Italian. The novel, which is neither purely documentary, nor entirely fiction, takes place on the island of Capri, where future key members of the Bolshevik party and, later, the revolution, met to play chess. Here, Panel publishes an exclusive translation of one chapter of this novel, with a follow-up interview with Istvan Orosz on page 66.*

Naturally, Gorky, the host, can also remain in the picture. He, too, has a real name: Alexei Maximovich Peshkov. In chess, *peshkov* means pawn. Foot soldiers: *peshka*, *peshek*. Gorky, on the other hand, means bitter. It is under this pseudonym that the artistic community has come to know him since his *Makar Chudra* in 1892. His surprisingly translucent light green eyes constantly exude a sort of intangible Slavic melancholy. His giant Adam's apple bobs up and down between his collar and his droopy, tobacco-smelling moustache whenever he spits—sometimes into a cuspidor, sometimes into a handkerchief. He's a rail-thin construction—a wobbly, imposing skeleton balanced on wiry tendons. Over his peasant shirt with its standing collar (*koszovorotka*), he wears American braces and curls long, wavy hair that falls over his forehead and around his finger as

he talks. Now he is sporting a hat, and the brown curls are covered. He has haemorrhoids, like any writer worth his salt, so he prefers to stand, or to lean upon the terrace railing. He is the villa's most well-known resident.

Indeed, probably the most famous person on the island. Half of Europe follows him. Munich's *Simplicissimus* doesn't just carry anyone's caricature. *Simplicissimus* is Parvus' favourite weekly, and Lenin often knocked at the doctor's elegant flat in Schwabing just to flip through it in case there was something relevant to Russia. Of course, the Old Man won't mention *Simplicissimus* now, because then Parvus will come up, which might result in more tension. For the time being, it won't do to get Gorky's moustache in a twist. He has clearly become tangled up in the affair.

Alexander Lvovich Parvus has come up before—if only in the fine-print of a footnote. That suits him, the tiny marginal mention, since he is always seeking to disappear into the background, even if that is not especially feasible on account of his physical attributes. He is an enormous bear: 24 stones, with short legs, eyes the colour of kelp and the sort of pot belly one sees only on tycoons in newspaper caricatures (*Simplicissimus*). His fat fingers glitter with signet rings, and, when he sneezes, he sneezes mightily into a gold-lidded snuffbox. He is incapable, even, of hiding behind his strange Latin alias (Parvus

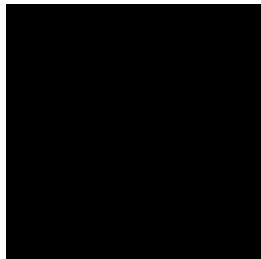
meaning little). He was present at the first revolution, and, having witnessed the ineffectualness of the clumsy revolutionaries, became determined to help.

Those who attempt to decode his real name—Dr. Helphand—in English, believe they are receiving a helping hand, but those who hear it pronounced—Helfand—are more closely reminded of an elephant that had been set loose in a china shop. His help, of course, should not be construed as charity. After all, Parvus (we will call him by the name Gorky uses to refer to him) is wont to view the revolution exclusively from a business perspective.

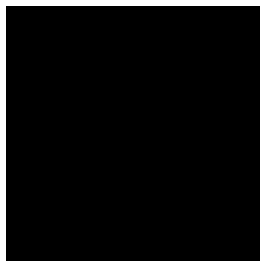


An illustration from the book *Chess on the Island*

He has a brilliant mind (a student of Nietzsche), but his thoughts revolve exclusively around money. He is the merchant of the revolution, its trafficker, broker, dealer, profiteer



- biographers will not flatter him with their epithets. He has set out to be Europe's richest man and predicts that the overthrow of the Tsar's empire will be a means to that end.

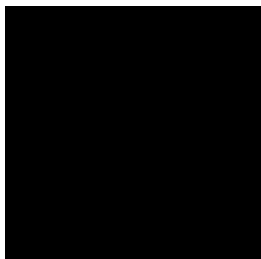


All manner of things are necessary for a revolution. Besides materials and liaisons, it's good to have a leader with a characteristic profile — someone to model statues after,

write books about, who won't balk at playing the marionette. What's more, such a man might not even notice the strings being used to manipulate him.



Parvus' first choice was Trotsky, but it was soon clear that he was excessively headstrong. He was too easily carried away, was a hopeless idealist. Lenin, though, was



slower on the up-take. He was less of a charismatic orator, however, and, in terms of external attributes, not a patch on the matinee idol Trotsky (whose hairstyle, alone, was sheer revolt). Lenin was much more impressionable, and he had long looked up to Parvus (which we need not only read figuratively, given their foot disparity in height). They met in 1900, and Parvus immediately convinced Lenin to publish *Iskra*, even offered him the use of his press in Munich. The house in Schwabing, where the printing press clattered away in the cellar, became a meeting place for Russian emigrees and left-wing German intellectuals. Parvus is already a member of the Socialist-Democratic party, and, in that capacity, has tried to raise money for emigrees grumbling about the Tsar and for striking workers in Italy. He tends his own garden too, of course, usually on the go as an arms trader (disguising merchandise in shipments of grain or condoms, if necessary), delighting in each new outbreak of war. He is a Freemason and a communist, although he is capable of becoming, from one day to the next, an advocate of aviation, of the suffrage movement or the founding of a football club, depending on how he stands to profit. He awes Lenin, only three years his

junior, with his ability to foresee everything. He has predicted the eruption of war in Japan, Russia's subsequent loss, and that the humiliating peace would lead, first, to internal dissatisfaction, then to 1905 Revolution (indeed he not only predicted the uprising and the outbreak of the revolution: his crowning invention was the "creative channelling" of enemy funds — in this case, yen — into publications by opposition emigrees or, to speak frankly, into the propaganda machine. Which worked). Now, he will also have you believe that a world war is on the horizon.

He expresses himself so simply and precisely that it is impossible to doubt him. He gathers all his information from newspapers — or, more precisely, by following the trail of news stories. The papers lie shamelessly but coherently. One can discern the truth remarkably well through the opposition's lies. He has the dailies read out by three secretaries in three languages, while dictating in a fourth. It's no accident that the many, small, German-speaking states have formed an alliance. They want colonies of their own, not to mention a larger market for all the crap rolling off their assembly lines.



For now, they view Turkey as an ailing country, perhaps the easiest to secure territory from. Because of Russia's misadventure in Japan, the Tsar can no longer go east. Later, he, too, will need the Bosphorus if he should care to go sailing on the seven seas. He dreams of a great Slavic federation with a new capital at its centre: Istanbul, Constantinople, Byzantium. He does not dare write out its new name, being superstitious, but he does pronounce it from time to time: Tsargrad. A third Rome.

The German Emperor was even willing to join with old Franz Joseph to get his hands on the Balkans: Bosnia-Herzegovina are already occupied. It is only a matter of time before the annexation is announced, whenever they feel strong enough to break bread with the Tsar over the question of the Slavs. Because not even the Russians will let that pass without a word. The fact that they saved both Germany and Austria—the first from Napoleon, the second from Lajos Kossuth—means nothing to them. Nations, like people, tend toward ingratitude. It does not bother Ilyich, now, that the ruling cousins of Europe are donning their captain's uniforms and parading in them—they will dive for each other's throats as soon as it suits their interests. What was merely a fantasy of Marx and Engels is being made real: the world

war. There will be a world war, which might be made into a class war on a worldwide scale.

In 1908, Parvus went to Istanbul to collect an advance paid to secret operatives for igniting the Turkish Revolution. This, in German marks, Russian rubels and Austro-Hungarian crowns. He did not rub it in Lenin's face, but, instead, managed to convince him that the interests of Germany and Russia were in conflict—to put it mildly. In other words, since they yearned for the same territories, they would be forced to go to war.

He explains, "It will be in the Germans' interest to weaken the Tsar from the inside—that is, they will help the Russian revolutionaries. They'll help you with money, and believe me, Ilyich, they have plenty of money."

The sausage fingers begin crumpling Lenin's coat lapel.

"Plenty, and it's going to pour."

For a moment, it occurs to the Old Man that Parvus may have offered the German socialist-democrats money from the Tsar for their own uprising, that he might have urged them on, too, with the prospect of Russian rubles, but then something else comes to mind. He thinks of Elizaveta, of Liza, how well she had decoded the restaurant menus in Rome, how Italian her gestures had suddenly

become, and how they smiled at her as if she were a regular at the *albergo* beside the Pantheon where she had her luggage taken. Under Parvus' influence, Lenin has begun to pay attention to world politics, to take an interest in the interrelation of international events.

Parvus, for his part, is happy to instruct him: "The Tsar is insignificant. It doesn't matter what he wants. Russia is ruled by two men, an iron-fisted reformer and a mad monk, Stolypin and Rasputin. They differ in every respect, but they're equally opposed to war. They must be swept aside. Of course, the people will oppose it, too. The peasants will be against it when they learn that the outbreak of war will mean a ban on alcohol, but they can't see past their own noses. Everything can be calculated perfectly, my friend, even if random events occasionally upset our plans."

He inhales with a whistle.

"If history needs an excuse to have a world war, believe me, it will find one. History, in its great big laboratory, has already begun to make trials: hauling a wayward prince before a firing squad, slitting the throats of converted shop owners, steering a night-time fishing jaunt into the path of a fleet of cruisers, castrating a consul, busting a faggot spy, stabbing an old man with a kitchen knife, or, somewhere, driving a crown prince into a bullet just as it happens to fly by. Take your pick. Choose your favorite *casus belli*. No doubt about it, there will be war. Maybe somewhere they're already sewing the dummies dressed in enemy uniforms that are to be tied to the front of military trains like during the Japanese War. The most important question is: How many uniforms will they need?"

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*Bio note:* Patrick Mullowney



Having graduated from New York University in 2000, with bachelor's degrees in mathematics and playwriting, he pursued a career as a playwright and dramaturge in the city for two years before relocating to Budapest, where he still resides. Currently, his focus is Hungarian drama literature and translation. Patrick has translated plays to English for nearly all the prominent theatre venues in Hungary.

# Heat Warning

Gabi Csutak

Translated by Ildikó Noémi Nagy

As we leave the mountain country, it seems like we've plunged into the heat very suddenly. There's nothing else to see except the stark fields and the black lines splitting and rejoining between the teetering telephone poles in the sharpening light. Only the thickening weave of wires signifies the approaching city. By the time we reach Bucharest, I'm swept along towards the exit beneath an utterly tangled net. The guide book says this is the City of Joy.

Adrian's standing around at the edge of the platform with exaggerated nonchalance, as if he'd just happened to wander in out of boredom, and since he's already here, he might as well hang around and watch the trains a bit. We scan each other's faces for a few seconds, like terrain features we've never seen before, like the surfaces of distant planets. Then everything runs its course as it should: kisskiss, backpack off, backpack on, jeez it's hot, how was your trip, let's go.



Illustration by Lyuda Martynova



Illustration by Lyuda Martynova

Adrian carries my hand and my hand drags me after it, like dead weight. Train steam, bleach smell, crepes, shreds of words, a loudspeaker. Then on we go, through the white-hot strip of light, our shoes nearly sticking to the pavement, sizzling sweat on the back of my neck, hot oil. Right before it all becomes intolerable, we dip into the chill of the subway. How nice it would be to stand here, swaying to the rhythm of these incomprehensible station names, until the buildings scorching above us cooled down. In gibberish, I hum magic words invoking rain.

Yet the heat is unrelenting. By the time we reach the surface, the city has become a desert: a dry river bed, rusty pipes, and rubble in place of the road. A scaffold on every building; it's as if we are walking among movie sets, as if nobody lives behind the windows covered in green netting. If someone does happen to be here, they'll have dissolved long ago into the endless afternoon slumber settling upon the whole city. We're the only ones tripping along the makeshift sidewalk of planks, yet there are eyes watching us from the depths of trenches. Adrian explains that it's street kids and stray dogs huddling between the pipes. There's nothing to fear, but it's better to avoid their gaze. A sudden gush of water: a mud-colored cascade bursts forth, and all the kids are suddenly

shrieking and splashing, as if spewed out by the pipe. I can only watch them with longing; Adrian says we can take a dip pretty soon too. He knows the place for us.

At the next corner we jump off the plank sidewalk with great momentum, as if it were diving board. Of course there's no water, but the street scene suddenly changes: now we're walking on concrete, among ten-story apartment blocks. There are people on the streets here now; many are bunched up in the strips of shade. But it still feels like we're on a set. Certain buildings are almost entirely shrouded in



Illustration by Lyuda Martynova

advertisement banners that are several stories high. Several people cross themselves in front of an enormous picture of a plane. Adrian takes me behind the mantle. Two tower blocks flank a small, onion-domed church unbelievably tightly. The cool scent of frankincense hits me.

He's already leading me on without a word, through gaps between grey wedges, always a step in front of me, always on the shady side. Sometimes I let myself be dragged along like a kid, but then I come to my senses and do my best to keep up. Finally, I spot green grass between two buildings, and I know that's where we're headed. And already we're running so we can make it up the steep embankment. When we reach the top, I almost stagger from the light. An enormous artificial lake stretches before us. The line of the opposite shore nearly blends into the horizon.

A garbage strip stretches between the concrete slabs and the lake's greasy surface. For a moment I think we're seeing wild ducks floating in an orderly formation, but as we get closer, it turns out they're only green plastic bottles. They wedge themselves into a neat row among the shoreline's jumble of tin cans, condoms, and plastic bags. Adrian looks around triumphantly—as if we have just reached a mountain peak after a hard climb—and he's already throwing off his clothes.

I don't want to disappoint, so I start undressing too. Shards of glass cover the uneven concrete. The only way I dare approach the water is by holding my breath before I leave the top of the embankment. I don't succeed in jumping over the entire width of the debris. I kick my legs wildly to shake off the slime of unidentifiable origin caught between my toes. The water is surprisingly cold, even though the heat wave has been going strong for days. Adrian keeps quiet about how we're floating over a church

Illustration by Anissa Casarella



and a cemetery right now. Maybe because he more-or-less believes the urban legend that its the desecrated graves that make the water so cold, and, of course, that's also why so many people have drowned here.

As we swim further in, the outline of a chapel slowly becomes distinct above the water. It's not a chapel, it's a fountain: Adrian answers my unasked question. Only later does he explain that this is all that remains of The Leader's last grandiose plan: the half-completed fountain and a few scraggly palm trees. They shot him before he was able to move into this carefully designed Garden of Eden.

We have a hard time clambering out of the lake because of the slippery slime stuck to the concrete. By the time we reach the top, our hair is completely dry. We start along the embankment. The scorching heat dries even my thoughts. I feel a bit dizzy. I close my eyes and let Adrian lead me. Don't worry, the market's just here, he says, before I start to worry. After a few steps I can smell the fermenting vegetables and used cooking oil, but I only open my eyes in the shade of the mountains of watermelon. Adrian is refreshed by the commotion. He gleefully sniffs, crumbles, taps, tastes. The number of little packages in his hand increases; pretty soon he has one hanging from every finger, but he won't let me help. He lifts out an uncannily large tomato from somewhere, offering it to me from his cupped palms as if it were spring water to drink. I'd love to dip my face into it. He calls it a rose tomato. Later, he proudly tells me that back home, even during the greatest poverty, there was at least one tomato that could be made into a salad to feed the family.

All the feast is missing now is cheese. Customers pinch the translucent slices off knife tips with devout expressions. Adrian is among the worshippers. When a vendor offers him whey