



PANEL

April 2020 / Issue #5

*Contemporary writing
& art from Central
Eastern Europe*

Writing that sings: prose
from previously unpublished
writers in Hungary

“If We’re Talking Budapest”,
short fiction from Panel’s
forthcoming anthology

Latvian flash fiction and
poetry in translation

Writing in lockdown: Panel’s
contributors reflect on
strange times

“We live in the kind of world
that is always looking for
adjectives”, an interview
with Muharem Bazdulj

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Editorial note

It is not every day that one writes an editorial note during a plague. If historical trends continue, I will not have the chance again for more than a hundred years. I just thought it would be worth pointing out what a unique opportunity this is to say something profound and resonant while we stand here watching it sail past.

Of course, it is also worth pointing out that due to the unusual conditions surrounding the 2019-2020 coronavirus pandemic, you may be reading this after purchasing it on pre-release over the internet. If that is the case, if you are not holding a physical copy, if you are reading this in your apartment on your phone or laptop because the bookstores are closed, because all the cafes and bars are shut—the same way I am writing it—I wish you the very best. I wish you good health and a speedy recovery. I wish you alacrity in the months ahead, peace in solitude, uncommon forbearance in confinement with others. If you are not, if you are reading a hard copy because you are out the other end, if there is another end to this thing, I envy you. How's the weather out there, you lucky jerk? Give us a toast, will you, the men and women staring greedily out of their apartment windows in the first radiant days of spring.

In as much as it has been a difficult past few months for the world, we have had some exciting developments at Panel. We have received a generous grant from the Jan Michalski Foundation to help us cover our operating costs. This is the sort of thing you don't realize you need until you have it, then you wonder how you ever got along without it—not unlike a good shoehorn. If you do not own a good shoehorn, purchase one; it will change the way you leave your apartment.

Panel, it seems, is rapidly becoming what we always hoped it would be, an institution. This is particularly validating for us, its editors, since we founded the magazine less out of a specific aspirational impulse, and more out of a sense that such a magazine should exist. It appears that someone out there agrees with us.

For this issue, we have original work and work appearing in translation from writers in Budapest, Prague, Riga, Berlin, Sarajevo and Belgrade. We're featuring artwork from an even wider swathe of the continent, including pieces from as far away as St. Petersburg. With everything else going on in the world, we are more grateful than ever that you are here reading with us, have chosen to spend some time with the writers and artists we have selected for your perusal.

Stay safe and our sincerest thanks,

Duncan Robertson (on behalf of the Panel team)

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Crash

Adam Berta
Translated by Lina Mounzer

Just as I am about to take the bridge, it opens. A long barge passes through the narrow channel at a good clip, as little as one meter on either side between its hull and the bridge. In four or five minutes, the metal structure with its concrete overlay locks into place, and cars occupy its entire length as if nothing has happened. I drive across to the other side.

I commute to the center everyday by car. I work in the gift shop of the Groninge Museum. Today I park at a quarter to nine, a little later than usual. I tend to arrive a few minutes early, so I am in a hurry. Plus, the only spot I could find was further away than usual, near the grade school. I glance at a sign warning drivers to slow down. If I were a tourist, I might marvel at it, with its colorful snail incongruously wearing a backpack.

I am in the gift shop by 8:57 and ready to open for business. Still, I take a few minutes to go to the back room and wash my hands. As I press down on the soap dispenser, I glance in the mirror. I am a curly-haired woman: big, with fat that

doesn't show in the mirror but which I know is there. I'm alone in the store, just as I am alone at home. I throw the metal shutter open and the day officially begins. A quarter of an hour passes before the first tourist comes in.

I came to Bruges from Brussels yesterday in the morning. I walked along the banks of the canals, looking at the old buildings and at the groups of people. The canals were crammed with sightseeing boats, long and packed with tourists. Two boats heading in opposite directions came to a bottleneck at the same time and, for a moment, it seemed like they would crash into each other. On one of the decks, among the sightseers, I spotted a pregnant woman. Next to her, an old man in a black robe and with long gray sideburns clung to the rail, his cane clamped between his legs. I planned to be back in Brussels that evening, but something I liked about the town held me back. I thought I would stay another night and, in the morning, visit a couple of the museums.

As I was leaving the hotel after breakfast, I sneezed. A middle-aged foreigner, charming, Italian by the look of him, sat across the street on the terrace of a café. He looked up and gave me a smile. In a few steps I arrived at the arcaded gate of the Groninge museum. I recalled that it was here the Gerrard David painting, Cambise's Judgment, was exhibited. A few days ago I had come across the painting on the internet while googling the word "flaying". I entered the museum store. Behind the counter, a large woman preened her curly hair. Aimlessly, I poked at an eraser with an illustration on it. In the

front partitions at the counter there was a selection of brightly colored tweezers and nail files. I turned away. A postcard rack barred my path to the left; I gave it a spin and came face to face with the image of a horse. I examined it for a moment before turning the rack.

I looked up. Big rugs were draped on one wall, their pattern like boulders. They reminded me of the steep little streets that ran up the side of Mecsek mountain in my hometown, in Pécs. I felt drowsy, but in an agreeable, homey way. I selected a large-format coloring book for my oldest niece, and the

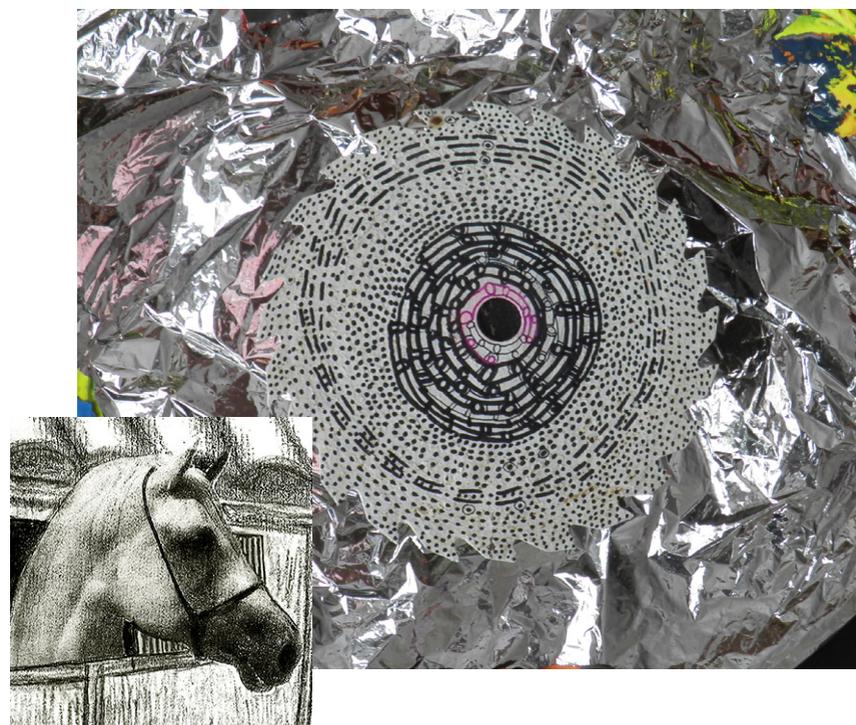


Illustration by Mici Gaál

Illustration by Sandor Sipos

woman behind the counter placed it in a plastic bag and handed it to me. I paid with a five euro bill, pocketing the change with my right hand. As I reached for the doorknob, the image of a liver-spotted hand rose to the surface of my mind. I had no idea where it came from or who it might belong to. As I stepped out of the store, I was bathed in a blinding ray of slanted sunshine. I wanted to shift the plastic bag to my other hand but the wind caught it and stuck it against my leg. I must have been holding it by only one handle, because, as I turned to grasp it, the handle broke and the coloring book spilled to the ground. I bent over to pick it up.

That is when the horse struck me. When I came to, I found myself lying next to an ambulance, a doctor in a red jumpsuit bending over me. I could not have been out for more than a few minutes. With difficulty, I turned my head, and saw the horse-drawn carriage. So this was the thing that had hit me. The driver of the carriage, a young blonde girl in a decorative hat, cast her nervous gaze in my direction. Her father must have driven the carriage before her, I thought. I had seen many such carriages the day before, some driven by young ladies like her, maneuvering delicately between the loitering crowds of

people. It had seemed, then, as if the horses knew which way to turn all by themselves; I had noticed a few of the drivers leaning back to hold easy conversations with their fares. Well, this horse had not noticed me, I thought.

I experienced several hallucinations in the period between being kicked by the horse and coming to. They were simple hallucinations, but all the more realistic for being so. I felt I was alone. I imagined that I was a big, curly-haired woman. That's what I am, I thought, big, curly-haired. Inside ten years I would become explicitly, decidedly fat. And my hand covered in liver-spots.

I rubbed my face, trying to banish the quiet, hopeless feeling the hallucination had brought on.

I had not suffered any serious injuries, but they held me in the hospital for five hours under observation. After what had happened, I decided it was time to return to Brussels. Walking back from the hospital, I found myself once again in the old city center. From there, I headed in the general direction of the railway station. I walked among old houses until I came to the bank of the canal. In front of the bridge that crossed it, a signpost read: this bridge opens up from time to time so that cargo

ships may pass through. The equipment is automated.

It was then that I realized I was walking in the wrong direction, and not towards the railway station at all. Still, for some reason, I felt irresistibly tempted. I walked across the bridge. I imagined what it would be like to sit atop the driver's seat of a horse-drawn carriage, wearing a hat, gazing down at a horse's hind quarters from up close.

I passed two men who were standing on the bridge. One of them had a bull terrier, the other was holding his bike. Even after I passed, I continued to watch them. The one with the bike was fumbling in a plastic bag, which contained a beer can, a sweater, and a soap dispenser. He held the bag by only one handle, and then suddenly it slipped from his grasp.

I was still wandering the streets when night came upon me.

Bio note: Adam Berta



Adam Berta (1974) lives in Budapest and writes novels and short stories in Hungarian. His sixth book entitled *The Head of the Snake* (original title: *A kigyó feje*) is forthcoming on Cser Publishing (<https://cserkiado.hu/>).

Bio note: Lina Mounzer



Lina Mounzer is an essayist, fiction writer, and translator living in Beirut. Her essays and fiction have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *Literary Hub*, and *Bidoun*, as well as in the anthologies *Hikayat: An Anthology of Lebanese Women's Writing* (Telegram Books: 2007) and the forthcoming *Tales of Two Planets* (Penguin Books: 2020) an anthology of writing on climate change and inequality. She has translated fiction and essays by, among others, the Algerian writer Salah Badis and Lebanese writers Hassan Daoud and Chaza Charafeddine.

The Dumbest Dickhead on Earth

András Lőke

I was only nineteen and so the youngest of the three waiters at the Lurching Hobbyhorse, the finest pub on the main square of my hometown, Kecskemét. I had intended to work as a waiter for only one summer, but, discovering that I enjoyed making a living wage, decided to postpone my studies and stay on for the rest of the year.

Being the youngest, it was my job, though I hated it, to, once an hour, peek out through the glass window by the entrance to the main square and see what was happening on its two stainless-steel benches. If there were homeless people on the benches, I had to approach them and ask them to leave. Homeless people, Uncle Gyuri—owner of the Lurching Hobbyhorse—explained, were bad for business.

Cowardly as I was, I didn't confront them directly but bribed them into giving up their privileged positions. Before the office workers from the nearby buildings arrived to order our thousand-forint daily special, I put some sausages or stew in a doggybag and offered it to them. In return, I asked them politely to move. This method worked fine, but with the following exception: they became dependent on alms from the Lurching Hobbyhorse, and they usually returned before evening and asked for more.

That is, until one Sunday afternoon when, under a mature fall sun and with a gentle breeze blowing, life around the bench changed. I looked through the window by the entrance, but couldn't see the usual bunch, who, by then, I knew by name: Dávid, the rocker in his sixties, always wearing a pair of black jeans and a black T-shirt with a gray skull; Klári, the middle-aged, alcoholic literature teacher, who was put out on the street by her own daughter; Béla, about thirty, who had never had any kind of job but who had once tried his luck at dog whispering. They were nowhere to be seen.

Instead, two Gypsies sat on one of the benches. They were at once funny and portentous. One was fragile-looking and weighed about fifty kilograms, the other one weighed more than twice that much. The small one sported a baseball cap with its visor pointing backwards and held his left hand to his forehead to shade his eyes. His right hand was moving to and from the front pocket of his baggy, purple hoodie. From there, he was rapidly and mechanically delivering sunflower seeds to

his mouth which he chewed with the intensity of a hamster. Once every minute he spat out a wad of saliva-soaked shells.

The bigger man wore a greasy black hat, a white shirt, and a series of large golden signet rings on fat, dirty fingers. He raised his face to the sky, eyes twinkling against the rays of the sun, and produced a tired and knowing smile whose real purpose might very well have been to signal to everyone that he alone, and no one else, sat atop the world's pecking order.

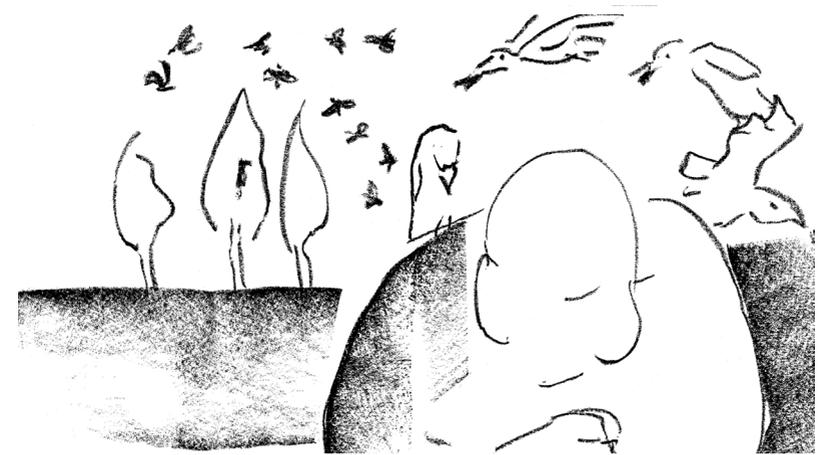


Illustration by Bori Györi

It seemed clear to me that this odd couple no more served the business interests of the Lurching Hobbyhorse than the homeless. But I was unsure of whether it was wise to try to persuade them to leave the way I normally would, with the help of a few sausages. If they were offended, they might beat me up. And asking them candidly to leave seemed even worse. On the other hand, not doing anything was unworkable in the long run. If I failed to perform my duty, Uncle Gyuri would withhold a part of my wages: I was sure.

And I couldn't ask Uncle Gyuri, because he wasn't in the pub—was said to be visiting a buddy at City Hall. Half procrastinating, half cowering, I continued to watch the Gypsy duo from the entrance.

"It's the Old Raven and his nephew," said a voice in my ear. It was Sanyi, the senior waiter. "He used to own every girl on the M-5. What a life. Then he spent seven years in prison for manslaughter."