

Tóth Krisztina

NEL Festival interview

Translated by Owen Good

1. Can you describe the mood of (city) as you feel/see it?

Twenty-five years ago, when the Berlin wall fell and Hungary let East German refugees pass through, the heart of Europe beat in Budapest. We watched the Pan-European Picnic on TV and it was clear that we were witnessing historic events and that a new and wonderfully fresh life was beginning. Since then a lot of time has passed but to this day I have happy memories of those moments. The city remembers and it reminds us, it holds in history in layers. There are old buildings where you can see bullet holes from the nineteen fifty-six revolution, elsewhere there're buildings from the Monarchy, the baths from the Turkish times. In recent years one of the old districts of the city centre, full of half-demolished buildings, has become the ruin-pub quarter and young people come from all over the world to see it. Sziget Festival is famous too and one of Europe's biggest festivals. Budapest is a city of music; classical music and jazz are distinctly present. The atmosphere of Budapest isn't characterised best by the loud presence of popular music, but by some kind of nostalgic melancholy.

2. What is your most heart-breaking memory in this city?

One of the biggest loves of my life broke up with me over the telephone. That telephone booth was there for a long time and whenever I passed it on the tram I always felt that original pain. I often dreamt in those years that I was lying in a glass coffin like Snow White and of course the glass coffin was always a telephone booth. Last year I lost my father and we sold the house where I spent my childhood. I knew that the contractor who'd bought it was planning to build an enormous construction on the land and would demolish the house where I'd spent my childhood. I'm sure I won't go back to that district for years.

3. What is the most extraordinary detail that goes unnoticed by most of the city?

The labyrinth under Buda Castle is a very special place. During the Second World War it was host to a fully operating army hospital and certain parts of the labyrinth are blocked off to visitors to this day. When I was a child there was an underground network of open tunnels which ran beneath our school building. The school was only a few buildings' distance from the State Protection Authority headquarters, now a museum called the House of Terror. Once during a class party we started playing there, we were ten years old. We'd shout, *the boilerman's coming, the boilerman's coming*, because we were terrified of the basket-toting, coal-faced man who tended to the coal-burning boilers beneath the school. The poor man carried the coal on his back in a big basket and we'd run away from him. We got each other so worked up we began running around the tunnels and ended up in a very strange place, in front of the padded door of the State Protection Authority interrogation rooms. They were still in use in the seventies. After this incident the basement tunnels were closed off with metal bars, while the ringleaders in the class got a warning.

It's possible to get up to the Buda Castle battlements even though it's closed off to visitors. I've been up there plenty of times and there's an incredible view over the town and the Danube. For years I photographed telephone booths, mainly because I knew one day they would disappear. Once I saw one in which a homeless person had built himself a complete little apartment. He slept sitting up and rested his head on the small shelf under the telephone, a dirty pillow stuffed under his forehead. Since he was asleep I was ashamed of taking a picture. I also make note of the unusual graffiti around town and from time to time I check whether they're still there. Among the painted phrases are confessions of love, curses and indecipherable messages. Every one of these phrases is one part of a secret poem, the city writes it, murmurs it, and we go about day-in day-out collecting the lines to unravel the story the city wants us to know.

5. Is there a place here you return to often?

I have my own frequented routes, I like the city centre's old doorways rotten with damp and the characteristic round gangways above the courtyards. When I was young, a friend organised theatre shows in these big old courtyards and would get the residents involved. They turned the lights on and off in their apartments to change the lighting on the courtyard-stage. I love going about the town by night and on the bus I shamelessly gape into every window, because this is a performance as well, short little scenes from other people's lives.

7. Are there hidden cities within this city that have intrigued or seduced you?

The homeless have created a separate society within the city. When I was a child people didn't live on the street, you only saw tramps sleeping on the ground once in a blue moon, while nowadays practically every single underpass is full of these nitty people, caked in filth. I know virtually every face along my own routes, and when I travel to town on the train I see huts and tents built between the trees, the officially non-existent villages of poverty. Most of the homeless lose their teeth, so when they hoke some kind of solid leftovers from the trash, they toss it into a plastic can, dissolve it in alcohol, then drink it down. That's the secret city hidden from visitors. I write a lot about these people because they carry stories inside them, and I've been collecting stories my whole life. I take part in the work of the homeless community's self-published paper (*Fedél nélkül*, 'Roofless') and I continuously rediscover just how many talented people are going to waste on the street, how many draw, how many paint, how many write. It's important that they keep the need for self-expression alive because it's the only way they can latch on to society again, if their personality hasn't already crumbled to pieces.

6. Is there an iconic literary place we should know?

One of the city's most well-known literary coffee houses is the New York Café, which as it happens received the flattering title of the Most Beautiful Café in the World. This was the local haunt of the poets and writers who came together around the once legendary literary magazine *Nyugat* ('West', 1908-1941). Nowadays it's more tourists who lounge about here, but reading these authors it's easy to imagine what the atmosphere might have been like at the time.

4. What writer(s) from here should we read?

If I had to recommend Hungarian authors, I'd suggest Dezső Kosztolányi, Ferenc Molnár and Sándor Márai. István Örkény's unique ironic humour, which can perhaps be compared to the Polish Mrozek,

tells a lot about Central European life. The recently deceased Péter Esterházy is one of modern Hungarian literature's most exciting authors, and I'd absolutely recommend the works of Péter Nádas too. Readers can learn a lot about the sometimes surreal atmosphere here from the dark, slowly building texts of László Krasznahorkai.

9. One of your works about the city.

Several chapters of my novel *Pixel* are set in this city, in Budapest, and I have to say that often my ideas for the chapters originated from overheard, chance conversations. Since I don't drive a car I always commute by public transport. I stare at people and guess who they are, what their lives are like. Once for example on the metro a woman was sat opposite me right until the end of the line. She was wearing dark sunglasses and holding a long white stick. I found it odd that she was wearing relatively high heels, not typical of the visually impaired. Then I noticed she had a wristwatch on, and I was puzzled, it got me thinking. I began weaving a story in my head about the watch she'd got from her husband when she could still see. I'd soon created an entirely plausible story about who she was and what had happened to her. Then at the last stop she stood up and pushed back her sunglasses. That's when I realised she was actually carrying a long, white curtain rod and a furniture store's shopping bag. That's how books are born: catalogues of possible realities.

8. Where does passion live here?

Passion lurks in private stories, in the tiny details unexpectedly on show. People use their phones as though nobody were around them. I listen to their conversations with their lovers, only hearing one of the speakers, only hearing half of it, but in my head I fill out the gaps in the dialogue. From time to time I listen to the never-ending monologues which are awfully exciting too. Young girls recounting over the phone how they left them, how they fell pregnant, middle-aged women soulfully silent as someone grumbles down the telephone, men shouting, convincing others on the other end, haggling, or letting someone know how long they'll be and which stop they're coming into, and I'm listening in to every detail. The most fun is when I'm standing beside someone and I hear them lying about where they are that moment. A writer's goldmine!

Of the thirty-three chapters of *Pixel* at least half of them were inspired by the city, shamelessly strutting and flashing its stories about town.