The Lines That Cannot Be Broken: On Krisztina Tóth's "Barcode"

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By Krisztina Tóth

Barcode

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THERE IS a tradition of the best Central European novelists beginning as poets. Milan Kundera began as a poet, as did Bohumil Hrabal, Sándor Márai, and Olga Tokarczuk. None of their poetry has made as lasting an effect as that of Krisztina Tóth, who became one of Hungary's leading poets by the mid-1990s and continues to write poetry as well as plays, children's stories, and prose works that lie between short-story collections and novels, such as the newly translated collection *Barcode* (originally published in 2006) and *Pixel* (2011; English trans. 2019), which was runner-up for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Literature Prize.

Although *Barcode* is a collection of stories, the tales are tied together by Tóth's poetic sensibility. A barcode, or "Vonalkód" in Hungarian, is made up of a series of lines, some thicker, some thinner, that create meaning when read all together. Similarly, Tóth uses the word "line" in the subtitle of each of the 15 short stories, creating a thread of resonances that runs through them. As in her poetic work, Tóth plays with language, using "line" not as an obvious meditation on borders and separations, but rather stretching the meaning, showing the word's family resemblances, more like Wittgenstein than a dictionary. *Barcode* is Tóth's first collection of short stories, but she continues to use themes to guide the forms of her collections, whether it be lines in *Barcode*,

parts of the body in *Pixel*, or apartments in the still-untranslated *Fehér farkas* ("White Wolf," 2019).

The stories in *Barcode* feel staunchly personal, with a first-person narrator who resembles Tóth herself. The narrator is roughly Tóth's age, looking back on earlier periods of her life, from more recent moments to the narrator's childhood in Kádár-era Hungary. Readers with even a cursory knowledge of Hungarian history, particularly the closing years of the communist regime, will be rewarded, but those who have less familiarity with the region will have no trouble getting to the root of the stories. The stories are less specifically about Hungary, experiences of Goulash Communism, or the illiberal Orbán government, than about more common experiences such as familial problems, the difficulties of growing up, the embarrassments of young love, the embarrassments of older love, children and childbirth, and the struggles of being embodied. The subject matter is intimate, but Tóth never strives for pathos; rather, her distant narrator looks to understand the characters in the stories, even the younger version of herself.

Although some of the stories are about a young girl's experiences, Tóth veers strongly away from any kind of nostalgia. In the second story, "The Pencil Case: Guidelines," for example, the narrator is accused of tripping a classmate, resulting in a separation between the I of the narration and the "she" who has

been accused. This story marks a distinction between the narrator's self-perception and the world's perception of her, a realization that not everyone sees us in the same light as we see ourselves. The border, or the line, between these two versions of the self, the image of ourselves for ourselves and the image of us for others, has become stronger, more distinct. This moment of realization could be a source of trauma for the young girl, but the narrator never lets us into her psychology, instead keeping her distance and allowing for a certain ambiguity in the stories. "The Pencil Case" ends with teachers questioning who has stolen a prized pencil case brought from the West, with the narrator volunteering that it was she. The reader does not know, however, if she is telling the truth, or if this is a further separation of the self for herself from the image of herself for others.

The storylines appear rather straightforward, but Tóth layers them to create a richer set of resonances around the themes of each story. In "The Fence: Blood Line," for example, there are three overlapping stories: one about a dog, one about her father's mysterious injury, and one about her father's attitude towards migrants in the present day. The story begins with a dog that gets its head stuck in the cat door to the garage, waking up the whole neighborhood. The father has to cut the garage door to free the poor dog, who is traumatized by the whole experience. The second story revolves around scars across the chest of the narrator's father, who always told the same story of an accident on

an icy road. After a gallbladder operation, however, the doctors find shrapnel in her father's liver, the result not of a car accident but of being shot while trying to flee Hungary in 1956, when the Soviets invaded to reinforce their rule in Central Europe. The final story turns to the more contemporary era, with the father wanting to raise a border around his own house in response to seeing migrants trying to get over the fence separating Hungary from its non-EU neighbors. In each case, a character has a fierce encounter with a border, and as the focus shifts from the dog to her father, Tóth makes a case for sympathy towards migrants without ever becoming overtly ideological. Tóth supplies the series of analogies but leaves it up to the reader to imbue them with meaning.

In the collection's central story, "Tepid Milk: Barcode Lines," Tóth provides the key to interpreting her stories. In communist Hungary, barcodes were only found on those rare items imported from the West, "those little black lines impart[ing] a magical allure even to stuff that was otherwise quite ordinary, transforming them into messages from a world beyond our reach." The mysterious code tantalizes the narrator, who later tells us of how she used to write secret messages in elongated letters that "looked like a barcode." The messages were like the skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*: "[T]o decipher it you had to look at it from a different angle. If you tipped the book to one side, and held it in a way you never would when reading, it was possible to

make out the writing thanks to the foreshortened angle." Tóth encourages the reader to look at the texts, and in particular the concept of the line, from these different angles, so that we can read the secret messages she is conveying. (I should note that the Jantar edition of *Barcode* has a series of lines printed on the edge of each page, tantalizing the reader with the prospect of another message.)

The stories do not all deconstruct various "lines" since some are made to remain. In the final story—"Miserere: Draw a Line Under It!"—the narrator spends a youthful summer with another family while her parents are away in Germany. She goes fishing for frogs with the young boys, catching a frog herself, but piercing its insides with her hook. The frog jumps away after they cut the line, but clearly the frog will not survive much longer. Skipping ahead in time, the narrator returns to the same family, meeting the grown-up son who now suffers from miserere (commonly referred to as ileus today), a karmic retribution for catching frogs by their intestines. This story's line is not just about that retribution, however, but also about the lines that connect us to others, "like gossamer in the pale light of dawn, with the ends of each strand tied to a different corner of time." These are the ties, the lines, that cannot be broken, even if we wanted to break them.

Tóth's collection is an excellent and accessible new addition to the growing number of Hungarian texts translated into English. Peter Sherwood's translation is crisp and clean as always, and we should be grateful for his continuing work to bring Hungarian fiction to the English-reading world. Tóth uses her poetic skills in ways that are extraordinarily difficult to render in another language, yet Sherwood has allowed the verbal play to come through in English. The introduction by Tímea Turi provides some background for readers less familiar with Hungarian history over the past half century. The quality of the translation and the edition itself should serve to introduce more readers to Krisztina Tóth, and Hungarian literature generally, hopefully ensuring that more translations will be forthcoming.

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