

## Any country in the world

Krisztina Tóth, *My Secret Life* (Bloodaxe Books) £12

Reviewed by Nóra Blascsó

Considering the fact that around two million people from that part of the world call the UK their home, Eastern European voices are shockingly underrepresented in UK literature, especially poetry. Those reading translated literature might already be familiar with Hungarian novelists such as International Booker Prize winning László Krasznahorkai, Nobel Prize winning Imre Kertész and PEN Translation Prize winning Magda Szabó, but books of Hungarian poetry in translation are few and far between, and awareness of them is even lower.

Krisztina Tóth is one of the most important Hungarian poets of her generation, but this is the first book of her poetry in English, translated by the eminent Budapest-born English poet and translator George Szirtes. The work in this book has been selected by Tóth from five of her collections, published over a twenty-year period (2001–21), as well as including some of her previously uncollected poems.

It is easy enough to read her work as the product of socioeconomic circumstances. It is after all what most British readers will associate with Hungary: post-communist economic crisis, disillusionment and poverty. Tóth is part of the generation of writers who came of age in 1989, and the melancholy permeating these poems is undeniable. However, as Szirtes highlights, there is so much more to these poems dealing with universal themes such as love, desire, loss, ageing and mortality. To a fellow Hungarian who grew up in 1980s/90s Budapest, but then emigrated to the UK in the 2000s, this, above all, is a feminist book.

An English friend who accidentally picked the book up off my couch and turned straight to 'Ode to Men of Fifty' felt compelled to read some of the lines aloud, smiling. 'I checked the size of my ass / in the mirror, and well, it's not what it was, / yet I fervently desire you' are words that will resonate with female readers of a certain age everywhere. Her poems are conversational and informal, many of them addressing us readers like friends. She uses irony and tongue-in-cheek humour in places and ways that English-speaking poets perhaps would not. The irony and humour often mask something sin-

ister under the surface, like in the poem 'Gumtree', where a woman almost buys a blow-up doll for her child by accident. Despite the humour ('so it would have a daddy') this is a dark and menacing poem portraying something (sadly) universal ('outbid by someone / who wanted a little girl with a terrified face'). The same theme reappears in 'Valley Road', where a woman goes running with two stones and we all suspect the dogs following her are of the male, human kind. This sinister undertone to Tóth's poems becomes especially poignant once you find out her story as a writer living in exile after receiving death threats in Hungary for daring to suggest the inclusion of more contemporary female writers on the school curriculum.

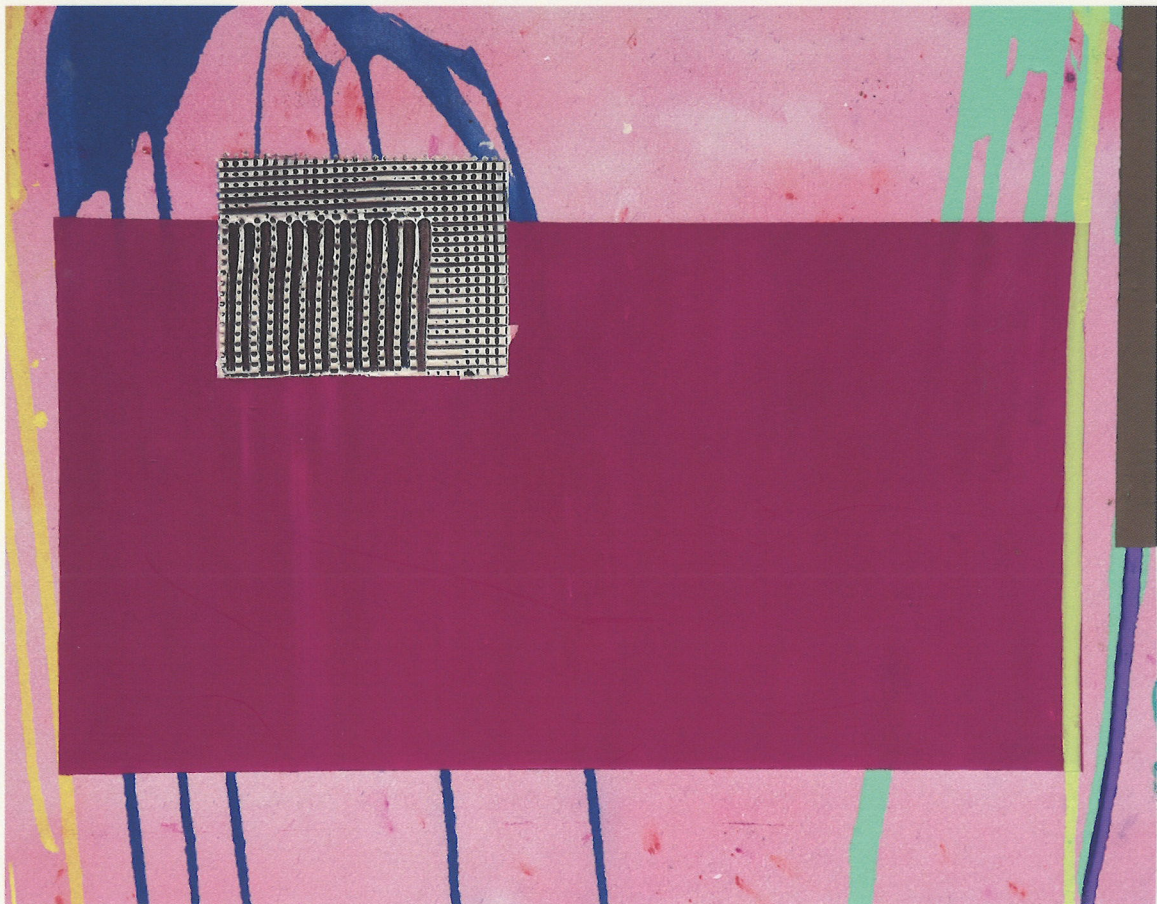
The female body takes centre stage in this book, and it is a body that goes through transformation: the body that desires ('But I could still not help wanting you wrapped / about me at night'), the body that has given birth ('There's a faint scar where my son pushed his way out'), the aging body ('I don't know what to make of the widening of my hips') and the body that is eventually 'released from the prison of this world of vanities'.

The first poem, 'East European Triptych', is the only one dealing explicitly with 'Eastern European-ness' (perhaps a deliberate choice), but there will be something UK readers find essentially (and unexpectedly) relatable in these poems of disillusionment and melancholy. Reading lines such as 'My mouth full of amalgam fillings, / my heart full of inherited anxieties' or 'my veins are full of circulating poisons', they will be faced with the uncomfortable reality that late-stage capitalist UK is not so different from post-communist Eastern Europe after all.

This collection is another reminder that 'accessible' does not mean 'easy' or lacking depth. Tóth's language might be conversational and informal, but her poems often serve up surprising changes of tone (i.e. in 'Send me a smile' 'Before it hardens a chestnut is a leaf on a tree' to 'Crazy, I say, to think I'm one of nature's nerds'). I found her poems lingering in my mind long after reading. She is a master of the unsaid.

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