

# Zsófia Bán: *When There Were Only Animals*



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Zsófia Bán** was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1957 and grew up in Brazil and Hungary. A writer, essayist and critic, she made her **fiction debut in 2007** with her acclaimed book *Night School: A Reader for Adults* (published in German in 2012 by **Suhrkamp Verlag**, translated by Terézia Mora, with an afterword by Péter Nádas). Her stories have been widely anthologized. Her work as an essayist, fiction writer, and critic has been awarded several prizes. She lives and works in Budapest, where she teaches American literature and visual studies at Eötvös Loránd University.

## Prizes

- 2009 Mozgó Világ Prize
- Palladium Prize (awarded to the book **Próbacsomagolás** [Test Packing]), 2009.
- József Attila Prize (for outstanding literary achievement, awarded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, Hungary), 2008
- Balassa Péter Prize (for achievements in scholarly and essay writing in the field of the arts, awarded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, Hungary), 2007.

## SOME OF ZSÓFIA BÁN'S WORKS IN TRANSLATION

- *Abendschule. Fibel für Erwachsene* (Night School: A Reader for Adults - published in German in 2012 by **Suhrkamp Verlag**)
- *"Film – 24/1"*, translated by Jim Tucker, **Kenyon Review** 2012, forthcoming.
- *"Self Help Or: the Power of Nohoo,"* translated by Jim Tucker, **Epiphany**, 2012.
- *"When There Were Only Animals"*, translated by Paul Olchváry, Best European Fiction 2012, ed. Aleksandar Hemon, Champaign-Dublin-London: **Dalkey Archive Press**, 2011.
- *"Skatul'ka s fotografiami." "Self-help alebo moc nou-hau."* Trans. into Slovakian by Renata Deáková. **Revue Svetovej Literatúry** 2010/2.
- *Night Zoo*, trans. Paul Olchváry, **Kenyon Review**, Spring 2010.
- *The Two Fridas*, trans. Jim Tucker, **World Literature Today**, November 2009. (shortlisted in the Fiction category of WLT's favorites chosen for 350th anniversary issue)



## ABOUT THE BOOK: *When There Were Only Animals*

(*Amikor még csak az állatok éltek*) – Short stories, 212 pages, June 2012

How many images do we have of ourselves? Of others? Of our culture? In her new book, Zsófia Bán finds many ways – and as many beautiful, captivating stories – to ask and answer these questions.

What is a picture? An image? A memory? An imaginary still from the movie of our recollections? A frame in an old home movie? A famous painting by Velázquez turning up in an all too real life? Unspoken family traumas in a photograph from the forties – *father in forced labour service*?

Or perhaps it is the shift in life, love, and chemistry, as one person replaces the other in the snapshots of a love triangle's unexpected events. Or the flickering attraction between a taxi driver and a passenger, doomed because some things are just too hard to change.

Is it the intimate secret behind the first ever X-ray picture and its laconic caption, *A hand with rings*, made by Wilhelm Röntgen in 1895? Or the reopened wounds, the searing images from the past evoked by a one-time musician, back in the old country? Snapshots of a love and life she never had, thoughts and feelings which almost mystically affect the present, disrupting the musical performance of a complete stranger, perhaps to prevent hearing a painful, long-forgotten piece of music.

From the jigsaw pieces of recurring motifs and characters throughout the book, we can also discover a family history played out in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Eastern Europe and outposts of exile from Antarctica to South America, from the perspective of mothers and daughters.

Narrative styles alternate harmoniously along with – and sometimes within – the stories. Matter-of-fact storytelling gives way to nostalgic remembrance, discreetly depicted emotions, artistic sensuality, philosophy, sometimes a touch of comic relief or irony. And permeating it all, the need to understand, to interpret – an exciting, intellectual, interactive game in which the reader is invited to participate all along.

Ultimately, *When There Were Only Animals* is a book about relationships. It is wonderful, passionate, and clever. And very, very entertaining.



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## AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

### WHEN THERE WERE ONLY ANIMALS

Why. Why take a picture of this, too, why take one of everything. Will it make you feel better to have a picture of her looking like this, a picture that won't even be of your mother, but of a stranger camouflaged as a corpse? Whose nose is this, whose mouth, and what are those tubes? How the hell does that look? What good did it do shoving this obsession down my throat, all this organizing of everything in albums. You tried, but it did no good, gluing it all nice and neat into a book but leaving out life, sticky, gooey, running-all-over-the-place life, shaping it instead into a compact little story, a cock-and-bull story, if you ask me, who's going to believe that it happened like this and *only* like this, that it all played out always on top, like some mountain climber who lives on the summit, but that didn't keep you from acting cute and ignoring the asthma attacks, the bouts of fever, those numbing moments of humiliation, the lies, the smugness, the murderous impulses, and the fear. No, *sweetheart* (it's time you tried on the word for size), enough already of always getting what you want, thought Anna, smiling faintly, for even these were her mother's words, you can't always get what you want, because you're the kid and I'm the mother, and not vice-versa. These words always gave Anna a laughing fit, which in turn only sent her mother flying into more of a rage. Now what are you sniggering about, she'd say, cut it out, act like you're normal, but this made Anna roar with laughter so much that she just couldn't cram it back into herself, true, she took a little stab at shutting up, but that made her gasp for breath, whereupon her mother turned beet red, ran out of the room and slammed the door shut behind her, yes, this was their usual scene, one they'd played so many times before, indeed they'd refined it to such polished

perfection that it would have hurt not to occasionally perform it, like taking a breath, like saying pass me the salt or run down to the store for some butter. They each needed the other to play their part; for, after all, who else could they have produced such well-oiled, burning hot, quavering passions with? We always have only one greatest adversary.

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Most people don't even know Antarctica is round, why, it's unbelievable how little is known about this place, not even the most basic facts, griped Gina, who for her part knew everything about the lives of penguins, and it seemed that once again someone had posted a comment on her blog. Dear Gina, most people don't even know what makes them happy, much less what Antarctica looks like. That was from Alan, who would normally comment only on his area of specialty, oceans. For a moment everyone looked up. But they imagine they know what it's like, continued Gina, unperturbed, only because they saw a few pictures, and here Gina raised both her hands and, in characteristically American fashion, curving her index and middle fingers just a tad, formed quotation marks in the air, *dramatic* pictures of icebergs and of one or two cute penguins, but don't take it too hard, Anna, dear, I'm not blaming photographers, it's not your fault, or at least it's not just your fault. Your words are soothing, dear Gina, I was practically starting to feel uncomfortable, and though her own words came off sounding ironic, Anna really was feeling uncomfortable, which was nothing less than the most suitable word to describe what she was feeling, indeed this feeling hadn't left her in days. So what is it for example that makes you happy, asked Julie at this unexpected opportunity, Julie, who, as she was apt to put it, was on hand in the project as a "landscape worker" to beef up the art department, and who for days now had been seeking the right moment to strike up a little chit-chat with the soft-spoken oceanographer. Oceans do it for me, said Alan without so much as stopping to think, at which they cracked up laughing. Alan, a New Zealander of Māori descent, cast an awkward, apologetic smile as he ran his fingers through his lustrous black hair. The snow and the ice suited him well: he was a black king on a white chessboard.

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The light green tile on the wall behind the bed, the floor covered with light green linoleum washed respectably every day but still hopelessly stained, the suffocating heat of the room, the motionless leaves on the trees in the park beyond the window, her mother covered only by a thin sheet, and even that but half over her as she lay completely naked under the sheet. Believe me, said the nurse, it's better for her like this, there's no other way to bear the heat, and as if to prove her point, Anna presently discovered two tiny beads of sweat between her mother's breasts as they formed a little stream and trickled downward onto her belly. Not as if she had never seen her mother's naked body, no, the sight of a body was not taboo to them, but then again, the *sight* was everything, said Anna aloud, as if speaking to the green tiles, to the grouted gaps between the tiles; the sight without touch, smell, sound, speech, just the sight of the body showering onto the retinas again and again: the now sagging breasts still somehow beautiful in their autumnal repose, the nipples with their enormous brown areolas resembling little yards, *dvor* in Russian, *na dvare*, came the words from a long-ago Russian class, yes, *na dvare* full of tiny little bumps, especially when she was cold; and on the bottom reaches

of the belly, the horizontal, *state of the art* bikini cut superimposed by the striated marks of stitches, as if carved in stone by some ancient centipedal creature, a paleontological trace of a world before human beings, a world *when there were only animals*, as Anna had put it at the age of three, in words that, to her, meant simply *a long time ago*, yesterday included. And when this came to her mind as she watched her mother's blue-veined hands resting upon that wrinkled bed sheet, hands speckled with faint brown spots, it seemed to her that all of this—childhood, the past, and even this present, suffocating moment—had indeed happened in some strange, distant space and time.

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That's why those Buckminster Fuller maps are so darned good, Gina rattled on as if nothing had happened, y'know, those maps sprawled out like run-over frogs, which finally do justice to Antarctica by showing it like it is. Traditional map-making is a pretty screwed-up affair, ain't it? It pretends to be scientific, though you know that's not true, that it's just a bad convention, and a dangerous one at that, seeing as how it drips ideology right into your brain without you ever noticing. Sure, it's clever how it operates, but that doesn't make it likeable. Just look at those maps that don't have Europe in the center, for once, but, say, Australia. Sure puts things in a different light, huh? While talking, Gina was busy carving her section of the ice bench. She'd learned this and many other skills in training camp: how to carve benches, chairs, and tables out of ice, as well as how to make an igloo, not to mention a bed—everything needed for survival when survival is at stake. They were almost finished making three benches and a table to have their lunches at, for it would have been a shame not to take advantage of that day's searing sunlight even if the unusual warmth was also an ill-omen. While the effects of global warming on the lives of penguins was among Gina's favorite subjects, it was nonetheless possible to talk with her about other things. Human relationships, for example. Not long before she'd been dumped by her girlfriend, a climatologist who, in a turn of events that surprised even herself, had fallen for one of the helicopter pilots stationed there. Now and then Gina flirted with Anna, if only to stay in practice. But she could see it wasn't worth her time. This two-dimensional take on map-making really does muddle things up, she jabbered on. When I was little I, too, thought the South Pole was a sort of big white blotch spilling all over the place at the bottom of the map, but it seems there have been a few interesting developments since then. Remember that Australian dude the other day who told us about a project using sonar-equipped planes and other devices to measure gravitation and magnetic fields that give you a topographic picture of the land lying low under the ice? Really something, huh? Like a crime story. A cheeky little venture, this business of representation. What you say, Anna, big white woman? You're the authority, after all. Like some everlasting solar cell, Gina's endless supply of working-class Italian-American spunk regularly filled up the team's depleting energy reserves; had Gina not been on hand, Anna might already have lain right down on a bed of ice and not gotten up for days. She hadn't taken a single picture in two days, and Gina, as usual, in her no-nonsense, free and easy style, had once again taken a shot right at the heart of things. Sometimes, said Anna evasively, it seems you don't need special devices to figure out what's under the ice. A few days ago I saw the carcass of a dog that belonged to the Scott expedition. Just imagine, the ice melted right off it in this insane heat, and even the chain is still around its neck. Anna now recalled that apt little idiom

from her native tongue that had come to her mind on encountering the dog, *Here's where the dog is buried*, but as she'd seen little sense in saying it aloud to the others on hand, and then having to either explain or not explain that what she was really saying was, *That's the bottom of it*, instead kept her mouth shut.

(...)

*Translated from the Hungarian by Paul Olchvary*

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