

KRISZTINA TÓTH was born in 1967. She has written two books of short stories, and is one of Hungary's most highly acclaimed young poets. She has won several awards, and her poetry has been translated into many languages. She lives in Budapest where, apart from writing and translating (from French), she designs stained-glass windows. <http://www.tothkrisztina.hu>



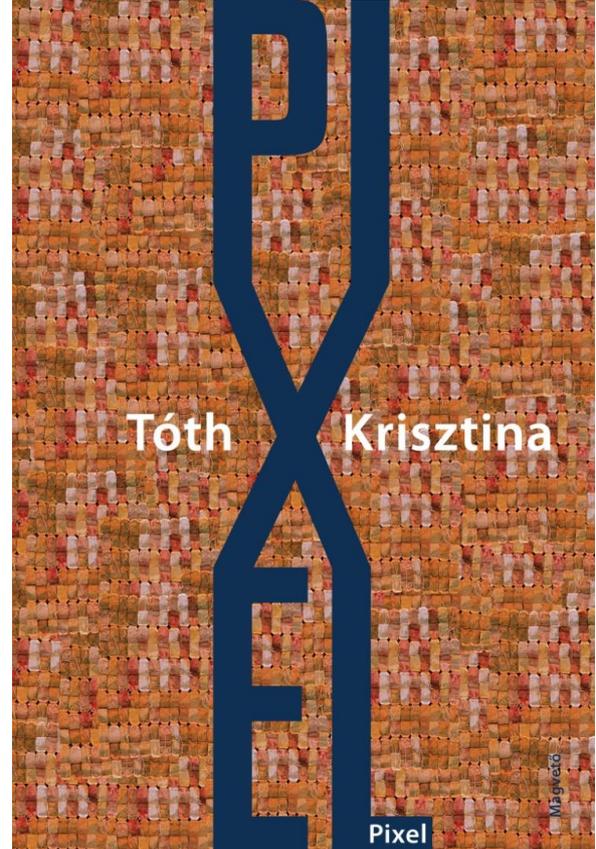
PIXEL (BODY OF TEXT)

A novel in short stories, 2011.06., 168 pages

In her highly anticipated second book of prose after the successful *Barcode (Vonalkód, 2006)*, Krisztina Tóth goes further and further in exploring the invisible threads that connect relatives and strangers alike, determining our lives in dramatic, comic or tragic ways without our knowing. Each one of the thirty chapters can be read as an individual short story, telling tales of love, loss, failed attempts of communication or self-determination, in a snapshot that reveals a decisive moment in someone's life when his or her destiny is forever changed – or the moment when it is decided that it will never change at all.

But these stories are also like pixels of a bigger picture, since all the characters appear, disappear and reappear in the chapters as dancers in a choreography that is only known to the narrator, and the reader, who is constantly looking for clues and links between the events and characters from story to story. A young girl meets an Indian man who visits Hungary only for the sake of a rendezvous fixed with the girl on the internet, presents her with a pair of earrings, but flees after the unsuccessful attempt of romance; in another chapter we see the same girl, wearing the earrings, trying her luck at a more traditional matrimonial agency and finding the picture of her father among the eligible bachelors; in yet another story we see the Indian man in England, finishing his gay relationship with the son of the protagonist of another chapter – and the dance goes on, slowly building up a vast panorama of contemporary Hungary and Europe, a kaleidoscope of interlinked destinies.

Brief encounters, furtive glances on the street can just as well make these connections as ties of blood or love in the case of parents, children, spouses and adulterous lovers. The chapters all bear a subtitle evoking a bodypart: *the story of the eye, the story of the navel, the story of the heel, the story of the fingers* etc., marking that it is always our body on which the story of our life is written, either with tickles and amorous touches, or with slaps and scratches.



EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

Chapter 2

The Story of the Neck

“Mum, don’t be so silly, no one would say you look old.” The younger woman stood in the cramped corridor outside the changing booths and tried to push her mother back in. Germans standing around with coat-hangers dangling over their arms looked on bemused but the older woman just stood and shook her head; she looked determined to stay put. The problem wasn’t that she’d caught sight of herself from behind in the double mirror or that she’d seen her bra-strap cutting into her back below her dull, grey hair. It could well have been the problem but that wasn’t it. Neither did it seem to trouble her that her daughter planned to pay because, after all, her daughter earned a decent wage and her German husband was often willing to buy the odd item for his mother-in-law. It was something else entirely. The older woman had suddenly realised something inside the booth and she couldn’t talk about it. Her face was on fire but she couldn’t say why. She was unable to tell her daughter the story of the neck.

She’d travelled to the West for the first time in the seventies. She hadn’t been so very many times since but it was that first trip that stuck in her memory. They’d invited her to a conference in Ulm. The girls had still been small; her husband looked after them. It wasn’t customary for a doctor to take an assistant radiographer with him, especially not to a five-day congress in the West. She suspected that he’d organised it that way and that he was expecting something in return.

When they clinched in the hotel corridor that evening, she knew she’d go with him to his room. They’d both had a drink and it hit her hard. They slumped woozily onto the bed and made love until first light, then the doctor suddenly sobered at five o’clock and left like he’d been called to a patient.

The woman only got up at eight. When she got into the bathroom, she realised that he’d given her a love-bite on her neck. Nothing like this had ever happened to

her before and she was worried whether it would fade enough in just three days. She took breakfast in the hotel and then set out to explore the city with her daily allowance in her pocket. She eventually ended up in the ladies wear department of a large store. With a night of lovemaking behind her and an empty morning in front of her, she felt free of the usual pangs of guilt that used to cut into her every time she prepared to buy something for herself.

She stepped into the changing room with a low-cut, red dress. She'd have never chosen something so eye-catching back home but here she imagined she'd wear it. She saw herself in the mirror and was greeted by the bright-blue eyes of a woman staring back at her who could happily continue to wear red for several years to come.

She turned sideways to see what the dress looked like from an alternative angle and that's when she saw a scarf on the hook. Someone must have left it there. It was pure silk in red and blue with something written on it. She'd never stolen anything in her life before and she didn't mean to keep it, she just tried it on. It seemed to suit her and perfectly covered the blemish on her neck. She took it off and hung it back over the hook so that if its original owner should return, they would find with no problem. She was just about to leave when her heart began to pound and she felt overwhelmed by the urge to push it into her handbag. A silk scarf was the perfect accompaniment to a red dress. She looked up at the changing room ceiling as she were nervous that someone might be looking down on her and then she scrunched the scarf into her bag. As she stood at the cash-desk, she felt convinced that the shop assistant could see right through her and would, at any minute, point to her bag and ask her to empty out its contents. Then another customer would come running over asking where her scarf had gone that she'd absentmindedly left the changing room. But no one as much as blinked when she paid, and neither was she followed as she strolled out of the shop with the bag in her hand. Her heart only started to slow its frantic beat when she stood on the escalator to go down.

She wore the red dress, along with the scarf, at the congress that afternoon and fed the slides into a projector that accompanied the presentation. The scarf highlighted her gloriously blue eyes. The doctor gave a long spiel in German that she

didn't understand but she felt as if everyone was staring at her breasts and that, despite having two kids, she was still seen as desirable.

She left the scarf on for supper and again allowed the doctor to knock her on door and do everything they had done the first night for a second time.

Now, 29 years later, when she was trying outfits on, she felt suddenly unsure of herself and was overcome by the usual stress: what was the point? She peeled the uncomfortably tight blouse off her body and went over to her daughter in the adjacent booth. She pulled the curtain back and walked in. The younger woman was in the process of trying on a pullover and she spoke from inside the garment.

"Is that you Mum?" Then her head poked out but a piece of shiny material appeared instead of her bottle-blond hair. At first her mother thought she'd got tangled in her slip. Then she saw that she had a scarf on her head and it was covering her face like some kind of veil. She pulled the silk scarf off and hung it on the hook where two other identical scarves were hanging.

"They have them everywhere," her daughter explained. "Or at least in the better stores. They're to stop customers getting makeup on the frocks when they try them on."

The older woman turned and walked out without saying a word. She suddenly saw herself standing on the podium in that department-store scarf in '78 and she was sure that everyone had seen where it was from. The scarf had a stripe of red and blue on it that was the same as the logo on the bag they'd given her. And now she was convinced that they had also seen the purple patch on her neck through the stolen scarf as well as the stolen night of passion and the husband she'd left at home with her two daughters, in just the same way she saw things on an x-ray of which the patient still had absolutely no idea.

"I don't need anything," she told her daughter in a tired tone. She pushed herself out past the women waiting in the corridor just as she did at the hospital when she had results in her hand and didn't want the relatives to ask her uncomfortable questions.

Translated by Ralph Berkin.

BARCODE (VONALKÓD)

Short Stories, 2006, 186 pages

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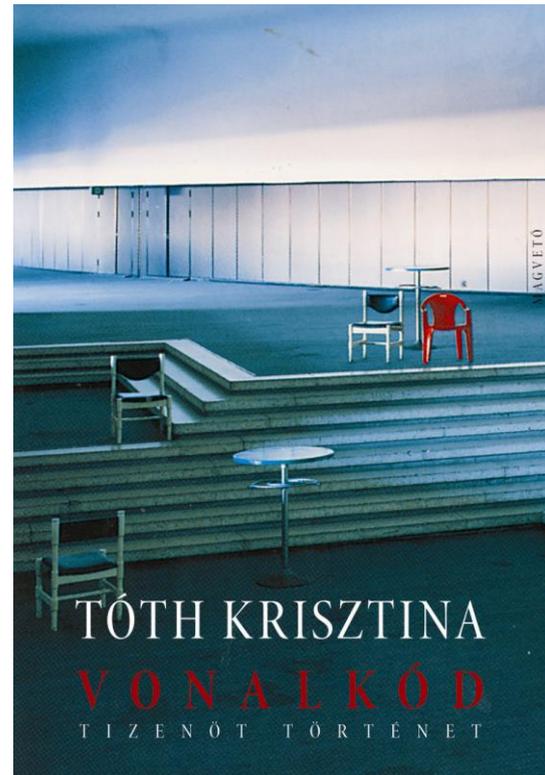
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This is the first work of prose from a remarkable poet. It contains fifteen short stories, each having subtitle containing the expression line/bar.

The seventh story, Warm Milk, has the subtitle “Barcode” – it is about an American girl, Kathy, who visits her friend in Budapest in the early eighties. Kathy disrupts her host’s life, edges her out of her room, and unravels her relationship with her boyfriend, Robi. The young girl eventually begins to consider suicide. Barcode acts as a metaphor for Western goods and therefore symbolises an unreachable world faraway from Hungary.

The narrator of the stories is either a young girl or a young woman, depending on the reader’s interpretation of each story and some may see her as the same person all the way through. However, every action is seen from a woman’s point of view: childhood acquaintances, school camps, love, children, deceit, and journeys set against the backdrop of the Kádár era towards its close.

The body, especially the body in pain, carries a central position in the work. Tóth often links the ailing human body to the wounded bodies of animals and the structures of buildings. And she also does a fair share of humoring the body. Directly alongside moments of the absurd, Tóth peppers her stories with the brutal and the grotesque. She builds a narrative world which is both tragic and comic. Her world is at once unsettling and invigorating as she leads the readers on a romp through everyday existence distilled to its extremes, with all of its attendant traumas, serendipities and vagaries in the spotlight.



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