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Writing Sample

Kinga Tóth

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Kinga TÓTH
Prose and poetry

I.

MOONLIGHT FACES
(excerpt)

LADY (I)

Red overcoat, like the linoleum, no, that was in the dorm. This linoleum's green, brownish green, and parts of it are cracked. No, that was in a different building. Here, compacted soil. No tiles in the bathroom, and everywhere the smell of Palmolive, which is what I use here. Blue lid, milky, but without almond, for sensitive skin. Red spots on my back, from the Medrol, I have a sun allergy. Sensitive to light, can't go out in the sun. With black clothes and my hair undone, I'm a vampire. Reading under a tree at the beach, need the fresh air, it does me good.

The woman does swimming and stretching in the pool, they put weights on her limbs so she can use them longer. Her arms or legs give in from time to time. She throws her body against the wall to stop herself from falling. They told her a while ago, she already knows. With me it's uncertain, not a clear-cut case, I come up negative but still it could be Bechterew's. Bechterew's is their favourite, even though I'm negative. Got new medication, it could give me cancer. Can't bring myself to read about the side-effects, sick in bed now, take everything they give me so I can go home. It makes me allergic to the sun, the red bumps are from the Medrol. Have you ever seen a spotty vampire, dressed in chains and boots, sitting under a tree at Balaton? '98-'99, beat that, *Twilight*.

OTHER LADIES

This old lady has a bag that fills up with blood three times a day. They replace it and that's it, she should rest more. They told her it will stop, but she can't go out and her doctor hasn't checked on her, even though she gave him money. They change the bag and that's it, she should rest. But something's not right there, why is she bleeding? Been here ten days now, examination, IV, bladder catheter, but they won't tell her anything, they just replace the bag. She's scheduled for an operation, but someone (the cleaning lady?, the nurse?, my mother?) told me that anyone who bleeds that much will most likely die. This old lady will die too.

The lady with the perfume won't. She looks fit enough to go home. They might let you go home, but everybody comes back sometime. Sweetheart, don't take this the wrong way, but I hope I don't have to see you for a long time, although you should at least come back for the check-ups. That's what my doctor says to me as we smoke together on the balcony. Later he gets angry with me for calling him on his mobile, he doesn't think it's an emergency, but it is. I call him before the ambulance, something isn't right, I feel it in my kidneys this time. He prescribes the cancer medicine again – I only realise after I buy it. I'm not taking it.

BUTTERFLY NEEDLE

I want the butterfly one, the veins are scabby. Half asleep, I check the inside of my elbow, carefully feel the skin. It's sensitive, so I touch an inch above it. If I don't feel plastic, I'm not in hospital. Sleeping in long-sleeved pajamas, I pull the sleeves into my hands, hold them tight. If the cannula is in, I wrap the blanket round my arm and convince myself it's my pajamas. They reach down to my hands – I'm not here.

The butterfly needle doesn't get stuck in my veins, it comes out after the infusion. Doesn't snap, doesn't fall out. Causes no hemorrhaging, and the scar is small. It works well with my hand, but not with the inside of my elbow. I dread the forearm, the soft bend. It hurts when it's there, every time I move. A plastic tube goes into my vein, the chemicals enter through it. If they flow backwards an air bubble could get in, I could die. They never come on time, the drip chamber turns red, my roommate shows me how to squeeze the tube in case they don't react to the alarm. If it gets sore and starts to hurt, I can pull it out.

I get the butterfly needle, the veins have all exploded, they tell me they're unuseable. They call me Rubber Skin, the needle barely goes through me, my veins are tricky, they're hard to hit. She circles the inside of my elbow with the needle, I feel the tip searching for the vein, just give up. I say it out loud. I wish I had at least one good vein for the nurses to find, so they wouldn't hate me. They attach a sense of failure to me.

BUBBLE

Pink for sucking, black and green for pumping. Suck up two ampoules, tap the air bubble, press a little, then change the needle. Bend one knee, put the other one behind it. Thumb on hipbone, hold out middle finger – this is how I always measure it. Two-thirds is enough. First push the needle in a little; if there's no blood, you can push it further. If there is blood, find a new spot. Twenty-two millimetres, the size of A's baby: I have a cyst, the walls are sclerotic, this is my embryo. The other is in my ovaries; it's smaller but also nastier, doesn't want to come out, it's stuck there. If it doesn't dissolve, they'll have to take it out. It's the same size as the air bubbles in the syringe, when they join together before I push the needle in.

LEVITATION

Please keep calm, I'll ask the crew to bring the teacart. We're experiencing a bit of turbulence, which is perfectly normal since we're flying over a storm. Lightning below us, no candy floss. Everything vibrating, like when you have a fever. And then the pleasant levitation.

They're not calling me for the ultrasound even though I've been referred. I'm sliding off my chair, smiling, talking slowly and quietly. I see the fear in my mother's face turn to anger, she's going to raise hell and scream at the doctors. I merely say, Let's go, they don't understand, they have no idea, I'll just feel worse here. You shouldn't trust people, only walls – walls are always there when you're feeling dizzy. People have their own pace to which you need to adjust, and there's no time for that. There's no time when you're ill.

Find the wall. According to my mother, that's what I mumble as we leave, and I refuse to take her arm. Otherwise they'll notice. You can lean against a wall discreetly.

DIVING (I)

I hold my nose between my thumb and forefinger, closing the nostrils. I blow until my ears pop. Only a hiss from the left one. Need to train the valve some more, otherwise I could lose my balance. The valve doesn't close right. I wash my hair in the sink, less chance of something getting in. I bend down, hold my nose. Hammer-anvil-stirrup. Put a salt pillow under my ear and lie on my side so the water runs out. But it's trapped. They pump it out, give me a tampon and some cream. Pimafucort – I'm sixteen and laugh at the name. Sounds like pussy. Coming back from the ENT doc I join the others at the bar, don't have to go back to school today. My hair almost reaches to my waist, I pull it over my ears and watch intently, Bambi eyes are a winner. Later, on my way to the dorm, I get dizzy, need to do the trick to make my ears pop. Even if I wear earplugs in the lake, it's no good, the water still gets in. It gets in through the gap between the bones, gets inside the cochlea, makes me dizzy. Everything is muffled, the car, the people talking to me. Like in the bath when you put your head underwater and try to speak – that's what they sound like to me. I'm at the bottom of the bath, and they're trying to reach me from above.

DIVING (II)

Neon pink, green, and purple swimming trunks, white laces in the front. His thighs are hairy. That's what I see as I dive in. They're pushing us into the pool one by one, the survival instinct automatically triggers the hands and feet. They're not looking for me yet. The legs of the swim coach move like a frog's, kicking hard, but without moving forward or backward. Most likely it was him who pulled me out of the water, I don't know, but after that I can't go to the swimming pool again. Can't even take swimming lessons in school. If there's even one E. coli bacillus in the pool it's sure to find you, you have a tendency for this stuff, he tells me, while pushing the needle into my thigh. I stiffen because he touches me, feeling my leg to find a place for the needle. This is where the B12 goes in, then the immune strengtheners. At one point, the needle breaks inside me. He sprays the area, tries again. Very stubborn, this child, won't relax, though she knows it hurts more this way. When I'm older they inject me in my veins or in my buttocks, the buttocks never hurt – will never let them touch my legs again.

SKIN

On the roof of my mouth a small, white cone filled with fluid, I nibble at it with my teeth. I chew a hole in it, the juice runs out, it's cold inside. Tastes like the fluid from a wound, like pus from a blister. The skin is torn, peels away, leaving a wide yellow layer. Nothing left to chew on. The largest is the size of a fifty-pence-piece, then it spreads to the other side, above the teeth. Under the tongue, on the sinews, yellow patches and little white spots. Until I've developed a new layer of mucus, I can only put a straw in my mouth. That's how I drink – yoghurt, water, tomato juice. Tomato reduces inflammation, salt draws the mucus together. The biopsy will tell the cause, they snip tiny tissue samples into a vial. One white, one yellow, the results are unknown. The composition of the new skin is unknown.

FOWL

Chickens are walking all over me, scratching my skin with their claws, tiny white bumps appear when I shiver. It could be IgD, fever, an allergy, they don't know which symptom belongs to what.

The chickens are coming closer, my thighs are burning, two red stripes, like slices of ham, bright red, the chickens are getting closer. They want to peck at the skin, I scream, louder and louder, they're tearing at the scabs. It takes a long time for the side-effects to pass, can't take it, your body, the drugs, who knows how you'll react.

I want my sandwich, I'm hungry, there are traffic cones on the road. Still two hours from home, tomorrow is history class, still don't know the Hungarian part. 1920–1930, Károlyi, pre-Facism, the rise of National Socialism, my history book in my lap. My sandwich is pulsing, the cheese inside is quivering, my teeth are sharp, I'll tear through my sandwich, bite off half, no police, no inspector, I rip the cheese apart. The cones outside the window are yellow, but we've left the city, there are no road signs here, no accidents. Tomorrow I'll know the whole thing, get a five, the whole domestic and foreign political situation, 1920–1930, Károlyi, the Nazis.

MERRY-GO-ROUND

I want to ride on the horse, it doesn't move, is frozen. A pole goes through the horse to the top of the tent. The merry-go-round is slow, won't make me dizzy, check out the park, the dodgems going round. The pattern blurs, I hurry to a bench. No need to be afraid, it will soon be over, a bit of patience, it's already passed. It starts with heavy breathing, they settle on your chest, we can't give you any more antibiotics. We'll open the bronchia, expand the lungs, then you won't choke. Have a bit of patience, you're not going to choke, it won't come back, a lot of time has passed, there's been a development, you're in good hands. A little bell signals that it's coming to an end, three more rotations, slower and slower. The horse is wobbly, its feet are not well fixed, I collapse.

TUMBLER

Ghosts of children wander through the hospital, telling us how they were shoved inside their closets. They take away the alarm from next to one of the beds, Kataton's. I know her, we have similar toothbrush holders, white, grey, and blue dots. They replace the toothbrushes when they disappear.

VICE

The thymus gland has disappeared, this won't cause problems anymore. Similarities between cases are not a reason to worry.

This bed is closer to the radiator, my head is warm, I won't get fever here. The bedclothes are old, but not the same, the sheet is not the same, the bed is not the same. No inhalor. I imagine I'm in a vice, I'm in a vice like the ballerina in the poem. The vice presses the chest from front and back, it's the front one feels first. Theospirex, Bronchowaxon. Bronchowaxon can't be taken by people with autoimmune diseases. The bronchia-expandor helps with breathing, the immune-

strengtheners activate the antibodies. In *Once upon a time...*, a white-clothed, curly-haired group charges through the blood vessels, after the evil-ones. The evil-ones' hair is also red, and stands on end, thin. Soon I'll be an antibody, my mouth will be a cube when I chomp down on the evil-ones.

SILENT KING

We talk for exactly two minutes, then stop. I have no symptoms at this table, the others at the table know nothing of my symptoms. It's warm, I'm brown, my skirt is a spinning one, and I have only one pair of stockings on. We don't speak till half past four, then they come to check. Blood done, pee done, stool done. Done, done, done, we talk for exactly two minutes, then the thermometer is up. 35.8°C, you're cooling down, the electric one is not reliable. When I put the earplugs in I can continue the game, I tell the others I've got the earplugs in, cannot hear them. Done, done, done, the devil is in the trap, we play the silent king, whoever speaks first cannot sleep, cannot leave.

FAG

I've four cigarettes, I put them in my boot, I give them to the others, nobody'd think it's allowed, one drag alone is life-threatening. IgD doesn't cause immediate or instant death. It builds up in the organs slowly. The constant fever exhausts the organism, causing a prolonged fatigue-state or incapacity-state. You experience the simultaneous under- and over-activity of the immune system. The operations may cause hallucinations, and a state of deliriousness, there's no known treatment, there's no known cure, there's no known outcome of the disease. All of a sudden there's only one in my boot, I give it to the others, that one drag's enough, then the inhaler.

COFFIN

My hands are bound, so that I don't move. I'm in a coffin, and I can't breathe, there are 4-12 hours of air in the coffin, it depends how much air has been pushed out. This coffin's pretty small, the lid is low. It's white and bright like the nose operation, I know it's an MRI but I can't convince myself, I don't believe it. My lungs don't believe me, they don't let the air in, I can't remember when I press the button.

DOMESTOS (ANTISEPTIC)

Smell of frying meat, you have to be here, you are safe here, you can easily reach us if things get worse. Smell of frying meat, this room is the closest one to the kitchen, I stuff the gap under the door with towels and bedsheets to stop it getting in. Meat frying in oil, spices burning. Sunday rules, cleaning, disinfection, first the vacuum cleaner then the bactericide. Heat kills the bacteria on the frying animal flesh, burnt fat and the smell of meat fills the room. I take the Domestos out, Domestos suppresses the smell of death. I mix air freshener from detergent and water, the detergent is skin-friendly and smells like roses. Search for a flacon with a pump, fill it with the

mixture, shake like the syringe, to mix well. One squirt for the breast, one for the thigh, liver is more intense, for that I use up half.

MERRY-GO-ROUND (II)

If not the horse then the car, accelerator and brake at the same time. Round and round go the animals, the car, you can sit next to driver and check which road he returns on. Overrunning of the engine, overtaxing of the pulse, overexerting of the parts. The car doesn't move, pressing both pedals, till it explodes. Like purgatory, says the writer, who was the first to read it, like the merry-go-round it goes in circles, deeper and deeper, but always in circles, no escape.

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II.

HAVÍŘOV SCULPTURE PARK poem series, HAVÍŘOV

3 TUBS

1

water is taken from the girl
the feet do not reach it
holds her hair at the back
so it's carved by the sculptor
not to let the hair touch the water
the reservoir-basin is shoal
birds do not drown in it
triangle-shaped was the basin
on a small step the girl stood
shall the feet move to the water
stood that direction now
looking at the concrete
concretowards the stone's back leans
there the toes go
the step is narrow and high
the bottom is far

2

the metal flower suits the girl
in the metal basin
in the roundabout
the flower is real and withers
the new ones are not changed
the bunch is removed
taken out of the water

3

in another tub
women take a bath
from among the stones it squirts
from below the tunnel the metal plate
where they sit is getting warm
from the sun plum-shaped
is the bottom carved
white white is the back
there is no frontal part
the right one holds the head
from the top the left from
the bottom towards the center
take a bath in the concrete

MERKUR

GROUNDPLAN

with roundabouts they slide
the miner's resting place
on the plan a deflected
palm the first phalanges
are visible three hotel towers
merkur reaches the sky
like the zeppelin

among the three towers
tante emma laden
in baskets local vegetables
on the main road green lanes
two-generation-houses are built
keep the slogan of the milk bar
don't change
the production of the ice cream

bore a tunnel for the train
between the mine mountains
and underground water
because of the holes
the soil sinks
the ground does not fill it
from the upcoming water lakes and reed
poisonous substances
but where the birds swim
no danger among the phalanges

SHAFT

the shaft was broken down
nine kilometers away
the parts will be replaced
under the feet steel coal
the city is a covered container
first the big bell goes down
pushes the water out
the small one pushes
the pressure and the residuals
locks the tower
on the bottom of the wood heater
a small hole
the boiling metal flows
this is the spyhole of the workers

FEET

the container is a can
the compressed air
in two big feet
over the dust collector
onto the feet metal boots
are melt

WOMAN

the woman is the container's part
on her head a yellow snapped helmet
the channels crackle outside
squirring as a maze
not every one of them
gets back into the body
the woman rates numbers
air cubic metres
the drowned ones
asks whether you discover
whether you see there was
water here was taken out
from container's body

the heater has four towers
with the hot air
the metal slips into the pipes
not every one of them
gets back into the body
a car leaves to the towers
nutriment in residual out

on the left side of the draft
the palm with curved fingers
four tower is the woman
one tower the bridge to merkur
this is smaller this is the connector
merkur reaches the sky
like the zeppelin

„MAKE YOUR BIG DREAM COME THROUGH (HAVIROV)”

sit in semicircle
the group instructor is 2.
the event is supervised
by higher numbers
visualize the most equivalent
investment plan in the end
are balanced and relieved
we his we yours
most interesting the one
two from the leader right
wants to love fruits
the director prepares
fake documents with him
to the top of the docu goes
the common breathing
preparing the imagination list
strawberry dreams cherry compote
concentrate on one
on the cherry tree
the excavator cleans the monument
the park around it the visualized
trees go to the place of the weeds

„Together we'll make (Havirov) city for young again (HAVIROV)”

right
petition collectors
pregnant clubmembers power lifting
corporate program organisers
miners motorcyclists
student circle special circle sports circle
volunteer circle public interests
action action actionpeople
who stays sitting off

„WE PUT SMILE BACK ON FACES OF VULNERABLE KIDS” (HAVIROV)

in this campaign
they go until
they find the equivalent
school for the film the clothes
of the protagonist is ragged
his appearance is prostrate
his thin shin bone is visible
hole on the trousers
this campaign's
protagonist is tall
in his dependable lap
the sad ones the hungry ones
his hands full of apples
and candies like santa's
only that he's i suits and
the helpers don't have sacks
collect accessories from the trunk
to the assistants

*Written in English or translated from the Hungarian by the author,
with editing by Roberto Santaguida/Szabolcs Laszlo/ Phil Baber/Owen Good*