

PILVAX

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Ferenc Barnás (b. 1959) is an acclaimed Hungarian novelist whose most recent book, *The Ninth* (*A kilencedik*), was published in Paul Olchvary’s translation by Northwestern University Press in May 2009. Barnas is also the author of two previous novels: *Bagatelle* (*Bagatelle* 2000), from which the excerpt in this issue of *Pilvax* is taken, and *Az eloskodo* (*The Parasite* 1997). He is the recipient of two of Hungary’s highest literary honors—the Sandor Marai Prize (2001) and the Tibor Dery Prize (2006)—and of residencies at leading artists retreats in the United States. His website is ferencbarnas.com.

Bagatelle

by Ferenc Barnas

Translated by Paul Olchvary

This excerpt comprises chapter four of *Bagatelle*, Ferenc Barnas’s second novel published in Hungarian by Kalligram (Budapest) in 2000. The third-person narrative concerns the doings of a Hungarian man who spends many lonely summers earning money by playing classical music on his flute on the streets and squares of cities in Germany, Switzerland, and environs, retreating by night into the minivan he dubs the White Ship. Its twenty-six chapters are arranged in a non-chronological structure that suggests the protagonist’s perception of these summers as an atemporal whole. In 2001, Barnas, who is currently working on a third novel, was one of three co-winners of Hungary’s prestigious Sandor Marai Prize for literature, and in 2007 he won the Tibor Dery Prize.

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He’d been strewing sadness all over the streets of Germany for three years now, lugging it along like a vendor packing his wares. Of course this was only three months times three, but he was in the habit of calling it three years. Perhaps his sense of time had gone askew. No, not at all in such a way that would have left him unable to distinguish between seasons and months. That much, he more or less, had down pat. What was more of a challenge was how to tread over those nine months of the year he spent back in Hungary. He would most gladly have hibernated, if he could.

The emissary of sorrow set to music, that’s what he was. No matter how jovially people had been chattering away, a somber reserve invariably befell everyone all at once wherever he showed up, set down his bags, set up his music stand, unpacked his flute, and began to play. With the exception of certain rare instances, during this period of “slow movements,” as he would later come to think of it, all the breath he sent into his flute invariably came out as largos, andantes or, at most, andantinos.

Only much later—after he underwent a comprehensive physical—did it occur to him that this tendency toward melancholy music during those years could not have been pure chance, for even then his circulation was not exactly in order.

Indeed, this flutist of the streets often gave the impression of being a living advertisement for some new Tristessrn cult of sadness that had embarked into the world from Lusitania, as if he and his music were infused with all the longing, the saudade, of some Portuguese tune set to Pessoa's poetry. If melancholy were a sought-after commodity he would have been an ad kiosk fought over by top salesmen. Back then, this manifest sensitivity of his invariably got the better of him, so much that, as soon as he arrived in a city and happened upon the most peaceful café, he'd sit down at a table after discreetly seeing to this and that, open up whatever newspapers happened to be on hand, and peruse the obituaries. He studied the photos of the deceased, occasionally happening upon someone he recognized. For example, the kindly priest of a church he'd often played in front of, a priest who'd toll the bell after every single victory by his favorite Formula One race-car driver and whom he consequently came to think of as Father Formula One.

The newly deceased were usually strangers, although he couldn't exclude the possibility that he might have exchanged a word or two with one or more of them, or that they'd at least seen each other in passing. Sometimes the obituary would mention the date and time of burial, and if no distractions intervened, he'd reflect upon the person at the appointed time. Indeed, this habit must have gotten the better of him, for while he was engaged in such deferential contemplation of the dead, a pedestrian would occasionally approach him and ask, in a tone of concern, whether something was wrong, or if perhaps he was ill. He just stood there more often than not in the brilliant summer sun, at the heart of a city brimming with youthful energy, and pretended not to understand a thing. Yet he had a good many dead to mourn.

And then there were those dead whom certain pedestrians would talk about when he took a break from playing. Yes, occasionally a woman overcome with emotion not only couldn't hold back her tears, but her most grievous words. Often these words concerned children who'd committed suicide. But all this really got to him only when he learned that it was on account of his instrument that a woman's wounds had reopened to the point where she divulged her secrets, because more than one among those who'd left the world so prematurely had played the flute.

Then, once he'd finished also poring over the names of the survivors, each and every day he would fold up the newspaper and look about him trying to guess who among those sitting there would be the next unwitting advertiser on this page; for this, too, was part and parcel of this ritual of his. Only then did he gulp down what was left of his coffee. After ruminating on the dead in this manner he would step back out onto the bustling street with the zeal requisite to convey the memory of Herr Winderberger or Frau Krumbachtel to hundreds of pedestrians by way of his flute.

Funeral home operators would have done well to hire him, had they been resourceful enough. No doubt the competition would have been negligible. For one thing, in keeping with the demands of the era, he performed on the international stage, and so he would have made his weekly lineup of appointments as geographically varied as need be—and not only in Germany, for he would have had no problem finding a

ready and waiting clientele in Italy, say, or for that matter, Scandinavia. For another, he would have verily made a killing if this were to get off the ground, seeing as how he was already well practiced at funereal tunes or doleful farewell songs, which invariably cropped up in his daily repertoire. Indeed, he was inclined to devote a bit of time to such works even when playing amid brilliant sunshine at some health resort. Surely it wasn't by chance that he pulled off his occasional big successes among those listeners most apt to frequent such resorts, those who were in that certain high-risk age group; those who were still around to let the world know that, so far, their names had eluded that inauspicious section of the newspaper. Sometimes he'd glance at a patient little audience of a half dozen or fewer old ladies and gentlemen, and on hastily adding up what he estimated as their ages, he often came up with a figure of around 500. Perhaps this was why, more than once, while playing Albinoni's Adagio in G minor, he imagined that the more fainthearted seniors around him were perhaps already imagining the sound of clumps of earth knocking against the wood above their heads. Ah yes, he'd sometimes half whisper to himself, someone is home, but they're not about to open the door just yet.

Chapters five & six of Ferenc Barnás's Bagatelle can be found in ISSUE 6 of PILVAX, locally available in Budapest.