

PILVAX

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Nikola Tutek (born 1978) graduated from the University of Rijeka with a thesis on Quentin Tarantino's movies. He has lived mostly in Hungary since 2001. His short stories and plays have appeared in the prominent Croatian literary magazines *Rival* and *Književna Rijeka*, as well as *Književne novine* in Belgrade. In 2006 his first book, *Zlatna pirana* (Golden piranha), was published in a Katapult Edition (Rijeka: Zigo). He also won a short play contest organized by Teatar.hr (Virtual House of Croatian Theatre), and later worked with Lorne Campbell of the Edinburgh Traverse Theatre. In 2007 *Moricz Square* was played on stage in the Embassy Theatre of London at the Accidental Festival (Project nEEd Circuit). A collection of his short plays will appear in French in 2008 (*Le Theatre Volant*. Paris: Theatroom Noctuabundi) Nikola Tutek is also active in the field of linguistics and is expecting to publish an educational book, *Croatian and Hungarian Contrastive Phonology* (Budapest: Croatica).

from Budapest Miniature

by Nikola Tutek

(Translated from Croatian by Brad Fox)

I've been writing as long as I can remember. But when a writing man sends out tracts full of his opinions it's awful. I hate those "clever books." Politicians, celebrities and public figures can simply come on camera and give advice, or publish an interview in the newspapers.

They are powerful, and their words carry weight (almost every word is a tract in itself—just look at the eyes of their audience!). Writers have that same power (although they're usually neither powerful nor famous; quite the contrary—that so much power lies in the hands of the powerless is just one of the absurdities of the writing trade, or could it be called a rare blessing?)—all they have to do is write a few pages of text and find a publisher. Very often they make a muck of that power—by writing such tracts. What a pitiful mistake! And worst of all, sometimes I do it myself. In times of exhaustion, sadness, contemplation, days when I close in on myself, I regret it—trying to be too clever.

Last night around three o'clock I was woken up by the sounds of an argument on Erkel Street. Usually I wouldn't have gotten out of my bed and spied through the window like an old woman from some coastal village (but it's not only there; in Győr, in northern

Hungary, near the church, there's a house with a truck's rearview mirror affixed to the window frame, so the inhabitants of the house can tranquilly observe who's going in and out of the chapel—I often think about that house), but last night I was driven by a simple impetus—I didn't recognize the language the people were using to argue. Maybe that doesn't sound like reason enough to leave a warm bed in the middle of winter (but there's no winter anymore—first my window defrosted, then all of Antarctica), but you should know that I'm a linguist (basically), and I always boast of being able to recognize any language I hear on the street. And there I was listening to that melodious shouting with nothing to suggest its point of origin. What's more, I couldn't even tell if their shouts were angry and threatening or if it was just a friendly dispute. I ran over to the window and, in silence, found a position where I could spy from (Where did I learn that? Maybe it's just human instinct).

Down on the street I could see three guys pounding on some poor fool. All the while singing in that incredible language! All the world's language families marched through my head. I tried to match sound and cadence to what I could hear from the street (just like a dentist comparing the colors of false teeth on his palette before he shoves one into his patient's mouth) but I couldn't find a reference. Actually, I found too many references to too many language families. And when a language sounds like Italian, Latvian and Farsi at the same time, that's no language at all.

The unknown language echoing up from the serenity of Erkel Street was driving me insane! Along with the sounds of fists hitting flesh, soles squeaking on asphalt. I closed my eyes and realized that the sound of human fists in combat is almost the same as the sound of pigeons coupling in a sandbox (the deep pigeon gurgling, the flapping of wings—what a strange association!). But what language were they speaking? I thought of calling out to the people down on the street. That way I could do two good things—I could stop the conflict (and maybe save that poor soul's life—he was holding up pretty poorly against three pairs of clenched fists and six dancing feet) and at the same time I could ask them about their language. By then I'd already realized, with a certain amount of shame (and it hurts most when a man feels ashamed before himself alone—but this is no tract!) that in my heart I wanted to be down on the street fighting. I wanted to beat those three men, don't ask me why—because of their language, maybe, or because of my ignorance... my lack of recognition. Or it was just that the night was humid, and the linguist was turned on like a pigeon in heat.

The three extraterrestrials (I give myself the right to call them that because of their language—my favorite language in the world) all shouts and posturing, pulled back and disappeared down Ráday Street. The poor fool got up off the pavement and caressed his head, as tenderly as he would a baby, then stood still in the middle of Erkel street, his eyes fixed on the corner of my building, around which the extraterrestrials had disappeared. Then all of the sudden he started applauding and calling out in English:

“Bravo! Three on one! Congratulations!”

Actually four. Counting me, squatting behind the curtain like an old woman from the coast. As soon as I heard English, I wanted to go back to bed. All was lost—I'd never know what language the extraterrestrials were speaking . . .

The rest of Nikola Tutek's piece can be found in ISSUE 5 of PILVAX. Locally available in Budapest.