

Péter Zilahy - The Last Window Giraffe (excerpts)

The *Window–Giraffe* was a picture book from which we learned to read when we didn't know how. I already knew how by then, but I had to learn it anyway, because what else was school for. The *Window–Giraffe* made the world intelligible to us in alphabetical order. Everything had its rhyme and reason, symbolic or mundane. Thus, we could learn from it that the sun rises in the east, that our hearts are on the left, that the Great October Revolution took place in November, and that light floods in through a window – even when it is closed. The *Window–Giraffe* was full of seven-headed dragons, fairies, devils and princes, but it told us that these things do not exist. I remember four kinds of dragons that do not exist, and also three princes. The *Window–Giraffe* taught us to read between the lines. It was taken as much for granted as the teddy-bear on the children's bedtime TV programme. It didn't occur to anyone to question it. The window–giraffe was a window–giraffe. The *Window–Giraffe* is my childhood, the changing room, the PE class, the continual growing taller, the age before a better age, goulash communism, my homework, my innocence, my generation. The *Window–Giraffe* is a book one of whose characters was myself. It was only on being asked twenty years later that I realized the words of its title stood for the Hungarian alpha and omega. Yes, the *ablak* – window – is the beginning, the opening through which the light comes, whereas *zsiráf* – giraffe – is a bounded infinite – surrealism, flaming giraffes, we'll never die! A dictionary which contains what's been left out.

There's a window–giraffe in Paris as well – I saw it on a postcard. It's called the Eye-fell Tower. It was sent by Sophie Brünner, who had defected to France with her parents and was now studying from a French reading primer. The Eye-fell Tower has a long neck, four legs, and an awful lot of windows: window and giraffe in one, even its name sounds good too, spur and promise in one, surpassing the *I'm-just-a-tot-I'll-grow-up-one-day* attitude of the nursery, a sudden leap, holding out the hope of a definitive break from the worm's eye view, which the express elevator down the middle reduces to a matter of technology. Sophie looked a bit like a giraffe herself, except she didn't have a window or an express lift down her middle. The express lift was in my throat when she tiptoed over to my desk on her matchstick legs and let me smell her fragrant eraser. That night I was in syllabifying ecstasies, with letters zooming into view like cat's eyes on a dark road. The next day, she defected. Our class teacher told us that her family had gone away unexpectedly. She might well have said 'was cut down in its prime', the way Party leaders go. The fragrant eraser left

an indelible mark on my heart. Only later did we discover they hadn't gone off on a holiday at all, when as a proxy for herself she sent the Eye-fell Tower, which was just like a window-giraffe, except at least it made some sense to anyone who could read between the lines.

I was a virgin, but that didn't bother me. I didn't have a clue. The world was black-and-white, you could see it on TV. I can still see, as if before my eyes, the extra time played by Argentina and Holland in the '78 World Cup, the Baader-Meinhof and Salyut-Apollo link-up, the death of the King (I didn't know who Elvis was, but Dad was choked), the ash cloud over Mount St. Helens, 'Bertie' Farkas the first Hungarian in space, and the Rubik Cube World Championship in Budapest. Sports were exciting in black-and white. In a boxing match you had to tell the boxers apart by counting the stripes on their socks. I even remember how many stripes my first date had. I'm not sure about the colour of the eyes, even now I see her in black-and-white. After the first kiss my parents bought a colour TV, and it turned out that the Dutch are orange, whereas the Italians are blue, and there are even red devils. Only the Germans remained black-and-white, as if they were being punished. Their country was split in two as well. I almost felt sorry for them.

My first childhood memory is of crawling on all fours during the rest period at nursery school. The curtains are drawn, and there's a moon shining on the white blankets. It can't be the Moon itself, of course; we were never there at night. Anyway, I'm crawling on all fours under the beds, afraid that if the others wake up, then I shall wake up as well. I am alone, a near-fictitious child, balancing on the creaking parquet floor, breadcrumbs drilling into my kneecaps. I'm small and nobody notices me. I'm worming my way along the enormous room as if I had been doing it for hours. I'm dodging hands and feet that are dangling out from under the white sheets. Dead tired little angels. Formations of fleecy clouds float past, podgy fingers, dimples, curly locks. Uh-oh! Somebody's coming the other way under the bed. Our heads bump, but because of the sheet I don't see the face. She's panting on my neck, hot breath. The nursery assistants are coming in their white overalls, white socks and white slippers. We crouch under the bed, her little hand grasping my little hand. Her palm is sweaty.

The historic building on top of Eagle Hill where I went to school had been a convent before it was upgraded into an institution of learning. When German troops occupied Hungary, in March 1944,

they set up their HQ in the main hall. This is where Budapest's military commander was detained. The hall later served as our gym, and we ran round and round in circles between its historic walls, a domestic history in a tucked handstand. The Magyars entered Hungary along the highway of nations, said our walrus-moustached PE instructor, which sounded good. I could just imagine them trying to hitch a lift on the steppes, holding up a marrowbone with 'Hungary' scratched on it in runic script, but nobody could read it. Leapfrog over the box and a cartwheel on landing. According to sir, a huge expanse of wasteland stretches from the Pacific to the Great Hungarian Plain, roughly from the Amur to the Danube, with the Magyars at one end and the Gulag at the other, so we'd better behave. He dished out two-handed slaps so we would not lose our balance – his idea of the golden mean. I would rather have climbed a pole or done two circuits. No more helping hands, he said, and bore down on me with all the gravitas he could muster. He just wanted to mould me into *an upright Hungarian*. Something didn't add up, because although our language was supposed to be our greatest remaining treasure, they were trying to get me to hold my tongue. Domestic history merged into anatomy, patriotism into grammar, solidarity into moulding. To cut a long story short, the Magyars came to Hungary a thousand years ago, and they've kept on coming ever since. No-one knows where from or where to, and anyone who says differently is wrong, or not Magyar, or not honest. The Magyars are shrouded in mystery, or lost. The Magyars do not stand out: they look just like anybody else and assimilate with ease wherever they may be, except in Hungary, where they are divided by a common tongue. The Magyar has a little bit of the Serbo-Croat in him, a little bit homeless. He marches down the highway of nations, driving huge herds of cattle before him, and is constantly at war. Gusts of wind sneak up behind him to deliver gigantic slaps in the face. No messing about here! My own image of the Magyars combined the progressive traditions of the Wild West and the Wild East, growing out of a close study of Karl May's stories and Árpád Feszty's panorama of the *Magyars Entering Hungary*, now on view in the Ópusztaszer National Memorial Park. The Magyars lived like cowboys, and fought like Red Indians. They collected antiquities long before the great explorers. Cortés and Pizarro are descendants of the Magyar leaders Lehel and Bulcsú. The Magyar Indians raided the Middle Ages, holding them up halfway like some stage coach, circling them, whooping and shooting arrows at anyone who stuck their head out. They even attacked the Vikings and the Moors, plundered monasteries and generally kicked the shit out of Europe, though it's not the done thing to be proud of that, and it's not my reason for mentioning it. Then they reached the Atlantic and realized that the prairie had run out. It was not possible to ride

right round the globe, whooping it up, because there was an ocean to be crossed. There was nothing for it but to clamber up onto the stage coach – over the wheels, unfortunately. The Carpathian Basin was once a sea itself. Had we only arrived in time, we would have become a seafaring people, with our very own sea, not a historical one, not one so soaked in blood, not a rented weekend cottage.

A Pioneer, that's me! Brave and intrepid. What's there to be scared of? My fifty-five pounds are utopia made flesh. I ceaselessly deepen my knowledge, willingly and cheerily, along with friendship between nations. A Pioneer, that's me. Dib, dib, dib – dob, dob, dob. I lend a hand wherever I can – to you, and you, and you too! You didn't get into trouble for nothing. I'm steadfast as the trust endowed upon me, as upon all of you too. One tug on my neckerchief and the reactionaries scatter, sobbing all the way home.

The Pioneers' Twelve Rules, unlike the prescriptive Ten Commandments, reflected a descriptive world view. They dangled an already consummated future before our eyes. A Pioneer is a fully fledged, perfect being and acts like one by, for instance, always telling the truth – Rule Six. I'd rather have the New Testament any day. If a stone is thrown at you, throw bread in return. Just great! When a Creator runs out of ideas bun-fights are always an option, then it descends into farce. But what if a Pioneer says all Pioneers are liars? Because everyone knows Sohár tells fibs, even if he does have a red tie and a whistle. It's a nice whistle but Sohár doesn't deserve it. One has to admit the Pioneer is only human. That could be Rule Thirteen. Then again, it's so obvious it doesn't need a separate point. Rule Thirteen remains unspoken. We all have our weak points. I, for one, stole a logic game and hid it in my sock. I was only a Little Drummer at the time, and my parents made me return it, but you could tell they were really proud because in those bright red circles and triangles they saw their son's unquenchable thirst for knowledge. As for stealing, there was no rule about that, it was built into the system.

My bath time was during the early evening news. Mum would look in, every now and then, to check that I was all right, while Dad watched the TV in the living room. In order to be able to protect me from the lies they had to be aware of the details. In the bathroom all that could be heard were Mum's sighs – what a mess I was making, flooding the apartment. I would submerge myself, and

under the water a voice would speak to me, telling me what had happened in the world that day: a landslide had buried a hundred and fifty people in Bangladesh, revolution had broken out somewhere in West Africa, a new nursery school and an Olympic swimming pool had been opened, and MTK had beaten Ferencváros 2:1. I had no idea who was sending the messages, or why, but clearly they had plans for me because they also told me what the weather would be. The next day I was able to distinguish several voices in the tub, which suggested I was dealing with an organization. This manner of communication seemed logical. I couldn't send them messages, because you can't talk under water, and they could only get in touch with me without my parents and teachers knowing during my bath time. I found it hard to grasp why it was so important for the organization that I should have detailed low-down on the latest war games in Poland, or which Transdanubian communities were being granted municipal status, but I knew that if I paid attention, sooner or later they would give a sign. My life gained a deeper meaning under water. One Sunday, when Mum was washing my hair and, unwittingly, dipped my head into the water, a pleasant female voice whispered in my ear that the harvest had been flattened by hail. I knew what was expected of me, and to be honest, I had no objections: to make a big mess. Even before then, I had been in the habit of battling with submarines and fighter planes in the dark, after going to bed, and sometimes I would end up on the floor, so it was only thanks to my doggedness that victory was mine in the end. From that day on, I was busy as a bee sabotaging the development of our people's democracy. Earthquakes, power failures and gas explosions marked my path. I would figure out military objectives on the basis of intelligence I received in the bathtub. When a factory or a power plant was inaugurated, I would be there, doing what I had to do. Comecon fiddled at repairs behind the Iron Curtain, little suspecting that a stone was being thrown inside the glass house.

In 1956, the quincentenary of Hunyadi's triumphant defence of Belgrade, Budapest was blown to bits. Pressing new venues into service, the Soviet army revived the traditions of the siege of '44. The city is riddled with holes: holes on house walls, holes between houses, new holes mixed up with old. Whether a house looks the way it does due to the siege or the revolution, because of '44 or '56, used to be a constant subject of debate: It can't be '44, it's a new building! The hell it is – typical Bauhaus! Can't you see the curved terrace? Then the snow would fall and cover up all the holes. Then more snow would fall, and the new snow got mixed up with the old, so one could no longer tell which snow was covering up all those holes, and people waited for the snow to melt, because the

country was in the grip of eternal snow. Forty thousand big and several million smaller holes. Budapest is the city of holes. I was born in this city of holes, with bullet holes on its hospital walls, holey gravestones. A seven-foot grass snake slithered into the crypt of Baron Manó Schwanbergi Kruchina (and his wife Marianne) before my very eyes. The baron died in '56, his wife in '44. A victim of the class struggle, or a drunken monumental mason? The gravestone later disappeared, leaving a hole in its place. Then a new grave came to replace the hole – a hole cycle could be traced in that way. The house in which we lived had been built on the hole left by my grandfather's house. As a child my father used to play in bomb craters in the garden. The bigger holes had houses built on them, smaller ones were used as rubbish dumps. Discarded TV sets and radio valves lay in heaps at the back of the garden, an electronic junk yard on Liberty Hill. In one hole we found a winged bomb, and even that had a hole in it, someone had screwed off the detonator head. We climbed walls, stuck our fingers into the holes and with our eyes shut tried to imagine the bullets. A Braille modern history of Budapest – a city that cannot be seen by the eye, only felt with fingers, read between the lines: house-wall-sized hieroglyphs, epic and lyric variations, wartime graffiti, crude erotic messages, an inside-out archive.

My bumpy road to sexual maturity was paved with the deaths of Communist dictators. My first sexual experience coincided with the death of Mao Zedong: I was bitten by a girl called Diana in nursery school. My voice broke when Tito died, and I had my first ejaculation when Brezhnev went. For three days all they played on the radio was classical music, which I thought was rather overdoing it; some schools were even closed. Then for a long time there was nothing. As an experiment, I took a girl to the movies, but the film was too good, and I got a cramp in my hand. Events accelerated at high school. There were only a couple of months between the first kiss and the first frantic fumbblings. After Andropov Chernenko quickly checked out. A few more weeks and it was Enver Hoxha's turn, but I'd rather not go into that. I first found out about the G-spot when Ceausescu was executed. Kim Il Sung cast new light on my broadening horizons. Luckily, the charges were dropped. Now as for Fidel . . .

The letter O is a perfect circle found in the middle of the Hungarian alphabet, every point of it being equidistant from its centre. Accordingly, the centre of the letter O may be regarded as the centre of the Hungarian language.

My Russian teacher says I will never understand Slavic culture until I have read *War and Peace* in the original. She read it while riding the Trans-Siberian Express, there and back. I'd rather read *Crime and Punishment*, as that would let me off at Moscow. Maybe it would be enough just to work through the crime part, then for the return leg I could fly Aeroflot (such a splendid word that – like cologne made from recycled poison gas). Language was part of the pretence. We pretended we knew Russian. *Noo!* Forty-five minutes every day I listened in Russian, nodded in Russian, sighed in Russian, even set out *War and Peace* next to me on the bench.

It never entered my head that knowing another language could be useful. Knowledge was a prerequisite for growth, something to be acquired for its own sake. If you wanted to grow, you had to do your homework. Russian was something we learned because it's a splendid language as well, of course – not that Hungarian isn't fantabulous, mind you. Back then, only Russian teachers spoke Russian, and they were all women of about fifty with dyed hair, a militant ethnic minority with their own tribal rites. They had a particular obsession for roll calls. Taking a head count before every mission was a matter of life and death. The only Russian soldiers I saw were in war films, and even they were dubbed into Hungarian. The first time I saw them in the flesh was when they withdrew from Hungary. The Cold War had come to an end, and so did peace. Since there was no longer any sense dying for it, the Russians were selling off their equipment for token sums. My pal wanted to buy a parachute and I acted as his interpreter.

Parashoot yest'ye? – Is there a parachute? I asked, but I began laughing and dropped the ye at the end. Good lord! The Russian for 'is' and Yankee 'yes' sound the same! Maybe it had been worth studying after all. 'Yankee go home' or '*pashli damoi*' it comes to the same thing. The occupation is just a line on the map, an accent, a conjunction. Not the tanks, not the eight grades, not Misha the bear, but a signature on my report card. The lance-jack answered in Hungarian: two bottles of vodka, he said, raising two fingers, because there were two of them. He asked how I was doing in school. I resented his familiarity and grumbled *noo-noo*, just like I had seen in *And Quiet Flows the Don*. He said he had a son, too, Sergei, and he knew it was not easy for us either. What would we say to a Kalashnikov? Or how about this pistol? It's like letting Cookie Monster loose in a sweet shop. A good job I'm not sweet-toothed. He'd throw in a cartridge clip as a gift, let's have a drink to the good old days. The good old days when I wasn't yet alive and our fathers were merrily killing each other off – I should drink to that with an enemy soldier who is speaking to me in my own

language! *Ege segedre*, said the NCO, his *nazdarovye* sticking out a mile. *Egészségedre* ‘to your health’ or *ege segedre* ‘to your ass’ – close enough. Sergei was also called Sergei, like his son, but we could call him Seryozha. He handed me the bottle and quoted Petőfi impeccably. Hungary is poetry, he says. I tell him that a group of Hungarian scientists had identified what they claimed were the remains of Sándor Petőfi in a grave in Barguzin but it turned out to be a woman’s skeleton. He wasn’t surprised, he said, Russia’s a big country. He wasn’t in the least pushy – helpful rather. He didn’t particularly want to go home, he said. He’d got used to being in Hungary and liked Hungarians, especially the women, winking at me as though he expected me to know what he was talking about. I gave him a Pavlovian wink back, because I knew that’s what you do when you talk about women. We didn’t want to bother him any longer, but he begged us to stay, still speaking Hungarian, of course. I’d better watch out! Could it be he didn’t even speak Russian – an Ob-Ugrian double agent, perhaps? We back away, waving. When we reach the door, he calls after us: How about a few hand grenades into the bargain?

Translated by Tim Wilkinson