

András Cserna-Szabó



András Cserna-Szabó was born in Szentés, Hungary, in 1974. He studied Humanities at university from where he went on to work as editor on a literary journal. He has also worked widely in cookery journalism and has enjoyed the last ten years employed as a restaurant critic.

He is known equally for his ventures into literature and his cookery writing but has also written dramas, screenplays, an extraordinary cookery book that revolves around the horrors of the hangover and has won awards for his lecho and “wolf tripe”.

Works published by Magvető:

Half Past Three (1998), Half Past Six (2001), Fear and Fright in Nagyhályog 2003), Kiss Shop (2008), Poisoned Swans – Essays (2009), Sam in the Soup – gastro crime fiction, with Béla Fehér (Magvető – M-érték, 2011), The Hair of the Dog – How to Cook with a Killer Hangover (co-author: Benedek Darida) (2012), The Death Star Grows Where Your Heart Once Was (2013)

Awards

Zsigmond Móricz Scholarship (1998), Golden Wooden Spoon (first prize at the 5th Szentés Lecho Cooking Festival – team contest, 2006), Miklós Mészöly Award (2008), National Cultural Foundation Scholarship (2008), EMIL Award (2009), ARTISJUS Award (2009), Attila József Award (2010)

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András Cserna-Szabó:

The Death Star Grows Where Your Heart Once Was

A (quite) unorthodox love story, 368 pages
2013, Magvető Publishing, Hungary

“In hot pursuit of love’s elusive bluebird or, at least, the bouncing beach ball of romance.”

Fuzzy Recall (for all intents and purposes, our hero) spends a quiet Sunday afternoon studying his favourite men’s magazine from which he learns that a hormone by the name of feniletilamin is responsible for all initial feelings of romantic attraction and that love comes in seven distinct forms.

He eventually gets to the end of the article and, red with rage, begins to yell, “What a load of shite! There’s only one kind of love and that’s the blind, pathetic, empty love that means nothing but passion, nothing but slavery! Anything else is just nonsensical neurosis and registry offices!” And then, as a reminder that life does have a sense of humour, however cruel, the phone rings and the woman on the other end of the line is the exact same female who chucked him and whose memory he still can’t quite completely erase.

“I took a good, long look at her and knew that this one would be trouble. In fact, she was trouble incarnate. She was dilemma distilled.”

This novel is the story of two vast love affairs. It’s a tale of two romances that end in disaster. The unorthodox love story sweeps through PRESENT-DAY Budapest, Pécs and Kolozsvár, travelling all the way down to the Adriatic coast.

FEATURING:

- **great chicks (PLUS a rubber duck!)**
- **a macho hunk with a bent gender,**
- **a star author wielding a samurai sword,**
- **a misanthropic father with a need to eat,**
- **a transvestite love demon (a real one!)**
- **a Western-writing hero**
- **The legendary Filthy Eleven’s Gang from the Wild Wild West**
- and**
- **many more**

And all are in hot pursuit of love’s elusive bluebird or, as it is described in the book, the bouncing beach ball of romance.

AND ALL THE WHILE, LIFE ROLLS ALONG IN THE WILD WEST: intrigue and love, crime and punishment, betrayal and revenge.

The legendary Filthy Elevens Gang gets wiped out and gangsters have their hard hearts smashed to smithereens while the saloon of Blacklord’s infamous Eldorado Brothel resounds to the sound of the Donkey March at the dawn of every day...

Then two worlds collide. Or, well...

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András Cserna-Szabó:

The Death Star Grows Where Your Heart Once Was EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

I had lived according to a carefully planned daily timetable for many years. I only ever set for outside the flat when it was completely necessary. I lay on my bed with the curtains drawn and read recipe books by lamplight or reclined in the bath paging through crime stories. And that was more or less enough to satisfy my spiritual needs. I liked to be alone. I had survived a number of disappointments in life and I was forced to agree with Schopenhauer's assertion that a man may only be truly happy when he is happy with himself. I liked to cook on my own, muse on the meaninglessness of life over a glass of Curly Dog, and I found nothing wrong with masturbation. If I ever did feel like a chat, I always had Kazmir, my yellow rubber duck, who lived in the bathroom.

I regularly suffered from a lack of finance. I could never understand why I appeared to be broke all the time when there was always plenty of work around as well as advance payments. I scribed articles on rock music for Metal Hammer, wrote a restaurant column for a magazine called Gusto, and provided reviews on new crime fiction to a number of dailies. There had been a time when even the odd novel popped out of me, but I'd done nothing like that now for several years. I had been completely art-free for at least the last two. So I lived without a worry in the world. Hamvas was right when he said that only those who give up writing are able to enjoy the full glory of another's written words with no pang of envy Sheik Yerbouti.

My monthly bills didn't come to all that much but I paid them pretty rarely and I hadn't had to spend money on women for a good while. My restaurant bills were paid for and I got books and records given to me all the time by various publishers. Unlike my colleagues, I didn't insist on expensive wine either, and I bought Curly Dog at the wholesale rate in three-litre bottles from a wine merchant's on Szondi Street. The theory was that my arse was forever hanging out of the seat of pants, but practicality saw me wallowing in the whirl of pop life in Budapest. I frequented sparkling, popular, trendy eateries, got invited to all manner of receptions and given free concert tickets. I had an embroidered tea towel on my kitchen wall that read "We may be poor but we live well!" with a moustached man propped up in one elbow below. In front of him on the table stood a candle, ink and a yellow rubber duck. My mother gave it to me for Christmas; she'd embroidered it especially.

I didn't have a trouble in the world if you don't count the fact that my soul was as empty and dark as a deserted school gym in the dead of night.

I'd always loved the autumn with its rusty light and tame smell of fish. And I felt perfectly fine on my own this autumn, too, as I quickly abandoned my plans to author a novel and gave myself over once more to comfy slovenliness. Recipes and detective stories accompanied by Slayer, The Misfits, Motörhead or System of a Down blasting out of my stereo speakers. But I always made a habit of listening to classical music on Sundays. I never felt like going anywhere or seeing anybody and I had become perfectly accustomed to day spent in solitude either on the bed or in the bath.

And nothing would have ever gone awry if my ill-sitting subconscious hadn't decided to revolt. Even though I was surrounded by almost infinite silence and calm, a voice within began to nag "you can't live like this, you need to get out into the world". Okay, I said to myself, when I couldn't stand to listen to my restless inner self for a moment longer, you might have a point, what harm could a short walk possibly do? The park it is! And I forced myself to remove my permanent apparel when at home; my shabby, blue bathrobe.

So I dressed and set off on a walk. It was the first of October, a Wednesday, early evening. I squinted through the spy hole first to check that the Pink Puma wasn't patrolling the stairwell. With a maintenance fee debt as large as mine, I couldn't afford to take risks. I established that nothing suspicious awaited me and slunk out onto the landing and tiptoed to the lift. Once down on the ground floor, I checked the contents of my mailbox in the faint light of a 20-watt bulb. A stack of envelopes, notices, leaflets and bills came tumbling out on top of me. Gas, electricity, maintenance fee, final demand, pizza delivery, flat wanted, invitations. One silver-trimmed envelope shone out from the litter

and had “V.I.P.” written under my name in bold, gold letters. I stuffed the rest into my coat pocket but I opened this one straight away. The invitation stated that I was politely requested to attend the Dead Lion Music Club that very evening to a record launch for the Strap-On Tits.

My feeling was that it couldn't be worse than drinking myself stupid in the company of a handful of dodgy characters in the Eden, the Szimpla or the Seagull, because that was normally how these strolls in the park tended to end. I turned around and went back up in the lift. I pulled my tight, black leather trousers on, slipped into my knackered denim jacket, and slicked my hair back. Ten minutes later and I was on my way to this club in a trendier part of town.

The weather outside was damp and decidedly Noah-esque while the climate in the club was hot and tropical. The guests all appeared to be perspiring around their make-up line. Furnished out of Africa with plenty of ebony effigies, the basement club was packed with soap stars, duvet-mouthed celeb chicks, dumb models, overblown media types, businessmen in smart suits, powdered-arsed party people, self-important politicians and aging musoes. The place was heaving. Everybody was doing their best to pretend they were having a wild time as if they were out for a night on the town. But none of them were because all of them were actually hard at work. This was prime viewing. Their eyes were set on permanent scan for photographers. They were desperate to see where the next flash would flicker. Kissy-kissy, huggy-huggy, rubbing up, elbows out, schmooze, schmooze and more schmooze – Pest's pop people were out to party.

The Strap-On Tits were a dead new disco punk outfit; they'd only got it together a couple of months before. The front man was a bloke called Micky and I knew him from the days with the Adulterate Beasts. Now those boys knew how to play punk with hairy bollocks. I lauded their first record (Shit'n'Sugar) to the skies in Metal Hammer. It wasn't just because we were mates. Their lyrics were sharp and filthy, their rifts were pure punk'n'roll, they had big talent and were shockingly good. They did gigs in small, smoky dives on the outskirts of town, threw buckets of animal innards over the crowd and did this thing where they bit the heads off live hamsters halfway through their set. They were genuine and jolly lads. They got spotted by a gay producer sometime after that, who saw something in them. Okay, so they were good at the game but they needed to turn up the volume on the pop if the cash machine was ever going to start dispensing, or at least that's what he reckoned. The answer was as follows – the producer explained – they should drop Adulterate Beasts and pick up Strap-On Tits, lighten the punk with a touch of Boney M and the chaps would do better as chicks!

So that is how the Adulterate Beasts magically transformed into the Strap-On Tits and the four rough-arse heteros made the change into bum-wiggling trannies with plastic grins. The target audiences of preteens in search of gender identity soon turned the Strap-On Tits into pop idols, with queues snaking out of record shops when they showed up in person, screaming kids at concerts, major play time on the music channels and an invitation to any pop party that took itself seriously.

It wasn't long after I walked in that I spotted the gay producer in the throng who had made the Tits who they were today. He sat on a black throne decorated with lion heads at the back of the room. He had a balloon-breasted professional prossie with flame-red hair prancing around him. They were doing a fair bit of kissing and the bloke's head kept disappearing into the super slut's chocolate-tanned cleavage. Of course, I knew that the whole thing was just an act designed to please the paparazzi. I had it from a reliable source that the producer much preferred younger boys and could reputedly handle up to four at a time.

I didn't really feel like mingling with the media masses. All I wanted to do was drink myself into a stupor for free in a splendid setting. And anyway, what business would I have had with that lot in the first place? These were the beautiful people who sought happiness in the heads of others.

I sat at the bar with my shoes on a monkey-head footrest and a disco ball glittering above. I slurped the free cocktails and flirted in the haze with the chubby wench serving the drinks. She boasted the extraordinary name of Ethel, wasn't even twenty yet, and was studying to be a vet. She told me how she grew up on a farm in the southern provinces, how her parents bred sheep, and how she longed for nothing more than to tend sick livestock. “Piggies, moo-cows, doggies and pussycats”, that's what she called them. She didn't have the faintest about cocktails and admitted that she never touched a drop. She

mixed up the dozen or so drinks that appeared in the printed menu (the usual clichés: Sex on the Beach, Mojito, Piña Colada and the like) from a little notebook that the owner had scribbled full of simple quantities. I liked her and her naive loneliness appealed. I was also touched by her studded belt with a bow and show of dimpled baby fat below her crop-top. I hadn't been with a woman for some months. I wanted to give her something, some kind of gift; not a tip, not an empty complement but something that only I could give to Ethel. And so I settled on telling her Hemingway's Daiquiri story.

"So, Ethel, a new barman started work in the Floridita Bar in Havana in fourteen," I bellowed like a bull ready to rut. "He was a Catalonian kid called Constantino Ribailagua, who was soon known to all as simply Constante. He knew more than a hundred and fifty recipes of which the ingredients were always the same: tropical fruit, sugar syrup and Cuban rum. He's the guy who invented the Daiquiri. Your classic Daiquiri is made from a blend of rum, lime juice and sugar syrup poured over very finely crushed ice with perhaps a couple of drops of maraschino added to extra tang. Hemingway formulated the Daiquiri Special along with Constantine, leaving the syrup out and replacing it with a double helping of shaved ice and rum. And that's what led to the birth of the Barbarian Daiquiri, better known as the Papa Daiquiri, and its further refined version, the Double Papa.

"I'd love to taste a Papa," Ethel said with a saucy smile.

I was just about to say that I only lived a couple of streets away and let's leave this mad monkey circus, scurry back to my flat, run a hot bath, fill it with bubbles, jump in and slurp delicious Double Papas. I could see that Ethel didn't appear phased by the age difference between us and was showing definite signs of empathy. The problem lay in the fact that the owner had sensed the self same thing. He appeared out of nowhere in his belly-filled denim shirt and cowboy hat and – before I could make Ethel an offer she wouldn't refuse – he grabbed the girl by the arm and dragged her into the cloakroom. She was then replaced by a bonier and much older redhead with a face like a snake: the cloakroom attendant. She flashed me a gruesome grin and pushed another Mojito in front of me.

"We don't drink with the guests, this isn't a brothel! We're here to work!" the serpent hissed.

I kicked myself for not getting Ethel's number before she was so rudely removed. It was too late now. The owner was standing sentinel on the cloakroom and guarding chubby Ethel like a German Shepherd.

It was way past eleven and I was still sitting all on my little own at the bar. I stared at the bikini beauty contest and if my cocktail glass ever emptied, the wrinkled cloakroom woman had already mixed the next one without me even asking. Then the evening reached its crashing crescendo and the gay guy called the Strap-On Tits to the stage as "Best Newcomers".

Micky (Tit name: "Bloody Mary") wasn't there. He was laid up in a private clinic in a posh part of the city, taking a well-earned rest from months of intense cocaine abuse. And so there were only three of them, but that still didn't stop them banging out a quick rendition of Rasputin à la Pistols in sequined flairs, bouncing false breasts, silver wigs and shovel-loads of make-up. Of course, it was all done to playback as the bass player stepped in to mime for Bloody Mary, but no one in the crowd seemed to notice anything out of place.

Now this would be a great time to surprise this happy-clappy, jiggy-jivey crowd with a bucket of goat guts, I thought. I was suddenly taken back to the good old days and tireless nights when the Adulterate Beasts set their gear up in suburban pubs and played with no attention to taste of any sort.

I was drunk. And, as generally happens at such times, my drunken heart became a lone love marksman. I cast an eye over the dance floor where a gaggle of celebs, all out of their heads, shook their funky stuff and felt each other's bits. I was looking for love in the crowd; the one, the meaning of life. I wanted to get Lena out of my head for good. Because she was the reason my soul was as empty and dark as a deserted school gym in the dead of night...

The harder you look, the more desperate you get and the further the bouncing beach ball of love rolls under a prickly bush. I threw a quick Piña Colada down and made a beeline for the gents. The Strap-On Tits were giving it some Bahama Mama on the stage. They were so stoned by this stage that they mostly forgot to mouth the words and didn't seem the least bit interested in the rousing reception they were getting. Folks congaed around like they were at a winter wedding in the sticks.

The bogs were all done out in black wood. Everything. The hand basin, the mirror frames, the toilet door and even the bloody bowl. I propped myself in front of the tiger-head urinal. The only way a fella could relieve himself was to push his dick into its open jaws. I got it out, aimed it straight and felt mildly

horrified as I let go of the flow. The stream of white piss shot right down the big cat's throat. My prick trembled in my hand. I wasn't every day that I got to pop my knob into a tiger's gob.

I was still standing in position and shaking the stubborn drops off with drunken dedication when someone tapped me on the shoulder. It made me jump because I couldn't recall hearing anyone come in after me.

I looked half back over my shoulder and caught sight of a bloke with big boobs and a beard dressed in a bright blue two-piece. His chest was a mass of hair.

"A hermaphrodite. Fuck me, it's a genuine hermaphrodite! This is some party! Or am I just hallucinating? I shouldn't have any more to drink!" I whispered to myself but loud enough to hear.

"Do you want happiness?" the bearded wonder asked quietly.

"Oral sex or coke?"

The two-piece hero said nothing.

"Dear Freddie Mercury, the truth is that I'm really not in the mood at the minute."

"Do you want happiness?" he repeated.

"You really are very kind and all that, but I'm dead broke, I haven't got a pissin' penny. I'm suffering temporary but serious financial problems and even my publisher's toughened up, mate, really."

"It doesn't cost money," he said. "The reason I live is so that I might show everyone once in their life where their happiness abides. I'm a happiness demon, you see. Everyone has a chance and now it's your turn."

"And if my happiness ain't at in, darlin'? Then what? Then are we gonna stand and serenade until it comes home again?" I snorted as I laughed at my own joke.

But the demon didn't laugh with me. He stood in silence.

I pulled my flies up and turned around. I was struck by the thought that perhaps the bluebird of happiness really did exist after all. Now I had the bluebeard of happiness standing staring right at me in a black African bog.

"If you don't want happiness then I won't force you. I'm happy to give you the address and I'll even accompany you there if you so wish."

"That'll be quite enough of that, bunny boy, the show's over, sling your hook! And whatever it is, don't smoke any more of it, you hear?" I barked and turned back to wash my hands.

"If that's how you want it. But I still have to tell you the address. It's the rules. Cover your ears if you don't want to hear!" he said and then he really did give me that address.

And with that the love demon turned on his heels and strolled out of the loos. And boy, did he know how to shake his derriere. That was probably just as hairy as his chest and his chin.

The very idea made me shudder. Warm water poured over my hands. I felt disturbed by a sudden thought: what if the demon was telling the truth? What if my damned cynicism was ruining everything again? What if I was being presented with my big break in life and I risked passing up the bouncing beach ball of love for the sake a few wisecracks?

I threw the door open and hurried after the hermaphrodite. The Strap-On Tits were playing Daddy Cool. I caught up with the demon by the cloakroom. Ethel was just helping him on with his mink stole. The cowboy-hatted owner shot me a warning stare and the medic watched with tears in her eyes as I left the disco with the big breasted, bearded diva.

The hermaphrodite's red Volvo was parked around on Ó Street. We got in and he pushed Frank Zappa's Sheik Yerbouti CD into the player. Talking was out of the question because the music began to pulse out of the speakers at top volume. *Hey there people I'm Bobby Brown, they say I'm the cutest boy in town, my car is fast my teeth is shiny, I tell all the girls they can kiss my heiney.* We drove through a raging wind storm and could hardly see a thing for the swirling clouds of dust. The bearded bloke didn't take a single wrong turn and knew exactly what he was doing and where he was going. He'd most likely have found his way with his eyes closed. It took us about an hour and a half or at least that was my best estimate in my inebriated state. It could just have easily been ten minutes or three hours.

Suburbs. Stark, grey tower blocks everywhere you looked. Proletarian paradise. We got out and shielded our eyes from the stinging wind. It had started to rain now, too, and we got soaked to the skin in seconds. Ten-storey block, the umpteenth floor. We left two big puddles behind in the lift. The demon stopped in front of a red door and pressed the buzzer. My throat dried up. I was on the wrong side of

nervous. I wanted to make a dash back for the lift but he grabbed my jacket sleeve.

The door opened.

Standing in the doorway was a girl in her thirties with curly, golden brown hair and a slight squint. Her body was draped in a see-through, red negligee. She was ever so slightly fleshy but not what you would call fat or heavy. And she looked less like a human and much more like an android: her movements appeared mechanical and her eyes stared forwards into empty space.

“She’s asleep,” the demon explained. “She’s fast asleep and she won’t remember a thing tomorrow.”

“I don’t bloody believe it, man! I’m overcome! She’s the most beautiful bird I’ve ever seen!” I raved.

“Her face is just like Bridgette Bardot. No. More like Teri Tordai. But there’s a touch of Marylyn in there, too, somewhere. Perhaps the best fit would be Paprika Steen. None of the girls on Blue Hustler even come close, and I...”

“You’ve met before,” the demon informed me.

“Never!” I announced.

“Twice in fact.”

“I think I’d remember.”

“She sat two rows in front of you in the cinema several years ago. You went to watch *Wild at Heart* with a Chinese girl who, for your information, moved on to Firenze where she works as a hooker. And the second time you met was on the day of your divorce. She walked past you in Király Street. You turned around. You looked at her arse. You weren’t to know then that she was your happiness. But now you do. She’s the one. No one else. Ask her anything you like.”

“What’s your bust size?”

“Ninety-two,” the girl replied in an emotionless tone.

“Waist?”

“Sixty-six.”

“Hips?”

“Eighty-nine.”

“Can you cook?”

“Tripe and onions, steak, goose and lentils, salmon fillet with all the trimmings, oyster soup, lamb stroganoff... They’re my specialities.”

“Fantastic! Favourite authors?”

“Swift, Rabelais, Chandler, Hašek, Bulgakov, Bret Easton Ellis, Bukowski and I could go on. I’m pretty open when it comes to my reading matter.”

“And would it upset you if a bloke lay reading in the bath all day?”

“Of course not. I adore guys who love reading. I like to take them a glass of wine into the bathroom. I always say that you shouldn’t disturb a man if he’s enjoying himself.”

“And how do we stand on temper tantrums?”

“I’m not even vaguely temperamental. My man is my idol and I’d never want to rob him of his freedom. I don’t want to own a man, just give him all my love and make him happy. I’m pretty old school on matters of the heart. My gran’s my role model.”

I couldn’t believe my ears... or my eyes. I fired at least another twenty questions at the girl standing in the doorway of the tower-block flat and her responses were all just as perfect as her.

“She really is my happiness,” I eventually established, and shook the hairy demon by the hand.

And then I lost my mind in less than a second. I really don’t know what came over me. I started to shake, I shivered with fright, fat drops of sweat sped down my forehead, I went red, one eye began to twitch and my heart beat so hard that it nearly burst out of my chest. I span around on the spot and the demon tried to catch me but I was far too fast. I was already running down the unlit stairs. I took them three at a time and flew several metres on the turns. I burst out of the building and didn’t stop but just kept on running in the rain. I ran all through the night, I ran down dimly lit streets and across shadowy squares, I ran through the storm, I ran through the city, I ran through my life, I ran through it all. I didn’t matter where, I just had to run and run and run away from my perfect woman.

I woke wrapped tight in a soaked sheet in my bed in the flat on Király Street. It was well into the afternoon and my pillow was so wet I could have wrung it out into a bucket. I remembered nothing of

the previous night at first. Complete and utter blackout. The inside of my brain was packed with perfect darkness like a full Hoover bag. Then the pictures began to reappear in slow succession. The chubby medic was the first to pop up, then the Strap-On Tits, the bearded trannie, the female ideal standing in the doorway and finally the marathon run that I thought would never end.

That bastard coward of a heart of mine had ruined my life again, I thought. I was only a hair's breadth away from taking my happiness by the hand and I had fucked it up. I slammed my alarm clock on the floor in fury. Springs and screws and anonymous metal bits flew off in all directions. I put my head in my hands and sobbed like a tinker who'd had his last horse stolen at the fair. I stayed in bed for days after that as the tears just kept on coming. I remembered every word, every sound, every colour, every scent; the only thing I couldn't recall was the sodding address! Suburban tower-block lift, red door. That was the lot. I stopped crying some time later because my face simply ran out of saline. So I sat on the side of the bed, bodged my clock back together and concentrated with all my mental might but I just couldn't get the address back. Not the number, not the street, not the district, not nothing!

But that was all years ago.

Since then, Bloody Mary has overdosed in a village hall toilet.

Since then, the gay producer fella has bought a house in Mallorca and throws wild parties populated by underage boys.

Since then, Ethel has left uni to become the club owner's kept woman. She sits in a bedsit all day long awaiting the return of her greasy lover and talks to her pet budgie.

Since then, the happiness demon has shown millions of people their one true love.

Since then, Boney M's front man, Bobby Farrell, has died in a Saint Petersburg hotel room of an unexpected heart attack.

Since then, the burnt-out redhead cloakroom woman has married her man and set herself up as a palmist on the main stretch through town.

Since then, the world press has been full of stories of a young Indian girl by the name of Twinkle Dwivedi who cries tears of blood and has left medical experts scratching their heads

And... the Strap-On Tits have since split up: one's an electrician, the second's a wealthy pimp and the third surviving member shone for a time as the country arm wrestling champion but then took his place as the resident alcoholic in the local pub.

I spent weeks skulking around the cinema and walking up and down Király Street in the faint hope that I'd bump into my happiness again. Other times, I sat staring out into nothingness at Szimpla; drinking mulled wine, eating bread dripping. Or I gaped for hours at colourful guppies in the seventy-litre aquarium in the window of "Pets 4 U" on the corner of Izabella Street. Or I slowly stirred my double espresso in Eden. Or I had bored, routine sex in an unfamiliar bed. Or I talked to my mum on the phone.

But whatever I did, all I could think was: where does happiness live?

The third of November was a Monday. I called my publisher.

Gizi picked up.

I told her I was looking for Mor.

"Hiyah. Hang on a sec, I'll have a look."

A couple of minutes of silence and then Gizi came back with the sad news that she'd just remembered that Mor had gone off to some book conference in Kenya and wouldn't be back for weeks. It might even be months.

"Perhaps even years, Gizi?"

"Perhaps even years. But he said to tell you that the only way to write is to write. Ciao for now!" and she hung up.

Translated by Ralph Berkin