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A Blinding Need for Each Other

by [Deborah Eisenberg](#)

The Door

by Magda Szabó, translated from the Hungarian by Len Rix, with an introduction by Ali Smith
New York Review Books, 262 pp., \$16.95 (paper)



Bodo Gabor
Magda Szabó, Budapest, circa 2003

Magda Szabó, who died in 2007 at the age of ninety, was acclaimed and widely read in her native Hungary. She wrote in many forms—poetry, novels, plays, memoir, essays, and screenplays—and her work has been translated into many languages. Between 1949 and 1956 both she and her husband, the writer Tibor Szobotka, were prevented by the regime from publishing, and the award of an important prize to her was revoked on the same day it was bestowed. *The Door*, first published in 1987 in Hungarian, is unmistakably a work of fiction, with fiction's allusive and ambiguous purposes and effects, but it is narrated in the first person by a writer and composed—perhaps almost entirely—of frankly autobiographical recollections.

One has the uneasy sensation that, through the medium of her fictional narrator, Szabó herself is whispering fiercely into our ear, asking our understanding and assistance as she attempts to resolve a punishing anxiety—a sensation that is explosively intensified when, toward the end of the book, a central character addresses the previously unnamed writer as Magdushka. “Only my parents had ever called me that. No-one else.”

The Door opens with the description of a recurrent nightmare, repeated in exact detail, in which the narrator expresses to herself her helplessness in the face of the death of someone named Emerence, and her anguish over what she believes to be her own—inadvertent—culpability. The dream elements are familiar, the narrator's voice is pitiless—correct, astringent, brisk, and intimate—and the reader is likely to experience a faint physical echo of the condition one is in when one wakes from such a horror.

The story that leads up to the dream takes up the rest of the book, and its premise could hardly seem less suited to a dream's reverberant overtones and equivocations: the narrator is a writer whose career has been politically frozen, as she puts it, but is now picking up again, and “it had become clear that if someone didn't take over the housekeeping there would be little chance of my publishing the work I'd produced in my years of silence, or finding a voice for anything new I might have to say.” An acquaintance highly recommends Emerence, a woman from the neighborhood who is old but very strong and remarkably skillful:

Emerence had been rather brusque when asked to call round for a chat, so I tracked her down in the courtyard of the villa where she was caretaker. It was close by—so close I could see her flat from our balcony. She was washing a mountain of laundry with the most antiquated equipment, boiling bedlinen in a cauldron over a naked flame, in the already agonizing heat, and lifting the sheets out with an immense wooden spoon. Fire glowed all around her.... She radiated strength like a Valkyrie.... She had agreed to call, and so now we were standing here, in the garden....

Naturally, the writer offers this titanic representation of housework a job. Emerence hears her out, and then, instead of giving an answer on the spot as expected, astonishes the writer by announcing that she'll ask around to ascertain whether the writer and her husband are people she's consent to clean for, and she'll be deliberate. And then, when she's ready, she says, she'll return with her answer, whether it's a yes or a no.

It won't do to say much more about the plot of the book, first because the rather white-knuckled experience of reading depends on Szabó's finely calibrated parceling out of the information, and second (though this might be something that could be said of most good fiction) because the plot

although it conveys the essence of the book, is a conveyance only, to which the essence – in this case a penumbra of reflections, questions, and sensations – clings.

But without doing damage to anybody, it's possible to describe a few things about the relationship, begun there in the garden between the narrator and Emerence, that endures for the entire twenty years and is so intense that the account of it crowds out almost everything else we might expect to learn about the narrator's life. Information about her marriage, for example, or the vicissitudes of her personal and political history, or her husband, or relevant national traumas, or the elevated social circles to which she and her husband apparently belong, or films whose scripts she apparently writes, or her books, or her husband's dangerous chronic illness, or her own frequent illnesses, or an immensely important literary prize she receives, - all of which bear on the story in ways we are given to understand elliptically – this information is subordinate. Reading *The Door* is like being spun at varying velocities through a tube, beyond the translucent walls of which we can catch glimpses of the other characters involved in the drama, toward the gigantic, fascinating, and mysterious figure of Emerence.

The writer's account of Emerence reveals as much about herself as it does about her subject, and the terms of their relationship have been set, we eventually realize, long before that first meeting in the garden. Although they now live in Pest, both women are from villages in the same region and both have been tossed about on the hairpin turns of recent economic and historical events. Otherwise, the two appear to have little in common.

Emerence is from a background of peasants and craftsmen. She is barely literate, brilliant, implacably proud, terrifyingly astute, unremittingly hard-working, fastidious, scornful, bizarrely reserved, and passionate.

The writer is well educated, intelligent, cultivated, from an old and prominent family, a devout Christian, slightly self-important, and equipped to observe herself with a certain, though perhaps insufficient, degree of irony. She is also progressive and idealistic, despite the hardships she has suffered at the hands of Hungary's postwar Communist regime – the same regime from which Emerence, poor and from peasant stock have stood to gain greatly, if only she had deigned to accept training or an education.

The social determinants of behavior and mental experience could hardly be more graphically expressed than they are by these two women and their relationship, and there is plenty of room between them for paradoxical conflicts and misunderstandings so severe as to border on both the slapstick and the abusive. The ostensibly introspective, analytical narrator demonstrates plenty of automatic and unexamined class prejudices of the sort that she would probably be able to identify in others. About an episode during which she has been ill with worry and the previously aloof Emerence has taken care of her with complete competence and has distracted her from her troubles, the writer tells us:

It has always been important to me to lead a full emotional life: to have those who are clearly connected to me show pleasure when we meet. Emerence's perfect indifference the next morning didn't exactly wound my pride, but was a disappointment after that surreal night, when she had stayed by my side and revealed her childhood self to me... I truly believed that at last something

has been resolved between us, that Emerence would no longer be a stranger but a friend: my friend.

The writer responds to this affront to her “full emotional life” – as she interprets Emerence’s failure to “show pleasure” – by quickly establishing Emerence in her imagination as the cliché of a brutish peasant – greedy, wily, ignorant viciously anti-Semitic, entirely self-interested, and evasive. Emerence’s account on the preceding night of her childhood, which had transfixed the narrator (and the reader), is converted by the narrator’s resentment into “the sort of tale she must have heard from a fairground entertainer or found in a trashy novel in her grandfather’s attic.” This, when we remember the writer’s description of Emerence with the fire glowing all around her.

Emerence, for her part, loses few opportunities when stung to goad the writer – to point out that obtuseness and fatuous high sentiments are hazards of privilege. “People who don’t know you wouldn’t believe how clueless you are,” she says. And her opinions are maddeningly resistant to any argument:

Above all, she hated the idle, lying gentry. Priests were liars; doctors ignorant and money-grabbing; lawyers didn’t care who they represented, victim or criminal; engineers calculated in advance how to keep back a pile of bricks for their own houses; and the huge plants, factories and institutes of learning were all filled with crooks.

By now, we were really shouting at each other; myself, like Robespierre, representing the power of the people – although it was in those years that they were doing their best to drive me to the point where I could no longer work, and send me to the ghetto I’d been assigned to with my husband (who had himself been so harassed and humiliated he couldn’t work at all)...

In Emerence’s view,

whoever happened to be in power gave the orders, and anyone giving orders, whoever it was, whenever, and whatever the order, did it in the name of some incomprehensible gobbledygook. Whoever was on top, however promising, and whether he was on top in her own interests or not, they were all the same, all oppressors. In Emerence’s world, there were two kinds of people, those who swept and those who didn’t....

On hearing the radio or television blaring out of people’s windows, if the tone was positive she immediately contradicted it, if negative, she praised it. She had no idea where any particular place might be found in the world, but she related news to me about various governments with impeccable pronunciation, reeling off the names of statesmen, Hungarian and foreign, and always with the comment: “They want peace. Do you believe that? I don’t, because who will then buy the guns, and what pretext will they have for hanging and looting? And anyway, if there’s never been world peace before, why should it happen now?”

The narrator’s initial summation of Emerence, tidy but hastily assembled, is rapidly dismantled, and, although it is replaced by others increasingly accurate, it is very difficult to get a consistent

picture of Emerence into focus – she is too complex, too hidden, and on too large a scale to easily apprehended. At moments, in fact, she seems to have attributes that are generally associated with divine presences; not only does fire glow around her as she handles a mountain of laundry with a gigantic wooden spoon, but she also demonstrates a shocking capacity for violence, a limitless compassion, directed indiscriminately toward those in need, and uncanny ability to communicate with animals.

A small community of neighborhood characters figures in the narrative, sometimes rather like the chorus in a Greek classical play, but in fact the book's premier character – aside from Emerence and the narrator – is a foundling dog that has been adopted by the narrator and her husband but whose heart belongs to Emerence. How exactly are we to understand this dog? The dog is male, but Emerence, with no hesitation, names him Viola. We are told that Viola is remarkably intelligent, but that's quite an understatement about a creature that acts almost as a messenger between the rational world and the world of subtle and precise comprehension unavailable to humans.

Clearly, despite Emerence's idiosyncratic but refined sense of responsibility and her peerless housekeeping talents, the often quarrelsome and abrasive relationship between her and the narrator could be discontinued at any time – and in fact it's occasionally interrupted by a silence on one side or the other.

But it's not an inclination to quarrel that ties the two women together, in any case; what does is clearly a recognition of some sort – one that resides in the deepest part of the self. The conflict between them tend to arise from a temporary disequilibrium of need, or from a reproach, usually unvoiced, concerning devotion inadequately reciprocated. It's inevitable that each sometimes suffers from bruised feelings and that the two often misunderstand each other, because the need for each other for the other is blinding.

The narrator's tone of controlled exasperation – the feeling that within the pages there's an insufficient margin of comfort – is elegantly expressed in the wonderful translation by Len Rix. It's as though the story must at all costs be dragged from the darkness, and at times the brittle precision and airlessness create an atmosphere that's feverishly hallucinatory and even horribly comic. At one point the dignity of an entire life is weighed against an imperious television crew honking the horn of the car that is to take the narrator to the studio in time to have her makeup done for the camera.

Sometimes baffling details lodge in one's brain like shrapnel until we receive an explanation for them. Why, for example, does Emerence give a male dog the name of Viola? And once, many years after Emerence's death, when her nephew and the writer

met beside her grave and talked about how impossible it was to change her view of the world, the young man spread his hands in the gesture of helplessness...I didn't tell him about the lawyer's son. I sensed that the cause of her rage somehow lay with him.

What lawyer's son? We haven't heard a word of such a person until this conversation. Eventually, we learn the answer to questions like this, many pages after they arise.

"We are all traitors," the narrator laments. Her husband's response is just as plausible: "Not traitors," he says. "Just too many things to do." *The Door* is like an enigmatic object with a seemingly simple shape that calls up a wealth of associations. Although it vividly depicts the cultural construction of attitudes, it concerns itself primarily with the mysteries of human connections beneath and beyond that – the mortal struggle to breach the gulf between oneself and another, the hundreds of rationales with which we console ourselves for failing truly to do so, and the heavy costs of love.

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