

Be Grateful: A Short Story by Éva Veronika Kalapos
Translated from the Hungarian by Timea Balogh



Today we're delighted to share the frank and moving short story *Be Grateful* by Éva Veronika Kalapos translated from the Hungarian by Timea Balogh. The translator included a note on her process which gives some background on Kalapos' work and speaks about the narrator's "complicated relationship with her own body in a refreshing and refined way. She turns an often-sensationalized phenomenon into a touching account of a woman's relationship to her body's mysteries in just a few short pages." This is a compelling read about body-image with profound observations about the thin public's view of fatness, like how "people look at fat people as if their fat were a costume they can step out of if they want to badly enough, as if their real body lies somewhere underneath." Happy National Translation Month and happy reading!

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Be Grateful

At first, we thought I'd wet the bed. We were swimming in it. Then the pain started, and I knew.

Bernard didn't want to believe it. He wasn't willing to get ready. He just sat on the edge of the bed, sulking, saying how I'm not in my right mind, this just simply isn't possible. If I would've been able to talk, I would've defended myself, but I just laid in bed in the fetal position.

I've been fat for as long as I can remember. Not thick, bulky, or curvy, but fat. A big fat fatty. My body spills in every direction. My breasts aren't visible. I don't know how big they'd be if my fat didn't envelop them. I don't know what shape my face is. This is my face, I don't know a different one.

Until that morning, I'd never questioned why Bernard was with me. We started dating our freshman year of high school and have been together thirteen years, so it's second nature now. Of course, I always got surprised looks, but I never listened for what people whispered behind our backs. I considered Bernard my consolation prize. He's what I get in exchange for this disgusting body. That somebody—God knows why—loves it.

There are countless ways people tried to slim me down. My parents, my sister, even a personal trainer TV star. His eyes lit up when he saw me. He'd decided I was going to be his success story, but despite doing everything he told me to, despite sweating, fasting, the fat wouldn't budge. Not a centimeter.

Of course not. Because we are part of a whole. People look at fat people as if their fat were a costume they can step out of if they want to badly enough, as if their real body lies

somewhere underneath. I'm sure this works for some people, lots of people lose the weight. And they almost always gain it back.

Fat is armor. I don't want to give it up.

Mom screeched into the phone so loud that I threw it at Bernard's back, who was still sitting on the edge of the bed. He picked up the phone and robotically started calming her down while rocking himself back and forth. As if he were in as much pain as I was.

He only called the ambulance once I started screaming. The paramedic barked at us, why did we screw around this long, if something goes wrong, it'll be our fault. Bernard blanched. I couldn't think straight anymore.

I couldn't get an epidural, it was too late. And they couldn't have pushed the needle into my spine anyway. They didn't say that, but I saw it in their eyes. The doctor barely said a word to me. I don't know if he was mad because I'd come in so late, or because he was afraid I'd break the hospital bed. But he let Bernard in the room anyway.

Mom took us home two days later, because Bernard couldn't get a car. My sister visited us. She came at me the moment she stepped inside. How come we didn't notice, people notice these kinds of things. I didn't get sick? I didn't have cravings? How come I didn't pay more attention? She didn't believe these kinds of stories, even when she read about them on the internet. *A person notices, even if they don't have physical symptoms, which is ridiculous anyway. That is, that they wouldn't have any, because everyone does.*

She didn't leave until that evening with Mom, who wouldn't step out of the nursery all day. She only called me in when it was time to breastfeed. Until then she sat in the armchair with my baby in her arms.

We're alone now. I should sleep, but I'm hunkering in the bed with my knees to my chest. The digital clock has gone crazy, it shows 19 months and 25 days. The red letters vibrate in the dark. I'm scared to death.

Be grateful that you have a child. That's what escaped my sister's mouth this afternoon while Bernard was down at the store and Mom was humming some song in the nursery. It sounded familiar, but I can't recall the words. *Be grateful*, my sister said, and she pierced her lips together.

She's right. I never menstruate. That's another reason we didn't use protection. Bernard once brought up adoption during Christmas lunch. No one said anything, I chewed on the meat, which Mom never tenderizes enough, always leaving it too thick.

The cot stands in the corner of the room. My sister and her husband brought over their old one. I can see the small, dark, still package inside it. When they handed the baby to me, I didn't know what to do. I have little milk. Mom says if that doesn't change, we'll have to use formula. Cot. Milk. Formula. The red numbers shake violently. We wanted to buy a normal clock in place of the digital one, but we always put it off.

I don't know what I have to do with any of this. I didn't prepare for it. I wasn't expecting it. And yet here it is. I don't have time to think about whether I wanted this or not, whether I'm cut out for this or not. My gigantic body did this to me. It hid this child for nine months, and then pulled the rabbit out of the hat. If I were to say I don't want this, take the child back, I'm not cut out for this, I don't want to be responsible for another body, what would happen? *Be grateful. Do you have a heart?*

As a girl, I always dreamt about giving birth to myself. To my true, skinny self, the one everyone wants to meet. But I did not dream about giving birth to someone else.

Bernard searched for my eyes all day. When I squeezed his hand in the delivery room, his anger dissipated. Since then he's just been happy. He transformed his feelings, like he always does, like I've never been able to. As of this morning he's a dad, with a lot to lose. And maybe I do too.

The child starts to squirm, takes a deep breath, and will start crying any minute. The bed creaks under Bernard as he sits up. The soft, warm smell of his sweat drifts towards me. The light streaming in from the street draws his silhouette as he watches me in the pitch-black darkness.

Translator's Note:

What I most appreciate about *Be Grateful* is not only how frankly the narrator speaks about her body-image, but also the profound observations she makes about the general, thin public's view of fatness, like how "people look at fat people as if their fat were a costume they can step out of if they want to badly enough, as if their real body lies somewhere underneath." While the body-positivity movement is a worthy and necessary movement, this story serves as a reminder of how far we have to go as a society and as individuals on how we treat fatness. I feel that these messages translate seamlessly into an American context. I also have a soft-spot for stories that consciously do not portray motherhood in a saintly light and that don't perpetuate the myth that all women want to be mothers.

Hungarian does not have gendered pronouns, and so when I come across undefined pronouns in work I'm translating, I typically ask the writer to tell me the intended gender of a pronoun. I purposely did not ask Kalapos about the gender of the child in "Be Grateful," because I am certain it is not an accident that the narrator never reveals the gender of her child. Maintaining the lack of gender specification present in the original makes it clear to the English reader on a language-level the lack of attachment the mother of the story has towards her child.

The lines "As a girl, I always dreamt about giving birth to myself. To my true, skinny self, the one everyone wants to meet," struck me so deeply when I first heard Kalapos read this piece at a reading in Budapest this past spring. Kalapos expresses her narrator's complicated relationship with her own body in such refreshing and refined ways to me. She turns an often-sensationalized phenomenon into a touching account of a woman's relationship to her body's mysteries in just a few short pages. Maintaining this tenderness and precision were my primary goals in my translation.

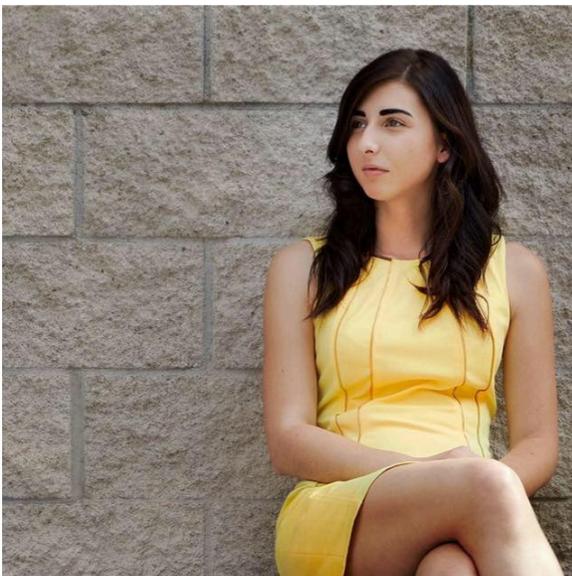
— *Timea Balogh, translator*

About the author



Éva Veronika Kalapos was born in 1983 in Nyíregyháza, Hungary. She began her career in 2013 with her young adult novel series *D.A.C.* and later, *Massza*, and *Muszáj?!*. She has published her short stories for adult readers in nationally recognized journals like *Élet és Irodalom*, *Kortárs*, *Hévíz*, and *Tempevölgy*. She is currently working on her first novel for adults, which will appear in spring 2018. She is a journalist for *ELLE* magazine and the Hungarian translator for Kate Welshman, Nova Weetman, Julie Fison, and Holly Bourne. She received a Mórícz Zsigmond Literary Grant in 2014.

About the translator



Timea Balogh is a Hungarian American writer and translator with an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. A 2017 American Literary Translators Association Travel Fellow, her translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Offing*, *Two Lines Journal*, *Arkansas International*, *The Short Story Project*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Dream Pop Press*, *The Enchanting Verses Literary Review*, and the *Wretched Strangers* anthology by Boiler House Press. Her debut original short story was published in *Juked* magazine and was nominated for a PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers. She divides her time between Budapest and Las Vegas. You can tweet her at @TimeaRozalia.