STORIES

OF

THE SEVEN-HEADED

SEWING MACHINE

by

KATALIN LADIK

Translation by
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Katalin Ladik was born in 1942 in Ujvidek, Hungary (now Novi Sad, Yugoslavia). Her formal education was bilingual, in Hungarian and Serbian. She received her degree from the College of Performing Arts in Novi Sad, majoring in Theatre and Performance, minoring in Economics. She has been steadily performing since 1963.

Presently, Ms. Ladik is a member of the Ujvideki Magyar Theatre in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. Her interests and performances have taken on a multi-media form. She is a visual poet, mail artist, and she works and composes music for vocal performances for live and radio audiences, her works have been both published and recorded.

In 1980, Ms. Ladik was one of the participants at the 12th International Sound Poetry Festival in New York City and in Baltimore.

“Come with me to the mythology that is about me and is therefore risky,” writes Ladik. Taking risks, Katalin Ladik clearly chooses to identify and protest the discord between Nature and man, which causes the oppression and the sorrowful fate of woman. She reaches for the ancient and emerges in the future. She paints by crossing lines of Dali, Fellini, and Judy Chicago. Her poems are verbal grimaces, wearing many masks and telling no lies. Her words linger and are part of the imaginary, illogically logical, intuitive, reflecting on the rift and absurdities of life and the world as she knows it since 1942. Her words and voice are more than a reflection of a totalitarian state and of a fractured humanity. For this reader she is the oracle of a contemporary creation story, classically endowed with mythology for a new century.

-Emoke B’Racz
ON KATALIN LAKIK & THE SEVEN-HEADED SEWING MACHINE

"She is fifty years ahead of us!"
-David Sovges
(University of Budapest)

"(Emoke B’Racz) is a poet translating a poet."
"Katalin Ladik’s poetry is incomprehensible only in the way that scrupulous veracity is incomprehensible to liars. Her poems belong to a kind of pop art. She plays about with words like a child."
"As a performance poet, Ladik bewitches her audience, working in a shamanistic tradition, and probably would have been burnt in the Middle Ages."

"Ladik’s outburst of passionate maternal love is almost unrivaled in poetry. Her work is deeply rooted both in tradition and in the European classics of Arany, Petofi, Bartok, and Kodaly."
-Lorant Bencze
(Literary Critic, Translator
Budapest, Hungary)

"These are poems of the Fertile Mythos, the same one that turned me out. I wish I’d written these poems! Ladik’s magical reach is visceral-deep and filled to the rim(s) with music."
-Andrei Codrescu
(Poet, Translator, Editor)

"In surrealist terms, this, is myth as haiku. Never in the West has so much been said with so little!"
-Thomas Rain Crowe
(Poet, Publisher)

"This is not the work of some snuddering twit or word-biffing pretender, this is oeuvre-stuff of a woman of the first water!"
-Natalie Scull
(Translator, Musician)
STORIES
OF
THE SEVEN-HEADED
SEWING MACHINE
SEVEN-HEADED SEWING MACHINE

He himself is a swimmer in the sky,
he is without joy,
in his mouth the wise, strident snake.
The old woman crouched, her knees throbbing. As they throbbed, so time expanded. She let her hair down; the hairpins sparked and dropped into the black hole. It inhaled them as it expanded-constricted in its joy. When the hole filled up, she dropped them between her legs, ohmygod, cobwebbed, stewing-seething dark huddle, ready for birth. This is how the World came about.
DISPERsal OF HUMAnITY

The beautiful fat hen came down from the mountain every
day and laid her eggs. The ground was slippery, so humanity
multiplied. The elders were wicked in the evening, and the
young ones became evil by morning. One night the water jugs
overflowed and the women breathlessly poured the muddy
water into themselves. The hen saw this and sent fire upon
them. There it hangs on a red thread, a glowing eggshell in the
sky, and the women are snapping after it as they scream. JÍ! JÍ!
HOW THE MUD CAME TO BE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE LAKE

Sunday morning they cut the pie crust. There was an awful lot of steam and filling that oozed out, so they sat on the hard crust at the bottom of the pie and sailed home. Surely, the pie crust softened in the water, but they made their berth on the other side of the lake. Hence the mud at the bottom of the lake.
HOW THE LOCUST STOLE THE MOON

The girl was sitting on the chimney guarding the Moon. She tore a hole in her stocking and there was light. She believed that Dawn was breaking and closed her eyes. This is the moment the locust was waiting for. The locust opened the drawer in the girl’s thigh and smelled a fresh, white lightbulb.

THE LOCUST STORY ABOUT IMMORTALITY

The clothesline is up high in the mountains. It stands shining in the cold wind and sings of immortality. The flying birds are black boxes with neither eyes nor ears to shout: “Be Still!” The doors open with a creak, and the lungs shriek. The birds rise above the clothesline, their beaks cutting the sky. From the sky, hissing wasps burrow into bird lungs.
THE LOCUST STORY ABOUT LOVE

There are four green buttons on her chest. When she touches the first one, the light grows dark in the windows, the people desperately gouge their eyesockets. If she touches the second button, oranges fall from the sky, christmas trees roll chiming, tof-tof. The third button’s place is empty. The fourth button is just being sewn on. With much hope she forces the screwdriver into her own lungs.

THE SINGING LOCUST

In the morning, the girl ate rose-colored pudding until she turned into a rotund locust. Then she combed her hair out, began strumming it, and sang bawdy songs.
THE SUN, THE SNAKE
AND THE
BRANDING MAN

He cuts down the tree that reaches the sky.
Scorches his wife till she is ashen, till she is roasted.
Cools his testicles on water, on iron. His woman
is a shining well; his children are cold streams.
TWO VIOLINS AND THE OWNER

I myself shall remain dumb, and always, and forever. I will be calling to my water moccasin.
THE MAN WHO NAILED
THE SHIRT ON HIS HEAD

I shall crack the head of this shirt, and I will only let you in, if
you give me half of all you get in there.

THE BOSE-COLORED RIRD

Who could imagine! Here comes Everyman. His hands and legs
are bose-colored. He lacks a face. There are many pockets in
place of his face. In them are rules and documents. His lighter
is constantly working. Zuz! It sends a spark, scorching those
who stare at his face. This is how he searches for the essence.
In himself. Outside of himself.
THAT BREEN GIRD

The finger of truth hangs from the ceiling. It throws light on us. Sometimes it goes out. Or we break it. Then we grab the scented toothbrush and chop off its head. Whose head but those who caught the breen gird and hold it under our noses and stink up the air like we did not have something more pressing to do then waste our ticking consciousness on this stinking hen.

THE RED MACHINE

All could have a machine and leggings, but a blooming machine on the lapel of the coat belongs to a man who has eyes in the back of his head, closes them when one signals green and the other red. Now, how can one know which one is true?
Uncle Mihaly’s grandson comes with a loud bang-bang. He brought with him this rolling and chiming cooler-heater box, in it the weathervane so he knows which way the wind blows. This is how he guards his bravery and virtue. On his way here, he aimed to sell shiny, lacquered flyswatters, but not even the dogs wanted his wares. Angered, he catches all the crickets so they don’t jump around, so they don’t serenade in his ears. He locks them up in his frost-flowered box. “I’ll come back,” he shouts, “when the times get better in these parts!”
SEVEN LEAN YEARS

-Anybody here?
-One horse’s head and one-and-a-half men.

BLUE SOLDIER

Behind barbed wires the soldier lived. For seven years, no sunlight fell upon him, whiteness like sheets. One night, his thighs were pushed through the fence. The dogs howled, jumping out of violins. The whiteness grew, broke down the fence, suffocated the dogs.
THE MAN WHO CAUGHT
BIRDS IN FLIGHT

The man lived in a barren landscape. The cold, easterly wind blew hard there. It went through his bones. But, by springtime his bones began to squeak and creak so he had to let the warm winds go. He opened the window of the house and the wind rushed to the river and rode the ribs of the icefloats! The man looked for bitter grass, made a fire on the shore and put his hands in the fire.
COLD DAYS

And the cold days came. The axes were thrown out of the house, but he wasn’t. The fence kept growing, growing, forced itself into the room, reached the bed, ripped the pillows. For three days, the wind howled so, then the planks broke, the geranium windows shattered, but he just stood, white and beautiful, alone.

WITCHSATURDAY

As the dog points into the looming darkness, the voice begins its journey from the barn. Weakly, fearfully it uncovered itself from under the leaf-padded pail. It wasn’t really a voice but a tremor, the tremor of the melon cut in half. The horrified melon was shaking its black seeds from the flesh, throwing itself against the side of the pail, once, twice, but the voice did not seem to ebb. The dogs nervously chewed the gatepost, jumped on the barbed wire. There they twitched until someone cut the clothesline. The shining shirts, t-shirts, fell to the dust screaming. That is the moment the magic stopped. One end of the clothesline was tied to the chimney, the other to the cow’s udder.
SEVEN COUNTRIES

There were many times when there was another country. And day after day this is how it went.

THE LITTLEST PRINCE

When the new neon lights were strung in our street, blinding, blue light flooded the area. I went out in front of our summer kitchen where we have lived for the past six years, and I saw how I lived and I ran away.
THREE WISHES

The horse jumped once, twice, and took to the air, robed in silvercloth, and that’s the truth.
-Where are you that I cannot see you?
-You talk, but I cannot see you.
-Windows, windows, open to the air.

He caught the handkerchief, like the first one. Herded the horse inside because his handkerchief will be posted tomorrow and he’d rather only lift his ass.
PEGASUS

The horse flew, did not walk. It ran so that it flew.
-There is nothing to eat if there is no soup?
-Do not beat the child because the cat got in.
The girls screamed. There was a lot of smoke in the kitchen.
She quickly removed her dress from her ear and like a butterfly already dressed, stood in the front gate, hand on her hips.
THE GRIFFIN

The griffin ate the barren cow’s meat, fluttered above the ship while fixing pots and pans.
-I want to paint my son’s room, but he just keeps falling like a thrown rock.

THE BROWN COW

poor woman: Fi, Fi, Fi.
poor man: Careful, woman, here comes the golden bull.
poor woman: Quickly, then, pull one hair out of my ear.
poor man: Woe is me, alas.
poor woman: The golden bull came to me;
the granite is breaking under me.
golden bull: I am strong when I graze in golden grass.

At that point they slaughtered the brown cow with the golden bull.
They are still alive, if they haven’t died.
THE SLY SWINEHERD

The Sun was returning home. Shook itself, tall, slender, and turned into a white-haired old woman. The swineherd wove the rope until he pulled the old woman between his legs. There are five legs here which equals eight in total. “Two pigs also have eight legs,” shouted the swineherd.

THE PORCUPINE

“Did you buy any, father?”
“Tought some, my son.”
If you bought some, did you buy a white rooster, a red rooster, a black rooster?
Spring came, they had to herd the swine.
“Who will sound the horn?”
“I will sound the horn but, father, you need to give me the horn.”
The porcupine sits on the roof and sounds the horn. Next he sits on the black rooster and so herds the swine.
When he reaches the forest he is lured into the woods and ties the rooster up.
In those times one year lasted three days.
THREE LITTLE PIGS

One, two, three houses run in the meadow. My father died. But still he can’t reach the houses with his arms. One. My father dies again. Two. One of the little pigs expands and the others hide inside her. I said to my father, “You have to die again, it will take less time.” Three. The pig stares into the night. Spring is coming.
HOW THE QUEEN LOST WEIGHT

Pale, she lay amongst the pillows. She was white, skinny like a thread. For hours she had to cavort amongst the pillows, amongst the wrinkles of the bedsheets, in the pillowcases before they could find her. Finally when they found her, they dropped scissors between her eyes, threaded her through the needle’s eye and put her up in the sewing box.
SCISSORPLAY

Mother, mother what time is it? As she said this they bathed her, anointed her with oils, plucked her hair, put her in the oven and pulled red thread through her tongue while they asked her if she wanted the thread short or long.

FIREPLAY

What’s the fire for? To heat water with. What’s the water for? To pluck the chicken. She is small yet, half green. The smallest snake will give her its tail.
TAG

Little onion, where did you come from? Lambs circle me. There is enough, there is some left.

NIGHTPLAY

Did you hoe? The right leg makes a move like a hoe. Watered it? Watered. If I go in? Then I will go out.
WHITE BIRD

The beautiful white bird rose from the bones, flew high, and this is what she sang:

My Mother killed me, my Father ate me,  
my little Sister, my Marie  
collected my bones,  
tied them up in a silk scarf,  
placed them at the foot of the elder tree,  
it sprung a shoot, here it is! Here!  
What a pretty bird I became!

This they heard and put a beautiful hat on.
**WICKED GIRL**

The titmouse ran in the house, closing the window.

From wire I weave hemp seed  
put on water and beans  
I shoe three mares  
I throw three bridles  
three mares, three girls.

Then I saw that the girl has two heads.

**ASH WEDNESDAY**

They took me to the white walls, lifting me towards them my  
legs kick the chimney but still higher they lift me, six girls mend  
my head,  
throw me into the water, pull me by the hair, and break my  
waist, go, catch a bird so at least we have a bird since we do not  
have children!
IGNITE, CANDLE!

Without light,
without hands,
without kindling,
without a mouth,
without a soul,
without bones,
come to my house
without a shadow.

CHICKEN CALL

Come water-well,
come golden trough,
come silver towel,
here chickie-chickie,
come knife.
Luck be with you!
MOON GIRL

Who sews without stitches
and cooks without steam rising
and whiter than the moon
is the long-necked girl
who pleasures herself on ice
and sparks fall from her soles
makes a dress from her own heat
this girl of the moon
saddled with silver tongue
looks into her head
and her moths are molten silver.
TALKING WASHTUB

If white is eaten, white is seen
if black is eaten, black is seen.
The earth that you are swaying on turns to lard,
earth that you stuff with, turns into a mirror,
those who look into it, turn human.
HIDE AND SEEK

Boiling water fills the pail
Kati Ladik, come-a-here
scissors chatter, short is the hair
only the roots show
not your bones
who lacks a crown
and nuts in the kiln
under her head, the shining mirror
found by the lover
finds drought in her fiancé’s arms!
MARGIT LADIK

Do not cut the hallow tree,
the decayed tree, Margit Ladik.
It won’t do for a rowboat, ever!
Are you my mother?
I surely am not your mother.
The sun gets up, the rock turns nine times.
Are you my mother?
I am not the one who beds in the house
who carries the stone around her neck
who resurrects lightning in her head,
this is not the woman who birthed you
only the bones were passed down
you are not the one who beds in the house
you only dandle in her boat.
FOUR BLACK HORSES FLY BEHIND ME

My black-eyed mother, ease your thirst
from this dark room.
Evening comes and I blanket you in fiery ashes,
your windows I wall up,
and I shall seat you in the false window.
The white dove flies without door or window.
I count my fingers seven times,
I beat my wings.
The warm winds blow on my back,
look back mother, what do you see?
Four black horses so starved
that I get the chills.
Cut your arm off, mother,
and place it in my mouth
so I have wings to fly with to you.
Eyes, mouth, nose, ears, where are you?
Here in the smouldering ashes is where we are.
White dove flies taking the door,
the window away, forever.
This is what I sang in my dark room.
ICEBIRD

Jik! Jik! Hu.
Kvrc. Kvrc.
Shoo!
SPRING WINDS SEND FORTH WATER

The embankment, from a distance, was in red, bloody threads in the landscape. A yellow dog just threw itself, falling, into the flaming haystack. The howling calls the brown carts to gather in the sky. The ice of the black lake cracks under the wheels.

BARREN COW

The woman stood on the doorstep and shook herself. Knife, fork fall from her hands. Clutching her breasts, she felt them on fire. Turned pale like the whitewashed barn. But it’s useless, already they were nursing hard. “Janos,” she shouted into the house, “give the children milk, I’m staying outside.”

THE BROWN COW’S SON

The cow said to the boy, “Wrench your horn,” and then returned to the tree. “Why don’t you leave the tree alone?” The tree shrank and ate. Immediately the handkerchief began to bleed. The cow breathed on him, made a cold well in his own body. Yes, she found her own son’s dead body. “My sweet son, if I hadn’t gotten here, you would never have woken up.”
NOW THE BLACK KING

Careful, don’t sit on me!
The driver of the cart looks who is talking, and sees that he was pricked so one drop of blood would come. Instantly, the driver of the cart turned into the king. He waited till it was said three times then as he stood up recognized his wife. Immediately, he embraced her and brought to the world a child with such golden hair that you could look at the Sun but not at the child. The woman waited a little bit till they fell asleep because she was so swollen she could burst. Jumped into a bath and two servants lifted her out and put her to bed. The two young men got whips, nailed and burned the woman. This is her fate so she’ll honor her mate.
THREE RAVENS BURN EACH OTHER WITH A BLUE FLAME

Awakened by the warmth from the embers. Brought water in his beak so that the dream would not steal from him. Remove it, my brother, otherwise I will die at this moment. Frees his fingers from a hair, gazes into the water, nothing. Gazes at the tree, nothing. Gazes into the rock, nothing. Gazes into the Sun where he spots the third raven. He wrote, “girl,” in the ashes with a big needle. Prick me so that only one drop of blood comes. The girl pricked him and fell in love with the raven whose eyes never remained dry. What a pity that you captured me. We could have burned each other with a blue flame.
ALL-KNOWING WINDMILL

What kind of young man are you that you come into this world with a mulberry tree?
The young man turned back and stood it between two rocks. Boiled its already slashed neck, like the forgotten squashes in the fields.
What’s in the colander, brother?
Well, it’s a windmill.
What kind of a windmill?
One without a roof.
He removed a stick from his ears and struck all four sides. This was the kind of windmill that never screamed when under a young man.
THE KING’S LITTLE WOMEN WHO TORE UP
THE SLIPPERS

The Devil was coming down from the mountain.  
Under him, there were three sewing machines.  
One was black as a lizard, the other was blonde as a fish,  
the third was red as the tunnel to Hades.  
They hardly ever brought lanterns with them.  
Suddenly the Devil noticed the king’s little women.  
He gave them slippers so they could  
dance to their hearts’ content.  
On this note the Sun came out.
GOLDEN EGG

The mirror is lodged in the mouth of the Queen. Whoever can steal this, go ahead, steal it. But push the window closed so that the dove stays inside.
GIRL WITH A GLASS EYE

Took off her dress, swam to the table, opened the drawer and the birds flew out and said:
“May your eyes turn to gold!”
When she arrived home, she put one in the babe’s mouth to suckle on.

ENCHANTED GIRL

“This is the bird I will marry!”
The bird is caught. The bird changed into a kneading trough. He broke the trough. The bird changed into a distaff. He broke the distaff. The bird changed into human. She made him a beautiful wife!
“Shake out your dress, too,” said the girl.
HEMP HARVESTING GIRL

The second girl says:
“If you married me, from (o)n(e) sh(ea)f (o)f h(e)mp I c(ou) ld b(a)k(e) s(o) m(u)ch br(ea)d th(a)t th(e)re w(ou)ld b(e) s(o)m(e) l(e)ft f(o)r m(e) t(oo).”

When the son of the emperor heard this, he too began to harvest hemp and sang while he worked. He could not do this too long.

He was whimpering so much that his mother could not sleep, neither could he.

“(o)nly d(o)n’t b(e)tr(a)y me, s(a)y y(ou) s(a)w (i)n (a) d(ea)m!”

The eyes of the emperor’s son bulged, brought out two stallions that were most vicious. Tied the wife to the tail of one and the daughter to the other, then dragged them twelve times around the castle, so that both of them would break away piece by piece. This was their punishment.

“Well, this is a lovely story. Reminds me of the Tw(e)lv(e) Th(ie)v(e)s, (o)nly tw(i)c(e) t(o) ld.”
Sounds of tapping on the window. Shoo, shoo, you ugly bird, already, you are taking to our daughter! There she amuses herself in the adorned mirror, Phew, girl, not even the devil wants you! The black insect comes. He wants her. By fall, she amuses herself in a stranger’s mirror.
SMART GIRL

Met a white fig tree. Whenever she swallowed a figtree, always one of the horns disappeared. Finally her head became round and smooth, as never before.
STORY OF THE DILIGENT GIRL

“Marry the one who has a flyswatter sticking out of her head because she sweeps well.”

THE WATER-CARRYING GIRL

The girl put the rooster on her head and patiently, like a brightly shining star, gazed down into a well.

UNBORN GIRL

When the girl with the golden hair turned blue, he took off his own clothes and along with the girl threw them into the well, hid the bucket, climbed up the tree and sat in the girl’s place.
DOGTREE

The dogtree grows in the green marsh. This is where the girl goes to at night, her mouth fastened to the treetrunk, sucking. By morning the dogs grow quiet and the stars harden. A girl with a black face hangs from a branch.
ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR:

EMÖKE Z. B’RACZ was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1948, daughter to Hungarian political activist and winner of The Officer’s Cross of The Order of The Hungarian Republic Medal-Of-Honor in 1991, Istvan B’Racz.

She came to the U.S. in 1964, she is a poet, translator, and bookstore owner living in Asheville, N.C. Her first published translations from Hungarian were of Gyula Illyes and appeared in 1973 in *The New York Quarterly*.

*Stories Of The Seven-Headed Sewing Machine* came from a volume of collected poems entitled EXILE which was published in Budapest in 1988.

About The Illustrator:

Townie New, extravagant artist and character. A dear friend, with a most brilliant mind, a true blessing to encounter this person we know as Townie. Last heard of living in Montreal, Canada. We trust she will blow back into town soon.