

CHRISTINA WATERS

Yellow Sky, 2022
Watercolor and oil pastel, 6 x 8 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MARGIT LIESCHE

Postmark Budapest, October 1956:

A Love Letter to Kyiv, March 2022

At the intersection near her apartment building, waiting for a tram, Iza Németh tapped the sidewalk with an impatient toe. She was late getting to the exclusive antique shop, part of the state-run chain, Bizományi Áruház Vállalat, where she worked. After a restless night, she'd managed to fall asleep sometime near dawn and then overslept.

A screeching of metal signaled the streetcar's arrival. As she climbed the steps to board the yellow tram, she dismissed her worries and gloomy thoughts of the country's future. The car was jammed with young people. Smiling, exhilarated young people. They filled the bench seats and stood clinging to the ceiling straps. A dark-haired girl with a prominent dimple rose from her seat, insisting Iza take it. She was too keyed up to sit, the girl explained, thrusting a red-white-and-green paper rosette into Iza's hand.

"What's going on?" Iza asked. "Is this to do with the rally this afternoon?"

The girl nodded. "Yesterday there was a mass meeting of students from the Technical University and we agreed on a whole set of demands. Today we proclaim our sixteen points. The time is right! We must free our country!"

Voices rose from the girl's friends seated nearby.

"Withdrawal of the Soviet bastards!"

"Free elections! A free press!"

"The right to meet when and where we want!"

"Worship as we see fit!"

"The dissolution of the ÁVH!"

Cheers erupted time and time again.

Goosebumps ran over Iza's arms. "You think they will listen? Even consider the demands?"

"They will have to," the girl replied, her dimple cratering deeper. "The Soviets' time here is up. We will make them go!"

A young man with a thick mop of black hair chimed in. "We'll give them no choice when they see us, the entire country, rise as one!"

"The whole world will rally to our side!" Another jubilant voice.

"We're going to the Technical University. An afternoon demonstration. An *approved* demonstration." The speaker was a grinning red-haired youth with freckles. "Then we march to the statue of General Bem. To show our solidarity with the Polish people."

Iza understood why they'd chosen Bem Square. The Polish general Józef Bem, one of the greatest figures in Hungary's 1848 war of independence against the Hapsburgs, was a national hero.

"Independence and neutrality for all Poles and Hungarians!" The girl's smile faded, her dimple diminishing to a mere shadowy imprint. "The next step after that, who knows?"

"One thing is certain," the mop-top young man said. "'National Song' will be recited many times today, and not just at the Bem statue."

The poem by Petöfi, Hungary's most famous poet, was a rallying point at the start of the 1848 uprising. It echoed through her mind.

Magyars rise! Your country calls you!

Now or never. Time enthralls you.

Shall we live as slaves or freemen?

These, the questions, choose between them.

Iza sat back. She wanted to say, "Be careful. Many of our friends, fellow Hungarians, are considered enemies of the people. Should this backfire, they'll be the scapegoats . . ."

But that thought was contradicted by her core feeling. *I do not want to go on living like we've been living. Seeing loved ones and friends suffering at the mercy of this regime.*

The streetcar came to a stop. The young woman and her friends began piling off.

“Godspeed. I wish you every success,” Iza called to their backs. “We must hope. Work for the future.” She pressed the rosette into a buttonhole of her coat.

* * *

Being late should have meant her workday would be over more quickly. Instead, it had been one of the quietest days in memory. No customers, and the hours seemed to stretch forever. The monotony was broken by a continuing bustle of pedestrians along Szent István körút. But they were not shoppers.

Iza glanced up at the wall clock. “It’s nearly five.” She turned to Boncz. “Let’s lock up.”

“I’ll do it. You go. I want to stay a while. It doesn’t look safe out there.”

Iza considered the offer. Unlike her colleague, she could not wait to get out into the hubbub.

Chanting and roars from the area around the Margit Bridge, a block away, penetrated the store windows.

“No,” Iza said. “Let’s do it together. You can walk out with me. It’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

Boncz did not reply. She went into the back room to retrieve the keys, leaving Iza to begin removing the more valuable pieces from the display windows.

The collection of Hummel figurines could stay, she decided, her gaze lingering on the charming pieces embodying childhood innocence. Four rosy-cheeked, angelic young girls in a circle, hands joined, playing ring-around-the-rosy. A sweet-faced boy in shorts and a rucksack looking down at his puppy, who adoringly stared back at its young master. A fair-haired boy and girl, arms linked, under an oversized umbrella.

Children. More than once she’d weighed the idea of having a baby. But in this upside-down world? If only she could escape reality, like this artist, who so perfectly imagined childhood. Lose herself in a dream world. A world where fear and intimidation no longer ran their lives. A world where they were not told what to think, speak, and do. Where children ran free and parents could talk openly in front of them. Where they learned the language of their country, not Russian.

Iza blinked. *This is the world the marchers are*

demanding. Was it possible? She placed a hand over her stomach. A child? Dared she hope?

From outside, a cheer rang out. It was remarkable. Something tremendous was happening. Even inside the store, Iza could feel the electricity in the air.

Boncz returned with the keys, her expression fraught with worry. The thunderous din from outdoors continued. She drew Iza to the window. “See? It’s not safe.”

“Don’t worry,” Iza said. “They’re marching for our freedom.”

Together they stood, peering at the marchers outside. Thousands—students, as well as office and factory workers—surging like a river through the wide street, overflowing onto the sidewalks on either side.

Their chants could be heard through the window. “New government!” “*Ruszkik haza*, Russians out!”

A woman appeared on a balcony of the building across from them, waving the Hungarian tricolor. Iza grinned broadly, seeing the large hole in the center where the hammer and sickle had been. But then her exuberance ebbed. The symbolic cutting of the hated Soviet symbol from the national flag was the easy part.

Boncz tugged at Iza’s sleeve. “What will happen to us if they succeed?”

Iza looked into the anxious face of her colleague. “If the Russians abandon us?” she asked incredulously. “We’ll be Hungarians again. Free. C’mon, let’s get this place buttoned up. Get out there.”

Boncz’s gaze swung to Iza. “Ah, going to join the revolutionaries, are you?” Her voice was light and airy but did not conceal underlying reproach.

“It’s not a revolution. They have no weapons, only pens and ideas. It’s a protest.”

“It will not succeed.” Boncz was quickly recovering her confidence.

“Why not?”

“There is no leadership. Who is capable of standing up to the powers in Moscow while also being embraced by Moscow?”

“Well, Nagy of course.”

“Nagy is a good man and a great patriot. But he does not have the stuff. He had his chance.”

Iza reflected a moment, reminding herself that Boncz had recently joined the party. She might have an interest

in the status quo. Possibly an interest in cozying up to a certain high-level functionary.

“Frankly, I don’t know who or what structure would be best,” Iza said. “I’m here working most of my days. I leave that to better, more-informed minds. But I am sure of these things: The State Security Police, the ÁVH, are inhuman. The Russians are raping our land, robbing our heritage, subjugating our people.”

Iza clamped her lips shut. *Enough!*

The marchers had brought into focus the part of her that refused to be owned, refused to bow. The discovery was intoxicating. Dangerous.

* * *

Once in the sea of marchers, Iza became absorbed into the exhilaration of the moment. Shouting and excitement filled the air. She stood on the edge of the flow, watching the waving arms and jubilant faces, enjoying the cheerful holiday spirit emanating from the passing crowd.

“If you’re a real Hungarian, join us!” one of the marchers shouted to observers along the sides of the street.

Iza couldn’t believe her eyes. The young woman on the tram with a prominent dimple was among them. Iza dove into the tumult and edged her body through the thick of the crowd toward her.

She recognized Iza immediately. “They recited poems at the Bem statue and read the demands!” she shouted, projecting her voice over the din around them. “Students from Pest joined us! Workers from the morning shift! We’re going to the parliament now!” Her gaze swept the sea of people as they pushed ahead. “Isn’t it just marvelous?”

Carried along by the euphoric throng, Iza tried to take in what she was witnessing. Most of those around her were students, the new generation brought up according to Communist dogma but now determined to shed it. Pressed among them were ladies with kerchiefs on their heads, office workers in their customary raincoats, young couples arm in arm.

They arrived at the parliament building, dazzling in its old-world majesty and grandeur. The square in front, Kossuth tér, was packed with a gathering Iza guessed was in the thousands. Shouts of “Down with Gerő!” and “Gerő resign!” greeted them. They squeezed into the mass as the

voices grew ever bolder. “No more Stalin’s soldiers!” “*Ruszkik haza*, Russians out!” Then began shouts and chants for the appearance of the movement’s chosen new leader. “Imre Nagy! Imre Nagy!”

The entire square echoed with the chants, Iza crushed in among the thousands. A student nearby excitedly shared the news that another large group had collected across Pest at the radio broadcasting building, demanding that the sixteen points be read on the air. “They will not leave until they get their way!”

One of the dimpled girl’s friends was climbing a nearby lamppost and she leaped to join him. Iza joined the cries for Nagy as many more tricolor flags, large holes cut from the centers, waved from windows and in the hands of the buoyant crowd.

Finally, Imre Nagy appeared on one of the balconies of the parliament to ear-shattering roars from the crowd. “Comrades,” he began, using the traditional Soviet greeting. And this immediately changed the mood of the crowd. Booming and whistling and roars of “We are not comrades!” followed. “Fellow Hungarians,” Nagy began again, “my fellow Hungarians!”

Nagy went on to speak of resolving matters within the ruling party and of returning to the popular, but short-lived, reform program of 1953. But he did not address directly any of the sixteen points, and he spoke for only two minutes. An awkward silence followed—until he invited the crowd to join him in singing the national anthem. Tears streamed down Iza’s cheeks as she sang along. Nagy then asked the demonstrators to go home, suggesting their voices had been heard. Some took the advice; the majority of the crowd stayed put.

Iza broke away and began walking toward Margit Bridge, hoping to find a bus or streetcar still running. As she jumped onto a crowded bus, a voice from the nearby crowd shouted, “Where are you going? Join us! Come to the radio station!”

A few students leaped off the bus to join the demonstrators, but Iza found a seat, suddenly exhausted. Hungary had only two radio stations, both government owned and machine gun protected. Everything that went on the air was taped. How was it possible to convince the station to broadcast the demands live? Filled with both hope and trepidation, she let her thoughts from the day wander as

the bus jostled across the Margit Bridge, taking her home to the Buda side.

* * *

The next morning, Iza awoke to the booming voice of an announcer coming from the radio in the living room. Last night, when she'd arrived home, her mother had still been up, listening to news reports on the radio, completely riveted. After briefly describing the events of her own exhilarating evening, Iza had left Ilona to her radio broadcast, walked to her room, and fallen into bed. Now, rejoining her mother seated near the blaring set, Iza observed that she was still in pajamas and tattered robe, her face glum, her body slumped and unmoving.

Registering Iza's look of confusion, Ilona lowered the volume and revealed the latest events.

As Nagy's disappointing speech ended, on the other side of town at the radio building, the crowd—eager for word that the sixteen points would be broadcast—had run out of patience. A van reversed against the wooden entrance gates like a battering ram and insurgents began hurling bricks through the windows. ÁVH men stationed inside volleyed back with tear gas and water jets from fire hoses. Then shots were fired. Some students went down. Enraged, their compatriots fought back using primitive weapons—rocks, chunks of plaster, petrol bombs. By early morning, they had managed to take over the building.

Violence of a different kind broke out near Heroes' Square, where an immense crowd assembled at the most hated symbol of the Stalinist era, the giant twenty-six-foot bronze statue of the tyrannical leader. Working with ropes and acetylene torches brought by factory workers, with the crowd roaring, they toppled Stalin into the square that had been renamed for him, leaving upright only his two enormous boots.

Throughout the night, freedom fighters, as they were now being called, attacked government telephone exchanges, printing presses, and several arms factories in various parts of the city. Posters of Stalin, portraits of Rákosi, and books from shops selling Russian literature were burned in the streets. They trashed the offices of *Szabad Nép*, the Communist daily newspaper carrying "official" news.

A demonstration had been fueled into a revolution.

Ilona, her eyes puffy and smudged with dark shadows,

looked up at her daughter. "I couldn't sleep. Stayed up, listening to the bulletins."

Iza said softly, "May God be with us."

* * *

In the week ahead, forced to stay indoors, Iza and Ilona relied on sporadic reports from the rebel radio station and from a network of close neighbors. Freedom fighters of every age group—men, women, boys, and girls—fought the Soviets in ferocious street battles as Imre Nagy and the revolutionary government appealed for international assistance. Soviet tank units stationed in the provincial areas had arrived in the city, resistance groups were organizing and had begun manning key locations in Buda and in Pest. One of the hot spots on the Buda side was Széna tér, down the hillside, below their apartment building. From time to time they could hear the pop of gunfire.

Iza and her mother cheered as the broadcast announced that Nagy had been proposed as prime minister. Later, they cried. In Parliament Square, a large gathering of unarmed demonstrators carrying flowers and singing, some waving signs that read SOVIETS GO HOME, assembled for a peaceful rally. Without warning, a volley of machine gun fire originating from a nearby rooftop sprayed the tightly packed crowd. Confusion and panic reigned as more shots rang out from additional rooftops. Demonstrators hit the ground, a number of them lifeless, many others spilled out of the square in all directions.

Early reports estimated seventy-five people, women and children among them, were killed, and nearly three hundred wounded.

In the days that followed, the Soviet forces grew in numbers, but armed rebels, and the growing numbers of Hungarian soldiers who joined them, managed to maintain control of key areas in the city. Weaponry was limited, tactics opportunistic, formulated on selectively attacking small Soviet military units, then withdrawing into narrow side streets where the Soviet tanks could not, or dared not, follow. Local knowledge and the unconditional support of the local population worked to the advantage of the rebels and they pulled off many successes.

Ingenuity came into play in instances when tanks did become trapped. Young rebels rushing out of doorways smeared plum jam on tank slits to blind the driver. When

the crewmen clambered out of the tanks, snipers from nearby windows were ready to pick them off. Hilly streets were greased, making it difficult for tanks to maneuver. Dinner plates put on roadways upside down and cans of food lined up to look like explosives caused tanks to slow down, making them easier targets for Molotov cocktails. Disabled tanks acted as barricades for the next skirmish.

A week into the revolution, the seemingly impossible was happening—after eleven years, the Russians were pulling out.

* * *

November 1, 1956

Iza left work, taking a slightly circuitous route to the pedestrian walkway of the Margit Bridge.

Streets were finally safe, allowing glimpses of the destruction. Holes from tank blasts gaped in the gray buildings she passed; a ceiling seemed to hang crazily in midair; in the middle of the street, a crater-sized hole. A half block later, Iza nearly stepped on a startling deep-red pattern of dried bloodstains on the concrete. Her stomach lurched. She walked around it, unable to avoid glimpsing a stream-like red-brown stain spilling toward the nearby gutter, and moved on hurriedly.

It was the evening of All Saints' Day, the Day of the Dead, and small lights burned in windows everywhere in remembrance of the heroes who had died for the country's freedom.

The solidarity of our country is demonstrated in this one simple act, Iza thought, observing the strings of twinkling lights adorning the apartment buildings on either side of the street as she walked.

"Every window blinks the light of hope into the dense darkness of the years our homeland has been imprisoned," she said aloud, her words escaping into the hushed evening air.

Her thoughts sobered as she recalled Boncz's whispered words from earlier in the day, *Like I said, this will never succeed. Soviet troops have moved in to surround Ferihegy airport and other airfields in the country. What do you say to that?*

Iza shook her head to banish the grim thoughts. Nagy was in discussions with the Russians, she assured herself. A truce was imminent. It was on the radio. It had to be true.

Iza passed the small park opposite the bridge's mouth. Her breath caught. In memoriam crosses had been erected on the green carpet of grass stretching across the circular space. She edged closer. Boy, age twelve years; Pista, sixteen; Kati, fourteen. A lump lodged in her throat. A headshot of the girl, Kati, was tacked to her cross. She wore a school uniform, a braid draped over her shoulder. Smiling in profile, eyes bright, she looked off into the distance at what was never to come.

Iza felt lodged in place. Hot tears filled her eyes. The youth indoctrinated for years to be trained as the Communist elite had become the backbone of the freedom fighters. Freedom fighters with weapons they hardly had the strength to carry, but which nevertheless they raised against those who took away their individuality.

It had to be true. The Soviets would leave as they promised. In the twelve-day battle for freedom, over two thousand Hungarians, including women and young girls and boys, had paid for this with their lives.

A familiar voice called to Iza. She turned. She did not immediately recognize the flesh-on-bone figure before her. Then she thought he must be playing a joke. Playing a ghost risen from the dead.

"Pál!" she managed finally, training her gaze on the bristly, emaciated face of her old friend. His skin was pasty, smudged with dirt, and his eyes held hers with a strange, glazed look.

Pál wore an ill-fitting soldier's coat and carried a rifle. He noticed Iza staring at it. "I'm in the National Guard now. We were told to turn them in. That we're making an agreement with the Russians. The fighting is over. But why are there Soviet tanks surrounding our airfields? I don't like it. Others in my unit don't either. We've been basking in our five days of freedom, they've been gathering reinforcements."

Iza clasped a hand over her thudding heart. "Lies? It was all lies?"

"They claim they want to assure safe departure of Soviet citizens. Ha! Nobody will bother them if they're evacuating." He patted his rifle butt. "Now more than ever we need our weapons. We have to stop the tanks from coming back into the city. I will never give up." His eyes shone feverishly.

"But . . . Erzsi?"

Pál smiled with effort. Then his face went slack. He rested the rifle on his shoulder, smoothed it affectionately. His look turned hard. “Everything I believed in has been crushed by this regime. I will love Erzsí and my daughter forever. But right now, at this moment, there are more important things than being with them.” As quickly as his eyes had hardened, they turned soft again. “I’m sorry. They know I’m sorry. They understand—” Pál pulled a hand down the bristly jagged outline of his face. “This is what I have to do.”

* * *

November 4, 1956

Just before dawn, Iza jumped out of bed as blasts boomed from below their apartment, near Széna tér. “Canon fire!” she shouted, racing to the living room.

Ilona was at the radio. She switched on Free Kossuth Radio as Imre Nagy came on the air. “Today at daybreak Soviet troops attacked our capital with the obvious intent of overthrowing the legal Hungarian government. Our troops are in combat. The government is in its place.” His words were repeated in English, Russian, and French for the whole world to hear and understand.

Announcements followed. Nagy had notified the UN and the UN Security Council had acknowledged the Hungarian appeal.

“They’ll have to do something,” Ilona whispered. “Military experts on Radio Free Europe have been advising our fighters, encouraging them. They’ll forward news of our situation to the world. Aid will come. It must.”

Moments later, their building was rocked by explosions and conversation was nearly impossible over the roar of fighter jets. In a moment of relative quiet, from the radio, another report. “Thousands of heavily armed soldiers, under orders to conquer or kill, are invading Budapest, supported by rocket launchers on Gellért Hill and combat jets raining bombs. Hundreds of tanks are rolling through the streets, firing indiscriminately. Few buildings on the main boulevards have escaped being torn open.”

Just hours after Nagy’s announcement, as Iza and her mother sat frozen with anxiety, a representative of the Hungarian Writers’ Association came on the air. In a sonorous deep voice, the dramatic message: “Civilized people of the world, in the name of liberty and solidarity, we are asking

you to help. Our ship is sinking. The light vanishes. The shadows grow darker from hour to hour. Listen to our cry. Act. Extend to us a hand. People of the world, save us. S-O-S! S-O-S! S-O-S!—May God be with you and with us.”

After this, a brief silence, followed by the Hungarian national anthem.

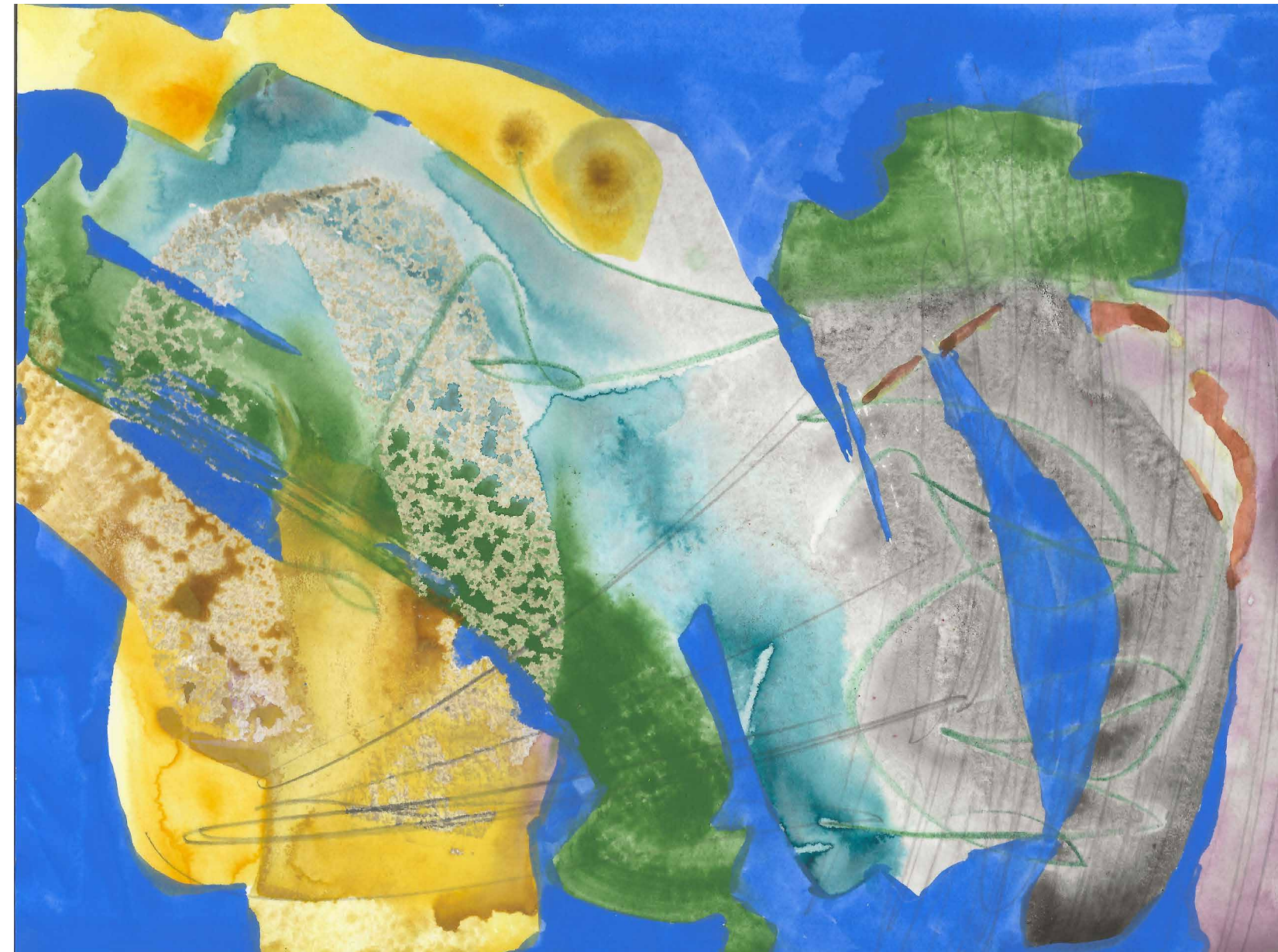
The excerpt from **Margit Liesche’s** recently completed fourth novel, *The Intimist*, reflects an abiding passion for her familial homeland and its history, in particular the years leading up to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution when she was a child. As a daughter of Hungarian immigrants, their history and their nation’s struggle against the brutal and oppressive Russian communist regime, the repression of personal freedoms and national culture, continues to haunt her and imbue her work. For her, it is the tragedy of this world and of her lifetime that it’s come to pass again in Ukraine. Except this time, this time, the world has chosen not to stand by while a courageous people fight for their autonomy and their freedom.

Margit has three previously published novels *Triptych*, *Lipstick and Lies*, and *Hollywood Buzz*, all featuring strong women protagonists, with *Triptych*, partially set in Budapest, spun loosely from family stories. “The Ocean Between Us,” a personal essay about her journey to a deeper understanding of her Hungarian refugee mother, was published in the *Chicago Quarterly Review* and was designated notable in *The Best American Essays*. Margit lives in Marin County, CA where she hikes the trails with her dog Tango every chance she gets.

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Blue Vector, 2022

Watercolor, oil pastel, and pencil, 6 x 8 in.



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