Ferenc Temesi
Bridge
A novel

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Line one

[IMAGE: The Coin's Page]

”They say that when my mother's father was born, the old Limp church bell sounded.

Whether or not that happened, I don't know. But what's for sure, the truth-telling Bora Vas Ferkó, the midwife who had a moustache that would have made all the boys of the village jealous, did not refrain from saying:

'Came at a good time.

He start to come out yet? inquired the bed-ridden Holy mother. Her mother, Rozália Zagarits, was a flourishing combination of Croatian and Pecheneg. Her coal-black hair was streaked with the white stripes of oncoming elderliness, the ibis-shaped spots on her dark Mediterrean skin hommage to her ancestors.

His head came out, but he's in that sac, said the friend, who was sitting next to the bed.

My great-grandmother did not say anything—she gave birth.

All four women knew that if the infant plopped into the world in his protective membrane, he would be lucky. The bullet wouldn't catch him, like it did Sándor Rúzsa, the king of the bandits, who had probably been executed for this crime after he was imprisoned.

Bell's already ringin'.

It ain't even started the first round, my great-great grandmother chimed in. She didn't understand why the big bell was bonging for the beginning of the mass. The doors and windows were wide open, as they usually are at births, so that whoever didn't want to hear it would. And in the most Hungarian town of the most Hungarian county, the bell would make note of the poor among the rest of some eight-thousand seven-hundred and ninety-seven people. Ding-dong, the bell rang, but then came the realization that it should be rung for the farmers, too (for them, it should be rung heartily). DING-DONG, the bell said flatteringly.

Must be that good for nothin' Sisák kid ringin', the godmother presumed. They praise 'im for havin' sandals so big, he takes one step, and the whole village hears 'im.

My great-grandmother gathered the rest of her strength for the final push, sweating and gasping for breath.

I'll toss out the water. It's all cold now, her mother said. The reprimand was aimed at the friend. It was her duty to watch that the water stayed warm. However, the water was sufficient when the midwife peeled the amniotic sac from my grandfather, and as she washed him off, the great old wrinkled newborn let out such a piercing screech that even the men heard it in the garden. Rather than crying, my grandfather greeted the world with a screech, the reason being that he had nearly suffocated. They say those who are born in amniotic sacs are not just everyday lucky people. They still get oxygen from their mothers, and this is the reason that not even their smallest of brain cells die during birth. In reality, the sac sticks to their face, and one can only call themselves lucky if it's removed in time.

Girl? my great-grandmother panted hopefully, because she would have liked for her second-born to be a girl. She'd even dreamed about it.

This lil' saint is a boy, said the truth-telling Bora Vas Ferkó, as if the brat were the one deserving of praise. 'Came wit' teeth, too. Right there, see! The friend pointed at the shrieking infant's mouth.

My great-grandmother hugged the baby with relieved happiness. She didn't even care that it wasn't a girl! That the child would come into the world with the sign of a táltos and a mouth full of bones, well, that would make him into a dashing, intelligent man, and it warmed her heart.

Smack-smack. Smack-smack-smack-smack, my great-grandfather was splitting firewood in the courtyard for the summer kitchen, though he'd just nailed a twenty-centimeter (according to his word) nail fit for Jesus into a larger stump of wood, using the pickaxe he'd inherited from his old man, the late Orbán. He was an angry, devout man, rough but realistic about things—he wouldn't

leave behind a day's work just because a child was born. Sándor Csepeli, the handsome Gyurkó, onto whom only the second of the two names stuck, was leaned against the weighing balance, smoking his pipe. Hey, wouldn't it be nice if they didn't just weigh the yarn the peasants brought here, but used the scale to measure hearts too! thought the brother-in-law, but the words remained inside him.

Sir, sir! The midwife lifted up the baby in the window. Under the protection of its half-closed eyelids, the infant gazed back at the place from which it had just arrived. Its eyes were deep, like time. You have a son! the midwife shouted. János Tóth, the town's weaver, glanced at the child next to the glowing candle they'd placed in the window sill. He nodded silently.

Child of May, dew midday, he grumbled under his moustache. The people of Limp considered May an unlucky month to start something; a new business, marriage, birth, these did not end well. They themselves did not know that their ancestors had instilled this suspicion because in May, when the weather was best, every person capable of moving their hands and feet was needed at the border.

There're people livin' upstairs! the brother-in-law said, jabbing his pipe towards the sky reprovingly.

Thursday kids go far 'n life, he added, to soften it.

The chiming softened, then soon silenced. My great-grandfather's eyes were laughing at the brother-in-law.

Shame on ye', ye' know, my heart's in pieces, he said sarcastically. If God gives sheep, he gotta give a field, too. Our friend'd better come in here! they shouted through the window. My great-grandfather put his axe down beside the handsaw, and he traipsed into the little white thatch-roof house. The wind was toying with the red tape on the door handle. The friend handed the master a little package, which was nothing other than the placenta of the woman who had given birth. This my great-grandfather would have to bury underneath a tree, so that there would luck over the house. As if this were all it had been waiting for, the great bell started ringing again, fast, as fast as it could go.

A quarter of an hour later, the grey breeze brought the sweet scent of burned flour all the way down to Market Square lane no. 9. The Beck millhouse on Mill street had started to burn, and six others caught the flame. Only by the help of the firefighters called in from Dustville were they able to save the yonder part of the village from destruction.

All of this amounted to nothing in the season of archangel Spugliguel, in the month of angel Ambriel (the prince in line of the throne), on the day of the archangel Caphiel and the cherub Sachiel (God's mantle), during the hour of archangel Michael, the bearer of peace, and the ghost of Mercury. Or rather, in spring, during the tenth minute of the tenth hour of the twenty-ninth day of May, in the 1890th year of our Lord.

[figure]

That’s what I heard.
You believe what you hear?
I don’t even believe what I see.
Now, you see.
I see: he rests his forehead against the train’s dirty window.
Summer is already turning to fall. He’s wearing a short-sleeved shirt. Its dull color a give-away: it wasn’t always black. A long, fresh wound cuts across his forehead, all the way to his eyebrows. It’s stitched up on the right: as if a confused look has frozen onto his face. The rain is falling, and the sun is shining. A thin, pointy brush has dotted his irises with dark brown spots. They show underneath his foggy glasses. Clack-clack. Pole, field, pole, cornfield. Clack-clack. House, dog. House, geese. Clack-clack. Clack-clack. God had a long ruler, he thinks. A lake bordered by sedge, maybe a reservoir. An unsecreted plastic bottle, like a shiny fish washed up on the shore.
Stupified student – why do I always get these crazy ideas? The field workers straighten their backs: windowpanes of village houses swim past them. So much life! They watch the train, the train watches them.
A stork has two legs, but they don’t make him a soldier, to hell with my mother, ’cause I wasn’t born a stork.
The man is leaned against the window of the train, his back to the landscape, eyes on the drunken, shouting soldiers. He’s as lanky as a teenager, but sturdy, like the stalk of wild hemp. No one should serve me sobbing; sender: the house, he thinks. The soldiers have beers in their hand, one of them sitting in another’s lap. Pimpled, but without shaved heads. A blonde, green-eyed girl opens the door to the dining car, the song stops playing. The man standing in window suddenly looks up, as if he’s seen something horrible.
Guszti, for fuck’s sake, give up your spot to this pussy, says the guy with the kid sitting in his lap.
This old man’s deaf, the kid answers. He has a plastic bag in his hand. The letters on its logo have already lost their meaning.
Every drunk is a day ending, thinks the man beside the window.
I’ll hit you so hard, you’ll fly right out of here, comes the answer. The soldier wipes the beer’s foam from his moustache, and with the same motion, he shoves the kid out of his lap. The girl steps up to the counter, as if she didn’t hear them.
This old sport’s gonna take a piss! says the kid with the plastic bag, staggering towards the bathroom.
Man, I’d put my joystick in you, says the moustached kid, as the girl walks past him. Without even a glance in his direction, the girl says:
Aren’t you tough. Like the Rolling Stones.
She has a hoarse, greyish voice. It becomes quiet. When she steps out of the dining car, the chorus starts up.
What? I’ve had enough! What about yesterday? It was rough. And what about tomorrow? Still tough.
The train starts to slow.
Which way is the cemetery? asks the man in the black shirt, in front of the train station. Like someone waking from a dream. Those are the first words he has spoken in weeks.
Which cemetery? the old man replies. He’s drunk, and he seems to be shaking his head in doubt.
The young man doesn’t answer. He starts walking along the narrow railway leaving the station, in the dust. In his hand, dead flowers wrapped in wax paper: one daisy amid carnations. Turtle doves flutter up from the tracks. One stays; it turns its ringed neck, fearlessly watching the passerbyer.
The rain lets up in the slow light.
I’m tired. Tired, like a valley.
The stars have already died, but for years, lovers will gaze at their light in the heavens.
That’s physics. Why are you talking nonsense.

A reluctant half-smile on the man's shadowed face. The smell of bland roast drifting between the box-like houses.
Crying children, a squealing drill, disco music spilling from the window. Rain's quiet. Along the easement of the newly-constructed buildings, thorny brush, a broken zipper caught in one of the bushes. Oncoming bicyclists.
The days fall backwards. But I lose you once. Forever.
The little railway's tracks turn to the left, the man too. He limps almost imperceptibly on his right leg.
Sometimes I even think I've gone crazy. What are you laughing about? Nobody in this world walks a straight path.
I buy it. Tell me again.
He knew from the vague smell of rotting flowers: he had arrived. He stepped through the gate. To the left, the graves of the dead who have been evicted from their plots, turned over headstones, charred grass. Jesus's head, made of plastic rock, is sticking out from underneath the trash can, the wires showing in his shattered arm.
The man starts to climb Calvary hill, the flowers quivering in his left hand. At the top, he pauses, looks around; he searches for the new graves. Her mother is kneeling down next to one, he spots her at random.
When he sees them, he still has time to turn around. They're arranging the flowers around the grave, the lean and sun-browned old man is tying a plastic bottle to the cross with wire. The woman wraps the wire around the stems of the calla lilies, clipping the ends of the flowers with a pair of scissors. A red-faced little girl with a blushing complexion, her hair a stately gray. The man in the black shirt is just one moment away from her glance, she'll look up from the flowers, now.
The woman looks at him through the thick framed glass. The scissors fall from her hands.
Yes, that's her. She has your eyes, your dimples on her face. Then he thinks: I came with flowers, as if asking for her hand.
The old man also stirs. Leaning over the grave, he turns his head to the side – his gaze meets the man's. Neither of them move. The young man finally takes two steps forward.
Hello, he says in a very low voice, and he stops. Whatever. If they beat me to death, I won't defend myself. Nothing matters anymore.
The old man straightens up, takes a step forward. You're him?
The man doesn't answer.
The woman steps towards the man almost unconsciously. You're the one? Her voice is strained.
Look, Emília, his forehead! the old man says. Look at his forehead.
The tiny little woman is already standing in front the man in the black shirt. The man lowers his head.
That's me, he says, or rather he sighs. Tears have washed over his hair, but he isn't crying. The woman pulls in his head to her chest. My Katika, she says, sobbing. My little girl!
The man in black also starts crying, like hiccups, his tears falling onto the woman's hair. The rain comes back. The old man puts his hand on the kid's shoulder, and softly, bashfully, he cries a little. As if he were saying something, but without knowing what. The three of them are standing next to the grave, leaning into each other and crying. On the stone, underneath her name, it says: *University student.*
Below: *lived 21 years.* Below: *and her parents.*

IMAGE: THE EMPEROR

Puff clouds were drifting through the sky, and the master of the house was puffing out smoke underneath the eaves with his brother-in-law. While his hat and his pocket knife were on the bed, protecting the newborn from evil spells, being on the porch with his pipe was his proper place. The drying peppers rattled as they hung down from the eaves.

The damn cat's inside purrin', the Handsome Gyurkó said to his brother-in-law. János, who would never let anyone step into the house before him, had a hard time accepting that his brother-in-law would hear the kid's name, just as he had struggled with his invisible rope: he could hardly wait to sleep with his wife again.

He's 'n the right place, like Dustville when the floods come, his brother-in-law wanted to say, but his wife appeared in the porch's doorway, accompanied by the midwife. She pressed the infant into the brother-in-law's hands—if the newborn were a boy, it was the man's duty to take him to church. They set out towards Félegyházi Street, into the blustering wind. Prior to the baptism, the newcomer would be called Idunnowho, and he wouldn't even get his mother's milk. But that's how it was in Limp. Due to its trend towards abundant children, they did not really put off christenings.

A horse and cart approached them from the other direction near Bocskai street. János Tóth greeted it with content.

Jancsi bears the name of Saint John the Harvester, or rather my name, he said to his brother-in-law. His name was known around the world as Saint John the Baptist, but Limp was not Limp in order to call everyone the same thing. I'll offer this lil' pagan the protection of Saints John and Paul. His name'll be Pál.

Besides knowing that John and Paul were brothers, all János could say about the two was that they had the power to seal the heavens with clouds, and to open its gates. But would that do any good for a weaver, who lead the reapers at harvest time, if he knew that the brothers weren't willing to take up the fight against the Scythians in Thrace, and that this had ensured their fate as martyrs? There was a reason he'd slept in the wheat so many times, because he knew when the stems cracked and were ripe for cutting: it was best to be on good terms with those among the heavily wars who looked after early summer.

There are three true saints, the midwife declared. Saint John the Harvester, Saint Michael the Winemaker, and Saint Andrew, the killer of pigs.

They arrived at the corner of Félegyházi and Csongrádi Street, at the yellow church, with its long neck and rounded shoulders, and the inscription on its facade attributing the church and its village to Dustville's patronage. János Tóth, who was very much a man of the church, entered first with a rosary in his hand. Ain't he sanctimonious, just got soot around his ears, thought the handsome Gyurkó.

Father Miklós, who was at least a head taller than these friends, peeled the little pagan from the shirt he had been given for the christening. It seemed he did not even notice the bright red wristband.

Pál, Bérnát, I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Father Miklós did not worry himself with the batismal pitcher, he dipped the newborn into the copper basin three

times. And wailing filled the Lord's house.
The friend was so astonished hearing the name Bernát that he hardly came to in time to renounce the devil in the child's name. Father Miklós was the kind of pastor who did not trust his fold with name-giving: he had taped up the names of the saints next to the birth calendar, for the sake of the little lambs. János Tóth hadn't figured that the child could have done worse than the patron saint of Alpine travelers, whose name has been attributed to a breed of dogs. The honorable Father Miklós could have also glanced up at Bede the Venerable, Saint Hubert, Saint Ferdinand, or by chance Saint Julius. He shook his head, like the flame of the Easter candle the priest had used to light the baptism candle.
You will pray for him, draw him by your example into the community of faith and walk with him in the way of light! János Tóth's eyebrows were pinched above his pointy nose like a bird's wings. He nursed his bitterness that they had made such ridicule of the Christian name *he* had devised.
In the parlor, which they now just call a room, on the strip of wall between the two windows, in the mirror hung above the bench, Anna Csepeli suddenly caught a glance of the friends. And did she jump right up from the bed! The Holy mother hardly had time to pull on her slippers.
Erzsók! Ye' can't hold up my lil' saint in the mirror!
Well then cover 'im up, said the Virgin Elizabeth, the friend. She held out the baby in front of her, and she said:
We took him as a pagan wolf, and brought him back as a Christian lamb! And then she set him down on the ground, over a blanket. The child's father picked him up, so that he would be held high. János Tóth smelled of onion now too, raw onion was his weak spot. He wasn't satisfied with just this: he grabbed the infant and brought him up the ladder to the roof of the house. So tha' he'd be on top throughout his life, just like tha'!
They sat down around the table for the feast. The brother-in-law sat in the straight-backed chair, which had long armrests and was fit for thinking. The crowning and the carved script "Long live the king!" were pressed against his back. The guests of the christening had time to glance around at the walls. Besides the picture of the trinity of the Old Lord God—Virgin Mary—Jesus, there was one single picture of the revolution: Klapka, Damjanich, Bem, Kossuth and Batthyány were standing on a hill, encircling the other Hungarian soldiers. Sándor Rúzsa's horse leapt beside them as he fired a pistol into the sky. Over to the side, on an oleograph decorated by a banner of war, was another leaping horse, the head of the calvaryman belonging to János Tóth. Next to that hung a glass painting bordered by a veil and a wreath of myrtle from the Radna pilgrimage. In between the door and the stove, next to the basin of holy water and above the bread basket, there was a candle watching over the weather, which had been wrapped in velvet and blessed on the day of Saints John and Paul. The furniture was of course only brown, but of the older, sturdier variety. It had no pillows or decoration, just good old hard wood.
János Tóth returned with the infant, and he went over to the grandfather clock sitting in the corner of the room, removed the lock (that had lost its key) from the chain, which served as a balance for the pendulum. Soon, time stopped.
The cup of blessings was passed around the table. The Virgin Elizabeth lifted up the infant, letting him sway in the air, and she cried:
Elizabeth spoke of him, Mary conceived him, Saint Joseph looked after him, sweet little Jesus, raise this little one to be great!
On the "great," the infant slipped out of her hands, and if it weren't for the low stool sitting there, the child surely would have hit the ground and croaked.
Sweet Mary, she gonna let the earth eat 'im up! Anna Csepeli snatched the screaming baby and took him back to the bed. She couldn't have been fond of this woman, who was constantly dolled up, and had obviously grown tired of being tasked with all the cooking-baking-cleaning here for several weeks.
Look, she done put a pillow under it, said the brother of the master's wife, so that he might soften things.
Eat, may yer' bellies be complete, the master of the house chimed in.

Those sitting around the table and spooning the weak pheasant soup were a bit buzzed when Sándor Csepeli, the Handsome Gyurkó, said jokingly:
Yer' father swings the hoe, yer' mother spreads the dung, the sweep pulls from the well: but don't ye' ever give such awful wine to yer' friends like yer' father does!
The brother-in-law was a scaly bastard. János Tóth didn't let it go without a word:
I don' go to the pub, 'n ye' don' go to church. Ye' could come here more often.
The Virgin Elizabeth sat on the edge of the bed and tried appease the bed-ridden Holy mother.
Pannika, the groundhog saw 'is shadow. The next one'll be a girl, ye' just wait!
Let the Lord givet', Anna Csepeli said. She didn't like people calling her Pannika, but she calmed down when she realized that she could finally leave the house. She could even get out on the road.
Don' ye' worry about the name Bérnát, brothe'. We goin' call 'im Pali anyways. János Tóth turned towards the window and said:
Small comfort to me.
Outside, the sky became dark, like paper crunched in a fist.

[figure]

As if a fist were piercing through the eddying pedestrians. Like a fist with a numb pinky finger. Numbly, he pushes his way along Irányi street, towards the library.
This town hates me. It kicks me, throws me from itself. Falls upon me like a pickpocket. When I first came here alone, it was May, and snowing.
He's already at the corner of Sugar street. Lightening tugs on the sky's edge, the heavens rumble. The man flips up the collar of his checkered jacket. That's all he can do. The rain is pouring. The worn, short-sleeved shirt underneath his jacket becomes even blacker.
The door is the height of two people, its buzzer in line with a person's head. He pulls back the heavy, bourbon curtains, inside dimness touched by the wrought-iron chandelier. He stops on the black linoleum, between a Doric column and a glass case full of books. Outside the street is bumbling, as if the war in heaven had rolled out across the earth.
Why are you mad at the rain? It's just little hands hammering out the crests of hills.
I'm just mad, that's all. It's better than blood.
What is rain to a drowning person?
Let's drop it.
You don't see it: we're in prison. I'm about to go and have my one call with a book.
He stumbles into an old bespectacled man musing in a chair. Reads the title, György Lukács. What a harmful person, he thinks. And I read him, too.
From the two sets of stairs, he chooses the one on the right. Beneath the light of the chubby chandeliers, he advances, his head facing the rubber mat. His hair reaches down to the nape of his neck in soaked bunches.
If a horse runs from the cart, it's a fresh start. Today's hunt is without a hunter. A meeting with his greatness.
What kind of saying is that? You'll take it to your grave!
Really?
Just don't laugh.
It's like you're sitting in the saddle of a horseman's statue.
Okay, enough with the rebuses. The man swallows a pill, and he steps into the catalogues room. Meter-long shelves with enormous file cabinets. Along one of the sides are tiny, alphabetically-labelled drawers, like birdcages poised before the doves' race.
Hello. I'm looking for the director. That way. The woman just nods in its direction.
He knocks on the long door. Nobody answers. He waits a little. Opens it to a woman's shrill laugh.
The director...
He's not here, one of the librarians says. Somebody pities him:
The assistant director is here.
He has only one door left to knock on. Come in.
Hello, sir. The director... What for?
For the internship. There was a call for applications...
Name? The grey-eyed man in a long grey jacket runs his thumb across the resumes. You're in my hands, that's what the gesture says. The stack of papers is at least an inch thick. A row of beautiful old books lines the wall with their worn spines.
István Zoltán.
The grey-eyed man lowers the first resume.
Congratulations, he says. The director picked you himself.
The wound on the man's forehead turns scarlet.

IMAGE: THE EMPRESS

On Saturday, the sun was shining, and this was not only useful from the perspective of the national weekly market, but also for little Jesus's diapers: this is when Mary would hang the washing in the flight path of the birds. As recorded following the ceremonial meeting of Limp's representative body: He could not return home until he had instilled a love of country into our hearts, through his crying words and his burning passion; then he came with silent lips, and this incredible silence strikes the flame of passion for our Nation, and that Nation's divine conception, which he had fought and suffered for so long—our sweet Home's freedom—we will stand and defend it. It doesn't matter who the person returning home was; if there were no other way, we would bring even greater richness to the soil of our birthplace by his ashes. According to the town records, a clock tower had been ordered from the local clockmaker, János Brauswetter, for 600 forints, and later, instead of the 9,994 forints requested, the town was inclined to purchase the pub that had been under Dustville's proprietorship for 5,000 forints. They had decided that The Little Forest, the evening's hot spot, would now be named after this returning person, and they had also voted to use 50 forints to build his a statue. Tomorrow will have everything—the bell cried—tomorrow will have nothing.

Mom, mom! Jani threw the bobbin at me!

Anna Csepeli had been napping in the kitchen. She could never got on with her business. She ruffled the child's hair, then drew a cross over his forehead, and said:

Here's the alter. Then, pointing at his eyes, she said: Here are the two candles. Then, at his face: Here are the two pillows. Finally, at his mouth: and here comes the priest. She pinched the kid's nose and laughed at him: Ta-ta. Ta-tatata. Or rather, at how the God-given child would soon be an alter-boy.

The child brought over the little chair, stood on top of it, and then undid the lace along the neck of her undershirt. He removed the cloth that his mother had tied tight over her bosom, out of shyness, and he peeled it away from one of her large, rounded breasts, the incredily dark nipple, and he began to nurse. He was already five years old, but he did not have the heart to be weaned from his mother. When he was one year old, and Father Miklós had come to say blessings over the house (the writing was still bright on the kitchen wall, underneath one of the hollowed-out windows, the *19 + G + M + B + 75* meant to banish evil), the child repeated what the priest had said word-for-word the following day. He was now at the New Testament.

The master of the house stepped into the kitchen, and while one hand searched for the large watering pot shaped like a little man, the other hand grabbed the boy's pants (which buttoned in the back and had become the mockery of Limp's overripe fruits).

Leave him alone! the woman said, freeing herself from the boy's grip. I won't let ye' make 'im into pork jelly, like poor Jani!

Ye' shut yer' mouth or I'll kick yer' ass, too!... Ye' worthless, lazy woman, the man added sourly. He beat his wife for several reasons: 1. Because she was an orphan, and except for her older brother, no one would protect her. 2. Because she was pretty, and the neighbor, Mihály the Hustler, occasionally snuck glances at her. 3. Because men unbuttoned their shirts even lower whenever she laughed at them. 4. Because she sometimes missed an order or two because of it. 5. Because she

was not inclined to wrap her husband's back brace tight around her chest, so that her milk would dry up. 6. Because. But Anna Csepeli was not a fearful type.
'S been a while since ye' were drunk, hasn' it! Day 'fore yest'rday! she shot back.
Her husband, who at 2-3 liters of wine a day was not considered a drunk in the village, wiped off his moustache, sighed, and left the kitchen.
The unexpected victory gave the woman confidence.
Go on into the room, Palkó. I'll be right there, she said. She didn't want her son to see: her breast surely did hurt from the nursing. She turned towards the tapestry on the wall, stroking her aching breast with her right hand, and she whispered to herself:
Docile person, indocile wife, a soft bed, but a stone pillow, God-spoken words.
Shortly after she spoke the last word, the pain ceased. Palkó was standing in front of the mirror in the other room. He removed the peacock feather from above its frame and gave it a flourish, then made faces at the mirror. He inspected the birthmark on his arm which was shaped like an ibis.
Don't go starin' 'n mirrors, my boy. We ain't the mirrorin' type, his mother told him, and only once.
She went over to the shelf inside the blind window, where there was an unusual amount of books lined up, considering it was a weaver's house. Anna Csepeli was known as a woman of letters, and her husband did also love books.
Of course the Bible started off the row, then the Cathecism, books of prayer, the Lamentations of Mary, the tales of the Radna pilgrimages, songs of mourning, *The Seven Holy Locks of Heaven* and other pious books—published by the Fürtös Brothers' Press, as well as Engel Adolf and Associates. There were stories hiding in almanacs—about Sándor Rúzsa, who they referred to only as the great peasant, and about the Dustville witches, bearded wolves, charred children, and the remorse of Gergely, who was chained to the rock; the story of the girl Genevieve, who gave birth to eleven children, but all at the same time, and other romantic and unromantic love stories. There was *The Remarkable Conversion and Somber Sighs of Marker Before the Punishment for His Act of Murder: authored by Jósef Nátly in Dustville, 1821, with Orbán Grünn's calligraphy.* This dime novel beautifully illustrates the story of a waiter wearing a blue frock with yellow copper buttons, who killed one of his guests in the Weekend Inn, and as this good soul had been among the nobility, the waiter was condemned to death by the sword. No eye remained dry when Master Slubas, Dustville's last executioner, said goodbye to his best friend, the waiter who had regarded his guests with such strong criticism:
Forgive me, my friend, it wasn' me that killed ye', but the law. And then there was *The Rare and Beautiful Story of the Heroic Warriors Florence and Lion with Marcebilla, the Turkish Princess,* and the latest acquisition, *Pali Ginger, or in Other Words Nine Innocent Dead. Written by Szorgán, a student.* On the cover, above the stack of eight coffins, ghosts are sitting in a circle around the imprisoned protagonist, holding out their bleeding severed heads. *As It Happened in Limp on the 21st of August in the Year 1890. Available at József Galamb Booksellers in Limp, Bocskai Street number 31. Plagarism punished acc. to 1884. Title XVI.* Anna Csepeli took this one down from the shelf.
Nobody liked poor Pali Ginger, they kicked 'im 'n slapped 'im from one place to 'nother. It was no su'prise he came to such pagan ends, she said, and then she started to sing the verse's astonishingly beautiful tune:

It is a sad thing for a mother who,
Bears a son onto the noose,
Though she give birth in good faith,
The gallows will remain his fate.

The child was so frightened that he almost gave his pants something to drink. Though the best was yet to come: the beautifully chilling verses retold each of the eight robberies and murders, starting with Bálint Förgeteg and his wife in Baks, then onto Borbála Balázs, a prostitute from Csömör, then István Tiskóczky, a Limp bartender. He even led a girl to the alter in Mindszent wearing clothes

stolen from one of his victims, but what brought him to the gallows was the murder of Léni Lőwy, the barmaid who had been the host of their reception, and whom he beheaded with an axe; and then onto the eighth in Szegvár, where he got off badly after the murder of a poor farm woman. He asked around for lodgings everywhere, but it seems he thought too little of kindness. He denied his guilt before the court: I'm as innocent as a dove. But nothing saved him from the noose. Once Pali Ginger was locked away, the ghosts of his victims appeared in his cell, holding onto their smashed severed heads.

Their heads they toss beside Ginger,
eat at his flesh, with their bloody fingers,
they take hold of Ginger, they squeeze,
only at dawn does this terror cease.

Oh, how the hair rose on his back! Palkó couldn't bear it any longer. He jumped from the stool into his mother's lap.

It will never be written on a man's face,
What rope may take him to his resting place.

Up next: New details, burial elegies, and the eulogies of the eight victims will be published next week, available at József Galamb Booksellers in Limp, as well as all the other stores where this issue has been purchased. And that's all, folks.
Just don't ye' ev'r get in trouble wit' the law, Anna Csepeli said, stroking the little boy's head. She drifted off into the story, then said softly: It's good to be anythin' but a mother. Her fat tears dropped down onto the child's face; she didn't know if she was mourning Pali Ginger, his victims or his mother, or perhaps even herself. Her tears were only quenched by the child's smile, which in Limp, for whatever reason, had been named the golden apple of little Jesus.

The guy's last move was to yank the steering wheel even farther to the right, but that just made us hit the truck front-on… The injured man acts out the scene with two matchsticks. They said the car ripped off the truck's grill, pushed it into the ditch, then flipped once and stopped in the middle of the highway. The match's label is advertising a soda brand named *Brand.* Its front end is scrunched up like an accordion.

It's a miracle you're still here, says the blonde and black-eyed man, his voice warbling a bit on the words. They're sitting on the bed in the injured man's room. The injured man stares at the hooks hanging down from the door frame; perhaps a child's swing hung there not long ago, tolling like a bell. Well, I'd better get to work, says the blonde. István, why don't you have any chairs in here? You can take one out of my room.

Thanks, but most of world's population don't even use chairs.

But you do.

Yeah.

The door closes. The injured man stands, goes over to the wardrobe next to the crib, the one with a diaper-changing table inside. He turns on the cassette player. The room is narrow, tall and dark. A few meters up, along one of the walls, there's a four-foot strip of green cardboard paper covered in pictures, drawings, photos, newspaper clippings, texts, and collages. The man stops underneath a French header: *Why are you waiting so impatiently for next week?* There's a picture taped above the white letters that shine bright against the black background: a sitting skeleton inspecting the head of a curly-haired person with a strong chin.

He can't bear the smell of pain, the man murmurs in the direction of the neighboring room. Love's death. God isn't interested in our accomplishments: he's interested in our wounds, he thinks. ... So keep on playing those mind games together, / Faith in the future outta the now, / You just can't beat on those mind guerillas, / Absolute elsewhere in the stones of your mind… Lennon's strained voice rises from the cassette player. The man is staring at another picture from close-up. I'm that plateau next to the lake in the middle of nothingness, he thinks. I built that cliff.

He lays down on the bed, his head rested against a graying pillow covered in the winding patterns of vines, two doves guarding a heart in the middle of the purple embriodery.

You wanted to kill us. If the belt on the bathrobe had been tighter...

István looks up at the swing's hooks. That was right after the hospital. That was before you talked to me, I was alone. Anyways, what does it matter if you rip out a page? Throw the whole book into the fire... If someone jumps out of a burning building, you might not necessarily call them suicidal. Maybe you don't have to cross the river where there's no bridge. The man covers his face with the pillow, he squeezes and squeezes.

Your scent is getting fainter.

It's just parfume, Tuba.

Why am I still here?

To suffer.

Why me?

Because you're good at suffering. Everybody worries about what's going on above them, but you don't. You know the suffering's up there, and not somewhere down here.

In one single motion, the man stuffs the pillow under his head and opens a large spiral notebook, covers it over his face. A blonde head appears in the doorway:

István, I'm going out to a friend's. If the phone rings, answer it. Later.

The synthesizer is stroked by string instruments- the sound of the guitar swallows the door's slamming.

And now ye' carry yer' man on yer' back, do ye'?! János Tóth pushed his wife to the side. The woman, not noticing her husband, had wanted to step into the house before him.

He referred to himself as Master Tóth, though János was only a peasant weaver, one of the men-of-flax-but-not-hemp types. Due to recurring bouts of malaria that came upon him at the most unexpected times, János Tóth did not handle field work well, and this is why he had learned his trade from Sándor Wolford-Bürgés, Dustville's weaver. It didn't matter that he was a member of the Limp Workers' Guild, the smiths, wheelwrights, ironworkers, carpenters, and ropemakers ruled over the collective, and it was only the guilds of our day that took him in as one of their members. He couldn't go to markets, and he couldn't take on apprentices: if there came an abudance of work, he had only his family to count on. True, he did not have to pay tributes. He spun everything himself: flax, cotton, wool, even leftover shreds. However, when he was making hemp clothes, he was only willing to weave with the hemp-yarn he had spun himself. Bedsheets, undershirts, underwear, shirts, towels, and blankets were produced by his handiwork, and he also made linens to go inside shopping or dough-baskets, even bread holders, not to mention all the cloth bags. Anger stirred within János, and he brought up Saint Severin with zeal, who despite the mix-up of his name was still the patron saint of weavers in Dustville and its surrounding areas. The Tóts made his head hurt, people from the region of Viharsarok. They showed up at Limp's weekly market more often nowadays, with their wear-proof nettle clothes, cheap bedsheets and undergarments. He had already seen enough of them: they flowed into the market square from Market Square sttreet like something from a novel.

If I'm talkin' to ye', then don't ye' jump up 'n down like a spark in six-week old ash. 'Cause I'll box yer' ears, like a begger hits a sack o' flour!

That bit of encouragement was directed towards the little Jancsi. And the kid did soon enter the workshop to spin balls of yarn, though first he shoved his little brother from the courtyard.

If I spin fifty bobbins, I can go play!

Now, that sounded promising. The two children even prayed silently: Lord Jesus, please let me go, let me be free soon!

I'm gonna spin Bora néni's, Palkó said. He heard that the truth-telling Bora Vas Ferkó had whispered: he spun the yarn onto a walnut.

About a half hour later, their mother came to work wit' 'em.

Ye' took a while wit' that cookin', her husband said. Annus, tha' vole sucked up the linen, he added. When the woman leaned over to pick up the bobbin, her dress stuck to her butt. The children laughed.

O' course, bein' a weaver's wife I gotta wear these ugly clothes. She would have liked a nice woven silk dress, or at least a muslin *blouse*.

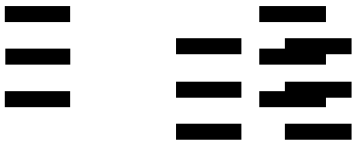
Ye' ain't a Turk, her husband muttered. He fiddled with the loom's pedals. Even if he tried, he could never forgive his wife for being a head taller than him. Ye' fell outta a peasant's cunt, like a priest's dog or a man who thinks he's a lord.

Palkó was now rolling his sixth bobbin, but he didn't find any walnuts in them, only rocks. The truth-telling Bora Vas Ferkó had gotten her name after her father, otherwise she would have been called Rosa Bud.

Story, story, story, please please please, he begged his mother in a sing-song voice, pouting his lip.

I ain't tellin' any tales now, Anna Csepeli said. Have yer' father tell ye' somethin'. He think' more

about what come’ out o’ his mouth than what goes into it!



István Zoltán is a man.
Man is mortal.
István Zoltán is dreaming.
He stumbles dreamily down the frosted street, to his workplace. Stares at the drunk voluntarily directing traffic, as if it were a rime-coated mare in the downtown avenue. He takes careful steps across the crackling ice, but he's stopped by a mound of earth. This ground is terrible, he thinks. You could only do sommersaults here. He gazes at the blind earth, stripped bare of its concrete clothing, the surrender born from the workers of the gas-company repairing the pipes.
This town is constantly falling apart, he concludes. He looks up, as much as his injured neck will allow him: he would like to see the army of doves, the wild pigeons. He stops next to the people waiting for the bus.
Back in the good old days, when plastic was still plastic!... Someone says behind him.
It's a general rule that if you go to the library and ask for the first volume of something, then it's already checked out, except when you want the second, says a short, chubby young man wearing a habor grey suit, white nylon shirt, and a bourbon necktie.
Papó, there's only one rule: nobody gives a shit about the reader, the man answers. The reader is nothing more than a rambling begger who wants to undo the shelves' balance and order. But we won't let that happen. He pulls out matches from two matchboxes sitting at the base of the curved tower of stacked-up newspapers, journals and periodicals. He counts fifty of them. When he's finished—István watches with increasing wonder—he squeezes them in his right fist and draws three clockwise circles. He takes one match from the pile and sets it to the side. With his left hand, he presses the match tips to his forehead, and he holds them there, transfixed.
What are you doing? István asks. He takes a paper from the top of the mound.
There's a large metal box on the table in front of him, with seventy rows of retractable drawers. Seventy times ten, that's seven-hundred. Seven-hundred magazines could fit in this alphabetical filing system. He takes out a newspapers's file from the row inside one of the drawers, writes numbers onto it, then slides it back into the plastic compartment and slams the drawer shut, smack. He draws symbols on the newspaper with a pencil, then sets it on top of the growing stack next to his right hand.
I'm asking for advice from I Tying.
From what?
Ji King. The Book of Changes.
I've heard of that. The great foundational work of Chinese Humbug.
Then you must not know it, my friend. The man's child-like face is soft as he calmly divides the matchsticks into two halves. Because then you'd know that it can put you in contact with great forces, the deeper channels that drive events and things.
Something is always going on, and nothing ever happens. István brushes his hair from his forehead. He's wearing a bread-brown suit. A kind of half-baked bread.
If you lose, you got lost, and if you follow, you find your metier, the other says. You aren't a robot.
And that's a problem?
I still have no idea, my friend. We'll see.

A rooster lays an egg on top of the barn roof, which way does it roll?
The person asked is a scrawny little boy with a tall head. He breathes in through his nose.
Which way? I dunno, left.
The response is sarcastic laughter. Roosters don' lay eggs, Lizard Head.
The little boy lowers his head. He's one of the bigger kids in elementary school, and he moved here just recently, from a vineyard called Rampage that lay six kilometers from the village. Now he lives on the faroff Nameless row on the outskirts of town.
Come on, Lali, Palkó Tóth says to him. Let's play ankles.
He presses the club into the boy's hand. They call this game 'ankles,' because they have to use a stake to strike down a piece of wood called 'The Ankle.' But mostly, they call it 'ankles,' because you can smack each other's bare feet throughout the game.
Particularly the ranger, who's tasked with guarding the piece of wood until he can stab one the boys racing after the tossed club. Shins are already reddish. Tears stream down faces, but they have to stay in the game. And who else would have been the ranger but Lali Czankó, the sickly little newcomer. And they would have stayed until the others got bored of the game. Because the bigger kids, Jani Tóth, Péter Vörös, and Józsi Galamb, liked this rough game better than any of the others, skipping buttons or bowling with bottles, 'racing snails' by reeling in a bobbin, even smack the gopher. However, the club that flew out of Palkó's hand struck Blind Tóni, otherwise known as Antal Hencsik, in the stomach as he was shuffling across the square. Both surprised and out of breath, Blind Tóni even forgot to swear. Everyone was fond of the village begger, who pretended to support the wife eight years his senior, and his lively children, too.
The boys ran away, and by the time they came back, they found a group of girls in their place. The girls were standing in a line; the two at the end questioning each other by singing:

Are you at home, bridgemaster?
At home am I, but I've just arrived.

The boys of course watched the girls. They already had an opinion about the game.

Let me go across your bridge!
Nay, I can't let you come, 'cause the bridge will fall down!
If it falls down, we'll grapple that!
How could you grapple this bridge?
With beads of rings and beading dew!
Where could you the find the beads of rings?
God would give me some from his right hand!

The bridge was made of two girls raising their arms up high, hands clasped together. The others were running beneath it when Józsi Galamb shouted: Ain' y'all so smart! His eyes were gleaming, and he

started to mock them: Friday’s longer tha’ Sat’rday! This was directed to the pretty Mári Jóska, a strong girl with a big chest. He liked the undergarment beneath her skirt.
Lil’ lady, ye’ farted out the window! Then said the ol’ lady: Oo, yer’ smelly, lil’ lady! Jani Tóth did not want to be left out of the mocking, either.
But the girls didn’t respond, and Jani and his friends drew off to play dodgeball. Only Palkó Tóth stayed: he watched the girls from underneath one of Market Square’s poplars. He was held captive by the sky-blue eyes of the Rácz family’s little Eszti, though the little girl was only in her fifth year. The Ráczs were wealthy, uppity peasants, even Palkó was aware of this. And still. A starling balanced at the top of the poplar and imitated a black finch, as if he were the greatest of all the lads—Palkó just stared at her eyes.
Let the great and famous Turks come! sounded the cry behind him, and just a second later his older brother hit him so hard with the braided leather football that it bounced right off his back.

The harvest began at the dawn of dawns in Pál Tóth's pub, at the corner of Black Street and Bercsényi Way (formerly Hatrongyos Way). The pub had no name, as the owner had no need for any nicknames, being in Limp's sea of Pál Tóths. As he did not add any water to his wine, nor his pálinka, he had no need for advertisements. The sign hanging on the door was meant to avoid unnecessary credit disputes:

Welcome my dear friend,
To the middle of the earth.
Ye don' believe me? Step in!
But have coins for what yer' worth!

There's always a pub for something in the middle of everything, and this nameless one just happened to be on the way for people who had business at the other end of town. There were never any fights here: the owner would personally knock out the offender. The biggest problem a person could ever have was that Pál Tóth told the story of King Mátyás and the prisoners of Limp a hundred times. When questioned by the Hungarians' most famous king, every prisoner but one declared they were innocent. Mátyás released that prisoner from the cell, may he not corrupt the other so-called 'innocents.'

Around the day of Visitation, on the first of June, and at the most grueling time of field work, Pali bácsi opened his bar at two in the morning. Here, he awaited the estate's wagons with their thirty harvesters, the scythemen and a matching number of gatherers. Every year, the leader of the harvesters was none other than János Tóth, the weaver, who was not only considered a good scythe picker, but could also bargain with the estate for a twelve of the produce—or, if a lot of wheat fell, maybe even a tenth of it. Both his sons were with him so that they could, well, learn the trade. So far Palkó had been a bigger believer in learning: he listened to the wandering Panka Káli néni with a gaping mouth. Panka Káli, the wife of the old bass player, was sure to complain about the old gypsy in the town hall that morning, because "it wasn' even an hour ago tha' the old drunk tried to have his way with me." He could watch Miska Pityóka bácsi, the rag-weaver who found his rightful place as a temporary musician playing the trombone. The man had fallen into a sweet sleep, leaned against his arm, almost like his brother Jani. But the best was listening to the truthful (or maybe not) Feri Pista bácsi. The wild old man was a reaper, though he was better known for his mouth.

When the Lord created the earth 'n the grass 'n the wheat, he started, while throwing back a glass of weak harvester's pálinka, tha's how he went wit' Saint Pet'r. Saint Pet'r say: Lord, my creator, well, what's it gonna be? It ain't like the rest of 'em! And then said the Lord: alright, let there be wheat. And he gave it his blessin'. But they'll cut us down! said the wheat. Multiply! the Lord answered. I's sufferin' in the heat 'n the cold! Multipy! 'M soakin' wet 'n freezin'! Multiply! 'M growin' up! Multipy! My eyes 'r burnin' out! Multiply! They're comin' at me wit' sharp irons! Multiply! They're cuttin' off my feet! Multiply! They're stackin' me together! Multiply! They're pickin' me apart! Multiply! They 're puttin' me under rock! Multipy! They're breakin' me seven times! Multiply! They're splittin' me up! Multiply! They're siftin' me! Multiply! They're rollin' me! They're cookin' me! Well, ye' better get smaller!

These stories made it worth getting up at the crack of dawn and walking barefoot across the

stubblefield. Because the two boys hadn't come here for the experience, but to carry water. Just like anything, carrying water wasn't only work, but a real science. Palkó had a three-liter jug, Jani a five-liter one, and that's how they carried the water to the thirsty from the tank on the ox-pulled wagon. The chaff on the stubbled ground hurt a person's heels, especially when one carried water after a reaper like Bearded Nandi Péter, whose scythe always just grazed, or in other words, he never cut straight. There were also harvesters like Márk Borsa Mezei Kopasz, one of the more zealous reapers, who could drink three liters of water in one shot. But of course there were also things one could take joy in. For example, if someone laid down to rest in the wheat and found a quail's nest. Jani wanted to try pouring water into the hole, but Palkó didn't want their stores to go to waste.

At the noon bell, the scythes stopped swinging, they did not walk their crossways, nor gather or stack. With their hats off, the reapers sat on the bundles and recited the Angelus. By the time they had finished praying and had drawn crosses not only over themselves, but all the fields, too, the estate's wagon was parked next to the plot, stocked with a thick, hearty dish of egg barley and bacon. Thank God the earth wasn't screaming with holes, and the bailiff wasn't stupid: he knew well that if the food were weak, the scythe wouldn't cut. The gathers took off their used gloves made from stockings which they had tied up above their elbows, and they let down the sickles, too. The swathers tied the big bundles they'd already started around their waists and settled down under the mulberry tree.

The surest sign of lunch was that Blind Tóni's son and single-minded Mita emerged from the shadows. Mita could pack away two or three times as much food as the harvesters. They didn't say anything to him; as he was gentle, they let him do whatever he wanted. Once he'd stuffed himself full, Mita would lie down in the cool grass and sleep until snacktime. When he sensed the scythes swinging, he scooted off to the side, dropped his pants, and gave life to such an enormous shit that the truthful (or not) Feri Pista bácsi's half-blind dog started barking.

And no matter how many times a person carried around the jug of weak, sour wine, so that the harvesters wouldn't crave water, the cry came more and more often as the day wore on:

Water! Water!... So that ye' grow as tall 's yer' father's hemp! And then of course one had to run, because you could not slide your feet across the earth, the wheat's wicked stems left such wounds on a person's heels that tears would run down his face. They just sprinkled sand over the wounds, and that was it. While the tetanus vaccine had been invented that year, in 1897, no one within the limits of Limp had ever heard the news. True, tetanus wasn't an everyday thing.

It sometimes happened that the two Tóth boys went in front of the oxen. When Palkó saw the wagon, he jumped from the wheat with joy. But the oxen became frightened, the water tank slipped backwards, the faucet broke, and there went the water. The harvesters could shout if they wanted, the children just shouted back:

Ye' can still drink, but only from the tread marks!

János Tóth, the leader of the band, who was thinking about the additional money he would make from the bargain, suddenly appeared, and without any unnecessary questions, he beat the shit out of his sons. He made sure they received an equal measure. And when the two children got their share of earnings from the work, he also divided that evenly: neither boy got anything.

The Chain bridge is covered in flags, and he leans over the railing at the spot where the police will one day close off both ends and arrest the protestors trapped there. Bastards, they aren't wearing their metal badges, the ones that change every year and separate the official demonstrators from the people wearing homemade cockades. The rubber batons fall, thump, bones vibrating, curses swirling into the sky, IDs flying into the Danube, slamming doors of patrol vans—but now the wind is only bringing soft murmurs from the mandatory national celebration at the Petőfi statue. A boat passes directly under him, and he watches the waves rushing against the shore, thinks about the river's mouth at the base of the red flags, and those banners of the nation's colors.
Pest is on the right side of the Danube, he thinks, why do I always believe such bullshit?
Because Dustville is on the left side of the Tisza, sweetheart. From there you look out at New Dustville. And here, Buda is in Dustville's place. Buda is on the right side.
I'm never going to remember this. Of course you are.
Why do you always know everything?
Because. Zhao Fan built the world's first bridge across the Yangzte river in less than three days. He didn't stop to ask questions.
He turns his back to Margaret Island.
Two secret police appear wearing cockades that hang all the way down to their bellies. I've lived twenty-five years for nothing, he mutters.
The Danube's promenade is scoured by passerbyers. He moves with them, turns onto a side street.
And our three months?
Okay, fine: I've lived twenty-four years and nine months for nothing... István stops at the corner and looks back.
I didn't go into work today. I don't miss them taking my ID.
That's what they call cowardice.
I call it forward-thinking.
Whoever wishes to burn every bridge behind him should be a very good swimmer.
He walks towards Proletarian Váci street, where he lives. The locals call the stretch from Kossuth Lajos street to Market Hall, with all its run-down buildings and smoking cars, 'that bougie street down there.' A wild fox wanders about in the forest of tires. István stops in front of the building, where he lives: he always looks into the caner's window. Next to a couple of pictures of canings, there's a header written with an ink pen: FURNITURE, ROCKING CHAIRS, CANINGS MADE FROM IMPORTED VIENAMESE MATERIALS. The old caner woman asks for an obscene amount of money for her import Vienamese goods. She can: she's the only one in town that does it. The store, or rather the building, is incredibly run down. He stops in front of the shop window because of the "rocking chair" header. He had a rocking chair when he was a kid, he used to travel far whenever he sat in it.
He steps into the dark, piss-stained stairwell. Rusting mailboxes, large human feces on the stairs. There's an eye in the slit of the door on the left side of the first level.
One of these days I'm going to blow smoke into the old lady's eye, he vows.
He stops in front of the bathroom door in the long and spacious entryway. SILENCE! GENIUS AT WORK. This is his sign, it's only made of paper, but he's proud of it. He's less proud of the sign that reads *separate entrance.* His room is narrower than the entryway.
His first move is to turn on the cassette player. He lays on the bed with partially-closed eyes. There's an open book on his chest, this phrase sleeping within it:
Sufferers have a lightening bolt on their foreheads, and even the greatest of sins shudder from it.
Chords, words spring from the cassette player, like lashes of a whip. …I don't believe in magic, I don't believe in I Ching, I don't believe in the Bible, I don't believe in tarot… His Adam's apple moves up and down, but he doesn't cry. …I don't believe in Buddha, I don't believe in mantra, I

don’t believe in Gita, I don’t believe in yoga…
Your scent left the pillow. Or your perfume, to be exact. Perfume is a dangerous thing. Last time, I almost fell out of the bus. A woman had stolen your scent. Those fashion perfumes... They steer men by their noses.
You can hide in smells, too. Ever thought of that? He winds the cassette back to the song’s beginning, the Beatles’s familiar sound: …God is a concept by which we measure our pain…
He stands in front of the bookshelf.
To be honest, I’m only interested in dictionaries. I’d be happiest if I didn’t read anything else.
The worst ones are still better than nothing, and the best aren’t exactly... Let’s say, what words would you choose for a schoolwork essay about “The most unexpected thing that ever happened to me”?
Passenger vehicle ram into, approach, freight truck. Someone lies me down, barricade, dead; passenger vehicle, like an accordian, scrunch; freight truck, turn in, ditch. The. Car turns, stop, middle. Zotye, see, me, go, Pest, the traffic, stop. I, don’t, remember, when, I, stand, I, remember, already, standing, feel, rain, fall. Wipe, my, forehead, my, palm, don’t, know, my, skull, open. I, don’t, feel, pain. Say, to, oneself, fall, the, rain. I, look down, see, my, clothes, bloodsoaked. I, ask, why, stand, here, all, these, people. My, eye, like, a, camera, I, don’t, hear, first. I, see, a, silent film, a, ruined, car, in, the, highway, center. Think, inside, the, car, nobody, alive. Go over, see, you, the, back, seat. See, your, face, again, lost, my, consciousness.
The bell rings. At first he doesn’t believe it, he’s so caught up in his composition. They ring again, longer, louder. Then once more. He knows his roommate is out of town, and as he goes to open the door, he’s expecting something bad. His three coworkers are standing in the doorway. Two junior clerks and a girl from archives. The lanky guy goes by Pali, he finished his degree two years ago at a technical school; he has onion-shaped glasses, and would like to become a sociologist. András has only got a high school diploma, he has been rotting in the library for years; he’s a short boy, his face covered in pockmarks. He wants to be a writer, but for now all he has is a penname: P. (Pothead) Logky—perhaps inspired by P. Howard’s legion of novels. He doesn’t know the girl’s name: her front teeth jut out from too much thumb sucking, almost like those of a rabbit, and her hearty laugh makes spirals, like a woman living in a Czech novel.
Hey. We thought we’d come and visit you, whether you’re sick or not. Papó gave us the address.
Come in.
A plate of toppings, bread and a bottle of Silvaner. The girl with rabbit teeth and a child-like body presses the plastic bag into his hand.
I’m not sick. I’m just waiting.
Le foire n’est pas sur le pont, Pali says. The show has not yet begun. No, it hasn’t, I.Z. says, relieved.

Nobody should think that attending a village's one-roomed schoolhouse wasn't one of life's great adventures. That is, if one were to end up with a teacher like Dénes Csöngey, a blonde but balding man with worn clothes and fiery black eyes. He didn't even earn a Krohne per day, but the man instilled so much faith, knowledge, and love of country into the children's hearts, one would think he got handfuls of gold for his work. He was coarse sometimes, like Limps's bulrushes, particularly if the flatland's wine had caught up with him. Even if he cut down the lazy with his words, he did this all with love. From first to sixth grade, every child of Limp was taken under his wing, with the exception of Mad Mita.

He had a less scientific approach regarding penmanship, though it was an extremely effective one. Back then, each year's new curriculum was not divised by some money-hoarding politician who hadn't seen a classroom since elementary school. With Mr. Csöngey, every child learned the alphabet by singing and moving their hands. He taught the letter *K* by having the delinquents put their hands to their forehead with open fingers. You'd have to imitate a rooster's crest, and then use your other hand to press its beak to your nose—Cock-a-doodle-doo! For the letter *R*, you'd have to pull on the clohes of a brand new sailor sailing in the seas of science—ragged clothes—for the letter *H*, you'd have to breathe over your fingers like it was winter, because of course back then one's children did not have gloves. The schoolmaster built the students' irreparable need for movement into his lessons. No illiterate, nor half-illiterate (or, as the children would say, immiteralate) ever escaped his grasp, unlike in *today's* schools. Every child in his class was able to read syllable-by-syllable before Christmas. Like this: Mo-ses was not on-ly the first saint, but one the first wri-ters. But ac-cord-ing to the more ge-ne-ric un-der-stand-ing, a man named Tha-oth or Thoth in-ven-ted it, be-fore Mo-ses-'s mast-'ry of wri-ting was dis-cov-'red.

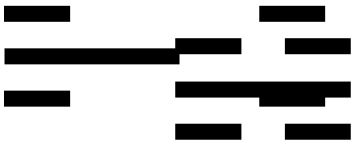
Oh, did Pal-kó Tóth love this per-son named Thoth, who e-ven wrote his name al-most the same way. He did not know that this person was considered an ancient Egyptian god, and that we have him to thank him for mathematics, geometry, astronomy, tarot, backgammon, and games with dice. Neither could he have known that Shennong was working with hemp 2,737 years before Christ. But when the schoolmaster had once asked the third-graders why we produce hemp, he raised his hand with an answer.

If there ain't no hemp, there ain't any underwear!

This was, of course, perfectly understandable coming from the mouth of a weaver's son. However, when Péter Vörös from the fourth grade was unable to name all the bodies of water in Csömör county, Mr. Csöngey started to pay close attention to the little pupils. He knew the rivers, the Tisza, the Mureș, and the Körös, but he did not know the creeks, nor the lakes. Come here, now, come up fron', don't waste ya' time tryin' to digest that map. Who knows, childr'n? One of the methods of the one-room schoolhouse was that, while one class received a verbal assignment, the rest would have a slate and chalk in their hands. But if someone managed to get through school with divided attention, he or she could jump grades according to their knowledge. Palkó went over to the map and started to recite:

The creeks. The Tőkei Creek, the Veker Creek, those 'r above Szentes, the Mágocs Creek on the edge of Mágocs, and then there's the Kurca and the Kórógy Creeks on the edges of Szentes and Szegvár and Mindszent, the Dong Creek and the Little Tisza on the edge of Limp, yeah and then the Dry Creek at Hódmezővásárhely. The lakes: White Lake, Csaj Lake, Gorse Lake, and Beaver Lake... That's enough Palkó. A+.

That wasn't only something that Pista Sisák heard, who was too old for the classroom, nor Lali Czankó, the stupidly good student with a tall head; Eszti Rácz would also hear that one year later, if she came to school. (Palkó's only grief was that the girls had to sit in a separate row.) Soon János Tóth and his wife would know this, too. János Tóth brought up his children to be good writers, and he considered school important, because once they finished, they could become apprentices. They should also be able to vote. Mr. Csöngey encouraged the parents that by all means they should give their God-given son as a priest, because in Bible studies, as well as oral and analytical exercises, he was particularly outstanding. However, the real teacher of souls seemed to regard the matter differently.



Wounded souls are asylums, moss-covered and damned—your name is a library. Papó gets there first. He’s got out his Chinese, fortune-telling matchsticks. Papó was educated as a pianist. Working side-by-side, they lean over the journals’ filing cabinets, called Kardex in Hungarian; this system—as they both know—could be done much more efficiently by a computer. Papó is one of the good-willed colleagues, along with the two errand boys, the only people who are a rung below István, and who don’t resent him for it. Papó speaks riddles all day long, and he licks tape while he does it. At most, he tells stories about playing four hands with himself and a cassette player, but that’s all. Their supervisor was born a librarian; a quiet, good-humored person with shiny, back-combed hair and innocent blue eyes. He wears a long brown coat, like an employee in a supermarket. He’s a historian, and has already published one book. He even pretends not to notice when István and the two junior clerks hold mini soccer tournaments between the desks with a tennis ball. Ah, and István no longer comes into work dressed in a suit, he wears a courderoy jacket that is reminiscent of a blazer.

The problems start with the assistant supervisor. Gizi is a refined old woman with hollow cheeks and feminine make-up, but during the coffee breaks—which start at ten and sometimes last until lunchtime, and which István never participates in—she presides over the best gossip. Supposedly, she’s the director’s trusted person, but she’s not that pretty, so in other words, she’s a snitch.

Berci bácsi is retired help, full of an acceptable amount of unnecessary latin quotes, always in a long blazer. These are requirements of an old bourgeouis world, which seem to have come to a definitive end. He talks down to everyone, especially István, the newcomer. If they ever spoke of a person who was more famous than him, it would soon turn out that they had been Berci’s student, or one of his colleagues in the Lyceum. He spoke most often about a famous scholar. Arnold Zengőváry, my student and friend, always used to ask me... And then we learn how Berci bácsi had redirected him on his scholarly paths.

Across from him sits an ugly girl with curly hair and eyes the color of vegetable stew, who managed her position due to her parents’ influence. She’s preparing for trade school, and making István in love with her, though there’s always a young man with big, droopy ears waiting for her after work. Ákos, the fragile and unbelievably knowledgable humanist, is the right hand of the boss when it comes to acquiring new books, and he can hardly disguise his reproach for István and his work. Sometimes he stops next to István’s workbench, and says things like:

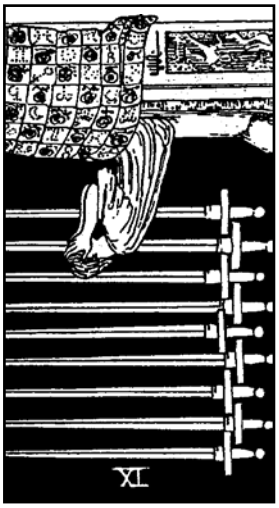
Whoever think he’s irreplacable should go home and fill the bathtub, then stick his finger in it, pull up the drain, and watch if there’s still a hole afterwards. István tries to be rather humble with them, but he has other bosses, too. In the journals section there are two women. One is blonde, forties, a desirable female. Whenever she’s looking for something in the Kardex, she leans over István with her pretty, round breasts, and enjoys the young man’s discomfort. She’s like the sort of bird that pretends to whistle, then settles down on the window’s wide frame, watches whoever’s working themselves to the bone, then flies away at one glance.

The supervisor of the journals section is a lean, energetic woman. Her whole life is being a librarian. The first week,when she showed István around the building, she grabbed his shoulder, looked deep into his eyes, and said to him: You need to be aware of the path these materials take once you’ve directed them. To make things simple, let’s consider you a magazine. Alright?

Let’s not, István said, and he stepped out of her grip.

She hasn’t shown the man the honor of speaking to him ever since. István is humble and willing to no avail, and will continue to be, as long as he can’t pronounce that simple, magic word: we.

Like that.



The year started with János Tóth and Sándor Csepeli, the Handsome Gyurkó, taking a trip to Sövényház, on a matter regarding a horse. Only the weaver returned. They'd drank pálinka on the way there, and on the way back. On the return trip, the Handsome Gyurkó insisted that he would not take one more step. The weaver begged him to no avail. He said he would sleep there. János Tóth had only enough strength to bring himself home. The Handsome Gyurkó fell into a deep sleep: they found him frozen on the side of the road. That day they let his horses free, stopped the clocks in the house, covered the mirrors, and put out the fire. Palkó and his older brother gazed suspiciously at the candlight in the window. The death had been forewarned only by a rooster's crowing, and they had not taken it seriously: they had cut it up and cooked it.

The Reaper also crept close to Palkó—but what child hasn't avoided him at least once. Palkó had always been a crier when he was little; if his father did as much as say a harsh word to him, he would burst into tears. According to the Truth-Telling Bora Vas Ferkó, there were spells, maledictions in the child, and this is why she boiled poppies and their seed pods in blessed water, which she'd brought into the house by daylight, and which was protected by charms. Palkó got this sugary dish. And he slept for three whole days. His mother raced up and down for whatever she could find, besides the doctor, because they didn't have the money for that. Two wandering Chinese physicians appeared in the village, and they healed him with smoke and sticks, but all they knew of Hungarian was: Foga pá, cöme pá. The weaver chased them from the house.

Ye' shouldn' 've poured out the kid's bathwater when it was dark, that's all the Truth-Telling Bora Vas Ferkó had to say. On the fourth day, Palkó woke, and he asked for something to eat.

It's as if all my limbs were broken, he said.

There was bigger a problem when the neighbor, Mihály the Hustler (whose nickname gives away everything), convinced the child to dig in the well in exchange for a large Füzér carp. Palkó knew that his father lived and breathed for seafood: he gobbled it up like a seal. The neighbor had already drafted the water from the well; he let the child down in a bucket. Palkó dug and dug, and he sent the dirt back up faithfully, but he became colder and colder. The water was starting to seep out from the earth more and more, so Palkó started to yell:

Let me up, Misa bácsi, the Lord's cold 's gonna take me!

But the neighbor was only inclined to pull the child up when he was standing knee-deep in water.

By nightfall Palkó had developed a fever, and he started to recite the topography of Csömör county, along with its lakes and rivers. He let out barking coughs. They immediately sent his older brother to get Bora Vas Ferkó, who had not lost any of their respect in spite of the poppy incident: it was obvious that in her ferver, Anna Csepeli had given him too large a dose. The midwife, who was considered a healing woman in the village, did not want to be shamed shamed any longer. With all her equipment ready, she made her advance. First, she boiled white canine feces, and she gave that to the child, who was now speaking feverish nonsense. Once he drank it, he became silent for a while. The innocent found that the raw egg yolks mixed with sugar and a burned sugar broth was quite tasty. Then came the tea steeped with orange mullein. This is the weed which informs us how long the winter will be, before June hits, and also tells us which part will be the most wicked. The orange mullein did not give any hints as to how long Palkó would stay in bed. On the day of Our Blessed

Mary, they gave him a drink of sainted spicy somborka peppers and a kind of mint.
The coughing did not stop. It did stop with licorice, as the child sucked on this gleefully. But then, like Géza Nemaz Szellő's dog, he started to bark again, and the cold made him shiver. He got these stews in the following order: blue lily, chamomile flowers, white horehound, walnut leaves, acacia and elderflower. Then came the milk-boiled garlic. Then the carrot soup. Then tea cooked with corncob, though the patient was not eager to swallow it. The truth-telling Bora Vas Ferkó tried smelly liver stone, even though she had only kept this for cases of rheumatism. Then she brought in products meant for healing, even antimonic persulphide, but the house shook even more from the coughing. And finally, the healing woman tried out the wonder she knew from her childhood home: oat straw cooked in milk with rancid bacon and sweetened with carrot sugar. And that did help. The patient was out of his bed in less than two weeks.

That day, the assistant director called István into his office. He was a gray-eyed man who always wore a gray coat fit for prison. Despite his name, Péter Pál Bronz, he had fiery red hair, such scarlet that one might think it was a wig. But who wore balding wigs? His skin was an innocent shade of pink, like a child's, but his voice was like an untuned double bass. He spent most of his time in the large catalogues room, so that he could expand his notes and journal entries about stray forms of literature, sometimes writers. In other words, he scribbled down at least one note for every French or Hungarian writer named "Peter" (Péter) or "Paul" (Pál). Bronz was also a mouthpiece for literature, and he liked to build bridges between works. His particular theory involved the never before seen footbridge between Proust and Zsigmond Móricz. To his own bad luck, the only one of his passionate works to remain in public knowledge was a 1952 anthology of Hungarian writers, composed with a bronze-dipped pen: *To Mátyás Rákósi, for the sixtieth birthday of our beloved leader.* This was equally painful because there was only one Péter and one Pál in it—defying all his editorial efforts. Then in the seventies, he destroyed every copy, even those found in libraries.

You're new here, and you're still always late, he says to István. Even while sitting, he holds onto his thin, bone-tipped bamboo cane.

You think you're so noble, but you're groping the rabbit-toothed girl in the back of the archives, István thinks, though he says nothing. Every morning, the workers have to sign an attendance sheet in the coatroom. The employees try to write in their arrival as having been a few minutes earlier, so that some of the notorious latecomers can also report themselves as having arrived before eight. At a quarter past eight, the attendance sheet is already on the assistant director's (according to a few brave whisperers, the real director's) desk. If someone was to write down, say, 8.01, he or she would have to explain to the assistant director via telephone the reason for being late. In grave cases, like István's, they called the person into their office.

Listen, son... what's your name again?

Zoltán.

No, I asked for your first name.

That's István.

The deep grooves on the asst. dir.'s forehead are hedged in by colorless eyebrows.

Now, look: you're still an intern here. As I know, you haven't even finished your state exams...

That's only a matter of months, Mr. Assistant Director, if I may say.

Tell me, do you live far from here? That oily, unctuous voice!

István is silent. The aparment on Proletarian Váci street is five corners away from the library, if one were to take a shortcut. That was one of the reasons they hired him.

No, he says softly.

This was your last verbal warning. Don't even think of a raise. The skin becomes taut on the asst. dir.'s withered neck. We take our holiday on March 15th, no?

Bronz taps his cane onto the floor, signaling that the hearing is over. I apologize, Mr. Assistant Director. István bows. It won't happen again. I promise. Goodbye.

The assistant director doesn't say goodbye; he acts as if he were reading. He has been pretending to work his whole life.

Some people read simply because they are too lazy to think. This thought occurs to István as he traipses shamefully down the stairs. He'd even spit on himself. He takes out a packet of tranquilizers, then buries them in his pocket. Interesting, I always have a bad day if I don't have some kind of music in my ear. Many mornings he woke—after drinking until midnight—humming a song to himself.

However silly that song might be, an operetta, cuplé, folk ballad, chastushka, working song or musical rhyme—he couldn't free himself of it throughout the later parts of the day: he'd hum or whistle to himself either in his head or quietly out loud. He was lucky if some kind of rock song got

stuck in his head, from the morning's radioshow. He steps out into the bright noonday. The wind is blowing like some kind of fake triumphant song about in the working class, the sort they play on May 1st, while on the other side of the street, an advertisement post is making love to one of its posters. István can't take his eyes of it, he cries out. Someone stepped on his foot, a young man with a moustache, curly hair, a shallow forehead, and glowing eyes.
Hey, Gall! he shouts with joy, and he smiles at the man, embracing him. Gall is one of those friends who'd stick through anything, ever since they both lived in Dustville, the capital of Csömör county. They'd even come up to the city together to find work.
Two chaffed chaps, they'd hit the fields, but they've got no yields... You remember, Isti?
Of course. Just forget the Isti already.
I was in the area, so I thought I'd wait for you. Even librarians have to eat at noon.
They stop in front of the Kárpátia restaurant.
No, Gall, not here. I took my lunchbreak here on my first day. Then I ate rolls from the Jégbüfé with whatever I could find, for a whole month. If Gall saw a bum emptying ash trays, or taking glasses back to the bar, he'd open a bottle of wine and order him something off the menu. He could do that: Gall has a degree in chemistry, but he works a gas station attendant. He makes as much as five chemists, but if he were to really break his way into the state's system of gasoline coupons, he'd make as much as ten. But he doesn't say anything right now, he leaves everything to his long-lost pal. In order to make a friend, we have to close one eye, and in order to keep them, we must sometimes close both. A friend is a person with whom a person can finally feel like a person. And so, he says:
We'll go wherever you want. I'm working in Vác now.
And so they went. Meandering towards the Ferencs' church.
Hey, Gall! You won't believe it, last time I was at the Kígyó Street bus station, I saw a girl on the other side of the street that was exactly like Kati, even how she talked. And she had the same coat!
And she said something to you? Gall knew the girl, he knows the details of the car accident.
No.
Did you?
Me neither.
I thought so. Where are we going?
Ibolya, on the other side. It's a bar, but you can eat there, too. And it's cheap.
I think Csendes is our place. Heads or tails?
Doesn't matter. I'll win, either way.
Come on, choose!
Heads and tails.
I've had enough with you. Mine's heads.
He tosses a fifty-cent coin. The Elizabeth bridge is on the back, the regime's pride and joy, the symbol of the glorious squander of the sixties, Europe's only white-colored bridge, and the widest. Of course, Gall wins.
They manage to take two steps along Kossuth Lajos street when somebody stops them. A pig-nosed man with watery-blue eyes, who wears a cap to hide premature baldless. He's the type that looked into the mirror once as a kid: seeing and falling in love with himself was a single moment's work.
Hey. Hi guys. You're still alive, Isti?
As you can see.
Rőzner, who started as a writer and then went into film, is someone they know from Dustville. He had a film there once, and they became friends. Rőzner claimed to have bonafide Dustville roots, that all the Förgetegs are his relatives. You could read that family name in one of Ferenc Móra's works. He slaps István's shoulder with genuine surprise on his face.
I was talking with somebody who saw you under a sheet on the side of the E 5.
The guy wasn't lying.
I'll get you guys a beer at the University bar, alright?
The other two look at each other: Rőzner inviting someone for a drink, that had never happened

before.
The bar only belongs to the queers at night. During the day, it's like any other establishment of socialist hospitality: Eastern Europe's unique combination of a bar, coffee and cake shop.
I'm drinking Unicum, Rőzner says on the terrace, like he's excusing himself. You know, because of my stomach.
The other two sip "Premium Quality" *Budapest* beers with stone faces.
So you say you're a librarian, Rőzner states, in between his second and third shot of bitters. A library! Gordianus the junior had two-hundred and twenty concubines and a library of sixty-two thousand books—both just him showing off.
István doesn't answer. Gall, who has just reread *The Little Golden Calf* for the fortieth time in an attempt to be like Bender Ostap, says:
Whoever doesn't read good books has nothing against an illiterate.
Good book—bad book! Rőzner sticks out his lower lip, and like a real Pestian, he speaks from the corner of his mouth, in a confiding and fastidious manner. Softly, like a conspirator. There were times I lived from my books, and times I lived for them. They don't even ask for my ID in book shops anymore.
At least writing a bad book takes as much effort as a good one, István says, looking Rőzner in the eyes.
Why, you've written a book?
I haven't. (Once, years after Rőzner's first book was published, he bought all five copies he had found at a train station in the countryside, and sent them to him.)
How about we write a book together?
Silence. He still seems to be a nobody from nowhere, a fan in the eyes of the hauty, cigarette-smoking man whose face is swollen from all the alcohol. The only thing interesting about him is that he's still alive. But how can that be used to his advantage?
And that beautiful girl, my friend, Rőzner says while tossing back his fourth spiced liquor, she died on the spot. Sick! How old was she?... Hsss! You still love her, or what?... He blows the smoke over the two of them. To be honest, I'm actually jealous. You're one to be jealous of, really. That girl had some kind of special gift... She could really knock a person out!
Should I flip over the table, or just slap him in the face. Though I wouldn't dare, István thinks. Gall, however, reads faces better than books. He wraps his arm around his friend, flipping the chair backwards. You filthy fake, István hisses.
Thanks, Rőzner. Gall tosses money onto the table. Forget about us. The man with watery blue eyes gazes into the wicked contents of his glass, a grimace on his blade-thin lips. Gall pushes his friend away.
He's a good guy, he says. You should be friendly with those types. Anyways, he doesn't have it all together, he says. His words bite, but there's a smile in his eyes.
The poor cook with only water, and become friends with their enemies, István says.
Gall lights a cigarette.
I'd rather be the guy that bought Rottenbiller street than the guy who sold it, he says.
And Ostap Bender, the king of frauds? The 7 bus stops next to them.
I think he knew it too, deep down. Are you coming?
Wise men hide weapons in the grass, and wait years, István thinks. My lunch break is over. I've got to get back to the library.
Then take five. That's Gall's substitute for a handshake.
Bye, Gall. Call me!
Gall waves back at him.
He dies in a car accident six months later. He leaves behind a child, a downtown apartment, and four short stories written in secret.

IMAGE: THE ARCHBISHOP

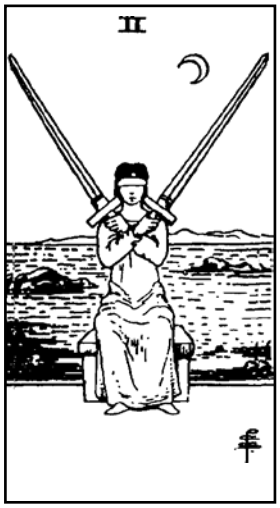
With the exception of Father Miklós's approval, everything else was in order for Palkó becoming a priest. He knew the Bible even better than his grandmother, the holy Rozália Zagarits, and he had catechisms seeping out of him. He woke reciting his prayers to the hours, one representing the Father, two the faith, three the Holy Spirit, four the angels taking Mary to heaven, five Christ's wounds, six the resurrection, seven Christ's seven words about the cross, eight the eight aims of joy, nine the arms of the angels, ten the Ten Commandments, eleven Christ's work among the grapes, and twelve the Last Supper. He liked saying prayers, but he liked the priest's flashy clothes even better. And, how even the nobles kissed the priest's hand. He liked Father Mikló's stole, which they threw over an epileptic, and then the seizure stopped. And the tassle on his wrist had such a good smell whenever a person kissed his hand. He tried to learn everything he could about priests. For example, he learned a very clever riddle from Jozefa Angyal, the begger woman sitting in front of the church:
A man, who was not a man, went into a garden, which was not a garden. He hit a bird, which was not a bird, so hard with a rock that it fell from a tree. The tree was not a tree. What was it?... Well, it was a priest, a cemetery, a flindermouse, a stone, and a cross.
His father, who was likewise full of hallelujahs, and always drawing crosses over himself, taught him: Ya' can never fill a priest's wallet, nor his stomach. And, he learned from Lali Czankó:
What's the difference between a priest and a sausage? A sausage 's tied up on both ends, but ya' only tie up the priest in the middle. However, it was without a doubt that he learned the most from Father Miklós himself, who did, yes, seem to be rather meek about tasting the Lord's blood: he always lifted the cup if the holy wine had been poured for him. Palkó kept a better watch than anyone over the relics that Father Miklós had acquired for Saint Stephen's church. The rocks and other objects of suspicious origins that filled in the cross's grooves alongside the glass. Such as:
Snails from Mount Carmel, where the prophet Elijah once lived. Rocks from Jesus's cell. A wreath from the Mount of Olives, where Christ ascended to heaven. Rocks from Emperor Constantine's church. Rocks from where Saint Helena found Jesus's cross. Rocks from Lazarus's grave. Rock from Saint Ignatius's coffin. Rocks from Saint Phillip and Saint Jacob's grave. A piece o' wood from Saint Paul's Pillar, the one they lashed 'im on. Yeah, and rocks from Saint Augustine's church. Palkó's faithfully believed that Father Miklós had acquired these invaluable treasures from pilgrims of the holy lands. He liked being in an alter-boy's clothes and ringing bells in the mass, but his favorite thing was saying Christ's psalms at the end:

It is now dark, so listen my souls
If you are asleep, awake!
The blessings are over, indeed the whole
mass, now only the road you will take.

He didn't like that the believers whistled on their way out of the church. Father Miklós often said

to him: When does the Hungar'an have one desire? One, when he play' cards, 'cause he want' to win. Two, when he want' to leave the church, 'cause everyone want' to get out first.
He and Father Miklós got along real well, just that incense! Palkó could not stand the smell. And he was horrified of burials, particularly if they were burying a small child. His dizziness from the incense became more frequent, and it started to become noticable to the congregation. The old women started to whisper about spells, because they knew that Satan was terrified of incense. However, it was an ordinary Sunday, on the third day of Lent, when Father Miklós's cup became full upon finishing the village's sermon. He was asking a young boy questions with honeyed words, inquiring about the depth of the farmer boy's faith.
My sweet chil', how do ya' start the Lord's holy day?
I go outside, 'n take a real big shit.
Now now, my chil'. I was wantin' to know if ya' prayed. 'N what does yer' father do?
My da'? He just stretch 'imself out 'n fart.
Father Miklós was losing his patience, but he came up with a plan to save the situation:
And what is the first thing yer' father says to yer' dear mother on the holy Sabbat'?
Wellllllll, the little boy stretches out the word, 'n he says, should I fuck ya', or sheld I knead some bread?
Palkó laughed so hard, he even set off the churchbell. And that bell was the farewell to his career as a priest. Oh, but Good Lord, those words! He was sure it was exactly how the child had said it.
I woul' believe that maybe those pagans woul' burn down the' neighbor's house, just to know if the bells in Rome were ringin', but that somebody'd laugh in such a savage, despicabl' way, I would'na dare have though' it!
Those were Father Miklós's parting words. Palkó could no longer wear the pleasant-smelling clothes of an alter boy. For weeks, he moped. His father, who had many sins to pray off, said matter-of-factly:
God's bett'r tha' a hundred priests, remember tha'!

Line two



The children really shook up the dirt on Duck street: they sure did have to run a lot in their game, which was called méta, and whose closest relatives are baseball and cricket. But what was this cloud of dust compared to Limp's rainfall? Those who had experienced its standstorms over the years said that it arrived with wind like a stronghorse. Like those three lil' figures who stepped determinedly across Dustville's road, sometimes called Goose street in confidence, before the floods that swallowed up the town.

We goin' far wit'out bread? This question sounded from underneath a frosty handlebar moustache, on a bench in front of a house decorated with sun beams.

Just right here, 'fer Mr. Becsey's scythes, answered a person of Limp, who had straw pinned to the side of his hat. And they indeed stopped in front of the next house, where the storm-battered and sun-baked scythe advertised the blacksmith's fame.

Can I watch the game? asked the kid, who was shaped more like a short man.

Ye' can watch, came the answer.

I think I'm gonna follow my heart 'n buy tha' scythe, said the younger man. The pieces of straw rustled in his hat. They only put out the good ones.

It's half rust'd 'n the back, said the other with a bat of his hand, and he stepped into the house.

The man with straw in his hat followed him: he had not invited János Tóth to pick a scythe because he had been so sure of himself. The weaver, who lived better from his respects and earnings as a leader among the harvesters, waited for the blacksmith to appear—a man who had in fact never heard of the modernist writer, Kálmán Mikszáth, but did know Mr. Tóth rather well.

We came to look at 'em scythes," János Tóth said to greet him. Which meant: But it ain't certain we'll buy one!

Well, then take a look around, said the trader, and he went back into the storage room. His nerves were not fit for what came next.

The younger of the two men carefully picked one of the field's swords from the many, lifted it towards his mouth, and yelled:

Boo!

But of course, the scythe's blade did not answer. He was already reaching for the next one. He broke the matchstick pinned next to the straw on his hat, and he licked it, set it crossways along the top of the scythe—and he turned very slowly, as if it were a command.

János, my friend, look at this! he said hopefully.

János Tóth took a penny from his pocket, and he drew its flat side along the length of the blade—the coin slipped off several times. In any case, *it did not stick.*

Even a sickle'd be better than tha', Mátyás, was his verdict. There was a bit of flattery in the words, as the man buying the scythe had originally been christened as Mihály. He had officially changed his name from Mihály Hugyozó to Mátyás Hugyozó. Otherwise, there was no problem with him.

I still trust it, insisted Mátyás, who used to be Mihály, but I can' make up mind if sheld buy it or not.

That's why I'm here, János Tóth thought. And 'cause they won' even give a handle sittin' on a

hemp cloth for two kilos o’ rye.
He took off his hat, put the flat of the blade on his head, and without a word, he pulled it by both ends. The scythe bent.
Choose, János, my friend. Mihály Hugyozó accepted his fate. Even though it was like letting the leader of the harvesters pick a wife for him.
With great dignity, János Tóth put the hat back on his head. He studied the sea of blades for a while. Then his eye fell on a scythe that was gleaming white and just a tad brighter than all the others. He took it into his hands, carefully ran his fingers along the sharp of the blade, then the back of it. His face did not betray his emotions. Suddenly, he struck it against an anvil, then threw it up into the sky. The blade made a clear, high-pitched sound, like a chorus of girls at their first Communion. János Tóth bent over to pick it up from the floor, which was greasy and covered in sawdust.
This’ll be the one, he said.
The shopkeeper appeared at those words. How’re ye’ givin’ it? János Tóth asked.
Jus’ like spring. This was how the trader stopped every bargain in its tracks. What they had to do, they had to pay.
N’ last spring he drove the price up! the leader of the harvesters said to the new scytheman, once they were outside.
As if it weren’ worth the money! Mihály Mátyás Hugyozó grabbed the blade resting against his shoulder like a sword.
Ye’ could cut bone with that, said the scythe-picker.
They approached the méta players.
I’ll make a saw outta the old one, said the man who now had a better name.
Palkó!
The child ran over to them at the first word. He didn’t ask. Whoever had eyes could see the scythe and the owner’s proud face.
Ye’ wanna be a blackmith, Palkó? asked Mihály Hugyozó, otherwise known as Mátyás.
Or a thunderbolt, the boy said warily. But he still hummed a tune to himself:
I ain’t swingin’ tha’ hammer no more, Ijustgonnasellthings...
Where we gonna have the toast, Mátyás, the child’s father asked.
Don’t get mad, my friend, but I’m goin’ home to Masa’s draft wine! My lady’s got real keen on me bein’ back ’fore sundown..
Vexed, János Tóth remained silent.
Once they left, Palkó piped up:
And what happens if the scythe don’t cut right?
His father was ready with the answer:
If it don’t cut like it should, then it’s either the scythe, the stone, the person, or the grass that’s the problem.
So there wouldn’t be any doubt, he put the emphasis on *person.*

[figure]

That was enough, he says to the mirror in the morning. His face is swollen, his head ringing. He walks along the street like a marrionette doll. He watches the oncoming faces coming—and he searches for only one, to no avail. The pain is cutting through his esophagus like a high-pitched gituar chord. He gazes numbly at the sayings scribbled on the planks at the Nyáry Pál Street construction site, words written in sharpie and spray paint.
Long live wd. Kissné and Handled Comb!
Beside it:

LONG LIVE ECSTASY!
Below:
EVERYONE WHO ISN'T A DRUNK IS AN IDIOT
Beside it:
This isn't just scribble
lick my ass
you donkey!
There's one more before he turns the corner:
Young friends, I have much grief,
I'm in love with the great void, nobody

He takes these with him through the library's gate.
Papó, my pinky is numb again, he says to his coworker, in place of a greeting.
Mercury is responsible, says the dough-faced man. And the Hotel of Pinky Fingers.
István collapses into the chair, lays his head on the table.
You can even learn how to row on a galley ship, his coworker says next to him.
Do you have a saw? István braces his hands over the nape of his neck, and he squeezes.
His colleague is grouping matches again. He pulls one out, then divides the rest. He counts the matchsticks on the table by fours, and then he factors in the remaining ones, and writes down a number along the edge of the L'Osservatore Romano newspaper. He repeats this process five times. His gestures become more pronounced. The numbers eventually become lines.
We got the fourth kua, Papó.
István doesn't move, as if he hadn't heard.
You aren't curious, my friend?
I didn't ask anything. Not from the Book of Changes, not from anyone. He squeezes his arms over his ears. Some people come to the library to get drunk. I always come here to get sober, he thinks.
The smile on his colleague's meek face does not falter.
The fourth kua means: young foolishness.
None of these fortunes have ever come true, have they? The collapse of capitalist society, or the socialist economy.
You have to wait it out, my friend!... I'm just going to say, there are forty-four variations of chromosomes in genetic code. That's the same number as the kua. In the Bardo Thodol, the transitionary stage between death and rebirth is 49 days. That's the same number as these matchsticks. Or, for example, John Cage's *Music of Changes,* which is built off of I Tying. But he used three coins instead of matchsticks. Whatever, the guy's American. Two men appear in the doorway, carrying a tower of black portfolios reaching up to their noses.
Hello! We brought the dissertations. Where can we put them?
Over there, under the window, the coworker says.
The two men free themselves from their burden with a loud groan.
Bye!
So anyways, if we unpack the kua... There's a mountain on top, and water below. The lower trigram is the interior. That represents an ignorant, headstrong youth. He's held underneath forces, and he feels like they've left him to his own devices. I have to add, there's failure in the picture, too. One

must start by removing their spiritual chains, but if he or she is inexperienced with taking advice, there's no point in repeating anything to them.
See! István props himself up on his elbows and grins at his colleague.
The wise is kind with the foolish, the other continues. One can find luck by giving himself to a woman.
Now that's what I don't believe.
The danger of inexperience is only surpassed by that of stubbornness.
You're telling me that?! You of all people? István lets out a mocking laugh. He doesn't say it out loud, though it's obvious: Your mother was your first and last woman.
The colleague continues to explain the lines.
I can also see something promising in your spiritual daylight: childlike purity can bring luck. But honesty without truth only adds to the problem.
István turns his head: he looks out the window into another across the courtyard.
I tell you everday facts without all the hocus pocus.
He has a Chinese magazine in his hand, but in English, with the registration number on it. He'd written it there.
Thirty kinds, he reads. A verse by Li Ho, born after Christ (whom he did not know) in 791. He died in 817, in his twenty-sixth year. He clears his throat: Thirty has not come,/ but twenty-four did./ All day I am hungry/ everything spent on rice.
/ The old man at the foot of a bridge / Gave me a book about war. / From his goodness/ I can analyze my destitude.
Berci bácsi passes through the room noisily. They fall silent.
You know, István says, now turning towards his colleague, I really like Chinese proverbs. Lao Tzu wrote that the wise don't speak, only the foolish. And he wrote a book from fifty-thousand symbols at a border guard's command.
He stands, runs his hand along the shelves. Tosses his hair, lights a cigarette.
Every Cretian is a liar, said the Cretian Epimenides.
His colleague takes out the breakfast prepared by his mother.
My friend: I tell you all kinds of fortunes, but to be honest, I think a little more free-spiritedness would also do me some good. He bites into the salami and pepper on buttered bread.
I'm thinking about the magazines on car colors, he says, with a full mouth and sad eyes.

Lady, let the groun' eat ye' up, where the hell are 'ya?

The drunken, hoarse yell came from the gate, and Anna Csepeli was quick to abandon the whitewashing. Her husband was staggering on the porch.

János Tóth didn't need any particular reason to strike the lady. His wife's greatest sin was that she made more money selling túró, eggs, and sour cream than he ever did weaving. And it was not her hen that scraped out the six-kilos of gold stamped by the caeser of the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, which they had sent to the Hun's governance in reconcialiation, and which had indeed stalled here, in Limp. Of course, nothing came out of the hard twenty-five thousand, but rather Juli Parti Csicsa, the little servant girl, received a bonus.

Whatever: Sándor Csepeli, the Handsome Gyurkó, could no longer defend his little sister. As far as turkeys were concerned, well, this was the reason Anna Csepeli went twice into town. Neither could her husband accept that his pretty little wife stood taller than him, his buddies at the pub would not allow that.

They mocked the weaver: Ye'll be a goddamm terkey sheph'rd.

Give me money! he grumbled in the doorway.

I ain't gonna, said his wife, drawing together all her courage.

No, 'cause yer' just a prey wife!

The woman didn't answer.

They even brough' up Hérmina Koczka!

Silence.

Hermina Koczka was intersex, or in other words, a hermaphrodite. In any case, he wore women's clothes, and the old ladies of the village even set him up with the choirmaster's wife, a woman of world-reknowned beauty.

What 'r ye' doin' in there?

Doin' the whitewashin'.

Mhm! So 'yer doin' the whitewashin'. 'N who are ye' waitin' fer so desp'rately? A lil' fuckin', cle'nliness, or what?!... Na ye' just wait, I'm gonna give ye' a smackin'!

Anna Csepeli was cleaning and doing the whitewashing because she was preparing for birth. But she knew her husband: he couldn't really give an excuse for not following through. So, she climbed out the window.

The weaver rammed himself into the door, but as his wife had not locked it, he smacked into the cabinet's edge with all his might. And soon, he laid down.

Sweet Lord… he whimpered with a broken face.

When the children came home from school, they did not find either of their parents. Palkó found his mother wailing in the attic. There was nothing worth asking, they just climbed down the ladder.

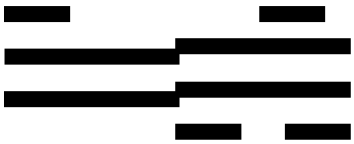
That's when Jani arrived.

Dad's gone 'n brok'n his face on tha' damn threshold.

Leave it, childr'n, let 'im sleep it off, their mother said.

Two weeks later, she gifted her sons with a little sister. With Anna's arrival, the weaver calmed

down for a while.



He wakes up to crazed shouting, as if someone were being skinned alive. Aaaayyyyyyy!... Sanyiiiiiii… Yyyaaaaaaa! I'm going to lose it!.... I can't take it anymore!... You're incredible!.... Sanyiiiiii!

István turns on the reading lamp, sits up. The moaning is coming from his blonde roommate's room: a girl drops by Sanyi's twice a week, a long-legged, flat-chested typist who's avid for pain. Medicinal love, István thinks. I-can't-take-it-an-y-more—he counts it on his fingers. Seven syllables, not bad!

He gets up, takes a graphic notebook from the bottom of one of his drawers, and he lays back down on the bed.

The story is about two teenaged girls: one is brunette, she has a snub-nose and wonder-filled eyes, twelve years old at most, and the other is blonde, about fifteen years old, with a face that seems hardened by experience, big chest and thighs, manicured pubic hair. At the beginning of the tale, the girls are headed home from school, and they can hardly wait to fall into each other, on a fuzzy blue rug, underneath two candles and a poster of some hot shot, between the red-and-white furniture in the girl's room. A vibrator also surfaces. In the story, the blonde with the wet, nicely-shaved pussy (some Mirjam) gets so hot that, with bold decision, she calls her family doctor. The doctor has already stepped into the room in the next scene, a large, moustached man about thirty years of age. The doctor quickly realizes what kind of medicine the blonde girl needs, and he runs the end of his stethoscope across her, exploring her naked body. He starts to stroke the girl's enormous, prancing clitoris, while the younger one sucks his swollen dick.

I wouldn't mind if someone talked into my microphone, István thinks.

Now both girls take the doctor's shaft for treatment, one girl sucks it, the other licks his testicles, biting them softly, working her mouth over them. Then it's the doctor's turn: as the girls kiss, he licks inside them. The text:

Sie schlagen sich beinahe um als Erste gefickt zu
werden, doch Mirjam hat Glück! Sie wimmert wenn der
steife Schwanz sich in sie hinein drängt.

Elles se battent presque à qui sera la première à
recevoir la belle pine dans leur petite fente, et
c'est Mirjam qui l'emporte. Elle gémit quand la grosse
bite l'enfourche…

They almost fight to be fucked first, but Mirjam
is lucky! She moans when the hard prick invades her.

He can almost smell the powerful, musky scent of the girl's discharge. He listens. They're still awake in the other room. He turns on the cassette player, puts the volume down low.

And now a sperm date with the woman of five thighs, he thinks. He takes a tissue out of the cabinet. He lays back down. He unfolds the tissue and clutches his tool with his right hand.

Come on, let's go, miss.

He closes his eyes and starts to work with movements that are too fast. To his surprise, it isn't the girl mating in the other room that comes to mind, nor the two having an orgasm in the notebook. Rather, the forty-year-old blonde woman from the journals section. Approaching her from behind, he grabs her breasts, and he bites into her neck. He pushes her onto the desk, quickly finishing off the zipper on her tight skirt. He pulls off her thin panties.

I'll push it right into you, you animal, he whispers. I'll fuck the life out of you. You want it? Tell me you want it!

I want it, the woman whimpers.
He pushes into her from behind and he just gives it to her, gives it to her. He unclips the back of her bra and squeezes her tits tight. The woman’s head moves up and down with measure movements, then knocks the pen holder from the desk. He can’t hold back: at that very moment, he ejaculates.

IMAGE: CHALICE OF THE LITTLE GOD

Nobody should think that attending a village's one-room schoolhouse isn't a punishment. Mr. Csöngey was taken at a young age due to problems of the chest. The new teacher was a stout, angry person—it's not worth remembering his name—and he was too occupied by other things to teach at all (the only things that interested him were wine, girls, and the land he received as compensation), and he was too uneducated to educate anyone. It was his opinion that the purpose of studying was to chisel out prosperity, which that studying was currently depriving us of. He was right to a certain extent: learning does reveal to the wise, and conceal from the foolish, if a person knows nothing.

Lali Czankó suffered the most from the new teacher. The teacher could not stand smart children. To make matters worse, the poor Lali had a habit of shaking his head whenever he was thinking, like a horse shooing away a fly.

When doe' the lesson, start 'n stop, Airhead?

While the child was still shaking his head, so that he could speak, the teacher already put him down. You ain't Lali, boy. Yer' Pussy. Pussy wit' crabs 'n it!

One winter morning, in the truest meaning of the word, he kicked the sickly nut-brown kid out of the classroom, just because he'd stepped inside with snowy shoes.

Don't ya' come back, 'til ye' wipe that look of yer' face!

The little boy didn't say anything about them playing whip during the break, and of course he was the whip's tail. He was on the bottom of the food chain, and the toe of Péter Vörös's boot left a wound on his mouth. His face scabbed over in less than a week, because of the homemade medicines they treated him with. That's when Palkó Tóth accepted him into definitive friendship.

Vörös, who was too old for school, did not last long either.

Ye' know this letter, kid? the teacher asked him.

Yup, I do.

Then tell me it's name.

I dunno it's name, I just know it by lookin' at it.

And then the teacher beat the Vörös kid so bad, his shame went 'round the world. The position of bellringer was left open for a while, and Palkó Tóth became its winner. And, instead of being the fugitive in the nativity scene, Palkó was able to play the oldest of the sheperd boys, with great success.

My father was a shepherd./ I'm a shepherd too, / He left me only sheep, / I'm rich though, it's true, he recited, transfixed.

While one death brought sadness to Palkó's life, another brought gold to it. The country doctor—while travelling—had died in Madrid. Every day until the coffin arrived, Palkó had to ring the bells to one or two verses. Or more like, three weeks. He got a lot of money for it. According to rumor, the doctor may have never actually died, but had just wanted to disappear, partly because Bora Vas Ferkó had put arsenic before both of her husbands. The third, the bootmaker, would have followed after his predecessors, if he had signed the life insurance papers, according to more wicked gossips.

In any case, Lali Czankó, who had followed Palkó's footsteps as an alter-boy, said that the gravediggers had found the fat doctor's coffin rather easily.

Alter-boy—bellringer: surely the Roman Catholic Church was the nurse of that lifelong friendship.

Thick, paunchy clouds blacken the sky, but it just does not want to rain. István strolls towards the Deák Square metro station. Stops next to a post. Across from him are headlines on the backs of the three benches:

A yellow tram pulls up. István gets into the third car. He has a Chinese magazine in his hand, but in English. He doesn't lift it up to his face, but leans into it.
When I was young, I did not know grief's mysterious taste, nor agony's flame. I climbed up into the tower, and I tried to steal the grief I did not feel into my heart, only so that I would become the master of the songs I wanted to sing...
He has to look up: a girl is watching him from beside the door. When their eyes meet, the girl smiles at him. István smiles back, flustered. He catches her gaze again. When he reaches the last stop at Vörösmarty square, he almost jogs down Váci street, until he gets to Kossuth Lajos street.
My kisses to yours, one woman says to another, in front of the Anna Café.
István stops at the underpass, gazes at the bridge.
Aren't you a dirty little thing, he thinks. About its gracefully pleated skirt or its pointy, snow-white breasts; half the architectural world helped the architect count its thin lines: at the start of the sixties, there wasn't even a computer in house of the person who had invented them, and not for such extravagant purposes.
It's hardest to know which bridge you have to cross, and which one you have to burn.
You know damn well: you have to burn the ones you've already crossed.
Why? Why are you making a big deal out of this? I can't help it if that blonde woman comes to mind sometimes!
Next to the library's crumbling wall stands a bundle of girls. He cut his way through them, his eyes on the ground. Once he's inside, in the cool, he lets out a long sigh.
Hi, Papó.
Hi.
His coworker looks up from between the cardboard sheets.
I'm lucky I made it at the last second.
I already signed you in. Your signature is easy to copy.
Thanks. István drops into the chair. I'm going to finish all my backlogging today. He points at the stacks of magazines which have made it almost impossible to move around the room. I'll have it finished by five o'clock, you watch. Did I say something?! The coworker loosens his necktie, doesn't look at István. All I'm going to say is that you could listen to warnings of Ghengis Khan.
István rolls up his sleeves. The file drawers crash as he shoves them back in.
What warnings?
You should only get drunk three times a month, at most. An upstanding person manages to get drunk only once. It'd be better if you never got drunk at all. But is it possible to expect this level of perfection from a human being?
Here it is! István removes the cards from the plastic case. This R.A. is driving me crazy! Next to the two filing cabinets are six sticky notes, every single one is speckled with tiny cursive letters,

notes and promptings.
We've got Tom. XVII and XIX, too. I urged Tom. XVIII in 1967. X. 20th A.R. I urged him again in 1968. I 29th. A.R. 1968. V. 12. Tom. XVI came, who wasn't with us either, but XVIII. was still lacking. I urged him again in 1968 V. 12th. A.R. Urged him again in 1968 VII. 8. A.R.... Who was this guy?
Antal Rektenwald, your well-named predecessor. István's coworker runs his hand through his thinning, back-combed hair. He isn't satisfied with it, takes out a comb from the pocket under his lapel, where he keeps his ironed handkerchief. He runs it through his glistening, gelled hair with a few quick movements. The man was a failed priest. Great guy. Unfortunately he was reeled in by a woman. She checked something out and forgot to give it back. Women, Papó... His face becomes bright with an unusually wide smile. There's been a bit of coming and going in the Kardexes ever since. You're the fifth.
How long have you been working here?
Sixteen years. But I can tell you the exact date. He reaches for the paper pinned up on the wall, where he's been drawing check marks for every day until retirement. Okay, let's drop it... He leans into the low table and looks at István. Tóni bácsi got sick a lot. If he didn't get whatever sickness was out there, then it wasn't worth catching. But he was hardly ever absent. If the library's power went out, he still came in, and he'd write his daily notes into the Kardex with a flashlight tied around his neck.
You know what, I'm going to cut out all these strips of paper.
Don't! Don't kill the poor guy again. He died last year... poor Papó. I remember he used to make notes of people slamming doors by drawing rombuses. Ten lines, ten slammed doors, that was one rombus. He never talked about it, he just locked it up in his briefcase at the end of the day.
István glances at his neighbor, then he puts the notes back beside the index cards. I write all these notes in French and English for 1,900 forints a month...
Antal Rektenwald could speak a dozen languages.
István pulls out the next drawer—hsss!—he searches for the right index card with his pen, and says:
Papó: please understand that I like you. But if you bring up that priest again, we're not going to get along.
He's surprised by his own audacity, and his companion does not speak. Flustered, István yanks open the drawers, slams them back shut. Hsss—smack. Hsss—smack. By four-thirty, he's faced with only one stack of magazines left to work with.
His coworker, who has already gotten through the day's toil in the morning, flips musingly through the magazines.
Listen to this, my friend! His sad, walnut brown eyes light up, and for a moment, he sucks in his belly underneath his nylon shirt. This is how a Chinese editor rejects a writer:
Look at the slave at your feet. I fall to me knees before you, and I ask for your grace, your goodness, so that I may live and speak. The content of your honored manuscript was graceful to shine its blinding light upon us. We read the whole thing with trepidation. I swear on the bones of my ancestors, I have never seen such ingeniuty, such poetic ferver, such thought! I am sending the manuscript back to you fearful and shaken, because if I were to publish this treasure, the emperor would demand that, from now on, I only print works of similar worth. However, if someone were to know literature as well as I do, they would understand that the kind of work you have sent me hasn't even been published in the last ten-thousand years. I ask your forgiveness ten-thousand times. My head rests before you feet, do with it what you will. A slave of your servant, Luo Ji, editor.
István eases up.
That's brilliant!
When am I going to get that kind of an answer from the jack-of-all-trades for sending my manuscript?
Pali, the junior clerk and sociologist, steps into the lobby, slamming the door behind him.

Another Tóth-named bartender turned up in Limp's sea of Tóths, that being Illés. It was there, in the local watering hole, which everyone just called the Lébuki tavern, that Palkó managed the nine pins. This place of execution on Brewery street was certainly not considered safe, unlike Pál Tóth's pub, which besides the discomforts of Miska Pityóka bácsi's trombone playing, or the truthful (or maybe not) Feri Pista bácsi's stories about Cecilia and David dancing on the moon, the women of Lele, or perhaps the stone lamb, no person was ever seriously harmed. However, if there was ever a ball in Illés Tóth's pub, there were deaths, too. The Dustville knifings were famous around all the world, and the boys of Limp were Mr. Sziráky's most loyal customers; clasp knives, fish-handle knives, paring knives, clip point knives or the newer version to come out in spring, retractable knives. These could be found in the bootlegs of every boot-wearing young man of at least fourteen years of age. One of the most popular games among Limp's children was called *dudéllázás*, which consisted of eight different hand motions and knife grips. The first person cuts to the chase: he says something real blunt about everyone else in the group. The boys of Limp may prepare to stamp out the life of one of their childhood buddies after receiving the general endorsement of their broader community. Of course, the survivor would end up in the prison hospital with at least five stab wounds. This is enough to explain the old Dustville saying about its surrounding villages:

Whoever they don't rob in Dorozsma, nor curse in Majsa, nor knife in Limp: that man may pass on bravely to the ends of the earth.

We should add that the Lébuki tavern's patron had been christened into Eternal Life, so we can understand why Anna Csepeli instilled fear into her offspring. Palkó immediately found more joy in setting up the ninepins, because the greasy kitchen work his mother had gotten him was both dirty and smelly. They ground up the unshelled sunflower seeds, kneaded them together in a bit of water, and then fried them in a hot pan, adding some cheese to finish. Yuck! Better the smoky tavern.

And the kind of characters that appeared in that smoke, my Lord and Creator! Here, and only here, could one find Hey-Hey Lali, who made a living assisting vendors in the markets. He could drink a bottle of soda water in one gulp. He burped and cried like a cow—receiving a spritzer or two for his theatrics. These goodwilled people didn't always know it was dangerous to give him something to drink: he'd then latch onto somebody—especially those with bigger feet—and try to pray off their boots (saying they were his). Sometimes Matyi Pista Pipa would turn up, who claimed to be a spy from another dimension, but was otherwise a hardworking hardworking mason on the farm.

There was another guy among the Tóths who wore a gentlemen's hat and jacket, a certain Tasteful Péter Tóth, who apparently had connections with patent agents. He ensured the Lébuki tavern that a miraculous weapon of his own invention—which he would not reveal even after five liters of woeful wine from the flatlands—would soon be accepted by the patent office, putting Limp on the map. He came before his time, because the First World War, now becoming a lifestyle, would only be invented twelve years later. He liked to show off his knowledge of French. This knowledge

consisted of only one little poem, but he recited it with perfect Frenchness:
Je ne suis pas curieux / Mais je voudrais savoir / Que le cul de votre femme / Pourqoui blanc et pas noir? In a rough translation, it sounds like: I am not curious/ But I would like to know/ Why your wife's ass/ is white, and not black?
Once, the bartender wanted to send him home.
Go home 'n wash up, Mr. Tóth, he said. (He at least called him Mr.) Ye've wet yer' underpants.
Let's say for five liters o' wine, I don't, said the Tasteful Péter Tóth.
The bartender sensed he meant it, and he accepted. He did mind five liters of wine. Because, when it came to proving it, it turned out that Tasteful had really soiled himself, but underpants—he was not wearing any.
Another typical character in the tavern was I'll-do-it Demeter, who got his name from his bets when he played colours (a game they called silent house in Limp), and who lived as a respected, fraudulent cardsplayer. It was his usual method that, after he had already fleeced an out-of-towner who was in Limp for the market, he would count his money drunkenly.
Now I can only curse at myself, he'd mutter, and of course he'd sober up along the way, if another victim came along. He'd stagger home, pulling a twenty Krohne coin on a string behind him. The children, however, already knew this "chase the money" game.
And Géza Szellő's house was on Nagy Sándor street, who showed an inclination towards begging due to the lung disease he claimed, and who went out to the market with a guineau pig, a dog, and a parrot. It's possible that his dog, Notthat, was the problem (it was not willing to hand over the chosen card to the client, in the interest of telling their fortune), though either way he quickly fell out of the business. He even lost his salvation when he got an idea that could be his saving grace: he would open a brothel in his house. Unfortunately, due to the poor quality of his wares, the business never took off. And now he did not have salvation going for him, either. In his sorrow, he grew a beard. The public trade went better for Kollár bácsi, who first opened shop on Steam Mill Street, and later at the end of Liberty Street (God, don't name anything after liberty, because then the people are most certainly slaves), along the circle intersecting Hétvezér street, where he ran his brothel under an official license, though he also came to the Lébuki tavern to complain.
How could I be a good taxpayer when the whole village is competing against me! I sheld get a state subsidy, he'd say. The truth was that he often got drunk at home, and would break and smash things, losing his more prim and finnicky guests.
But it wasn't that way here! Thank God for the owner's homemade Szatymaz wine, which was never lacking among the guests. The tavern visits were always accompanied by conversation: namely, how they had a reason to drink. Palkó Tóth, who straightened the ninepins industriously, and sometimes the people of Limp, knew they drank for two reasons: one, to quench their thirst, but more often to avoid it. And he never did forget: it wasn't long ago that they'd carried off the doctor in a casket, who had still been in the prime of his life. Here, the old men gulped down wine, beer and pálinka before his very eyes.
He learned two pieces of wisdom from the man who shared his name. The first:
The Good Lord created water, and man created wine.
The second was longer, and went like this:
Beware of the blonde gypsy, the spur-booted tax officer, and the pig-nosed whore.
Setting up the nine pins was good for Palkó in that it made him hate rowdy people for the rest of his life. And hey, if someone were to whisper to him that he'd be a wine dealer one day, and that despite being among the sea of Tóths, he'd be baptised as a Cooper—a name that would stick for a lifetime, and could not be scratched off.

Ever since God wrote on the wall that Nietszche was dead, I couldn't be surprised by anything.
This is what István says to Pali, the skinny junior clerk, before he hands the letter back to him. The one Zempléni, the head director, wrote. Pali shows him a slight smile, his strong chin jutting out even more. He takes a long drag of his cigarette and blows the smoke towards András, alias Mr. P. Logky, who sits across from him. András grins back and continues stamping the books. Pali pulls some tape out of the drawer, and he fastens the letter to the wall.

Pál Pesthy
Junior Clerk
Acquistions

It has come to my attention that on September 15, 1974, you arrived at 8.15 in place of 7.00, which was written by your colleagues. As I hereby give my reprimand, I would advise you all, in the future—for your own interest—to avoid similar conduct.

László Zempléni
Head Director

He can do a favor, Pali says. Try and shake things up. But that'll hurt me as much as a fish getting a rectal injection. He clears his throat nervously.
István is silent. He knows that Pali needs at least two years to prepare as a sociologist. And that time would be better spent in a library, no matter what the work is.
There's rarely a librarian that doesn't despise the head director, deep down. But only deep down. Zempléni has spies everywhere. But, of course, not in the way that snitching would live long and prosper. The reason being that, if it were to flourish, no one could call it snitching anymore. People conspire to destroy the country for dirty foreign money. If they fail, they're called snitches. If they destroy it, but remain in power, they become men of the state.
In his student years, Zempléni was already considered an essayist in the Nyugat journal. Antal Szerb wrote about him. This Zempléni published books on art philosophy, based on intellectual history. This Zempléni read French novels in the original language, and presumed he understood how one should write. This Zempléni published the book *Character Study* in 1943. Supposedly that was *this* Zempléni.
Because the real Zempléni, meaning the one who came to the head of the library in 1945, and then who, in 1948, wrote Marxist criticisms of the works he'd written in his youth, underneath the gaze of academia's old, mud-colored eyes. The Communists taught him that the bourgeouis were cowardly and stupid. If someone were to look at Zempléni, he certainly could have described him with the first adjective. How did Confucius say it? He was not shy nor obedient in his youth, and when he grew up, he did nothing of significance. Now he is old, and he still can't hear?! Lazy.
If I see him, I'll take him out, András says, and he smacks a book with his stamp, just like a pigeon shits on Saint Mark's square.
And then the door opens quietly, almost apologetically. In the doorway stands a man with graying hair and a slightly paunchy face, one-hundred and forty centimeters tall. András jumps to his feet.
Good morning, Mr. Head Director, sir, he says. The pockmarks are glowing on his pale face.
Good morning, sir, say the other two as well.
Put out your cigarette, the man says to Pali. Pali obeys. He leans against the wall to hide the letter behind his back.
He could have been spying in the elevator, András thinks.
This room is not your workplace, is it? Or am I mistaken? The old man turns to István, whom he

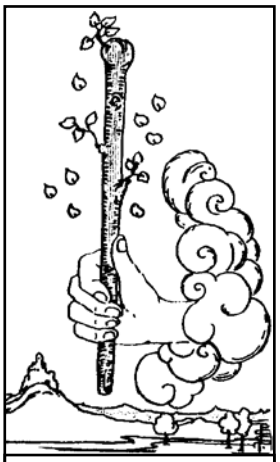
hired off the streets following a five minute conversation. István is already making a line for the other room. The old man, whose forehead is wrinkled, as if he has worn too tight of hats, limps along beside him.
Of course, Papó is working. István gives his colleague an irritated look through the enormous, five-kilo volumes of *Chemical Abstracts.* The director is already receiving Papó's greeting. He walks the length of the section, speaking to no one.
On his way back, he stops in István and Papó's room.
You don't take coffee breaks, do you? He asks István.
No, István says, suprised. He looks at Zempléni's unbuttoned fly. First, he forgets to button it, and then, five years later, he forgets to unbutton it, he thinks.
How are you getting along with the *Chemical Abstracts*? The director asks.
Well, István's colleague answers. But it'll be weeks before they make it to the university departments.
Then call the departments' librarians to come get them.
Yes, that's a good idea, Papó says. The sweat is glistening on his face.
You don't have to approve of it. You have to do it, the old man says. He closes the door behind him.
Alright, we made it. We're safe for the next six months. Papó wipes his face with his handkerchief.
Why did he ask me if I take coffee breaks?
Listen, my friend. Papó's face is gentle, like he's explaining this to an idiot. Zempléni gets his most important information from those coffee breaks. And who are the biggest coffee drinkers? Mrs. Jósvai and Gizi. Why do they always get the biggest premiums?
István stares off into space. Mrs. Jósvain is the blonde woman from the journals section. Gizi is their assistant supervisor.
His colleague stands up and goes over to the window.
Come over here! Papó points to the uppermost story, where there's a balcony. See? That's where Zempléni lives. With that little chick the party approved of.
He rarely comes over here because we're on the ground floor of the neighboring building. He can watch us with a telescope whenever he wants.
András goes back to his chair and clutches his hands over the nape of his neck, staring at the Kardex's drawers.
The library is sinking because they're building the metro, and because they're making a two-story archive out of one. And he's caught up in such pitiful things. How can an aesthetician have snitches?
Nowadays even cops philosophize in books, my friend. You can make a cop out of a philosopher, too. A person can be anything, to the point of becoming absolutely nothing... Everyone's got a foxhound asleep inside them.
And we've got to get rid of it, István says.
Papó starts scanning a crossword puzzle.
Hey, listen! Rock band, seven letters.
That or one-thousand. Look at the row crossing it. István scribbles faces on a piece of paper. He who many fear must have a lot to be afraid of, he says.
And that power corrupts, Papó pipes up. Weakness corrupts. The first letter is B.
It could be a hundred different bands. Look at the second, István says.
The faces he sketches don't resemble anyone. He isn't good enough at drawing to do that. However, he can give them characteristic mugs.
That person suffers the illness of being László Zempléni. István lets out a loud yawn.
The last letter is S, his colleague says. You know just as well that disease can't be cured.
Yours can't either, András laughs. Most bands have names ending in S.

I ain’t swingin’ tha’ hammer no more, Ijustgonnasellthings...
One day, Palkó sang this little tune on his way home.
I’ll tell ye’ what yer’ gonna do! His father said, and he handed the boy over to the truth-telling Bora Vas Ferkó’s third husband, as a bootmaker’s apprentice. The child was not enthusiastic about peasant work, and he was as fond of the weaver’s trade as a goat is fond of a knife. And the Hungarian people said their curses about that old nitwit!
Palkó had already treaded upon his twelfth year, and it was time for him to learn a trade.
The bootmaker’s workshop sat next to the large town restaurant rented out by Mór Neumann; ever since he was a little boy, Palkó would stopped underneath the signboard, which featured two lions angrily trying to rip a boot apart. The result of which was described in the writing below:

THE IMPOSSIBLE

What was impossible in the workshop—Palkó would soon learn—was even the tiniest bit of rest. The master had two clerks, and if there were a market, he would make them work all night.
Stab, pull, drive ’er into the wood! Tomorrow we’re takin’ ’er to the market! He’d say those magic words. Palkó quickly grew tired of the heavy duty boots, their soft, stitched sides, or the hard-hemmed ceremonial boots for the regiment. He didn’t like nailing the leather hide to the lasts, nor its deep smell and its fish oil coating. It was also his job to sew sandals and slippers from pieces of smelly, worn-out leather. He found the comings and goings of shoppers fit for his temperament, particularly the bargaining. Like Hey-Hey Lali, the boot freak, who was a guest in the workshop almost every day. That did not please Bora Vas Ferkó’s third joy in life. Whoever did not shop, and just tried on shoes, should go somewhere else. There were some twenty other bootmakers in the village. The master was determined to bring an end to Hey-Hey Lali’s visits.
May the Lord give us a good day, mister! Is it really true what’s written on the boots in the window? This is how the non-buyer greated him one day.
True, Lali. Sure is. Those boots belong to a man that ain’t at all afraid of his wife.
Lord be gracious, then these boots ’r mine! ’Cause I ain’t afraid of my wife one bit.
Palkó, bring that bench ov’r here!
His ears reddish, Palkó dragged over the round, glue-covered stool for the drunk boot worshiper to sit on. Hey-Hey Lali tried on the boots. They were a new style, sewn up in the back.
Would ye’ look at that, these ’r fit exactly for my feet, the lover of boots declared.
Ain’t they, the bootmaker said, nodding.
I ain’t ever takin’ these off, said Hey-Hey Lali, and he stood. Though he would’a sat right back down!
Sweet moth’r o’ Jesus! He peeled the bench from his pants.
What’ll yer’ wife say when she sees ye’!
Here, such splendid jokes rarely came to fruition. The grapes did, on the master’s good soil. And

let the Lord giveth, one day Palkó pulled himself together and started tilling the earth around the bootmaker's grapes. A pound o' ox meat is already fourteen cents, all of them taxed, so the little grapes should be worth somethin'.
It's true, they were already asking eighteen cents for a pound of beef, and the town was collecting tax on the consumption of wine that year, but the master could get a quintal of wheat for a pair of his boots! He could even get three of quintals for the ceremonial ones. The bootmaker, as if he had just sensed what was going on in Palkó's head, said to him:
Ye' better work hard, we're eatin' fish tonight!
Palkó liked fish, and he did work hard. But the hammer moved faster in the hands of the other two boys.
That night, Palkó ate from only one bowl of bean stew. He set down his spoon expectantly.
Why aren' ye' eatin'? the master asked. I need to save room for the fish, Palkó said. The master:
What, that ain't fish?
How could it be fish? It's beans! Palkó said.
If that ain't fish, ye' can spread the good Lord's gospel.
Palkó was amazed at the man's audacity. But the other boys had their heads in the right place.
Yer' right, sir, one said. It sure is fish, just a small fish.
And this was how Palkó went through a small year in the span of a month at the bootmaker's. Fortunately, around that time, the apprentice at Zsigmond Reichlinger's grocery store had finished his term, and whoever looked deep into Anna Csepeli's eyes once could not deny her anything. Unless that person's name was János Tóth.

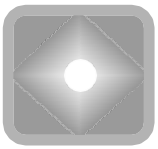


Vessző Ásza

IMAGE: THE STAFF'S ACE

Above Reich's grocery store hung a beautiful rod-iron sign. The rod was bent into a snail shape with a large loop at the end and a rooster in the middle. Time had chipped away its paint, but it didn't matter: regardless, everyone in the village called the store the Blue Rooster. When Palkó first came to the shop—in the company of his mother—a customer was expressing his indignance.
Ye've really raised the price o' this sugar, haven't ye'!
That ain't potato sugar, nor grape sugar.
It ain't even yellow! No.
'N ye' wanna pull a fast one on me wit' this?
This son of a bitch really seemed to want a piece of it. I don't wanna disappoint ye', but I can't sell it for any less.
(This saying became carved into Limp's memory after the Taka inflation.)
Then what the hell is it, if it's so expensive?
I'm tellin' ye': It's a bonbon!
Bomba sugar? I ate some o' those with the Italians! And what's this?
Parád curative water.
This?! This is like a fart 'n a glass. They got water fer changin' yer' shit?
If ye' what that kind 'o water, then go to the pharmacy!
The clerk could not handle the imbalanced struggle any longer, and he hid in the storage room. A bit later, a little bald man burst out of the other room. His voice was much more significant than his stature:
And what kind o' nitwit 'r ye' if ye' think yer' such an expert about ever'thin'? he shouted at the contender, and then he tossed him out of the shop.
That's Reich bácsi? Palkó hissed.
No. That's his silent partner, his mother whispered back.
They first put Palkó on a probation period; he had to take rolls and milk to the noblemens' houses. A peculiar pair lived in the Doleschall's house that summer: a very old man and his grandson. The most peculiar part of it was that the grandson beat his grandfather. Palkó asked his boss about it.
It ain't none of yer' business, son, Reich bácsi said. The great writer, Mór Jókai's spendin' his summer with us, with his wife and the artist Countess Bella.
From then on, Palkó was limited to only greeting the customers, and he didn't tell anyone that he saw the grandfather sitting next to the stairs in his own stool, writing letters on the wall with his feces.
He was already a real apprentice, and had turned thirteen before the day that his boss called him into the storage room.
Yes, sir?
Palkó, son, ye' know where Dustville is? How wouldn't I!
Ye' can't get lost, they got signs 'n everythin'. But still, if ye' don't know, just ask somebody...

Now, can ye' ride a horse?
No, but I'd really like to!
And this is how the boy took his first solo trip to Dustville on the back of a horse. The horse and its rider did become quite thirsty along the thirty kilometer trail. They stopped at a pump. Both of them drank from a trough. Palkó had to stand on the edge of the trough to get back up onto the chestnut horse. Once they made it to Dustville, the blanket substituting for a saddle was no longer beneath him, and the feed had also spilled out of the satchel. He asked an elderly person to watch the horse, and he raced back. He was lucky: the blanket was hardly five-hundred meters from town, and the horse was there where he left it.
Come on, Star! Let's go.
He had to bring the horse to a miller who lived on the other side of the Tisza river, in New Dustville. Reichlinger had bought a carriage from him. What for, don't ask.
Every bridge has its own guardian. The entrance to Dustville's bridge had three forbidding signs hung in a prominent place. The first picture shows a peasant in a little vest, swoop-neck shirt and baggy pants, long staff in hand, smoke drifting dreamily from his red pipe. Written next to it: SMOKING IS FORBIDDEN! In the second picture, the same peasant is sitting on a buck, passing a cantering horse. The title: NO SPEEDING! In the third picture, a Haiduk with a large moustache and mottled, decorative frock is beating the peasant with his club. That didn't need text: even the illiterate would understand that this was the punishment. Palkó got the token for the bridge. The token was a little thin piece of copper:



The miller had showered the carriage with the highest praise, and he couldn't stress enough how little he'd sold it for. He tacked up Star and shoved the rod into the carriage.
Palkó urged on the horse with words, rather than a whip. In Dorozsma, a young wife asked for a lift, but seeing the driver's lack of experience, she got off after a few kilometers and walked the rest of the way. She was right to do so. The rod fell from the carriage five times before reaching Balástya, the village neighboring Limp. The blacksmith in Balástya was quick to spot the problem. There was no nail in the rod. He pounded one in and asked for a whole twenty cents for his labor. Of course, he did not tell Palkó that he would have found the appropriate nail in the trunk underneath the seat.
The boy suddenly awoke to found them stopped. Star was grazing next to the cemetery, and Palkó was horrified. The star of the horse thief was twinkling above them. Palkó looked up at Ursa Major, which the people of Limp just called Saint Peter's Wagon. He reached for the whip. However, he still arrived home one hour after midnight, with the help of the heaven's stars and their earth-bound companions.

[figure]

The Ox is your symbol. To be precise, Earth-Ox, Papó says.
And yours is a donkey, István tosses back, but his eyes show that he's interested. And now what is this again?
Chinese horoscope, my friend. But my humble animal isn't the Donkey, but the Monkey!
Of course. And I can say: you monkey.
István is distractedly skimming a thin offprint. *Folklore Follows Vol. LXXX No. 212 Helsinki, 1972, Sumalainen Tiedeacetemia.* Or rather, he's getting his feet wet in the river of Finnish academia regarding folklore. The offprint examines incest as it occurs in folk songs and ballads. With the exception of Italian (!), Dutch (%), Irish (?) and Portugeuse (+) folklore, the tales of various European people groups have proved countless examples. Brother-sister, mother-son, father-daughter, uncle-niece, cousins.
Did you know that we have a ballad about incest called *Ilona and Albert*? He asks Papó.
No, my friend. But I do know that the nineteen-year-old girl who can run faster than her father and her older brothers is a virgin. Papó rests the phone's receiver against his shoulder, dialing with his pen.
The Bulgarians are the biggest fornicators, András says knowingly. Usually the Balkans are in the lead. But the Russians take the cake: seven brothers rape their little sister.
And what was the punishment? ...Hello, good morning, I'm from the University Library. I would just like to reassure you that...
Hello?... Excuse me. Papó dials again.
Earthquakes, nightfall by day, blood rain, a shower of rocks, or maybe the boy or the girl will kill themselves, monasteries and the rest... Wait, how did you get a hold of the 1972 edition?
They have journals like that. Following events two or three years later. These are serious journals. It'd be better if you just gave up.
Papó still doesn't give up after the fifth wrong number, but he never gets the right one. What day is it today?
The fourth.
And what time were you born, appromixately?
I'd believe my mother, she was there. Around four in the morning.
Then you were born in the year of the Earth-Ox in the month of the Pig and the hour of the Tiger.
You can just tell me I'm an idiot. You don't need half a zoo to do it.
You will use foreign wealth and travel as medicine, the other continues. He writes numbers one after another while flipping through a notebook. He adds them together, subtracts them. Finally, he looks up and says:
Today's prospects are good. An advance and some other kind of personal success await you.
Now I'd pay to see that!
Someone knocks. An elegant, gray-haired man in his sixties enters the room.
Arnold Zengőváry, he says softly. I'm looking for the supervisor.
He's in that room, all the way in the back, István says, pointing towards the door.
He and Papó look at each other. Papó stand up and follows the man.
Just as I thought, he says when he returns. Berci bácsi is hiding in the archives.
Count István Széchenyi, my student and friend, always used to ask me: do we need a Chain Bridge?... Poor old guy. That's István talking.
Ákos peeks in the door.
Isti, the boss wants you.
I'll be right there, István says, I'm just going to write in this journal about incest.
If looks could kill! István hates the name Isti.
You're never going to finish if you read everything, Ákos says, but without any slight in his voice.
So, what happened, István asks his colleague. Ten minutes: they must have really talked you into something.
István rubs the scar on his forehead. Before he can answer, Zengőváry and the supervisor pass

through the room.
You won’t believe it, Papó. This big academic gave me work. He’s preparing some kind of village monograph. I’m going to be the chair underneath his ass. István can’t help but keep him waiting. The materials will be here by Monday.
His companion laughs triumphantly:
What’s this? An advance, I’d say.
What, that I can do slave labor? You call that an advance?! He bats his hand, lights a cigarette.
The truth is, I couldn’t say no. I’m a coward. Yes. A cowardly ox.
I’d be cowardly too, if I had the courage. At least the ox is persistant, Papó says.

It wasn't raining, just sprinkling, but the believers were trying just the same to make it to church before the bell. It appears that Father Miklós was determined to discipline his flock, because the latecomers, be they judge or notary, were quite simply locked out of the church. He would maintain order in God's house—that was the message.

How are ye'?

I am how I am.

'N how are ye'?

A lil' sour.

Yesterday's rain really slowed us down.

Ye', that's right.

Ye' guys got those open-faced buds too this year?

I hear the work ain't goin' too well at yer' plot in Cserebökényi...

The bell rang, and the words vaporized from the believers' mouths. They hurried inside.

At the end of mass, during the announcements of the upcoming marriages, a grumble travelled across the pews.

Péter Kis's son Antal became engaged to András Sisák's maiden daughter Zsófia... Antal Vörös's son Antal became entwined with Imre Róvó's daughter, Mária. This came from Father Miklós's mouth.

The flock did not consider the pastor's saying a play on words. Some of them reckoned he'd pardoned the Vörös boy's sins with a firm smack on the back of the head. Two things were certain: Antal was a popular name in Limp, being the patron saint of peppers. 2. The Róvó girl's skirt came up shorter in the front than in the back.

The priest, who did not neglect to scourge out Tót mysticisms and Hungarian fallacies, did pardon the believers. There were some who wanted to write letters of complaint to the diocese itself, or to Csömör county, while others liked that the holy father took double the tithings from the nobles (there were maybe ten in Limp). They had their opinion about the Vörös boy, too.

There was one lamb who was not at all afraid of the pastor's sharp grey gaze: Palkó waited for him in the vestry. He helped Father Miklós out of his robes, just like old times, when he was still an alter boy. And then, with blushing ears, he held out a thin notebook bound by brown thread, wider than it was tall. Father Miklós recognized the notebook. He'd given it to the boy himself. In between the pages' oblique lines were verses written in the teenage boy's whimsical letters, characterized by their enormous, right-leaning loops. On the first page was: *In God's Name!* On the second: *Poems written by Péter T.* Perhaps the poet had started writing his name too close to the margin. Father Miklós flipped through the notebook. About a third of it had already been filled by the strictly composed lines. The first bore the title *Request:*

Dear mother I am hungry
Would you give me bread?
Don't make me ask for so little,

I've starved enough, unsaid.
You know, the neighbor, Jóska,
Has always had such luck.
He may have his choice of meals
He never goes without.
But I don't ask for only bread,
Tell me, please, why I have plead?

Father Miklós's face broke into a smile, but he didn't say anything. He turned the page. *For my good mother's name day* – that was the title of the next verse.

A good mother goes to the garden
She waters the flowers
Perhaps she wants to freshen them
Urge them on to new life

Father Miklós shook his head.

In respect the flowers
Nod their little heads
They say it is rare
They be loved 'til the end.

And I too am like them
And you always cared for me
I have grown up since then
Under your sacrifice

But forgive me for the hurt
My beloved mother
Let me honor you this day
On your dear name's day.

From my heart I wish
Your world happiness
And that flowers will bloom
For you, and your kindness.

The next verses were about how the poet was yearning, and how he felt trapped. Then the verses started to address a certain E, Father Miklós counted nine of them. He patted the teenager's head, and then all he said was:
Son, ye' ever write poems to God?
But I did, I dedicated all the poems to him!
Alright, alright, Miklós said, to calm the boy down. Bring the notebook back sometime.
He was thinking about the notes he'd written on the back of the invitations for Limp's Altar Committee. They were the scribbles of a novel in progress: a work about a certain father Kornél, as he observed the budding romance between György and Zsuzsika, in the time of the great Dustville flood.
Palkó spotted Grandmother Zagarits before the temple, in a circle of old women. Secrets were being exchanged; the members of the Altar Committee were sharing one or two secrets of the faith for prayer the following Sunday.
Palkó hid his notebook under his shirt.

Do you know what gephyrophobia is, my friend?
Did you write in one of those psychological journals again? István replies.
So. A guy gets married, and he move to an island with his wife. He can't bear to cross the bridge again as long as his past lovers are still around. He breaks up with them in a letter, and then he crosses the bridge.
So he's afraid.
The fear of crossing bridges. That's what it means. So, the belief in bridges.
István and Papó are separated by a column the height of a man, copies of *Chemical Abstracts*, each volume five centimeters thick. They're a kind of summary: who published important works in chemistry and where, all throughout the world. There are so many things to do and know. Why do we bore ourselves with this? István says. He pushes his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose with his pen. I can't agree with you there. Why do we have twelve copies of this huge index when the university doesn't even
have that many departments?
You'll understand if we do next year's ordering together. That'll be the real work. Papó lifts up half a column's worth of copies and sets them down next to the filing cabinets. He turns around for the next batch. We'll take whatever we wrote in to archives. They can come to get the rest.
Who?
The corporations, my friend. The research companies. We're frauds, to be honest. These Chemical Abstracts are ridiculous expensive—in dollars. But we, being a library, are not considered a profit-generating entity. We are an absolute non-profit—how can I put it? We are so non-profit, that we generate the non-profit. And we get these mammoths half price.
István has turned towards the typewriter, and is now tapping on the keys of the bronze-age machine for his own amusement.
So we're frauds.
Papó pushes over a column with his foot.
Let's not use such strong words. Let's say, we're clever. We help.
And that's why Zempléni was interested? István threads some paper into the machine.
That's why, Papó says. The telephone rings.
Good morning. I'm... Yes, they've arrived... Sir. Goodbye. Papó says all of this in a smooth, affable manner. Even with his hatred of man, Papó is a kind person. You know what I heard?
István pretends like he isn't listening.
Zempléni ran into István Vas, the poet. Here on Kecskeméti street. Zempléni started complaining to him that nobody likes him, and that he's alone even among fellow academics... And Vas said to him: whoever makes a whore of himself shouldn't cry about it. That's not exactly how he said it, he quoted some folk song, but you know how I am with folk music... So anyways, he left him cold. He must know that making a friend in power is minus another friend. It's good the guy said it to him.
Getting Chemical Abstracts half price isn't the problem.
What's the problem?
They cut a hundred hectars of wood for one single issue.
I didn't know you were green!
I'm colorless, my friend. All the green people here are suspicious. Everyone who breathes in this country is suspicious.
Meanwhile, the 18,000 sheathes on Hope street now belong to Béla Gondos. I'm reading in The National.
Papó gazes out the window dreamily with his pen in his mouth. He steps behind István.
Now, he's the only one who isn't suspicious.

Papó glances over István’s shoulder at the paper from the typewriter. A line can be read on the paper, almost like a decorative banner:
CSEKAGPUOGPUNKVDDNKGBSMGBKBGSRI
There’s a number beneath it:
16,777,216

Vessző Apródja

IMAGE: THE STAFF'S PAGE

Saint Lucia, who could not be taken by the brothel nor the fire, and who was therefore put to death by the sword as a virgin, would probably not have been pleased by the youngster's practices on Saint Lucia's Day. They gathered at János Kriván bácsi's house on December 13th of every year, as if there were already starting to sense Mardis Gras coming. At the break of dawn, the girls would prod the hens with a stick, and then scatter millet out in front of them so that they might lay many eggs. During this time one cannot sew, only trim, because they might sew up the hen's butt, and then it can't lay eggs right. You can't sell eggs for the same reason. But Eszti Rácz didn't care about the eggs! She put straw in the basket, as her mother had told her to, and then she sat down in it—though it wasn't the broody hens she was thinking about, but rather the afternoon's celebrations. She listened musingly as the children came to brood in return for gifts, but her mind was somewhere else. Whatever: she was already in her fourteenth year—and she had grown up to be a bronze girl with a slightly rounded face and eyes like bluebells.

Fatten yer' pigs, so they will be big, the fatter the bacon, the bigger the ham. May the horse foal, and the cows roam; may the axe cling to its handle, and the devil stay clear of a scandle!

This is what the children chanted. Upon receiving their gift, they moved on the next house. Eszter ate fish for lunch, but she did not drink water with it. Rather, she rushed out to the well so that she could get a glimpse of her future. The well looked back at her, dull and dark. All she saw was a frog in it.

This Lucia nonesense ain't gonna get ye' anywhere, her mother said, but she still poured water over twelve walnut shells so that she would know which month would be the driest.

When the sun began to set, or rather when the day began to wind down, Eszter set out anxiously towards the house of King Jani bácsi.

They called the old man the King because *there wasn' 'nough for him in the castle*. Though perhaps there was too much. Jani Kriván really did believe that he was a king, or at least that one day he would be. He was always running around everywhere to organize a crowning ceremony in the market square.

Even King Mátyás was chosen on the Duna's ice! He'd say.

His ambitions for power bloomed even more in the winter. Once he stood at the pulpit and even drew a cross over himself 'n cleared his throat before the choirmaster finally dragged him off. He demanded a carriage from the judge, T. Tamás Tóth.

I'm runnin' around on matters of the nation all day, 'n on my achin' legs!

The judge sent him the county hospital, where they cut his hair down to the roots, which had been fairly long, like that of a real Hungarian man, and which he had always explained was the result of a cold he'd gotten during his childhood. He even threatened the doctor:

I'll chop yer' head off for what ye' did to mine!

He flooded the authorities with letters regarding his reign, even the archbishop. When he didn't get an answer, he decided that he would see after the affair himself. A train stopped along the Dustville-

Budapest line. The railwaymen gave him a wicked beating, so he continued by foot. He met some deliverymen he knew along the way who were willing to take him in the carriage. But when he climbed up into the cart, they shoved him between the horses. One of the old man's legs was caught underneath the wheel, and since then he could only walk with crutches.

He opened up his house with food and a demijohn of wine for the celebration of the Day of Saint Lucia. That's what these fools thought. He of course saw the young people as potential voters.

Eat wit' us, yer' majesty, said Jóska Galamb and his friends.

Thanks, but I already ate, the heir to the throne answered haughtily.

But if the young people devoured the food, he wouldn't stand by without a word.

Would ye' just ask again if I ate already?

And soon he got eight stuffed cabbages and half a loaf of bread.

Everyone had already had their fill, but the King was still licking his plate.

Do ye' still want somethin' to eat, yer' majety? Palkó Tóth asked.

Ye' bet, nodded the Hungarians' Tót king, and he packed away four more stuffed cabbages. Better to have a sore stomach then let this bit o' food go to waste!

He made a good dent in the demijohn, and soon he fell asleep.

His stomach won him over, Jóska Galamb and his friends reassured.

But the party still went on. The adolescent boys and girls divided themselves into two groups to play *cat-and-mouse*. But then Péter Vörös cried:

Let's bring out the handkerchiefs!

They tied three handkerchiefs into knots and laid them on the ground, the outer two representing the boys, the one in the middle representing the girls. They lit the two knots on the outside at the same time—whichever knot spread the fire to the handkerchief in the middle proved which boy loved the girl the most. Every able-bodied young person in the village came, because whoever did not found spitefully broken plates in front of his house.

Eszti Rácz's handkerchief was between Jóska Galamb's and Pali Tóth's. Palkó Tóth's spread the fire. The young girl blushed, but even for half the world's treasures, she would not look at the boy who was a head taller than her, and now considered a real apprentice in parents' rival's, Reich bácsi's shop. Palkó was also embarrassed, and he picked what was perhaps the worst method for starting a conversation.

Eszti, ye' know what sticks up the most when the groom and the bride go to bed together?

Now Eszter Rácz was blushing out of anger.

I dunno, and I don' wanna, she said, and she turned on her heel.

The corner of the pillow! shouted the boy with a sprouting moustache, but it was already too late.

There was pounding at the door. Three figures burst in with a great quacking, covered in sheets and wearing duck heads. They were the ghosts of Lucia.

That was the sign: the gypsies had come up with new one.

Lucia's got a dick! They boys shouted. And I know how big it is! Lucia's ghosts shouted back even more giddily.

Palkó leaned gloomily against to the wall, next to the window. He watched Eszti slip out of the house, into the oncoming masquerade. He didn't dance with anyone all night.

[figure]

István is reading a newspaper in the bathroom. This is favorite place in the library: it's spacious and well lit, with a toilet and mirror (as well as toilet paper and paper towels, an ashtray, even soap), and a window that can be opened. Sometimes he reads here for half an hour, musing. No one can say anything to him.
His dream from last night is still hanging about his limbs. He's with his lover in a bar that's open all night; or at least, that's what they say. You have to pay a cover, though it's nothing more than a furnished storage room for the drunk, a cellar for people willing to rid themselves of their honor. In his dream, his lover has to be propped up on crutches, though her childhood wounds are hardly visible on her symmetrical doll face. With her crutches moving all around, the girl's enormous, unclouded pupils cast spells on the drunk. She resurrects them. István has to fight them off. He stands up, flushes the toilet. Stops in front of the sink, the writing on his black t-shirt gleaming in the mirror. LLEH OT OG. Humming, he step out of the bathroom.
Listen to this, my friend! He says to the future sociologist, who is munching on a roll and some bologna. A motorvehicle from Szank with a decal saying *START A NEW LIFE* hit and killed the crippled retiree László Váradi... He reads aloud from the newspaper.
Buddhists, all of 'em, András says. He has a button pinned to his sweater that says I HATE MONDAY MORNINGS.
More like Hindus. Pali laughs and continues to munch off the wax paper set on top of the books.
Come on, they aren't going to shoot themselves in the foot! András fires back. They're Buddhists.
A theological argument ensues. István shuts the door behind him.
Did you listen to the radio show? Papó asks in the other room.
No.
No problem, I'll tell you.
Please don't.
Hurt, Papó falls silent.
Do you have any printing paper? István asks.
Cougar cocoa, Papó says.
What?
Cocaine chocolate.
What are you praddling on about?
You never hear those words together.
That's enough.
There's a knock on the door.
Come in! Papó says.
A heavy-set man pushes open the door with his elbow. His face juts out beneath his glasses. He's holding a stack of binders that goes up to his chin.
Good morning. Which one of you is István Zoltán? He huffs.
Me.
I brought you these from the research institute. Professor Zengőváry sent them. Where should they go?
There, underneath the window.
On the floor?
Yes.
I have eight. He sighs as he frees himself from his burden. Sign here, please. He holds out a notebook in István's face.
It says forty-four. You aren't going to count them?
No.
Then eight. Bye.
He slams the door behind him.
As if in a slow-motion film, István goes over to the stack of binders, takes one off the top, then slams it against the table. A cloud of dust.

What’s that written on it?
TAXPAYERS ASKING FOR EXTENSIONS. István opens the binder with disgust. He flips through receipts, letters, decrees, warrants. He removes one and reads it aloud.
The honorable lawyer Dr. Lajos Malina presiding.
I hearby ask, for the last time, that the following taxpayers turn in their legal papers by May 11, 1937 6 p.m. at the very latest. István Zsótér, Sövényháza, István P. Kovács, Pusztaszer, Imre Király, Kiskunmajsa, Ferenc Kiri, Pusztaszer, Lajos Tímár, Pálmonostora, Mihály Biczók, Jászszentlászló, József Fodor, Kiskundorozsma, Antal Berta, Porlódfelsőtanya, Mr. and Mrs. István Vígh, Gergely Fazekas, Limp, Sándor Czombos, Pusztaszer, Mrs. Vince Tóth, Pálmonostora… There are twenty-two names all together.
And a signature?
No, István says. It’s just a copy. What is all this?
The materials for the village monograph. Unpublished documents.
And how much do you get for it?
1,500 forints total.
That’s still money.
Are you kidding? That’s almost my monthly salary, István says.
Hey, look! Your name’s in the footnotes.
Papó spins around in his desk chair.

IMAGE: FINAL JUDGEMENT

1906 was the year that the price of bread went up, when the truth-telling Bora Vas Ferkó departed from the living, and when Pál Tóth left behind his fate in Limp. There's nothing we can say about the price of bread, it never went back down. The midwife's circumstances were more peculiar. She had taken two husbands to the grave, but the third, the parsiminous bootmaker, outsmarted her. It could have also been that the woman loved this husband, because she made the biggest mistake of her life: she made the bootmaker the usufructuary (what a word) of the property inherited from her previous husbands. She soon regretted it. In her regret, and in the interest of causing fright, she hung herself in the attic with a thick cotton cloth, which would only cause death after a long period of time. She underestimated herself. Her children cried for the master to help take their mother down from the noose, but to no avail. The heartless bootmaker said that he wouldn't touch her without legal authority. He locked the door to the attic and went out to get the gendarmerie. But first he stopped at Pál Tóth's bar to drink a liter of wine—with quite a fearsome gaze. By the time he returned from the gendarmerie's headquarters, the truth-telling Bora Vas Ferkó was already dead.

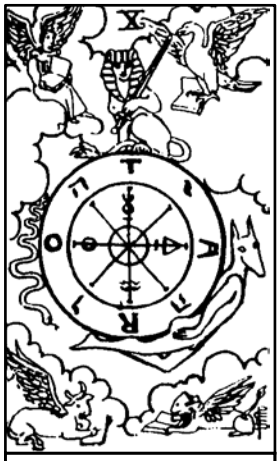
Palkó brooded over the event. She had predicted his future from cards—from a peculiar deck even bigger than regular Hungarian ones—so how had she not seen her own? Palkó did not know that fortune-tellers rarely want to know what tomorrow brings for them.

Palkó's future brought him a decision: he would try his luck in Budapest. Jóska Galamb, who had finished his term earlier, had gone to work in Pest and said they paid shop clerks much better in the capital. Even Reich bácsi approved. He didn't mind at all. He even gave Palkó a reference letter. As a farewell, he called Palkó into the storage room and told him the story of the NHTA's (National Hungarian Trade Association's) founder, the patron of traders. It was swift and splashing, like a creek. We'll come out and say it: sometimes he involuntary spit on the face of whoever he was talking to.

Pál Sándor's father, Móric Schlésinger, was born in 1830, and lost his parents at a young age. His older sister, Eszter, raised him 'n five o' his brothers, until he reached fourteen years of age. Then, Móric asked to get onto a Tót raft, and travelled to Pest from Liptószentmiklós. He knew they had a relative there, someone named Duschnitz, who was known to live in good faith with the Lord. And so Móric stood in front of the synagogue one Saturday, and he called out: Herr Duschnitz, Herr Duschnitz! And he found the relative. But the man couldn' help, he was poor too. He gave the boy some advice, sayin' that he could live off shinin' shoes. And soon he did. Once, Móricka wandered into the Orczy coffee house on Váci street, 'n he saw that people were drinkin' some kind o' black soup, 'n lookin' at some big sheet o' paper. They were readin' the prices o' produce from Lloyd's. I should add, he had a silv'r pocketwatch, which he'd got from his father, who sayed that he should never part with it, unless he was in great need. Móric learned how to read 'n write—in German o' course—with the money he got from that watch. But most importantly, he learned bookkeepin'. By

then he had a good job, ’n a year later he married a girl from Maka, who was a real orphan, had nobody. Katalin Deutsch. She brought the Hungari’n language to the family. They traveled from Pest to Vásárhely, just a lil’ ways from Dustville, and they started a business tradin’ produce.
Reich bácsi fiddled pensively with the string on the coffee sack.
Our greatest patron and defender, the model for Hungarian traders, was born here in Alföld in 1860. The family later moved near Kalocsa, to Pusztaszántó, where they rented land from the archdiocese, but it froze in one of the years of Our Good Lord, and in another year it was taken by a flood. They went to Pest and rented a one-room apartment with a kitch’n, on the fourth floor of the Academia building, but then that burned down. Pál Sándor’s father became a bookkeeper again, and he would not rest until he sent Pali to Dresden for his studies. There he became an exceptional organ player, and was even a stand-in musician at Christian churchs. Due to a scandal, which I won’ tell ye’ so ye’ don’ bad ideas in yer’ head, they almost kicked him out. He became a pupil at the Hungarian Trade Academy when he was fifteen years old. Graduated with the highest marks. He had his first apprenticeship at the Schlésinger and Polákovits company. He learned modern ways of management in Antwerp, gettin’ five-hundred franks pay. When his father became ill, they called ’im back home to take ov’r the shop. He made a bloomin’ business outta that company. But ye’ know, Palkó, wheth’r the stock exchange was at its worst low or its greatest high, Pál Sándor spent thirty minutes at his sickly mother’s bedside twice ev’ry day.
Reich bácsi, was this Pál Sándor quite a brave man? Palkó asked. He liked that the man shared his name.
Sure was, he was a cadet ‘n the Jászberény calvary, ’n now he’s the gen’ral of the Hungari’n traders. He organized our association two years ago. We got strength when we stick together. But ye’ll see that fer yerself in Pest. I’ll jus’ say one thing: if ye’ ever have yer’ own shop one day, lead it wit’ love and good spirits, ’cause then the shop’s gonna lead you.
With those words as provisions, Palko set on his way—not with a silver watch, but a silver necklace of Virgin Mary that he had gotten from his mother. He was sixteen and a half years old.

Line three



SORSKERÉK

IMAGE: WHEEL OF FORTUNE

It was the first week of October in 1906 when Pál Tóth arrived in Budapest to change his fate. This was the city which had spoken German and drank Serbian wine not too long ago, a slice of America in the Central Europe of that time. Swarms of people were bustling about the stately squares and backstreets, which seemed to have been modelled after Paris. It wasn't necessarily the crowds that stupified the boy, but rather the churches that seemed to reach up into the heavens, the supercilious houses. Everything here was large: this country could size itself up. In Hero's square, in commemoration of the Hungarian state's thousandth year, stood the holy kings of the house of Árpád, Father Hunyadi and our father Kossuth, beside them the embodiments of Work, Well-being, Honor, and Repute, the civic virtues from which and onto which the great statues were built in a mix of gothic and eclectic styles. Palkó was amazed at how even the sun could not shine the way it wanted between the enormous buildings. Józsi Galamb lived on Városmajor street. He waited for his friend at the Déli train station, even accompanied him to an employment agency on Rákóczi street. Pál Tóth paid the fee, but he didn't trust the agent. He went from shop to shop, offering his services. According to the people of Limp, coming across a broom, a grey horse, or a Jew are all signs of good luck. The latter rang true: he got a position in Miksa Braun's shop, on 45 Factory street. The owner informed him that he would have to bring milk and rolls to the houses. And then the older clerk tried to talk him into stealing money from the cash register. The places didn't keep hold of Palkó too long: once, a building's custodian got very nasty with him, telling him that servants could only use the back stairwell. Palkó once again grabbed the city by its horns. He could never grow tired of it: everything was two or three times bigger than it was in Dustville. Luck brought him to Gyula Bóka's spice shop on 53 Üllői street. He got room, board and twenty Krohnes a month for his work, starting at six in the morning until ten at night. He slept in an engineer's front room, in a house that the man rented from his parents every summer. Palkó was fond of the place. With his first paycheck, he bought himself a grey overcoat for ten Krohnes. Now he blended in with the Pestians in these fine clothes. It was however summer, so he just draped the coat over his arm.
He liked the markets the most: he kind of felt at home there. After all, fieldworkers were among the a peasants. Alongside the pedestrians headed for Town Hall were the flower merchants occupying Váci street with their tables propped up on X-shaped legs. It wasn't easy to push through the fleet of wreathes, ceramic pots and cut flowers. In the middle of the square before the town hall, you could find sour cream, buttermilk, túró cheese wrapped in cloth, plus the butter they packaged in big green leaves. Behind this, beside the town hall, stood the mountains of cabbage, the hills of kohlrabi, knolls of orange carrots and mounds of beets, all rising tall between the stacks of parsley and the spread of onions. In the canvas-lined valley lay the fragrant heap of mushrooms.
The country bakers had their place behind the Parish church along the side of the town hall. All those colorful sayings, the smells, the haggling, the swearing and whip cracking, seemed to go on

without end. A customer told a baker from Soroksár that his bread stayed fresh as long as it did because of the alum—and the baker quickly went head-to-head with the offender. Calmly watching the scene were the bright brown loaves, each about the size of a millstone.
A little ways off, the strong-smelling halves of pigs and slabs of beef were hanging from the butcher's stand, the tables where ready-made kolbász sausages and brauts had already been cleared off. They cooked meat in a little stove for hungry people.
They ain't nev'r tied sausage to a wreath, Palkó thought disdainfully. He made it out to the Danube's shore.
Peaks and cliffs stuck out from the hills of potatoes, the stacks of red tomatoes next to them shining brightly between heaps of cucumbers and piles of squash. The little wooden boats that had brought them here were anchored nearby.
He exchanged words with some people from Dustville in the Parish square: they'd brought red peppers up to the city, and were currently at war with the farmers from Kalocsa. Underneath the powerful scent of tripe and the pig bladders' greyish-white balloons, they listed off each other's produce to anyone who passed. Palkó left them.
He walked the length of Tower street, coming off of Fisherman's Square, past basketweavers and brushmakers, where fisherman offered the smelliest of wares. He turned right, and was once again at the Danube's riverfront, which had a fortress of hen cages standing tall in front of it. On one side were the cauldronmakers and soapmakers, vendors selling slippers and flour, and on the other side, artists offering religious icons and horror stories painted on canvas.
He knew enough horror stories to stop here, however it was also the noise, smell and filth that chased him to the Buda side. He strolled across the József Ferenc bridge.
All he really knew about Buda was that it had a castle. And that there were Germans in that castle. There was also a Limp saying that came to mind:
Where is he? In Buda, Vienna, maybe Ravenna! What does it have to do with you?
Upon the joyous occasion of receiving his second paycheck, Palkó jumped onto the intracity train. He printed five-hundred copies of one of his poems. That cost ten him Krohnes. He didn't choose one of those poems about a lover who had passed on too quickly—maybe he'd also sensed these were melodramatic—but rather a piece of advice. There is no mercy. You will have to read this.

TO VILLAGE GIRLS

I wouldn' want to be shop girl
In Budapest's streets
It's much better, believe me
In the country's retreat
I walk up 'n down the city
Strollin' on nice nights
But I won't stay here
Ye' don't hear the laughter
See the girls breakin' bread
'N ye' don't see the gardens

Nor the red flowers sittin'
In the windowsill
The happiness is hollow
Just looks real
There ain't no wells
Where the boys talk sweet
'N there ain't no bench
Where the couples meet
Those cool summer nights

I'll tell my girlfriends
We should all stay home
So our female souls
Will stay pure 'n whole
If lust tears our hearts
We stick to our mothers
We wait for our lovers
With whom we find
True happiness

There ain't the same joy
When springtime comes
The streets don't smell sweet
There ain't no forest o' popular
The birds don' come 'n sing
No place to make their nest
The nightin'gale don't speak
Among the hedges' green leaves
There ain't the same joy here

There ain't no loyalty
Want drives the wheel
Purchased joy
Or just plain ecstasy
Those pale painted faces
'N those bright red lips
A smile has a high price
I envy whoev'r finds it
'Cause the kisses ain't sweet

It wasn't the poem of a person who felt trapped, you couldn't say that. We know just by looking at it. The boy, who was weary of city life, was not afraid to speak up to his boss: asking if the man would let him put the poems in the window display, between the veal fricandeau and the smoked breast of a Pomeranian goose. Mr. Bóka read his chef d'ouevre until the end, and then he said with a smile:
That's nice.
Palkó didn't manage to sell a single poem. He learned the law of supply and demand (quite few country girls visited their shop) the hard way.

You’re going to cannonball, like you’re at Lake Velence!
You’re talking about Zempléni?
Yes.
I don’t believe it. He hid Béla Hamvas in here?!
And not just him. Several people.
Papó and István are flipping through catalogue notes in the hallway of the acquistions department. If someone were to observe them from afar, they would think they are working.
Either way, Béla Hamvas died as a retired archiver on November 7th, 1968.
And what do you know about that!
A lot. That György Lukács said about his death sentence: *we do not try and argue with those kinds of idealists.* After that they couldn’t really put up with him at the library either. And Déry, when he was a very old man, said only:
Béla Hamvas? I remember him. He always wore ugly neckties.
Papó leans against the filing cabinet, scratches his chin.
They always mocked Gustave Mahler in this city, calling him Malheur. A defiant curve of the lip. And, in a Hungarian TV series, we have to cheer on the Russian partisans trying to blow up a military vehicle full of Hungarian soldiers.
István doesn’t answer. He’s flipping through pages hung along a wire. Hungarian writers! Why do we make these kinds of books available to the public? Three-fourths of them are headed for the pulp factory.
I’m only interested in one, my friend.
They stare each other off.
Only transient works should be published. Immortal works may remain manuscripts. And after the author dies, a servant girl may gather it up in a basket. She may bring it into the kitchen to heat the house. If something immortal has been written its existence does not depend on human memory.
Where is that quote from?
Hamvas. That’s how he cheered himself up.
How do you even know him? Every one of his books has been banished or destroyed, and you have to prove you’re his widow to read his novels in the manuscripts section.
Sándor Weöres wrote an essay about him when he was younger, trying to summarize the main point of his philosophies. It’s called “A Kind of Wholeness.” This is how it starts: To my mentor, Béla Hamvas...
That’s not what I asked: *where* did you read his words?
Well, I read most of them here in the library. *The Invisible Story*, *Human Anthology*, *Tibetan Ministries*, *Scientia Secra*, and whatever else there was...
Those are the kinds of books a centrist reads and then thinks he’s cultured, or at least original.
Thanks.
You’ve got to throw out Hamvas, just like so many other things...
István would like to leave, but his colleague stops him.
What I want to know is if you stole the copies from archives. Yes or no?
I could have just brought them home. But I checked them out, according to the rules. It’s another question if they happen to lose them and I pay the penalty.
You know, there’s one thing I hate: librarians that steal.
László Bóka stole, too.
He at least had an excuse. But you?
Why, what kind of excuse do I need? You said yourself that it is a librarian’s duty to differentiate poetry from trash that just sounds nice.
But not by stealing.

If there’s a surplus of something, and you’re hungry and poor, then you should take your own share!
Look at these notes! There are so many useless books stored in here.
István pulls out a drawer’s worth of catalogue notes.
This... And this.. Vain hope.... This is about somebody who thought he was special, and then ended up in a mass grave... Futile...
Papó shrugs his shoulders, and then leaves István alone with his gestures.

Six months later, Pál Tóth left the shop on Üllői street. Maybe too many Dustville words had slipped from his tongue? The boss roasted him. Whatever the reason was, Pál went off to Nándor Ascher's deli on Rottenbiller utca, where he bleated out his case, as if he were replying to an order. The engineer's family moved elsewhere, so Palkó had to look for another room, as renting an apartment was too much for his paycheck. He found accommodations near the shop, next to the Keleti train station. Every Sunday, his landlords, a young printer and his wife, went to listen to Hungarian folk music in a neighborhood bar.

One Sunday evening, the landlord's wife came into his room. Without uttering a single word, she kissed him on the lips.

What's yer' husband goin' to say? Palkó asked, when he finally got a breath.

He's already drunk, and he's cuddling with a girl in the kitchen, the woman said.

I don't mind, unless we're together.

The boy left the shop on Rottenbiller street because of a drug addict, who always came in a few minutes before closing. The drug addict was still advertising Her Ladyship, Blaha Lujza's finest make-up, and he drank liquor in the shop every night. They often closed fifteen minutes late because of him. Palkó didn't even spend six months here.

Luck brought Palkó to the shop on Lipót boulevard, and even though the store's address was number 13, he stayed here the longest. He worked with three other clerks, but the boss entrusted him with arranging the window display.

Palkó built it like an alter. On the left side, the Prague ham gave a pink smile, the round mortedella sitting beside it, with various kinds of salami. He had to swallow every time he smelled the spiced sausages from Krakow. He put the local meats in the middle: and made a wreath out of the Debrecen sausages. One lemon-flavored, one garlic-flavored. Dustville's Pick salami became the centerpiece. There was bacon seasoned with paprika, smoked brawn, Gyulai and Csabai sausages, cubed cracklings, and ham wrapped around a cream filling. The Steiermark chicken smelled real nice, having been fattened with milk rice (*poularde* in the language of the may-I-call-you-sir clerks). That sat next to the dish of cow bladder. Above this was the duck liver pâté with Strasbourg truffle. Marinated salmon and lobster aspic encircled these delicacies from the right side. A little ways off were the small crabs still in their shells (the gentlemen referred to these as 'crevettes'), and of course the oysters, those could not be left out. Palkó put the cheeses on the right side: the Emmental imported from Switzerland, the French Camembert, the Dutch Edami, the fragrant Hagenberg, Banja Luka's Trappista, the Milanese stracchino, and smoked parecina, which was so kind to the stomach, and also the smelly Olomouc cheese, a favorite of connosieurs.

The boss knew the Chinese saying: he who does not know how to smile should not open a shop. But he could even smile to everyone throughout a fourteen hour workday. The customer had hardly set foot into the shop when the chorus sounded:

I kiss your hand, my lady!

Your humble servant, sir!

I am in luck! What would you like to order?
The boss was not among the stingy traders.
Clerks! He said once after closing. You see how many expensive items we bring in here, some from abroad. No one is stopping you from tasting the merchandise. The only way you can truly recommend these products is if you know what they taste like. Am I understood?
Of course, there were also buyers who came into their popular shop to taste the items. For example, a well-dressed young woman, who said to Palkó quietly:
You know, tomorrow we're having some people over for tea, and I'd like to see what kind of options you have.
I am happily at your service, my lady, Palkó said dutifully. What would you like to see?
Maybe we can start with the ham, the woman said. I see you have some in the slicer.
Of course! Palkó said, and in a flash, he offered the young woman a piece. The young woman removed a roll from her bag, put the ham on top, and took a bite out of it. She tasted a few other things and said:
I'm very satisfied with your merchandise. Tomorrow morning I will be back to do my shopping.
I hope we have the pleasure, my lady! Palkó said. And he looked towards his boss.
We're never going to see her again, the boss said with a smile, after he had closed the door behind the young woman. She'll eat her dinner in five other shops. A car's horn honked in front of the store. Automobiles were rare back then, even in Budapest.
It's the honorable Count Csekonich, the boss said. Clerk! You are going to serve him, he said, gesturing towards Palkó. And he winked.
At your service, boss!
The count arrived with his enormous Great Dane.
Your humble servant, your honor! The chorus sounded.
How can I be of help to your honor? Palkó asked, stepping out towards the tall guest.
Pwease, could I have some of youw Pwague ham?
We got it fresh yesterday, your honor, and we cooked it today. Then I would like a hawf kilo, but only fwom the ones shaped like woses. Yes, sir.
Palkó was about to wrap up the merchandise, but the Count stopped him.
Pwease give it to my dog!
The dog promptly finished off the finest piece of ham.
Pwease, the Count said to break the silence, I would like you to pwepawe a gift basket fow me! The pwice does not mattew. I want to to be vewy pwetty!
Yes, sir.
Palkó tried to choose the most expensive things. Champagne, cognac, liquor, sugar-coated pineapple, bonbons, and other treats all made their way into the gift basket. Of course, the flowers and bow could not be forgotten.
How much? That will be twenty-five Krohnes and fifty cents, sir.
Palkó held out the invoice to the count. Though he'd thoroughly overcharged the man, he knew from his boss's wink that this was the moment they would earn back the money from those tastings.
Hewe is my pocketbook, the count said. Pwease take it out youwself.
At your service! Palkó went over to the cash register with the pocketbook: it was full of golden ten and twenty Krohne coins.
On his way out, the count gave Palkó a bit of gold for his services. The boy bowed down low, and as he did, he thought of the actress who would get that gift basket in the Víg Theatre across the way.
Naturally, the count asked for an errand boy to carry the gift basket the great distance.
Palkó's next buyer was from the Administration of National Statistics, a man who was only paid daily wages.
At your humble service. The usual, please, the man said.
The public servant's 'usual' consisted of a few halves of hot dogs and a roll. On paydays, he bought cracklings.
Palkó whispered to him:

Buy three rolls. For ten cents, I'll give you enough leftovers from the ham that it'll be tough to pack it away!
The clerk, whose dinners were less certain than the dog's, gave Palkó a grateful look. Palkó had moved the world's balance just a little closer to the right place, and was satisfied with himself.
Rowdy actors rushed into shop, lead by Gyula Hegedűs and Zoltán Szerényi. Hegedűs was dressed in a huszár's uniform. They often toasted with champagne in the back of the store, and Palkó drank in their words as he swapped out their bottles of Törley. He quietly paid the ten Krohnes himself. The coin shone brightly, like the bohemians' faces.

István is drinking from the hand he holds under the tap, and he can hear Pali and András chatting in the other room:
Hey, that girl had such a beautiful ass. Like two breasts.
Klári Konfekció?! Please! Last time her mom went to the butcher's, he asked: Tell me, Ms., did you also have such an enormous ass before you hit forty-five?
But if you'd seen her in those jeans!
Trapper jeans are a treasure, good if you got 'em, better if you don't! You can sit in a well, or throw 'em to hell! István thinks of the blonde woman who peeks out longingly at him and his roommate from the apartment across the way. Her husband is a snuffling man whose beard hides his double chin, and whose ripped clothes always seem to want to fall right off him; he doesn't even let her go down to store. He must be a boss of something, because he lifted the woman out of the library and locked her inside the enormous downtown apartment.
Her thighs are probably itchy by now, István thinks. He dries his hands and goes back to the junior clerks' room silently. Papó is in a crossword puzzle's trap. István goes over to the filing cabinet with a listless expression, randomly pulls out a binder. He sits back down, opens it. Smells the binder. Musty. He pulls out a sheet and skims over it, then sets it off to the side. The first signs of interest appear on his face.
Listen to this, Papó! This can't be real. I just found a poet, a real poet.
It is better to work less but work smart, it is said,
My Hungarian brothers, let this verse be read.
Syllables! His colleague interrupts.
A man don't take a hundred steps where only twelve are due.
Save time and strength, this machine will surely get you through.
Due—through, this guy is really trying hard! Papó starts to look up from his puzzle.
Ye' can till the ground better, and make the produce bigger,
A good Hungarian tool on good Hungarian soil.

PÁL TÓTH TRADING CO. LIMP

Oh, a poet. He's got a pretty short name. That's Papó talking.
All there is about this Hungarian machine is that Hofher-Schrantz-Clayton Shuddleworth stored it in Sándor Tóth's house.
Those Tóts never give it a rest.
But just wait! That was only the beginning. Here comes the real folk feeling:

Kató asks Erzsi,
Could she give some advice?
'Cause her strudel is salty
Her cakes dry as rice.

I tell you one thing, my friend!
Keep it fresh in your mind!
Buy your sugar, flour here
Tóth's wares are sublime!

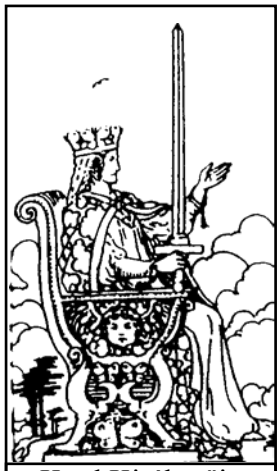
My dear Gerő, your brother,
Show'rs me with kisses,
'Cause my strudel is sweet,
And my cake brings the heat.

This Pál Tóth guy really lived it up. Or at least Gerő bácsi did, Papó says.
It'd be easier to say what he didn't sell!
Don't just summarize it! From the top.

István reads the advertisement out loud mockingly, in a childish voice, as if he were reciting the poem for school:

Ms. Ági, where do you shop?
Find everything you need
For the house in one stop,
'Cause Tóth's got it real cheap.
Clean business, good values,
Low prices, stocked shelves,
You'll shop nowhere else,
You'll see for yourselves.

That 'cause, I like that! Pali shouts through the door.
István reads on, over-accentuating everything.
Sugar, salt, flour, spice, chains, oil and dry paints, and every other item a homeowner might need, ten and one-hundred kilo scales at the manufacturer's price. You can find this in Pál Tóth's shop on Kossuth street no. 10 across from the Casino. István has now switched to a teacher's voice. Every regular customer gets a shopper's book, and whatever he buys will be written down in it. At the time of purchase, they will get three pennies back for every pengő they spend, or in other words, a three percent discount on their account's purchases—an account-discount: guy had a poetic sense for nothing—he's even rhyming about the low prices. Awaiting your kind patronage, with all respects, Pál Tóth Trading Co. Limp.
What on earth is that?
That bullshit Zengőváry left me.
It's not all that bad, Papó says, and he hides in his puzzle again.
Not this. But you should see the rest.



Kard Királynője

IMAGE: THE SWORD'S QUEEN

The clerks in the shop on Lipót boulevard referered to the boss's wife as Julcsa néni. They considered her a woman of high living, who had a real knack for business. She was fond of beautiful things. One day she gave Pál a real painting, a still life, which he was supposed to model the window display after. The still life window display landed him a silver five Krohne coin.

Pál had been working for the company for two years and had his own loyal customers, who would rather wait until he was available than see another clerk.

Clerk! We just got a telephone order, Julcsa néni said once, not long before closing time. Here's the list. The customer wants you to deliver it yourself.

The customer lived one corner away from the store. A few minutes later, Pál was ringing the doorbell on the second floor. He gave the cook the package. The cook came back saying that the mistress would like to see him in order to settle the bill in person. She led him into the salon. Pál found an exceptionally beautiful woman on the divan. Once they were alone together, the young woman quickly got to the point.

I've been watching you for a while now, the woman said, whenever you set up the window display. And this was the only way we could meet. Why don't you sit down next to me?

Pál was now twenty years old; he had become a young man with a meek face and dreamy eyes, and a pointy English moustache. Still, he blushed. Eszti came to mind.

My lady, they're waiting for me in the shop! He said.

Are they now! The boss's wife knows very well that you are here.

He finally sat down. The woman was even more desirable from close up. There was no fault in the kisses, nor the embraces. It was only when his hand slipped lower, touched the woman's right knee. He promptly jumped to his feet. He even forgot the bill rushing back to the shop. The boss's wife chewed him out head to toe.

There were other occasions that a lady called Pál over to show him the secret to making fish salad, aspic, tartar, or remoulade sauces, even real majonnaise. And though it was forbidden, Pál most certaintly–well, he didn't keep any of his knowledge secret from the prettier of women. If they were beyond that dangerous age—according to his own words—he avoided them.

There was however one day when a man waited for him outside the shop after closing time. He thought of the lustful eyes of the prostitutes at the Klauzál street baths, who paid twelve pennies to bathe in the Danube's warm waters. However, this man was different.

I would like to speak with you privately, he said, and he invited Pál to a tavern. He quickly got to the point. He'd been happily married to his wife for five years, but the heavens did not want to bless their covenant with a child. The woman was a regular in their store, and had picked out Pál as the father of their future child. This was all a bit much for a Limp soul.

Sir, he said to the man, I sell delicacies and spices, not myself!

The man finally started to beg him, questioning the purpose of life without a child, without an heir, then this and then that, how much happiness it would bring to them, etc. etc. He also mentioned

money. If a little girl was born, he'd give him one-hundred Krohnes, but if it were a little boy, he'd give him two-hundred Krohnes.
Pál asked for a couple of days to think it over so he could talk over the matter with his friend, Jóska Galamb. He observed the female customers closely, but nothing came out of that.
Good money and respect don' go togeth'r, said Jóska Galamb, who could have sold bits of sunlight if he wanted to. 'N fer a good trad'r, honor is just a part o' business speculation. The art o' soundin' out a person's desire for somethin'. Here's our chance: we're goin' to Vienna in nine months!
They had wanted to try their luck in the emperor's city for quite some time now. That decided the matter. So, he made the pact. The secretive sperm buyer sat Pál down for a nice dinner, even tried to fill him up with Bikavér wine, which the boy drank reluctantly. The man escorted him to Room 7 on the first floor of the London hotel.
I unscrewed the lamps. Promise me you won't light any matches! He said.
Sir, I don't smoke. Pál was thinking about what horribly ugly woman must be waiting for him in the dark. Good night, dear, said a deep, cool voice. Pál fumbled in the voice's direction. The woman must have been fantasizing as she lay in the bed's warm lap, because she immediately pulled him close to her.
At least tell me the color of your hair. And your eyes, he begged the woman, because he was very satisfied with her shape.
Brown, the voice whispered.
In order to be sure about the results, Pál fulfilled the pact's obligations three times. The night was so miraculous, so inconceivable, like an operetta.

It was the rooster's hour. The moon was already in the sky, looking like a raised eyebrow. He reached the city upon leaving the cemetery, where he had appeared ten minutes before eleven o'clock on a given day of the year. Why? So he could talk to someone, who he seemed to chat with less in his thoughts nowadays? He knew that what lay under the ground was not her. But then why had he asked the girl's parents which way her head was facing? And why on earth does he tell her the story about the car crash again and again every year, in which it turns out that he was responsible for the girl's death? And why does he consider the elderly couple his real parents, instead of his own, with whom he doesn't really have a relationship anymore? And why is he sitting in the little hillside cemetery this afternoon? And why is he reading the groundskeeper's announcement on the side of the building, and why does he memorize it, as if he would be quizzed on it later?

ANNOUNCEMENT TO RELATIVES

The parish, or the groundskeeping, has raised the renewal fees to 400 HUF for graves more than 25 years old, and for those which previously required 100 or 200 HUF for upkeep. We therefore ask relatives to please pay the remaining 200 or 300 HUF to the parish by December 31st of this year. If this obligation is not acknowledged, the rights to the gravesite will be rescinded without any further notifice.

The Groundskeepers

He started to skim the cemetery's rules:

1. The cemetery's grounds are a resting place for our deceased parents, ancestors and acquantainces. Therefore it is a place of respect. This sacred place, which has been blessed onto this purpose by the church of Our Holy Mother, must be protected with respectable and appropriate order, cleanliness, calm and peacefulness. Everyone must pay attention that these virtues are upheld. All those present in the cemetery are required to follow its rules, and to obey the security personnel and groundskeepers responsible for the execution of its rules.
2. Visitors must avoid all forms of disrespect both in speech and conduct. They should speak quietly and should not run about or cause any scandal.
3. Stealing or removing gravestones, crosses, flowers, wreaths or candles is forbidden.
4. Bikes should be left by the gate at the designated bike racks.
5. Do not place old fallen wreaths or flowers on the ground or on other graves. Bring them to the compost sites.
6. Everyone should tend after their loved ones' graves and should not leave them unkept. Planting and watering flowers is the responsibility of the relatives.
7. Please use the buckets and water pumps carefully, and do not leave mud around the pumps.
8. All work in the cemetery, including the installation of grave borders, gravestones or new crosses, can only be executed with permission from the groundskeeper's office.
9. The maintenance of gravesites and old gravestones must also be arranged here. The security personal are not entitled to arrange this.
10. It is forbidden to use the cemetery as a throughway or to bring animals onto the grounds which are punishable by a fine.
11. There is a designated book available for expressing complaints in the groundskeeper's office.
12. The cemetery's visiting hours are from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. during summer months and from 7

a.m. to 5 p.m. during winter months.
13. Children under the age of ten may only visit the cemetery if accompanied by an adult.
14. In the case of burials, the gravedigger is responsible for looking after the conversion of the gravesite by placing the appropriate markers, as well as digging and sealing the grave within the appropriate time frame. In other words, all matters pertaining to the burial. The burial of every deceased person or infant and the placing of urns all require permission, which must be requested from the New Catholic Parish Groundskeeper's Office, and must be given to the security personnel in the appropriate time frame prior to the burial.
15. In particular, everyone must notify the grounds promptly regarding the lighting of graves or tombstones.
16. The office of the New Roman Catholic Church documents each grave, as well as its plot number.

Gyuli Zsindely
Groundskeeper

Your memory will live forever! He sang softly. Two children under the age of ten stepped through the gate, watering cans in their hands. He went back to the little bench next to the grave. Lit a cigarette. He didn't know what to think about. They'd already discussed everything that morning, even made pledges to each other. He'd secretly buried two cigarette butts in the ground. Kossuths, his absolute favorite, which he probably only smoked because of their image, as they were the caustic choice of able-bodied laborers and the unemployed. He tasted the cigarette's rancid flavor again, nicotine still coursing through his veins, a bridge made of two lovers linking arms. He started to watch the little guy standing in front of the headstone, who was studying both him and the engraving. The kid didn't say anything. First they'd asked for matches, so they could light the stubby candle inside a beer bottle cap that their grandfather had brought. But when they came back, the freckled one asked, without any delicacy:
That lady died four years ago. Yes.
And who is she to you?
He waited to answer, but it got to the point that he couldn't put it off any longer.
The woman I loved. That's all he said. Nowadays people learn how to behave from television, he thought.
And you still love her?
Yes. One of these days you'll know the feeling.
And what do you do?
I'm a librarian.
Is that good?
Playing is better. Being a librarian is like being a groundskeeper here. A coral butterfly landed in his hair. He brushed it off gently. Bye, he said to them. Every evening is a previous day, he thought. And now he's rattling along the tram he boarded at Nyugati train station. The shot of pálinka he swallowed at the canteen is in his stomach, its bitter taste on his tongue and lips. He rattles along Bajcsy-Zsilinszky street, towards Astoria.
And then he looks up. Two black eyes are watching him, without any kind of challenge, but without trying to hide. He stares back. The girl holds his gaze.
What could I want from a gypsy girl? He thinks. But he's already decided to look into the woman's eyes again. Whatever, she'll get off at Budafok anyways, and just enjoy this for the moment. Now the girl is looking deep into his eyes, determined and searching, and she gets off one stop before Astoria. István, like someone sleepwalking, follows her. The girl is in a short skirt, and she has a strong and sculpted butt, the calves of someone who walks a lot. What is Kati going to say about this, he thinks. He remembers the pledges they made next to the grave.
He tosses away the end of his cigarette, and with more two steps, he's next to the girl.
Hi.

Hi.
Which way are you going?
To Semmelweis street.
Nice, that’s where I’m headed.
There is no surprise on the girl’s face, nor curiosity. She has a masculine chin, and she wears her wiry hair in a braid. Her skin isn’t the color of cocoa butter, rather something much darker.
I just got back from the cemetery, István says in his embarrassment.
Yeah? The girl looks at him. She does not seem to wonder at all. Instead, her enormous dark-brown irises seem somber in their white frames. I live here, she says in front of the house.
Would you want to meet up this weekend? István says, the humiliation of rejection catching in his throat. The girl could be sixteen years old, he thinks.
Yes, after work.
Where do you work?
The lighting factory, in Újpest. And who do you live with here?
My coworkers, girls. You can’t come up, she says sadly. Strength, health and sadness are all pouring from her body, from the way she holds herself.
So then where should we meet?
Here, at the foot of the Elizabeth bridge. In the parking lot.
How does five o’clock sound?
Okiedoke.
Man do I hate her for that, István thinks. *Okiedoke.* Country bumpkin. And what are you? Says another voice inside him.
Then goodbye, I guess.
István Zoltán.
Olga Orsós, bye.
The girl smiles for the first time since they saw each other.

Józsi Galamb and I were walkin' down Kígyó street in front of the Apostle's brewery, chattin' in our own gibberish. Ever since Józsi and I spent our days off together, we'd perfected our language, some kind Arabic-Spanish, Italian, Romani mix. Sometimes we'd even understand each other.
Kabekeke chaleya alleya mardaya? I ask Jóska.
He looked hard at me.
Cumbe jopna! Apekekaleyapa.
That's what I'm talking about!
Chabay Korlayheyrayriamuto. Endalayerzanaliada haleyomo. Tavalahayahaleyapapampillón.
But I wouldn't let him scare me:
Chabeykavayunvayullaypelustelallo. Uzuleodyabullepoppatuppa ruu.
Pardon me, a man stuttered. He was a respectable old-fashioned gentleman, dressed in a dark blue velvet blazer and biege pants, polished leather shoes and white spats. I speak seven languages, but I don't understand a word you're saying. The best part of it was that he addressed us in Hungari'n.
I looked at my watch:
We'd better go, we're late for the movie!
My friend Jóska was even more audacious. The pub on Koronaőr street was advertised as a grocer's and famous for its chicken paprikash, but once, after we'd stuffed ourselves, Jóska called over the owner, whom everyone called by his first name, and asked:
Mr. Pregrád, can you just tell us where to go if we want a good meal for once?
Our choice source of coffee was the Three Eighter at the Town Hall square, where we drank our joe among university students, soldiers, humble citizens, manufacturers and traders. 'Cause you could put as much as sugar in your coffee as you wanted at no extra charge. We also found our way through the gate of the Little Pipe Tavern, at Szervita square, but we got kicked outta there too, 'cause Jóska was bein' a smartass again.
I'll give ye' some good advice about how to get more beer into the glass, he told the bartender.
May Allah bless you for your kindness, answered the man wearin' a red fez.
Ye' pour less foam!
We found this city to our likin'; it was a bit like us. We like the sophisticated gazin' of the porters in red and blue hats, the commoti'n of servants in orange hats, express deliv'rymen in brown hats. The baker's apprentices arrivin' with breakfast at the sound o' a whistle, the lively, nightwalkin' merrymakers, the snoozin' guards on the nightwatch. The army of early-mornin' milkmen on one-horse or one-donkey peasant wagons, the cow's sad mooing soundin' from the cellars, where the traders, the milk vendors' fierce competiti'n, squeeze out their wares from the woeful beasts who ain't nev'r seen pastures. The Italian chestnut vendors, or chestnut vendors dressed as Italians, with their pierced ears and red hats decorated by blue tassles, they also roasted potatoes on their little stove tops and gave warmth to the passerbyers. The Tóts sellin' fieldfare thrushes, the people from nearby villages offerin' linseed oil, the Turkish and Italian confectioners near the schools, the red-faced Palóc women sellin' red apples, the Schwab vendors o' onions and thatch, the firewood

sellers. The words echoed in Hungari'n-Schwab-Tót-Italian:
Get your apples here!... Stroh-stroh!... Kravanet, kravanet!... Halva, mandoletti!...
Sometimes we'd go to the promenades, the ones for ev'ryday people. People from Alföld and Transylvania met in front of the Keleti train station, those from Felvidék in front of Nyugati, those from Transdanubia in front of the Déli train station, the Schwabs in Széna square, and of course in City Park at hot dog stands.
We loved the ne'er-endin' bustle, the crowds ye' could disappear in, the strangers' weddings, where—as surely nobody knew each other—you could assume the face o' a relative 'n sneak the bride a kiss. We loved the parades on Saint Stephen's day, the cannon blasts on Gellért hill, the newspapers reportin' the latest duel among the aristocrats, but most of all, we loved the theater.
We even liked this better than loiterin' in front of jewler's window display, even though they say the stones in the theater are fake. Sometimes we hang in front of the jewelry store for half 'n hour gazin' at topaz the color of wine, milkwhite opals, grass-green em'ralds, crimson rubies, violet amethysts, or perhaps the sapphires, which always remind me o' my Eszti's eyes. But we found the most beauty in the theater, where nothin' was real, and yet all true. Józsi Galamb liked operettas the best, and I liked old folk dramas, *The Red Purse* and *The Escaped Soldier*. But the most outstandin', the diamond that was sparklin' in e'ry color—and we agree on that—was Sári Fedák in the Royal Theater. The musical entitled *János the Brave* had already surpassed 350 showin's, and still, nobody got tired of it. Józsi and I saw it five times.
What would they say back home if they heard that a woman played Johnny Corn? The city folk's mouths would hang open once they saw the vest decorated with pearls, the beautifully embroided sheepskin cloak, the rimmed hat wrapped in ribbon, the pants embellished with colorful thread, the silver-tipped shepherd's staff, the meerschaum pipe, the horse-skin flask. And the huszár uniform, with all the soutaches! There ain't no words for it. The crowd only got real emotional when Miska Papp started singin' Bagó's song:
A single rose, it talks prettier than a love letter... And on the second verse, even the chorus started to turn. At the end, we were all sobbing for Bagó. Rich and poor, Hungari'ns and Germans, e'eryone collectively bawled. But it sure was good to be there! If only Eszti could'a seen this magical world! What's up with her these days? I should write her a letter.

This guy thought of everything, Papó. He took out life insurance in 1,000 USD and 5,000 golden pengős from Anker General Insurance Co. And he paid every balance for a decade. I have two handfulls of receipts right here.
Yeah? István's colleague doesn't even look up from his typing. He's preparing this year's magazine subscriptions.
But there's one thing he missed.
Papó doesn't say anything.
The Russians. And even after he got out of prison, his insurance contract was the first thing he dealt with.
He was in prison? Why?
I don't know yet. But he was in there for months. And then he gets this answer from the insurance company:

Life Insurance Dpt/loc. Budapest, Jan 5, 1946.
Regarding contract no.: 299017-292.209
We inform you in the following notice regarding the contract stated above that in the absence of payments for both your insurances extending beyond the payment deadline, we can only assume the risk of these insurances according to current stock values. Due to the change of terms and the delay of valuation—you hear what kind of sophisticated language they use, Papó?—the reactivation of your insurance plans can no longer be initiated, and therefore we regretfully inform you that we cannot pay out your insurance at this time. We ask you to please be patient while we wait for the new governmental order to be announced regarding formerly contracted insurances.
With all respects, the ANKER Directorship, Hungary,

Two illegible signatures

The stamp on it is worth eight pengős, and on that stamp is a muscular giant freed of his chains, hammer in hand, both the ruptured and rebuilt Chain Bridge in the background.
Yeah, and how did the story end?
István sucks in air. A disgusting habit: he sucks his phlegm back in and swallows it.
This is how he deals with the shortage of tissues.
Wait a second, I'm looking through a bunch of requests. Here it is.

State Insurer	Letter no.: 130013
Csömör County Directorship	Dustville, Sept 10, 1954
Paid postage	Dir. Décsy

In reference to your letter on Feb 7., we kindly inform you that the life insurance which you ordered from the Anker General Insurance Co. in the form of 1,000 USD has been accepted for reward. However, we kindly note that in years prior to the liberation, it was a federal requirement that life insurances contracted in foreign currencies be rewarded in pengős, and therefore your insurance—in as much as you have upheld it—must be rewarded in pengős. Regarding your insurance in pengős, it came to our knowledge that you asked for the valorization of your insurance according to order no. 6400/1946, however as the instructive for executing this order has still not been received, we naturally inform you that we cannot give you any more information concerning your reward.

State Insurer
Two illegible signatures,

one of them probably Décsy’s

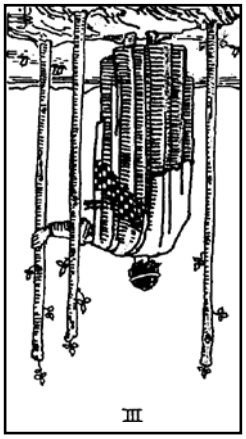
And the guy gave up?
Ah, it’s terrible. He tried again in 1980. Here’s the letter:

Csömör County State Insurance Office, Dustville

I respectfully ask the L. Directorship to perhaps kindly inform me by return of post—where is this guy living, Papó?—if the execution order regarding order no. 6400/1946 (concerning the valorization of life insurances)—this is gold! It’s only been twenty years—has come into action? Attached is a stamped return envelope.
As I took out a 1,000 USD life insurance with Anker Insurance—he’s not even talking about the other one, you know? You don’t care, whatever, I’ll go on—and while I transfered—with only one R, whoops—the payment after the deadline, I did pay (I can prove with the receipts), but as the reward has not been received (look at that passive voice, he’s trying to speak our language!) until this day, and now that I am ninety years old and not fit for labor—what a little naive heart!—it would be nice if I could receive my benefits. The contract number is 299.017.
I would also like to mention that I am your client as well, having insured my house with your company continuously for decades.—Does this guy ever learn?—Waiting eagerly for your answer, and everything, etc.

Dr. Pál Tóth
Limp, 10 Bocskay street.

So, did he get a response?
No. That was everything in this folder. I’ve just been mining out all the gold bits for you.
And the old man finally kicked the bucket?
I don’t know. He couldn’t be immortal, but they do say that whoever takes out life insurance stays alive in all kinds of ways, as punishment... But I don’t even know how he became a doctor. You know how many folders I have left? And here I am, working in this sinking, crumbling library, and I don’t even have accident insurance.



The golden days on Lipót boulevard didn' last fore'er. Neither did they anywhere else. One day—and boy, was the wind bitt'r cold outside—the boss caught Sanyi R. Nóti on Julcsa néni. In the back, inside the storage room, on the sacks. But that ol' woman refused to be found guilty. She took to higher ground, shoutin' at her husband:
We'd only need one clerk if you could still be a man every day!
That Sanyi R. Nóti (as to what the R in his name stood for, nobody knew; he said it meant Rátóti, but the other clerks sayed Rátarti) flew right outta there. 'N me too, two weeks later. The problem was that we had permission to serve wine 'n pálinka. Though as a matter o' fact, that wasn't the problem, the problem was happened 'cause o' it. A certain Ignác Kohn, who was a really great 'n loyal customer, drank a shot o' vanilla pálinka in the shop e'ery mornin'. I poured. He drank it, 'n then vomit shot right out o' his mouth. Huh, that must'a been pretty strong, I thought, but I still yelled for the boss.
Which one did you give him, he asked.
I showed 'im the bottle. He promptly called an ambulance. I'd poured that poor custom'r a drink from the bottle o' diluted ammonium hydroxide, which makes ye' real dizzy. Both o' the bottles looked the same. I ne'er would'a believed it, but that's why I became the second clerk to be kicked outta the shop.
I read an advertisement in the Pest Daily and was quick to answer it.

To the Honored Mr. Béla Boros
Trader of spices and colonial goods
3 Industrial Street, Szolnok

Dear deeply respected sir,

I read in the Pest Daily that you are looking for a shop clerk, who could also be used for part time office work.
In all due respect, I would like to offer my services for the position you have advertised. My school records are exemplary, and my references are exceptional. I finished my apprenticeship in Reichlinger's business in Limp four years ago. My handwriting is clear, and my grammar is excellent. I also know a bit of German.

Respectfully and hopefully awaiting your Honored Sir's gracious response.
With all regards,

Pál Tóth
194 Zsigmond street, District III, Budapest.

The response was quick and kind. I had no suspicions.

Dear Mr. Pál Tóth
Budapest

I received your application and would like to ask you to please come to my shop without delay to introduce yourself.

Béla Boros

My boss in Szolnok came off rather miserly. He even put a lock on the dome for the cheese. Howe'er, there were also times we got enough of the merchanise to fill a barge or a wagon. Almost everythin' was under lock and key. And o' course, if we e'er got the key, we clerks served ourselves. We didn' even spare the tropical fruits. The other problem was that the boss gave me one paycheck for two jobs. There was a lo' of lett'r writin'. With Pest's Tivadar Bárány Colonial Trading Company, for example. I wrote the letters of complaint.

Mr. Tivadar Bárány
Budapest

I am sorry to inform you that the coffee you sent does not stand up to the same standards of your sample, which I am sending separately from this letter. I bought coffee from your stocks in Trieste, but got a shipment from Fiume, which had much smaller and paler beans than what you sent in the sample, those having been larger and a beautiful green color. I had other experts look at the coffee, and they were all of the same opinion. I ask you to please investigate the incident and inform me of the cause of this problem.

With all respect,

Béla Boros

Now, the Bárány company did not back down.

Mr. Béla Boros
Szolnok

To answer your letter addressed on the 16th of the month, I have the lucky opportunity to point out that your complaint is without grounds. The coffee I sent you was not of inferior, but rather superior, quality. The coffee you sampled arrived in Trieste discolored, and for that reason I did not purchase it from the grower in Santos. In order to serve your honor with efficiency, I sent more expensive coffee to your address, from Fiume. As I made this sacrifice, I must say that I am deeply astounded by your complaint. If this sample coffee—from Trieste—was more suitable to you, then I could of course exchange it for the product I sent. However please be convinced that the product you received was of better quality, and that buyers will have a different opinion than your so-called experts, who have half-heartedly examined the undeniable quality of this Fiume coffee.

With the greatest respect,

Tivadar Bárány

At least there was some benefit: I learned how to write letters of business. And the kind of things I found in old folders! There was, for example, a LETTER OF INSURANCE from the Tisza's Royal

Association of Vessel Protection. The contract’s twelth and final point went like this:
If damage were to be caused to an insured item in the circumstances of war, invasion, rioting, civil unrest, or if the item were to be lost, or become subject to lawful or unlawful usurption on behalf of the authorities, or damaged in any way: our company will not hold the insured responsible for the maintenance or repair. If a protected vessel enters an ice regime or reef, becomes subjected to poor stocks, is endangered by some other unfortunate event, such as sinking: it is the responsibility of the Insured to contact (according to the procedure outlined below) the company’s office immediately: however, before the insurer may execute the necessary steps to restore the item at its own expense—the insured must remove all freight from the vessel, if there is freight onboard. However, if the insurer would be informed that the vessel had been purposefully damaged, or that the damage could have in some way been avoided: it is not the responsibility of the insurer to fulfill the previously stated obligations.
I loved bein’ in Szolnok because of these old texts and swimmin’ in the Tisza. That was where I really learn’d how to swim. At first, they had to send a canoer after me in the middle o’ the river, but later I could I hold myself up on a raft. Tóni Mocsányi, the son of Abonyi’s bailiff, helped with e’erythin’. One day, Tóni went up to the boss and asked for a five Krohne raise. The boss was reluctant at first, but later he accepted. Howe’er, the wooden plate in the office flipped o’er, and the pennies and Krohnes rolled e’erywhere. All the boss remember’d was tha’ there was a five Krohne coin among the change, though he couldn’ find it. He suspected me of stealin’.
And then I thought, there’s a new day comin’: they respect a man better ’n a new place. And I always liked to wander.
That’s how I ended up in Debrecen, at the Lajos Komlós company. The streets were for the horses back then. The shop was big, near the Great Church. It was half deli, half paint shop. Ye’ could see the paint colors on our sleeves. The buyers couldn’ really tell the diff’rence between lead white, steam white, Venice white, Tibetan jasmine white, permanent white, bismuth white, cloud white, zinc and pearl white. I didn’t either, at first. The greens were my favorites. But they made twenty-five different shades o’ green in Schweinfurt. There was Scheele’s green, emperor’s green, parakeet green, shamrock green, chrome green and Guignet’s green. But the green earth was closest to my heart. They mined this in Italy, Tyrol, Czechia, and the island of Cyprus. I thought about how much these paints have travelled the world, and I’m just sittin’ here in Debrecen, listenin’ to my bosses’ guilt trips ‘bout the *money.*
Cheese was the deli section’s strength, we got that from the Netherlands. I served it, and I was also in charge of the storeroom. One day, I noticed there were three bottles missin’ from the Tokaji Aszú wine. Of course, I was the one they suspected. I realized that one o’ the clerks had asked me for the key several times when I was roastin’ the coffee or the chestnuts, which I cooked the Italian way. He was the only one it could’a been, but I had to prove it. I spread a thin layer of aniline paint along the mouth o’ an open bottle, right near the cork. Once, when he was comin’ out o’ the cellar with a nice round piece o’ yellow gouda cheese, he had that paint on his mouth. All the boss said was:
Young sir, you like that Tokaji as much as Mr. Tóth likes the pickled herring. It was true, salty, onion-flavored herring was my weakness. Józsi Galamb wrote.
From Pest, that we’d go to Vienna. After all this, I didn’ hesitate.

She won’t come anyways.
She will.
Are you really cheering me on right now? I’m cheering for her.
Why?
Because she’s from the countryside. Like you.
István is leaning against a Wartburg in the parking lot. The night is falling slowly, and a portable radio is playing, he can hear it from inside one of the cars. Somebody says next to him:
Why are you staring at the ground? We’ll get there either way.
Hi, Olga.
The girl is like the child of a fairy and a wild animal. Desirable.
Hi.
Where are we going?
There’s a party in the factory’s cultural center. You wanna come?
Of course.
They cuddle on the bus, like a couple who’s been together for a while now. Olga feels István’s bicep. He undergoes this nervously, but says nothing.
Let’s take this off, he tells the girl. Olga is wearing a pin on her tight-fitting pullover. It has two images and the saying: DON’T + be + a + pansy. The girl accepts. They rattle on towards Újpest.
What do you do in the factory?
I make sure all the lamps light up.
You don’t get tired of that?
Of course I do. We always replace each other, but still, I can hardly keep my eyes open by the end of the shift. So that the man doesn’t ask anything else, she adds: I’m on the factory’s soccer team! She sounds proud of it.
The man has an opinion about women’s soccer, but still he conveys interest:
And what do you play?
Middle defense.
István is silent for a moment. They arrive. The party is not in the factory’s cultural center, but rather in a smaller location which, judging from the headers, flags and socialist group photos, belongs to the Young Communist League. The two doormen’s words make István uncertain.
Basic’lly what he said was, the politics of the union organ’sation ’d better be replaced by practices that better repr’sent the group’s interests....
By an impartial committee created by the party... the other doorman starts.
István looks to Olga for help, but by then they’re already inside. A drunk boy is rewinding the tape. He’s the DJ. It’s fine if the guy’s wasted, but if his dj-ing sucks!... They ruined the seventies with disco music: that’s another thing young people didn’t come up with. Rather, it was clever vendors, red-handed manufacturing leaders and questionable politicians. You could dance to it, but nobody did. They only sold beer here, though the kids’ eyes were already dim; they had something else in their pockets, hidden underneath the table.
Get the gitar off yer’ back ’n start playin’ the strings! A boy leaps up from one of the tables, his face bright. According to police reports, he is of a slight Creole complexion.
Hey, I will wipe you out! Says a guy with a pockmarked face, though there’s no anger in his voice.
Olga and István sit down at a table where two girls and two boys are already seated. After painful introductions, they drown their embarrassment with beer. The guys like how István drinks, and the kid in the biker jacket offers him rum.
Olga is drinking beer from the bottle, just like everyone else. She looks around proudly. Look at these guys I’m with! That’s what her eyes say.
The boys mention jokes from the radio show last week.

Why do we always stick our nose into other people’s business? Asks the guy with a round chin; István can’t catch his name with all the noise in the background.
István is also listening to the chatter at the neighboring tables; a sweet mix of dialects.
May firs’s only good if ye’ got liqu’r!
Yer’ like a coat, a temp’rary one! Ye’ wait in the closet fer the march, like the workers on Octob’r 23rd!
If I liv’d ’s far away as ye’ from this planet, I’d never make it home!
The table’s conversation turns to soccer. István watches the guy in the biker jacket and the blonde kid with the round chin: both of them have tattooes. The blonde kid has one on his arm: I’m a girl’s screw. The text on his left fist is a bit more grim, and it’s better if this certain girl—maybe whoever is with him at the moment—takes it seriously: BLOOD FOR BLOOD. The guy in the biker jacket has a cross with three horizontal lines, a symbol of the kids in the Aszódi Juvenile Detention Center. Here, the Aszódi Juvenile Detention Center is sort of like an Eton College. He’s got three letters on his other hand: WAD. István gathers together his courage, whatever little bit there is, and he asks.
Worldwide Association of Drunks! The owner of the tattoo says proudly.
Hey, Jackson, give me that beer! The gypsy boy—as if that modifier could differentiate him from the others—has already grabbed István’s bottle. The blonde boy cuffs his wrists.
You smell like a Turkish Bulgarian weighlifter, without any socks! Of course this is only the beginning. Give me that bottle, ’cause I’ll cut you up, like a wolverine!
You’re so dark, you make a bucket of soot look like lightening! That’s what the guy in the biker jacket says.
The kid lets go of the bottle. The guy in the biker jacket shoves him in the chest.
Olga is pleased: her friends have not only approved of her choice, they’ve even defend him. She would have been even happier if István had stood up for himself, but he just shrinks back, only standing to the factory boys’ challenge when it comes to alcohol.
...that pasturized milk over there, that square-eyed Napoleon floorvase, that gringo dick! Sounds from behind him, but not too loudly, so as not to cause trouble.
István is at home.