

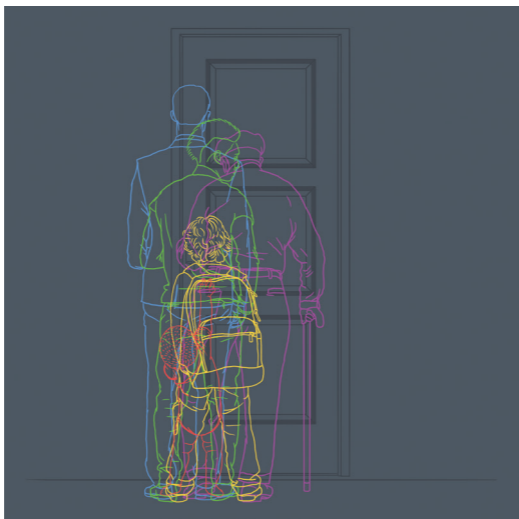
ONE HUNDRED VERY SHORT STORIES ABOUT BUDAPEST

Translator's note

The stories below are translations of a select collection of very short stories about Budapest by Hungarian amateur writers. In 2018, we called on writing aficionados for the fifth time to submit their stories with only two entry requirements: the stories had to be about Budapest, and their maximum length was set at one hundred words. As a result, thousands of brief novellas poured in: accounts of moods and impressions, memorable conversations, the footprint of history that lives with us, tales of love and pain, joy and sorrow.

We liked the stories so much that we felt they should be made available to a much wider, English-speaking audience. As we translated the texts, we departed from the 100-word restriction as the density of the Hungarian originals was often in need of relaxation to convey the full meaning of these exciting cultural vignettes.

The result is an exciting journey across Budapest in space and time, a touching sequence of colorful flashes on a city and its people who have seen and felt and lived much, yet eagerly look forward to more of the same.



Illustration

Richard Orosz

SUMMER ON MARGARET ISLAND

By Annamária Perczel

1956, the splendid afternoon sunshine is giving way to the early hours of the evening, it is time to go home.

I didn't want to leave the Island. I protested with all the force my 5-year-old body and voice could emit.

My father leaned down to me: "Don't cry, look at the people! See, those with kids take their kids' hands alright and walk home. In turn, those without kids, they take each others' hands and walk out to the island themselves now."

Summers went by.

Gradually, I was coming back from the Island later in the day, and my father no longer held my hand.

Last summer, my son was getting ready for an hour. He had a date with Kati.

"You take care! Where are you off to, and when do you get back?"

"To Margaret Island, don't worry! Wait, how is it that grandpa used to say?"

TRUE STORY

Panna Ferenczi

One day somebody let me have their seat on the tram, even though my belly was only round from my mother's stuffed cabbage. Once I saw a woman, helpless as a small and fragile wild animal, crouch between two cars as she relieved herself, I met her eyes for an instant, before the package landed on the concrete with a thump. One day a reckless pigeon hit me on my head in her flight. I once got dumped on Blaha Lujza square and once saw the place where the metro trains are turned around. I once applied for a job abroad, but didn't go in the end. Not once have I given up on you, Budapest.

UPS AND...

By Zsolt Balsai

Everyone at the company knew about the secret dates of Szabolcs and Dóri, except for her ex, Zalán, who on that day unsuspectingly unloaded his heartache on Szabolcs: “They saw her with someone. More of them.” He tried to fake commiseration. “One of them, at the Castle...” He recalled that Sunday. “...the other on night bus number 914...” The conversation started to become uncomfortable. “..the third spotted them on the Giant Wheel as they kissed...” Szabolcs’s face faded. “You okay?” “I am afraid of heights” - he answered to Zalán, looking surprised. “I would never sit on that”. And indeed at that moment, he felt quite as dizzy as though he were looking down from the top of the city into the gaping abyss.

HOMESICK FOR FIVE MINUTES

by Ambrus Ittzés

Of course I enjoyed being on the beach with my grandmother all day, and I knew too well that even though there was no school for me, my mom and dad had to work, and however good it felt to stare at sycamore trees and deep fried flat bread instead of Combino trams and undergrounds days on, still, I spent every day of my childhood summers in longing anticipation. I waited for the evening. This was because for five minutes every evening, my grandmother would let me feel homesick. For five minutes, there would be no grandmother, no Kenese, no smell of deep fried flat bread stuck in the air in our street, there was only Budapest, mom and dad, undergrounds and Combino trams. At the end of the five minutes, my grandmother would say: “Alright, that was that for today.” Of course, I secretly hung on to my homesickness till I fell asleep every night.

FITY FILLÉRS

by Borbála Beke

I have a fifty fillér coin in the palm of my hand. It is worthless. My parents told me it was our family's lucky coin. For they had their wedding when the Elisabeth bridge was inaugurated. - You see? - I remember my mother showing me the coin a long time ago. - There's the bridge, on the flip side. "Our bridge." This fascinated me back then. For decades, I thought about this every time I crossed that bridge. "Our bridge." Then my memories ended up in boxes. I had moved between places. They had, too. For good. Too early, too fast, too far away. I recently moved again. The boxes with me. All sorts of things cropped up. And now I have a fifty fillér coin in the palm of my hand. It is worthless. Yet my life started with this...

TOO SMALL A TOWN, TOO MANY ACQUAINTANCES

By Zsófia Flóra Horák

It was in the seventh district, in a small apartment full of books...but I can't say more about the apartment, for at this instant, the alarm clock went off. Sári glanced at her watch lazily, and felt astonished as she realized she had overslept. She sluggishly crawled off her mattress, and went about her morning preparations. In order to be at work on time, she had to call a cab. This wasn't the first time she had to resort to this trick. This time, however, just as she uttered the address in Buda, the driver cracked a smile: Dear Miss Teacher, my girl goes to this school, too, let's hope you both get there before the bell rings.

RED LIGHT

by Beáta Greczula

By 4 o'clock in the morning, dawn is breaking over the heat-stricken landscape of Blaha Lujza square. A lot of us are waiting for the night bus and watch the monotonous passing of cars. There is a red light, and a queue is slowly gathering. Out of one of the cars, a handsome-looking guy is staring at something next to me. I look there, too. There is a somewhat underdressed girl. This Platonic love is making me smile, which the guy promptly realizes. He smiles, too, at me, this time. We stare at each other for a few seconds. The light goes to yellow. He signals to me with his head, inviting me to sit in his car. I feel like going, but I stay. The light goes to green. He waits a little longer. Then he sets off and vanishes.

GROCERIES

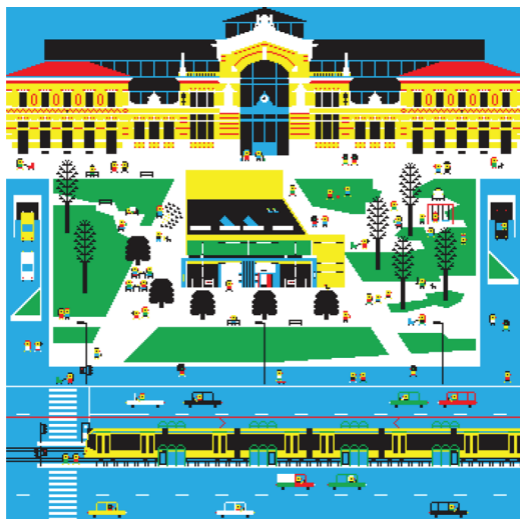
By Rita Evanic

There was a small grocery store called Pengő a few years back. Mrs. Slowmo, the cashier worked here. We called her that clearly because she was terribly slow, and she couldn't bother at all. It was a most special sight in Pest to watch the customers queuing up stand there in calm, statue-like repose and watch how she slowly approached the beer can to the bar code reader. Everyone took their time at the Pengő, all the time. Besides Mrs. Slowmo, they also had the stereotype of an old butcher guy: a heavy curve of a belly, a kidney belt and a t-shirt with grease spots, a chopper and a mustache. I always watched him as he nonchalantly wiped the chopper off his apron. By today, a SPAR branch has replaced the Pengő. The cashier's desk is video-surveilled, and meat is pre-packed (the butcher became a traffic warden, Mrs. Slowmo a memory).

TASTING

By Edit Németh

The gathering of Kispest's marmalade makers had begun. A new member was joining the club. Timi was testing the man's resolve with subtle banter. Gyulus knew the drill alright and struck back. He was getting support from an old member, Talabér, who was making a dynamic entry into the scene. He was bringing tasters from his new strawberry marmalade. - Timi, dearest, where have you been? - he asked while cracking up with laughter, looking at the rolled-up trousers of the woman. Shaking with fury, she yelled at the men: "You go to hell, the lot of you!" - and she ran off. At home, she was greeted by a message: "Timi, please forgive me, but I have a little bit of a flaw: whoever I like, I tend to take the mickey out of. Best: Talabér. She drafted the answer with a smile: "I, too, have a flaw, Tali, same as yours. Best: Timi."



Illustration

Tibor Kárpáti

RECONQUERING A SQUARE

By Dorottya Bartha

First it was the men in silk shirts that disappeared, then the girls with skinny ankles and weary faces, then there were no longer any old ladies in monoculars, and finally, when the playground had disintegrated, not even the most enduring of the kids ever showed up here anymore. By the time the excavators and the road drills had arrived, it was only pigeons and the homeless that remained on the square, unencumbered by the dust and the noise coming from the construction. For years on, the sea of mud that the square became was such that the only way to walk through it was on wooden planks. Then one spring, the chess-playing old folks re-emerged, followed by the young boys kicking footballs, and with the arrival of the peach season, the old women came back, then the thin guys on fixed gear bikes, the tattooed girls, the well-traveled dreamers, and the baristas talking in riddles, re-taking and re-making the square as their own.

THE PEOPLE OF NOAH

By Balázs Trosits

The storm hit Széchenyi Bath in a matter of seconds. In the blink of an eye, the scene transformed from people lying on beach towels to people seeking cover head over heels, trying to salvage whatever they could of their sudokus, boiled eggs, complete works of Jókai, deep fried flat breads and spritzers. Some remained calm and reclined in the hot water with their face up, enjoying every drop of rain like Ryan Gosling enjoyed the dance of the snowflakes in the final scene of Blade Runner 2049. An instant later, sizable pellets of ice started hailing down, the pool supervisors rushed everyone to cover, sweaty and wet bodies piled up against each other like herrings in a can. Within an hour, the storm blew itself out. I will never forget what I saw afterwards: curious eyes intensely searching the sky, faces expressing a muted and cowed sense of hope. Deluge over, curtain up. The people of Noah could take over the Szecska once again.

BERET

By Gabriella Nagy

I was raised by Granny. She seldom had time to play games, but whenever she did, she asked me: - What d'you want to play? - Let's play the one where we go to 'Pest to see Rita! - I instantly replied. This is when we both put our berets on our heads. Mine was brown, hers a deep blue. We sat on the edge of the bed and gave ourselves over entirely to our imagination: we were on the train. One Day Rita, my aunt, witnessed this little game and asked us, laughing: So why would you wear a beret to go to Budapest? I didn't get how it was possible that she had lived in Budapest for ten years and still didn't know that one had to do it with all the pomp and circumstance!

BUDAPEST IN JARS

By Csilla Magyar

The odd passion of Aunt Babi, recently a widow, started thirty years ago in the City Park. The greengage that landed just in front of the tip of her shoe tasted just like the fruit of that old, low tree she had known from the back of the garden on the ranch. Ever since, Aunt Babi is on the lookout from when the first fruits ripen until the fall of the leaves, takes notes of the places of her finds, then cooks the harvest of her forages, adds sugar and fills it all into jars. Gipsy sour cherry from Zugló and the wild cherries of Kelenföld, Óbuda pears and Újpest apples, mulberries from the Botanical Garden, the golden currant of Rákoshegy and Budafok medlar. It is now in her windowless pantry with mousetraps, that she keeps on shelves behind lace curtains, in jars crafted and labeled, a carefully steamed version of the whole of Budapest.

ON BLAHA

By Tamás Mihalik

The sun was setting on Blaha Lujza square. Hundreds of people were mounting the tram from the pavement molten from the summer heat. At the stop, the homeless took a shot at cooling the ground, some with the entirety of their body's surface. One of them slowly rose, only to fix his gaze - his face reddened only by the sun, surely - on passersby on their way home. -F**got! - he uttered to a man coming his way, who promptly ignored him. -F**got! - he cried again, addressing a mother with a small child this time. Then it was my turn, at which point the man tripped and fell against the wall of an apartment building. I ran up to him to help him stand up. - You okay? - I asked. The man smiled at me and said: -F**got!

WHY RUN?

Edina Sári

I went for my run later than usually, the traffic had started, forcing me to jog in one place waiting for the red light to turn, next to the crossroads at Elnök street. In the tram stop stood a man in a worn-down suit, in his fifties and clearly past his peak days, looking at me in bewilderment. I could see from afar that he would be the wisecracking type, I was sure he would throw some taunt at me. “Are you being blackmailed, I wonder, or why else would you be doing this at this hour?” Light was still on red. I grinned. “Or” - he asked, looking behind my back - “are you being chased”? Grin, still red. “Oh! So it is you chasing someone!” Still red, yet already, I am laughing. “There can be no other explanation” - he says, puzzled. Finally, green! I run across, waive back at him, and see him raise a thumb up in acknowledgement.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

By Éva Kellós

The widow of Mr Marton Matasits dozed off on the couch, her head supported by a throw pillow. She suddenly found herself at the entrance of the apartment building at Szondi street. She entered the gate, passed her fingers on the decaying wall, and gladly acknowledged the fact that she was at home. She pulled a weed from between the paving stones of the inside court, petted the cellar-dwelling cat pressing against her feet. She entered the apartment, aligned the portrait of Erzsike on the night stand, lay on the couch and fell asleep. When she rose again, she aligned the portrait of Erzsike on the night stand, left the apartment, petted the cellar-dwelling cat pressing against her feet, pulled a weed from between the paving stones of the inside court, passed her fingers on the decaying wall and stepped out through the gate. From 6 Szondi street.



Illustration

Mária Csenge Olajos

BUDAPEST IN ONE HUNDRED MINUTES

By Adrienne Angerer

“We are landing in Budapest due to a technical error. The airline will soon see to the resumption of your journey” - the stewardess announced. “Shit! We said Paris!” - the late teenage son of the American dad grunted in frustration. Ever since the divorce, his father had been trying to placate him with expensive trips. Eastern Europe wasn't part of the plan. “What the fuck is Buddhapesht...?” “OK, son, not sure, we'll look”. As they waited at the airport, the father googled Budapest's sights: Chain Bridge, Castle, Danube, Fishermen's Bastion...He was reading aloud to his disgruntled son, who, after a while reluctantly looked at the pictures. They spent 100 minutes on the airport. Budapest, done. As the loudspeaker called their names, they stood up, looked at each other, walked out of the airport, and hauled a taxi...

CHING-LING-CHING-CHI-CHI-LING

By Zsüliet Novák

In 1943, the bell from the tower of a small church in Rákosszentmihály was requisitioned. It was taken by the Hungarian Royal Office for Industrial Material. In exchange, they issued a certificate pledging to compensate the congregation within 5 years. From then on, Sundays were no longer commenced by the heavy and reproachful sound of the bell. Ten minutes before eight, the priest walked out to the entrance of the church, and started jingling Christmas bells with a delightful intensity. Sometimes, when his attention faded, the bells would jingle a disorderly rhythm, bringing a touch of distraction and chaos into the priest's practice of calling to mass. Ching-ling-ching-chi-chi-ling. I was not yet alive then. My grandmother, who told me the story, is no longer with us today. Yet a young priest still calls me to mass this way every Sunday. The church now has a bell again, but still.

TAKE A BREAK FROM GIVING UP

By Emília Gál

On the streetcar of your secret desires, hope is dodging the fare every morning. No matter how many times everyday reality will force him off, he will again and again jump back on just before the doors shut close. “Hope” - she who always rides without a ticket, she who will stay far away from the ticket machine, she who will never do the queue at the ticket counter, she who will never press the stop request button, she who pants unmuzzled with impunity, she who lets her ice cream melt entirely and splash on the velvet cover of the seat, she who always leans against the door, she who never steps back from the yellow line, she who always blocks the driver’s side view, she who floats over every trolley bus, revoltingly, in unrelenting fight, she, the eternal rupture of the overhead cable.

BEGINNING

By Sára Lotti Nagy

My parents lived in Dudar, but they wanted me to be born with my father present. The closest where such could be done was in Budapest. My mother was waiting for my birth at the Buda apartment of her friends. Check-up in the morning, go home, pack your things, come back and have the baby at three. An urgent telegram was sent to my father telling him to come. My mother sits calmly on the bed with her back straight, her hands on her belly, looking at her watch, "how many minutes are they?" - the others ask her, "one" she says. They despise her. Meanwhile in Dudar, Old Ica, the mailman and a drunk, sees the telegram arrive, but decides he would have the time for a short visit at every single tavern of the village before delivery. My father is racing with his MZ like he is Batman - he must be driving at a hundred. At the hospital, he presses against the wall the first man in a white overcoat that he can see, "where are we delivering the baby?" - he yells at him. Congrats, daddy, it is a girl.

THE HANGING CORRIDOR

By Katalin Pozsgai

Mrs. K., a widow, had been living her lonesome life in one of the run-down apartment houses with a hanging corridor in the 8th district. She was a familiar sight in the house as she spent her days fiddling about the flowers she grew in the boxes hanging from the fence of the corridor. Every year, she planted a few peppers, too, despite the fact that she never ate any of them. Her crops were regularly stolen. This always had her spit out a curse or two, such as “no one ever wants to lift the watering can, now, do they” or “if only both hands of these thieves were to dry off”. One day in June, the widow dropped dead among her favorite flowers. Yet the flowers lived on, there was always someone taking the time to water them. The peppers froze late in the fall. No one bothered to steal those anymore.

ITALIAN ICE CREAM BAR

By Ben

It must have been late afternoon. The tram, packed as ever, was approaching one of the stops on the Boulevard, when a child's voice pierced through the crowd. - I want ice cream! - the boy, no older than 5 years, sounded his demand with a lengthy cry. - Yet you will have none of it! - the father responded with full resolve. - But I still want ice cream! - the boy insisted. - Oh, will you stop it now! There isn't even an ice cream bar nearby - came the response. After a short silence, he boy continued, using the same pitch of voice as before: - If you don't get me ice cream, I will tell mom that you too peed in the bathtub last time. In the stop, with the vast crowd gradually encircling their figures, the father could be heard saying to his son: - Look, kid, isn't that an Italian ice cream bar over there?

REMEMBERING

By István Gulya

I remember, those were different steps - I whisper to Lau -, the whole world opened in that basement, everybody who wanted more than the mainstream music of the day staggered about down there, we leant against each others' bodies in Golgota street, Budapest gave us something like never before at the Black Hole, then came Tilos az Á, for flatbread we hit the Big Mambo, but before everything there was the Hole, where we gathered before every concert, but you know, what - I lean closer - the thing I remember most vividly is all the graffiti in the bathroom, most of all the one on a tile below the water tank: "Hilda Gobbi is alive" ...it is a weird thing, remembering, isn't it, pal? - I say, while I put the flowers on the grave, one after the other.

THE ORDER OF LIFE

By Éva Kertész

I sit on a packed bus number 7, Zsuzsi in my lap. Next to us sits a girl lost in her phone. The woman gets on with a little boy, the girl looks up and lets them have her place. The little boy pulls close to the window. Soon another woman appears from somewhere, heavy-looking grocery bags in both hands. The woman stands up and tells the other woman to sit. The other woman thanks the woman and tells the little boy “to just keep looking around”. You have enough space. Three stops later, she is getting ready to alight. She notices an old lady with a bent back, she signals to her. The old lady teeters close with her cane, she can hardly sit. “Mommy, I have figured out the order of life”, Zsuzsi whispers to my ear. Whoever is born first, dies first. There is a sequence. I pet her on her little head.

THE CUSTOMER

By Tihamér Kopor

I have been slaving away for a month at the dodgy little store on the edge of town. General store. We have everything, other than rules. Only regulars come. Béla is a regular. His thing is the quarter-bottle of mixed liquor (200 milliliters of stinky schnaps), three times a day. Always as a main course. Morning, day and night. Chases it with beer sometimes. He surprised me today. - Yo, listen! - he says, choosing his words carefully. - Y'gimme a quarter of saussigge will ya. - Which one? That is quite the question. His processor is at full stretch - his eyes blink with frequency. Meanwhile, he wobbles. Then there is a sudden spark in his eye, he has arrived at the solution. He puts on a wide grin. He shouldn't, though, not with three teeth. - Y'know what, for Chrissakes? Gimme the..the cheaper one - he says, flashing his upper right tooth. 'Cause I will puke it out, anyways.



Illustration
Balázs Tóth

FORM

By Júlia Varga

This is to kindly let you know that on the 10th, we shall move into apartment nr. 2/B, and in a bid to avoid conflicts in the future, we would like to inform you that we have three children, two dogs, one and a half cats, a couple of dozen tarantulas and mice, we have a senile mother-in-law who usually gets lost on her way home, we drink and we smoke, like to listen to loud techno, prepare our favorite foods (curry, fish, garlic) with the windows open, will transform the flat into a hostel for young foreigners, because we like our hanging corridor lively and our fights furious. None of this is true - yet in the next 6 months, we are refurbishing the apartment, and apologize for the inconvenience. Just think about how much worse it could all be. Best, Your new neighbors.

SEE YOU AGAIN

By Melinda Túry

I had long drunk my coffee, scooped up the foam with a spoon, chewed the ice that was left, yet one thought kept me glued to the bank I was sitting on, the thought that it might very well happen in the next minute, that in just a minute, he might open the window, uncombed, half-naked, you know, like after sex, will put his elbows on the window ledge, light a cigarette and run his eyes over Lövőház street below. Then suddenly I came to my senses, what am I even doing, he may have moved, and then why should we meet at all, ringing up was out of the question, I threw my coffee cup away and left. Believe it or not, once I was on the escalator, there he actually was, moving upward on the other side, he had not changed one bit, we stared at each other, I could read his mouth as he shaped the words “wait for me downstairs”. As for me, I barely caught the next train, and I swear, we had arrived at Blaha by the time I first stopped shaking.

SO MANY HOT WOMEN IN BUDAPEST

By Gabriella Nagy

I am on my way home from a company get together late on a Friday, or rather, it is early on a Saturday. My make-up has molten off somewhat, but I am still conspicuously dressed up, like Jimmy Jerkoff that day he was invited to the White House. I hop off tram number 4-6 at Oktogon, and set off toward home. It looks like I am not the only one who's had a good night out. At the stop are two piss-ant, semi-catatonic vagabonds. One of them, while making a desperate attempt to find his balance, eyeballs me from top to bottom and releases a loud howl at his friend: "Yo, saaa maayny hott woemeen een Buuudapesst! Saaa maaaany hott woemeen!"

A LOVE TRIANGLE WITH THREE UNKNOWNNS

By Eszter Száraz

Aranka Horváth, a postal clerk, had coffee with George Clooney on weekends. At 8 AM sharp, she would arrive at 27 Andrásy street, set up her foldable camping chair and sit next to the actor, only present by way of a street poster, not that this has ever troubled Aranka. She drank from her Thermos, and felt happy. Imre Hős had been selling flowers for eight years on Oktogon, she saw Aranka every week, and fell in love with her. He never dared to say anything to her, but his weekdays were powered by the thought of his weekends to come. Every Friday evening, he placed a flower under Clooney's poster, which Aranka thanked the actor in delight, while he interrogated the leaves of the daisy flower aboard the 4-6 tram on his way home, trying to learn whether she loved her, she, the woman who never knew he existed.

TABAKMACHER GASSE

By Ferenc Kapui

It was getting dark early, we shimmered in front of a drinking hole at one of the corners of Dohány street. I dared only enter for the community building drink. The 50 forint tip was considered a grumble, I feared that my coat would be donned by a nylon tracksuit. A man of surreal drunkenness coming from Rejtő's world through the spacetime gate opening at the tavern door accidentally picked up on the word "Weltgeist" emanating from among our beers. For you can only do Hegel in German! Ta-bak-ma-cher Gas-se, he mused, then lit up a cigarette. As a matter of course, he had known the translator, a man who had left behind an entirely futile life of work. Better learn German, and learn it properly! Two hundred years ago, surely we would have had this little talk in German. And there would always be a pint for mister Georg Wilhelm Friedrich at our table. That much is sicher.

GRACE

By Norbert Mester

I took the train from Debrecen to Budapest to see a concert. After the show, I walked back to Nyugati and saw two guys roughly my age kicking down on a dog. I rushed up to the scene, pushed them away and shouted at them. They ran away. The dog followed me all the way to the platform, waited until I got on and watched me leave with sad eyes. Two years later I came back to Budapest and was once again on my way to Nyugati. I must have been two streets away when three inebriated guys ambushed me and asked for my valuables. Out of the blue, a dog attacked them, bit one of them on the leg, leaving a bleeding wound. This brought my spirits back, so I punched another of them, then they ran. I am sure it was the same dog that I had helped.

CHEAP INLAY DRESSER WITH MINOR DEFECT FOR SALE

By Szilvia Matola

The mailman - like the messenger in a Greek tragedy - stood at the door, waiting for the effect. "Order to report for army duty". Erzsébet, while standing next to the piano, looked at her husband, her hands folded on her stomach. He hasn't even told him yet, even though it might be a boy. Months later, the old piano fell to the ground on a snowy afternoon by a few strikes of a hatchet. The painful sound it made carried the melody of waltzes, like when all the rooms were opened into one and the chandeliers beamed light. The baby was a boy, he was buried in one of the drawers of the inlay dresser, using the piano coverlet, no longer of use, as a makeshift shroud. Aunt Erzsi lived for 95 years. Her heirs advertise the inlay dresser for sale to no avail: it has a drawer missing.

THE HISTORY THAT LIVES WITH THEM

By János Csongrádi

The small table at the café was facing the street. It was the first time he had touched her hand. First her beautifully shaped, long fingers, then the back of her hand. For long he dared not even to imagine that he might once date the gorgeous, curly-haired Jewish girl. Zsófi usually wore black. After he had once seen her in a dress with a floral pattern, he spent hours roaming the streets as if struck by madness. Yet still, here they are now chatting. - It is a few steps away from here, the apartment that was taken away from our family. Do you want me to show you? - asked Zsófi, smiling. - Sure, if you want to. They were standing a few corners away from the apartment building in Újlipótváros. - I am living in your apartment - the boy said, pale as a ghost. He could not stand the wordless, stony gaze of the girl for much longer. He turned his face away and began to weep.

AUNT RECETÁR

By Klára Simándi

Aunt Recetár lived in the basement laundry room of the large villa in Zugló. She was tiny, barely five feet, and old, well past sixty. The neighborhood glittered from her hands' work, as she considered swiping the streets to be her profession. The largest event and the real challenge came when snow fell. That was when she really felt in her element. Twenty to thirty largely built louts followed her as orderly as a platoon of soldiers, snow shovels in hand, watching her every command, sheepishly swallowing her every reproach, in order if they left even the smallest of patches of snow on the ground: what a disgrace! Once at home, she put on a clean apron, and that not only in her dreams, began to bake, and waited for her Miki, her husband who was tiny just like her, and of whom there were two, for if counted together with his twin brother, they couldn't have been older than sixty.



Illustration
Csilla Kőszeghy

SEMI-BASEMENT

By Kitti Molnár

We lived in a semi-basement flat with my mother. We were trying to cope without a father, or a husband. I hated the semi-basement. It made me watch the shoes of passers-by through windows level with the ground. I pledged to myself that once I was out of university, I would own an enormous house with huge windows and my own garden. Then love struck. I wanted to leave school behind. When my mother learned about this, she lost her mind. - If you don't finish university, I will jump through the window! - she screamed in despair, as I was already standing on the doorstep with a suitcase in my hand. We both looked up at the window. All I could say was this: - Mother, in that case make sure you jump from the outside! - We laughed. Ever since, I always remember her smile as I admire the rose garden under my terrace.

AUNT MARGIT

By Dr Clarissa Balogh Szabó

The ghetto's entrance was at the end of the street during WW2. Aunt Margit lived on the ground floor in a flat with a ceiling five meters high. She had been widowed twice. Being the only Christian, she was made commander of the building. Her cabinet was full of branded china, she wore several rings on her fingers. In a bathroom on the fourth floor, there was a secret door that lead to the attic. That is where we hid people. They were all saved. Mother told me about a dry wall ceiling in a bathroom in Újpest where they hid the fur coats. That is all that remained when the Russians pillaged the flat.

THE REGULAR CUSTOMER

By Dorottya Kránicz

When I lived in Kacsas street, I decided that I would become a regular at Bambi presszó. I went at least twice every week, relentlessly ate their excruciating ischler, paid my tribute by way of generous tips for the milk coffee served in their dotty mugs, and always read mindfully the words to the wise of Mrs. Otto Oszfolk about playing it risky. I always watched admiringly the old folks rattling about with the checkers board, but felt it was too early in my life to reach for the bamboo newspaper holder. I sometimes took my dachshund with me, hoping that a cute dog would serve as a shortcut for at least a few long years of regular consumption. Then I had to move between apartments. I never again found a place where I would want to be a regular, yet every time I pass the Bambi, my heart is filled with a sense of defeat. Maybe once I get old, and none of the waitresses recognize me anymore, I might try again.

MEMORY

By Boglárka Hegedüs

I remember running up to you and hugging you, and you told me with feigned sternness: Oh miss! You are so full of smiles! But watch your step when you run around like this! How do you catch your breath? And I cracked up with laughter. The whole of Margaret Island echoed with it. I hung on to the sleeve of your coat all day, as if threatened to be blown away by the autumn wind. That is how we watched the baby deer at the zoo, and that is how we listened to the fountain sing a song to us. And I fell asleep on your lap. I will never forget this day, for this became my last memory of you, Daddy.

A SYMPHONY OF DIRECT NEIGHBORS

By Borbála Tóth-Zsiga

I always waited for him to play. When his music hadn't come for days, I panicked: he must've moved! He played the piano beautifully and relentlessly, it was almost as though I could see his flying hands. The sound drifted through the ceiling of my bedroom. Day by day I snooped on him, the beautiful blonde man who was most likely a professor at the Academy of Music. When I had had a lot to drink, I dreamed of his long fingers resting on my stomach. We eventually got acquainted on a rather prosaic note: he soaked my ceiling with water. I bursted with joy, thinking that after all these musical preludes, I could finally mount the stairs to his place, and imply with subtlety that he might have a pipe bursted. I watched on with excitement as he turned the water meter with his beautiful hand. I remarked that I enjoyed his practicing music. Oh, you mean the piano? That's not me, he sighed, that's Hegedűs, the guy living in the apartment below and beside you. So goddamn annoying.



Illustration
Kornél Rátkai

THE HEAD

By Clarissa Balogh, Dr.

The clinic is located in the middle of the 8th district, in the so-called Outer Clinic Block. It was started back in 1908 as a condominium run by a foundation. The new building was opened in 1972. At the entrance, a head sculpture of József Imre, a late physician of European renown and the predecessor to the clinic's professor at the time, was placed. Forty years later, the clinic was closed, and other institutions moved into the building. The sculpture has since disappeared, in its stead, a flower pot is looking down on us from a metal frame made by Tibor Vilt.

LESSON

By Kornélia Domján

They swarm out during spring, a type easy to notice at traffic lights, they could usually drop at least twenty pounds, they wear skirts and high heels. Ludicrous basket attached to the bike. I am rushing home, can't bother to ride around her, so I decide to sneak in front of her at the red light. She stares at me astonished, but I intentionally avoid eye contact. She should be my mother's age. I take off with force on the yellow, and stop thinking about her. For two minutes. When there is a long straight stretch, she overtakes me. Is she taking the piss with me? I really start pushing my pedals, but something isn't right, I can't get closer to her. I chase her from the power plant in Újpest all the way to City Park, where we are both stopped by the light. Still behind, I tell her, panting, "you've got game, ma'am". She smiles at me warmly. Thank you. Ten years. Újpest-Kispest. Don't get deceived by appearances!

CHRISTMAS LOVE

By Mária Tóth

At the street market on Kórház street in Óbuda, the space normally occupied by the tables of grannies in headscarves was taken over by nylon tents at Christmas. Tree ornaments were being sold. Storks, mushrooms with dotty tops, shiny boxes, silvery bells. Everyone decorated their Christmas trees with these. This is where we bought hangers for our Christmas candies, for they seemed more advanced than simple thread. At the same time, everything was filled with the scent of the Christmas trees on sale at the edge of the market. There was only larch, and even of that only the kind with lengthy pine needles. After dark, the swarm of lights made everything all the more beautiful. I was in my early years of elementary school. We went with a friend of mine to buy our cheap little presents. To this day, I remember how I was taken in by the magical atmosphere. My parents had no idea why it took me so long to get home. They welcomed me with a couple of resounding slaps on the face.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF BUDAPEST

By Adrienne Angerer

1918:

At the head of the Chain Bridge on the Buda-side, János the 22-year-old foot soldier picked the lion on the right side as the place to propose to his love, who had for four years loyally endured in writing letters to him while on the battlefield. János had been hurt in the war and couldn't kneel. Nevertheless, Icuska said yes.

2018:

András was cleaning the lion on the right side at the head of the Chain Bridge. How peculiar is it that exactly 100 years later, he should work exactly at the same spot where his great grandparents got engaged. Five children, twelve grandchildren, thirty-one great grandchildren. A wonderful life. Yet András is lonely... "Wanna go for a coffee?" - he heard. András looked up and saw the smiling face of a female colleague. "O-of course..." - he replied. As they took off, he glanced back at the lion. "Thanks, great grandma..."

THE BRAVEST OF THE MONKEYS

By Georgina Vitay

–Daddy! Why are some men hairy, and others not? - the little girl opposite me asked her grandfather, awakening me from my morning stupor. - You know, a very long time ago, we were all monkeys, and lived on top of trees. One day, the king of the monkeys said, let's all climb down, from now on, we will have to live on the ground. The bravest of the monkeys all jumped off one after the other, while the more cowardly slid down embracing the tree trunks. Their fur was rubbed off by the crust, so their offspring were born hairless, too, yet the descendants of the brave remained hairy until this day - the answer went. No man had ever ridden a tram as proud as I had that morning. One of the bravest of the monkeys.

SO, IS FELLINI STILL HAVING A LAUGH HERE AT RÓMAI PART?

By Ágnes Réka Szabó

Rich kids with a Facebook smile are sitting around, pretending to be relaxed, all the while emitting the smell of Lavender-flavoured wine spritzer. Mermaid-looking girls leave lipstick marks on their eco-serviettes, the old lady tasked with cleaning the toilet stares at the screen with chain-smoking eyes. Fellini himself ought to appreciate all the pretended decadence. Waiter boys gaze at the Danube with delight (or secretly frown with their backs turned), while hiding behind the process of making sandwiches. The deep-sea hake business is booming non-stop on the bank, the garlicky steam of the flat bread frier still transmits its kiss-killing odor to afar. The soft noise of the river is only somewhat disturbed by the sound-pirateering of party boats. Adolescent girls melt on muscular canoe boys, cyclists ringing their bells mistake the dusty path of the wandering Roman bank folk for a high-speed motorway. A naked flock of children awaken me from my sailor-striped dream, and I ask myself, “so, is Fellini still having a laugh here at Római Part”?

ON THE BUS AGAIN

By Eszter Lakó

My palms are sweaty as I make myself get on the bus. Again. The same thoughts once again. If only I could get through it without trouble this time, not like last time. It is simple, one should buy a ticket. I might as well go to the gym or take up running, so that I become faster when I have to run away. And yet this only occurs to me when already on the bus, once again. Why don't I think of these things earlier? I am on the bus. Again, it is too late. If only I could get to Örs without trouble. I run my eyes on the passengers, I can feel it, there will be trouble once again. My throat gets dry, my heart beats ever faster. I don't want it, but I have no choice. I step up to the most suspicious-looking bunch of passengers, and merely say, with my voice quivering, "Tickets, please!"



Illustration
Emőke Holbis

CAT MELODY

By Hajnal Tóth

Mrs. Krüger was an aloof and grumpy widow. Even though it had been 10 years since she had remarried, at the condominium in the 13th district, everyone still referred to her as the late Mr. Krüger's widow. They lived quietly in their apartment - two rooms and a kitchen - never had guests, talked to no one. That morning, they were coming from the market, when a cat started following them. It was quite a beautiful cat, her fur a beaming black and white, her eyes yellow and smart. In front of their condo's gate, the cat meowed, to which Mrs. Krüger replied: "Alright, you can come, but if only once you wee on my carpet, you are out!" The gate opened, in they went and the cat never peed on the carpet.

BACK AND FORTH

By Judit Polgár

Grandfather Lajos contributed to the arrival of his only grandchild in every way he could. The recently married couple with their infant first lived with the girl's parents in the eighth district, then with the boy's folks in Fürst Sándor street. When the evidently ugliest building block ever of Szabadság-hegy was raised in 1977, the so-called "brown 10-story high rises", they moved there. The young couple could not afford a washing machine, so Grandfather Lajos visited his son's family twice every day, and that by public transport. He took the dirty textile diapers from his daughter-in-law, carried them back to Pest, his wife washed them, ironed them, only for him to bring the refreshed package back. At times the elevator stopped working, he then took the stairs to bring the clean diapers all the way up to the tenth. Even though I never had a chance to meet him, I will always be grateful.

ON THE DIFFERENCE OF LANGUAGES OF LOVE

By Anna Ottroba

A family of five get on tram No. 1, packed as it is, pushing a pram full of all kinds of stuff in front of them. Before the doors shut with a beep, one of the men spits on the tarmac. One part of the family seeks a place to sit in the back of the tram. A stop later, one of them shouts through the crowd. -Why don't y'all sit down somewhere already! The boys search the tram with their necks stretched, unsure of what seats are available. They look at me, at my crutches, to be precise. One of them turns around. - This is a cripple, not gonna push her off her seat. And this, then and there, felt alright, for I had learnt quite a few things with a broken leg, and among those things was the fact that the languages of love are spoken in many a tongue.

AROUND THE BOULEVARD AND BACK

By Kristóf Szigeti

Seleznyik, like everyone else, was constantly chased and hunted by trouble. It was sometimes down to him, of course, other times to the universe itself. He had already tasted defeat in games, love, and losing money. He had known letdowns by the vending machine and the passing tram. Indeed, he did pull the short straw a few times. He'd been bitten by a rooster, by a ghost, scratched by a cat. He had known long waits for nothing at all. He had already backed out for love, straight into the ditch. He had already been left for someone else. Been there, done that, he thought with a unfeeling gesture of his hand, and at the same time he realized that bad things have done the full circle around him. Having successfully falsified the theorem of the infiniteness of the universe, he now boarded the metro on the blue line with absolute confidence, knowing that from now on, something good has got to give.

THE HANGING CORRIDOR II.

By Katalin Pozsgai

Tünde learnt yesterday that her lover had been cheating on her for years. - At least you are faithful to me! - she said, hugging her enormous cat. - Filemon! - a cry sounded off from the hanging corridor, and the cat suddenly jumped through the open window. Tünder hastily followed. She found her two floors below behind an open door and saw her munching on something in absolute delight. - I have a nice cat, don't I - an old lady told her with a broad smile. - But this is my cat - Tünde grunted. - Oh come on, dear! He's been living with me for five years now. See her little bed there? Tünde raised her furious eyes to the sky, and screamed with her voice slurred, "Whyyyyy?"

THE MATHEMATICS OF BUDAPEST

By Szilvia Matola

If bus number 7 is 5 minutes late, and the total journey time of metro line 2 is 19 minutes, and an ice cream costs 210 forints, and I waited 20 minutes for you at Deák square in vain, then how many lonely steps does it take for the stairs of an 1895 apartment building to wear to the point that they shine, and how long for me to finally forget you?

99. THE SILENT DEAL

By Ferenc Kapui

I was seven, it was around the regime change when my father and I visited Budapest. My mother's birthday was approaching, and we caught sight of a crystal vase at the Ecseri offered by a little old lady from Transylvania. After a quick chat, it was revealed that we were interested in it as a present and that the price was one thousand forints. She wasn't going to budge. I pulled on my father's coat and he leaned down to me. I asked, whispering into his ears, whether we could afford this. Tears gathered in the seller's eyes. What a sweet little child, he kissed his father pleading him to buy the vase for his mother - taken in by the scene, the woman informed everyone in our close proximity. She sold the vase for eight hundred. Nowadays, working as an economist, I often have to work down prices. Still, I haven't been able to make a bargain as elegantly as I did that time as a six-year-old.



Illustration

László Herbszt

ON WHY I DIDN'T BECOME A VENEZUELAN CITIZEN

By Zsófia Kálmán

In the autumn of 1956, the short-lived joy of my parents was quickly followed by dread. Even though my mother, lacking a substitute, was happily on duty at the hospital for weeks, they still wanted to escape. They carried a heavy baggage from the war, from the deportation they scarcely got away from, and they felt they didn't have it in them to start a new life for a third time. So rather, by pulling off what had seemed impossible, they arranged for immigration visas to Venezuela. My mother set off to walk home through Margaret bridge with the invaluable papers in her hand. The Sun was just about to disappear behind the hills opposite the bridge. A pink haze hung over everything, the grey buildings, the leafless trees of Margaret Island, the rattling trams and the sleepy river. She could see nothing from the tears that so suddenly sprung to her eyes, she had to sit on blown-down piece of the fence. She felt homesick about a city she had yet to leave.

THE TONGUE OF THE LIONS

By Zoltán Ferdinánd

According to Jakab Frick, a cobbler's assistant, János Marschalkó is a botcher. In turn, Marschalkó, a sculptor, thinks Fritz is a fool, and anyways, why on earth would he, a cobbler's assistant, stick his nose into sculptors' business. "I am no butcher, so I am not going to hang giant tongues out of their mouths, like they are ready to be smoked", Marschalkó replied to the press when they quizzed him about the missing tongues of the lions of the Chain Bridge. He allegedly also said the following: "I will bet 500 forints that whenever lions hold their jaws the way my stone lions do, their tongues cannot be seen at all for they lie deep down". Marschalkó eventually won the bet, as to whatever happened to Fritz, the annals say nothing at all.

SOME THINGS WILL REMAIN

By Kinga Maksai

J. Visited Budapest for the first time since she was twenty. Her first visit was to the house where she had been born. As the cab came to a halt, her heart was about to jump out her chest. The once fresh lime-wash of the wall was almost black. In decay. There was now a fast food restaurant where there had been a shoemaker, a store selling used clothing where there had been a grocer. Trees had disappeared from the side of the road. And the gate, too..Oh wait, the gate was still the same! She leaned as close to the the enormous wooden door as was possible. She investigated it for close to 10 minutes, until she finally found it: "L and J forever!" - It seems as though the important things have remained - she acknowledged contently, and pressed on the hand of J standing next to her.

TRAIN CAR

By Réka Vásárhelyi

Father, mother and their two little daughters are running from Déli to Keleti. They barely have enough time to make their connection. It seems like mission impossible. The smaller of the daughters is still in a pram, about to be catapulted onto the train together with the vehicle just like last time. It seems like they will reach the train, it is still by the platform. They quickly get into the last car. Dad stays on the platform, only the girls will travel back for a while this time, before they all move between apartments. He hears the train whistle, its departure is imminent. Three smiling faces peer out of the window. They are waving. Make sure you write! - Dad waves back. He watches on as the train departs..and breaks into laughter. The last car stayed by the platform. It had been disconnected.

MANZIL, SWEET MANZIL

By Panna Ferentzi

I had never felt such genuine, tangible sadness as that day at Keleti Railway Station. He was a dark-haired, brown-eyed little boy, the shoes he wore on his filthy feet did not match one another. He was sitting on the stairs on his own, drawing on the tiles using his dirty little fingers. I stepped next to him. He did not speak English, looking at his hands, I asked in Hungarian what he was drawing. Manzil - he responded silently. His voice resonated with a sorrow so deep that it would have easily penetrated a grown man's heart. I don't understand - I said, smiling. Manzil - he said again, and he slowly carved the figure into the dust once again, with determination. It was a square with a triangle on top. Manzil, I whispered, shaken, and started drawing.

SIGHTS

By Szilárd Suhanyecz

I was playing in the room. While I played, I eavesdropped on what mother and Uncle Gyuri were talking about in the kitchen. Mother said that we would get on a sightseeing boat tomorrow at Vigadó Square, then have cake at Café Gerbaud. Uncle Gyuri figured that should we have enough time left and still be in the mood, we can always take the sikló to the Castle. I already had difficulty grasping what my mother meant, how she wanted to have cake at Gerbaud, which was itself my favorite cake. As for Uncle Gyuri, his idea downright frightened me, the thought of having to go to the Castle on some giant reptile. I couldn't decide if they were only having a laugh or got struck by the sun earlier in the day.

SEE YOU AT THE METRO EXIT AT HALF PAST FIVE

By Noémi Beer

I lollygagged at Blaha for ninety minutes. Would this make sense in another language? We said we would meet at the metro exit at half past five. Then I waited and waited. He wouldn't come. This didn't happen now. This happened in eighty-six. This was at the time when mushroom-shaped fountains sprinkled water on those waiting for the bus, and there were no mobile phones. I went home, fuming. He stood me up once again. We didn't have a phone back home, only they did, they lived in an apartment block, while we lived in a green area. In the second-rate type. At the time, Zugló was registered as a second-rate green area, as the true green zones were all in Buda. Damn me if I am going to call him from a booth. It turns out the next day in school that he was waiting for me at Astoria. We had only said 'see you at the metro exit at half past five'.



Illustration
Fatime Germán

THE LADIES OF 'PEST

By Tünde Pataki

My grandmother told me that one day, toward the end of their walk on Margaret Island, her sister said to her: - Manci dearest, I am ill at ease, the lining under my dress is hooked up. - Do not bother, Juci dearest! Make sure you walk ahead of me on the stairs leading up to Margaret bridge, and once no one is looking, I will reach under your skirt and pull it right back to its place in an instant - she replied. Indeed, they did like they said: at the stairs, my grandmother let young Juci walk past her, and walked right behind her waiting for the perfect moment. When she felt it had come, she grabbed the fine silky material under her dress, and pulled the lacy female underwear of Juci all the way down to her knees.

OSCAR

By Klára Simándi

He first went to school after the World War. He already knew how to read, yet took the words of Mister Teacher in with awe. He would offer an account every day of what he had learnt that day to the old lady living next door. She always waited for him on the hanging corridor in a crisp white apron, with crispy bread crescents just out of the oven. He sat on the stool in front of her, leaned his head against her lap, and talked to her while he ate. Today, he happened to talk about the Jews, who, according to Mister Teacher were filthy, stinky and evil. He couldn't see the old lady's face, only felt her hand tremble for a second: "I am Jewish, too!" For this he wouldn't believe, not even in 20 years, what he had heard about the Jews.

CHAIN BRIDGE

By Eszter Czirják

She was standing on Clark Ádám Square. She had to get going. Her husband - if she still had any - waited on the other side. She wanted to talk, once she had found out about the affair with that stupid little girl. She hated him and the girl, too. She was raging as she walked. Midway through, she thought about the kids. She felt sorry for them. Especially for Lili. She adored her father. When she had done two-thirds of the way across the bridge, she looked down on the Danube. It swirled with darkness. Just like her life. The kids will lose it, Bence is just about to start high school. What should she do? She walked on. When she reached the lions, she caught sight of her husband. She could feel the love splitting her heart open. She still loved him. "How could I go such a long way on such a short bridge?" - she wondered.

AUNT ILONKA

By Mrs. Clarissa Balogh Szabó

Aunt Ilonka was camped in front of a gate on Bajcsy Zsilinszky street, selling small things. Later she was selling flowers at the market in Hold street, along with a few pots. Then in 1949, the table from which she sold things was declared property of the state.

Her name was Ilonka Béni, she'd been an actress. Before the war, she had spent every summer on the French Riviera. As a Jew, she was later deported. After the war, she had no one, lived in a shared apartment and cooked herself soups using fish heads. She sometimes looked at her old photos and newspaper cutouts. At her funeral, her casket made of rough planks arrived atop a simple wooden carriage.

THE LITTLE SPIDER

By Endre Bálint

He first wanted to strike it dead. He then admired the ease with which it moved on his slender legs, and finally, he let his slippers off his feet. From then on, he could feel a warmth surge in his heart whenever he saw it again. Someone had finally decided to move in with him in his fifties, after all. It was around this time that he began seeing Éva from work. When he emotionally invited her to his place, the woman quickly accepted, with a single reservation. There can be no spiders in the flat. She dreaded spiders. He had trouble sleeping during the night. In the morning, as he saw the little spider run across the wall, thinking about the pleasures of the previous night, he struck it with his slipper faster than his heart could have started aching. In the afternoon, Éva texted him. All this isn't such a great idea, they are colleagues, after all. He reluctantly set off toward the bus stop. He feared the minute when he would arrive back home.

STREETVIEW

By Dorottya Bartha

I go home to you every evening. Yet for 18 months now, it is only on Google Street View that I click along the familiar streets, on my worse days, I cross the Lib' Bridge in the opposite lane, or the one-way street up the hill, I stop in front of the house, it was still spring on the corner, here it is eternal winter, I sometimes wander around the neighborhood, and all this time I dread that the photos will be replaced and suddenly you will be on them, but no longer alone. The other day, I found a guy wearing a red hoodie two corners away, but I convinced myself that couldn't be you for you would never push two bikes up the hill while a girl in a polka dot dress, her face blurred out, walks next to you eating an ice cream.

PEST TALES

By Emma Naszvadi

Granny, tell about the war! “My sweet girl, I was 5 years old in 1944, we lived in Leonardo street. The city was bombarded, we had to move to the cellar for months. Your great grandmother decorated last year’s pine tree at Christmas. There were more families in the two-room airstrike shelter. Airstrike shelter. I chew over the words. Tell about ’56, too! “That time, I was 17 and was nursing the injured at the Emergency Department. They wouldn’t even let me go home. Your great grandfather was jailed, but like you know, he was later rehabilitated. We parked the car at the corner of Leonardo and Práter with granny. Granny is 79 years old this year, I could see the tears gather in her eyes. But this neighborhood...it changed so much! Yes, I said, since then, like you know, it was rehabilitated.

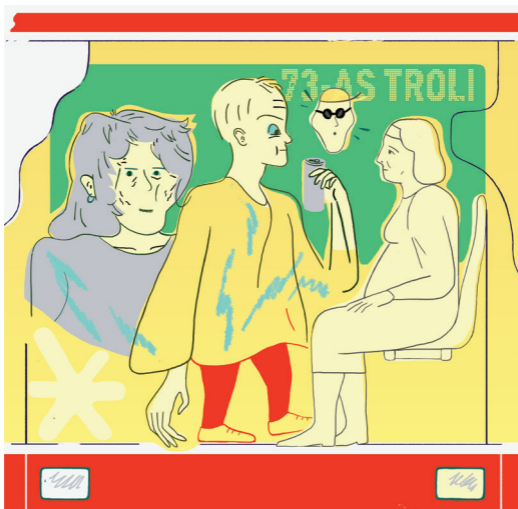


Illustration
Tamás ÁI

ONLY LOVE

By Era Szabó

I was traveling on trolleybus number 73. At the stop by István Road, three rogue young men got on. They held beer bottles and yelled. In the back, one of them mounted the bar handle, while the other two were thumping the side of the bus with their feet. Alarmed, the passengers took refuge in the front. I stayed seated in the back, looking at the youngsters with pity. I felt sorry for them for having no better amusement than disorderly conduct...they must be bitterly deprived of love!

The leader of the pack gulped on his beer can. I gently enquired what beer he was drinking. He reached the can right in front of my face and asked:

Want some, granny?

No, thank you, I rather like it mixed. We began chatting about cocktails. The others joined in with wide grins. As they got off, they called me “lady” and bid me goodbye politely. Love worked once again...

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

By Annamária Bíró-Szilágyi

An acquaintance of mine from abroad spent a few day with us. We showed him Budapest's sights (Parliament, Matthias Church, Heroes' Square). Later in the day, he gushed to his parents over the city on Skype: "We sat on this square and there was a fountain that played music, and we had a majestic drink, a mixture of wine and mineral water. We had flat bread and sausage, and this awesome dessert with cottage cheese, and we traveled on an antique metro, as if in some film, then we got home and the neighbor brought cake! Just like that, you know? Just like that..." - he then paused, his parents asked something. I could only hear the answer. "Oh yeah, we did, we did see the Parliament, too..." I smiled at the answer. Wasn't the most important thing to him, it seems.

IN MEMORIAM

By Panna Ferentzi

I first thought you were just taking a nap on the crooked paving stones of Páva Street, might have had a bit too much Unicum in the morning, or the twisted crescent roll, or God knows how you old folks kill the pain. I leaned over to you, close up, and asked if I could help. You grunted something nonsensical back in response, what now, I put my leather jacket under your head and called an ambulance. By the time they got there, you were already gone. I didn't know what to do, I dared not touch you. While we waited, I sat next to you on the ground, and quietly talked to you. "I am here. Everything is alright. You are not alone." I don't know if you could hear me at all. My leather jacket was later returned by the ambulance squad. I first started crying on the metro.

ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE

By Borbála Tóth-Zsiga

A couple regularly stands around opposite my kitchen window. Whenever I look out, I can always tell what the weather is like, I only need to check their clothes. The man always dresses a little too lightly, the woman gets cold easily. If the former is wearing a new uniform, I can always tell he has a new job. The woman must be an office clerk, she has had the same hairdo for fifteen years, so they can't have had too much drama going on in their lives. Still, the two of them must finish a pack of cigarettes each out there every day. The recently put four enormous Thuja trees next to their door. On the hanging corridor. An old lady shuffling in a nightgown lives next door, I can see her dog pee on each of the trees. The couple can't figure out why they are getting yellow, nervous as they are, they smoke even more. They are on one side of the hanging corridor, I am on the opposite.

BACKGROUND NOISE

By Tarja Kauppinen

Ever since I had learnt that my family had taken refuge there in '56, I was always taken by awe in the cellar of our Budapest apartment. The piles of firewood went up until the sky, light only reached down through the minuscule vent-hole, unless we turned on the “chandelier”: a naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling on a single wire. So this is where my ancestors weathered the revolution, I always thought. They listened to the rumble of the fighter cars, trembling among the damp walls...After they moved, the new owner transformed the cellar into a pool room. The neighbors have been complaining: they simply can't stand the awful noise that goes with it!

They can hear the clacking of the balls.

AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

By Péter Somogyi

A few years back, I had to park on Blaha for a meeting and it was my birthday alright. I went to the parking machine, and just as I reached for my mobile phone to pay, I noticed the machine was the older kind which had no number whatsoever for paying by text messages. I fiddled for my wallet, and I could immediately tell by the weight of it that I was going to be in trouble. My paper bills were no good here, the machine only took coins, yet the amount of coins I had on me wouldn't have bought me a bread roll. At this point, a disheveled homeless man stepped up to me, handed me the ID card that had meanwhile fallen from my wallet, threw two hours worth of coins into the machine, and told me with a broad smile: "Happy birthday!"

DISTRICT 16, FŐHADNAGY STREET

By Mrs Edit Németh Ötvös

Jenő was standing in front of his door in a grey t-shirt that covered the top half of his thighs. His fleshy lower lip curled downward. The evening perished into a tranquil silence. He liked it this way. That is when they came in; the woman and the man. Tourists. The new tenants of the flat next door. They said hello. That's a good thing. They asked something. Not a good thing. They wanted the code for the front door. He gave them a unsure look, then he called for his wife. Gizi is a resolute woman, it is better if he leaves this to her. He was right. The woman declined the request, from behind her broad shoulders, Jenő himself could now nod with more confidence, too. For a split second, he felt sorry for them but he chased those thoughts away. Trust will only lead to trouble, security is more important. He grabbed the broom and slowly swiped the court.



Illustration
Botond Vörös

NO RUSSIANS HERE

By Dorottya Kránicz

Grandpa lay in my grandmother's room, his transparent whiteness even more striking on the brownish bed. Brain tumor had quickly chewed its way through his recent past, only coming to a halt at the memory of socialism: he once again heard the noise of the Soviet planes.

Gyurci, there are no Russians here anymore - Grandma cried out, as though the truth could hold my grandfather back on his way from reason to death. Before he passed, he pointed the index finger of his skinny arm to his temple and whispered:

Your grandma's having a few screws loose.

And I rather wanted to believe him, as not even the thought of Russian planes was as frightening as the reality in which he will soon be dead. I looked at the table. Where will we get candies, once the bowl is empty?

DADDY'S COAT

By János Haász

Whenever we came to 'Pest, he wore a long, brown trench coat, it fluttered after him at the Keleti as we got off the train, it fluttered after him on the Boulevard as we looked for a self-service restaurant to eat in. We came for football matches, from early in the spring until late in the autumn, we had lunch in beat-up canteens, rode on beat-up buses and trains o beat-up stadiums, swimming pools and sports halls. It was always that brown trench coat that I followed with my eyes. When he died, I knew with the confidence of kittle kids, I knew for certain that he is alive, and only he moved to 'Pest. And once I grow up and go to 'Pest myself, he will be there in some soup kitchen on the Boulevard in his brown trench coat. I grew up and came to 'Pest. There wasn't a single soup kitchen on the Boulevard anymore, and there weren't any trench coats, either. That was when I lost him.

I AM FROM ANGYALFÖLD

By László Kónya

I am sitting on the train. Twenty more minutes until Nyugati. Two heavy fellows suddenly plop down on the seats opposite me. One of them produces a small package. He rolls it out: bread, sausage, red onions. They both have pocket knives. They munch on the food and chat. - 'Pesters are pretentious. Pesters are showy. They don't even know left from right. The one with a mustache suddenly turns to me. - You from Pest, too? I now have two pairs of suspicious eyes fixed on me, pocket knives halfway between us in the air. - Me? I am from Angyalföld - I answer with a great deal of self-esteem. My counterpart responds with a friendly nod, and reaches a miniature sandwich to me. The three of us continue to talk. Pesters are pretentious. Pesters are showy. Pesters don't even know left from right.

REPARATIONS

By Zsófia Németh

Mrs Béla Tóth, this firm lady full of charm even at age 84 would never have become Mrs Béla Tóth had it not been for Mr Tóth, called Béluska at the time, to lose a bet against his two best friends, Sanyi and Vilmos. It was for the loser to ring the doorbell at the family home of Mrs Béla Tóth, called Julcsa Szabó at the time. All this would have amounted to no more than childish banter, had Julcsa not opened the door at the exact same moment to leave for her piano lesson, and had she not scornfully declared to the frightened little Bélus that “as reparations for this most stupid little mischief he would be obliged to walk with her to the tram stop at the least”.

THE 'PEST BASIN

By Judit Molnár

The home of my Granny Ilonka in Sashalom was nothing short of a miracle. Every summer break began and ended there. We took the metro, the HÉV and the bus to get to the place. I started getting my summer clothes out of my small valise as early as at Örs Vezér Square. At Nagycice station, I already held my swimsuit in my hand, I didn't want to lose a single minute once we have arrived...for the large basin was waiting for me. It had white glaze...and I sat under the grape arbor in this squirt pool with water heated by the sun...Then one summer came, and all I was left with was the basin and the memories. I brought it out from the shed yesterday. I put it on the hanging corridor for the kids to sit in. They enjoy it. But I terribly miss that arbor...and grandma.

EXPRESS EDUCATION

By Gábor Bálint

I am on my way home late in the night. I am tired and hungry. I should eat. “Hello there, I’ll have a gyros”, I say, stepping up to the window of a fast food place. “Hello! It is not ‘I will have’ but ‘can I have’”!- the guy behind the window replies. “More polite this way, alright?” I raise my eyebrows and look at who is schooling me. A man with tattooed arms. I wouldn’t take him for someone perfectly polite, nor for a crusader of linguistic correctness. I have to give it to him though that he too seems tired, and after all, he’s right. - Sorry, I am tired - I reply to him after a short break. - But don’t be such a wiseass next time, alright? He too raises his eyebrows, but soon enough he breaks into a smile and asks: - Hot sauce? Onions?

This is how we’d teach one another good manners on this day.

SIX CENTIMETERS

By Panni Orcifalvi

Only six centimeters separate me from the pianist, who plays at night, too. Six centimeters separate me from the lady who can see no point to her life ever since her son died. Six centimeters separate me from the Greek woman, too, who lives in an 18 square meter flat with this rude guy. I can hear him from the bathroom tell her that she is “fat and has ugly hair. Would be better if she were blonde and skinny. And anyways, it is better if she knows that she breaks wind in her sleep”. The Greek woman is silent. I thought for a while that I would write her an anonymous letter saying that her hair was nice. Then she reported me to the landlord for soiling the corridor. So I will remain silent, too.



Illustration
Attila Stark

A RELATIVE FROM THE COUNTRY

By Mrs. Károly Fodor

They are struggling to keep the silent conversation going in the second-floor rental apartment. The mood gradually defrosts like bodies just in from the cold. The host offers coffee, sandwiches and pastries. They hadn't met for a long time, they would have a lot to catch up on, yet the conversation is failing to depart from the superficial. Those from Budapest (mind you, from Csepel, as they always protest) discuss at length whether it is possible to get to Keleti Railway Station from Nyugati Railway Station without changing metro lines. They mention various buses and trams, yet repeatedly come to the conclusion that you need to change lines in the process. At this point, a relative living 300 kilometers away speaks: - Trolleybus number 73 will take you straight from one to the other. They smile, and a silent bit of laughter can be heard for the first time since the funeral.

NO, SHE WASN'T

By István Endrédi

An old friend of ours was under surveillance during the Socialist era, the woman living opposite him was filing reports on him, too. Well after the regime change, the woman's son came back from Germany, and knocked on the door opposite her mother's. "Old man, was my mother a rat?" - he asked. He told me the suspicion had somehow been raised and he wanted to know the truth. I could sense that this was a matter of life or death to him: he had to decide whether to break off relations with her mother or not. "No, she wasn't." A few days later the woman came over. She thanked for the answer in tears, and apologized, if an apology was possible at all. It is likely that the lie wasn't blasted with a black mark in the heavens, either, but rather, awarded with fifty golden stars.

MUMBLING WORDS

By Judit Tatár

First I didn't understand why mom and dad were stroking my head, and why they laughed when I told them that on the way home from school, Saci took me to the church on Felszab' square, the nice ornamented house, I followed her every move, I refreshed my forehead from with water from a stone bowl (even though it was winter), then we walked all the way up to the first row, Saci kneeled down and put her hands together, once again I mimicked her, and as she began whispering something very quietly with her head tilted forward, me too started mumbling: "Hey, what the heck! Hen mother, ma'am", and felt proud that I had gotten nothing wrong.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

By Krisztina Varga-Berecz

She was barely older than 16; she had come from far away, straight to the top floor of the Gresham. “Mancika! You make sure you don’t let her ladyship sleep until midday!” Of course she let her. They both found the buzz of Budapest new and foreign, so she became her accomplice. At noon, when the elevator unhurriedly reached the top floor with her ladyship’s husband and his executive briefcase in it, all plates and silverware were already in place. This continued day in, day out until a poor gardener boy stole Mancika’s heart and she packed her little valise to move to Ferencváros with him. I still stop at their place today. I look up and think about which window my grandmother would sit at, wondering whether she is watching from behind one of the curtains right now...

END STATION

By Csaba Kampós

The little old lady was taking the metro to the hospital. They had found an alteration on the X-ray of her skull. -“Next stop: Franciscans’ square” - the loudspeaker said. She was traveling on her own, there was no one to go with her. -“Next stop: Calvin square”. She took everything she considered important, she left an orderly flat behind. -“Next stop: Tihany peninsula.” That is where Bandi proposed to her. She could smell flowers. -“Next stop: Békéscsaba Hospital.” That is where Katinka was born. A baby was sleeping on her arms. -“Next stop: Margaret Island”. She was kissed in the shade of a tree. Jenő and his mischief! He brought shame on her, he seduced her. He could’ve come earlier, too...But wait, we wouldn’t have had Katinka, then. All is well as is now. - “Next stop: Kőbánya-Kispest, this train ends here.” The little old lady was sitting with her eyes shut, her lips drawn to a smile. She wasn’t going to get off anymore.

DIRTY JOKES

By Dorottya Kráncz

My father used to take us to the restaurant of the Financial Guard's sports facility on each of his birthdays. He usually had soup, pig's trotters and cold beer, and told dirty jokes under his foamy mustache. My brother and I were feeling more uneasy with each birthday lunch, heavy as they were on both racist remarks and loud burps, so we used all sorts of excuses to gradually get out of this ritual. Nowadays my father visits me every week in Újlipótváros, he drags himself up to the second floor on his aching legs, he no longer tells dirty jokes and holds back the burps, too. He takes two spoonfuls of cane sugar with his cup of my expensive coffee. I wonder how he now feels at my place, but I haven't raised the courage to ask him just yet.

THE HOUSE

By Clarissa Balogh Szabó

The house is situated at the edge of Budapest's so-called Jewish district. It is a three-story building of clinker bricks with French balconies. This street was the first of the Petőfi Sándor streets. The apartments on the street-front were mostly shared between two, or even three families. They each had a room of their own, but the kitchen and the bathroom were shared. Some even had subtenants. Life in the house was overseen by the house supervisor and the house superintendent. The latter was outranked by the block superintendent. We put the chicken bones in other houses' rubbish bins for rubbish too was monitored. The house stands until this day, the neighborhood is now called the "party district", its front has been re-painted, yet the inside is slowly decomposing under the weight of history.

THE CHILLS

By János Haász

She opened the shower. It had been a good night out. Could've been. She liked the spritzers with the girls by the Whale stuck in inhospitable concrete, followed by the barefoot walk to Budapest Park. More spritzers, the giggles of Vera and the others, they were as if still in high school when these guys came up to them. The speakers shouted "sometimes it's good, sometimes bad, sometimes" - the rest she couldn't get. The others found dates, "I am interested in nothing", they sang. She wanted to be like them, too, but she couldn't. She just held onto her glass with jittery hands and was off to home before the concert even ended. She turned off the shower. She entered the bedroom naked, not that this mattered anymore. She then lay next to her husband, who snored once again giving off that other woman's smell.

I AM ALIVE AGAIN!!!

By Timea Csontos Takács

In 2016, I was diagnosed with cancer. Chemotherapy, radiation, gruesome medical tests. I wasn't happy with my doctor. I switched. Budapest, the capital, hope. I chose a private clinic to see a renowned oncological surgeon, whom I looked upon as my last hope. On the highway, I couldn't stop thinking "what will happen to my family, my students, when I am not going to be around? Meandering roads, packed parking lots, towering buildings on the Danube bank. My God, it's beautiful - the thought runs through my head, but thoughts are elsewhere. I step inside, everyone is smiling at me. Nobody is pointing fingers at me because of my hairless head. I am pacing on the corridor in excitement. The call me. Lengthy consultation, tests and the news: "Ma'am, there is no tumor here anymore!" Budapest. I exit the building smiling, flying. Everything is beautiful.

CATCH 23

By Szilvia Füleky

Are you from Budapest? Yep. Which part? Does it matter? Of course! It matters if you are a little Buda dandy from the hills, or a ghetto kid from the eighth. Well, I was born in the ninth...The self-proclaimed gentries. ...I was raised in the eleventh...Only old farts and pram-pushers there. ... I lived in the center, too...Five, six or seven? Anyways, only smog and tourists there! ...I went to high school in Újpest... Purple block-dwelling trash! ... Went to college in Óbuda... That's the place for those who were pushed out of the second, pathetic. ...One of my grandmothers lives in the first... So uppity...The other's in the thirteenth...New Jewland, huh?...And I had worked in Rákos...Don't even continue, from 15 to 18 it isn't even Budapest! Neither is it from 21 to 23! Hold on...Where are you from? Oh, never mind...

STOLEN TIME

By Attila Tóth

The flat is empty. Just the two of us, finally. So what should we do? Should we stay in? Let's rather go for a walk. Not to go somewhere specific, just to walk, holding hands. The weather is so nice. Let's have ice cream! You laugh. Genuinely, from the heart. Let's go to Gellért Hill, where we went on our first date. Was it this high that time? We are up top. Just sitting side by side. We talk. I haven't seen you like this for long. Your eyes are glowing. Let's go to a restaurant? Come on, that's not us. Better have a kebab on the Boulevard. The sauce dripping all the way down to our elbows. The day is almost over. You are telling me you fell in love again. Me too. It is only you and me today. They come home tomorrow, though. We'll be dad and mom again tomorrow.

THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

By Zoltán Ferdinánd

I believe my grandfather always suspected that her daughter was not actually her biological daughter, my mother just really didn't look like him at all. I learned the fact from my mother after my grandmother's death that my biological grandfather had been an unknown Soviet soldier liberating Budapest, my mother before me had learnt this from her mother after my grandfather died. Ours was always such a family. We never discussed awkward things. This is how our secrets passed from one generation to the other. Well, at least until the person that could have felt awkward about them was still alive.

THE KEY TO MASS SOLITUDE

By Barbara Gazda

I moved to Budapest, I craved mass solitude. For everyone is a stranger to everyone in the big city, no one cares about their neighbor. The studio in the grey apartment building did it for me alright, no one there knew I existed. On my third day, I arrived home late. It was past midnight, deep silence. There was a note on the door, it said “Lock front door after 10 PM!”. Key into lock, turn lock, pull key. Or I would have pulled it, if I could have. It got stuck. Light was cast from a single apartment only, so that’s where I knocked. A short, old lady stood before me, I told her about my trouble. He called Tomi, the neighbor upstairs, he would figure it out surely. With him came Klára, the neighbor downstairs, for two heads are better than one. In the end, it was Uncle Géza who could pull my key. They weren’t going to let me hide, after all.



Illustration
Levente Farkas

DON'T PLAY WITH FIRE

By Frigyes Venczel

August 20th. Sitting on my father's neck, I await with the joy of a child the miracles from the sky, which later turn into a war in the sky...only six years old, I fail to grasp the magnitude of the approaching storm, not until the point when my father warns the man standing next to him, about to open his umbrella: That will not help. An umbrella twisted inside out flies in the air above the Danube. We begin to run when the wind has blown off the metal ornament atop a wooden hut installed by the bridgehead: that ornament could've weighed close to a 100 kilograms. Trees fall and trash bins fly above our heads. I trust my father: it is under the arches of the Market Hall that we hide from the roof tiles falling from the sky. Run, last metro, clothes soaking wet, survivors sitting in a hot bath: father and son.

THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE

By Andrea Gönczi

Józsi, though he shouldn't have, had a pint every evening at the cosy pizzeria on the Boulevard. Dia, the bartender girl, even though she shouldn't have, always took five minutes to listen to him. Kati, the school teacher, though she shouldn't have, always bought a rose from the humpbacked old man on Liszt Ferenc square, who, even though he knew he shouldn't have, always tried to kiss her hand. Anna, who was still a student, and therefore shouldn't have, always gave a hundred-coin to the youth panhandling at Astoria, who should've been a student himself, had he been able to afford it. A city of shouldn't haves it is, it seems.

SUNRISE

Felícia Kocsmáros

I was walking home on the deserted streets after a big night out. It was cold and I can remember feeling sad. I walked past a bakery and having pinned all my hope on its opening early, felt disappointed as I bumped into the “Closed” sign. Yet the open door to the storage facility lured me into forbidden territory like a magnet. I stepped into the realm of freshly baked tiger bread all I did was suck in the scents. I didn't notice the guy working there, but he noticed me. He smiled at me, I felt a sudden surge of shame and backed out. He came after me and pressed a warm bag into my hand. Thanks to him, this morning was transformed into the happiest memory in my life, as I munched on my cocoa rolls looking at the sunrise above Szépvölgyi Road.

LONGING

By János Haász

She gets off by the bridge head in Buda. So do I. She is into her phone. The HÉV departs, so does the crowd, but she remains. I remain as well, struck by the pleasant scent. I am trying to approach, as much as possible. Her legs are long, beautifully tan, without a single hair on them. It isn't natural at all, I don't get why people are so into this. I suck the scent in deep, my mouth starts drooling from desire. Something must be done, I am running out of time, she had already put the phone away, she is fiddling in her handbag and goes. I'd go too but I can't, I just stare at her as she mounts the escalator chewing on that sausage pizza slice. My neck collar has never before given me as much pain as it does now.

SAUSAGE

By Gréta Szabó

Sausage! - a shout is let out from under the trees. The leash falls out of the hand, the ears of Sausage, the dog are flying in the wind as he runs, such is his happiness at the freedom of this glittering summer morning on Margaret Island. It would be nice to be this happy, to shun tomorrow and run with my hair flying in the wind until my shadow abandons me. Would it be an easier life? It would. A sausage-dog-with-ears-in-the-wind life. Starting with tomorrow, there is no sausage, no island and I will hear nothing but “how are you”. I wish I could just embrace the whole city on these last mornings. Only so that it knows I still love her even though I no longer wake up here every morning.

A TALE FROM DISTRICT 8 AND A SOCIOLOGICAL CASE STUDY ON GROCERY SHOPPING

By Dóra Vincze

When stumbling out of the Gólya a bit on the tipsy side, it happens that one discovers an abandoned shopping cart. Being a cart as it is, it is only normal that one should sit in it, and push oneself down on Práter street, all the while giggling fine and dandy. Nevertheless, one should always mind the fact that the cart is ill-suited to handle the bump between the sidewalk and the street, leading to one being easily catapulted from their makeshift vehicle. No one will have been surprised at the sight of this in District 8, some might casually raise an eyebrow at the timing of the act, however. Say, a young workingman in front of the night store, winding down from a long day with a beer in his hand. Well, to quote his words: “It ain’t even 8 o’clock yet”...

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