

Laszlo Naszodi

How to Become an American Writer

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Legal Garbage and Contact

The characters of the stories, including myself, are fictitious. Any resemblance to real people is accidental and I do not take responsibility for that. However, I take full liability if I could make you feel touched or upset, because your political stand is to the left or right of mine. If you think that we are in the same boat, send me a wink via email to Lasz@brinkster.net. I appreciate any different comment, too, let it be as provoking as my writing. You can write me in many language but in Legalese.

Web sites

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Preface

When I left for the New World, I thought I new English. The first person I spoke with on American land was a bureaucrat of the Immigration Office.

“Tchanay sah?” he asked me point-blank. I thought I couldn’t understand him because he spoke with a Southern accent. After a year I realized that the sentence would have sounded articulated as *“What’s your name sir?”*

To my incomprehension he repeated the question several times as if I was an idiot.

“Do you speak Eng-lish?” He articulated slowly.

“I do. Do you?” I asked back in the same manner.

He had no sense of humor. The admission process took long, and I missed the connection to Los Angeles.

“Once I’m stuck in New York, I look around,” I thought. After two hours I found me robbed in a street crowded with frightening fellows. *Welcome to America!*

You can find the continuation of the story in one of my other books titled *Menj Amerikába!* provided you can read in Hungarian. Those who can only read the English version should rest satisfied or practice with my bilingual books for a while.

The above story could have been a good commercial of an LLL, a “Let’s Learn Languages” series. The sad matter of fact in this story is that, unlike advertising boosters, it really happened to me. Besides, the primary moral is not that we should learn languages but we should learn the customs of another country. I hope that my books can help in both...

Preface To The 3d Edition, or The Two-Dimensional Cat

A friend of mine drew my attention to the fact that the story of the two-dimensional cat, mentioned in the first piece, is missing from the collection. Another reader contested that I should be more self-critical before criticizing my environment. I thought I did my best to balance my insults aiming at ‘us’ and ‘them’, but I might be wrong. So, here is the requested story about the two-dimensional cat, which is picking on a group of mine, on the society of physicists.

Carl has been one of those few honest truck drivers, who have never exercised the usual hit-and-run practice. At least not in the first two cases. Once he accidentally killed a cat in front of a house. He stopped, picked up the animal, but was afraid of showing up in front of the owner. His conscience didn't leave him alone, and on the way back he stopped at the house, brought the corpse to the entrance, and rang the bell. A lady inside was just about finishing her shower. She heard the doorbell and shouted:

“What?”

Carl thought that a man was behind that rough voice.

“Sir, are you missing a cat?”

“I am, but I am a lady and I can't open the door right now.”

“Never mind. I can pass it under the door.”

“You should stop here, “ my cat lover wife said, but I had to go on, to establish a moral.

Another time, Carl had worse luck with getting over a similar accident without talking to the pet owner face-to-face. At this time a physicist answered the door.

“How can I help?”

“Sir, is this your cat?”

“No, mine is three-dimensional.”

Needless to say, Carl did not stop anymore to take care of his victims.

*

Now it's time for the moral. Unfortunately each reader can get his/her own conclusion of an absurd story like this. Some may say that the trouble always starts with a woman. Others may pronounce:

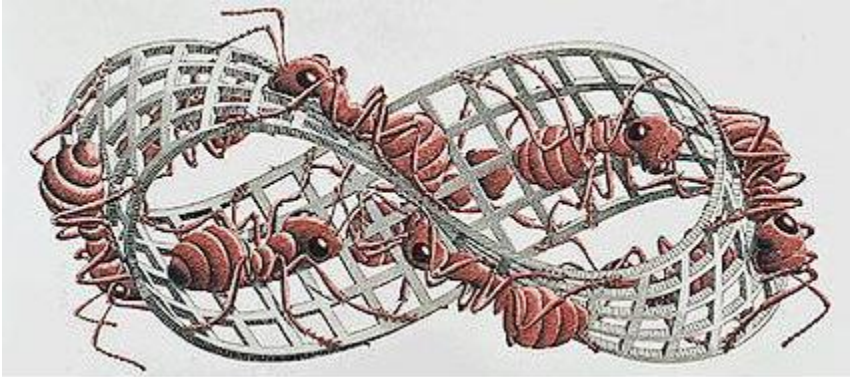
“Physicists not only created the nuclear bomb but also made people dishonest. Not to mention the high gas prices, the child exploitation in Asia, and the hurricanes.”

Once a member of a group makes a mistake, we can blame them for everything.

August 25th, 2005

*... as if their only choices were between Pepsi and Coke,
hamburger or hot dog.*

Like a Möbius Strip



You have your own spacious home in the Southwestern corner of an enormous country. You are surrounded with smiling people. Your freedom is so huge that it hurts already. Then it turns out that you live in a prison of your thoughts. You try to assimilate, to change your image between the long-hair hippy and the clean shaved professional back and forth, then you realize that it is not your appearance that prevents you from succeeding. You don't belong here, you don't fit here.

You desperately study their language, your vocabulary exceeds their average with at least a thousand words, and still, you are unable to loosely communicate with them. You try to mingle with akin people but after many years spent in the construction industry, the circle of artists remains closed for you. It turns out that American Jews are primarily Americans. Besides, you consider yourself Hungarian and not Jewish at the first place, either.

When you find the club of water sports, the members have already paired up, and after rejecting the overture of the very kind but homosexual John, you are alone during the whole trip of the 20-some members.

They don't understand your jokes brought from Budapest, and their baseball-related jokes sound like an empty barrel for you. They talk about some guy called Bob Hopkins, you talk about András Kern. No matter how far you strain yourself, after five or six years you must bow to the fact that there is no bridge over the cultural gap between you and them.

The majority of born Americans live a uniform life, as if their only choices were between Pepsi and Coke, hamburger or hot dog. After some pretentious, tense relationships you want a Hungarian woman, who you can make laugh without tickling. Zsuzsa and Sári understood when you were teasing about the two-dimensional cat. Jesse and Lynn just didn't get it. Of course, Zsuzsa and Sári are not available anymore. One is the head of a Hungarian State Department with two kids and with a broken sense of humor. The other one disappeared from the surface of Earth, or just hid behind a man's last name.

"Why are Hungarian women better than Americans?" your local friend, Paul asks after seeing your thrashing from one bad relationship to another. He wouldn't understand the real arguments, and you don't want to hurt his patriotic feelings. So, you answer with a stereotype:

"Hungarian women might not shave their legs but cook much better."

You think that you are in love with the teacher, who you met during your summer visit to your homeland and who full-heartedly laughs at your joke about the two-dimensional cat. She thinks that she loves you, too; happily moves over with you. In fact, she was only fed up with her demagogue school principal and she hated her living conditions in Pest. Naturally, she cannot teach in Los Angeles. After a year she finds her first American job in a library.

The work is a drudgery and it pays little. A few years later she stabilizes her position in a warehouse chain, receives her green card and leaves you for a born-American colleague. Her new relationship doesn't last long because the American man doesn't understand the joke about the two-dimensional cat. She breaks up with him, and moves in a separate place. She enjoys independence and freedom for a while, but she feels lonely. The story doesn't end here but starts again. She has her own spacious home in the Southwestern corner of an enormous country...

Skiers Don't Kill Skiers



In the last few months my two children were visiting me from Hungary. They are ski fans as I am. During their visit, flashbacks of sad events came to my mind. The last time I hit the slopes with them was seven years ago in Czechoslovakia.

Since Hungary lost her high mountains in World War One, many Hungarians have spent their winter vacations at Slovakian ski resorts. Sometimes we experienced hostility that, while inexcusable, can be explained by the thousand-year-old tensions among the Central-European ethnic groups. Some Hungarians made the hosts remember their original claim to those mountains and some Slovaks responded rudely to the provocation. Fights frequently broke out in the lift lines between representatives of the two nations, usually starting with verbal abuse, progressing to less harmful physical acts like disengaging one another's bindings, and finally escalating to more dangerous fist fights and ski pole fencing. The confrontations were not about legal dispute over territories or historic grievances. They just happened like other ridiculous macho show-offs do: who can spit farther or who can brag about a larger penis.

American people, even with their diverse interests, are more civilized. Not just those literate ones who read, but the majority, whose only source of information is watching TV. They learn about conflicts and race-related clashes in the United States, too, but - so far - atrocities happen on the periphery of society. Especially not in lift lines. Skiers don't kill skiers.

Snowboarders? Maybe, but not the ones from their own pack. Cohesive spirit among skiers is stronger than the distraction of ethnic differences.

That is what I thought until our latest trip with my children. Crested Butte offered free passes for everybody and we could not resist. The snow was great, the sun was bright and my kids were noisy, naturally in their native language. The trails were crowded and the lines were relatively long. People attempted to squeeze in the middle of the long line from the side. We generously let some of them get ahead but after a while we plugged the flow of the pushy fellows. A persistent couple still tried to cut in, not knowing where we came from. Even my fifteen-year-old daughter was experienced enough to give them a practical lesson on the topic "How to keep your position in a line". The situation seemed to be unresolvable as we and the couple formed a row of five. Approaching the quad lift, the male from the offending couple did not refrain from saying: "One of you should step out!"

"No! One of you should step out!" I replied.

Thanks to our long survival training in the past, they had to give up and move back. The guy could not accept defeat and started to make remarks behind us.

“These foreigners don’t know how to behave.”

“These foreigners don’t know how to behave.”

The comment touched one of my most sensitive spots. I turned back:

“I’m sorry. I know I’m only a dirty foreigner and unable to act as polite as you Americans can. Thank you for reminding me of being a second class citizen.”

“You’re not a citizen, are you.”

“Actually, I am, although, I did not acquire my citizenship the easy way by being born here.”

How funny that most people here say citizen and mean US citizen. But let’s not return to the issue of groundless pride and stupid macho boasts. Shall I argue about who’s got a larger citizenship? At this point the conversation abruptly ended. It was our turn to occupy the coming chair. Fifteen minutes later, sliding down the trail I noticed that my quarreling partner was following me. I stopped but somehow had the feeling that I do not need to raise my pole ‘en guard’. The guy caught up with me and said:

“Sir, on the way up I was thinking about what I said. I was wrong and I would like to apologize.”

“I wasn’t right, either, and I apologize, too,” I responded. I have experienced that Americans do not shake hands as often as people do in Europe, but I thought this was a proper time for reaching out. We shook hands as European, American, Asian, African and Australian human beings should always do. Did I mention snowboarders?

January 1995

*I am not sure if God exists but that day
He surely made me get down on my knees.*

Snowboarders Are Human Beings, Too



In my latest piece, **Skiers Don't Kill Skiers**, I made some picky remarks on snowboarders. I did that

for several reasons. As I finished writing, I reread the paper and became terrified. The article ended with a worldwide handshake, full of confidence and faith in mankind.

“This is not me!” I could barely utter a word. I did not write down such moronic morals back in the communist Hungary, where enthusiastic optimism had been officially expected and supported. Before my newborn piece drowned in the envisioned bright future I created, I had to find a better ending. Adding a sentence that mentions snowboarders as questionable human beings saved the article and my reputation: I am not a saint, either. Just one of the dirty, chauvinist, narrow-sighted pigs. A WnASnPLOMS (white, non-Anglo-Saxon, non-Protestant, liberal, old, male skier) of his own clan. Have your pigeonhole with your label and stay in there!

Everybody belongs to somewhere and I am not an exception. Should you be proud of it, you are partial and biased. Should you not be, you are a traitor. Even worse, I am always hesitating in the middle, as uncle Kohn did when the Nazis occupied his small Belgian hometown. For those who have not heard the story, here it is.

The Germans herded the bi-national population together in the marketplace and gave the command:

“Flemish to the right, Walloon to the left!”

Only the old Jew stayed in the middle and asked:

“And how about us, true Belgians?”

The lingering thought that I have not been fair with the snowboarders could not leave me alone. How dare I judge something I have not tried? The scandal around the movie “The Last Temptation of Christ” came to my mind. A Hungarian archbishop demanded the immediate ban of the film. However, the eminent churchman refused to tell whether he’d seen it. If he had and his soul had not been doomed, how could he restrict other people from the experience? If he had not, how could he form an opinion about it?

I decided to learn how the world looks from the other view, from the top of a snowboard. I can ski, I can surf, so, nothing can surprise me. One foggy morning I rented a board, which had the sign “Original Sin” and headed to the bunny slope. I faced sideways as I saw boarders live and pharaohs in ancient Egyptian drawings. (No wonder the latter ones’ empire disappeared.) The result was horrible. I am not sure if God exists but that day He surely made me get down on my knees more times than ever before. Skis are forgiving. A snowboard is not. Whenever I made a little mistake, the next second my face was smacked to the ground.

“See what you’ve done?” The evil board cynically asked me from above.

“I don’t, my eyes are full of snow!” I tried to answer it.

Sometimes I fell right under the lift and skiers riding above me - my fellow pack members - smiled and clapped their skis to pour chunks of snow on me. It was humiliating.

Forgive me, snowboarders. I will never again say that snowboarding is not a sport, it is a matter of IQ. A single digit. I will never laugh at the remark of ski patrollers:

“It’s not true that snowboarders are not useful people. We can fill up trenches with them.”

My perspectives have definitely changed. I almost like you, dudes. Yes, I do like you with your disgusting blue-pink-purple hair, filthy long coats, and stupid earrings in your noses, and your attitude. The problem is not with you. It is I who is losing his hair and there is not much left to dye. It is I who is afraid of the boss, what he would say if I showed up in the office with rings hanging everywhere. I envy you, snowboarders, because you have something I do not and cannot. It is your age.



What's in Common Between an American Movie and a Hooker?



The foreigner is bitching again. Sorry, let me be more specific. I'm not talking about all American movies, only about the all-American movies. So, don't take it personally. Statistics show that in good periods the US film industry produces about three movies a day. The mass production is done with a well-oiled cliché. The plot, the cuts, the actors are professional. After a while, blue print driven professionalism gets boring. There are routines and extravagant solutions. But, what if extravagancies become routines, too? Movies are cooked by recipes. The three main ingredients are:

1. **The characters.** Women are beautiful, men are brave.
2. **The thought.** A hero has to tell a very wise sentence that can sound only from a great thinker's mouth like a Buddhist monk or Sylvester Stallone.
3. **The progression.** Wherever we come from, a happy ending is obligatory. The heroes should suffer, get in trouble. The bad can gain temporary advantage in the middle, but the good always overcome in the end. There's no such thing as love making without orgasm. It is not what we paid for.

A movie provides what a hooker does. They fake joy for money. The only circumstance you should forget is that they both lie. Remember those Las Vegas motel beds that vibrate for half a dollar? In case of machines, the functions of give and take are clear and separate. You throw two quarters in the slot and receive a minute of good vibration. It *is* real. Purchased love and movies work more shrewdly. You have to participate, to be a part of pretension, while money is converted to illusion. That's the name of the game. The prostitute or the film cannot be delightful if the trade becomes obvious. However, just because the exchange is not evident, the film still can be deceitful. So, where is the line between real and phony?

In a local rental shop I found a tape, in which the imaginary world reflects real life exceptionally well. The title is *Forced March* and it is about a film shooting in my old country, Hungary. Movie making in a movie is a common Hollywood technique. The main character is a Californian actor, whose task is to reconstruct the life and death of Miklós Radnóti, one of the greatest Hungarian poets of our century. Because of his Jewish origin, Radnóti was sent to a work camp in 1944. The American actor tries to understand why Jews trusted the Hungarian authorities that they would not be killed or handed over to the German invaders. The actor does some private research and begins to identify with his character. The director deprecates his abilities, stating that a spoiled yuppie cannot feel the pain and hopelessness of a tortured man. In a scene Radnóti should lethargically wait for a soldier shooting him in the head. The actor departs from the script, by twisting the soldier's arm, taking the gun and pointing it at an officer. The director stops the camera and explains to the young man, who was raised on Western movies, that heroism does not fit here and the situation makes the prisoners apathetic, unable to fight back. At this point I realized that this picture was trustworthy. I started to believe what I saw. It seldom happens to me since I live here and watch mostly American movies.

Hollywood has been fooling generations by showing us American heroes with the world's hardest fists and unstoppable skills. Their triumph is indisputable. The Vietnam War was the first and ultimate lesson of our generation that taught us: we are also vulnerable, we too can break down under torture, we may lose sometimes. Does it mean we are inferior? No, merely human. Among other messages, that's what the *Forced March* tells us. Without a beautiful girl or a bulletproof guy. Without a wise sentence from a superhero. Without happy ending. Possibly, that's why I like it.

*I love you, America, you big child!
Wouldn't it be about time to grow up?*

The Newcomer, the Flower Child and the Politically Correct



Before I left Hungary for the USA, my image of America resembled a broken painting, soaked in sewage water, torn in pieces and illuminated by a dimming candle. Breast-fed by the Marxist ideology, I thought this country was a world of unscrupulous capitalists and oppressed working class, president murderers, Negro-hunting KKK members and blackmailing gangsters. The bright side of the picture had faded away in the atmosphere of cold war. Since I've been living here, my opinion has changed a lot. I learned that everything is true, including the opposite. The United States has provided me a habitat where I can live a decent life. My new homeland did not promise me happiness but the right to pursue happiness and she kept her word. You cannot really appreciate the freedom of speech, if you have never experienced its lack. Because of these gifts, I owe and love America. It is easy to use to the good things and notice the bad ones. I admire most parts of the Constitution and I can throw up seeing some legal practices abusing its spirit. My articles seem only to criticize the system and some typical American phenomena. I make jokes on concepts most people here consider sacred and untouchable. I do stand up against imperfections but my intentions are far from standing up against the country or its people. The times of the Vietnam war come to my mind. Public opinion judged the anti-war flag burners insolent. I proudly admit the similarity between the flag burners and me. These youngsters saw that

America was on a wrong track and they wanted to shake up the nation. Disregarding their manners, they felt much more responsibility than some politicians, who should have spoken up using their legitimate means. Demagogue conformism in power and scandalous outlaws collided. As always, the Establishment formally won but technically lost the battle of the sixties. Recently President Bush could not carry out his plan to initiate a new amendment that would ban flag burners. These days there is a new attempt against flag burning. If it succeeds, pride may win but people will lose. We give up a chunk of our factual freedom for a symbol of freedom.

Today's memory of yesterday's hippy generation has been intentionally falsified. As usual, small twists could totally change the view. I can imagine a typical dialog of the sixties between a mainstream politician and a flower child, who was lying in the grass of a public park. The conversation hardly started, the parties seemed to speak in different languages.

"Hello, my friend. May I ask you, what would you paint on your flag?" The well-dressed gentleman approaches the long-hair hippy of indefinable gender.

"Sir, we don't have flags."

"I mean, what do you believe in?"

"What do you mean, what do we believe in?"

"I mean, what do you want primarily in the future?"

"We want in the future what we want today."

"So, what do you want today?"

"All we need is love."

"And how about drugs?"

"Well, we like to get high while we make love."

"And how about wild parties?"

“I personally like rock and roll.”

After the conversation the hippy stayed in the park. He had a lot to do nothing. The politician went home, took his notes, drew a banner full of flowers and wrote on it: ALL WE NEED IS LOVE! He crossed and rewrote the slogan: LOVE, DRUGS, ROCK ‘N ROLL. *“Still too attractive. I hate them using the word ‘love’. Love is ours, family-oriented, believing Christian people’s, not these yoyos’.”* He finally wrote down: SEX, DRUGS, VIOLENCE.

“See, what they have got on their flag? How sickening these kids are!” The politician kicked back contently.

I do not really like movements. I am neither an -ist, nor an -ian. Neither a -crat, nor an -ican. (Please, do not label me: I am not a nihilist, either.) Vivid streams of ideas trickle down, leave hard deposits and all that remains is sediment. Movements and ideologies do not parent ideas, they use them and abuse them. An idea dies when it is painted on a banner as a slogan. That is why I do not like flags, banners and campaigns, either. However, I am not against the people flags represent. Smart activists do not name themselves straight; whom and what they are against. Everybody is ‘for’ something. The anti-abortion movement calls itself ‘pro-life’ and their opposition is ‘pro-choice’. In my opinion, euphemisms lie. For example, polls show that a significant portion of ‘pro-life’ people agrees to reinstitute the death penalty. Fishermen’s mentality: Throw back the small, kill the big.

Let me tell a tale, how reasonable thoughts turn into stupid ideology. Once upon a time there was a kingdom, where alcoholism created some problems. The ministers proposed that the king ban all spirits. Drinking habits did not really diminish, but the gangsters profiting from the black market became stronger than ever. In the end, the king realized that making alcohol legal again would result in a more normal situation,

with a controlled and taxed market for the benefit of the whole empire.

Today other substances ‘jeopardize’ the health of society. Anti-drug (pardon me: ‘pro-abstinence’) activists try to purify the world, and they do not realize that their movements tend to develop the same troubles the alcohol prohibition did. They don’t even let the less hazardous marijuana be legalized, making those innocent people guilty, who only want to smoke a joint in bed sometimes. Don’t get me wrong. I am not for drugs in general. I know their threat. Not too long time ago I had been assaulted by a heavy drug user. I don’t wish that anybody feel what I felt with his knife against my neck. Should I hate my attacker? Would the incident have happened if he could have accessed his dose legally, controlled and supervised? Or should I rather hate those well-respected sober fellow-citizens, who left me coping alone with that desperate guy at the always-crowded corner of Hollywood Boulevard and La Brea in L. A.? Because of this holdup, should we outlaw those, who do not wish to go out to the street under influence, just wanting a little relaxation and joy at home? If this is forbidden, why don’t we penalize diabetes and prohibit insulin? Fatal car accidents happen because of its incorrect dosage, too! Tobacco smokers can also cause accidents just because embers falling on their laps may distract their attention from driving. The problem is not with marijuana or with alcohol, but with those people who drink and drive, smoke and drive, regardless of what they smoke. Mild narcotic substances are closer to tobacco than to crack cocaine. However, considering real similarities and differences would require some thinking, not just slogans. Also, the tobacco industry is much more powerful than those easy-going hobos. It is simpler to target the pot smokers and group them with heavy drug users. Scientifically false, but politically correct.

Am I Green or What?



Dear Sir:

I just received your letter among a lot of junk mail today. Yours is not junk at all. It is so personal I have been really, really touched. How can I compare your kind two-pager with that brief notice from my employer that I am required to participate in Sexual Harassment Training? *“What a country!”* I should say with Yakov Smirnoff, if I were an immigrant comedian, but I’m only an immigrant statistical analyst. *“They want to train me how to sexually harass!”*

Or take another mailing. That is really abrupt. My bank reports that I owe them \$1792.29. Unlike in yours, there’s no personal introduction, no business card enclosed, no visualization of the bright future. And the details are not exciting, either: previous balance, cash advances, billing period, etc. That is junk. Yours is not. You were writing me about \$5,000,000.00, about good news, and worry-free life. You used nice sentences like

“Please feel free to call.”

They were rude:

“Questions? Call 1-800-555-2843.”

Your letter starts with a promising sentence:

“Even though we have never met, I may turn out to be one of the most important people in your life.”

“You must be a beautiful woman!” I started to fantasize. Then I read your name and I figured out your gender.

“These newcomers might be almost as smart as born Americans. They know that name implies gender,” you would think. But it is not as simple for a foreigner as you would think. Once I responded to a rental ad. I did not know the difference between the names Dennis and Denise and I almost became a

roommate of the opposite sex. (I mean the opposite of what I wanted.) But don't think I lost my interest, just because you're a man. Thank you for reaching out your friendly hand toward me (with \$5,000,000.00 in it). You deserve my trust, so, let's get to know each other!

I came from Hungary about six years ago. You know that small country in the middle of Europe, between the non-existing Soviet Union and the non-existing Yugoslavia. It is South of the separated, i.e., non-existing Czechoslovakia, next to Transylvania, which country - believe or not - does exist. (If we consider being in the body of Romania as existence.) When I arrived to the USA, I was very naive. Also, I was a proud Hungarian. I remembered the proverb from home that says: "*Hungary is the bouquet on God's hat.*" I should have learned here that Hungary is at most a spot on God's hat, if it is on his hat at all. I learned the American proverb about us:

"If somebody enters the revolving door behind you and exits in front of you, you met a Hungarian."

Funny, isn't it. I don't think it is. It really hurts my national pride. Number one, it is not true. Number two, front and behind are relative terms, especially in the case of revolving doors. Number three, who do you believe? The guy, who came out second? Ridiculous!

Pride is very important for the people of small East-European nations. You've got your Grand Canyon, they've got their pride. You should respect their pride. They can kill if pride got hurt. (See Bosnia.) After a while pride and respect are not the issue, but they still can kill.

In the last six years I have been very hardworking to learn how to be an American. I learned, for example, that here they don't use the obsolete Latin word 'diligent'. People here are not diligent. They are hardworking. I learned that a theater is not a theatre (you know, where actors and actresses play), but a movie theater. I learned, how to eat popcorn in the theater. I'm still not a perfect American, I can't spread the popcorn all

around the floor like born Americans can, but I'm practicing. I'm working hard on it.

So, if you are asking, what have I done lately, I proudly say: I learned. I learned about freedom. I learned that I couldn't afford items advertised as free. I learned the language, which seems similar to English. At least, I learned the most important American words like 'bullshit' and 'sucker'. Also, I did learn that nouns could be used as verbs. For example: "*Don't bullshit me!*" Please don't take it as an offense against your letter. Now, let's return to you.

You enclosed your business card. That convinced me of your seriousness. In Europe, after that old French guy called Descartes we say: "*Cogito ergo sum.*" (He spoke in Latin in order to sound like a foreigner. Here foreigners try to speak in English and we sound like Americans from Downtown L. A.) "*Cogito ergo sum*" stands for "*I think, therefore I am.*" Here you say: "*I have a business card, therefore I am.*"

After the introduction, you put me on a pedestal of a singled out person eligible for the

\$5,000,000.00 Grand Prize. I

admit, my heartbeat got heavier, my breaths got shorter. Yes, they did. At the first dozen times I received such letters. Now I know why America is called the Promiseland in Eastern Europe. Promises, promises. Later I always find the fine print remark: "*if your number matches with the winning number*". But, how can they match, when my number has thirteen digits? Thirteen eggs can match. Thirteen pins can match. Thirteen matches can match. Thirteen digits can't match with another set of thirteen digits!

Minor detail that ruins my happiness, like the minor difference between Dennis and Denise. The very detail I would like to know is: how many people received your letter that you might

be one of the most important people in their lives? Please do not think that I am jealous or too picky, but this really matters to me. Or, as you would write:

This really matters to me. Let's say one million people received the same notice. (If I look at those thirteen digits that can differentiate ten thousand billion separate numbers, I'm afraid I extremely underestimate your capability, but let's stick to the lousy one million.) It means that my chance to win the \$5,000,000.00 (what a good feeling to write down those zeros) is about 0.000 001 (what a bad feeling to write down those zeros). But if I start the calculation from the thirteen digits, the chance that the winning number will match with *any* of the million selected persons' numbers is 0.000 000 1. With a slight risk of pay-off like this, I can offer \$5,000,000 to you, my friend, and to a million other people, not in 30 years installments, but instant cash, even though I currently owe \$1792.29 to my bank.

I have to confess: I am cursed by my profession. I know that the possibility of my winning, 0.000 001 times 0.000 000 1 is a longer form to express the term 'nothing'. Nothing as zero. Zero as null, nada, zip, nix, zilch. If you disagree, let me ask you something: Would you carry an umbrella all day if the weather forecast said that the chance of rain was 0.000 000 000 000 1? I doubt it. And, although I find it unlikely, suppose that the non-distributed numbers will not participate in the drawing, and we are talking about the bigger chance: one in a million (provided that only one million selected households received your promising letter). That's why I want to know the number of people eligible for the Grand Prize. Could you send me a short letter, not a two-pager, just a card that indicates that figure? Or, you know what, let's make a deal. If the number of the happy, selected-to-be-multi-millionaires is one million or higher, do not respond to my request. You can save a stamp

and a card. (In fact, a million stamps and a million cards.) Little pieces of papers produced from a branch of a tree. Had you not started the whole thing, you could have saved a forest. Sorry, I changed my mind. Don't consider me a friend anymore. I will lose or recycle your business card and instead of chasing fake promises, I will work hard and try to find ways to become a real American. Other ways than diligently entering sweepstakes.

Maybe I'll publish this letter for some money. Real money. You know, the green stuff not the pink.

Sincerely yours,
LN

*A basic human feeling, the killer instinct
is intensely working in me today.*

Another Day, Another Innocence



At five in the morning my alarm clock unleashes. I am leaving for a chess tournament in Craig, Colorado. A dark silence is resting on the neighborhood when I crawl into my car. I have to be there by nine and a trip of hundred fifty miles is waiting for me. I am already on the highway, my eyes are open, my foot is pressed against the gas pedal, but my stomach and my head are still sleeping. After drinking a quart of coffee, I start to feel awake. I need it. My thoughts are my only traveling companions. I turn on the radio. We are enduring the ‘trial of the decade’. O. J. Simpson is coming from everywhere, even from the faucet.

*“What is right and what is wrong? Written by Mayakovski.”
I presented the poem with enthusiasm on the celebration of Rákosi, the Hungarian Stalin, when I was five. I thought then that right and wrong were distinct, well-defined entities. Later on my father disappeared. My relatives secretly let me know that he was in prison. “He did not commit any crime. It was a preconceived trial of fabricated accusations,” they told me.*

The darkness is shredding. The radio is talking about the peace efforts in Bosnia. One can listen to the champions of justice. People kept killing each other under the leadership of these ‘brave’ men during the last years. The arguments of both sides are the same. Here we are, devoted defenders of the homeland,

freedom fighters as opposed to them, the conquerors, snipers, genocidal gangsters, terrorists. Aren't there universal norms, regardless of birthplace, skin color, religion, state of wealth? Do not all Bibles, Torahs, Korans, Constitutions say: don't kill?

“Simulant pretender, have him transfer back to his Division!” the Army Surgeon General declared in the Military Hospital of the Hungarian People’s Republic. He had been a knowledgeable doctor and loyal to the system. I had been good at pretense and a faithful antimilitarist. Both of us believed in something. Thirty years ago I was convinced that the world needs flowers instead of weapons and love instead of war. Following my conscience, I proudly lied and cheated. Since then I have not been any kind of -ist, -ate, -ican or -ian. Not even a nihilist.

“You are a deserting traitor!” A comrade soldier shouted at me when he discovered how I imitated hemophilia.

“The enemy’s defection is heroism, mine is a shame, isn’t it,” I replied.

I am exiting from the highway. At the roadside a rapid river is running against me. In the Rocky Mountains snow is common in September. As I am traveling over 6000 feet, the canyon opens up and the white spots integrate into a wide virgin snowfield. Aspens surround the road.

I lost my virginity under aspen trees. I was fourteen and we boys sneaked to the fence of a lake side camp of the Communist Youth’s League to gaze at the girls dancing.

“Do you like me?” one called me excitingly.

“Y-y-y-yes, I do,” I muttered. She looked at my tightening pants.

“So I like you.”

In the forest we dropped our under-waist clothes in a hurry and united in a teeth-into-necks, nails-into-buns hug. I could not withhold my juvenile rush and I finished in seconds.

“That’s all?” I thought.

“That’s all?” She asked.

As the road climbs north bound, the rising sun illuminates the peaks on the left. Nature awards me with a similar gift almost every day in the Grand Valley, where I live, but watching it is never enough. While driving to work I stare at the rocks of the National Monument and the show begins. First the edge becomes red, then the middle of the wall turns to yellow like a traffic light. In the end the brightness emerges in the green of the foothill. It is free to go. I am free today as well.

“This is Paradise!” I thought four years ago when I moved here. After so many struggles I found my peace of mind in the Grand Valley. At that time criminal reports of the city covered mostly traffic violations. I did not lock my house and in the heat of the summer I left the car windows rolled down as many other residents did. Then the outside world discovered us. The clean air of high altitudes, the inexpensive homes, the ski resorts, the cheap marijuana grown secretly in the vicinity attracted many people, including criminals. Not too long ago somebody stole the stereo from my car parking in the garage. I checked around and realized that some money, my tennis racket and computer parts were also missing. The intruder must have been from the neighborhood and must have known my habits, my anti-gun feelings. He probably saw me on the street while I was installing new CD equipment in my car. It was not the

first time the guy visited my garage. "Next time I am going to kill him!" With my first anger I wanted to buy a revolver.

Here in the Wild West men without weapons like me represent a minority. By the Colorado "Make my day" laws, murder is a serious crime but killing a thief on your property is legally excusable. If the warning shot hits the forehead, misfortune happened. The owner testifies that he was aware that the burglar also had a weapon and the case is dismissed.

I gave up possessing a gun, though. I would not draw it anyway. Since then I lock my home and my car. I no longer can have an honest and sincere conversation with my neighbors. Everybody is a suspect.

"How much do you think your loss amounts to?" the deputy sheriff asked me.

"Less than a thousand dollars, but this is not the issue. The intruder stole my innocence!"

I am arriving ten minutes before nine. The chess tournament is held in a school's assembly room. The first round begins. The board on the wall shows my present position: wins zero, losses zero, draws zero. That's about my gunfights. As so often in my life, I am looking in the eyes of my opponent with innocence while shaking hands. However, the coming games are going to be different. My thoughts on the road psyched me up. A basic human feeling, the killer instinct is intensely working in me today.

September 30th, 1995

*Let's take the (bad) Chinese people
and the (good) Hungarian.*

The Birth and Death of the First Chess Machine



It all started in the ancient world and it was the Chinese's fault. They were sick and tired of the persistent Mongolian attacks and they built the Great Wall on their Northern border. The Mongolian economy was based on warfare and robbery. To the North the cold Siberia restricted them, so, the Khan gave the command: "*Go West!*" This Mongolian slogan was adapted by the American pioneers a thousand years later. Recently, descendants of Genghis Khan say that the American apple pie is of Mongolian origin, too, but we all know that the claim is false. Apple pie is a Hungarian pastry. As a general rule, we, Hungarians invented everything on Earth from the matches to the H-bomb.

The pressure from the East initiated a huge migration of Eurasian nations. The vacuum on the other side of the continent, caused by the decay of the Roman Empire, accelerated the movement. The Hungarian tribes were pushed from the Ural area to the former Roman province Pannonia. They settled down in the late 5th century and they expanded their territories during the next thousand years. (The difference between glorious gain and unscrupulous acquisition of land is that the former is carried out by **us**.)

In the 16th and 17th century the Osman-Turkish Empire incorporated the middle of the country. Hungary's Northern part was controlled by the Austrian Habsburgs; the Eastern third, Transylvania became a pseudo-independent state. After

the Turks had been expelled, Hungary was reunited under the rule of the Habsburg Emperors. (According to the feudal laws the actual Austrian monarch became the king of Hungary as well.) This was the time and place when and where the chess automaton was born.

The Owners' Manual of Chessmaster 4000 calls the inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen a Viennese expert in hydraulics and acoustics. The statement is true but it needs some minor corrections regarding his name, residence and profession. His given name is Farkas, which is the Hungarian equivalent of the German name Wolfgang. As to his origin, his father was either Irish or English, but daddy did not hear the voice: "Go West!" and he settled down by the Danube river. The Habsburgs gave him the title of Hungarian nobleman. (The German word 'von' in front of the family name refers to nobility.) Farkas was born in Pozsony, Hungary, which city is called Bratislava today and it is the capital of the new Slovak Republic. (Clear, isn't it.) He served Maria Theresa as a counselor of the Austrian Imperial Court, but he spent most of his time in Pozsony. He had always been interested in technical sciences, but those days the only respected profession for a nobleman without financial resources, besides being a priest or an officer, was to become a lawyer. After office hours his favorite pastime was to design and create equipment like talking machine, garden fountains, water lifting equipment, typewriters for the blind (half a century before Braille).'

The chess automaton was first exhibited in the Viennese Court in 1769. It was a desk-like box filled with cogs and gears. A life-sized figure of a Turk was sitting behind it. In fact, a human player was hiding inside the desk. Images of mirrors made him perfectly undetectable and unrevealable. The secret had never been discovered either by the spectators or by the opponents. However, the inventor eventually told about the deception to the Prussian King Frederick the Great. A short encounter on the operation took place between them behind

closed doors and, as witnesses stated, the King left the room laughing: *“Even a child could have figured this out!”* he said. The fame and publicity of the automaton were outstanding. The inventor himself called it children’s toy and he was bemused by the admiration surrounding the equipment. After a while he grew tired of the shows and stopped giving performances. After Kempelen’s death in 1804, the automaton’s new owners were only interested in money. They exhibited it mostly in exclusive shows. For example, Napoleon was invited for a game. As legend has it, the player inside was advised not to defeat the Emperor. Napoleon tried to make illegal moves. The third time the automaton “lost patience and control” and swept the pieces from the board. Napoleon avoided getting defeated and could leave with pride. The story however contradicts the score sheet published by Ludwig Bachmann in 1920:

Napoleon - master Allgaier (the automaton)
Schönbrunn, 1809

e4 e5 2. Qf3? Nc6 3. Bc4 Nf6 4. Ne2 Bc5
5. a3 d6 6. 0-0 Bg4 7. Qd3 Nh5 8. h3 Bxe2
9. Qxe2 Nf4 10. Qe1 Nd4 11. Bb3 Nxe3+!
12. Kh2 Qh4 13. g3 Nf3+ 14. Kg2 Nxe1+
15. Rxe1 Qg4 16. d3 Bxf2 17. Rh1 Qxg3+
18. Kf1 Bd4 19. Ke2 Qg2+ 20. Kd1 Qxh1+
21. Kd2 Qg2+ 22. Ke1 Ng1 23. Nc3 Bxc3+
24. bxc3 Qe2++.

“Play a game of chess and I’ll tell you who you are!” Says the proverb. Researchers try to solve the dilemma: Was Napoleon brilliant or crazy? Probably both. Disregarding his aggressive and ignorant second move, White’s play was not too bad for an emperor. What he missed, according to the connotator, was a resignation after Black’s 11th move.

The automaton ended up in the Chinese Museum in Philadelphia. It was sitting in storage for 14 years with no one's interest. A fire in 1854 destroyed it and the secret of the first chess machine was buried forever. I told you that the Chinese ...

*I may not have the killer instinct,
which is an essential prerequisite of American life...*

The Spiritual Life of an Agnostic in Two Acts



Act One

I'm not religious but I may not be an atheist, either. In the winter of '92 the spirit of Christmas definitely touched me. Those Sundays I went to church, although not to the morning masses.

Every Sunday night a Chess Club gathered in the classroom of the small Colorado town's Lutheran Church. I was considered strong among the local players. The other club members didn't believe me that I had never been qualified. I told them that on the benches of the Budapest parks sometimes higher level games take place, than in a qualifying tournament here. Letting to the pressure of the club's president, I entered the next tournament. I easily won the unrated section, so, I got into the ever-paying camp of rated players. Tournament chess is different from leisure chess. Players pay a high entry fee, and the winners can take home substantial amounts of money. The fight is fierce because a misguided move can cost you.

A local tournament was also held in the church. In the last round I was paired with a talented 19-year old. The winner could count on the first prize. During a break I already talked with him. That was his first for-prize tourney. His enthusiasm toward the game wasn't deflated by the fact that he had no job or home.

In the end-game I gained a pawn, which would have been enough for a win. I saw that the boy became sad. He already counted on the money that he could have spent on a dinner and

a hotel room. Those days I was also unemployed but I lived in my own house and I had some reserve to cover the next month's bills. I looked into his disappointed eyes and before he could have said the same, I said:

"I resign."

I walked out of the church, took a deep breath of the cold winter air. The boy followed me.

"What happened? Why did you do that?" He asked.

"I just wanted to be a nice guy."

He didn't understand my decision.

"If I were you, I wouldn't, for sure." He said.

I may not have the killer instinct, which is an essential prerequisite of American life. But I couldn't explain this to him.

"Take it as a Christmas gift."

Later I told the story to one of my church-going girlfriends. She agreed with my decision and, as she said, she would have passed the money to the boy, too, but only after winning the game.

"Does it matter, how you give away something?"

"But of course. If you give it with a check, through the church, you could have written it off."

Now, who is the Higher Authority? God or the IRS?

Act Two

As I mentioned before, I'm not religious. We can get along with God, without having each other. Sometimes I feel a little squeeze from Him but whenever I pass the eventual test, He lets me loose and loves me again. As a compensation, I still don't pray to Him but frequently examine my conscience.

When I desire spiritual life, I go up to the National Monument, sit down at the rim of a canyon and meditate. This summer I had the chance to practice my non-denominational lonely sermon on the Northern rim of the Grand Canyon. I sat down on a massive rock that overhung above hundreds of meters of nothing. Deep down the Colorado river wound; across a huge curtain of multi-colored, multi-shaped rock wall let down its feet into the river; above on the Southern side it thundered and lightened continuously. While merging in with the extraordinary nature, great topics swirled in my mind such as the birth of the World. Somehow the Big Bang theory I learned at the university didn't fit in this gigantic picture. The Bible must have been written in a similarly frightening, almighty environment. It seemed logical that after creating the Earth, the Sun and the other celestial bodies, the animals, the Lord thought on the sixth day: *"I must create something similar to me, who values what I've done so far. My work is not worth anything if nobody says 'Gee'."* So, He created Man.

Of course, the materialist approach is as logical as the one above. The opposite happened. The enthralling nature inspired the Man; not on the sixth day but on the first when he realized how wonderful this World was.

"This is so great that I cannot even measure it up," he thought. So, he created God in his mind.

In the two approaches there is a substantial common point: Lifeless nature existed before human being. We can never make up our few-day or few-billion-year handicap. What's more, we don't have a chance to survive the Earth. After

humans disappear, the Grand Canyon will be here for millions of years, to the delight of lizards and locusts. The homo sapiens will probably exterminate itself, and God, if exists, can sit alone on the rock at the edge of the big opening. He can keep admiring the perfect Universe without the imperfect human, and He can meditate about who will be grateful to Him, whom He can punish for one's sins, or at least, leave alone if one behaves fair.

I think that the strongest argument against the existence of God is that black and white, Bosnian and Serb, Jew and Arab systematically kill each other. This would not be tolerated by an Omnipotent, if existed.

That came to my mind this summer, when I was sitting at the wide-screen show called Grand Canyon.

But, I am not a hopelessly non-believing person. I'm willing to pray. *"Existent or non-existent God, whoever you are, give us the chance that I be wrong about the fate of mankind."*

*My captivation and aversion can be explained at once:
Everything is cheap there, including rent and human life.*

How to Become an American Writer

Motto: "Some know, some teach..."

I could never have a loose chat with my father. He has been interested in the 'essence' only. In my first thirty years I lived in Hungary with him, and whenever I tried to explain something from various aspects, he interrupted me. "Get to the point!" I was so envious of my friend, Peter, whose father used to say, "I don't care about the issue. Just tell me the details!" The two approaches reveal the difference between news and literature. The former must be tight and strict like my dad. The latter may wander around and may have a questionable title that needs an explanation. However, don't we have time and space to depict our subject? That's what talking and writing are for. Let's do it!

Far too many American books have the titles beginning with 'how to'. How to get rid of your anxiety, your boring lover, your kleptomania, your lender, your extra pounds. How to be healthy, wealthy, attractive. How to become a carpenter, a computer guru, a scuba diver. How to get a good job, a nice home, an adorable pet, an orgasm. How to avoid confrontations, AIDS, pesticides. I am always skeptical of these books. Is the world really so simple that they can write recipes for solving the big problems of life? Their lives, maybe, not mine. After all my disbelief, I take a peek in these works, as you, my dear reader, did in my script. "*Who knows? Something may come out in the end,*" you think. I am warning you. Most articles, including mine, provide either obvious or stupid advice. But, hey, let's forgive the writer if he is honest. Unfortunately, many authors lie. Some imply that the world is flat, some swear that they reached its edge. For example, one

writer promising wealth claimed he started from zero. In fact, he started from six zeros because he inherited a million dollars at a young age. Since then he has gone bankrupt, but his last enterprise made him rich again. He sold millions of copies of his *How to become wealthy* book. So, do not expect much more from me, either. I'll tell you how to become a writer, and I hope that I do become one.

I almost forgot the adjective in the title, the *American*. I *happened* to get to the United States. That is another story. (I am looking for a publisher to sell my full length book on how to become an American. A high place on the international best seller lists is guaranteed.) A man who carries the fate of being born in Eastern Europe becomes American by living here, working here, watching American female butts on the street and expressing his admiration by saying "gee" instead of his native language word "húha".

I left Hungary with a tooth brush and a Ph.D. in Nuclear Physics, in 1988. The former was very useful but I could not use the latter without a security clearance. Some stations of my fast career in the USA have been: handyman, messenger, carpenter, computer repairman, programmer, harp player in a rock band, ski instructor, appraiser. Currently I work as a statistician and write columns for a chess magazine. See, how simple it is? It took less than six years and I could read my articles in printed form regularly. I stabilized my position in the Rocky Mountain Chess Magazine. So far the owner fired two editors but I stayed like a rock and in the last issue more than a full page was mine. It was really the last issue, because the magazine temporarily ceased publication. Trust me, it was not my fault. Probably no more editors wanted to work for free. The owner and the editors always debated on the compensation. Compensation was never an issue between the management and me. I carried over the habit of not being paid from Budapest, so, the last statement probably did not help the reader to approach the promised goal. Nevertheless, take my

advice seriously, please. If the definition of writership is based on the amount of money earned, many great authors would be excluded. *Publishing* is the key word. I think measuring the talent in terms of dollars is as stupid as in terms of kilowatt-hours or of ounces. Circulation minus advertisement is a better indication of talent than fees collected.

Where was I? Oh, yes. To become an American and a writer. You would think the two desires do not have anything in common. In my case, life in America brought up the urge to express my thoughts. I started to write in Hollywood. I did not work for the studios, but I lived around the dream makers. My days went by aimlessly. On the street I did not need much English. Many people in the city spoke many different languages, anyway. American English seemed primitive. I should have forgotten half of the four thousand words I brought from Europe. I picked up a dozen new ones and I could fluently communicate. Everything was 'coming' or 'going'. The food to take out is 'to go'. The aspiration or future tense is expressed with 'go': "I am going to kill you!" or better "I'm gonna kill ya!" The past tense is 'go', too. Anything that expired, is over, finished or too late: "It's gone". Lost and stolen things are 'gone', too. A mediator or a middleman is a 'go-between'. You do not establish or close a business, you 'go' into it or 'go' out of it. To continue something is 'to go on'. Misconduct in class is 'goings-on'. Current, prevailing, available, working is said to be 'going' or 'ongoing'. Stage dancers are go-go girls. An energetic, aggressive person is a go-getter. Slow progress on the freeway is 'stop and go'. Dating, having entertainment, eating in a restaurant is 'going out'. It seems funny for us, Hungarians only, because in our language 'going out' has a particular meaning; something related to the outhouse, as opposed to 'going in' which means something bad happening in the kid's pants.

I mostly lingered on the Hollywood streets. Sometimes I wished I only acted in a movie, and after the shooting I could

return to my home land. “Can’t you dub this dirty life in Hungarian!?” I cried out into the imaginary shooting. They did not change the language, so, I learned more English, besides the words ‘come’ and ‘go’.

Those who are familiar with Los Angeles know that I am far from boasting with my Hollywood residence. The good neighborhoods are closer to the Ocean. As we leave Beverly Hills east bound, Greater Los Angeles becomes thicker as oil refinery columns do downward: at the top the lightest alcohols distill, at the bottom only sticky tar remains. I proved to be too heavy for the fancy areas, sank east of Hollywood and deposited in Koreatown. My captivation and aversion to the place can be explained at once: Everything is cheap there, including rent and human life.

I interrupted myself again. Let me return to the how. In the seventies and eighties I wrote scientific papers for prominent international periodicals, i.e., for Nuclear Instruments and Methods, Technometrics. In the USA financial need dictated my articles. My first nontechnical work was published in a local free newspaper. I share it with you in full:

Computer specialist installs hardware and software

for \$20 per hour. Call Laszlo (213)555-8613.

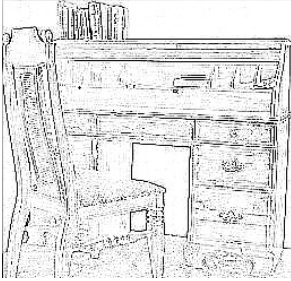
My second miniature hit the jackpot and appeared in two million copies. It does not have deep thoughts, though. I wrote straight from my heart, with my blood. Without going into details, I got to the point. The journal’s name: RECYCLE, the section: 82 domestic cars. The editor abbreviated my masterpiece but it still shines:

Plymouth Reliant, 2dr, cln,

slvr/gray, radio, rr dmg, looks & runs gd. \$2,200.

OK, I know, the last word is a bit strong, but the reader should understand what I meant. I do not want to try your patience. I get to the point. Father, this is for you, too! The other day I received a letter from a big New York magazine that they had accepted one of my articles for publication. In a nutshell, this is the way to become an American writer. Well, between the car sale and the success five years went by. For those who are interested in the details I will write again.

When the Urge of Writing Strikes



The writer suddenly hit the brake. A desk stood on the road side, the desk he's been dreaming of for ages. A loftlike structure of tiny shelves and compartments elevated above the writing surface that could be covered by a roll-top. The top shutter would also hide items left on the desk. Drawers located on both sides of the legroom, two shallow, two well sized and two definitely deep ones.

"Tolstoy, Thomas Mann and Victor Hugo might have created their masterpieces on desks like this", the writer thought.

Next to the desk a sign indicated that the owner wanted to get rid of it for a modest price. The writer rang the doorbell, handed over the asked money without bargaining. He carried his new treasure home. He placed the desk in the most valued spot of the jam-packed apartment, although he had to rearrange his room completely.

"I must write, right away", he said to himself.

He sat down and rolled up the desk's shutter. Inspiration came immediately, as if he opened a whole new world. For a while, he submerged in the beauty of the small shelves and racks, which he already populated with useful objects, like a ruler, staples, paper clips, and a magnifying glass. He enthusiastically grabbed a pen but could not find any paper at home. For several years, he has typed his works directly in his computer, and submitted them over the Internet. He scribbled down a

working title, “When the urge of writing strikes”, on an old used envelope, and moved over to his computer but the flow of ideas that rushed him just a minute ago suddenly stopped.

He tried to revive the lost mood for a couple of weeks, even bought paper, but all he came up with was an aphorism: *“Inspiration flies but a desk stays forever.”*

This idiom was picked up later in Peru, where a movement, turned from Marxist to pure Materialist, replaced the slogan of *“Proletariats of the World, Unite!”* in the header of its newspaper with this tagline. By that time the saying distorted, the word *inspiration* had been replaced with *spirit*. The Peruvians did not know about the pathetic origination of the sentence. That the writer dumped the desk in the street, and nobody wanted to take it, would have surprised them, as well as the fact that the word inspiration - by the translator’s mistake - has been replaced with spirit in the Spanish version.

The associations of a desk with spirit and with inspiration are equally peculiar but quotations do not necessarily become popular because of their wisdom. Dilettantes may suspect hidden meaning behind ambiguity, and vice versa. A remarkable statement may not mean anything for those who missed the context. For example, the nurse in the hospital thought that the last words of the writer didn’t make any sense. They went: *“For those drawers ... I would have loved to write.”*

*Just because something sounds sharp
doesn't mean it's true.*

Me and the President

You don't think that Ms. Piggy is smart, just because she uttered a good sentence on TV, do you? I admit that I heard some wise thoughts from the mouth of the President, too. So I did from Sylvester Stallone. They have good scriptwriters. I don't. I'm on my own and these are my own thoughts. Or, at least, I forgot that I read or heard them before, and later I identified with them. So, here is my first miniature you can quote about unintentional violation of copyrights: *Senility can make someone brilliant. Don't blame the one who lost memory but kept sensitivity to others' good ideas.* Now let's go back to the President, who cannot say that his deeds are unintentional. President Bush is cited thousands of times a day but how many original thoughts he has? What the President and I have in common is that we both are proud of those words that are quoted under our names. Separately, of course. The difference between us is that I admit that some of those thoughts may not be mine. Secondly, unlike him, I acknowledge that I am an idiot sometimes. But it doesn't matter. If I become a famous writer, people will quote the words below as mine, no matter who said them first or if they make sense at all. If I don't become famous, they are still worth a penny or more. You can stick the short ones to your bumper and wear the longer ones on a T-shirt. Or whatever. I hope that I will be so famous that even the previous ambiguous expression "Or whatever" will be attributed to me and not to GWB.

About Limited Choices

“Working-class people are not working-class by choice. The construction worker breaths in cement dust because he has to pay his bills. The roofer climbs on other people's roofs because he wants one above his family. If you have a choice, respect those who don't.”

“You think you have limited choices when you leave the laundry room on your two feet and with three socks in your basket. When someone comes back from the war, has two socks and one foot, the number of his choices is really limited. Support our troops to come home now.”

“Democracy is all about real choices. Not the kind we had the last time between an idiot and a not-so idiot who blew it. The second one may think that we blew it because we elected the first one; and he may be right. Who is the real idiot then?”

The logical answer would be that we the people are idiots; but it's not the correct answer. Number one, the outcome of the US presidential election does not necessarily reflect the will of the people. Al Gore won the popular votes and still lost the previous election. Number two, elections are more about the confrontation of financial resources, not of ideas. The better and stronger marketing sells its candidate. A few more TV ads, i.e., a few more millions of dollars would have overturned the results to John Kerry's favor. Third party candidates had no comparable resources, so, most people didn't even know their names. Money can defeat honesty, justice, consciousness and righteousness. The system is idiot, not the people. *Wouldn't it be time to bring democracy to the United States?*

About Freedom

“America is the land of the free. You can freely say that the President is an idiot. I would rather live in a country where I can say that the President is an idiot - but I shouldn't.”

About Evolution and Creationism

“Evolution created life. Creationists evolve around ruining it.”

Other's

Let me close my list of quotes with one that is definitely not mine but it is not GWB's, either. It is an original Gandhi and it belongs to everybody, even to the President. He understands the first part already. He should only recognize the second part:

“Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.”