

Frontátvonulás ['Frontal Passage']

*Tamás Cseh and Géza Bereményi's Album of No Return*¹

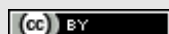
Diana Senechal

Abstract: The legendary songwriting collaboration between the writer Géza Bereményi (1946–) and the musician Tamás Cseh (1943–2009) led to twenty full-length albums as well as countless bootlegs, singles, and unreleased recordings. With its unique mixture of absurdity and suggestion, story and song, comedy and pathos, their work broke ground in its time and influences songwriters today. Little has been written about it in English; this article aims to introduce readers to Bereményi and Cseh's opus through their *Frontátvonulás* ['Frontal Passage'], a story-song show first performed by Cseh in 1979 and released as an album in 1983. Telling of the characters Vizi and Ecsédi and the miracles they incite at Budapest Keleti Station, and setting a plethora of other characters to song, this work is at least partly about ends and endings. After briefly introducing Cseh and Bereményi, this article examines *Frontátvonulás* in light of its four stages (disorientation, stagnancy, breakthrough, ending), treating the last as a key to the whole. The author calls *Frontátvonulás* "an album of no return" both because it emphasizes its own ending and because it confronts the audience irrevocably.

Keywords: *Géza Bereményi, Tamás Cseh, Frontal Passage (album), Hungary, communist Hungary, Hungarian popular music, Hungarian literature, songwriting, Budapest Keleti Station, Dénes Csengey, Grácia Kerényi, Tibor Juhász*

Biography: Diana Senechal is the 2011 winner of the Hiett Prize in the Humanities and the author of two books of nonfiction, *Republic of Noise* (2012) and *Mind over Memes* (2018), as well as numerous essays, stories, poems, songs, and translations. She earned her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in Russian literature from Yale University, taught for nine years in New York City public schools, and moved in 2017 to Szolnok, Hungary, where she teaches at the Varga Katalin Gimnázium. Her translations from the Lithuanian of Tomas Venclova's poetry were featured in two books, *Winter Dialogue* (1997) and *The Junction* (2008); her translation from the Hungarian of Gyula Jenei's 2018 poetry collection *Mindig más* was published in 2022 by Deep Vellum as *Always Different: Poems of Memory*. dianalouisenesenechal@gmail.com

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People, people, people, have you seen this man around here by chance? Here, take a look, here's his photo, come see, come see. Oh come on, strain your brains! Doesn't this face mean something to you? I'm looking for this very man, I want to find him. His name, his name is Vizi, Miklós Vizi. This Vizi knows something, and I'd like to know what he knows. An old classmate of mine, we stuck together through thick and thin, and now he's gone. Miklós, Miklós! Vizi, Miklos Vizi, Miklós! [He whistles.] Sir, sir, sir, I see you've got the look of someone who's been around. Surely you've seen him somewhere? No? No. So they're denying it, they're putting me on for sure. They're just loafing here, do they really think I don't see through them? Everyone knows where he is, everyone's just standing here like morons! Miklós! Where are you, Vizi? Miklós, Miklós!

– *Emberek, emberek, emberek, nem látták itt ezt a férfit? Itt, tessék, mutatom, itt van a fényképe, tessék, tessék. Jaj, kérem erőltessék meg az agyukat! Nem mond ez az arc önöknek valamit? Ugyanis én ezt az embert keresem, meg akarom találni. Úgy hívják, hogy Vizi, Vizi Miklós. Ugyanis ez a Vizi tud valamit, és én is szeretném tudni, amit ő tud. Régi osztálytárs, jóban-rosszban együtt, most meg eltűnt. Miklós, Miklós! Vizi, Vizi Miklós, Miklós! (fütty) Uram, uram, uram, maga látom, hogy olyan az arca, aki sokfelé megfordult. Biztosan látta valahol? Nem? Nem. Akkor meg letagadják, biztosan letagadják nekem. Csak itt állnak, azt hiszik, nem látok át magukon? Mindenki tudja, hogy hol és csak itt áll, mint egy hülye! Miklós! Hol vagy, Vizi? Miklós, Miklós!* (Cseh and Bereményi 1983; Bereményi 1993, 7).²

Thus—in comic urgency—begins *Frontátvonulás* ['Frontal Passage'], the fifth album of the singer and musician Tamás Cseh and the writer Géza Bereményi, two legendary Hungarian artists. Cseh first performed it on October 18, 1979, four years before the album's release. Its combination of pathos and absurdity, song and story, displays the richness of their creative collaboration. It also marks a breaking point, being their last collaborative work before Bereményi's decision in 1982 to write no more song lyrics. His hiatus lasted seven years; he and Cseh resumed their collaboration in 1989 and worked together almost until Cseh's death in 2009. While any of their work could serve as an introduction to their art, *Frontátvonulás* stands out as the first *album* in their special genre, a combination of theatrical storytelling and song. The songs are connected by a narrated story, which Cseh performed with theatrical verve. Despite its vivacity, *Frontátvonulás* comes to an emphatic musical and narrative end, suggesting that the album is partly about ending. This article will explore the role of ending (as theme and form) in the album.

² All of the translations in this essay are my own. Literary quotations are presented in English translation and Hungarian, non-literary quotations (from articles and interviews) in English only. The quotations from *Frontátvonulás* match the text as it appears in Bereményi's 1993 story-trilogy *Kelet-nyugati pályaudvar* ['Keleti-Nyugati Station'] (Bereményi 1993, 7–28), except during the *Frontátvonulás* section, where the quotations will match those on the Cseh Tamás Archívum website so that the reader can follow along easily. The two texts differ slightly in punctuation and formatting (and there is one passage in the book version that does not appear on the album).

Cseh and Bereményi's shows and albums create a microcosmos of situations, places, and characters. While the action of their first album, *Levél nővéremnek* ['A Letter to My Sister'], stays within the intimate realm (the songs tied together by a letter to the narrator's sister), *Frontátvonulás* moves into a public space. Most of its action takes place at Budapest's Keleti Station, a majestic, eclectic edifice with an arched iron-and-glass facade. First opened in 1884, and significantly damaged during World War II, the station underwent repair in the 1950s and 60s; the ticket windows and restaurant, added during that time, figure prominently on the album. The 1970s can be considered the station's second golden age after that of the early 1900s. With its express international as well as domestic lines, the station represented a connection to the outside world (Indóház Online 2014a, 2014b). In *Frontátvonulás*, however, all travel ceases; the trains are not running at all until the breakthrough at the end.

The basic gist of the story is as follows: After a drunken evening with his friend Ecsédi, in which Ecsédi ends up shouting women's names and street addresses, Vizi decides to leave.³ A magic trick he performs with a glass in the kitchen—where the glass floats in the air—tells him that he is capable of everything; he takes off. Ecsédi, finding him gone, rushes all over, looking for him. Over the course of various encounters and songs—the characters include a certain Comrade Eagle, a ticket clerk, a suicidal man, a restroom attendant, a *diseuse* (nightclub singer), a group of graduating seniors, and others—they both end up at Keleti Station, where it turns out that no trains are departing. When Ecsédi finds his friend at last, he urges him to do a trick he has performed many times before (the same one he performed in the kitchen at the start of the story): to hold up a glass and release it. Vizi does so; just as before, the glass floats in the air instead of falling. Buoyed by this miracle, the following morning they drive a locomotive through the glass façade of the station and take it on a victory tour around the city. After much confetti and cheering, they watch the event later that night on television, back at Vizi's place. Vizi watches it to the end—Ecsédi has fallen asleep in the other room, slumped over his arms—and turns off the television. Then he goes up to Ecsédi, pulls him by the hair, and roars in his face: "If you yell women's names at me here one more time, and street addresses, it's over, get it?" [*Ha nekem itt még egyszer nők nevét kiáltozod, meg házszámokat, ennek vége, érted!!!!*] The album ends with Cseh addressing the audience: "It's over. Get it?" [*Ennek vége, értik?!*] (Bereményi 1993, 28).

What is over? What has happened? The story moves through several stages: 1. Being lost and disoriented, Vizi seeks a new life and Ecsédi goes looking for Vizi; 2. A gathering of diverse and quirky personages at Keleti Station, a place of stagnancy; 3. An inspiration and a dramatic, quasi-cathartic breakthrough; and 4. An emphatic end to it all. Interpretations abound. From one angle, *Frontátvonulás* is a polyphonic story of two friends and an array of other characters.⁴ From another, it conveys a message about societal desperation and hope; from still another, it eschews messages and defies conclusions. Still, any interpretation of the album must reckon not only with its ending but with the very theme of ending, which courses subtly through the album and defies even the circular course of action.

³ The Hungarian surnames 'Vizi' and 'Ecsédi' derive from words meaning 'water' and 'younger brother', respectively (Hajdú 2010).

⁴ As Balázs Csengey (2024) noted in conversation, *Frontátvonulás* is truly polyphonic in that it allows each character to speak (sing) in a particular voice without judging any of them. (Balázs Csengey is the son of Dénes Csengey.)

Cseh and Bereményi met around the end of 1970 through a series of unexpected events late at night. Cseh was near Budapest Keleti Station, trying to figure out how to get home. He thought he would take a taxi as far as he could afford but then recognized someone in a youthful group heading toward the Astoria intersection. He ended up joining them. They sat down together at a pub; it was then that Bereményi (a stranger to him at that point) addressed him and offered to write Hungarian lyrics for his songs. They made an appointment; Bereményi showed up at his apartment the next day, and they wrote their first song, “Az ócska cipő” [‘Shabby Shoes’]. Shortly afterward, Bereményi moved into Cseh’s sublet; they lived as roommates for a year and a half and wrote songs continuously (Bérczes 2019, 104–9).

Unlike musicians who focused on recording and publicizing albums, they saw their albums as a way of setting down what they had already created and performed. For both of them, songwriting came first; in the beginning, they had no specific goals beyond writing (Cseh and Bereményi 1980). Bereményi initially opposed the idea of large concerts—indeed, any sort of large public appearance, whether in print or on stage—partly out of concern that this could lead to self-censorship (Bereményi 2017). Yet he ultimately relented when he understood how much Cseh wanted to perform (Bereményi 2022a). In any case, it was always Cseh who performed (sometimes with fellow musicians). His first large concert took place in 1973 at the 25th Theatre in Budapest; many more followed.

The music of Cseh and Bereményi stands out for its flexible rhythm, its explosive, compact expression, its inherent contradictions, and its playful profundity. The songs’ *tá-rá-rás* and *tű-rű-rűs* take the listener beyond direct meanings, as each one has a slightly different inflection (Senechal 2024c). The contradictions in the songs invite many interpretations. In a television interview in 1980, Bereményi said that he tended to laugh at his characters, while Cseh took them seriously. They sometimes created ambiguity on purpose: Cseh might play a mournful-sounding song, and Bereményi would set absurd lyrics to it (Cseh and Bereményi 1980). The songs could come across with different tones and moods, depending on how Cseh delivered them at concerts and who was listening.

Their work belongs, as the cultural sociologist Anna Szemere suggests, to a “semi-underground” (Szemere 2001, 122n), different, say, from the imaginative space of Vágtázó Halottkémek [‘Galloping Coroners’]—a groundbreaking, threshold-leaping ecstatic proto-punk band whose concerts were officially outlawed—but bracing on its own terms. Many who describe art and literature during Hungary’s communist era refer to the three T’s, *támogatott*, *tűrt*, *tiltott* [‘supported, tolerated, forbidden’]; while Cseh and Bereményi’s work could arguably be considered *tűrt* [‘tolerated’] (Danczi 2009), it crossed subtle lines and held layers of secrets.

Though far from mainstream, their opus has filled concert halls, been featured in film and theater, and influenced younger and future generations. Numerous musicians today, including Lóránt Csorba, Zoltán Beck, Benedek Szabó, Ákos Gyórfy, Józsi Hegedűs, László Sallai, Sándor Sárkány Jr., Olivér Csepella, Dávid Konsiczky, Asztrik Kovács, and others, cite Cseh and Bereményi as influences or speak of their importance; some have written songs in Cseh’s honor (Csorba 2018, *Recorder.hu* 2023; Héra 2019; Kolozsi 2023). Cseh and Bereményi’s work is admired for its subtlety and irony, its musical richness, its mixture of story and song, and its non-commercial sensibility. (Like some of the best so-called “alternative” music today, it eschews clichés and plays cunningly with style and form.) Its own musical influences include the troubadour style of Jacques Brel and others; the harmonies of Simon and Garfunkel; the rumbling guitar and understated intonations of Leonard Cohen; Hungarian folk melodies and rhythms; a klezmer strain here and there; and even Gregorian chant. In the stories’ absurdity and

pathos and the characters’ lonely angularity, one can hear overtones of Nikolai Gogol, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco, among others. The often dour themes (including heavy drinking, suicide, defection and sordid relationships) combine with idiosyncrasy and whimsy; recurring characters such as Antoine, Désiré, Vizi and Ecsédi grapple with improbable events and instigate magic.

Over the decades, Cseh and Bereményi’s music—and Cseh’s persona—have become icons of Hungarian culture. Some might see this as a deliberate attempt on the part of the Hungarian government, ruling since 2010, to further its populist agenda. The state grant system introduced in 2014 was initially named the Cseh Tamás Program (Barna and Patakfalvi-Csirják 2022, 337), perhaps because Cseh’s music checks all the boxes as an exemplar of Hungarian heritage: evocative, emphatically Hungarian, and (on the surface) relatively safe. However, in my experience and perception, the attention devoted to Cseh today has deep and complex reasons. At any event celebrating Cseh’s music, whether in a large concert hall or a local pub, some members of the audience may have known Cseh personally or attended his concerts; others may admire the musical, literary, and theatrical qualities of the songs; others may appreciate their subtle political and social commentary (still relevant today); and still others might simply enjoy how they catch the ear and mind. These groups overlap. If the audience breaks into a rhythmic clap to the chorus of “Lee van Cleef,” it is likely not out of nationalist fervor or collective nostalgia but something more shaded and wry.⁵

Their work exemplifies the intimate relationship between the arts in Hungary, where literature, music, theatre, and visual art combine and collaborate and where “high” and “low” art may share the same space. This relationship characterizes the Ördögkatlan [‘Devil’s Cauldron’] Festival, founded in 2008 by László Bérczes and Mónika Kiss, who named Cseh and the film actress Mari Törőcsik as the festival’s permanent patrons. The annual summer festival brings people together for five days of performance, expression, revelry, and quiet, with some events dedicated to Cseh’s work and memory (Ördögkatlan Fesztivál 2024). Similarly, hundreds of events commemorating the eightieth anniversary of Cseh’s birth in 2023 and 2024 bring various arts together. An exhibit at the Petőfi Literary Museum, curated by Cseh’s daughter Borbála Cseh and Dénes Csengey’s son Balázs Csengey, displayed three-dimensional situation scenes from select songs, along with artifacts (Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum [2023]). H. Miklós Vecsei’s song-play *Füst a szemében* [‘Smoke in His Eyes’], based on Bérczes’s book and the lyrics of Bereményi and Dénes Csengey—and featuring Huba Ratkóczi, Balázs Szabó, and Vecsei (as Cseh)—tells a story of Cseh’s life through theatre and music (Magyar Zene Haza [2023]). *Frontátvonulás* itself was brilliantly reimagined and performed in 2024 as a musical play by graduating students of the Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem [‘University of Theatre and Film Arts’]. Directed by Vilmos Krasznai (one of the graduating students), it features actors playing multiple roles and musical instruments as they clamber through and transcend a confining stage set (Gazda 2024; Senechal 2024a).

A brief glimpse at the lives of Cseh and Bereményi will give some background to the discussion of *Frontátvonulás*.

⁵ “Lee van Cleef” [sic] is the seventh song on Cseh and Bereményi’s 1981 album *Műcsarnok* [‘Art Gallery’]; the actor Lee Van Cleef appears as a fictional character within it, and the interjection *hej* [‘hey’] takes on myriad tones and meanings (Senechal 2024b).

Tamás Cseh, 1943–2009

Cseh was born in Budapest on January 22, 1943, and lived in the village of Tordas (in Fejér County) until his thirteenth year. In 1956, just after the revolution, the family moved to Budapest. He received a guitar from his grandparents as a high school graduation present; he then formed a band with two neighbors, boys with some musical knowledge. In high school, he had already begun exploring the “Indian” (i.e., Native American) lifestyle with some friends; later, he started an “Indian” camp in the Vértes mountains that shortly moved to the village of Bakonybél, where it remained. The activities included rugged outdoor survival, roleplay, dances and other rituals. For Cseh and his companions, as well as many others in Hungary and around Eastern Europe, the Native American lifestyle represented freedom and simplicity, as well as implicit resistance to the political and social system (Torkos 2021; Földes 2013; Wilczyńska 2018).

In 1961 Cseh applied to the Képzőművészeti Főiskola [‘Hungarian University of Fine Arts’] but was rejected. After working for a year as a mason’s assistant and then as an apprentice painter and being rejected once more by the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, he decided to become an art teacher. During his training period, he began teaching in the small village of Perkáta, where he played guitar in the evenings, setting his melodies to English lyrics (Horsch 2013, 104–105). In 1965, after a sudden illness, he left the village and moved back to Budapest, where he worked first in Kelenföld at a vocational training school and then, after receiving his teaching diploma, as an art teacher in Kőbánya. In 1970 he met Bereményi and began collaborating with him. One of their songs reached the film director Miklós Jancsó; Cseh played it in Jancsó’s 1972 film *Még kér a nép* [official English-language title: *Red Psalm*]. From then on, Cseh acted and played in numerous films by Jancsó and others, as well as on stage.

Over the decades of their collaboration, Cseh and Bereményi created twenty full-length albums (some of them are concert recordings or compilations) in addition to numerous bootlegs and unrecorded work. During Bereményi’s hiatus from songwriting, Cseh and Dénes Csengey created and released the album *Mélyrepülés* [‘Low-Altitude Flying’, ‘Deep Dive’, or ‘Plummeting’] (1988). Cseh’s significant collaborators, besides Bereményi and Csengey, included János Másik, who with Cseh composed the music for the first album, *Levél nővéremnek* [‘Letter to My Sister’], and its two later sequels; the cellist János Novák, who played on a number of the albums and also contributed to the composition of *Levél nővéremnek*; the composer István Mártha; the composer, poet, and guitarist Mihály Víg; and others. In 1993, Cseh received the Ferenc Liszt Prize and, in 2001, along with Bereményi, the Kossuth Prize (among many other awards over the years).

In 2006, already ill with lung cancer, Cseh performed his last full concert. On August 7, 2009, he died at his home on Béla Bartók Street in Budapest. Several thousand people attended his funeral. In 2013, a statue was erected in his memory.

Géza Bereményi, 1946–

Bereményi (whose early life story is depicted in his film *Eldorádó* and his autobiographical novel *Magyar Copperfield* [‘Hungarian Copperfield’]) was born in Budapest in 1946; his mother was seventeen at the time of his birth. His name at birth was Géza Vetró; his Italian ancestor Giovanni Vetro had moved to Hungary in the eighteenth century. His grandparents, who ran a vegetable business on Teleki Square, raised him until the age of six,

when his mother and her husband adopted him. From age six to twenty-four, he carried the surname Rózner, after his stepfather. When his first collection of stories was about to be published, he was informed that he needed to choose a Hungarian surname. The possibility arose of reverting to Vetró, but instead he chose his grandparents’ surname, Bereményi (Horsch 2013, 107; Bereményi 2022b).

In 1964, Bereményi graduated from the Türr István Gimnázium és Kollégium [‘István Türr High School and Dormitory’] in Pápa, after attending two other high schools. After a year of military service, he attended Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar [‘Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities’], from which he graduated in 1970 with a degree in Hungarian and Italian.

Bereményi worked first in book advertising, then as a dubbing dramaturg. Since 1978, he has worked independently as an independent writer and director; he also taught for years at Budapest’s Színház- és Filmművészeti Főiskola [‘Academy of Theatre and Film Arts’], which later became the aforementioned Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem [‘University of Theatre and Film Arts’]. The author of songs, stories, novels, plays, screenplays, and two autobiographies, and the winner of numerous awards (including the Attila József Prize in 1984, the Kossuth Prize—with Cseh—in 2001, the Prima Primissima Prize in 2011, the Petőfi Music Prize in 2016, and the Libri Literary Prize in 2021), he keeps a low profile to this day, occasionally appearing on stage or granting an interview.

Much more can be said about Cseh’s and Bereményi’s lives—but let us turn our attention to the album now.

Frontátvonulás⁶

The front cover of *Frontátvonulás* displays a wry, melancholic black-and-white photograph of Cseh (taken by Miklós Gáspár). Cseh performs the album solo; the sound effects and musical accompaniment were presumably added by Péter Péterdi, the musical director. Cseh, Bereményi, and Péterdi are credited on the back cover, along with Károly Peller as sound engineer, Gáspár for the photo, and József Szurcsik for graphics (Cseh and Bereményi 1983). The title word has a meteorological meaning: according to a Hungarian geographical glossary, it refers to “the passage of a weather front over an area, causing weather changes and affecting the human body as well” (Makádi 2015, [29]). It also connotes the passage of an army; thus, audiences might associate it with the Soviet Army’s supposedly temporary occupation of Hungary.⁷ The word arises only once within the work (beyond its title). In context, it suggests some kind of human movement, a disruption of the usual order of things—and, on the other hand, stasis and occupation.

⁶ Since the album itself does not have track divisions, the track numbers cited here match those listed on the *Frontátvonulás* page of the Cseh Tamás Archívum website; the link to this page as well as the link to the album on Spotify, can be found in the bibliographic entry for Cseh and Bereményi (1983). In this section of the article, after the first citation of *Frontátvonulás* (Cseh and Bereményi 1983), all subsequent citations will list the track number only, e.g., (A1). The quoted text throughout this section matches that on the Cseh Tamás Archívum website. The reader can find the lyrics and sound recording at <https://csehtamasarchivum.hu/lemezgyujtemeny/frontatvonulas> and https://open.spotify.com/album/3x9OV7SvFjyaarmFJnWYFI?si=_inkq9NwRDKWU03zc13pLg, respectively.

⁷ I would like to thank the editors of *Hungarian Cultural Studies* for pointing out this connotation.

The poet and translator Grácia Kerényi, who attended the debut performance, praises its musical and literary excellence: "The performance, exciting at the dramaturgic level—I didn't mention Rózewicz, Mrožek, Ionesco by accident—is also musically outstanding, with parodic references as well ... and also holds its ground on the poetic plane." She notes the significance and originality of Bereményi's rhymes as well as the hidden levels of meaning. Kerényi also hears, below the text, a possible debate between Cseh and Bereményi about whether or not to continue (Kerényi 1980, 30). That is, at moments, *Frontátvonulás* may be about their art itself, and about art in general.

Any discussion of *Frontátvonulás* must acknowledge the album's limitations in comparison to the performances. Many songs in the performances are absent from the album; moreover, the album cannot capture Cseh's gestures and expressions or the audience's reactions.⁸ Nonetheless, there is enough here for a listener to enjoy and absorb many times and to understand differently with each iteration. Even those who do not speak Hungarian can appreciate and enjoy *Frontátvonulás* if familiar with its premise and narrative arc.

The following discussion will consider only a fraction of the album's narrative and songs; one could write a plethora of essays about the album, each one with a different focus and angle. However, even the most exhaustive treatment would leave many questions unanswered since *Frontátvonulás* is as elusive as it is vivid, akin in spirit to Mark Twain's ironic introductory note to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot" (Twain 1885). While any interpretation will touch on motive, moral, and plot, it must also resist simplistic conclusions. *Frontátvonulás* abounds with tensions: between continuation and ending, between stagnation and motion, and between charmed and uncharmed states. If we consider it in terms of the aforementioned four stages (disorientation and quest, assembly and stagnancy, breakthrough, ending), we can grasp the emphatic conclusion and its relation to the whole.

The beginning can be characterized by Ecsédi's and Vizi's disorientation and separate quests. In Cseh's spoken narration, Ecsédi is running around with a photo of his old classmate Vizi, at the intersection of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky and Arany János Streets in Budapest, asking pedestrians if they have seen him anywhere. Instead of answering, they just stand around. One of the pedestrians asks another if he knows who this person is; the other replies that it is Ecsédi, that he is harassing people, and that it is already in the news. He presses a newspaper into the other's hand, in which a text appears in "italic, that is, cursive letters" [*dőlt, azaz cursive betűkkel szedve*]. This text is the first song of the album, "Vizi és Ecsédi találkozott" ['Vizi and Ecsédi Got Together'] (Cseh and Bereményi 1983: track A1). This stands as an example of the surprising ways that narrative can lead into song in *Frontátvonulás*: in this case, the song arises as the italicized text of a news article.

⁸ At the Cseh Tamás Archívum, on January 4, 2024, I listened to two complete unreleased recordings of *Frontátvonulás* concerts: a performance at the Ifjúsági Ház ['Youth House'] in Szeged on October 30, 1979, and one at the Szkéné Theater in Budapest in 1980. In addition, I watched an eight-minute video of a performance of *Frontátvonulás*, which includes the part where Cseh, in the character of Vizi, releases the glass.

This wistful, incantatory song gives us the recent backstory of the two characters, set to a chanted, repeating melody and guitar strumming. Vizi and Ecsédi met in Vizi's apartment, talked about the old times, drank two liters of coffee liqueur, and then turned to some sort of cognac since there was nothing else. Around midnight Ecsédi got up and started yelling the names of women and street addresses of places he had lived in the past. Vizi, for his part, recalled that there was some mixed liquor left in the kitchen. The dreamy singing contrasts with the mundane lyrics (which play a key role in the whole, as they will be evoked at the end of the story).

After this song ends, the narration returns to the present. Vizi makes his way to the kitchen, gets dizzy, and wonders where he is: "How did I get here? I didn't prepare for this. What is this here, where I am? What sort of train am I on, who booked the ticket?" [*Hogy kerülök én ide? Én nem erre készültem. Mi ez itt, ahol vagyok? Miféle vonaton ülök, ki váltott erre jegyet?*] (A1). This disorientation sets the mood for what is to come: in the world of *Frontátvonulás*, people do not know quite where they are or where they are going. It is also significant that Vizi invokes the image of a train, for the trains will presently come to a halt, then, at the end of the album, break into motion again.

The second song, "Úristen, hol vagyok?" ['Lord, Where Am I?'], moves gradually from speech into melody and rhythm. In contrast with the previous song, where a short melody repeats, this has a longer melodic shape, spanning the entire song. It is a brief, unified expression of being physically and existentially lost—along with a theatrical motif since Vizi suggests that someone else is playing the illusion that this is he. My translation takes slight liberties for the sake of rhythm and rhyme without distorting the meaning.

Lord, my God, where am I?
Lord, my God, where am I?
When did I book this ride so I'd
go rumbling away with a train?
Lord, my God, where am I,
Lord, what did I end up inside?
When on earth did I get stuck here,
where there is only half an I.
Half, half, half an I,
I am not here, not I,
since someone other than I,
someone else is playing the lie
that this, this am I.

Úristen, hol vagyok?
Úristen, hol vagyok?
Hát mikor váltottam menetjegyet,
hogy velem egy vonat robog.
Úristen, hol vagyok,
Te, Úristen miben vagyok?
Hát mikor szegődtem én ide,
ahol csak félig vagyok.
Fél, fél, félig vagyok,
itt nem is én vagyok,

*hisz' helyettem is
valaki játssza csak azt,
hogy ez én vagyok. (A2).*

This crisis of identity catalyzes one of the miracles of the story, for now Vizi declares (in Cseh's spoken narration) that he has to make a change since "if I stay, it's the end of me" [*ha itt maradok, végem*]. He realizes that he has been procrastinating with his life, just like everyone, but now will procrastinate no more. "Let's do an experiment!" he decides. "Now it's possible, because now I want it" [*Tegyünk egy próbát! Most lehet, mert most akarom.*] He goes to the kitchen table, where, among lots of unwashed dishes, he finds a glass. He takes the glass, "like this" [*így*] (Cseh demonstrates with an actual glass), lifts it up, "like this" [*így*], and lets it go (the glass shatters). Cseh tells us, "Vizi's glass stayed there in the air. The glass floated in the air, Vizi looked at it and knew that from this moment on, he was capable of everything; he could accomplish everything" [*A Vizi pohara ott maradt a levegőben. Lebegett a pohár a levegőben, Vizi nézte és tudta, hogy mostantól kezdve mindenre képes, mindent meg fog tudni csinálni*] (A2). In performance, Cseh would hold up an actual glass and release it; the glass would drop and break, but the power of suggestion was such that one could sense, along with Vizi, a moment of intuition (Kerényi 1980, 29). Cseh commented in an interview that this was mesmerizing for him too; at moments he wondered what would happen if it actually stayed in the air (Cseh 1980). This glass-dropping miracle will recur later, toward the end, and will give clues to the whole.

Skipping ahead a little: Ecsédi, still running around with the photo, keeps asking if anyone has seen his friend. By coincidence—the narrator emphasizes that this is entirely coincidental—he ends up next to Keleti Station. Making his way through the crowd, he falls and the photo falls from his hand. He crawls around trying to recover it; as he does so, a *gojzerverrott cipő* ['goyzer-stitched shoe'] steps on his hand, a shoe so shiny he can see his own face in it. Ecsédi recognizes this shoe from somewhere—"Hey-ho, hey-ho, hey-ho! Let's get a grip" [*Hoppá! Hoppá! Hoppá! Észnél legyünk*], he tells himself—and addresses Comrade Sas ['Eagle'], the owner of the shoe. Sas questions whether Ecsédi is in his right mind, Ecsédi starts asking about Vizi, and Sas lets it slip that Vizi is causing us "a commotion, a scandal; he's doing a circus act" [*csinálja nekünk itt a felfordulást, a botrányt, cirkusozik*] (B1). Ecsédi, gleaning that Vizi is at the train station, cannot contain his delight, but Sas—in an exquisite satire on Hungarian communist officialdom—keeps ranting about the dangers and the scandal, and about how Comrade Sólyom ['Falcon'] has gotten angry (after being informed by Sas of the goings-on), and does Ecsédi really want this to reach Comrade Karvaly ['Sparrow Hawk']? Sas continues in this manner—but Ecsédi presses on, asking if this actually means that Vizi is at the train station. Sas takes him by the shoulders and tells him to relax, then reaches into his pocket, pulls out a candy and puts it in Ecsédi's mouth. Now Comrade Sas, who according to the narrator has sung beautifully until now, starts to "sing at an even more exalted level" [*most még magasabb szinten kezdett el énekelni*]; the next song—"Sors elvtárs dala," ['Song of Comrade Fate'] puts Ecsédi in a trance (B2).⁹ This song, which Cseh sings with great relish, playfully satirizes the saccharine optimism and paranoia of communist officialdom in Hungary.

⁹ The song is sung by Cseh in the character of *Sas elvtárs* ['Comrade Sas', or 'Comrade Eagle'], but its official title is "Sors elvtárs dala" ['Song of Comrade Fate'].

Finally Ecsédi enters the train station, where we have just left Vizi asking whether there are any trains departing at all. This moves us into the second phase of the story: assembly and stagnancy. Vizi approaches the ticket counter and discovers his own drunken father burying his head in the ticket clerk's hair. After Vizi looks up at the ceiling and sings the slightly absurd yet devastating "Jó év volt" ['It Was a Good Year'] (B3), someone grabs his arm with great force and turns him around. It is the female restroom attendant, who reveals that she has been waiting for him since time immemorial, and that everyone here calls her *mamika* (Mommy). Promising to reveal a secret to him, she begins to sing her song, one of the funniest and most poignant of the album: "A világ mamikájának dala" ['Song of the Mommy of the World']. With rumbling fingerpicked guitar and a dreamy lullaby lilt, this song reveals one of the essences of the *Frontátvonulás* worldview: that everyone here belongs to one immense, trapped family, mothered by the only person who seems to know what is going on (or not) and who has possibly the dirtiest, humblest job of all.

Since I had no husband to make me pregnant,
I gave birth to a train station, travelers within it.
I make my many infants vomit and burp,
and I watch as they kick their lives to the curb.

Tűrű-rű-rürű-rüm, türű-rürű-rüm.

Since I had nothing else, just scores of latrines,
in the end I became the world's mama queen
in a train station, birthing this whole fray and you,
so listen to my song, kiddie-poo:

I, mommy of the world, whisper in your ear
that no trains whatsoever are leaving from here,
everyone's pretending, parading their druthers,
but they stay here with me—I am their mother.

I'm the mommy of the world, just letting them play
that the idling trains will depart here some day.
I know they need starter games, how could I not?
I know every one of them; they are my tots.

But nobody's moving, they just stand around lazy,
and among them you're one of my little boys, Vizi.

I'm the mommy of the world, and with you I'll level,
no trains are departing, there's no hint of travel.

*Mivel nem volt férjem, ki teherbe ejtsen,
egy pályaudvart szültem, belé utasokat.
Hánytatom, böfögtetem sok-sok kis pulyámat,
s nézem, hogyan teszik tönkre magukat.*

Tűrű-rű-rürű-rüm, tűrű-rürű-rüm.

*Mivel nem volt másom, csak sok piszoárom,
világ mamikája egy pályaudvaron így lettem én végül,
mert én szültem mindet, téged is,
hát hallgasd kívánságdalom:*

*Én, világ mamikája füledbe súgom,
hogy vonat innen nem megy, itt nincs forgalom.
Itt mindenki csak úgy tesz, de ők nem utasok
és velem itt maradnak, az anyjuk vagyok.*

*Én, világ mamikája csak hagyom, hogy ők játsszák,
mintha indulnának az álló vonatok.
Tudom, nekik ez kell, indulósdi játék,
ismerem én őket, az anyjuk vagyok.*

*De nem mozdul semmi, csak áll és hiszi,
és közülük egy vagy fiacskám, Vizi.*

*Én, világ mamikája most elárulom,
hogy vonat innen nem megy, itt nincs forgalom (B4).*

Astounded, Vizi dashes into the restaurant, jumps on a table, and asks the crowd whether it is true that no trains are running, that this is an *álpályaudvar* ['pseudo-station']. A silence falls over the room. Then people start shouting out: about Vizi's father, about the eighty-seven-year-old man, about the man who has just hanged himself, the banqueters—about how, for ages and ages, nothing has changed. Hereupon, the *disease* tests the microphone and begins to sing about the train station "where everyone's related, / where there's nothing besides / just waiting and waiting" [*hol mindenki rokon, / hol nincsen semmi más, / csak egy nagy várakozás*]. Everyone has joined in by the time that Ecsédi enters (B5).

Ecsédi begs him to do his trick just one more time: hold up the glass and release it in the air. Vizi wants to call off the whole routine, he says they've done this some two or three hundred times already. However, at the mention of the trick,— Vizi finally consents, picks up a glass, lifts it up, and releases it. As before, the glass floats in the air. Ecsédi and Vizi begin to consider the physical implications of this phenomenon. After some absurd calculations, Ecsédi concludes, "So we have ten to the minus two in our hands" [*Tehát tíz a mínusz kettédiken van a kezünkben*]), to which Vizi replies that it is not in their hands, but will be "in the train, in the train, in the train, in the train!" [*A vonatban! A vonatban! A vonatban! A vonatban!*] (B5).

Now, we move into the story's breakthrough and quasi-catharsis. The next day, the miracle swells to immense proportions: a locomotive bursts through the glass wall of Keleti Station and starts gallivanting around the city, past a series of landmarks and waving historic figures and over the Chain Bridge. Vizi and Ecsédi are the conductors; the loudspeakers proclaim: "Long live Vizi, long live Ecsédi!" Flowers, confetti—and Ecsédi, who has climbed off of the locomotive, begins to give a poem-speech. Cheers and fireworks ensue, which Vizi and Ecsédi watch later on television at home. Vizi watches it to the end—Ecsédi asleep—and turns

off the television. Then he goes up to Ecsédi, pulls him by the hair, and roars in his face: "If you yell women's names at me one more time and street addresses, it's over, get it?" [*Ha nekem itt még egyszer nők nevét kiáltozod, meg házzszámokat, ennek vége, érted?!*]. This penultimate ending is emphatically mundane; Vizi has left his charmed state.

The album ends with Cseh addressing the audience: "It's over. Get it?" [*Ennek vége. Értik?*] (B5), as if snapping us out of our state as well. Thus the album begins and ends with endings: it begins with Vizi starting a new life and ends with him threatening to end his friendship with Ecsédi. Cseh also tells the audience that the show is over. In between, the trains have stopped; travel has come to an end. Yet ironies abound; Vizi's new life is not all that new; the trains are partly figurative; and the breakthrough at the end leads to something like a repeat of the beginning, with Vizi and Ecsédi drunk at home. Even Cseh's final words play against the continuation of *Frontátvonulás* as a performance. The emphatic double ending seems to say, "we really mean it," yet we are left wondering just what kind of ending is meant.

The writer and politician Dénes Csengey—who collaborated with Cseh as the lyricist for the 1988 album *Mélyrepülés* ['Low-Altitude Flying', 'Deep Dive', or 'Plummeting']—describes *Frontátvonulás* as "the peak of Cseh and Bereményi's decade-long common trajectory up to that point, from every perspective." Like Kerényi, he admiringly describes the 1979 debut performance; he interprets the two-time "It's over, get it?" as a commentary on the entire story and its boundaries. That is, "it's over" because these antics, tricks, and miracles cannot go on without turning into something else entirely (Csengey sees political potential in them). The end of the game is the end of all games of this sort:

Miklós Vizi's negation ... in the name of complete existence is comprehensible and ruthless. We sense that moving on from here will be mercilessly difficult. For Vizi, a young man capable of performing miracles (floating the glass in mid-air, i.e. defeating gravity), the next stage of his destiny cannot be anything other than a full-blooded, valid, followable action program. Or the madhouse.

In other words, according to Csengey, *Frontátvonulás* as a whole suggests that the raucous, miraculous horseplay of Vizi and Ecsédi, for all its urgency and passion, can only serve as a prelude. Csengey perceives the work as an expression of societal, generational and personal contradictions that can only be resolved through action (Csengey 1983).

In an article written at the University of Debrecen, the poet and author Tibor Juhász, drawing on the theories of Marc Augé and Michel Foucault, builds on yet challenges Csengey's methods and conclusions. At the end, he considers whether the closing words "It's over, get it?" [*Ennek vége, érted? / Ennek vége, értik?*] truly signify an ending. Juhász writes that the ending can perhaps be taken as part of Ecsédi's dream, which could well repeat. He points out that the story begins and ends with Ecsédi sleeping, thus forming a circle; moreover, the 1993 album *Nyugati pályaudvar* ['Nyugati Station'] begins with Vizi and Ecsédi waking up from a forty-year slumber. However, he notes, that since Cseh and Bereményi had not yet conceived of this sequel when writing *Frontátvonulás*, one cannot rely on it for insight. Instead, this closing might suggest both a continuation and an ending. That is, the characters' routines might repeat, but for now the story of a generation striving for agency comes to an end (Juhász 2019, 207–208).

Csengey's and Juhász's analyses appear in some ways diametrically opposed, Csengey emphasizing the political potential hidden within the action of *Frontátvonulás*, Juhász the political futility. Yet both perceive *Frontátvonulás* primarily as a political and social parable. If

we take the political aspect as only a piece of the whole, we can integrate their interpretations with Kerényi's. Both Csegey and Juhász recognize a paradox in the work: something momentous happens, yet nothing does. The floating glass embodies this "something" and "nothing": it floats in the imagination but shatters on the floor. Kerényi writes that the "frontal passage" of the story lifts the characters up from mundanity into a floating state, in contrast with the narrative's realistic details (Kerényi 1980, 29). From that angle, *Frontátvonulás* combines imagination and play with history and grief. Our political and existential traps can be broken by the imagination, yet perhaps they cannot. Or perhaps we must break them again and again, as each breaking comes to an end.

Frontátvonulás stands out for its sheer fun mixed with loss: a gleeful romp soon to be followed by a long hiatus in Cseh and Bereményi's creative collaboration. Vizi and Ecsédi transcend the stagnation of Keleti Station, yet this transcendence takes part in their larger game which, like all games, must come to a close. Because *Frontátvonulás* plays with endings all the way through—the disappearance of a friend, the end of a way of life, of travel, of each song, of stagnation, of a friendship—the final words to the audience carry at least a sliver of urgency. Something irrevocable and irretrievable has happened: a show of disturbing delight, meaning something, nothing, or both, but lurching outward, breaking a wall. It is up to us what we do with it but, in any case, we are urged to let it go: not by putting *Frontátvonulás* aside but by coming to it anew, without clinging to our past interpretations.

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