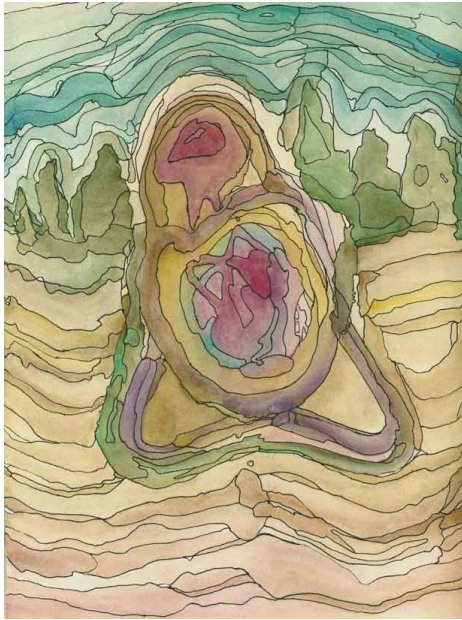


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Melissa Bryant ♦ Fiction Fix Family Portrait



Pictured: Laura Vigen, April Bacon, Mark Ari, Vanessa Wells, Chrissy Rand

*Special thanks to Mark Ari, for his continual and indispensable guidance and support, and to the University of North Florida.*

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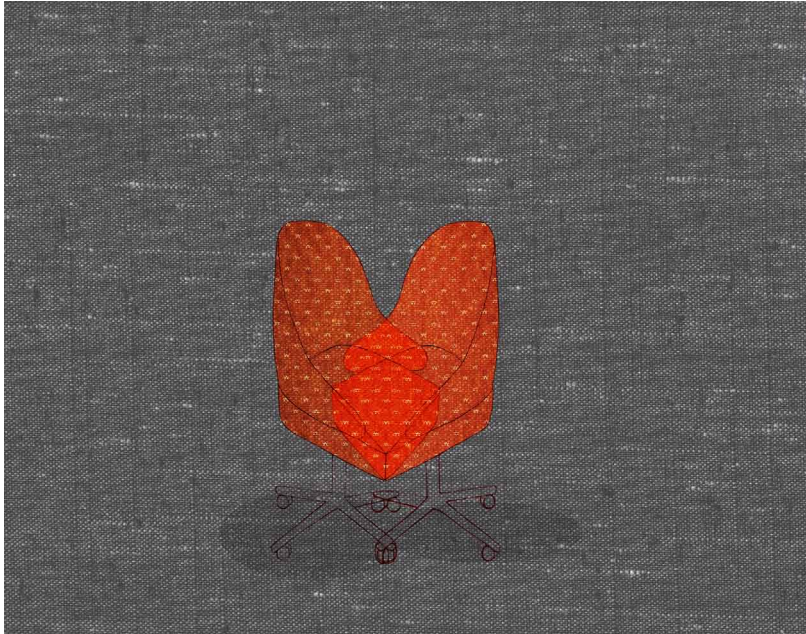
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I believe writers write and readers read because the world could not be more beautifully mind-boggling and funny and we **love** that about it; we read and we write because we delight in this strange place and even when and even though it can be so very painful—this life, from flesh to industry, is infinitely tasty.

I discovered a French phrase recently which produced that feeling in me (you know the one): *La trêve des confiseurs*. To translate, *trêve* means cease fire and *confiseurs* are candy makers, so, yes, this phrase means “The truce of the confectioners.”

This is not French politics, just to be clear: rather, it is a phrase used to designate the time period after Christmas day and before New Years Eve in which very little happens and very much candy is enjoyed.

It is my wish for you, Dear Reader, that in the tradition of Christmas in July, you roll up your sleeves and explore the enclosed delicacies—some beautiful, painful, some mind-boggling, some funny—as your very own private *trêve des confiseurs en Octobre*.

Warmest Regards,  
April



## VILNIUS

BY KLEMEN PISK

TRANSLATION BY SHAY WOOD

KLEMEN PISK (born July 31, 1973 in Kranj, Slovenia) is a contemporary Slovene poet, writer, translator and musician. Between '06 & '09 he lived in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. In '98 he published his first book, *Labas Vakaras*, a collection of poems, which was nominated for book of the year in Slovenia. His second poetry book *Visoko in nagubano praočelo* (*High and Wrinkled Primordial Substance*) was published in '00, and *Mojster v spovednici* (*Master in the Confessional Box*) in '02.

Pisk's poetry and prose have been translated into many foreign languages and published in Austrian, Bosnian, Czech, Polish and Finnish literary magazines. His most recent book *Pihalec* (*The Blower*) is a selection of humoristic short stories published at the most respectful Slovene publishing house, *Nova revija*. From this book is also the story Vilnius.

SHAY WOOD is a Master's student in History at the U. of Kansas. He works on the history of urban life, travel, and sports in the former Yugoslavia. During the '07-'08 and '08-'09 academic years he received a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship to study Slovene. He received his BA in History at Utah State University in '06.

### 1. The Saw

I might have made it to the city gate and Mary of the Gate of Dawn if Algirdas Martinaitis had not prevented me with his work *Gija* (Thread). Algirdas had called me on the phone in the morning and said, "It's impossible to walk to the end of Aušros Vartų Street without running into the Philharmonic. If you come early enough, take a quick stroll down the street to the Madonna and kneel down and cross yourself to your heart's content. But if you lose track of time and are late to the concert because of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, then you'd better not dare come before me."

Because my punctuality failed me and I was already short on time, I turned right instead of starting toward the city gate.

I entered the Philharmonic, which I had, in fact, run into. I eventually made my way through the vaulted hallway to the goddess of fire Gabija (I read her name on her nametag). She checked me off on the VIP list and let me into the large concert hall. I took my seat in the front beside an old lady whose wide build forced me to lean to the left. I had to contort myself somewhat if I wanted to prevent shoulder

contact. I waited, hunched over, for the string musicians to pick up their stringed instruments, the wind musicians their wind instruments, the percussionists their percussions, and so on. I waited to hear the latest creation of Algirdas, the composer who bore the same name as the Grand Duke of Lithuania, who, historians say, was buried in the fourteenth century according to pagan traditions, together with all his jewelry, weapons, animals, and servants.

Just as Algirdas the duke swore by paganism, so too did Algirdas the composer cultivate an affection for pre-Christian traditions. He was a Lithuanian Stravinsky; at least that is what Moscow critics nicknamed him in the time when the *Sovietų Sąjunga* still ruled with a firm hand in these parts. Algirdas' ballet *The Sun* from the late eighties did not speak about the sun as a celestial body but about the sun deity, the goddess Saulė, who is wooed and proposed to by Moon, but who, after marrying her, prefers to escape to Dawn, until Perkūnas, the god of thunder, punishes him and cuts him in half. Algirdas found the basic motif in a folk song that the leading folklorists brought to his attention. While the local public was enthusiastic, the firm hand of Moscow ridiculed: "Well, what's with you, polytheist, trying to revive old folk culture? Would you like to undermine the foundations of *perestroika*?" But because the Lithuanian national consciousness was fearless at that time and events were turning in a familiar direction, the ballet became quite interesting in the early nineties and experienced more than a hundred encore performances, even a few abroad. Perhaps the former world champion of chess, Mikhail Tal, watched it in Riga, and later the same day suffered a heart attack and passed away. He was found on the sofa next to a chessboard, stiffly clutching to his chest a pawn in one hand and Latvian citizenship in the other.

I therefore waited curious and hunched over to see what would happen, what Algirdas would offer this time, for he had uttered not a word about his new work to anyone. Not even in the program was there anything written in greater detail, but we did know that it was an orchestral work and that a soloist on a saw was in store for us, which was causing considerable speculation and reservation among the audience, from what I could decipher from their conversations: "Pjūklas, taip taip, labai įdomu, pjūklas (!) – keistai!" (Pjūklas = saw, taip = that, labai = very, įdomu = interesting, keistai = strange). A soloist on a saw then. Some folkloristics again, I thought to myself; again an emphasis on the primitive and the rural, on customs and habits. I thought of Beštrov Tonček from the village of Žiganja Vas, who always grabbed a saw at village festivals and coaxed howling sounds out of it. I imagined the saw in a folkloric light. I had seen its widespread distribution throughout Europe: from Gibraltar to Nordkapp, from Malta to Svalbard, from the Urals to Iceland, from Cyprus to Novaya Zemlya, from Lampedusa to Franz Josef Land. I had seen the smartest monkeys play on it, and I had even

seen Laplanders bend it according to the rules of their pentatonic scale. The saw: the tool of carpenters, lumberjacks, and woodworkers, who animate the tedious hours with folk art, transforming the saw from a tool into a musical instrument. Bravo, bravo, Algirdas, I thought to myself. As always you have managed to look beyond the average compositional horizon; as always you have bitten into the artistic surplus. I know well that you will charm us, you who has never yet disappointed. I can hardly wait for my ear to hear you and my soul to experience you.

The work began with a powerful atonal eruption, with an explosion. All that remained after the devastation was a thick cloud of wind instruments, supplemented by a mild but fairly discordant violin base. Gradually the rhythm slowed and the tense atmosphere relaxed. The composer afforded the audience a moment of rest, he let them breathe, but it did not last long. The kettledrums boomed and the cymbals struck unexpectedly. As I glanced around the concert hall I saw frightened people. But perhaps that was also the composer's intention – to sow horror.

Before the start of the second movement a surprising musical instrument was brought on stage. It turned out that Algirdas did not have an ordinary saw in mind but an electrical circular saw, which the soloist randomly switched on and off. He even laid thick logs on it, causing the small particles to fly about the concert hall, and we listeners sitting in the front were given an unpleasant shower. Quite disgruntled, we immediately started removing the sawdust from our pants, jackets, necklines, and hair. (The soloist on the saw – whom I could get a better look at once I had cleaned my eyes – very much resembled Markič.)

I glanced back toward the balcony and caught sight of Algirdas grinning wickedly and contently. It now became clear to me why he did not want to sit in front next to me, even though it would be appropriate for him as the author of the composition to sit with the distinguished guests. He made fools of us and mocked our refinement. Oh, how could I have been so naïve! I had imagined a romantic folk musician with a bending saw. I had mistakenly created in my mind that pleasant howling, but here he offered me a modernly equipped carpenter who could teach a dog to mew if he were to lay it instead of a log on the saw. The circular saw wailed and Algirdas laughed. Not only did he laugh, he howled like a cat on a circular saw.

## 2. Black Heifers

After the concert Algirdas invited me to dinner, but, because I was already scheduled to be somewhere else, I turned down socializing with musicians, which I did not regret anyway. I know how exhausting it

can be at such gatherings when a person must play the role of a balanced individual, even though it is clear that he has wandered among the greatest of madmen. Not that I consider myself an eccentric, since whoever looks on himself in that way is certainly not an eccentric but merely an ordinary buffoon, a comedian. So many times, though, I have tried my best to conceal my comedic nature, which, frankly, I am ashamed of. But some tactless person has always shown up and ruined everything, leaving me no other solution than to try to explain, justify, and resolve the incident with comedy. I prefer to speak in general terms because concrete descriptions are needless, and it would also be tactless to speak here of all the nonsense I have been forced into, not so much of my own will as in defense of my honor. In short, some people truly lack tact and do not know what is appropriate and what is not. Someone might be genteel, dressed according to the latest fashion, and full of nice manners, but emptiness and darkness rain from his mouth. (The inverse is also possible, as well as two remaining combinations that combinatorics permits.) He is weak linguistically, but not so much in the sense of correct pronunciation as much as in the sense of content. There are many cavaliers in the world who are bothered by individual words, merely a letter, spelling, or phoneme, instead of dealing with the semantics of sentences, paragraphs, and entire texts. But I should be honest that many times I myself have been that cavalier, that morphologist. It is obvious that there is a certain special attraction, a certain pleasure, hidden in forms. People admire nature more for its form than for its informational value or functionality. They exploit functionality but take pleasure in form and then marvel why form collapses. This sounds rather ecological, and if I were a true ecologist I would have refused dinner at Algirdas' out of protest that, because of his vile artistic impulses, trees are being chopped down.

I had arranged to meet up with Agnieška Olšauska (allow me to write her name by the rules of Lithuanian orthography) in a friendly pub in the middle of Castle Street. It is located right there when you, fellow traveler, set off from the Philharmonic straight past the Church of St. Casimir, where the Soviets guested with their Museum of Atheism twenty-three long years. Then suddenly you spot City Hall on the right and you are already on Great Street. After that you continue past the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas. You stand there for a bit and marvel why the Soviets did not prefer to guest in a more familiar environment. If you are interested in pictures, you can stop by Chodkevičius Palace. When you exit the gallery, you just cross the road and you are already on Castle Street. Waiting for you on the right is the pub, where you go in, order a Lithuanian beer, and watch the waitresses, who would certainly become successful models, actresses, singers, and television hostesses in Slovenia. When the waitress politely addresses you, you see that well-

bred people still exist in the world — and you say to yourself that beauty is not valued very much in Lithuania, thank God.

The waitress had just served me a beer when Agnieška appeared in the pub. She was late, as is appropriate for a lady, and allowed me to hang her fur coat on the coat rack<sup>1</sup>. As a representative of the living Polish minority in Lithuania, Agnieška spoke Polish, though not like Poles speak it in their homeland. She mauled a dialectal Polish, mercilessly articulated strange phonemes, conjugated verbs and declined nouns in unexpected ways, and even had intonation in certain words, presumably under the influence of Lithuanian, where the acute and the circumflex are the rule. And that is why Agnieška said, for example, *muost* instead of *most* (when she told her story of rushing across the bridge to a recording), *kmiel* instead of *chmiel* (when she explained what Lithuanians make beer from), *zviönzac* instead of *związać* (when she complained that some malefactors in the entertainment industry wanted to tie her hands), and *jodajka* instead of *czarnulka* (when she told the joke about the black heifer). I listened with interest to the interesting forms of the Vilnius dialect and concentrated more on her pronunciation than on the content.

“Oh, Agnieška,” I said delightedly all of a sudden during our chat. “You’re a living example how palatal shibilants turn into sibilants, and how neuter-gender nouns get feminized. You’re also an excellent example how double consonants conflate into single ones. When you said *vina* instead of *winna* when you were talking about a feeling of guilt, that’s when I noticed it. And when you kept talking and said *a* for the word-final unstressed *e* — you can imagine — it truly hit home for me and I really concluded that there’s something to the thing Franciszek Stawski explained to me during his lifetime, but I hadn’t entirely believed him. I wanted to hear it with my own ears and go, that’s right, go to your marshy land. And that’s why I’m here now in front of you, I — your student... I implore you, one more time, please tell me one more time what Lithuanians make beer from!”

“From *kmiel*!” Agnieška replied.

“What did you go across when you were rushing to the recording?”

“Across the *muost*.”

“What kind were the two heifers that were knitting on the tree?”

“What kind? *Jodajki*, of course.”

I should explain why I even met up with Ms. Olšauska in the pub. We had probably met each other earlier, but it is also possible that we had not. And if we had not, I had likely been informed beforehand about her appearance and must have recognized her merely by some descriptions, by her hair, eyes, breasts, backbone, calves, thighbones, shinbones, and thyroid. It is entirely possible that we were on a date because

<sup>1</sup> According to etiquette, I should have waited for Agnieška in front of the pub, but Agnieška herself ordered me to wait for her inside. I say this just so someone does not suspect that I have an unrefined character.

I had won a prize — dinner with Ms. Olšauska — on some show, but it is also possible that she had won a prize, and that I was, in fact, the prize, while she was the prizewinner.

In short, we met up because I wanted to listen to her, and she wanted friendship; because I desired morphological analyses, and she desired Aunt Liz’s jam; because I craved cabbage lentils, and she craved minority and nationally conscious happiness; because I liked to eat bread made from whole-grain flour, and she wanted to have bilingual children...

“Agnieška, have you received any awards for your work? Do you have any international honors? Are you meeting the top criteria?” I asked her, full of the kind of arrogance only a Slovene artist can bring from his homeland. I was a poet and I liked pure rhyme, feminine paroxytonic, but sometimes I flirted with impure assonance too. When I was able to shake off some arrogance, I also listened to others — then I became truly excited that there are so many creators and designers, so many performers and copyists, so many poets and thespians, so many improvisers and scenic designers, so much performance and body art, so many lighting technicians and make-up artists, so much passive voice and so many participles, so many Hittites and Tocharians, so many Markičes. I respected the fact that a person actively produces something and that he indeed works on something he gives permanence to. If a person does something, that in itself is positive. If on top of that a person is still young, then that is very near perfection.... Every idea of a young man gives me joy. If only I was able to shake off some arrogance. I respected activity in every form, but most of all I respected the creativity of old Aunt Polpetka, who cooked the best lentils that my tongue had ever tasted. I loved them with turnips or without, regardless whether or not I had thrown off arrogance beforehand.

“My success story,” Agnieška answered, “began the year before last, when I made an appearance on a reality show on commercial television. From then on I had no peace from people. Men on the street gawked and shouted at me, strangers called me on the phone in the middle of the night, and the paparazzi were constantly on duty in front of my house. I knew, though, that it pays to strike while the iron is hot, and I decided to set sail into musical waters and build a singing career. I hired a songwriter and spent a lot of money for him to write me a song that stayed at the top of the charts for at least seven weeks. Unfortunately he recently stopped writing for me and chose some other female singer. And so my fame has almost completely disappeared. Once again I have to prove myself to people. I would love to sign up for Eurosong! I would need to find another songwriter, but there aren’t a lot of good ones, and I want the best because, for me, only winning counts!”

I shook off some arrogance.

“Hmm, well perhaps I know the right man for you,” I said, think-

ing of Algirdas. “I know of an excellent composer!”

“What kind of music does he write?”

“Atonal dodecaphonic avant-garde.”

“Oh, really? What’s his name?”

“Algirdas Martinaitis. Haven’t you heard of him before? He’s a famous Lithuanian composer.”

“I really wouldn’t know. Has he ever participated in Eurovision Song Contest?”

“Probably not. But he is a fearless, daring man. He dares to do a lot of things that his colleagues never would. I can guarantee you that he would try. For him, too, winning is the only thing that counts.”

“That’s the kind of man I need. What kind of music did you say he writes...?”

“Atonal dodecaphonic avant-garde.”

“Is that more dance, trance, or techno?”

“Well, it’s hard for me to say. You have to hear it. I’ll get you tickets for his concert, on the floor!”

“And how much does he charge?”

“If he sees a muse in you, he’ll work for you for free,” I winked.

“Oh, there still are romantic men in the world! And when will you introduce me to him? I’m very late, you know. The competition for Eurovision Song Contest will be over soon.”

“We’ll go there right now. Algirdas organized an after-concert party, and everyone is already there.”

“Won’t that be impolite?”

“Agnieška,” I exclaimed, “you’re a musician, for crying out loud, and all kinds of kindred spirits are there: atonalists, dodecaphonists, neoclassicists, and neo-baroqueists.”

“Where does Algirdas live?”

“Not far from here, in Užupis.”

“Are you going to call a taxi?”

“No, we’re walking.”

“Oh, we’ll have to go across the *muost*!”

“That’s right, across the *muost*!”

### 3. Across the Muost

The Vilnia is the river from which Vilnius got its name. It is very tiny and powerless if you compare it to the mighty Neris. The Vilnia, however, does not care for mightiness but puts its trust in technique. (The Vilnia reminds me of Markič.) Which is to say it meanders skillfully among the tiny houses; it knows exactly which path to take so as not to

flood the streets. At this point it is worth asking which came first, the chicken or the egg. The egg, it seems to me, since chickens developed from proto-chickens. For the chicken to have arisen, the proto-chicken must have laid a mutated egg. I am not a paleontologist who could prove the existence of proto-chickens, nor am I a hydrologist who could explain why the Vilnia is so meandering. But I can confirm with great certainty that the Vilnia is a twisted, winding, undulating vine whose core neither an unwinder nor a roller can get to. As the Vilnia leisurely but completely rolls through the landscape, so the clucking hen incubates her eggs: at first very calmly but in the end successfully and cackling with pride. As the Vilnia weaves, so the poet weaves his wreath of sonnets. As Valjevo is the Serbian Vilnius, so Vilnius is the Lithuanian Valjevo. People may roll with laughter as much as they want. This interpretation is probably true.

The city arose due to a strange combination of circumstances. It occurred in the Year of Our Lord 1320 when the Grand Duke Gediminas returned home toward nightfall, fatigued from a tiring hunt through the forests above the Vilnia’s river basin. Those regions were not yet inhabited then. Gediminas was so tired that he could not keep his eyelids open. His wife could not even convince him to have a little fun in their short, antique bed before going to sleep. He lay down to rest and saw in his dreams a howling iron wolf. When he awoke the first thing he did was ask his wife, “Laima, what does a howling iron wolf mean?” His wife did not know. Then he asked his squire, who likewise shrugged his shoulders as he cleaned Gediminas’ bows and arrows, halberds and spears, swords and sheathes. When his handmaid Lok could not explain the complex wolf symbolism, he finally summoned the wizard Lizdeika, who first wisely stroked his gray wizard beard and then even more wisely said: “The iron wolf means that here will stand a solid castle around which a great city will grow. The wolf’s howling means that a good reputation about the city will spread through the entire world.” The wizard Lizdeika probably did not know that Vilnius would one day be included on the UNESCO World Heritage list, but his prediction was absolutely correct, and therefore we can count him among the world’s most successful interpreters of dreams. But the interpretation of the dream was in fact a hint to Gediminas that it was high time to start construction. Perhaps the iron wolf actually meant and said something else, but the cunning wizard tailored it to his own interests. If the wizard were born today, he would probably be a skilled lobbyist. Perhaps the iron wolf portended that Algirdas the composer would be born one day and would write the symphony *Iron Filing*. Instead of a log he would put the iron wolf on the circular saw; instead of sawdust, filings would whizz around the concert hall; and the wolf would howl like a cat in heat.

Agnieška and I came to the Church of the Immaculate Conception of Blessed Virgin Mary, which stood on the bank of the Vilnia next

to the famous bridge (*muost*). We stepped onto it and started to walk across. I observed Agnieška and saw her with my own eyes crossing not the bridge but the *muost*. I do not know if I am capable of explaining the difference between my crossing and hers. It simply defies being explained by some logic of the object. It is a matter of energy, feeling, and unique experience. It is that dialect-ness which nearly all collectors of national artifacts and folk songs crave. It is, in fact, folkloric eroticism or dialectological orgasm; the insanity of the dialectal that shocks the dialectologist; the dialect-ness that has to be experienced in person and not on a recording (for instance, on cassette tapes). With her dialect Agnieška was immersed in a whole. She not only spoke it but she also lived it. Her dialect was her way of being and moving.

We transitioned suddenly from dialect-ness to the-other-side-of-the-river-ness, because we were by now on the other side of the river in Užupis, which means just that (*už-upis* = the other side of the river). The Republic of Užupis welcomed us. The musically inspired angel on Užupis Street, blowing into some kind of angelic trumpet, welcomed us. He stood on a tall pillar and looked toward Riverfront. Once the inhabitants of either side of the river were in conflict with each other because they could not agree whom the river's water belonged to. The Lord of the Waters came and urinated into the river. The water was no longer drinkable, and they stopped quarreling. The Lord of the Waters came up with a Solomonic solution to the problem.

“Did you know that I went to Užupis Gymnasium?” Agnieška said and pointed out the building on the left side of the road.

“Do you mean you were educated in Užupis?”

“Yes, and when the school recently commemorated its fiftieth anniversary, they invited me to sing at the celebration. Everyone remembered me well, and the principal told me that he had always been convinced that I have a marvelous voice, but he had never thought that I would become such a successful singer and build a great career. I sang them the song ‘I Am Finally Free.’”

“You definitely have to tell that to Algirdas. You have to make it clear to him that you’re not just another singer.”

“If he follows the media at least a little bit, then he has certainly already heard of me. They took my picture for the cover of *Moteris*<sup>2</sup>.”

“What an original name for a women’s magazine! I remember when they built a theater in my native city. They didn’t know what to name it, and then they decided that it would just be called The Theater. So I’ve decided that if I ever have a son, I’ll name him Son, and if it’s a daughter, I’ll name her Daughter. Perhaps I would prefer to name him Sunus and my daughter Dukte, so that it would sound fancier, more Lithuanian. Where I’m from, it’s not unusual for a person to give his child

a foreign name, even though that child doesn’t have any foreign roots at all. I know a Jeanette who doesn’t have even the slightest roots of foreignness in her, not even as much as a piece of ginseng candy contains ginseng. Despite that, she has a French-sounding name because perhaps it seemed fancy to her parents. Where I’m from, some children learn English as early as pre-school, although my acquaintance says that he would love to shove the parents of those children in jail with pedophiles, arguing that it’s an equally serious sin.”

“But children at that age are very receptive to foreign languages!”

“You’re right, but why do children have to learn English of all languages? My son, if he’s ever born, will prefer to learn Tocharian. And as an adolescent he can chase Tocharian girls if he wants. Or I’ll go to a second-hand bookstore and buy him a Hittite grammar, one that reeks of moldiness, has coffee spilled on the hundredth page, and has an antique smell to it!”

#### 4. The Workbench

Algirdas opened the door and looked at us with surprise at first but then with kindness. Presumably he was amazed that I had dared come to his after-concert party. After all, I had declined an invitation and apologized a few hours earlier. But because I am a man of tact, and an apologizing is nothing foreign to me, I presented an exceptionally sound, well-argued apology that needed no verbal explanation. I was leading a being of angelic proportions and diameters by my side: Agnieška with an accentuated side arc, a woman with an amazing front view and a heavenly top view. Algirdas happily dimensioned her with his eyes. He drew imaginary dimension lines on her body. (Algirdas looked like Markič, my technical education teacher in elementary school.)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Now that nostalgia for Markič has seized me once again, it is proper to say a few words about him. He was a tall, slender man, whom we students feared like the devil fears holy water. He always let us know that technical education is the most important subject in school. Whoever did not submit to his strict rules quickly fell into his disfavor. He invited the best students into his office, where they got to admire his masterpieces on the workbench. On the other hand, the rest of us had to make pencil sharpeners for hours and hours out of sandpaper that Markič ordered in huge quantities from some company in exchange for commission. Markič never raised his voice. He just looked at you with his glassy eyes, and you already knew that you needed to shape up. In extreme cases he calmly pulled on your ears with a gloomy look on his face. Markič knew how to squeeze every droplet of handicraft out of the most untechnical child, like I was. Dimensioning was his great passion. After explaining to us with millimetric precision the secrets of drawing an arrowhead, he piled work on us up to the top of our heads and even over several times – preferably on long Friday afternoons. While we were dimensioning feverishly, he fixedly read magazines like *Life and Technics*, *Radar*, *Defense*, and *Team*. In his cabinet Markič hoarded a lot of pencils of varying hardness (H, HB, and B), and he hung a large wooden compass for drawing on the blackboard on a special stand. He seemed then considerably advanced in years, but if I think hard about it, he had to have been around

<sup>2</sup> Lith. *moteris* = woman.

“Algirdas, allow me to introduce Ms. Olšauska,” I said, somewhat interrupting his dimensioning.

“You probably recognized me,” Agnieška said, then allowed Algirdas to kiss her hand. “I’m Agnieška, from the television show, the reality show. Everyone watched it. Have you read anything about me? There was a great deal said and written about me.”

“Of course I know who you are!” affirmed Algirdas enthusiastically. “I avidly cut out articles about you and I have almost all your appearances recorded on video cassettes. And the last time I saw you was at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Užupis Gymnasium, when you sang ‘I Am Finally Free.’ I stood in the middle of the crowd and applauded you loudly, but you probably didn’t notice me.”

“I’m so embarrassed that I don’t know who you are even though you are, as I hear, an acclaimed composer,” Agnieška said.

“You know,” Algirdas replied, “I don’t even consider myself a composer. That’s how others speak of me. I’m just a man who recently moved from Riverfront to Užupis, although I still haven’t been taken out of the Riverfront registry! I still have to collect a few papers and then the Užupis secretary will see me. Will she see me in the municipality’s main reception office? No, she can’t see me there because they’re renovating right now. Will she see me in the stuffy little room on the ground floor? No, she can’t see me there either. It would be too stuffy, you know.”

Algirdas made an excellent impression on Agnieška with his modesty.

He invited us inside. There were half-consumed glasses and ashtrays full of cigarette butts on the table, but there was not a living soul anywhere.

“Where is everybody? Isn’t there a party here?” I inquired while glancing at the empty parlor.

“Uhh, we had a fight as usual,” Algirdas said and waved his arm. “At the very beginning the atonalists got in the neoclassicists’ hair. Then the cacophonists added their two cents and started to prepare my piano. The neo-baroqueists even encouraged them! They wanted to tune my most precious Steinway to quarter tones just so some young budding talent could perform his work for a prepared piano on it! I barely stopped them. Just when it seemed that the situation had calmed, an acrimonious debate flared about who will get an award this year, and a terrible jealousy arose. The debate about awards became increasingly political. I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I shooed everyone home early. I may feel sorry now, but I can’t watch as professional colleagues sling mud at each other under my own roof. And this is supposed to be a party on the occasion of the premiere of my concert! I’m already accustomed to this, but I don’t know if I’ll keep socializing with my colleagues. I will rather

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27 years old, which is even younger than I am now.

look for friends in other artistic genres; for example, thespians, poets, or lighting designers.”

“Lighting designers are a good choice, and I definitely recommend them,” I said. “They aren’t completely sure about their artistic mission. That’s why they don’t yearn for awards.”

“Lighting designers?” said Agnieška. “Aren’t they lighting technicians?”

“Oh, God forbid that a lighting designer hears you!” Algirdas exclaimed. “They really don’t yearn for awards, but they are very sensitive.”

“I admired a lighting designer once,” I said dreamily. “He was like my second father and knew a lot about everything. Whether he had to aim the beam of light into the sky or into the ground, he could create visible things out of invisible ones. He was the great lighting technician of lighting techniques, the true master of true mastership.”

“I knew a master of the Lithuanian dialect pop song,” Agnieška said. “He wrote songs for me for a long time, yet he wrote very few of them. He didn’t want money, but I often had to sit on his lap because that would supposedly insanely inspire him, as he himself claimed. Studying my body also would supposedly give him special power, as he himself claimed. At first I was naïve and humored his requests. But one day he started to try to persuade me to pose nude for him because he could compose more easily like that, as he himself claimed. I didn’t fall for that. I told him to his face what he deserved and broke off all contact with him. I’m always blunt, even if people don’t like it.”

“Well, I understand the man, and I also understand you somehow, or at least I’m trying to understand,” Algirdas joked. “What’s his name? Perhaps I know him.”

“Vitas Gerulaitis.”

“Hmm...Isn’t that a tennis player?”

“Yes, but this one doesn’t play tennis. They’re namesakes purely by coincidence. He’s not even related to him. I’m amazed that you don’t know him, since he is the doyen of the Lithuanian dialect pop song.”

“You know, I socialize mostly in atonal circles. I don’t have any friends or acquaintances on television. They don’t like me much because I’m crazy. Despite the fact that I’ve gotten a lot of awards, they’ve only recorded one of my concerts for television – *Concert for the Prepared Fly*.”

“Last year I participated in a dialect pop-song festival. Gerulaitis wrote an excellent song.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t watch. Please sing an excerpt for me.”

“What, sing right now?” Agnieška charmingly smiled.

“Yes, Agnieška, be courageous. There’s nothing to fear,” I encouraged her.

Agnieška cleared her throat and began to sing: “You drive down our street everyday, you watch where I walk to, what I do...just to see where I live, if I got a man, you’re so cool, just scared of girls...”

“She sings beautifully,” Algirdas enthusiastically whispered to me.

“Indeed,” I quietly agreed. “But the lyrics charmed me even more. It’s so dialectal.”

“... you and me could be a tight couple, ooh, a tight couple, me and you, look at you, man, get movin’! Come over tonight, take me to a crazy club so I can show you what’s hip, what a freakin’ good party’s like<sup>4</sup>.”

“Bravo, excellent!” Algirdas applauded. “When I stood in front of Užupis Gymnasium and listened to you, my knees hurt like hell because I have problems with my bones, but despite that I persevered. You were worth it!”

“I’m glad that you like my singing. That’s precisely why I came here, isn’t it?” Agnieška said and looked toward me.

I explained to Algirdas why I had brought the young talented lady to his apartment in the first place: “As you already know, Agnieška was unexpectedly left without her personal songwriter. The selection for Eurovision is getting close now. So I thought of you.”

“You thought well. This isn’t beneath my honor. I like to take on crazy things! Because I’m crazy, you know.”

“That would be hard to dispute,” I concurred with delight.

“So, Mr. Algirdas, could you write a song for me?” Agnieška asked cautiously yet femininely.

“Of course I could!” consented Algirdas.

“Thank you, that makes me very happy,” Agnieška said. “But we’re late, you know.”

“When do you need the song?”

“Today. The deadline is tomorrow.”

“Can you wait five minutes?”

“You’ll write the song that fast?” Agnieška said with surprise.

“I studied music. Notes aren’t Greek to me.”

“But I would like to go over some things with you first. I want you to write a song for my soul.”

“I see into your soul better than you do,” Algirdas said and sat down at the piano. “And I’m not just going to write a melody but lyrics too. I already have an idea!”

“But what will my song talk about?”

“It will talk about Markič.”

“About whom?” Agnieška said with bewilderment.

“Excuse me for interfering,” I intervened in the conversation, “but which Markič are you referring to?”

“Which one? Your former technical education teacher, of course!” Algirdas exclaimed.

“How do you know that he taught me technical education? That was more than twenty years ago.”

“How do I know? Markič told me himself. He came to Lithuania just now. Do you remember the soloist on the circular saw?”

“Unbelievable, what a coincidence! I thought he looked like him.”

“Markič has really mastered the circular saw. He has distinguished himself as an excellent soloist. He even remembers you, you know. He told me that you were making trouble one time, and he pulled on your ears and said to you: ‘Grow, grow, grow.’ And you did grow – and look, perhaps you have him to thank for the fact that you’re a tall, upright man.”

“I don’t like to remember that incident.”

“Excuse me, but why should I sing about Markič now? I don’t understand that.” Agnieška wondered aloud.

“Because Markič is worth it,” Algirdas answered. “He’s simply worth expressing in poetry and setting to music. He’s worth being touched by lyric poetry. He’s worth being praised in song by the vocal chords. Markič is a big, big challenge because he’s personified poetry and music at the same time.”

“But how will I be able to really get into the lyrics when I don’t know Markič at all?”

Before Algirdas had time to answer her, the doorbell rang.

“Wait here. I’m going to open the door,” Algirdas said and hurried toward the door. “Well, look who’s here!”

I would not have believed my own eyes if I had not rubbed them and come to my senses. My former technical education teacher had stepped into the room. I had not seen him in twenty years, and now we had run into each other a whole 1,480 kilometers from home (road distance). But I had sensed Markič for a long time. I just knew that he would show up sooner or later. I had had a vision that Markič would appear soon. I knew that he must come, for he had been adumbrated and portended. In fact, he had been foreshadowed and metaphorically hidden behind the bush like some kind of silent allusion that only here and there peeks out from an artistic work. He had appeared to me not only in my dreams but every time I was tackling something technically challenging. When I was changing a flat tire, his imaginary dream voice encouraged me like a teacher, and he advised me how to handle the jack and

<sup>4</sup> Agnieška was actually singing in dialectal Lithuanian, but I thought it proper to translate her lyrics into colloquial American English. The lyrics that Agnieška sang went like this in Lithuanian: *Važiavai kiekvieną dieną mūsų keliu, / žiūrėjai į mane, kur vaikštinėju, ką darau. / Tam, kad pamatytumei, kur gyvenu, / ar jau turiu vaikną, / tu gi esi super vaikiną, bet bijai merginų. // Tu ir aš galėtume tikrai neblogai padykti, / ua neblogai padykti. Tik tu ir aš, prašau, vaikinuk, pasiskubink truputė! / Ateik šį vakar, / nuvarysiva į kokį gerą klubą pasitūsinti, / ten aš Tau parodysiu, kas tai yra cool ir kas tai yra šaunus tūsas.* Besides slang expressions, such as *nuvarysım*, *cool*, *vaikinuk*, the lyrics contain a lot of dialectological surpluses. If we analyze the original, we see some ancient vestiges; for instance, the use of the dual (*galėtume*), which has disappeared in standard Lithuanian. And precisely because of the dual, the commission placed this pop song in the Lithuanian Dialect Pop-Song Festival. Agnieška did not win an award, but she did charm the leading Lithuanian linguists, at least those who could take a break from writing in-depth linguistic treatises long enough to sit down in front of the television.

where to put it. When I was assembling a chair, he helped me decipher the complicated instructions, called my attention to some irregularities, and suggested a different, better solution with respect to a screw that was hard to install. When I was putting up a tent, he held up the support poles so that I could calmly drive in the pegs. When I was replacing a chain on a bicycle, he checked whether it sat well on the sprocket... But those had been only visual and auditory hallucinations. Now he had come and had revealed himself in all his physical presence. Markič was really in the room. He was, he stood, he moved, and he maintained a calm expression on his face, just as he had twenty years ago. As if an invisible force had lifted him from behind his home workbench and had carried him to the north, to the wild Lithuanian marsh.

“Now you can’t make excuses anymore that you don’t know him, Ms. Olšauska,” Algirdas burst out laughing. “This is him! This is Markič!”

After Markič kissed Agnieška’s hand, which seemed to be in considerable disagreement with his simple technical nature, he turned toward me and stared. Both of us were silent for a moment. Nothing else came to our minds in that unique moment but to keep silent and stare.

“They’re coming to their senses,” Algirdas explained to Agnieška. “To run into someone after all these years, it’s, how should I say, romantic.”

“Mr. Teacher, Mr. Teacher Markič,” I finally found the courage to say after a few moments of lyric silence. “I’m very happy that you showed up. Ever since you disappeared from my life, my handicraft has deteriorated a lot. When I was up against the wall, I always remembered you and imagined how you, the one who always knew the solution, would act in that situation.”

“Didn’t you once call me ‘Comrade’?” Markič smiled serenely. “And now – Mr. Teacher. Please.

“True, but times are different now. You too addressed me informally at one time.”

“We can also address each other in third person, if the mister so desires.”

“Rather not. Addressing someone in third person has died out,” I said. “Say, Mr. Markič, how are you and your technical pencils, and what’s going on with the sharpeners? Is your home workbench still standing?”

“Oh, please,” Markič smiled serenely. “You really haven’t followed my work till now. Technics is history for me. I was through with dimension lines once and for all twenty years ago. I sold my home workbench too. I do linguistics now.”

“Markič is one of the foremost Indo-Europeanists of today!” Algirdas said proudly as he patted Markič on the shoulder.

“I came to Lithuania to research vestiges of the dual in some Samogitian dialects,” Markič said seriously. “I’d had enough of elemen-

tary school brats. I have academic ambitions now.”

“Markič is writing his second doctoral dissertation in Baltology,” Algirdas added.

“Wow, I can’t believe it!” I exclaimed. I could not comprehend that my former technical education teacher had become a Baltologist.

“You can’t believe it? Wait, wait!” Algirdas said. “Markič, decline a personal pronoun in the dual!”

Markič shot off like a cannon: “*Mudu, mudvieju, mudviem, mudu, mudviem, mudviese!*”

“Did you hear that? Markič, conjugate the verb ‘to carry’ in the conditional dual!”

“*Neštuva, neštuta, nešty.*”

“Markič, the present active participle!”

“It’s formed with the suffix *-nt-!*”

“Markič, the future passive participle!”

“*Būsimas, būsimo, būsiamam, būsima, būsime!*”

“Markič, what about orthography?”

“The comma sometimes jumps in front of *which, when, because, that, and if!*”

There are people that will always be out of my reach. If I had once seen a technically well-versed expert in Markič, he now outdid me in that field that I was convinced I had truly mastered – linguistics. No matter how hard I had studied and analyzed declension and conjugation patterns for hours on end, in comparison to Markič I was just an ordinary memorizer who is not capable of an in-depth scientific synthesis and who cannot put together a measly doctoral dissertation from the pile of information that he has. I was ashamed. Once again I was ashamed, just like twenty years ago, only this time not of my manual but rather of my intellectual abilities. Markič is a genius and I will never be his equal.

“I admire you,” I said. “Now even much more than before! But did you really give up all your former hobbies? At one time you said that you can’t imagine life without Life and Technics!”

“Ha,” he laughed serenely. “I stopped subscribing to Life and Technics twenty years ago. Now I subscribe to totally different journals: *Indouralica, Baltoslavica, Baskogalica, Keltoferica, Srbolužica.*”

“Which journal do you like the most, if I may ask?”

“*Srbolužica.*”

“I thought so. I do too.”

“Well, it’s nicely illustrated.”

“I admire you more and more as well, Mr. Markič,” Agnieška spoke up after a long time. “Fifteen minutes ago I still couldn’t imagine singing a song about you, but now I very much want to. You truly are worth expressing in word and setting to music. If anyone is worth that, then it’s you.”

“I told you so,” Algirdas happily affirmed. “I know exactly whom I want to dedicate a song to and who deserves it at all.”

“You’re going to dedicate a song to me?” Markič asked astonished.

“Whom should I dedicate it to if not to you? Should I dedicate it to Anne-Sophie Mutter? I’m not Penderecki.”

“Okay. Dedicate it to me.”

Algirdas sat down at the piano and ardently started to compose, and we could only stand speechless and admire the artist in action. He played through the scales, tried out various combinations of chords, muttered the melody line to himself, and made the song increasingly complicated. It would be hard to say that there was anything explicitly pop in the song. After all, Algirdas belonged to the dodecaphonic avantgardists. Sending that kind of song to Eurosong might seem weird to some; however, Eurosong had to be revived, it needed freshness, something shocking that would shut the mouths of writers of simple tunes and that would finally elevate the Artist on the pedestal, someone who comes from the world of true music and true scores. Countless plagiarized songs have been heard before. Stealing has been going on lengthwise and across, along and crosswise, vertically and horizontally, obliquely and zigzag, in circles and squares. Eurosong not only had nothing in common with music, it was a crime against humanity, something like the Holocaust or abortion. Only Algirdas could cleanse it of sinfulness. With an in-depth approach to music, he could restore its reputation; he would raise it from blasphemy to the level of symphony.

The song about Markič sounded heavenly. He finished it in five minutes, honing the lyrics just a little by saying the individual verses aloud. Algirdas’ vision of Markič was captured in impure rhyme with a paroxytonic clause, in caesurae and diaereses, oxymora and synecdoche. For example: *I am Markič, I live among the roots* (an example of an oxymoron. It is in fact clear that it would be difficult for such a giant to live among roots, but the cleverness of this verse is hidden in Indo-European roots, in seeking ancient roots and origins, in etymological reconstruction<sup>5</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> As I later learned, Markič was the one who first called attention to the mistaken etymology of the Slovene word *bogomolka* [praying mantis]. Linguists rather superficially supposed that it was a German calque of the expression *Gottesanbeterin*. They thought that it simply referred to an animal that, because of the posture of its front legs, prays to God. Markič demonstrated, however, that such an explanation does not hold. He came to his ingenious discovery by accident when he was once leafing through a dictionary of the Northern-Samogitian Lithuanian dialect and found that the expression *busbulvinė* for a special subspecies of the praying mantis that is also simultaneously the northernmost living among the representatives of the praying mantis genus. *Busbulvinė* literally meant “that which will be tuberous,” which is possible to explain by the fact that dead praying mantises clump together, resembling some kind of tuber. And the feminine form of tuber was *gomoljka*. The Lithuanian *bus* is the third-person future tense of “to be,” and *bulvinė* means “tuber,” therefore it was a Slovene calque of the Lithuanian expression “it will be a tuber.” Markič supposed that we Slovenes took the word from the Lithuanian in approximately 1500 B.C., therefore in the time of the most intensive Balto-Slavic contacts. The original form of the Slovene word therefore had to be *bogomoljka*, which Markič also proved, and even the Freising Fragments mention the word: “If our ancestor had not

When he had filed off the details, Algirdas played and sang the song for us from beginning to end. If the angel on Užupis Street could have strained his ears, he probably would have joined in and blown into his trumpet. He too was likely a committed dodecaphonist, at least he seemed that way at first sight.

Markič liked the song. Not in the way that he had once liked technical pencils, sharpeners, and the most modern workbenches; not in the way that he had once liked being an expert in handicraft. He liked the song almost to the same extent as the dual in some Lithuanian dialects. Markič yearned for conjugations and declensions, for declining and conjugating, for nouns and verbs, for participles and perfectives. He also yearned for nostalgia, and this song certainly aroused nostalgia. The melody awakened in him a 5000-year-old Indo-European memory. A melody that raises consciousness and invigorates. A melody that can be the only savior of Eurosong. Markič, Agnieška, Algirdas, they can save Eurosong from Eurosong elements.

“But how can I sing the lyrics ‘I am Markič’ if I’m not really Markič?” Agnieška asked. “That will seem pretty strange to the audience.”

“It’s a role-playing song,” I expertly clarified. “That means that the author and the performer aren’t identical with the lyric subject.”

“But people won’t know that,” Agnieška frowned.

“Sure they will! Every remotely experienced critic today has heard of the role-playing song!” I said, growing upset. “I knew a poet with a huge butt who wrote a verse about ‘his little butt.’ Did any critic therefore accuse him of delusion? No, no, indeed no one, because they understood it as a role-playing song. And that’s how it will be with this song that you’re going to sing. Everyone will know that you’re not Markič, and qualifying for Eurosong is a sure thing because there has not yet been a role-playing song on Eurosong.”

“I know that people in favor of the role-playing song will certainly be sitting on the judges’ panel,” Algirdas affirmed.

“There won’t be a judges’ panel at all; there’s going to be televoting instead!” Agnieška exclaimed.

“Do you really believe in telephone voting?” I asked and burst out laughing.

“Look how naïve you are,” Algirdas said, shaking his head.

“Televoting,” I said, “was thought up for money. It seems like people are deciding, but they actually aren’t. It’s interesting that today more people believe in televoting than in God.”

“Please, stop with the televoting! How can you occupy yourselves with such a mundane thing?” Markič said, becoming agitated.

“What about doing business in sandpaper and collecting a commission? Isn’t that mundane?” I poked at him.

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sinned, praying mantises would have eaten him.”

“Sandpaper is history. Now I sell score paper,” Markič answered.

“Look,” Algirdas exclaimed and waved his score in front of my face. “Markič brought me first-rate score paper. He brought so much of it that I can live to be 120 years old and I won’t use it all up.”

When I inspected the score paper more closely and turned it toward the light, I noticed a manufacturer’s name printed on it that had been well known to me in my youth: *Slavc & Žmavc*. The same company that made the sandpaper made the score paper as well! My head became incredibly overwhelmed. And then it became clear to me, as if I were some kind of assistant detective from a German series, that the tragedy of Markič’s existence is hidden behind this.

No matter how much Markič felt like a Baltologist, how much money he received from various institutes just so he could pursue Baltology, so he could seek self-realization, confirmation, and fulfillment, and regardless of his linguistic activities, he still did business in paper. I do not think that it could be otherwise because I cannot imagine that he could live only off Baltology, and what fool would do that? Oh, God forbid that I insult Baltology and Baltologists, who will never admit that things are going badly for them. God forbid that I look condescendingly on this noble community, which I am trying to enter myself. Yes, I would really like to see them accept me into the elite, but it is necessary to acknowledge that nowadays you must, if you want to realize your life vision, perform a lot of dirty work, in quotation marks or without them. My neighbor, for example, went to the factory in the morning to load tires so that he could assemble a glider in the afternoon. Markič sold paper in the morning so that he could be a Baltologist in the afternoon. He did this for Baltology itself as well as out of pure and genuine love for the Baltic languages – for the two that are still around and the one that is no longer around (Prussian).

“Mr. Markič,” I said, “now I can finally ask you: Who are Slavc and Žmavc?”

“They are my cousins who established the family company. They have a lot of forests and can therefore manufacture a lot of paper. Žmavc<sup>6</sup> was once a well-known Slovene skier who took sixteenth place at the Olympic Games. I have one more cousin, Skumavc<sup>7</sup>. He trained in ski jumping. We’re not on good terms with him and we haven’t spoken in several years because he moved into our grandfather’s house without paying us out.”

“And how do Slavc and Žmavc view your linguistic revival?” I asked curiously.

<sup>6</sup> Gregor Žmavc (1957), Slovene skier. From 1976 to 1983 competed in the World Cup in the slalom and the giant slalom, a participant of the Olympic Games in Lake Placid. Greatest success: 7th place in a competition in Schladming.

<sup>7</sup> Dare Skumavc (1962), Slovene ski jumper. He was a member of the Slovenian National Team for two years. Greatest success: 30th place in Obersdorf (1981). Personal record: 146 m (Planica, 1982).

“They see profit,” Markič answered. “They’re very adaptable, and no work is too much for them. Now they’re making a special etymological paper designed for the reconstruction of Lithuanian words. I’m going to offer it to my Baltologist colleagues and to other Indo-Europeanists as well.”

“Skumavc has a son who also skis, right?”<sup>8</sup> I asked when I remembered that we had gone to the airport a few weeks ago, right before my departure to Lithuania, to welcome our young skiers, one of which was a young Skumavc. I held in my hands a poster that read: “Our dear young skiers, we are happy that you delight us with your marvelous results.”

“Yes,” Markič said, “he has a son. He’ll achieve a lot more. Have you heard of his daughter, Špela Skumavc, yet?”<sup>9</sup>

“No.”

“How haven’t you?”

“Well, I just haven’t.”

“But how is that possible?”

“Just is.”

Forceful howling coming from the courtyard suddenly interrupted the lively conversation. At first it howled in intervals, then more frequently and loudly. It sounded quite terrifying, and we stood dumbstruck in horror and exchanged frightened glances.

“What’s that?” Agnieška shrieked.

“Oh no, the iron wolf!” Markič exclaimed.

“Let’s run!” Algirdas called out and began running through the room.

“Where? If it’s outside, then we can’t go out. Is there a side door? What if we lock the door and stack furniture against it?” Markič was asking in a panic.

Then wild knocking sounded at the door.

“The iron wolf, he’s knocking on the door...” Algirdas said in amazement.

Agnieška burst into tears.

“Ouch, ouch, help!” was heard behind the door.

“It’s a person!” I exclaimed. “I’m opening the door.”

“Don’t open it. It’s the iron wolf imitating a person!” Markič said.

“Yeah, sure,” I said and hurried toward the door.

“Don’t open it; don’t open it, for the sake of Baltology and for our sake!” Markič yelled. Algirdas hid behind the piano. Agnieška plunged onto the couch and trembled.

I courageously opened the door, and, look! I was not mistaken. A little old man with a gray beard stood in front of the door. He was bare-

<sup>8</sup> Miha Skumavc (1988), 18th at the World Youth Championships in the super giant slalom.

<sup>9</sup> Špela Skumavc (1985), Slovene biathlete, gold medal at the World Youth Championships in the biathlon.

foot and blood was dripping from his heel.

“I was going past your house and stepped on a nail and now it hurts, ouch!” were the first words the little old man uttered.

“Please, come in, we’ll pull it out for you immediately,” I said and invited him into the house. “Algirdas, do you have any pliers?”

“I do,” Algirdas said and peeked out from behind the piano.

“Why are there so many nails in front of your house?” the little old man asked with a moan.

“I know why,” Algirdas said, “because last week we were practicing with Markič for the concert and were sawing boards. There were a lot of nails in them, and we took them out. And we’ll do the same for you.”

He brought the pliers and instantly pulled out the nail with them. The old man bellowed like a wounded bull, and Agnieška dressed his heel.

“I don’t know why you walk around barefoot. If you would wear shoes, this certainly wouldn’t happen to you,” Algirdas said.

“Because,” the little old man replied, “I’m a kind of guru. And a guru must always walk barefoot around the world to be in contact with Mother Earth.”

“We thought you were the iron wolf,” Agnieška said and burst out laughing.

“I’m not the iron wolf. My name is Dievas. I travel around on my vessel. From time to time I descend from the sky and wander among simple people, among peasants. And that is why I came to you.”

“But we’re not peasants, we’re intellectuals,” Markič declared.

“Oh well. I get it wrong sometimes. I intended to participate in the everyday life of peasants. This time, let it be the everyday life of intellectuals, whatever that may be.”

“I intend to participate in the Eurovision pop-song festival,” Agnieška said. “I wandered among the intellectuals by chance.”

“You’re also an intellectual, just a woman,” Algirdas comforted her. “My ex-wife also signed up for Eurosong once, even though she lectures in Ancient Greek Literature at the University of Kovno. That’s how you women are: you constantly have to be in the center of attention.”

“Tell me, what’s the life of an intellectual like? I would be happy if you could demonstrate it to me so that I can visualize it,” Dievas said.

“Markič will best explain it to you. He had to go through real hell in life to reach the level of intellectual,” Algirdas said.

“You know,” Markič began, “I once lived the calm life of a technical education teacher. I thought that I had realized my life’s mission and that I would retire as an educator. But a guilty conscience suddenly began knocking on my door. I said to myself: ‘Markič, will you really end like that? You have to make something of yourself; otherwise you don’t deserve to be alive at all.’ So I began studying Baltology and Indo-European linguistics. I finished my studies in record time, and soon after that

I submitted my doctoral dissertation. I had become an intellectual. And now I live the life of an intellectual. I no longer look at beautiful women when I walk down the street but rather think about serious linguistic problems.”

“I still like to look at beautiful women, even though I consider myself an intellectual,” Algirdas said. “Because I’m an artist, beautiful women inspire me. When I feed myself on their beauty, I obtain creative power. There’s no force more powerful than creative power.”

I did not know what to say, but I felt obliged to speak up and illustrate my intellectual essence: “The Lithuanian *dievas* is related to the Latvian *dievs* and also to the Old Prussian *deivas*, and they all come from the Indo-European *deiwos*, which the Greek *zeus* comes from too.”

Everyone there applauded me, but Markič condescendingly frowned: “Where did you read that? Everyone can boast of the discoveries of others, but a true intellectual comes to his own conclusions. Allow me to explain to you where the name *praying mantis* derives from....”

Markič gave the explanation, and an even more thunderous applause followed. I felt exactly the same as twenty years ago – like a small and helpless boy.

“I see that the life of an intellectual is quite thrilling,” Dievas said. “You all have a rich and diversified spiritual life. So, you deserve the most. And the most that I can offer at this moment is to take you with me, if, of course, you want to.”

“Where?” Algirdas asked.

“To heaven,” Dievas replied. “But don’t worry, not for good, just for a trip. For a short glimpse and then back.”

“How will we get there?” Markič asked.

“I’ll take you, on my flying workbench!” Dievas said and burst out laughing.

“On a flying workbench?” we said with amazement.

“Yes. Master Perkūnas remodeled it, and now it serves me well.”

“This will be interesting!” Algirdas said with enthusiasm.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” Markič urged.

“May I come along too?” Agnieška asked and looked at us tenderly, seeing that we had somehow forgotten about her.

“But you have to get to the studio as soon as possible to record the Eurovision song,”

Algirdas said and offered her his score. “The deadline is tomorrow; the competition will be over soon.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’ve finished my pop-song career. Thank you, Mr. Algirdas, for the marvelous song; nevertheless, I think that it’s better that I dedicate myself to intellectual pursuits.”

“Well, alright, come along,” Dievas said.

5. Heaven

After old Dievas switched on the flying workbench, we sat on it to be taken to heaven, our reward. We took off and climbed higher and higher toward the sky. Although it was night, we saw the lighted city below, for the times of power outages had long since passed. We flew over St. Anne's Church and Gediminas's Hill, where the castle with the tower stood. We flew over the cathedral beside the tall belfry. We flew across the Vilnia and then the mighty Neris. The top view of the ancient city, shrouded in the night-time silence, was outlined below us; the buildings became increasingly smaller, the houses changed into small houses, and the cars were like toys we played with as children. With great speed the workbench pierced the first layers of clouds, and then we got cold. I pressed myself against Agnieška Olšauska. The wind completely disheveled her hair; her hair covered her eyes. I was hugging her with one arm, and with the other I was holding the workbench's iron frame that probably once served as a vise for clamping plywood or some other type of wood intended for processing. Algirdas and Markič were positioned in the front directly behind Dievas, who skillfully controlled the unusual vessel. They giggled playfully, excited about the wild voyage to the land beyond.

All of a sudden it began to thunder fiercely. Lightning bolts shot out of the clouds, and we found ourselves in the middle of a terrible storm. In an instant we were soaked to the skin. The workbench became unsteady and rocked wildly across the sky.

"Perkūnas is angry," Dievas said. "He becomes jealous if I transport peasants on his workbench."

"But we're intellectuals!" Markič yelled.

"Now, you explain that to Perkūnas!" Dievas screamed. "Peasant, shepherd, sports commentator or intellectual – he can't tell the difference."

One of the lightning bolts struck the workbench's metal undercarriage, and big sparks shot from it. Our electrified hair stood up, and Agnieška's looked especially terrifying because it extended almost a meter in width and height. The workbench shook, and we nearly fell off, but fortunately we grasped the frame in time. We were being tossed across the sky. We were losing altitude and screamed in fear. The workbench eventually steadied, but it sounded like the engine was seizing. We were losing altitude, and an indescribable panic engulfed us.

"Uh oh, it's dying!" Dievas screamed. "What are we going to do?"

"Oh no, oh no," Agnieška cried.

"Markič, you're an expert on workbenches. Fix it!" Algirdas exclaimed.

"I haven't dealt with workbenches in more than ten years," Markič lamented.

"Try anyway, perhaps you'll succeed," Dievas said and yielded

the pilot's seat to him.

Markič made his way to the front and occupied the post. He did not have a lot of time to recall his former technical knowledge. First he tried to stabilize the control handle, which was moving unrestrained in every direction. He pulled pieces of chewing gum from his pocket and wedged them under the handle. Then he opened the hood and checked the fuel flow. The heavenly manna, of which there was still sufficient in the fuel tank, propelled the workbench. Markič lay bent over the engine and closely studied the fuel injection device.

"The vacuum valves have broken. We'll have to make an emergency landing!" he screamed.

"Oh, holy virgin of the Gate of Dawn! Oh no!" Agnieška cried and clung to me tightly.

"Where will we land?" Algirdas asked with a frightened tone.

"Wherever we can!" Markič answered and tried with great difficulty to shift the handle.

The workbench spiraled increasingly lower among the old buildings, and Markič tried to tame it like an unruly horse.

"Watch out, watch out, there's a school there! We're going to crash into it!" Dievas warned him.

"I'll try to land alongside the river!"

"Turn already, we're going to smash against the school's façade."

"Oh no, we're going to fall onto the roof!"

"We're going to break to pieces!"

With considerable speed we fell onto the building that stood beside the school. Fortunately the workbench was equipped with a flexible spring system, so the landing was not too hard. We were thrown from the vessel anyway. We lay dizzy from the blows, each of us on a separate end of the flat roof. We slowly came to our senses and began to look around.

"The river is below. Do you hear it rushing?" I said.

"I know where we are!" Algirdas determined. "On Petras Vileišis Street. The Gymnasium is next door and the statue is below. Do you see them?"

"Look at that, we must have landed on the Lithuanian Language Institute," Markič concluded.

"Unbelievable!" I exclaimed. "We were bound for heaven, and now we've landed here!"

"I still can't believe that it ended so well," Agnieška said. "I thought we were going to die."

"Forgive me for not being able to take you to heaven," Dievas said sadly.

"Another time, Mr. Dievas," I said and patted him on the shoulder.

"But..." Markič spoke up.

"Yes?"

“As a matter of fact...”

“Markič, what would you like to say?” Dievas asked.

“Perhaps...this is our heaven,” Markič said. “At least I think so. What about you?”

“We do too, we do too!” we agreed almost in unison.

“If that’s the case, then there is no reason for sadness,” a cheered-up Dievas said. “Come, I’ll treat you to heavenly manna!”

This was heaven! There were no television hosts and sports commentators, no song competitions, no Eurosong and no dialectal pop song; there were no skiers or skiing, no Skumavc and no Žmavc, no Špela Skumavc, and no Beštrov Tonček from Žiganja Vas. There was only pure, perfect Baltology and Baltological truth. There were morphological analyses and ancient word roots. The roof of the institute was simultaneously our semantic base and derivational plane. We, the participants of verbal action, converged and diverged around the roof, and each pecked at his own lump of heavenly manna. Day began to break.

“Markič, the moon is setting and dawn is lighting the sky,” a poetically disposed Algirdas said.

“Indeed,” Markič agreed and likewise stared at the dawning horizon.

“Each night brings with itself restlessness and intoxication,” Dievas said with satisfaction.

“Look over there in the distance!” Agnieška exclaimed and tugged me by the sleeve. “The *kmiel* that Lithuanians make beer from is growing over there!”

“Oh, you’re right!” I said with excitement. “What a lot of hops!”

“It’s such a beautiful morning,” Agnieška said quietly. “I have never experienced such a marvelous sunrise.”

“And *jodajki* are grazing over there. Look!” I said. I pointed out the black cows in the distance and hugged her. In that moment I thought the cows looked like a herd of mighty brontosaurus.



**LAURA FERRARA**  
**LEFT: YOUNG  
AND  
OLD**  
**BELOW: FRANCIS  
WITH  
LILACS**  
**OIL ON CANVAS**





*Surprised*



*Unsure*



*White house by the sea*

Remember



Instruction  
for Letting  
Go





## DIVESTITURES

BY NANCY GESSNER

NANCY GESSNER was born in Santa Cruz, California and grew up in the Ozarks. By the time she was cast in her first play on her twenty-first birthday, she was living in Arizona, where she directed and acted in local productions for more than a decade.

Since moving to New York in 1999, she has produced, directed and starred in a one-woman play, and appeared onstage as a singer.

In recent years, she has added new rhythms to her artistic voice by studying drawing at the Art Students League of New York, and by writing.

She has found inspiration in the Heather Gardens at the Cloisters, on Neptune Beach, and dancing in the dining room with her husband Charlie. They live on Long Island.

Marie sat on her front stoop, smoking a cigarette, and listening to her husband's faint grunts from the backyard. Despite her objections, he was digging up the back corner for a vegetable garden and she was waiting to see if he would discover what was underneath the smooth topsoil. Although by now, there was probably not much to find. That part of the yard hadn't been touched by anything but a garden hose for more than seventeen years. Since the summer Sam was three years old.

She'd logged a lot of time on these steps back in those days, sitting on the stoop surrounded by cigarette butts and lackluster houseplants she brought outdoors with her for the light. She didn't know if these excursions did them any good, but it made her feel proactive while she practiced blowing smoke rings. Mostly she was just hiding out while Greg put Sam down for his nap. It had been the last year they could get him to take a nap. Greg liked to put him down on the weekends or whenever he was home, but it worked best if Marie stepped out. If Sam heard Mommy walking around, he'd never get to sleep, but would keep talking, keep

asking questions. That summer her son was three, the general theme was dogs: which of the neighbor kids had dogs, which dogs were having puppies, and why can't we get a dog?

Marie couldn't tell her three-year-old that he was more than enough for her all by himself, that he took every ounce of her care-giving capabilities and even though she gave him all she had to give, she still wasn't sure she was doing it right and she already spent way too much time praying he wouldn't grow up malnourished and deranged.

She couldn't tell his hopeful little face that even her droopy houseplants felt like a burden and a reproach, and with her infrequent attentions and cigarette smoke, they probably were heading for an early disposal. She couldn't tell her son what she hadn't even told his father yet, why she was so exhausted and cranky, and why she had tried to cut back on cigarettes until she decided it didn't matter anymore. A puppy was out of the question. But Sam wore her down until the day she finally told him to ask his father.

On that Saturday, Greg put Sam down for a nap while she waited outside, wondering if Sam was asking the big question. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she went inside. She entered her own house like a burglar, gripping the front doorknob and turning it until she heard the catch release, and silently stepping inside to find Greg standing there with his shirt off. Before she could wonder if he was hot-and-bothered or just hot, he said, "took the laundry downstairs for you, Hon," and disappeared down the hallway, his socks making no noise on the carpet runner. She took off her sandals and followed him, stopping on the way to peek into Sam's room. It was cooler in there, with an oscillating fan pointed well above his head. Marie kept meaning to get one for their room. Sam's face was turned toward the wall so she couldn't see if he was asleep, but he was still and his breathing was even. That was enough.

Down the hall in the master bedroom, Greg was lying on the bed. He'd taken his socks off and his slacks were already hanging neatly on a hanger on his side of the closet, leaving only his modest royal blue shorts. In his late thirties, his muscles had hardened and the hair on his chest had only a few hints of gray. His eyes were closed, and she sat on the other side of the bed, gently shifting and lowering herself to lie beside him on the blue chenille bedspread, leaving plenty of room for the air to circulate between them. They really needed to get that fan.

"So glad to be home," he said. "The office was crazy."

Whispering, she asked him, "Did you get a lot done today?"

He whispered back, "We got a lot of legwork done and we're in good shape for the meeting Monday. Sorry I had to go in on a Saturday,

but it couldn't be helped. But when Sam wakes up, we can all do something."

"Did you have anything in mind?"

"Not just yet-why, did you?"

"I wondered if you'd promised him a shopping trip or anything?"

He laughed and she immediately shushed him, "Greg, please!"

Whispering again, he asked, "The dog?"

"Yes, the dog-it's all he talks about lately."

"Well, we'll have to see about that."

"Greg—"

"Now don't worry, I didn't promise him anything. Yet. I told him we had to talk to you about it first."

"Oh, that's just great."

"What?"

"I told him to 'ask your father.'"

"His father doesn't have a problem with it-his mother, on the other hand..."

"It's a lot of work, Greg."

"He would love it, though."

"We really should talk about a few things before you go and—"

He rolled over and kissed her gently. She reached for him, but he'd already rolled back to sit on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to take a shower now. We'll talk about it later."

He went into the bathroom and turned on the little waterproof radio they kept there. It was tuned to a classic rock station they both liked, and suddenly a blaring My Sharona blasted her from the bed, hissing at him to "Turn that thing off now," as she lunged for the bedroom door.

Too late. She heard her cue: "Mommmyyyyyy," and went down the hall to answer.

That afternoon stood out in Marie's mind because that was the only conversation she and Greg ever, EVER had about getting a puppy, until he came home from work one day with a puppy.

She'd been excited all day. Greg had called from work and said he'd be a little late-he had a surprise for her. She thought it would be something she actually wanted-tickets for something, a babysitter, maybe even some opportunity to finally have the private mommy-daddy talk she'd been trying to circle around to for weeks now.

Marie was waiting in the living room when he got home. She'd been picking the dead leaves off the plants, but when they were almost bald she gave up and was just sitting on the edge of the sofa with Sam skittering around her, half playing and half watching her. She never had any idea a kid would watch her this much. Like he was studying her. Like he knew her secret. The sound of Greg's car out front released

them both and Sam started jumping and spinning around as Marie sank back into the cushions, glad the waiting was over.

She could hear Greg's footsteps on the stairs and he took longer than usual to unlock the door. Only when the series of jingles and clicks freed the door lock and the knob turned did it occur to her that she should have gotten up to unlock it for him. Greg was carrying a sturdy box with no lid on it, but as he reached back to push the door closed, he didn't even glance at his wife. Instead, he looked down at Sam and said, "Guess what I've got? Guess who's here to say hi to you? Do you want to meet him?" and carefully knelt down on the carpet and lifted out a black, brown and white short-haired puppy. Sam's eyes got big and he was almost panting in his excitement, staring at the best thing to happen to him in his whole life. Greg set the surprise down on the carpet, where he promptly peed. The surprises just kept coming.

"Honey, could you get us a towel? Hey, Buddy, let's take him out to the kitchen," and Greg gingerly lifted the leaky little puppy and walked away to the kitchen, with Sam trotting after him.

As she carefully knelt down and blotted at the rug with an old towel, she could hear Sam squealing, "I'm gonna call him IGGY! Can I? Can I?"

"He's your dog; you can call him anything you want."

Marie had a few things to call that dog.

Housebroken wasn't one of them, and a lot more of their towels graduated to "old towels" that first week, the smell seeping into everything, making her sick. She had no idea how to make a dog pee outside. They took Iggy for walks and he and Sam had a terrific time exploring, but other than saying, "C'mon Iggy, do your thing," Marie had no idea how to get him to get down to business. Eventually they'd go back home and then twenty minutes later she'd step in something, and try not to gag as she dug up another towel to desecrate.

And she and Greg still hadn't had their talk. When she called him at the office, he was too busy, and when he came home, he usually went straight into the living room after he got cleaned up so he could watch Sam and Iggy rolling around on the carpet. Eventually he would call to her to come out and join him. She'd put dinner on hold to go sit on the couch, where he would absently put his arm around her, and she'd wonder how two people could look at the same scene and see something so different. Greg lit up watching them play, cheering them on with a delighted laugh. Marie rested back from the scene, just happy both energetic unpredictable little creatures were together right in front of her and not getting into anything at the moment. And if they did, Greg could handle it.

After about a week of this, she asked Greg, "Did you have a dog

when you were a kid?"

"Sure."

Silence.

She asked him, "Are you going to ask me if I had a dog?"

"What?"

"Well, that's the usual mode of conversation, a little back and forth — don't you want to know if I had a dog?"

"Did you?"

"No."

He looked at her, "So then what was the point of that?"

"The point is that you didn't even care to know, want to know that about me. It didn't even occur to you."

"Well, I'm sorry. I guess I just figured you never had a dog or you'd know what a great addition they are to the family, how good it is for Sam, and I wouldn't have had to talk you into it."

She stared at him. "When did you ever talk me into it? You never talked about anything to me, just mentioned once to think about it on your way into the bathroom one time and then months later from out of the blue, now we have a puppy! What's talking about that?"

"Why are you so down on everything? Look at them, they're having a great time."

"They're having a great time NOW but what about at night?"

Nights had not been going well. Whatever the distracting frolic of the day, the night was big and dark and Iggy missed his mom. Or maybe he just missed his daytime playmate. Whatever the reason, he usually woke up around midnight or 1:00am and whimpered. A lot. Marie thought about going to him but she didn't want him to get used to company-on-demand in the middle of the night and she definitely did not want the dog to sleep with them. They had enough to deal with.

Greg said, "Oh, come on—he's just getting used to us," and he slipped off the couch to sit on the floor. Sam and Iggy were still tussling around, oblivious to their audience.

She replied, "I wonder if Sam would cry if we left him alone one night."

"I don't know."

"Want to try it?"

He looked up at her. "You want to make our son cry?"

"Of course not, just my way of saying maybe we could go away somewhere. Overnight. Just for one night."

Greg put his elbow up on the sofa to lean up toward her. She imagined that suddenly he realized their romance had been stuffed into a back closet with the box of baby clothes and it was time to take it out

again, when he opened his well-shaped lips to ask her, "What would we do with Iggy?"

She jerked herself to her feet and would have stormed over to the door but with all the toy, boy and dog in her way, it was more of a seething tiptoe.

Sam was watching her now-again-and Greg. Her path finally clear, she opened the front door and stepped out onto the stoop.

Swinging the door around to block some of the light, she stood in the dusky shadows and stared into the blackness, trying not to get teary. The autumn air was cool and she leaned against the railing, rehearsing the words she would say to Greg if she ever got the chance. At this rate, she'd probably end up cornering him in the shower with a "here's a fresh towel, I'm pregnant but I've made an appointment not to be pregnant, not sure what to do, you want eggs or Fruit Loops this morning?"

The appointment was next Tuesday.

Unfortunately, Marie and Greg had spent the majority of their entire dating career making out instead of talking about political or moral issues back when they still had the buffer of being general and hypothetical, so she had no idea if Greg would look at her plan as a practical option or think she was a monster plotting to kill his child. But there was no way they could dispassionately discuss this as a fetus or an inconvenience without sliding into thoughts of what Sam's little brother or sister would look like. And once they'd started thinking of the baby as a fourth in the annual Christmas photo, the whole discussion would go up in smoke. Maybe it was good she didn't talk to Greg, until she was sure.

It was probably out of her hands anyway.

The last time they'd even had dinner without Sam was about three weeks ago, but that was to meet two of Greg's associates and their wives for dinner. They were both from the regional office and their wives knew each other and all the men knew each other. They were very friendly and talked to Marie, but it was only on the ride home that she realized she didn't remember the wives' names but she knew the names and ages of all their children, along with their school projects and sports. Just like they probably left thinking of her as "Sam's mom."

The porch suddenly flooded with light and she turned around to squint at the outline of her husband in profile, as he said, "I went ahead and put the hamburgers on-everything's just about ready."

He walked away without waiting to see if she was coming.

She followed behind him into the kitchen.

Sam was already sitting up in his chair with his napkin tucked into the neck of his t-shirt, peeking over the edge of the table to watch Iggy eat. He didn't seem to notice when they came into the room, and

he didn't seem to notice that he was the only person either of his parents spoke to the entire meal.

Marie sat back and watched Greg and Sam focusing on the dog, and surveyed all the cleanup she was supposed to do for the dinner she couldn't manage a mouthful of. Nobody was looking at her, and she timidly rested the palm of her hand on her abdomen.

Surely Greg would have noticed she was pregnant if he'd bothered to look?

"You didn't eat anything much, you okay?" he said.

She yanked her hand away. For a moment she thought he'd read her mind or was on the verge of guessing, but when she opened her mouth to answer, he stood up. "Ready for a walk, guys?"

They rushed out, leaving Marie sitting by herself in the kitchen, almost alone and almost decided.

In the morning, she was sure.

Greg was in Sam's room trying to wrestle him into his clothes, but Marie was already dressed and Iggy was waiting by the front door. She'd better get the show on the road.

"I'm taking Iggy out," she called down the hall, before she grabbed the leash off the closet doorknob with one hand, and grabbed up Iggy with the other. Once outside, she walked down the front steps and sat down, watching the neighborhood come to life with morning commuters hurrying off to their cars and hurrying off down the road.

She looked down at the puppy in her hand, and felt his tiny heart beating through his thin skin and his fragile ribcage. It would have taken two seconds to click the end of the leash into the loop on his leather collar, but she didn't. Instead, she quickly lowered the dog to the sidewalk and flipped the back of her hand against his backside to make him trot across the sidewalk toward the street.

She saw the car coming, and saw clearly the inevitable fate of this little part of her family. Of this inconvenient pet. Of this creature who was more than she could deal with. The rapid approach of the car was forcing her to decide right now if this was what she had meant to happen, if this was what she wanted. Before she knew the answer, the car knocked Iggy onto the side of the road several yards away from her and kept driving. It didn't even slow down. It was all over.

Sam and Greg came outside just a few moments later. Sam wanted Iggy, and when they saw her standing there with only a leash in her hand, her shock and her hormones surfaced in instant tears. "I don't know what happened — I guess the clip wasn't on good. I was just coming to get you-Iggy ran off down the street," and she pointed in the opposite direction of where the lifeless dog made a small bump on the side of

the road. "You guys go start looking for him-I'm going to the bathroom. I'll catch up with you in a minute," and she watched them hurry up the street.

Ducking around to the backyard, she pulled a garbage bag and an old box from the shed and in less than a minute, Iggy was off the road and stowed behind the shed until Greg went to work and she could bury him.

Greg took the morning off work that day, and all three of them looked for Iggy. Marie felt positively buoyant and the search to her felt more like a freedom march. The three of them were together and united in a common purpose. It was enough.

That afternoon while Sam took his nap she dug up the corner of the backyard. When Greg came home, she said she'd been thinking about doing some gardening.

The three of them spent more time together after that day, beginning with their hours walking the sidewalks, talking to neighbors, and together convincing Sam that Iggy would turn up later, convincing him that maybe a nice family had found Iggy. This continued through the weekend. It was the most time they'd ever spent together in a row, united in their search. Marie felt like she'd already found what she was looking for.

Every now and then Greg asked her about her garden and she said she might get around to it someday.

Every now and then she thought about the talk she'd wanted to have with Greg that summer, and wondered what the outcome would have been if they'd decided together. As it was, she'd watched the appointed hour approach, when she was forced to decide. And when the time came, she quickly lowered herself to the table and waited for it to be over.

She was a better wife to her husband and a better mother to her son for keeping their household a size that was manageable to her. She never did get around to starting that garden, and as the years passed, the area she dug up grew to look the same as the rest of the yard, until she couldn't pinpoint the exact spot.

Just as she couldn't pinpoint why Greg decided today was the day to begin the garden, or why she was hiding out from it. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she stubbed out her cigarette and walked around to the back of the house, where her husband was standing with his shirt off.

The topsoil in the corner of the yard had been turned over and broken up in a nice square patch, very contained and orderly. He smiled at her. "We're ready now."

“For what?” she said.

“For anything we want to grow,” he said.

And together they walked into the house, leaving all the casualties of their marriage buried behind them.

*Melissa Bryant ♦ Family Portrait 3*





OUTSIDE  
BY THOMAS KARST

THOMAS KARST lives in Jacksonville Florida and studies English and Anthropology at the University of North Florida.

He and his wife have recently been enjoying a new son, changing diapers, and losing sleep (which is why he is writing this in the third person).

I find inspiration for fiction in the stories which constitute my life and the lives of those I encounter.

Life is a story – it ebbs and flows.

And I find myself drifting through it, swimming in words.

Confused I awaken to a sense.<sup>1</sup> The dripping of the storm drain above has ceased. Only the motion of blood in the ears, the knock of the heart fills the silence, thick in the void. The memory is present, soundless. You are there. In your place of never, in stillness, you are there. She is there, cold and small, a body. Again, reciting. In the silence, the absence, lost and fusing with an intimate infinity. I retreat. I retreat to a place outside of me.

#

<sup>1</sup>He was born into a small family in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1977. He was the youngest of three before the sun broke upon his adolescent eyes, his father woke him to take him out to sea. They left the wildness of the sea with her voice. At times she sang, and he listened as the motions of the waves his soul.

<sup>2</sup>He was born in Soweto, a large township in Johannesburg, South Afrika in 1953. It was a place of waste silence. It was here that he woke to the intrusion of the night. The walls ripped down around him. The Zaire. And he met her; starved, pregnant, asleep on the side of a muddy road. If ever there was someone faintest shadows of the night, that he would walk, hand in hand, with his daughter. They crept into the invoke terror drove them. At these times the villagers would abandon their homes for the safety of the

<sup>3</sup>He was born in Ausburg, Germany in 1918. The star of his family even at birth, he was a strong boy with teaching the local children to read. And if the silence impressed life upon him, teaching endowed that life people's, and his own, superiority came with time and training. He was not a soldier at heart, perhaps he

In de road de dus clouds dunc in sheypes. De sweerl arund me an come into de lungs.<sup>2</sup> Ahrugh. De caravan of trucks moved an lef de dus here. De town ees silent. Only lef de screams an' de tears, soundless but here. You are steel dier. On de side of de tin walls, you steel dier. She is dier wif her li'l nuked body. Cry-ing into en'less nu-ting. I run. I run to a place nut inside me.

#

Ze morning alarm zounds as I move toward ze block buildzing.<sup>3</sup> Ze silenze in zis place is over powering. In ze stillnez I hear death, ze heart is gone. Only ze motions remain. Ze pounding on ze doors is a memory. Present, and zoundless. You are zhere. Ze small naked body, smeared in ze shit from ze hundred oter jewz, you are zhere. Ze eyes glaised and cracked, she is zhere. Again, sing-ing ze song of Moses. In ze silenze, ze death, lost and present. Unending zis infinite horror. I retreat. I retreat to ze place outside of me<sup>3</sup>.

#

I wrench into consciousness without you. The first without you and her. The door wide open, never to return, I run. I run into the endlessness, the vacant populous, the ever present absence. And you are there. Your eyes dimly fading as the knocking ceases, you are there. In your

children, all boys. His favorite childhood pastime was to walk the cold, rocky shore as he waited for his y j cth"cu"vjg"uwpuu" f tuv"hcpx"nki jv"cr rgetgf"qp"vjg"jqt|qp."c"fwmm"inqy"cv"vjg"eqtpgt"qh"vjg"y qtnf"Vjg recollected in the melody. Their daughter's infant cries became the shadow as the howling wind. It was The phone rang into the night, disrupting the silence. Wife and daughter ... the waves, no longer silent, and refuse, the excrement of the city. The landscape was miles upon miles of scrap-houses, constructed f pcn"etkgu"qh"jku"o qv jgt"cpf"vjg"i wt i nkp i "dtgcvj u"qh"jku"hcvjgt"y gtg"vj kem"kp"vjg" fctmpguu"cu"jg"y cu he wanted to rescue from the darkness of the world, it was her. The years that followed moved them surrounding trees, the aroma of the leaves clearing their lungs, and continued to the edge of the large vtggu."cpf"tgwvtp"vq"tgdwknf"kv"y cu"hcvg"cpf"vjg"pki jv"hgmv"vcp i kdn{"rtgugpv"y jgp"vjg" f tuv"yctkpi"qh blue eyes, which even then pierced through to the soul. He attended the schools in Munich, excelling at with its purpose. It was during these times he felt truly alive, and that his surroundings were alive as well. lacked the courage to be confronted with death; perhaps some part of his soul clung to the presence of the vjg"dgcuw"tgmgf"qh" f nvj"J g"tqfg"ykvj"vjg"qvjgt"i wctfu"kp"c"ugrctcvg"tcknect"cy c{"htq o"vjg"uvgpej"qh"vjg p g x g t" c" o q o g p i" q h" u k n p e g l" G o r v {" e t k g u" f n g f" v j g" t c p m" c k t l" V j g" c k t" y c u" c a o q u v" r c n r c d n {" r t g u g p i" V j g {" had never felt a silence so alive. He felt it now. She moved toward the door, slowly, her boney legs

writhing fits of coughing, you are there. She is there, already cold and still – the breath left her little lungs, leaving the door wide open. Again. Again, re-being. No motion, but I retreat. I retreat to a place outside of me.

#

I wutch you wail as you burn. Dey beat me to keep me from you. She is dier, burning wif her li'l nuked body, reciting de songs tru de flames an' de tears. De rubber meltet to your skin. Nu-ting close for help. I run. As de club swings at my face, I run to a place nut inside me.

#

I exzamine ze vapor filled chumber. Ze door locked, ze silenze broken as ze ab-sence approaches. Pain and fear on ze floor agonizing. Contortions of ze dance. Ze death is dense, and present. And you are zhere. In your naked twisted hor-ror, undone on ze floor, you are zhere. Calling and crawling, crying softly, she is zhere. Ze chest shudders last, little head collapse. And I retreat. Standing present at ze post, I retreat to ze place outside of me.

#

Waiting. The helpless terror grasps into the absence, the unknown, the possi-bilities and

hcvjgt"\*c" f u j g t o c p + " v q" t g w t p" h t q o" j k u" v t k r u" c v" u g c l" V j g" e q q n" u c p f" c p f" u v q p g" c i c k p u v" j k u" d c t g" h g g v" u r q m g waves, no longer silent, rolled and dropped under the bow – the motion was their voice. As the sun rose here, with them, that the emptiness of the world was drowned from his thought. He would walk hand in dropped and rolled through him ... drunk driver ... the wind howled the emptiness within ... the collision and reconstructed, entwined with constantly shifting dirt roads. His home, built of tin and limbs housed dragged out into the night. No faces, only hands around his waist, pulling off the tattered pants covering into the wild countryside and away from the depravity of the city. He built their home in the middle of a grove. Here, looking out over the savannah his mind was free, the silence of the early morning wind danger was heard. He sprung from his cot, calling urgently to his wife, and holding his daughter close. everything he put his hands to. The summers of his adolescence were spent in the Austrian countryside at By his early twenties he graduated from university and planned to teach as a career. It was in teaching that mountain air. He did not want to lose the calm and life found in the silence, yet he found its recollection r t u a p g t u l" F l u e c t f g f l" V j c v" k u" y j c v" p g g f g f" v q" d e" f q p e" y k v j" v j g u g" e t g c w t g u. " v j g u g" l g y u" o" v j g t e" y c u" p q grabbed at his clothes as he shoved each of them through the doors into the chamber. He closed the door. o q x p i" e q p f f g p m {" c e t q u u" v j g" e q n f" d t k e m" e q q t l" J g" h q m q y g f l" J g t" j c p f" u v k m" k p" j k u" c u" v j g {" t g c e j g f" v j g

probabilities, running rampant in the silence. The images fading slowly from her eyes now nearly hollow. Almost darkness. You are there. Gasping every breath, you are there. Fading, she is there. Again. With every sigh a little sob, with every cry an agonizing fear, she is there. Again, again. Again reciting. Everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing come crashing into here, and I run. As I sit holding your hand and caressing her face, watching life vanish into the world around, I run to a place outside of me.

#

De darkness is close. I feel de breath inside de cloth bag ova my hed. I heer de screams as dey rape you. Hepless. I am deir, I can do nu-ting. I strain as de rope cuts my wreests. As she screams against a tin wall, de teeror grows an' all hope has lef me. She is dier, in de house cry-ing. You are dier, violated next to me, your breat' heavy tru de screams. Blud feels my mout' as I breat'. I run. I can nut move, but I run to a place nut inside me.

#

I look into ze eyes, through ze observation window in ze door, as zey begin to fill with tears. I know ze fear on your face will be forever wis me. Ze eyes at that moment, silent but unveiled,

soundlessly of the wildness of the sea. The wind howled the emptiness of the world in which he walked all was silent – the gulls sobs stuck in their throats, the movement of the waves suspended in time – in hand with his wife and child down the shore of his childhood, the voices of the world quelled by the

him, his father, and mother. The thin tin walls of the shanty were all that kept him separated from the his boney legs. Pain coursed through his body. Violated. He wretched. He could see nothing. Alone. eucalyptus grove a great many miles from any city. As time moved on, others came to share their home, swept across the grass and into his lungs. He breathed in the silence from moment to moment, and the

his family's summer home – he craved this escape from the stark, monotonous life of a student in some sense of the mountain calm, the life of his adolescence, was maintained. His plans, however, i tcfwcm{" o qtg" fkh f ewnv"vq"uvkt"kp"jku" o g o qt {"0" J g" y cu"vq"dg" c" i wctf"ô"pq"mkmkpi"qt"dgkpi"mkmgf0"V jg jw o cp"swcnkv{"jg"eqwnf"ugg"kp"v jg o" í "pqv"pq y0"Wrqp"cttkxcn"cv"Cwue j y kv|"jg"hwppf"v jku" y cu"cn o quv Cv"vjg"htqpv"qh"vjg"pgzv"nkpg"uvqf" c" {qwp i "hg o cng."rgtjcruc i g" gki j v0"V jg"lgyu"ctqwpf"jgt" y ckgf" cpf door.

will haunt me. Ze surrounding jews trample each oter in ze madness. Zey curse ze god of zhier ancestors. In ze next breath zey plead wit ze jewish god. Abandoned, no anszer has come. Still, she is zhere. Silent in ze madness, weeping through ze sadness, you are zhere. Every moment is ze last, every breath is taken fast. You are zhere. Ze door sends a shudder through me as it slams shut. And I run. I close myself, and I run to ze place outside of me.

#

The heart pounding silence cannot be ruptured as I go to find you. The waiting is dizzying. The fear of loss is almost more than I can bear. You are there. As I drive to our last meeting on the corner of a street, you are there. And she is there, I know that I will lose her, but I'll kiss her one last time. And I run. As my heart throbs, lungs nearly exploding through my chest, the fear of absolute emptiness creeping over me, I run to a place outside of me.

#

I hear de trucks coming tru de trees. I know deir is no escape. I run. I cannut leave wit'out you, but I run to a place nut inside me.

#

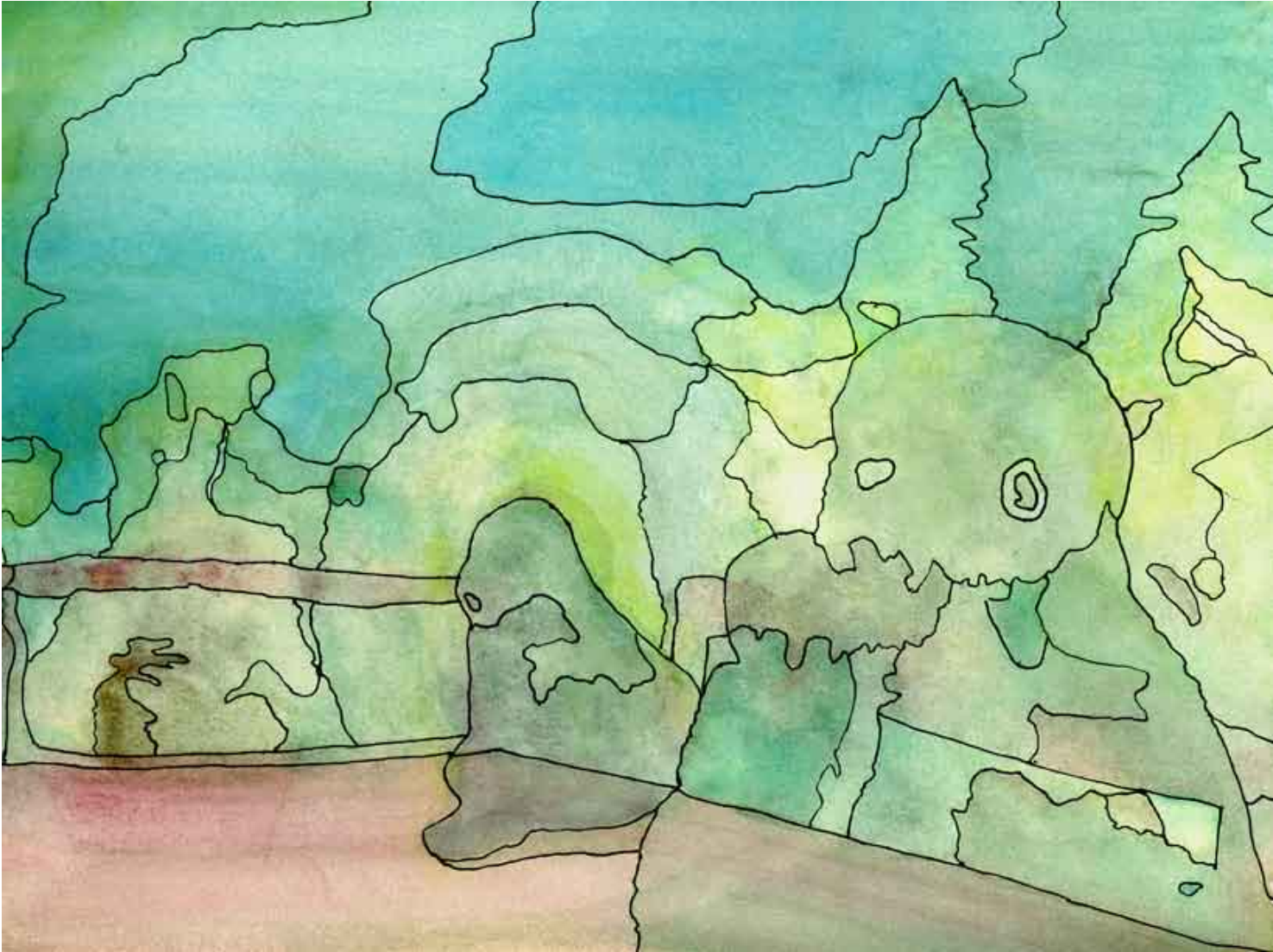
as it blew across the shore spiraling the sand, their voices mingled in midair. Only the waves remained cpvkekr cvkqp"qh"vjg" o q o gpw0" J g" y qwnf"ugnfg o " lpf"vjku"ukngpeg"qp"vjg"u j qtg."dww"jg" y qwnf"dg" j cwpgf" d { o q o gpw0"Cp"vjg" y qwnf"uvcpf." y cvej kpi "vjg"uwp"tgvtgcv"qxgt"vjg"j qtk| qp."vjg"u j cfq y u"etggrkpi"qxgt"vjg

terror of the nights. At times the shrieking of a nearby rape in the night or the gurgling of some passerby's Absolutely alone. There was nothing left between himself and the night. The night had come inside him. fgxgnqrkpi"kpvc" c"u o cm" xkmc i g0" J ku"fcw i j vgt."pq y" gk i j v" { gct u"qn f." y cu" jgt" o qv jgt" c p f" hcv jgt u" rtk | g f presence of his daughter brought the silence alive. From time to time the village came near to

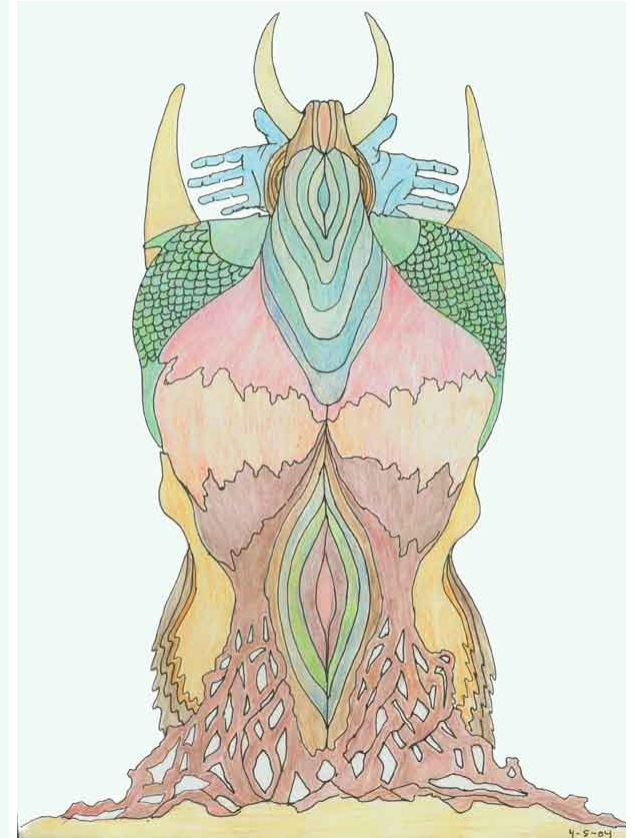
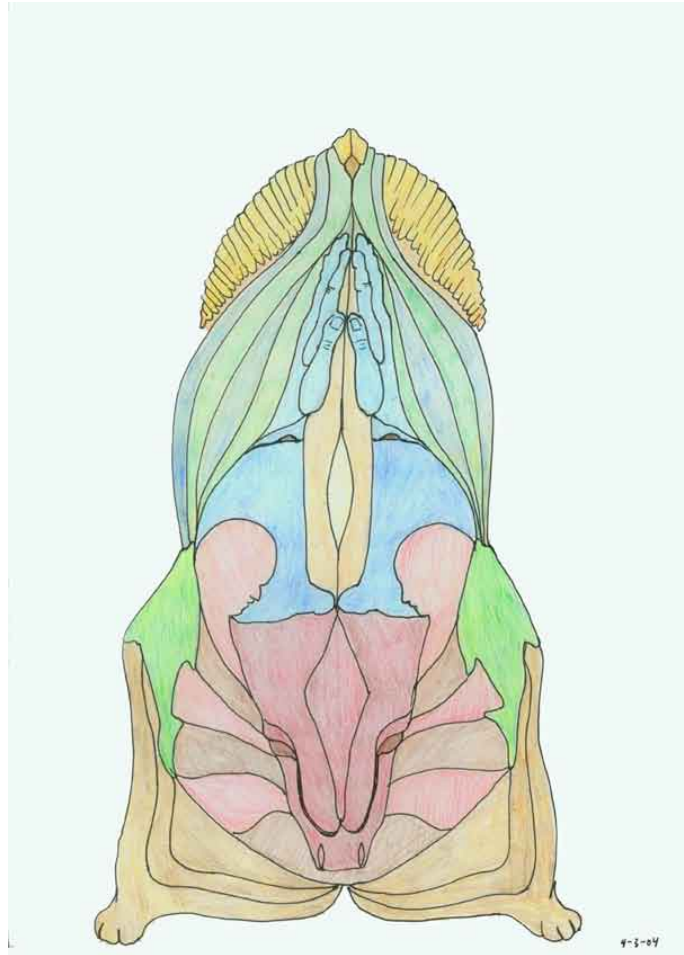
Munich. The countryside was full of wholesome air which, even in the silence of the midday mountain were changed by the persuasion of close friends to enlist in the war effort. Though completely uninvolved lgyku j "rqrwncvkv." xkng" fgc/tk f fgp"etgcwv tgu." pgg f g f"vq"dg"kuqncv g f." swctcpkpg f0" Cp f"uq" j g" y qwnf" i wctf exactly the orders from the national government. Able bodied males and females would be kept for work pleaded. She was silent. No tears came from her eyes, only an unveiled calm, only the same silence

Ze hand at my side grips harder as ze door comes closer. As you turn into my eyes I see ze calm, ze silenze, ze dread, ze life of ze mountainz of my childhood. Ze hand now clenching mine, I remove. As you claw at my heart pleading, clutching my clozing, I tear away and push you through ze door. Ze silence never to be heard again, ze emptiness only to remain in me forever. Only now, in this moment, do I know and understand the desire for the silence. Time has slowed down and I know, I know what will be said as the wind and sand and rocks mingle together. Their voice is an inescapable doom. But before, immediately before, the sunlight breaks the horizon and the sounds erase my soul, all is silent in anticipation of the moment. The words are your destruction, as the wind howls. And I am haunted by silence.

unabashedly silent to him, despite their roaring and crashing – it was only empty sound. One morning, sand and stone under their bare feet. All was silent in anticipation of the moment. And the silence haunted ... sand and stone against the back of his throat ... silence in anticipation of the moment ... last breath kept him awake. The memory, the sounds were forever ingrained, and nothing worse than He ran. In the following years he ran from village to village working – running. Rhodesia, Botswana, destruction from the terrorism of rebel groups. Young men with nothing to live for, and only the desire to She sobbed loudly, for fear of the night. calm, was present with life, and in each moment life breathed into the silence. His afternoons were spent I gt o cp { "htq o "vjg" kphgevkqp"qh"vjgug"etgcwvtgu" Gxgpiwcm { . "vjg" i jgwg" jg" i wctfgf" ycu" xcecvgf. "vjg" lgyu – he could not understand why – and the others would be disposed. He was in charge of the doors to present in each moment of the midday mountain air. She stood naked, the only symbol of life he had U j g" wtpgf" jgt" ugewt" i c | g" vqyctf" jku" rkgtekp i " g { gu" o' cm" jgt" nkhg" cpf" jku" tggcngf" kp" c" o q o gpv0



RENEE PRESS  
BLUE BACKYARD  
WATER COLOR ON PAPER



RENEE PRESS

LEFT: TOTEM 1

MIDDLE: TOTEM 2

RIGHT: TOTEM 3

COLORED PENCIL ON PAPER



## CLOCK ME IF YOU CAN

BY THEMBA MABONA

THEMBA MABONA was born and bred in Switzerland. She studied Sociology & Anthropology at the U. of Zurich, Sociology at Francis College, and received her B.A. from Knox College and M.A. from the U. of Chicago. She spent 4 months in Berlin with a young Internet Startup doing marketing, 9 months in Cape Town doing Development Cooperation and interviewing both Youth and disadvantaged people from an alternative economy network (talent exchange). Presently she lives in Lucerne, waiting to land a job in journalism. She is most interested in contemporary literature from Switzerland, USA, South Africa, as well as Anthropology, studying alternative economics and anarchism (David Graeber). Other hobbies are running and badminton. Favourite reading: P. Roth, D. DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, F. Pessoa, U. K. LeGuin, I. Calvino, S. Bellow, Hugo Loetscher, Terry Eagleton, Nicholas Mosley, Max Frisch, Zakes Mda. Mabona has a blog in German & English: <http://themzini.wordpress.com>

Can you hear it too?

Agh, what a silly question, of

course you can't hear it. But in the beginning I didn't know. I mean, that's how it usually goes: we start out with a healthy dose of goodwill and faith in the world, believing in one thing or the other, then, as we run out into the wild, wild west of reality and, as far as our personal tally is concerned, our WIN-LOSS balance begins sliding to the right, we realize or let me be specific, I realize that maybe my goodwill, high hopes and great expectations might have been misplaced to begin with. But in this case not the world was at fault as I usually like to imagine but nobody, there is no blame to be assigned. I simply asked:

- Can you hear it too?

But folks looked at me strangely, as in

- What on earth are you talking

about? The traffic? The birds? Well no, I hear nothing in particular.

But I was hearing it. It was coming from beyond the horizon so that I couldn't help but ask others, however nutty it made me sound.

- Can you hear it too?

What I heard, loud and clear, was an ominous TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-

TOCK. We are likely to associate a regular sound with a ticking, distinct quality to it as indicating the passage of time and thus being indicative of a watch. So that's what it was to me, the loud ticking of an immense, threatening, invisible clock. Ticking off time towards I didn't know what calamity. But of course not knowing didn't mean not being able to speculate: how about a giant, world-ending bomb, miles underground, ticking insanely towards the apocalypse... The more evident thing to do was to assume that I was suffering from a minor auditory disorder or, if things were really bad, an insignificant variety of an usually even worse schizoid condition. However, this train of thought suggested that I should go see my doctor and after asking him, to be on the safe side, if he could hear it too, demand he refer me to the appropriate psychoanalyst.

I didn't totally dislike this idea of having my psyche checked out because 'The Sopranos' and reading Freud had given me this glorified notion about having sessions at what we call 'the soul plumber' [not such a bad expression if you think about all the shit clogging up your subconscious]. In particular the idea of reclining on a huge leather couch and non-stop going off about myself and what could it all mean and "Oh, I'm so grandly symbolic/ archetypical" etc. was the main draw for me. The pampering of the old, childish instinct that the whole world is created around oneself and no one but oneself. But before I even got so far as my doctor's practice considerable doubts assailed me:

A) Did my health insurance really cover this?

B) What if I was indeed going nuts? Did I really want to know this? Wasn't it nicer slowly, blissfully slouching towards bedlam and then dealing with convulsive electro-shock therapy when I get there?

C) What if the therapist indeed, as fantasy would have it, was drop-dead gorgeous and all these sessions just devolved into me indulging all types of insalubrious sexual fantasies with the additional masochist twist that I was unlikely to land with the therapist [of course only due to her professional ethical standards so that she too, sub rosa, would be suffering from secret pangs of lust, abandon, desire].

D) What if there was actually something to the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK and for whatever unlikely designs I, Benedict Foster Fanon, was the only person to be able to hear it and play savior of the world or whatever the hidden metronome demanded of its unlikely hero? Awgh, there were just too many open questions that would have been shut down by frequenting a shrink and so swallowing empty and biting down hard on my caries-riddled molars I decided to get to the bottom of this all by my incompetent self. For good or bad or incredibly worse. I stumbled upon "Midnight's Children" and for a few fleeting days I gave myself up to the delusion that I too was fatefully intertwined if not with

my country and its mythology then at least history, the vast movements of humankind, the final rising of the post-industrial proletariat of which I was to play a key role. So in full crazy-mode I would open the mailbox in the morning half-awaiting a thick envelope with my heroic, neo-marxist script in it. It was sweet make-believe, “as if” at its finest, but exhilarating while it lasted.

Finally, one Monday when I actually had the awareness to realize that it was Monday, the start of the dreadful, eternal cycle of wage slavery, I decided to once again act conscientiously like I were employed and went to check my day planner. As you could imagine finding the day planner, the least used and most disabused object in my tiny inventory of possessions, was a heck of a job. When at last, nearing exhaustion, I had the good fortune of finding it at the bottom of the laundry bag smelling of club smoke, soccer pitch, weeks of sweat and worse, I opened it with a sense of apprehension that there might be some momentous appointment that I had willingly forgotten about.

I flipped through its pages.

The ones from earlier in the year were indeed full of appointments and to-do lists. This concept of having a day planned out with things to be accomplished and checked in my state of non-linearity struck me as something very bizarre. In the fullness of time I arrived on the Monday in question and, a shock to my system, there was indeed written down an appointment for that day: 10:15 RAV. Now in case you’re unfamiliar with our country the RAV can be sort of rough depending on your personal advisor. The idea is pretty basic: trust is good, control is even better.

You meet with your advisor who in 8 out of 10 cases cannot help you due to an army of reserve labor, etc. But of course you don’t get into any ideological debates on these occasions. Instead you get this subtle or not so subtle suggestions that you are a parasite of society [try thinking of yourself as a tic sucking on a scalp and see how that soothes your ego] and that you should change your ways, write more applications, make a bigger effort, put on a wider smile, go turn tricks, repent and reform, whatever it takes.

But such was my lot for the day. To sally forth to the outskirts of town to the most derelict street there is, scuttle up the hill towards the steep cliff against which the administrative building is huddled like a modern-day leper colony. There I would exchange a few pronouncements of my willingness to write further applications for the advisor’s acknowledgement of these efforts. Some of the advisors would just have you get a telemarketing gig in one hot second but you find ways to forestall this dreadful option for a couple of months before you give in to the titani-

um-grade realities of the job market.

But then a most unexpected thing happened. As I sat on the trolley and it made its way down the bank of the dark green river, the ticking became louder and louder. Hearing this I felt optimistic that I might still get to the bottom of it all. I turned in the direction of our medieval battlements, thinking they are more than symbolic enough of our town [and thus my existence] to be the keepers of the secret clock. But we passed by them without the keen dopplering in- and decrease in pitch that would have confirmed my supposition.

A few minutes later as I walked towards the grey, ugly, trash-strewn cliff, the regular reverberation of the mystical metronome increased to a booming pitch so that I tarried a while to look all around me. Then I took the stairs to the fourth floor and entered the office’s grey-in-grey desolation. The lady at the entry desk who was typing in data with a professional smile on her face was unconcerned so I knew she surely couldn’t hear the deafening clock.

- And you are Mister?

- Oh. Fanon. I’m Benedict Fanon. I’m here to see.... sorry, I forget the name, I’m really terrible with names. It’s embarrassing.

- No problem. Fanon? Let me quickly have a look. .... Oh, there, Office #12, Ms.Theiling. Please have a seat.

- Do you mind if I take some of these? [I’m pointing at the job application effort forms]

- Not at all. Help yourself to as many as you want.

The fact that she is genuinely upbeat despite the institutionally somber environment never ceases to catch me off guard. I always think: yes, I want to be emotionally like her, unimpressed by my environs, fed by an inner fire nobody can see, much less comprehend.

Ms. Theiling was late and so the admin lady told me to go ahead. I did. The view from the office, as usual, swallowed me alive: you can see the green, apartment speckled hind-hills of the city, the medieval wall making its way up the incline, encircling the old, scenic part of the city like a turreted necklace. Down to the right of this flows the river, some whitecaps, a large construction site, crossed by wooden and concrete bridges.

But this time I was not so much checking the view as examining in a last ditch effort the window panes themselves: if the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK was a part of reality then these sheets of glass should have been in sympathetic vibration. I walked over to the sill, apprehensive, put my hand on the cold pane: nothing. I sighed. It was me. I was losing it. I would have to learn to either live with the unforgiving loud chronometer or board the boat of fools, neither of which particu-

larly appealed to me.

Then something at the very edge of my vision caught my attention and I turned to my right. Just below the windowsill protruding at the height of my knees was a small, rusty latch. I turned around to check if Ms. Theiling was opening the door yet, which she wasn't. In a flash I bent down and pulled the latch so that a dwarf-sized doorlet opened squeakily. Behind it there was a metallic... chute or tunnel approximately twice my diameter at the hip sloping downwards steeply, the kind of gradient that, had it not been for the darkness that cut vision off after a few meters, would have given me a bout of vertigo. The miserable ticking of the clock was coming from down there reducing my range of possibilities to one, death-defying option: fling myself down the chute! Unemployment pay sanctions or no. I cast one last, wistful glance upon town then awkwardly inserted myself into the tube and slid forth into the unknown. The first couple of meters were slow so I still was able to gather my faculties about me and do some speculating as to what all this signified. At first I was of a mind to think of it as an abandoned helvetic military lunacy, that is, one of the uncountable tunnels they had drilled into rock during the defensive panic of WWII... but then why would it be attached to a RAV office? Next, I considered that government employees avail themselves of outlandish perks the average citizen cannot even imagine and this slide would simply exit next to the parking slot of my advisor. As I accelerated downwards and the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK yet increased to a point where I was convinced I shouldn't even still be able to hear it because it should have long since destroyed my snailish inner ear, I indulged one last fancy: that this steeply twisting tunnel was of the "Alice In Wonderland" variety and I would exit into a complete fantasyland, a realm full of adventure. Though, evidently, this scenario would also have implied that I was indeed be perfectly insane, imagining stuff.

Accompanied by the unchanging tick I corkscrewed into the depths of that long-ago Monday. Finally, with a resounding "SCHLUNGH" I was flung into thin air, sailed for a second and landed in an pile of unknown stuff. The texture of the encompassing material felt very familiar and when I moved so did the rustle it made. Here the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK was at its loudest. I was in a cubical, badly lit room overflowing with A4 sheets of paper. I picked one up at random and studied it:

Benedict F. Fanon  
Tiger Plaza 21  
9004 Lucerne  
benfan@gmail.com

CPS Personal AG  
Samuel Illi  
Kanonenallee 91  
70 003 Altra Luna

Lucerne, Nevuary 9th, 2009

- Oh!

Was all I could say in my astonishment. I leaved through the vast pile but each sheet was either of the variety above or it had a company logo in the upper right and some lines of a variation on

"[...] thanks again for your interest in our company. We received an unexpectedly large volume of applications. Thus we were able to select a candidate even more closely matching our profile for the position. Please do not interpret this to mean that you are less [...] We hope that you will soon find a new challenge that matches your needs and [...]"

Only these two types of letters with both of which I was heart-breakingly familiar with. But instead of sinking to a new all-time low this room full of futile trial and error encouraged me, refueled my foolish hopes. And there was after all still the mystery of the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK to be resolved.

I began scrambling through the pile of processed pulp like a mad hatter in search of his lost timepiece, desperate and non-methodical. Soon enough my search paid off as my foot somewhere below the raging sea of paper struck a solid object. I dove down and came up with a sizable grey and black, rectangular box the face of which was a huge black display with neon-yellow digits:

01 years / 08 months / 23 days / 09 hours / 44 minutes / 16 seconds  
Above the digits I was informed what this was all about, what persona I was to perform in the great play of history. It said: Time until Full-Scale Ejection of Benedict Foster Fanon from Standard Helvetic Society.

- Ha! Hahahahaha!

I laughed from the bottom of my belly but in true scorn. For a surreal, obscure clock to function as though it could tick off my fate, how laughable!

- Never!

I yelled.

- I will keep my own time!

And hurled the chronopathic box at the nearest wall where it burst into a thousand useless pieces and the obnoxious TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK came to a stop. I felt my symbolic status as a parasite poof and vanish.

- Take that!

I screamed triumphantly both my middle fingers extended in the direction of the disintegrated clock. I calmed down shortly and began looking about for an exit. The entry was too high above ground for me to get back into. However, there was another circular opening in the opposite wall and I pulled myself strenuously up into it.

Suffice it to say that the way back was incredibly long and bothersome, at times I got picked at by mechanical arms swooping down upon me from the dark recesses of the confined tunnels. A few times I peeked through potential openings but the grey offices that I saw and the heavily technical HR jargon issuing from them scared me back into the oblivion of the tunnel. For a while I even thought that forever worming my way through the tunnels would be my punishment for destroying the dastardly timepiece. But no.

Where the tunnel became darkest and I was just about ready to lie down and call it a life, I saw an outline of light I hadn't come across before. I inched forward on my elbows and knees with the last of my remaining energies, arrived at the luminescent portal, pushed it open and beheld not sickly office- but daylight! I hauled myself out of the pitch-black passage into the light of a new day. I turned around and beheld, to little or no astonishment, the post office across from our apartment block.



## LET ME SLEEP

BY CHRISTINE UTZ

CHRISTINE UTZ was born in Miami, Florida and graduated from the University of North Florida in 2008. She is currently working on her Masters thesis in fiction at Adelphi University. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

He rolls over in the bed and wraps his arms around me, nuzzling himself into the crook of my legs, his chest against my back; he thinks I'm sleeping. His breath blows across my ear and I am very much awake. I twist from his grip and shift closer to the edge of the bed; he thinks I'm having a bad dream. His body presses up to me once again and now his breath is on my neck. The hairs rise on my arm and I'm sweating from the heat that comes out of his skin. I grab his arm and move it, shift even closer to the edge, and tell him again.

"Let me sleep."

The sheets are wrapped tight around my shoulders and he pulls at them when he rolls over. He's up against the wall on the opposite side, our backs to each other. Then he kicks the sheets off and repositions himself, shaking the whole bed. I wait for him to finish his fit of protest before I fall back asleep.

It's Valentine's Day. He wakes up early to go to work and I have the whole bed to myself. There's a knock on the door at half past twelve and when I open it, a vase full of tulips and a box of chocolates are on the doorstep along with a handmade card. I bring the flowers inside and fill the vase with water. He wants to take me out to dinner later.

We go to some Chinese place and sit at the end of a long table filled with other couples, leaning over their soup and talking loudly so I can hear their plans for the rest of the night.

"I need to go to bed early. I have class in the morning," I tell him.

I'm lying in his lap on the couch. He knows something's wrong because I'm not good at hiding it.

"Things aren't the same between us anymore," I tell him. He wants to know why. I can't explain it.

"Did you cheat on me?" He asks.

"No." The pillows are bunched up underneath me and I'm chewing on the corner of one.

"Is it some other guy?"

"No."

"You don't love me anymore?"

"Yeah, that's it."

He keeps a straight face through it all. He doesn't believe me. How can you just stop caring, he must wonder. I don't know. I let my words flood through the fabric of the pillow and think about making myself look sadder.

This is how an ending works. Give a reason, let him wallow, wait for the flare-up. He doesn't get mad; he won't cry. I was expecting him to cry. I hug him and he doesn't want to let go; his hands lock onto my shoulders. When I pull away and tell him I have work to do he says okay, but keeps sitting there.

"You should go," I get up from the couch.

"I know. But really, is this it?"

I move into my bedroom and he follows. He sits on my bed for another hour. I sit with him, I have to. We don't say anything to each other and I keep getting up to move around the room, trying to look busy, trying to signal to him that he needs to leave but I won't actually say it. He keeps touching me. My leg, my arm, my hair. He needs to remember them, needs to hold on to that last image of me sitting on the bed beside him breathing loudly through my nose.

I let him stay the night. Just one more time. It's three in the morning and he's past the shock and moving into a fit of shaking. I don't want him driving. The bed isn't big enough, we both are on the edges, and if I roll over I'll touch him. His fingers are on my back.

"Goodnight," he whispers.

My eyes open a minute before my alarm is set to go off. His arm is draped loosely over my stomach and I'm lying in the middle of the bed. I've stolen all the blankets for myself; his toes are freezing when my feet touch them. He's still asleep but he feels me stir and pulls me against him and I let him hold me in the last seconds before the alarm sounds.



Group Therapy

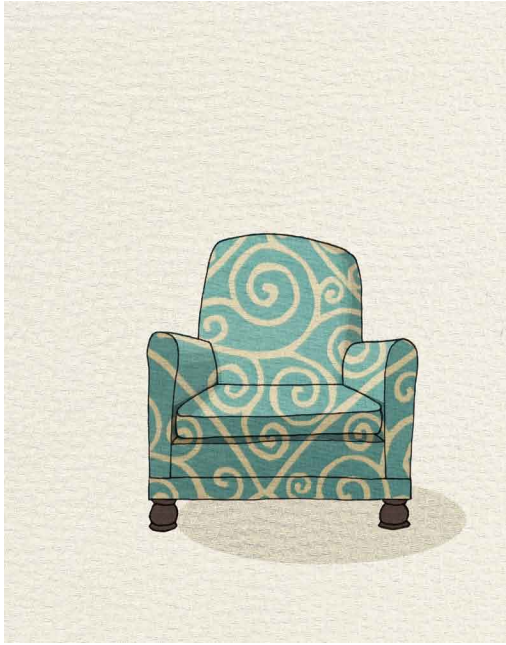
MELISSA BRYANT  
DIGITAL COLLAGE

Family Portrait 1



Modern Sofa 2: Blue Brown Damask





**Modern  
Chair:  
Teal Swirls**

**Circle  
Time**



**Wingback:  
Aubergine  
Spot**





## LA VIE BRÛLÉ

BY SEAN THOMPSON

SEAN THOMPSON is a new author who has been seriously working at, and developing his writing for about three years. He graduated from UNF in 2008 with a Bachelor's in English and despite his hopes is still trying to find a job willing to make use of his particular skills. He has moved around a lot for various reasons and experienced his fair share of a multitude of different people and personalities and tends to day dream about "what if" scenarios. Once he started putting ideas onto paper he realized he'd been writing stories most of his life sans the paper. He enjoys writing and hopes to continue to do it for a long time to come, and maybe eventually make some money off of it.

chop. Chop. CHOP! Derek Carson sighed and dropped the knife onto the cutting board. The half-diced onions in front of him glistened and said 'Don't stop now. We haven't reached our potential. Sauté us!' He told them to leave him alone and that he wasn't in the mood. He turned around to the meat table and sprinkled some parsley on a leg of lamb.

'What are you doing man? Parsley is a garnish for my dish, not a seasoning. What's gotten in to you?' the lamb seared.

"Just shut up already, I know what I'm doing," Derek huffed and put a lid over the pan. More and more arguments sprouted with his food and their once bold voices, which usually sang jolly tunes to his quick knife, had become feeble and stuttered. His life, his passion was evaporating.

His frustration was the result of a doctor's visit from several weeks back. In the examination room he had looked around at the white walls and imagined they were made of marshmallow. He considered licking one, just in case, when the doctor entered with his diagnosis.

The doctor explained that Derek's cholesterol was too high and it was

thickening his arteries. This was why his extremities were feeling numb and he got dizzy easily. His circulation was too slow and if he didn't act quickly he faced a potential heart attack. The doctor prescribed Derek exercise and medicine that would help thin his blood and lower his cholesterol. However it had the potential side effect of lost appetite. This side effect, the doctor told him, could also help to change his diet to a more heart friendly course. He consoled that it was not the end of the world.

Derek fumbled with his apron tie and let it fall to the tile floor. 'What's wrong with me? What's happening to my food?' he thought, tugging at his beard. He picked up an avocado, squeezed, and threw it to his side where it squished against a wall. A tiny squeal sounded off the walls and upon inspection, he found the avocado. Ashamed, Derek picked it up and brushed it off. "I'm sorry," he said, and heard what sounded like the whimper of a disciplined puppy. Bits of pulp seeped from open wounds and it had fresh bruises.

Melting to the floor and he looked with damp eyes at the apron flayed next to him. The avocado continued to whimper and the bag of potatoes under the table said, 'Way to go asshole, what'd he ever do to you?'

"I said I'm sorry!" Derek boomed.

"Sorry for what and who are you talking to?" It was Troy, his best sous chef.

"No one. I mean myself. I mean, you know what I mean." Troy had been Derek's friend for eight and a half years and his fellow chef for nine. The rigorous hiring process of their restaurant, Le Petite Bistro, was the reason for the delay in their friendship. Once they accepted their shared passion they became fast friends. Derek the head chef and Troy working right under him. Troy was the only one who would hang out with the strange head chef who was often heard talking to his food. No one knew why either of them did this. Derek had confided his trouble to him the day after his diagnosis.

Troy looked around the corner from the cook line. "Are you okay? You look sadder than a limp noodle," he teased.

"It's nothing, I'm just a little distracted," Derek replied.

"You sure? You're not still upset about that doctor visit are you?" Troy was a reliable source of venting steam.

"Nah, I'm okay."

"What about your stomach? Are you taking that vitamin I gave you?"

"Yeah, the Hoodie Gor-whatever has been helping, but it's not my stomach."

"Hoodia Gordonii." Troy corrected. "It's really popular for indigestion, straight from Africa."

"I just feel, off. And my medication is killing my appetite." Derek burbled.

Troy smirked, then adjusted his mouth to a half-frown. He pulled a vegetable crate up next to Derek and sat down. “Listen, I didn’t want to say anything cause I figured, you know, you were just going through a slump. It happens to the best of us. But, I’ve noticed something wrong with your food.”

“What the hell are you suggesting,” Derek sizzled and leapt up nearly knocking Troy over, “my dishes are the best in this restaurant!”

“Calm down. That’s not what I mean. It all tastes fine, the best like you said, but there’s just something off. I can’t put my finger on it. They’re lackluster, less appealing.” Troy braced for a verbal braising. Derek sagged and leaned against the meat table.

A little cautious he continued, “I don’t know, maybe I’m crazy but even the clientele have been complaining.”

Derek’s eyes watered a little, and he choked “The guests?”

“Yeah, and that’s the funny thing; they can’t explain what’s wrong either. They just make a weird face, say something doesn’t seem right, and either go back to their meal or ask for a new plate.”

Derek frowned and laid his face in his hands. “I know, I know. Don’t you think I know! I hear the servers talking. ‘That’s the third time today Derek’s food’s been sent back’” he mumbled in a childish voice.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” He slid back down to the floor and kneaded the muscles in his neck. Next to him was his dirty, ragged apron. He reached out and spooned it into his lap, then began to untie and retie the strings, the tendons in his neck strained.

“I can’t figure out what’s changed. My food is the same as always but they’ve lost their life,” Derek said.

Troy looked around, making sure they were alone. “Hey man, it’ll be ok. Maybe you just need some time off. It might be your diet wearing at you.”

“Maybe. Stupid diet.”

“That’s gotta be it. Take a vacation and let your diet run its course. You’ll be your old self in no time.” Derek pondered this and worked at a tangled knot.

“I’ve been feeling empty but I can barely finish a meal. I thought this was supposed to make me healthier.”

“It will but you have to give it some time. Go and relax. De-stress” Derek percolated.

“That’s a good idea. I need to get away from food for a while. I swear it’s like they’re taunting me. You’re a good friend, you know that?”

Troy grinned and shifted his eyes. “Uh, yeah. I doubt the food is taunting you Derek. But I am about the only friend you’ve got in this place,” he joked then eased up to his feet. “I’ll let the owner know you’re taking a hiatus. Anything else I can take care of for you?”

“No. Thanks again.” Derek started to walk out the back door.

Troy followed and mashed Derek’s floored apron. “Don’t worry. I’ll look after the place.”

The next morning Derek fell into his health routine of the past week. He had loved life and thought how seldom someone was able to turn their passion into a career. Now it was all evaporating; never hungry, barely able to hear the voices of food, couldn’t enjoy any especially rich dishes, and what he could eat tasted like cardboard.

Derek woke, showered, and dressed. He looked in the mirror and wondered if his face would get as bright as a tomato from a heart attack. Then decided a shiny marble carrot half-buried for a headstone would be nice and considered revising his will. In the kitchen he made a bowl of Cheerios. His mind bubbled with possible improvements to breakfast.

In the fridge he reached for the reduced fat milk. The strawberries whispered, ‘you could slice us up and toss us in some sugar, wouldn’t that be lovely?’ And the bananas on top of the fridge hissed, ‘Man they’re not even ripe, way too bitter. Caramelize some sugar on us, we can take it.’ Bananas like it rough.

Food sired him to the shelves of the refrigerator. Though still very hushed, the voices seemed almost louder than they had been. He reached towards the produce drawer and halted. Derek shut his eyes, then closed the door and tugged away. He knew it would start with one ingredient then another, and another. The strawberries would encourage protein and he’d get some eggs. The eggs would say, ‘you know we’d taste better cooked in bacon grease, go ahead fry some crispy bacon.’ An image marinated in his mind of himself as a heroin addict, hunched against an empty fridge, itching for more to burn. More. When his eyes opened, taped to the door in shaky red handwriting like a death threat were the cholesterol results.

Bothered by breakfast and appetite reduced to a simmer, Derek gave up and decided exercise was the best bet to distract himself. He changed into jogging clothes and took his medication. His stomach felt fine so he ignored Troy’s herb and left the apartment at a brisk pace.

His mood glazed over the further he jogged from the kitchen. Deciding on a park nearby he was expectant that the woods could offer a culinarily barren comfort. Derek soaked in a pungent brine and time boiled by without incident. Just when his mood regained a little fire he saw a family setting up a picnic. The mother was having trouble with her blanket when the wind picked up and blew it right in Derek’s path.

He picked the blanket up and faced the family. The mother ran over, frantic. Her hair was the color of a dark red wine and there was an olive tint to her skin. A tasty Italian dish. Derek handed her the cloth. A little winded she said, “Thanks for grabbing my blanket. Not exactly the best idea to have a picnic now eh?”

“Huh?” He said, “Oh, uh, no. It’s a bit too windy for a picnic.” A

gust of wind blew and odors of fresh picnic goods from the woman seared his nostrils. Appetite nibbled at his stomach and confusion salivated his thoughts.

“Yeah I know, but we made all this great food so we couldn’t let it go to waste. We’ve got potato salad, deviled eggs, and barbeque chicken. Oh, and I made my special angel food cake for dessert with a kiwi frosting. My name’s Brenda and those are my boys.” Brenda pointed over her shoulder to three children passing around a football that looked strangely like a kiwi. “What’s your name Mr. Picnic Saver?”

Derek shucked the sudden appearance of his appetite. “I’m Derek, and I’m head chef at Le Petite Bistro. Nice to meet you.”

“Really?” she squealed “I love that place. You’ve got to try my food. I’d love an expert opinion.” She took his arm then tried to pull him to the food but was stopped when he didn’t move.

“I really shouldn’t. I’m on a diet and I need to finish my exercise,” he explained.

She pouted and coaxed, “Come on, just a taste. I would really appreciate any advice you could give me. You’re the head chef after all so you must be very good. I won’t tell on you.”

Derek’s eyes widened and knees shook, he argued with himself, ‘No, you can’t. One taste and you’ll be done. But it’s only a little bit, and it smells so good. I’m so hungry all of the sudden. Fight it, remember your health. Do you want to die? I haven’t died yet. One little taste won’t kill me. I’m soo hungry.’ “Only,” he huffed, “only a little taste.” Victorious, she beamed and pulled him towards the picnic spread. With each slice of his foot through the grass strange whispers sounded ahead. He began to sweat and felt his heartbeat quicken. Step.

‘Eat me.’ “Is that the potato salad? So tasty yet not finesse,” Derek said aloud, shaking his head. Brenda turned back and looked at him. “Did you say something?”

“No.” Derek replied. She grinned and continued. Step.

‘Ba-gawk.’ “Chicken, always joking.” Step.

‘Come Derek and have your fill, we’re delicious. You know you want us, just take us.’ “That must be the deviled eggs, always tempting.” Derek said. Brenda stopped, “Are you ok?” But Derek continued to walk. Step.

‘Oh Derek, I’m like heaven. Come to me.’

“I will angel, I will.” Brenda ran ahead to her children and folded her arms around them. “Come on kids. We have to go. Just leave everything and run.” Step.

Derek woke alone and unsure of his surroundings. ‘Trees, grass, a picnic blanket, what happened?’ he thought. His clothes were shredded, his faced smeared with potato salad, and barbeque sauce basted his shirt. When he sat up something squished between his legs. Alarmed,

he looked down and saw lime colored frosting splotted on bare legs. “What the hell happened to my pants” he said. In the distance a police siren screamed. He burst to his feet and in a blaze was running through the park, naked, and covered in food. He had no idea what happened but knew he was in trouble. He needed to talk to someone, he needed help. Dodging bushes and using the occasional tree for cover, Derek stumbled through the woods to his nearby apartment building and snuck in the back entrance, hopeful that he would not meet any of his neighbors.

In his apartment Derek dressed quickly. He had to see Troy. If anyone could help him it was his best friend. Though he did not want to go to the restaurant and risk another blackout he was desperate and he knew Troy would be working. He put on a jacket with a hood and left his apartment headed to Le Petite Bistro.

He took back roads and walked in the rear entrance to avoid notice. Troy was on the back prep line chopping scallions. ‘This guy has no idea what he’s doing’ they complained.

“Troy I need your help,” he whispered.

Troy jumped and turned around. “Oh god man, you scared the crap out of me. What are you doing here?”

“I need your help. There was an incident while I was jogging in the park today. I woke up covered in food from some family’s picnic and I don’t know how it happened. One second I was walking to the picnic and then I blacked out. There was a cop siren nearby when I woke so I just ran. I don’t know if they’re looking for me or not but I don’t know what to do. You gotta help me.”

Troy smiled and leaned back. “Oh so that really was you we heard on the radio. I thought so. Sorry Derek. He’s right here guys!” he yelled behind him.

“Sorry for what, and who are you talking to?” Derek said. Then two police officers walked around the corner of the cook line.

“Derek Carson, you’re under arrest for indecent exposure and assault.” They grabbed Derek and pressed him against the wall, then handcuffed him. “Thank you again Mr. Fink for your help in apprehending the suspect. We’ll take it from here.”

“Sure no problem, I’m glad to get this maniac off the streets. He needs some psychological help, did you know he talks to food and thinks they actually talk back?” he laughed. Just then Derek noticed the words ‘Head Chef’ right underneath Troy’s name on his chef coat.

“You backstabbing asshole!” Derek yelled. “You were after my job? That vitamin you gave me, it was poison wasn’t it? I thought we were friends.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Troy smirked. “That’s just an herb used to settle a sore stomach. I think it might also be for reducing appetite in some weight loss programs. I’m not really sure, but

it's definitely not poison to a normal person. Have fun in the loony bin. Derek, it was nice knowing you."

After he was processed, he tried to explain to the police that food really did talk to him, that he blacked out in the park because of a health condition and didn't know what happened, and that Troy had poisoned him to try and get his job. The police delivered him to the local mental health hospital where he was packaged with a padded room, a straight jacket, and three square, nutritionally coordinated meals. He had his first session with Dr. Mender a few days later.

"Mr. Carson. We're gonna start you on some anti-psychotic meds in a few days to see how you react but first we have to let the cholesterol medication get out of your system."

"But I need it or I'll have a heart attack."

"Actually we called your doctor about that. He had trouble finding a Mr. Carson's lab results. Turns out their secretary mixed up the paperwork with a Mr. Larson that came in the same day. He says you were actually in perfect health, only a mild case of food poisoning. Luckily all the meds might have done was thin your blood out a little. Now, why don't you tell me what the food says when it talks to you, hmm?"



## SANTA MARVIN

BY BEAU DENTON

BEAU DENTON recently graduated from the University of North Florida and is now living in Los Angeles, looking at the future and trying to put words together.

The sun rose early on Black Friday, heralding the official beginning of the Christmas season for Harbor Hills Mall. Turkeys, cornucopias, and decorative pilgrims with black hats were replaced by pine trees, cotton snow, and giant boxes with colorful bows. Employees greeted each other with nods and tight-lipped grins as they rolled open the gates in front of each store, every corner of the mall ringing with the advent of songs about bells and chestnuts and Jesus.

Marvin Griggs woke up at 5:30 to prepare himself. The president of the local chapter of the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas, Marvin knew it was crucial he fulfill his reputation as the most respected mall Santa in the tri-county area. He arrived as early as possible, stepping into his makeshift dressing room in the storage area behind American Eagle. He spent an hour making sure his new red pants and coat were lint-free, his beard was the perfect mixture of fullness and wispiness, and the top of his hat angled appropriately to the right side of his head.

After his prerequisite grooming, Marvin began his walk through the mall to survey his domain. He waved at

the man in the Discovery Store and visited briefly with the young lady at the Cingular kiosk. He hesitated after noticing a North Pole sign pointed toward the east wing. Marvin looked for someone to explain the change in placement, but kept walking after seeing only a Brookstone clerk. He forgot his confusion, though, when he rounded the corner and recognized the ornate display resting in the courtyard in front of Sears. A toy train circled a golden throne with red velvet cushions, rolling through the cotton mountains and tunneling under steps that connected the spectacle to the carpeted waiting area. A pair of ropes zigzagged across the carpet, ready to corral the throngs of eager children and impatient parents. An arched sign marked the entrance to the line with gold letters reading “North Pole.” The entire display was layered with strings of twinkling white lights that danced in Marvin’s eyes.

A middle-aged security guard with acne glided up to Marvin on a Segway. “Good morning, Santa Marvin.”

“Merry Christmas, Al.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Al said with a smile.

“Sure is. It gets me every year.” Marvin wiped a gloved hand across his eyes. After a few more seconds of silence and smiles, he turned to Al. “Do you know why we’re down here this year?”

“What do you mean?”

“This is my ninth year here, and I’ve been in front of Dillard’s every time. Why’d they set it up in the east wing this year?”

“Oh don’t worry, Santa Marvin. You’ll still be in front of Dillard’s. This is for Santa Stan.”

Beads of sweat dotted Marvin’s forehead. “Who?”

“Ho, ho, ho!” A skinny, clean-shaven man in a red jumpsuit walked up behind Marvin and extended his hand. “Stanley Altman, American Santa Society. Pleased to meet you.”

Marvin shook the man’s hand, then watched as he reached into a bag at his side and pulled out a pillow and a fake beard attached to a thin, elastic string. Stan smiled broadly after stuffing the pillow inside his shirt and stringing the beard to his face. Marvin swallowed, struggled for words, then turned and hurried in the other direction.

Near the center of the mall, after pausing to catch his breath, Marvin turned into a side hallway and strode into the main office. He was pleased at the way his angry footsteps rippled the coffee on the desk of his supervisor. “Frank, what’s going on here?”

“Good morning, Santa Marvin. How are you?” Frank said, scratching the top of his bald head.

“Two Santas? Is this a joke? He’s not even with FORBS!”

“Marvin, I know you remember Desoto Square Mall and all their lawsuits. ASS is a perfectly valid organization now.”

“But two Santas? How is that possible?” Marvin said, chest heaving.

“I know it’s not ideal, but management thinks it’ll bring in some more money. Maybe families will walk in one side, pay for a picture with Santa, then get to the other side and the spoiled brats will make them do it all again.”

“That’s baloney, Frank. All this’ll do is confuse people, and we’ll have a bunch of angry parents who have to explain to their kids why there are two of us. And what are you gonna tell them? That you’re trying to ruin Christmas?”

“No one’s trying to ruin Christmas—lighten up a little bit. We’re just trying to make some money, Marvin.”

“That’s Santa Marvin. And I’ll lighten up when that bald-faced impostor is out of here.” He turned quickly and stormed from the office, knowing the mall would open soon.

By 10:00 Marvin’s line already had more than a dozen people in it.

“What do we know about him, Carl?” he asked the short, green-clad man standing beside his throne.

“Nothing yet. I’ve got the SMEL office looking into it.”

Marvin nodded approvingly. The Shopping Mall Elf Legion, sister organization to the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas, could be trusted with such an important task. “Ho, ho, ho! And what’s your name, little girl?”

Carl lifted the blonde-haired girl and placed her gently in Marvin’s lap. “Sally Marie Bishop. I’m a very good girl and I want Astronaut Barbie with the Astronaut Barbie Space Shuttle and the Astronaut Barbie Lunar Module.”

Marvin laughed and dragged his hand across his beard. “Well you just keep being good, and Santa will see what he can do. Merry Christmas!”

He nudged Sally slightly to let her know it was time to leave, but she refused to move. “Santa? Are there two of you?”

“Of course not, Sally. There’s only one Santa.”

“Then who’s that man by the toy store?”

Marvin looked toward the east wing. Stanley Altman was out there somewhere, defiling the good name of his mall. “Don’t worry about him, Sally. He is a bad, bad man who is pretending to be something that he’s not.”

“Then why is he here?”

“Santa’s testing you, Sally. If you really are a good girl, then you’ll know which Santa is real, and you will stay far, far away from the one who lies.”

“I know you’re the real Santa, Santa.”

Marvin smiled. “Good girl. Be sure to tell all your friends that.” At lunch on Tuesday, Marvin sat with Carl the Elf as they ate in the storage closet behind American Eagle. “He’s a writer,” Carl said. “He writes stories and articles and shit. Apparently this is his side job, and it’s just

his first year in a mall.”

Marvin shook his head. “Only ASS would certify a skinny writer with no beard and no experience.” He bit into his ham sandwich, ignoring the mustard that smeared his beard. “How do we get rid of him?”

“I don’t know yet. Our contract with the mall doesn’t say anything about not having two Santas. But I’ll keep looking, see if maybe we can pin him with harassment or something.”

“Good.” More ham, more mustard. Marvin reached over and poured Carl another cup of tea. “We need to end this before that asshole kills Christmas.”

“Boss, I thought Santa wasn’t supposed to cuss.”

“Sorry Carl, you’re right. It’s just—it hasn’t even been a week, and I’m already sick of all this.”

“Don’t worry, boss. We’ll take care of it.”

Later that afternoon, Marvin was wiping the sweat from his forehead when a little boy with a green shirt and a mop for hair ran up the steps and jumped into his lap. “Merry Christmas!” Marvin offered with a laugh.

“I want a football!” the boy screamed.

“Well what’s your name, young man?”

“Sammy! And I want a new puppy dog!”

“Have you been good this year?”

“And a G.I. Joe Nerve Gas Warfare Kit!”

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do.”

“And a tarantula!”

“Carl, let’s get Sammy here back to his parents, please.”

Carl the Elf lifted the boy from Marvin’s lap and set him on the stairs leading toward the picture kiosk. “You ready for the next one, Santa Marvin?”

“No, give me just a minute.” Marvin raised a hand to his head, feeling the exaggerated pulse from his temple. “I’ve got a migraine. And I’m depressed. And that Altman bastard is stealing all my kids. He’s destroying Christmas, Carl. You know that? Destroying it. He’s making me do things I haven’t done in years.”

“You want a break?”

“No, no breaks. That would give him the upper hand,” Marvin said, waving his hand and forcing a smile. He noticed the line was shorter than usual. “Is it just a slow day?”

Carl shook his head. “No, boss, it’s not a slow day. Santa Stan’s got cookies for all his kids.”

Marvin’s heart quickened and his rosy cheeks turned crimson. “Don’t you dare call him Santa, Carl. He’s a fucking weasel and he is murdering everything we stand for. And see if you can get us ice cream for tomorrow.”

“Santa, what does fucking mean?”

Marvin turned to the side and was surprised to see Sammy still standing there. “It’s a plant, kid. Merry Christmas.”

After clocking out that afternoon, Marvin saw Stanley Altman walking toward him, beard drooping from his face and pillow protruding to one side. Marvin turned quickly, but it was too late. “Santa Marvin!”

“Bastardfuckingshitasshole,” Marvin hissed as Stanley ran up to him.

“Santa Marvin, I’ve been wanting to talk to you all week.”

“About what, Stan?” Marvin raised his eyebrows and glanced at the exit.

“Well, I hear you’ve been doing this Santa thing for a long time, and a lot of people around here seem to respect you. I was wondering if you had any pointers for me.”

“This Santa thing?”

“Yeah, you know...this job.”

Marvin shook his head and started walking away. “That’s why you’ve got it all wrong, Stan. Santa’s not a job. It’s a life. Don’t talk to me again until you can grow a fucking beard.”

Marvin reached under his bed and pulled out a box, turning to avoid the cloud of dust that followed. This was where he kept those things that were not fitting for Santa’s house. He gazed down the hallway toward the living room to make sure he was alone; the twinkling lights on the walls offered the illusion of movement, but the house was otherwise still. Marvin opened the box and scanned its contents: a pile of magazines, two DVDs, and an antique pistol which had been passed through generations for almost two hundred years. Griggs family legend said that Marvin’s ancestor would invite competitors over for tea before challenging them to a duel.

But the pistol was not what he was looking for. Marvin reached under the magazines and found a tightly folded piece of notebook paper. He slowly lifted each crease and looked at the numbers scrawled on the paper. Reaching for the phone on the bedside table, he froze when he noticed the framed picture of an old man in a Santa outfit. “Sorry, Dad,” he whispered, placing the picture facedown before dialing the number.

“Are you there? It’s Santa Marvin... I’ve been naughty. Do you have any openings tonight?... Okay. I have a hat I want you to wear... And maybe some bells... How much extra?... That’s fine, but I want at least an hour... It’s the house with all the lights on Willow Road. Be sure to come in the back.” He returned the phone to the table and waited, surrounded by silence and dancing white lights.

Frank called Marvin to his desk in the mall office. “We need to talk.”

“What is it?”

“You and I have worked together for a long time,” Frank said with a sigh. “So I wanted to give you a warning before I send a report back to FORBS.”

“A report about what?”

“Well Marvin, I’ve been hearing some things this week that are pretty upsetting. I had a mom the other day tell me you cussed in front of her son. You, Marvin Griggs, cussing in front of little kids.”

“Santa doesn’t cuss, Frank.”

“Well let’s make sure it stays that way.” Frank nervously shifted a pile of papers on his desk. “And I know this is crazy, but there are also reports about you forgetting to say your ho’s. I try to defend you to the parents—I show them all your positive reports and everything. But it’s getting hard, Marvin.”

“Santa Marvin.”

“Right. Listen, people are starting to talk. Alice from Starbucks thinks you’ve lost your spark, and I won’t even tell you what Food Court Cindy said.”

“Hey, I’ve just had a couple off days,” Marvin replied. “This whole two-Santa thing threw me off a little bit, but I’ll get it back.”

“That’s what I want to hear. I’ll be watching you today, and I want lots of smiles and lots of ho’s.”

“You got it.” Marvin stood up and walked toward the door.

“Oh, and you really should give Santa Stan a chance. I’m actually working on a report to send back to ASS about how well he’s doing. He’s a great guy, and I think he wants to learn from you.”

“Sure thing, Frank. I’ll see what I can do.”

Carl the Elf was pacing outside the office, the bells on his hat jingling with every step. “Everything alright, boss?”

“Frank thinks Altman’s doing a better job than me. He even told me—me!—not to forget my ho’s. I’m the best Santa in the tri-county area, dammit.”

“Listen, boss, we can end this. I got a buddy from SMEL who says he can pay Stan a visit if we want. Or there’s this lady friend who might’ve forgotten to tell the cops about what Stan’s done to her, you know what I mean?”

“That’s alright, Carl. Let’s just get to work. I’ll take care of everything.”

That afternoon Marvin went to clock out a few minutes early,

then waited for Stan. He closed his eyes and exhaled heavily when he saw the pillow-bulge and the stringed beard, but he forced himself to smile. “Hey Stan, how are you?”

“Pretty good, Santa Marvin. Look at this!” He lifted his beard and pointed to a thin layer of fuzz clinging to his cheeks. “I’m working on that beard you talked about.”

“Glad to hear it,” Marvin said with another smile. “Listen, I thought maybe you and I could spend some time together. You know, Santa and,” he gulped, “Santa. I know I’ve been a little rough this week, trying to get used to the changes around here, but I think we could be good friends.”

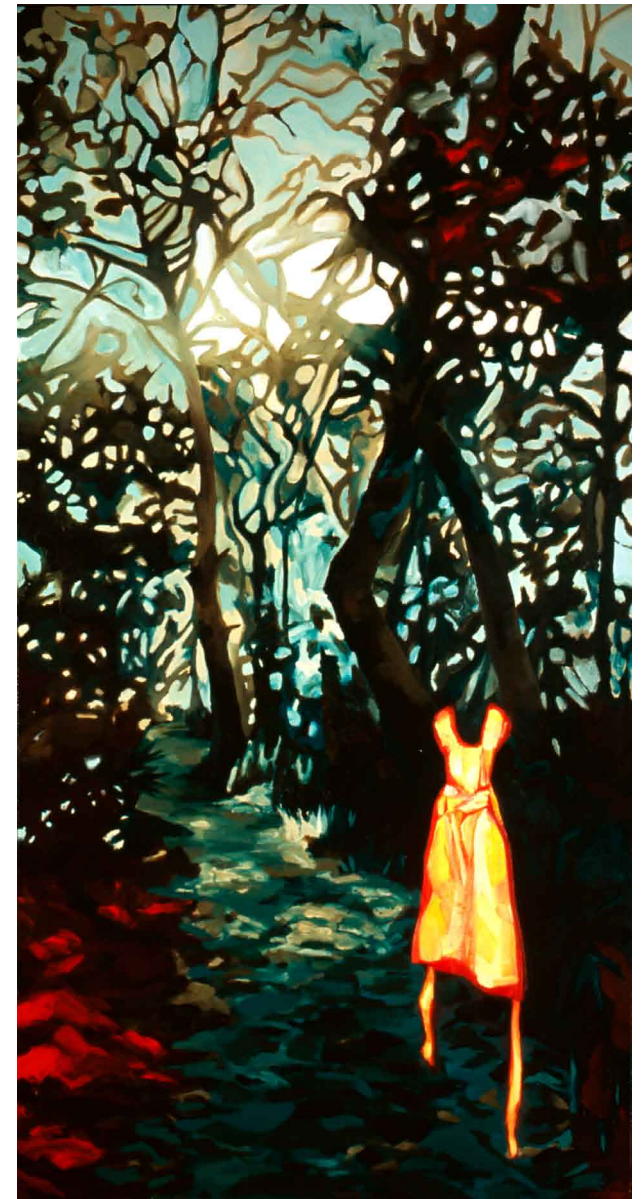
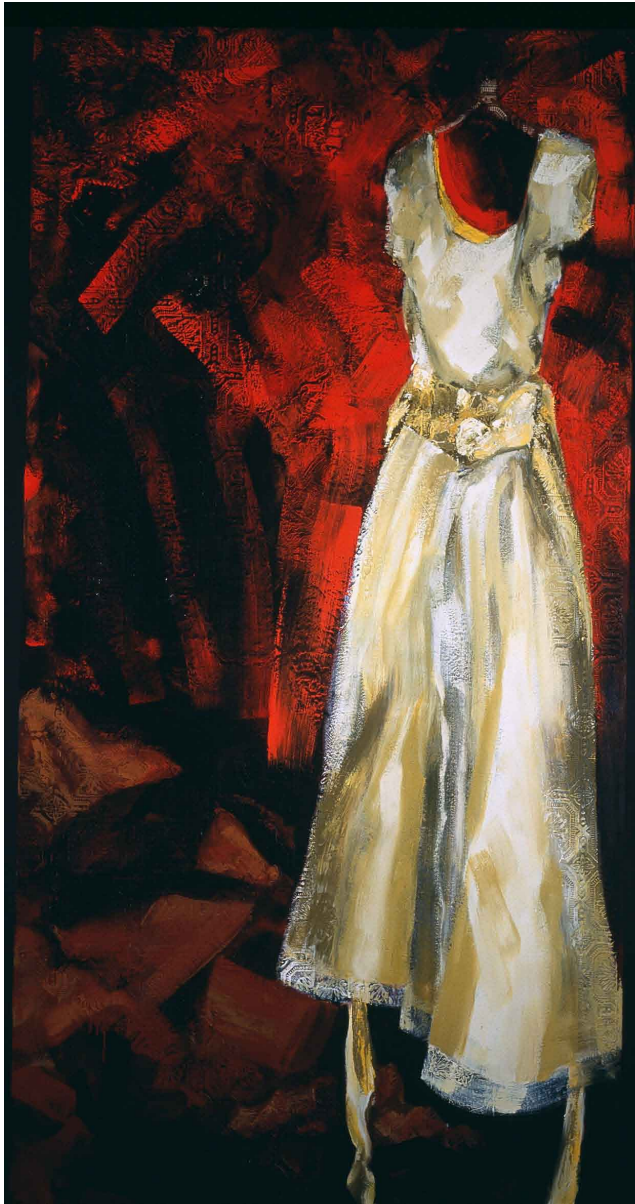
“Yeah, I’d really like that.” He patted Marvin’s shoulder. “Who says an ASS and a FORBS can’t be friends, right?”

“That’s right, Stan. I could have you over to my place tonight, if you’re free. Do you like tea?”

Monday morning Marvin settled into his throne and adjusted his hat. He looked across the mall, smiling proudly. “It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it, Carl?”

Carl stood on the steps and nodded. “Sure is, boss. Frank says Stan didn’t show up for work this morning, and look at this—the day’s just starting and we’ve got the longest line of the year.”

“Yeah, I think things are looking up.” Santa Marvin opened his arms for the young boy at the front of the line. “Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!”



*Body | Home | Spirit* Oil & Wallpaper on Panel || Oil on Canvas

*Untitled 1*



*Oil on Window with Photograph*

*Oil on Panel*



*Hold On*

*Oil on Panel*

*Cold Air*





## CONVERSATIONS IN 201

BY SARAH PREVATT

### Saturday

SARAH PREVATT has an MFA from the University of Central Florida and currently teaches creative writing in the community with UCF's Literary Arts Partnership. Recent work has appeared in *Saw Palm: Florida Literature and Art* and *Oak Bend Review*.

That morning Violet's cell phone rang twice as she stood in the stark bedroom, watching in the mirror as the seamstress crouched on the floor, carefully slipping pins through the delicate organza. The dress was simple, strapless, so tight she could barely breathe. She took in a deep breath and felt her lungs fight against the stiff bra. Another two months, and the dress wouldn't fit at all. She thought about asking the seamstress to let out the sides, just a little, just in case, but she didn't want the questioning look, the confused "Are you expecting to gain weight?"

She stared at herself in the mirror as the seamstress worked. The glaringly white dress made her look washed out. Her face, lips, cheeks, hair even looked pale, lifeless against the brilliant fabric, and suddenly she wanted to tear it, to just take the thin organza between her fingers and pull until she heard the sharp rip and felt the fabric give way. She wanted to run outside, through the mud puddles left from yesterday's rain, run until mud splattered all over the hem, the train.

"I'm out of pins," the seamstress said, standing up. "I'll be right back."

It was while the seamstress was gone that Violet felt it. Her abdomen had been pinched with cramps all morning, but the doctor had said not to worry. When she saw the red drops gleaming on the white tile floor, though, she knew.

She didn't even think about calling her mother. Instead, she climbed into her old Taurus and drove north on I-75. She drove and drove, stopping only for gas and some stale cheddar popcorn from a convenience store. She drove until the sky was a deep, even purple, until her eyelids were so heavy she was afraid of falling asleep at the wheel. As she drifted along the interstate, she saw skyscrapers in the distance, walls of light outlined against a starless sky, and she decided to stop. She drove aimlessly along steeply sloped hills, through mazes of one-way streets until she found a hotel whose sign flickered in the harsh streetlights.

### Sunday

She awoke to the sound of a man speaking. His voice—even, cheerful, with a light British accent—was so clear and distinct it sounded as if he was sitting right next to her bed. She bolted upright, her heart beating rapidly, then collapsed back onto the pillows when she realized it was coming from the next room.

"Just thought I'd check to see how Julie was feeling," the voice was saying. "How is she this morning? Does her back feel better?"

Violet closed her eyes. Next door, the man's coffee pot gurgled. She imagined him sitting there, probably in a dark business suit, tearing open packets of powdered creamer, the receiver cradled between his ear and shoulder. She wondered who Julie was. A friend? A colleague? Whoever she was, she was lucky. Lucky to have someone calling at eight in the morning to check on her, to make sure she was all right. Violet thought briefly about Peter, about her mother, and wondered if they were concerned about her, if they'd even realized she was gone. She thought about her students, backpacks slung over their shoulders and shoelaces untied, walking into the classroom—the classroom she had taken the time to decorate with brightly-colored bulletin boards about multiplication—and seeing someone else standing at the front. Outside, rain slapped the window intermittently. She pulled back the heavy green curtain and tried to make out where she was. All around the hotel skyscrapers loomed, disappearing into the thick fog that had settled overnight. Far below, people walked along the glistening streets, black umbrellas bobbing.

She was hungry, and she felt greasy. She had a sour taste in her mouth. Her gums were sore from embedded popcorn kernels. She

suddenly realized that she had no change of clothes. She had no toothbrush, no make-up, no clean underwear.

She slipped into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. Her eyelashes were crimped from sleeping on her stomach, and yesterday's carefully applied mascara formed ashy semi-circles below her eyes. She took a bottle of the hotel's fruity shampoo and lathered her hair in the sink. The suds slid down her forehead and stung her eyes. When it was all rinsed out, she pulled her hair back without bothering to comb it.

Out in the hallway, she waited for several minutes for the elevator to make its way down from the top floor. She stood studying her feet, the dirt crusted between her toes, the flaking pink polish on her toenails. Down the hall, a door swung open and clicked shut. A man emerged from the room next to hers, room 201. The British man who asked about Julie. He wasn't wearing a suit, but he was crisply dressed in a button down shirt and pressed black pants. A laptop bag was slung over his shoulder. He smiled at her as he joined her by the elevator. A short, polite smile, his eyes averted.

Violet wondered what was on his laptop. Probably important files, business letters, memos. Maybe Excel spreadsheets filled with complex data and formulas. Maybe pictures of his wife, his children, the places he wanted to visit.

After she found out she was pregnant, Violet had spent a lot of time on Peter's computer. She told him she was researching baby names and cheap wedding dresses. What she was really doing was checking his emails. She discovered his password—her name—and checked his email constantly. She read everything that came through, even the junk mail from people trying to sell porn, hoping to find something, anything that suggested he was cheating on her. When she couldn't find anything, she considered creating a fake account and emailing him disguised as another woman. Or she could call his house and leave a breathy message on the machine. Anything so she could scream and cry and tell him she didn't want to marry him after all.

Later that day, as she stood in the bathroom trying to wash her shirt in the sink, her cell phone rang. She left the shirt floating among the flat suds and retrieved her cell phone from the bottom of her purse. It was her mother.

"Where the hell are you?" her mother asked as soon as Violet answered the phone. She didn't sound angry, or worried. Only tired.

"I had to get away for a while," Violet said. "I'm fine."

"Are you with another man?" her mother asked. "I won't tell Peter."  
"No."

"Do you need money? I can see if Peter will send you some."

"I don't need money." Violet pressed a hand to her aching forehead. Soapy water trailed along her brow and into her eyes, making them burn.

"Look, could you just tell Peter that I'm fine? I don't know when I'll be back, but I'm okay."

"Sure." Her mother sounded distracted. In the background, the doorbell rang, and her mother's Chihuahua began barking. "I'll tell him."

Monday

The next morning was as gray and dreary as the previous. Violet lay in bed, listening to the rush of water from the roof, the splash of car tires in puddles, a distant siren. After a few minutes, she heard the distinct sound of a train calling out a warning.

In room 201, the door slammed. Sounds followed: heavy footsteps muffled by the thick carpet, keys clattering on the table, a faucet running. A woman's voice, high-pitched, piercing. The distress and anger almost palpable even through the wall.

"Oh my God, where have you been?" she said. Her voice was loud, forceful, but Violet thought she detected a tremor. She climbed out of bed and sat down on the cold wooden chair by the wall. She thought about pressing her ear to the wall, but then realized that would be too much.

"My God, you smell," the woman said after several long seconds. Violet imagined the man, probably in a rumpled shirt, jeans damp and smelling of the rain that floated down outside, walking over to the bed, maybe to give a conciliatory kiss, or to reach for the television remote. Maybe he had been out drinking. Maybe the woman smelled alcohol, sweat, vomit, all combined into one salty, sour, nauseating stench. The stench of loneliness, bitterness, escape.

"How many times must we go through this?" the woman asked. The quick sound of a zipper, the rustling of plastic. "It doesn't matter where we are. New York. Atlanta. The freaking Bahamas. You'll never change."

The man finally responded. His voice was soft, tired, barely discernible through the wall.

"This is who I am," he said. "You knew this about me when you married me."

Those words. Frustrating, familiar words. Violet pushed back

from the wall. In the bathroom, she brushed her teeth and pulled her hair away from her face. She slipped on her shoes and left the room.

Outside, the damp, cold air made her lungs burn. Raindrops settled on her eyelashes and with every blink, the world around her grew blurry. People pushed past her, bent forward for balance as they hurried up the steep sidewalks. Beneath her, the sidewalk rushed by, gray concrete smeared with wet red clay and pink earthworms, some already dead.

*You knew this about me.* Peter's words to her last Christmas morning. They lay in bed, Peter with a cold cloth over his eyes, his hand on his stomach, Violet with her head propped up on a pillow, refusing to look at him.

The night before they'd been at a Christmas Eve party at her friend Margaret's house. Violet knew almost everyone there: friends from childhood, her mother's friends, even a few co-workers. She was so proud to show off Peter, the lawyer from Miami, who wore a suit and tie to work, who owned shoes that cost more than Violet's grocery bill for an entire month. Peter with his quick, dimpled smile and strong hands. There was no one like him in Homestead.

Peter who liked to drink. Peter who drank all of Margaret's expensive cherry liquor, who got quiet and sullen and wanted to leave at nine o'clock. Who threw up in Margaret's bougainvillea bush.

Violet had been so embarrassed. Her friends smiled and acted like it was no big deal, but she could see the judgment in the way they averted their eyes, the way their smiles faltered as they looked at each other. They were thinking that she did no better with her rich Miami man than she did with any of her high school boyfriends from Homestead. That she hadn't made much progress in her life after all.

## Tuesday

The next morning Violet stayed in bed until almost noon. Her stomach twisted and ached, and she could barely move. She watched television for a couple of hours and then lay on her side to watch the rain stream down the foggy window.

Shortly after noon the door clicked open and shut in room 201. Feet shuffled on the carpet. Keys clattered on the table by the window. Someone turned the television to the weather channel.

"You know, I don't see why you're making such a big deal about it." A man's voice, guttural, emphasizing the 's' sounds. "I was only joking."

"Well, you just don't joke about something like that." A wom-

an's voice, a thick southern accent. "You embarrassed me."

A mattress squeaked. Violet imagined the man sitting down next to the woman, maybe rubbing her back. Maybe she jerked away from him.

"You know I don't really think you'll need one," the man said. "I was only offering to pay for it if you did. Can't you take a joke?"

The woman muttered something that Violet couldn't understand. The volume on the television rose until all Violet could hear was the upbeat, instrumental music played when the weather channel displayed the ten-day forecast.

Violet rolled over and closed her eyes. The first time that she had brought Peter to meet her mother, he had embarrassed her. Violet wasn't sure why; she'd expected her mother to be the one to embarrass her.

They were sitting out back after dinner. Her mother was nursing a beer, Peter was finishing his second glass of wine, and Violet was playing with her watered-down daiquiri. The air was warm and salty. The banana tree, heavy with curved purple bundles, rustled in the breeze. The peach flowers of the angel trumpet bush bobbed, directing their silent music at the grass already glistening with late night dew. In the distance, the cars at the Homestead-Miami Speedway entered their final lap, their straining engines humming like bees.

Violet wasn't even sure how the topic came up. The conversation had been slow and awkward all night. Her mother, normally so loud and boisterous, got quiet when she drank. Peter, who could be very charismatic, seemed uncomfortable in her mother's house with its tie-dyed curtains and glow-in-the-dark peace signs. Somehow, though, along the course of the night, the topic came up.

Violet wasn't paying attention, really, until she heard her name. She had been studying the puddle of condensation on the dusty glass tabletop. Peter said her name, and when she looked up, he was tapping the bottom of his chin.

"Not now," he said. "But eventually. She's got that Harmon face, doesn't she?"

A facelift. He was telling her mother that Violet was going to need a facelift someday.

Her mother looked at Violet and brought what was left of her cigarette to her chapped lips. "Where the hell did you find this guy?" she wanted to know.

## Wednesday

Violet woke to the sound of the train, a distant whistle. Below her, cars rushed by, grates clunked under heavy tires. What she did not hear was the sound of rain. She slipped out of bed and pulled back the

heavy curtain. Gray sunlight fell over her. The sky was still overcast, but at least the rain had stopped. The streets looked dry. There were no more black umbrellas.

A few minutes later her cell phone rang. It had been beeping all night, signaling a low battery. She didn't have the charger. Once it died, she would be cut off from the rest of the world. Completely. Her mother could never find her. Peter could never find her.

She picked it up after checking the number on the screen.

"So are you ready yet?" Her mother sounded so nonchalant, as if she was asking Violet if they were still meeting for lunch.

Violet pictured her mother curled up on the pink couch covered with dog hair, tapping her cigarette against the top of her empty coffee mug. She was probably still in her nightgown, the same silky one she always answered the door in, the one that clung to her drooping breasts and bunched around her midsection. Her daughter had disappeared, and she was probably lounging around like any other morning.

"Am I ready for what?" Violet asked, wrapping the curtain cord around her finger.

"To come home." Her mother sighed, then lapsed into a coughing fit. "It's getting old, you know. Peter keeps calling, keeps knocking on my door at ungodly hours. He doesn't believe that you're okay."

"I don't know." It was the truth. Violet sank onto the bed and pulled her knees to her chest. The hair on her legs was soft. She needed to shave.

"You know, I did the same thing once," her mother said. "After I had you. Just left. Just got in my jeep and drove."

That didn't surprise Violet. Her mother had always been the only mother who didn't come to school plays, or softball games, or high school graduation. She liked to remind Violet that if she'd believed in birth control, Violet wouldn't be there.

"And then you know what?" her mother continued when Violet didn't speak. "It got old." She paused, coughed a few more times. "Well, it's a good thing I came back. A hell of a good thing. Do you know how you would have turned out if your dad had raised you?"

Violet studied the paint chipping on her toenails. That was one nice thing about dating someone like Peter. She could afford things like spa pedicures. She could afford to have someone scrape away dead skin and polish her toes so they looked brand new. It didn't matter how many pedicures she had, though. As soon as she stepped outside, a stray speck of dirt always found its way into the gleaming polish.

"There's no baby," Violet said. She hadn't planned on telling her mother. But it just came out, and suddenly she couldn't stop. "Tell Peter that. I had a miscarriage. I'm not pregnant anymore. See if he still wants to know where I am. See if he still wants to marry me."

Her mother laughed, which sounded completely inappropriate, yet Violet wasn't surprised.

"It's just as well," her mother said. "So, are you coming home, then?"

In room 201, the door slammed. There was a rustling sound, like a suitcase being dropped onto the bed. Or clothes being taken off. Someone giggled, a short, sharp, ragged noise. It could have been hiccup, or a sob.

"I don't know," Violet said. "Tell Peter I'm sorry." She hung up and turned the cell phone off.

Next door, the noise stopped. Not a rustle. Not a whisper. Violet stood and pressed her ear to the wall. She tried to drown out all of the other noise—the cars on the street below, the rattle of the housekeeper's cart, the hum of the vending machines—to focus on the life in the next room. Maybe, if she could hear something, she could join their lives for just a second. Maybe, for just a second, she could escape her own.



## THE PROJECTIONIST

BY LAURA MURREN

LAURA MURREN currently attends Valdosta State University and is majoring in Spanish. She is from Snellville, Georgia, a town in the suburbs of Atlanta, and comes from a family of four kids (two brothers, one sister). She enjoys other types of art including painting, film and music. She plays guitar and sings, and paints mainly with acrylic and oil. As a hobby she likes to play around with video. In 2004 Murren placed 2nd in a national PSA contest put on by Voltzwagon called “Fasten your seatbelt & Go far.” In 2008 at VSU she also placed 2nd in their centennial art competition. Murren volunteers at Valdosta Tech, teaching English as a second language once a week. Her graduation date is set for May 2010 and after that she plan to go overseas to teach English in China or perhaps in South America.

There’s this guy in my neighborhood that just disgusts me. He follows me everywhere, dogging my steps—it seems like he’s waiting for me around every street corner. I don’t know how he always seems to find me and I don’t know where he came from, but he is really starting to get to me. He’s ‘that guy,’ that guy you don’t ever want to befriend, because once you do, you can never get rid of him. It’d be one thing if he were just a harmless, annoying loser, but it feels like more than that. He’s not just annoying, he’s untrustworthy—it always feels like he’s trying to see into your dirty laundry. There’s an underlying nastiness in his every move; you always feel like he’s planning and scheming against you, trying to use you to his advantage. You don’t like him, but you know it would be useless to just tell him to fuck off.

But I wish he would just disappear.

I went to a whore for the first time not too long ago. She seemed sexy at first, but about ten minutes into our conversation she completely flipped out, saying that I was a piece of shit and that just looking at me was making

her sick. She said she would never, ever sleep with me, even if her life depended on it.

“And considering the pigs I’ve slept with,” she had continued, in her nasally voice, “that’s saying something.”

She was being really bitchy, and, not gonna lie: it shocked me a little bit. But I got over it pretty quick, because normally the ladies love me. I could hook up with any one of my girlfriends whenever I want. All I have to do is dial the numbers and they’ll come running. She’s a whore—I can never be worse than her. And I told her so. I told her to go put cream on her vaginal warts and walked away.

Her name was Denise. What a lousy whore name. She couldn’t’ve been very good; otherwise she would’ve had a sexy name like Candy or Jasmine, or April. So I took the money I had and went to an ice cream shop across the street from her filthy, disease ridden apartment.

But the ice cream was ruined by the fact that this disgusting guy showed up at the very same ice cream shop to get some ice cream. Lucky me. He asked me if I liked the vanilla ice cream, and why didn’t I get the rocky road? Because Rocky Road Ice Cream is The Best Thing ever; it’s better than all the other ice creams. He knows the guy who invented rocky road ice cream, and his family takes trips every so often to go see the rocky road creator’s estate on an island in the Caribbean.

I listened, knowing it was a lie.

As much as I wanted to ignore him, or tell him to go away, I couldn’t do it. I don’t know why; I mean, I guess the guy hasn’t done anything to me, so in reality, I have no right to hate him. But I can’t shake the disgusted and annoyed feelings I get whenever he’s around. And he’s always around. Whenever I want some peace and quiet, he shows up almost instantly.

I finished the remainder of my ice cream and left the spoon and plastic bowl on the bench I had been sitting on. The wind blew the bowl off the side. I walked down the street, heading back towards my one-bedroom apartment. On the way home, I ran into Chandler.

“Yo Yo, Chandler, what’s goin’ on, man?” I asked.

“Fuck off, man,” Chandler said.

“Right on, buddy, haha! Fuck you too, man!”

Chandler and I have a little game we play. We insult each other, but then he always comes over and plays video games. I’ve known him for like six months. He’s my best friend.

“Ok, call you later, Chan-o!”

He flipped me off without turning around as he walked away. Chandler’s such a dick, but I love the guy anyway.

I continued on to my apartment. The disgusting guy was coming

at me from across the street, telling me to wait up. I pretended like I didn't see him and ducked in to see my good friend Jason before heading home. It was convenient because he lives on the first floor of his building. Poor, lonely bastard hardly ever comes out. He'd be thrilled that I'd thought of him.

I knocked on his door. I heard some rustling around, but no one came right away, so I knocked again.

"Hey Jason? It's A.J.! Hey man, you in there?"

I heard shuffling much closer to the door, but still no one answered.

"I know you're in there man, open up. It's A.J., dude! Yo!"

Jason's a really shy guy. He's very reclusive and can't handle very many visitors. He likes to pretend like he doesn't like people, but I know he's just desperate for human contact. I knocked a few times more, because I know it just takes a little coaxing before he gives in to his true feelings.

I proved to be right when he opened the door a few minutes later.

"Hey," Jason said, with no feeling in his voice. I felt so sorry for him as I looked at him; he suffers from severe depression. Probably does cocaine or something. I think I heard that somewhere.

"You busy?" I asked. "What's goin' on? I was just around the neighborhood, figured I'd drop by."

He had opened the door only a crack, so I had to push past him a little to get in. I walked into his kitchen and sat at the table.

"So what's up with you, Jason? What've you been doing?" I knew he wanted me to ask him how he was doing so he could tell me how badly he was doing. He's always trying to tell me his problems.

"Pretty good, how 'bout you." Again, there was that lack of feeling in his voice. Well, if he isn't gonna get help for his depression, there's not much to be done about it.

"Oh, I'm doing great," I said. "I got laid by this hot chick today named April! Man, she is soo into me. She's so damn fine too. I just wanted to fuck her, but I think she wants a relationship or something. But I don't want to give up all my other pussy." I almost felt bad telling him about my good fortune, since he probably hadn't been laid in a while, but in my glee I didn't care.

"Uh huh." Clearly he was upset or jealous that I had gotten some. I know for a fact he hasn't gotten laid because no one would get with a depressed cokehead. He needs to go to rehab or something.

"Yeah, so," I continued, looking around. "You got any alcohol? I'm broke but I wanna drink."

Jason's eyes became hooded and glazed over. Obviously this was

what he'd been waiting on all day. Poor guy; my visits are the only thing keeping him going.

"Um, I don't really feel like dr—"

"Oh, come on, man! I'll pay you back, I just really wanna drink today! How can you refuse me after all the shit I do for you! Who took you to work the other day?"

"You did, but that was like three weeks ago. And that has nothing to do with—" "Dude! I helped you out! I can't believe you're gonna forget about it at such a convenient time!" I looked at him hard. He knew it was true.

"I'm not forgetting, but I really don't feel like drinking. I have to go to work."

"Come on! Just one drink! Jason: come on."

He stared around the kitchen.

"Jason! Come on! Dude, I have to have some alcohol today, and I'm broke! I really need this! Come—"

"Fine." He got up and went to the fridge and grabbed two beers, handing me one when he came back.

"Man, I hate this kinna beer, dude," I said, cracking it open and taking a big gulp. I don't know why Jason always has to get shitty alcohol.

I finished the six pack—it doesn't matter because he owes me. Big time. He knows it too, that's why he wouldn't say anything about the beer and the fact that I haven't paid him back yet—he wouldn't want me to have to start going down the list of things I'd done for him. I wouldn't do that though, unless I had to, because I'm not one to bring up past issues and shove them in people's faces. Friends just don't do that to friends.

I had been lying on the couch for about 20 minutes, after I'd shot-gunned all the beer, when Jason started getting up and messing around with things in the house. His cell phone buzzed occasionally, signifying that he was getting text messages. I vaguely wondered who would text him; I thought the only time his phone rang was when I called him. I turned on the T.V.

I was happily watching music videos when out of nowhere he says, "Hey man, I really gotta do some housework, and I have to go to work in about thirty minutes, so..."

He trailed off. I looked at him blankly as he poked his head out like a turtle, expectantly, his eyes wide with assumed comprehension. He was looking at me like we shared some telepathic bond or something.

"So...what?" I asked.

"So, I guess you need to...probably...leave..."

Bastard. After everything I do for him!

“Why?” I asked. “You don’t want me here or something, Jason?”

“No,” Jason said, sounding tired, “that’s not it. I really do have to go to work. Normally you could stay longer, but I have to go.”

“So can’t I just stay until you leave?” Damn, I was only trying to help the guy out; I know how lonely he is. He just wants to live in a world of misery, I guess.

“Uh...I really have to take a shower and clean a little bit...”

“Oh, well, I don’t want to be rude. I mean, if you want me to leave, just say it. I’m not gonna get upset or anything.”

“Ok, well I need to get busy here.”

“Ok, fine, I’ll go. See? Easy as that. No big deal. All you have to do is just let me know,” I said, walking toward the door.

“Ok, talk to you later.” He shut the door behind me.

That had been a pleasant visit. I think I greatly improved his chances of living another day. Sometimes I almost get tired of having every person figured out.

I left his apartment building feeling very tipsy and turned the corner of the final block to my own apartment, whistling to a made-up tune.

“Yo, what’s up, A.J.!”

It was the disgusting guy again. I thought I’d shaken him off, but apparently our lives were star crossed on this day and here he was, more disgusting than ever.

“Not much,” I said, feeling suddenly drained, my buzz fading away.

“Yo, what’s up? You headin’ back to your apartment?” The very sound of his voice made me want to wash the slime off my arms and legs, and then punch him in the face and say “Fuck you!”

“Yeah, I am, but I wasn’t really planning on—”

“Cool, then you mind if I come hang out for a lil’ bit? I wanna chill out.”

He’s clueless.

Obviously he had no idea that he wasn’t being invited back to my place. Why wasn’t he getting this?

“Sure, you can come over for a while.” I wanted to kick myself. But I just didn’t feel like arguing with him.

I sped up my pace, with the great idea in mind that I could out run him to make him leave, I guess. I practically sprinted up the two flights of stairs to my apartment, but it still didn’t throw him off. He kept up with me stride for stride, breathing only as hard as I was and running only as fast as I was. When I reached my door, he was still right by my side, standing too closely.

I unlocked the door. It crossed my mind that it might not have

been the smartest thing to let him know where I live. Nevertheless, in he came. He entered the house even before I did. I don’t even know this guy.

He walked into the living room that doubled as a bedroom for me on most nights and plopped down on the couch.

“Thanks for lettin’ me come over, man. I really needed to chill out somewhere for a while.”

Though it was clearly a lie to anyone who was truly listening, I said, “No problem.”

He looked around. “Nice place, dude. I just moved into a two-story house about a month ago. It has a pool and a three-car garage. But this is nice here, what you have. You gotta see my house though, it’s amazing. I throw awesome parties there all the time, it gets so crazy! Last weekend I held a five kegger there...you shoulda come, man, it was freakin’ awesome!”

“That’s awesome,” I said jealously, wishing he would shut up. I sat down on the couch to play some video games.

He looked at my Play Station 2. “Nice,” he commented. “I’ve got an Xbox 360 Elite, but I also have older stuff like that too.”

“It’s not really that old,” I said.

“No, but, well, you know what I mean.”

I really didn’t know what he meant. “I got this when it first came out, dude,” I said, annoyed.

“Yeah...but that was like a really long time ago, wasn’t it? I always get the newest stuff.”

I didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“So do you have any food? I’m starved!” He said, eyeing my kitchen.

I looked at him, incredulously. He looked back at me as if he didn’t know he was being unbelievably rude and demanding.

“What?” he asked, looking shocked.

I wanted to kill him! But instead I just said, “Nothin’, man.”

“...So,” he said, after a moment, “do you have any food? I am so hungry, man.”

This was almost just too much. He comes in my house—uninvited. He sits on my couch—unsolicited. Now he’s asking for my food too? I found myself thinking suddenly of Jason; I wish I could just go over to his house or something. Too bad he was at work now.

He got up and went over to the kitchen area. “You have bread here, do you have any turkey? I love turkey sandwiches.”

“Yeah, have whatever you want,” I said, putting my face in my hands. I just wanted him gone.

I walked into the bathroom, closing the door.

“Dude, what are you doing? I’m takin’ a shit!”

He was in the bathroom sitting on the toilet. God! I just wanted him to leave. I looked into the mirror at myself; I could still see him on the toilet behind me.

I walked out of there and into my bedroom, slamming the door.

“So man, lemme tell you about this chick I hooked up with the other day.” He kept talking from the bathroom but it felt like he was right next to me. His voice was grating harshly on my eardrums; every time he breathed it felt like my own breath, and each one got shallower and shallower as the pressure of his presence wore on me.

“Yeah, I showed her a good time, kinda broke in the new bedroom if you know what I mean. But she won’t quit calling me! She wants my sack pretty bad.”

His lame-ass story made me want to vomit; that guy couldn’t get pussy if his life depended on it. He’s disgusting, and he is incredibly unattractive. He has this huge teddy bear nose and little tiny slits for eyes, and hair that is way too big, even for his fat head. He’s overweight too.

“You seen Angela lately?” he asked, still in the bathroom.

How does this fuck-up know Angela? I asked myself. Had we been hanging out for that long?

“Man, she is so fine. I could have her in five minutes if I wanted a random hook-up, but you know...”

“Uh...I dunno know about that,” I said, my anger rising.

I could get with Angela anytime I wanted, but she would never get with a disgusting creep like him...would she?

“Dude, trust me. I could have her. But frankly, I don’t know if I wanna hook up with her. That’d open up a can of worms I don’t even wanna get into. She’d be on my sack so bad after one time that it wouldn’t even be funny.”

The feeling of nausea was stronger now. This guy’s perception of reality was sickeningly distorted.

I had to get away from him. Maybe I’d call someone and tell him he can’t come.

I went into the living room and picked up my cell phone.

Who to call? Jason’s at work. I could call Chandler....

I hit send on his name (Chan-O).

No answer. I called again. Still no answer. I decided to send him a text message (“What r u up 2?”); he was probably in the shower or something.

Then I continued going down my list. I decided to call Angela. I hit ‘send’ on her name, Angie Boo.

“Whatcha doin’, man?” He had just come out of the bathroom.

“Nothin’.”

No answer from Angela. I tried her again. No answer. Well, third time’s the charm.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Ange, don’t sound so happy to hear from me!” I joked.

“What’s up.”

“I have a question for you,” I began, teasingly. I knew it would arouse her interest.

“Mmkay.”

“Do you like...sushi?”

There was a pause. “Uh, well, yeah...why.”

“Would you like for me to take you out tonight, to eat sushi?”

“No thanks. I’m broke.”

“Ange—I got it. Don’t worry about that.”

“I’m busy. I have a lot of work to do.”

“Oh come on, you can make it out for a couple of hours! A.J.’ll show you a great time, I promise.”

“I really can’t.”

“Come on!”

“I can’t.” She sounded mad. Poor thing, she doesn’t handle being broke very well.

“What if you get your work done?”

“It won’t all get done,” she said.

There was a long pause. I waited.

“Look,” she said, “if I get my work done, I might give you a call.”

“Aight, then,” I said coolly, “Talk to ya soon.”

I hung up. Of course she’d call later.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Just a really good friend of mine.”

“Was it a chick?”

“Uh...yeah it was,” I said.

“Was it Angela? Oh shit!” He suddenly realized his forgotten turkey sandwich, and hopped up to retrieve it.

Then he came back. “So? Was it?”

I sat back and looked at the ceiling, trying to stay calm.

“Was it—”

“Yes! It was Angela. Why?” I hated it when he questioned me. It was so intense, like he wanted the answer for a particular reason of his own.

“Oh. Oh man. Sorry,” he said, his hands up in the classic surrendering pose, “Sorry dude, about what I said earlier. I didn’t mean it.”

“What are you talking about?” What was he talking about?

“Dude...when I said I could have her...me and her, we’re just friends. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Wha?—look, I’m not ‘with’ Angela, ok? Well, I mean, we kind of—”

I thought back to the time I had kissed Angela at a party. She wasn’t that wasted, I don’t think.

“—Had a thing, at one point, yes,” I finished. “I mean, she really likes me, but I’m not after anything.”

“But you guys used to mess around? Do you still like her? Why were ya’ll talking to each other? You’re wanting to hook up with her again. Did ya’ll, you know, fuck, or anything?”

“Uh, well,” God, I needed out of this apartment, “I dunno know if you’d call it fucki—look, I gotta go. I think I’m gonna go see one of my friends now.”

“Cool. Can I come?”

“No...it’s a personal friend.”

“Angela?”

“Uh ye—no, this is someone else.”

“Who?”

Ahhhh!!!!

“Look, I really have to go! So you just need to leave, ok?” I was getting very, very angry all of the sudden.

“Damn...geeze...well if you want me to leave...just say it, dude.”

“I want you to leave!”

He looked around the room, apparently hurt. I didn’t care, I just wanted him gone.

“Ok then. Well, if you don’t want me around, then...I won’t bother you anymore.”

“Look—” Wait, why was I trying to stop him? I found myself almost telling him that he wasn’t bothering me.

“Look, I gotta go,” I said instead.

He got up and was out of the door in a split second.

Suddenly my phone rang. It was Rachel, this fat-ass ginger chick that has a huge crush on me.

“Hullo,” I said, trying to sound annoyed; I love leading her on.

“Hay A.J.! Wudder you doin’?”

Ugh. She sounded too happy to be talking to me. Getting her in bed would be too easy, but I don’t like to think about that.

“Workin’ on some stuff,” I said.

“Can I come over?”

“Hmm...” I said slowly, knowing she was waiting with bated breath at the other end of the line, “I dunno, Rach, I gotta lotta work to

do here....”

A knock at the door.

“Dude, A.J., you still home?”

The disgusting guy again.

“You know what, I’ll just come over to your place,” I said. “Be there in about ten.”

“Okay, see you soon!”

I ended up eating dinner at Rachel’s place—she makes some killer pot roasts, and she loves to cook for me anyway.

She was annoying as usual, boring me with stories of her day, and who was in it, and what they were talking about—so I saved her the embarrassment and talked about my day, a subject that would make everyone happy.

“...Yeah, this chick was pretty amazing, lemme tell ya. Blonde hair, green eyes, olive skin! Sexy slender curves....”

Rachel was looking around the room as if in thought. “She’s prob’ly a slut, though, I mean, thank about it A.J., you just met ‘er and ya’ll’ve already had sex? I hope you used pertection...”

“Yeah, you’re right. And of course I used protection, I mean, come on!”

After the blonde slut we moved onto Jason.

“...I’m pretty sure he’s a coke head. I think that he was trying to clean it up before he came to the door, and that’s why it took him so long.”

“Oooh, really? He does coke? Well, I think I heard that somewhere. He looks like one, and he’s soo depressin’, ya know? Just never in a good mood! So you really think he ain’t been laid in a while?”

“Oh. Positive. You should’ve seen how jealous he was when I was talking about the blonde girl.”

There was a flash of something in Rachel’s eyes.

“Jealous? He’s uh real jealous person, ain’t ‘ee?” she asked.

“Yeah, he’s always wanting what I have, lemme tell ya. Every time I get something new he just gets this look on his face (It’s soo funny!) like ‘I am so jealous.’ It’s great!—But yeah, he is super-jealous.

“Oh yeah, I saw Chandler today,” I said suddenly. “He wants to hang out tonight.”

“Chandler? Really? Are ya’ll gowna hang out?”

“I dunno, Ange wants to chill, so I may not be able to. Let’s call Ange and see what she’s doing.”

I hit send on “Angie Boo,” and waited, looking around the room as I listened to the ringtone. Rachel had plopped back in her chair and

had her arms folded.

“Hullo.”

“Freeman!” I said her last name.

“What’s up.”

“What’re you doin’?”

“Working.” There was a long pause. “What are you doing,” she asked.

“Oh, you know, hanging out. Me and Rachel were just sitting here, feelin’ so good after the roast she made. You really missed out. Just calling to see if you wanted to come and partake in some card playing with the two of us.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, “I’m, uh, still working.”

“You need some time to relax,” I said. This girl can be so difficult sometimes. I tell you, I have the strangest friends.

“I don’t—”

“Angela. Come on. You know you want to. You need to get away from your work for a minute.”

There was a long silence.

“What card game are ya’ll playing.”

45 minutes later, Angela finally made it over to Rachel’s place, looking slightly disgruntled, probably because I’d been spending time with Rachel and not her.

“Hey guys,” she said.

“Yo Yo,” I said, uninterestedly. Keeps ‘em wanting more.

“Hay girl,” Rachel said sweetly.

“So, are we gonna play cards?” she asked, with a cheerful note in her voice.

“Hmm...yeah, in a minute,” I said.

Angela sat down on Rachel’s couch, not saying anything.

“Anyway,” Rachel continued, “A.J. and I’ve been talking about Jason and what a cokehead he is. The other day I saw heym comin’ out of the gas station and ‘ee was lookin’ rough. He is so damn depressin’, you know? I mean...” She said, giggling a little.

“Um...why would you say that?” Angela asked suddenly.

“Say wut?” Rachel seemed a little shocked.

“Say that he’s a cokehead. Where’d you get that shit from?”

“It’s troow!” Rachel said, looking to me for support.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “he’s a cokehead. Trust me. That kid’s hooked on some shit.”

“Uh...I’m pretty sure he’s not,” Angela said, sounding annoyed.

“No, he is,” I said. Who would know better than me? I’m his best

friend. His only friend.

An hour later Angela got up to leave, looking angry.

“Where ya goin’? We were just about to play some cards,” I said.

“I’ve gotta get back to it,” she said. “See ya.”

I watched her leave, feeling annoyed. I think she’s bipolar or something.

This morning I woke up and went into the bathroom to take a piss. Then I went into the kitchen to get some water and—

“Sup dude?”

He was on my couch watching my DVD’s.

“Uh...” I was temporarily lost for words. What in the hell was he still doing at my house?

“What are you doing here?” I said.

“Well, good morning to you too,” he answered, affronted.

“No, seriously, what are you doing here?”

He looked at me with wide eyes for a moment, then looked away, snorting indignantly. He too seemed at a loss for words.

“Wow,” he said finally. “Wow. So it’s like that? I mean, I can’t believe you’re acting like this. A friend can’t sleep over at his friend’s house? Goddamn. Damn, A.J., I thought we were tighter than this.”

Where does this guy get off thinking we’re friends?

I walked back over to the kitchen to get some water. “Do you want me to make you some breakfast?” he asked.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth.

“I mean, wasn’t she acting weird?” I asked Rachel over lunch this afternoon. I had invited her and Jason to eat with me at a bar-be-cue restaurant down the street from my apartment.

“Oh yeah. I mean, I don’t wanna be mean,” she said tentatively, “but she was bein’ uh bitch last night.”

I looked at Jason. “I mean, I know you don’t know Angela that well, but if you did you would understand what we’re talking about. I mean, she’s bipolar, so it’s expected, but it doesn’t make it any less unpleasant.”

“I down’t know why you hang out with her,” Rachel said to me, folding her arms.

“Well, someone’s got to, I mean, I feel sorry for her, you know? Bipolar with no friends...I just wanna help her out.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Rachel replied thoughtfully, “I feel bad for ‘er too. Yur such a good person, but I cuin’t hang out with her all the time.”

I took a sip of my water. I looked over at Jason.

“What are you smiling about?” I asked.

“Nothin’,” he said.

“You know what we’re talking about, don’t you?” I gathered, starting to laugh. Jason knew Angela too, and you didn’t have to know her very well to understand her personality. Angela could be a bipolar bitch and Jason had obviously already been clued into this.

“Look, I gotta go,” Jason said suddenly, dropping some money on the table.

“Where you goin’?” I asked. (“Awww!” said Rachel.)

“Work,” he said.

“...Thought you were off today?”

“They called me in—welp, see ya later,” he said over his shoulder in a cheerful tone—an awfully odd tone for a depressed cokehead that just got called into work.

We watched him walk out the door, then looked at each other.

“Gotta feed that drug habit,” I said.

Rachel laughed loudly, and couldn’t stop for a moment. Some people turned their heads in our direction.

She started getting on my nerves, so I paid our bill and told her I had to go. I walked down the street toward the video game store.

Jason had been acting weird. Wonder what was up with him.

Where could he be going? It wasn’t work, that’s for sure—

“Sup dude?”

I closed my eyes, trying to calm myself.

“Hullo,” I said dully.

“Oh my god, dude, I just had the craziest shit happen to me! I was hangin’ out with this chick, and, she wanted to suck my dick—in the middle of the restaurant! I was like ‘No way!’

“So, she got mad at me. Whore.” He snorted derisively.

“That’s great—”

“And then, she starts pulling at my pants and I’m like ‘Whoa, bitch’ and she tries to slap me, so of course I push her down and shit, so this guy comes up—big guy—and thinks he’s gonna get into it. He pulls her up, and—I mean, I’m not gonna go out like a little bitch you know?—so I was like ‘Dude, back off.’

“And he was like ‘Fuck you.’ So I jumped him and beat the shit outta him, man! It was so crazy. But you know, I mean, that’s how I handle things.”

“Don’t you have a job or something?” I knew the story was completely made up.

“Huh? Oh—yeah, I own a little recording studio. I make a lot of

money doing that. So anyway—”

“Look, I kind of just wanna—”

“What about you? Don’t you have a job?”

“Of course I have a job.”

“Well, what do you do?”

“Make money.” I paused then added, “Lots of money.”

Yeah, I make lots of money. People are always asking me for favors, or to borrow some of it. That’s what sucks about being rich. People try to use your money all the time, and then they don’t want to pay you back. Then you have to make them pay you back.

“So, whadda you think Jason was up to? He was acting really strange...don’t you think?” He was looking at me from the side in a way that annoyed me; I knew he just wanted to see my reaction.

“I dunno...how do you know about that...”

“Talked to Rachel. Me and her are good buddies. Do you think he’s gonna get drugs? I think he is. In fact, that’s probably exactly what he’s doing. Going to get coke, I bet.”

Well, he was more than likely right. I’m surprised I didn’t figure that one out a little quicker. I mean, what else would make a depressed cokehead cheerful? And the lie about work, I mean, it’s not like he’s all open about his drug use. I could’ve smacked myself in the head.

Just then I saw Jason.

Sitting in a coffee shop.

With Angela.

Now this brought me to a dead stop. What was she doing there? With him?

Was she a cokehead too?

They were laughing. High on coke, of course. I slipped inside the shop. They didn’t even notice me, high as they were. I sat at a booth near them, but didn’t announce my presence.

“...Are you serious? Haha. Oh my God! I cannot believe him! Wow, you know, he is really annoying. I really kind of hate him, Jason. I’m sorry, I try to be his friend, but...I just don’t like him. I hate him. He’s like this...”

“...disease.” Jason finished her statement darkly.

“Yes! And once you catch him, you can’t get rid of him! And it’s like, he has no idea. He’s so clueless about life. You give him the cold shoulder, and he only comes on stronger. Be nice to him and he thinks he’s got some kind of power over you. It’s disgusting how he uses people.”

“He’s so self important!” Jason said through gritted teeth. “He only talks about himself: how great he is, how much he has, and yet, he constantly takes everything that I have. He claims to have all this stuff,

all this money, but then he'll come to my house and say he's broke—"

"I know! He's always calling me, asking me 'out,' and he's always saying that 'he'll take care of it,' but I know that's a flat-out lie, 'cuz I've actually been out with him twice, and both times, when he paid, he announced the bill so loud I thought the cooks could hear it."

"And it's like you said, you just can't get rid of him. There's nothing you can say, there's nothing you can do. The other day I acted like I wasn't home, and he just kept on knocking. Knocking and knocking until I thought I might go crazy. And you know what? I let him in just so the knocking would stop."

"And the lies, man! Is there anything true that comes out of his mouth? I think he really thinks that what he's saying is the truth though, I really do. I think he believes it."

"He needs to be shot." Jason laughed at Angela's statement. Angela did too. "...Haha, I'm just kidding, but seriously, I do wish he would disappear or something. I mean, who would miss him? I really can't think of anyone...."

"Me neither. I mean, do you think he has even one friend? One person that actually likes him? One person that would, you know, be there for him?"

Angela smiled ruefully. "No, Jason, I don't. The man is despicable. Everyone I know despises him. Oh, well, except Rachel. I guess she likes him."

"Yeah, but she's in the same boat as he is...."

"I mean, how can he be so clueless? How can he not know that everyone hates him, everything about him? How can he go through life, doing the things he does? How can vermin like him be allowed to live?"

Wow. I just sat stunned.

It was like they were speaking to me. It was as if they were speaking through me. I felt exactly the same about that asshole. He never leaves. He takes everything you have. He talks about himself non-stop and all of it is a lie.

I almost laughed out loud.

"Hey guys," I said, smiling.

They looked to see who was calling, not fully aware that someone was talking to them.

Angela spotted me and a look of surprise flashed across her face.

"Sup," she said.

Jason turned around, and the same look showed for an instant on his own face. "Oh hey," he said.

"Well, well," I said, walking up to their table, "thought you had to work?"

"Uh...."

"It's ok, man. I know what's going on."

"Really?" He didn't seem convinced. God, he has no idea how obvious it is!

"Oh yeah," I said, looking out the window, squinting at nothing across the street as if I were distracted. "But—I know how worried you are about keeping your 'secret' under wraps"—I winked at Angela—"So I'll keep your—secret—safe. In fact, maybe I can even help you out with it if you're ever in a bind."

Jason looked confused. I chuckled inwardly. He can't believe I know about his drug problem.

"You too, Ange—just call me anytime, sweetie.

"Oh, and by the way: I heard everything you said."

They just stared.

"Look, man—" Jason began.

"Hey, don't worry, I'm not mad at all. Please! Like I care! Actually, I totally agree with you. I'm just saying I'm glad I'm not the only one."

Both their eyes were wide. They had no idea I felt the same way? I must be quite the enigma to these poor people.

"Look, I gotta get outta here, I got a busy day, but call me later or something and we'll chill."

I walked out of the shop. The two sat in silence, looking at each other.

"So what's up with them?" the disgusting guy asked.

I looked at him. God, I felt sorry for the bastard. Thinks he has friends. Wonder what it must feel like to be constantly vying for attention, friendship and status. I almost feel bad for hating him.

"Oh, you know them; they're just high on coke and all that."

"Well, they didn't seem too happy to see you."

I smiled sardonically to myself. You try to be nice to this guy and it just bites you in the ass. "You don't even know what I could say to you right now, dude."

He flashed me a look of false surprise, quite out of character for him, I thought. "Oh, sure. Look, man—not my fault if they don't like you. They like me, though. We hang out a lot. But hey, they aren't that cool. I enjoy your company. But they sure do make me laugh a lot."

God I hate this guy.

I really hate this guy. Keep cool. Just keep cool.

But now my cool is slipping by the second. I really hate this guy.

"When do ya'll ever hang out?"

He's looking at me, sensing he has gained the upper hand. "Every moment I get that they aren't being bothered by you."

This is giving me quite a chuckle. If only this guy knew. He is the most hated guy in the whole city. All my friends hate him.

“So, you wanna know what they really think of you?”

“I do know,” he says.

“I’ll tell you, man, what they really think of you.

“They laugh at you. They laugh at the lies you tell. They laugh at how you see yourself. They cringe at your approach, or just try to block you out.”

“They hate you. They despise you. Angela actually used the word ‘despicable’ to describe you. They think you are a disease, a sickness that they can’t get rid of. They marvel at your cluelessness.”

I am inexplicably angry, and he seems to be unaffected. This is only pissing me off more.

“Do you hear me? They talk about how CLUELESS—how SELF-ABSORBED—how senselessly INFLATED you are, how you take EVERYTHING that anyone has!

“THEY THINK YOU’RE A LOSER! A FUCKING LOSER! THEY SAID—”

God, I’m yelling at the top of my lungs. People are staring. I have to calm myself. I’m taking deep breaths.

“They hate the fact that you exist. They said someone needs to kill you,” I hiss—so full of anger—“and that if you did die, no one would miss you.”

He’s silent. I stop walking—I’ve only just realized that I was. I turn away from him, to look at myself in a shop window, but all I see is his reflection looking back at me, smiling slightly.

“And what do you think?”

“I totally agree.”

He says nothing, and we stand frozen, me staring into the window at his reflection, and him back at mine.

“Jason is fucking Angela.”

He said this quietly, insidiously.

“What?”

“You heard me. Jason is fucking Angela. Your precious little ‘Angie Boo.’ That sick obsession you have with her? It’s just that. An obsession. Pointless and one-sided. Oh, but—you look like you didn’t know.”

Is it that obvious? It can’t be...how can something be obvious if it isn’t even in existence?—

“Oh, what a surprise! A.J. is clueless about something! HA! Who do you really think they were talking about, A.J., hmm? Since I seem so much more informed than you; makes you wonder....”

As I’m watching his reflection it peers off to the side, squinting, apparently trying to see something far off in the distance.

“They were right,” he’s saying, “someone does need to kill you. God, you’re a loser.”

All the sudden I’m whirling around and running for my apartment. He’s crazy...he’s a lunatic.

They’re right. Someone does need to kill him. And they’re right: who would miss this bastard? Does he have any real friends? NO!

“Where you runnin’ to?” He’s breathless, matching me stride for stride.

I can’t speak; I can barely breathe. The air is closing in around me—the air tainted with his breath and sweat—with his very existence—Sharing air with him is becoming physically impossible—my breathing is shallow, hollow, laborious—

“Just saying, they don’t seem to like you—never—wanna hang-out, do they? I mean—I’m the only—guy—you ever really—see—I don’t even like—you that much, man—”

Shut up shut up shut up shut up SHUT UP!!!

Running up the stairs to my apartment—gun’s under the mattress—gotta load it—only take a minute—his blood gushing—see him fall in surprise—looks at the blood, looks at me—eyes wide, so wide—falls—falls—eyes wide—so wide—in shock—finally getting a fucking clue—too fucking late—

Opening the door, running to the room—hear my breathing and my anger, nothing else—see his lifeless body on the floor—want it to be real—just want it to be real—just want it to be over—

Now I whip around, the gun is pointed at his head.

“Whoa, man, hey—”

“SHUT UP! Just shut up!” voice so high—“I hate you! Hate you! You disgust me! I hate being around you, you worthless fuck! God! I would rather be with ANYONE but you!

“I hate you! Do you understand how worthless you are? Do you understand how much everyone FUCKING HATES YOU? DO YOU?”

I look at him now, and I’m crying with anger. I’m going to kill him. And he is staring back at me, just as angry, his tear-stained face identical to mine.

I punch—and punch—and hit—and hit—my hands are bloody—hit—and hit—just keep on hitting—his face is broken into a thousand pieces—wish it would make him go away—won’t go away—have to do it—point the gun—have to do it—so disgusting—pull the trigger—so—disgusted—with—that—face—in the mirror—so dis—

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