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The Quivering Fan.

Stories

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Sample translation by Ann Cotton

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Chafer

She cannot be sleeping. One doesn't do such things when one is asleep. I must acknowledge that there is a conscious mind inside the head that leans against mine, one that considers it a good idea to stroke me in a repetitive manner. We are on our way through arid plains, the light is dimmed, the whole bus is asleep or dreaming. Dreaming with the bus driver as he hits the tapestry-lined dashboard in time to the music with a many-colored little leather whip, making the tassles wobble. Something – an electric guitar, a flute or a woman's voice – wanders in serpentine through the upper regions of the human hearing range. In the lower parts, close by us, a karkabèn, crude iron double-clapper, expresses its calm and regular excitement. The young man in the yellow caftan, who has been sitting in the front of the bus in the seat behind the young women passengers for the whole trip, whispering various things to them, his cheek pressed to the back of their headrest - even he is sleeping now. At the first rest stop, as I, smoking, shifted my weight from one leg to the other, feeling odd to be a woman for no reason, like a donkey on hooves, he crossed the road to pick a yellow asphodel. Now his head leans softly against the seat in front of him, where the beauty he was harassing, and who ignored him with habitual grace, is sleeping too, or at least holding herself completely immobile. The two boys who got in without baggage to work for a few months in a place where the bus will let them out by the roadside, are awake and whispering. Behind them their mother, before them 700 goats, and in between, dominant in the moment, their beauty, the elegance of their manner, their wise feet. Outside, dusk is flying through the cities through which the bus passes, along the dusty roads under a rosy sky that seems to utter jokes and scatter unmistakable signs. Dusk falls on all inhabitants, those in a hurry and those who linger in the square, thinking of someone or some problem that is scuffed like an old canister and covered with

dust every day afresh. And people in business and people visiting relations, whose inner life I cannot imagine.

Our two sweaty heads have fallen toward one another, rolling in the swell of the road, hidden by the window curtain, flashed by the street lighting. Krassa has laid her thin scarf over our laps, a trick to allow freedom of movement, unwatched. Her small, hot hands use the realmlet she has made to stroke mine. Rolled between Krassa's thumb and fingers, I wonder when it will stop, this going and coming, back and forth. She strokes and strokes. In clouds, in swarms, in schools, waxing and waning in scope. Please remember this scene. It is to return again and again, disturbing and annoying me. I would like to help myself by using an explanation with ghosts, which would provide an exit to the troubling attentions I have been spending on circular arguments, using only rational reasoning to treat the old problem that it is impossible to understand what is going on and to act at the same time. Not that I were looking for epiphany, but... why not? After all, is it not something of the sort that one seeks in literature, in sex, in *amour fou*? It is certainly a dismal suspicion, if it were to be true, that one might be forever just taking turns allowing the other to experience some unreal inebriation one is incapable of feeling oneself. One keeps quiet and behaves as cooperatively as possible so as not to disturb the other's illusion until it is over. And then, in the worst moments, when pressed until further existence seems to require a fast getaway involving the use of a verbal machine gun, one will stumble word for word into hurtful honesty, breathing deeply in surprise at the uncomfortable fact that one does truly forever preclude the other: one never felt anything of the sort.

It is a moral question I am revolving around, but also a physical one: How can it be possible that one person loves and the one he loves dislikes him? Is love not the kind of thing that can only come into being from two sides at once, in a kind of feedback loop? From the party of unrequited love we have enough reports. Regarding it, and regarding supermarkets and tourism and imperialism and other irrational swellings of oneness, it appears to me quite clear that it is a delusion, a simple case of self-embezzlement, swelling in time, multiplied by imperious notions of self-righteousness. And again it is not mere chance that the illustration of delusion is a specialty of literature.

I have always known that to love means to get lost. But I thought it was to lose oneself to the truth, a daring escape from the labyrinth of false ideas that is society. What worries me is whether I am not now, by rejecting a woman in love, betraying the truth, and then putting myself in the hands of society for protection against her revenge. For this reason I have always refused to admit that anyone I don't love might ever fall in love with me, and even now I keep glancing toward the easy way out, to claim that what is driving these people out of their minds is merely a hairball of clichés, not love – otherwise I would be quite with them.

Now, however, I am able to report from the other side, and willing to do it with the best of hearts. Recently in love affairs I have found myself sprawled on other people's windshields, all six legs scattered from me, the last organs gurgling their elegiac upheavals as I drown in my own blood. It

would make sense to draw some conclusion from this, some philosophical insight that could lead me on in fixing up some principles, like one fixes a paper collar with chalk. Of course I have for some time been suspecting my indulged idiosyncrasies, and the way my own timidity makes a monster of me, just like the others; but first of all I am worried that I generate brutality precisely through my conviction – a fixation of noblest intentions – of having to find some way of dealing with myself before I dare to hand myself in to others. How come?

I would like to express directly my disgust with the whole situation: life, with all its dirty suggestions, and my own distaste against participating in any way in this idiotic panorama. Maybe that is even more pressing than my longing to be convinced of the opposite. But if nausea is as dictatorial as love, it must also be able to be dissected. Therefore I retreat, a bit shaken, and continue to watch, fascinated, from a certain distance.

If we take love as the suspicion, reasonable or not, of a somehow *important* confrontation – just like a thought is the sketch of a relation between facts – it really would be the same situation, and then also the same amount of work, as an interesting conversation. And quite the same as there, I am seized by terrible impatience as soon as I feel the other person is heading in a fruitless direction. From then on I can only watch – granted he fascinates me aesthetically. Krassa was brutal: relentlessly she used her competence, her decisive, sensible opinions on me, and I had great pains to defend my silliness against her. At the same time I sat quite calmly and was full of wonder: What might be going on inside of her? And how spectacularly ugly she was! The question I must ask myself is if I – if I actually had any real thought about her at all.

The long time that I spent staring at her blankly, while she, on the other side of the gap, was following some scent or other, seems to me now like the endlessly drawn out moment of a choice. "Paris as arbiter" by Max Klinger comes to my mind, a huge painting in which, on a high terrace, one goddess after the other presents herself naked to the man who is sitting, he too naked, in a pose on a seat in the shade. The three women stand tall and firm, well dressed in the sporting whim of a morning, and yet they tremble before the painful results of nuances. How cruel the joke is, but also how wide and free! The figures are life size, the air bright daylight, one seems to feel the wind on the large amounts of bare skin, to be able to estimate the temperature. I remember well how the picture impressed me, especially when I saw it for the second time, in Munich. It was October, and I was in the city to take a test to prove I had reached a certain level of proficiency in Japanese. The evening before, however, I had met up with my Munich friend Godiv. He appeared with two other students, both blonde, one girl a bit pinched, the other creamy and sprinkled with moles. The way Godiv was with them, I no longer desired him, which threw me into a raging depression and I ordered round after round of vodka. Godiv was no longer as I remembered him. The two times I had met him before, he had been somehow extended by his own surprise into a longer reach than usual, a shining person he himself hardly knew. But tonight

he entangled himself in boring, academic-moralist discussions with the girls, with whom he seemed to be trying to compete. And while I tried to either lose him completely to the girls, so he could unfurl his arts, or find a topic that would reerect him, they refused to drink more vodka and gave me theirs. In the end it worked, so to speak: Godiv disappeared into the subway car with the girls, and as the doors closed I finally saw that wide-eyed, scared, questioning, screaming, altogether present glance I had wanted to see again.

But it had taken too much to get there. More like a flower than a person I drifted to my hotel, fondled the iron handrails on the way up the stairs and slept the three hours that remained before my test. Saturated with coffee that held open my eyes like the awning of a long-term campsite resident in heavy rain, I sat at the university in a neon white classroom, stared for a while at the test paper and began to laugh. Ten multiple-choice questions stared back at me with small, expectant eyes, with delicate fake lashes. One character was more beautiful than the next. But what did they mean?

I found it absolutely idiotic to waste my knowledge on tracing the line between right and wrong, particularly since the people giving the test already knew the facts they were trying to get me to spit out. I was to cross out two of three characters, which consisted of completely blameless possible parts, in order to participate in this game. Was it not much more important to know and love them each in their own right? To protect them – the right ones, the wrong ones, and particularly the nonexistent ones – by refusing to choose?

Of the three characters in the first question, two together formed a familiar combination. Was it word, literature, book, university or warning? The third character was the same as the first, only on the left the one had the radical 'man', the other 'water'. And I had always just left that part out when I wrote it, I discovered with horror! I had been learning alone, no one had ever corrected me. The characters were so interesting. I copied them, in vertical calligraphies that shrunk, tornadolike, towards the corner of the page. Loved them on to the paper again and again and again. Characters, no matter what they may be like, are supposed to fit in a rectangle of a certain size, but you would never guess how difficult that is. After I had spent some time on the refinement of my stroke, I felt farther away from the answers than ever. Something like a hunch crept over me, then a slight dislike for the left side of the page. But the dislike, I reasoned, would probably point to the right character rather than a wrong one, seeing that I am always *against* the right things. Didn't the wrong characters fill the air with the more interesting perfumes of the nonexistent? Finally I handed in two pages of calligraphy, it having morphed on the second page into a series of pinup figures, and went to the museum. I felt three. Free. Free of linguistic competence, free of calligraphy.

At the museum I thought I was able to feel the troughs in the floor where people would stop in front of the pictures and shift from one foot to the other before moving on. When I came to "Paris as arbiter" I rested my limbs using a bench that was there, trying to imitate Paris' pose. I watched a Kokoschka, then an oil painting by Schiele. How on earth did the painters remain the masters of their

colors? At one time, I too had been able to hit all possible nuances of the skin by swiftly switching the order of the colored pencils in my hand; often blurring the page with squinted eyes as I scribbled. But nowadays, though I had withdrawn to the reduced palette of black ink, not even there could I command my line: it led me on, in figures I had not wanted to breach, it and I in the spell of some obstinate fidelity to something I had hardly the slightest idea of. Thus everything I did was necessary and imposed by its own character; I stepped back when a choice appeared, as if I were in trance or an animal that can be immobilized by simple tricks such as eye contact. Like a child that one can actually prevent from doing anything by giving it confusing choices; like a band of robbers that can be draped in arabesques of heavyhandedness by dropping tidbits of conversation from out of a treetop above their camp. In this manner I would land on the back of any idea, any whim, any strict internal logic that would carry me away from the moment of a choice. Usually something like prodigality or excitedly racing around. But while I languished in the passing time, in the light of my latest lamp, the world forgotten, something else lay beside it all, unnoticed. Had I really avoided the choice? I fear I had merely avoided my judgement.

Outside the window, a desert is passing, briefly illuminated by our headlights. One city after the next. On the back of my hand I feel the delicate pressure of Krassa's hot fingertips. They are going to rub me to insanity. I cannot sleep, but slowly I drift away into the pleasant black cosm. Then a new wave of consciousness arrives, dragged by Krassa's fingers onto the tray of my mind, in candlelight, as it were: w- w- wo- wo- woman, someone wishes a word with you.

I am generous, I am generous, I don't mind, I breathe deeply, change my position in the seat, procure a bit of air for the posterior by giving up some around the shoulders, scatter my hands differently and – great side effect! - they land far away from Krassa's puffy fingers. Air! Freedom! Existence and respiration! Now back to the naked cosm, to sleep.

The invention of being enclosed in the logic of jouissance as by a high fence of palisades remains with me even in my sleep. At the same time, I am in the uniform of an officer of the Czarist army. I stand facing a line of glasses filled with vodka. I do not remember how I got here, but I know I must defend a woman I have kidnapped, whom no one must treat badly. She is a foreigner, a heathen, a tribeswoman. I don't know the significance of the glasses in front of me. I believe I have demanded a duel, and someone is trying to change it into a drinking contest. I protest! I want high cliffs, the first light of morning, numbered bullets! They say I should marry her. The idea is closing in on me like a tapestry closes in on a frothy-mouthed dog! They insinuate that otherwise they might not have sufficient respect for her. Swine! Well then, I will marry her if you like, we will marry three times, by the church, by the state and by the devil! Except that already now it fills me with disgust that she depends on me. You must educate her, says my friend, a warm moist breath in my ear, good advice, but I shake it off. Make her your equal in society, an equal opponent. That is too difficult. *Too* difficult! Drink! I cry.

I empty two of the glasses and leave. With that, I have lost a dozen friends at once: To rise above their games is unforgivable. Now I have only the woman I kidnapped. I stand outside the casino and stare at the starry sky. Its insolence.

Something small begins, an impulse, a miniature movement – yes, a rubbing on my thigh. Devil, have Krassa's hands now fallen upon my thigh! There, like a patch of oak processionaries, they decide – darling creatures that hands are, in all their plotting – to slowly make their way across my thigh. At this speed it will take half an hour. We have more than thirteen to come, during which we will remain in precisely the same position...

What am I to think? Should I go searching for reasons to stop the hands' procedures, which do me no harm? I brush them off, that should do it. I pretend to be sleeping, it is not my fault if my honest insides act on their own needs during my sleep. Let brute force take the place of confused delicacy. Why not do away with Krassa altogether? Into the cosmos with me! I am entering slumber, feel the breeze of nothing on my cheeks, see my officer friends in the distance, greeting me with ironic salutes: they have stumbled out the door to look for me. I call from out of the constellations, I cannot hear myself. I am the kidnapped Circassian woman and soothed by the stars in a song that I am playing on the flute, while my officer is at the casino. The officer stares into the stars, which seem to have some pull, the consequential flow of a melody that he cannot quite grasp. It is I, standing on the ground, no, my feet are actually floating, carried by a bus through the desert, above the vibrations of the motor. Some of the reading lamps are on, while most people are sleeping, among them the three Kabyle engineers, one of whom had grown suddenly excited and told us he had spent ten years working here – he pointed into the dark, where on the horizon a faint glow could be seen from the great refinery several miles off the road. Krassa heaves a deep breath and snores a little.

The odd thing is that I am only here because she has a false vision, fuddled by love. If her mind were doing what it should, she should have no reason to take a trip to the desert with me. "Many a pair of friends," she said, as we leafed through guidebooks, "never spoke with each other again after travelling in the desert." If I succeeded in changing her notions to fit mine and she ceased to imagine love, my presence here would become problematic. If, on the other hand, I went along with her, I would merely be someplace else, which I like so well, right? Yes, but I cannot be there, because she is already there, and so massively. I can't? I mean that physically there is no space for me in her thinking. But it is thinking, it cannot be a question of physical space. But one also cannot think two versions of the same thing at the same time. She may desire me, but I think she doesn't particularly like me. That is the bag that caught the cat, the brutality, the misunderstanding. Certainly, I do not like her particularly. Why not? She is amazing. No, she is terrible: she doesn't notice that I don't want to echo her desire, or she doesn't care. She has a dream, and I am supposed to play a role in it. I am supposed to want her dream, I am supposed to enjoy it. I am supposed to want her. Want to enjoy her. I cannot, it is impossible, I gasp for air and she begins to stroke me again. Slowly. She gathers confidence, becomes methodical,

regular. Diligent softness, self-confident gestures. I stop her again. A few of her muscles become tense and she turns to me slowly like a superdimensional mechanical puppet. Her eyes, popping out of their sockets, are far too close to my face, her upthrown, strutting, confident upper lip, crowned with its silky mustache, spits out her full, warm voice: "You don't like?" A voice squeaks out of my oesophagus: "No. I don't like. It prevents me from sleeping."

I feel the hard sentence sending waves of disappointed realization through her body, then she is shaken by a few sighs. She turns away from me, rearranges herself, like one shakes up a pillow.

The Circassian, the Circassian, devil take me, I had forgotten her for a moment. And yet she is locked in my room all day long. I don't want to teach her to be a lady, I wanted and still want the way she storms through the room, or flies over to me, hair streaming behind, or wraps me with hot silence, wrathful, not punishing. She is the creature in me, I am her carpet, the receptacle for her words; she doesn't understand what I mean by sensible reasoning, by freedom as a mood, easily broken, dependent on the faculty of judgement. Her words, that consider so much of me not worth considering, the rules of society no arguments, nor all my moral duties. She has her own morals, and they demand of me my own, wild kind of fidelity. My comrades, adieu.

We arrive in the morning, not long before dawn. The music drives away with the bus and its place is taken by birds welcoming the morning with their peculiar and drastic song. A native of the town brings us to a cafe, where he begs a friend of his to sit with us. The air becomes lighter and lighter. My heart pulls toward the music, yearns for the day, wants to walk and walk and walk, as the air bangs my pants about my legs. *Laissez-me voir venir le jour*. I have to remain seated. I get up and pace up and down.

"What's the matter?" asks Krassa, not wanting to displease the guardian, who is there to protect us from dragons, robbers, demons and our own ignorance. Protection is courtesy in a region famed for its wildness. "No," I say, "I can sit no more." I appear weak, unable to discipline my body to meet the standards of good behaviour. I roll a cigarette and light it. Krassa and the guardian glare at me. She who does as she pleases, while others force themselves not to, earns eternal jealousy and bitter revenge in time. This cigarette has placed a seal on our antagonism, but as will be shown, Krassa is willing to forgive me several times, at least for the duration of this trip.

We wait, no one knows for whom or what. Someone has called someone else, and therefore someone having something to do with our quarters will emerge out of the morning, out of this wide world of sand and the city, protected from which we sit under the awning of a café that is as active as sleep-encrusted eyes. The glass cooler is full of fresh mint leaves and bread. Outside lies the world, incredibly beautiful, while the parting dusk retreats like a clear wave on a beach. The way it plays high up into the sky in this particular place makes me admire with no restraint the extent of physical objects. It begins here, this world I desire so much. But if I went out into it, leaving behind my little human duties, I no longer would know who I am. As we are in a desert, the end would resemble all other ends: I would die

of thirst, like millions of people have died before me. Or be ashamed if I should be saved. I acquiesce to my confinement. With sardonically small steps in my heroic garb of billowy striped brown pants and cobalt blue shirt, I go and sit back down on one of the plastic chairs.

The sight of an awning from below reminds me of an image that impressed itself on my mind as a child. It was a rainy day at an arts and crafts fair, and I was sitting beside my mother, who was spinning at a wheel. The drops would slide to the lowest point of the material, which was gathered up in loops, and fall from there. Only in one place they fell from a loop that was not the lowest, as if giving in to the temptation to fall. They could not know there was a lower loop not far on. With my eager little soul I wanted to tell them, but found no words to talk to drops.

Finally, the proprietor of the hostel comes across the square, an elderly frenchman in khaki pants, fresh convert to Islam, obstinate, stern, friendly, a young grandfather. 'To walk! To walk! The three of us walk through the town as it grows lighter and lighter, trousers and hair fluttering as if moved by the wind of time itself. In the kitchen of the guest house, we set down our things and drink the old coffee out of our thermos bottle. Then Pierre takes us through the town. We pass through a labyrinth of mud walls that rise high above our heads, into close tunnels under ceilings of woven palm leaves, the anterooms of the houses. There is no such thing as public and private space, it seems, only various degrees of familiarity. Not even the families are really private, not even the emptiest part of the desert is really public, as one is so dependent on networks of human culture to survive. Some kilometres on, following invisible paths with a guide in a 4x4, we arrive at a castle on a cliff. The wind whistles through the open windows. It is the only obstacle between the horizons. Three saints lie here in their graves, above which there is a small room with a tin teapot half buried in the sand. The wind has been blowing through the window for centuries. Three coins lie in the sand. Koran verses lie in the mouths of the dead. For help, there are social networks. Help, social networks. One has to behave well, wherever one is, I realize uncomfortably.

Into the walls of the city children or adults have scratched drawings and letters, logos like Coca-cola and Toyota, portraits of people and cars and comic figures. I cannot hide that all this is quite new to me. We pass out of the labyrinth into a wider street leading to the "fortress", which is used as a hotel. Beyond the steep, palm-covered descent, the salt lake begins, *Le grand Erg*. On the edge of the rise lies the source, from which the old irrigation system branches out to supply the whole oasis. Pierre leads us to its mouth, tells us to remove our shoes and to walk into the tunnel of the canal. It was dug by slaves, he says. We wade through the clear water until we reach a bend, lighted from above by a hole in the tunnel's roof. The stark light is a mere placeholder for the heat outside, strengthens the feeling of dark cool. Krassa and I balance in the half-light on sandy outcrops of stone. Then we come back out. The heat seems friendly as it smothers us, like a mother's love. I drop my scarf in the water and wind myself

a dark, dripping turban. Under the wet hat I wander on, an odd, theatrical mushroom, breathless at the beauty, shy, step by step, as if on the moon. Krassa too. Her formality is afloat, her arab pantaloons, her sandals, her feet pattering over the ground sure and rough in those ugly sandals. We are dizzy and blinded. I feel excitedly good, like on a tipping balance where balance forces one to be unafraid. In the hostel we prepare ourselves for sleep, it is early evening. A yellow room with no windows encloses us. Woollen blankets with black and white patterns hang on the walls and off the ends of the beds, reminding me of outside, serving as vents for claustrophobia. Krassa wafts around in a white, square nightgown, brushing her teeth. At the end of her sleeves, her small hands emerge, not without grace, olive brown like her feet which pad about under the big, white legs. She moves around the hostel, preparing this and that. I have thrown myself onto my bed in my clothes. Then I get up again, roll up the blanket at my feet, remove my bra, remove my trousers, cover myself with the sheet and close my eyes firmly. Krassa shoves herself onto her bed and lies in fetus position, facing me.

"You do not want to come to me?"

"No."

"Then you do not live the same thing as I."

"No, I don't."

"Hm," she says. "I thought you do."

"Sad, no?"

"Yes. Very sad." A reproach, awaiting something, some kind of hope lies yet in this sentence.

Should I, even now, come over to her? Surprise her with the opposite – fabricated, without conviction? Surprise her with brutality, my only answer to her fondling? Over her, around her – I swear, I would have to stop short after two or three seconds, nothing would lead me. Build my own roads, of asphalt, and later nothing would keep me there, so close to her, except a feeling of guilt. Every one of her limbs would be too much for me, their heat an ugly hell. Her proximity means my own removal. I praise myself for staying put and keeping my eyes shut hard. I am cool, I am cool, and fall asleep, sending rakish thoughts toward the ceiling.

"So you really do not live the same thing as I?" I start; lift my head slightly and answer again: "No."

We have no zenith, we race over the rock desert and the dunes with our curves, we clamber over the dunes, climb them like the Himalaya, dust in our lungs, hearts, hands, camp in the flank of one. In the dunes stars come up, it is quiet, but the silence seems prickly, it is empty, but the emptiness is like a slinky, restless, dangerous animal. It chases my thoughts into eddies as I climb the flank of the dune with circling shins, to see the lights of three cities from the top, to the north, to the west and to the south. Twice we have changed the tyres when they were pierced by thorns. Ahmed, the guide we obey, searches and finds secret trails where they lie open on the surface of the desert. We walk a few paces to

stare at immense wadis, our clothes fluttering, turn and still Manu Chao is pouring out of the 4x4. We drink water from the Chinese 1.5-litre-bottles whose caps tear around the mouth of the bottleneck if you screw them closed too hard. The senselessness of our driving around is terrible. Should we write poems about the wadi, the distance, the fact that a third thorn would have us stranded? Would it be better if we had a mission: repressing people, for example, revenge, or trade? Rapt, but moody, I continually rewrap my turban, and painstakingly botch sketches, rumped by the career of the car, into my notebook.

In the evening, on the roof of the fortress, Krassa sits in her sheet nightgown with the insides of her thighs on my hands laid onto our bench before me, astraddle and almost nose to nose. I continue to extrapolate. I believe I am telling a story about some ex-lover. Is it revenge, is it just a sadistic kind of seduction? I seem to take pleasure, drawn by some strangely irresistible pull, in pushing my cool, solipsistic game further and further, while I sit across from her. I free my left hand to gesticulate. She removes herself from the other, of her own accord, so to speak, and sits back, a heavy spectre filled with human interest.

Dusk draws in with its army of intensity, we watch it from the parapets of our fortress, a huge phenomenon crossing the great salt lake. On the lake, an inconstant light swerves around, a 4x4 with a soul full of enjoyment and longing in it. For the whole hour that we sit there, the light blinks in various places, and finally finds its way back into the palm grove, into the labyrinth of small lights and neighborly errands through the dark, the hot excitement of a body that, now it has grown cooler, lays itself down to rest and celebrates its rituals in the familiarly decorated defenses.

We go back to our room. My gaze follows Krassa as she moves, in her square nightgown, under the yellow storm lamp, through the room. She emerges from the shower with a hairbrush, she stands on her bed, sits down, brushes her hair, rolls around. Now she is lying on the bed, the nightgown flipped up high on her back, reading an essay on aesthetics. Blanchot, brought from Paris. I look up from "A Hero Of Our Times", which I am reading for the second time, and find my eye resting on the back side of her legs. How unbelievably hideous they are! White, irregular flesh, pierced by phalanges of black stubble which gather to give off denser comments wherever the mass of the flesh demands a fold, comments that seem to determine the world as grumpily as letters. I understand how necessary it is, and must be to her, to have this loved, loved and forgotten – what is love but forgetfulness? – and in it, through it, touch her soul... I avert my eyes, half in fear that she might catch my glance and misinterpret it, half out of cowardly, lame love for the so regular, disciplined letters that spell out, line for line, the story of Petschorin, and between the lines allow my taste to behave like someone lithe in a uniform, fetching his foil. With a horse-whip I pass through the rows of letters and caress round backs, the soft underbellies of "u"s, tickle the "k"s. Ah, if I had the Russian text here, "y" would propel me down into sweet hells; I would come; I would readily come along.

Time passes. In Berlin, outside the window, the sun gazes on the merry and yet somehow wistful-looking foliage of the Ailanthus tree as it moves in the air above the parking lot. Sun and trees seem to know that I am using my time badly. Children scream in the preschool next to the graveyard. A circular saw goes from time to time. Where is the curly audacity with which Prätz just a moment ago approached me, took me around the middle and seemed to entice me to come back into the undefined area that lingered around him on my bed? I turned off the fire under the potatoes I was making us and followed Prätz, in the distance of his head-start that made him invisible, prowling through the jungle of my own flat, breathless. The scent led me through the hallway past the bicycles to where my bed lies, in the last corner, where I found Prätz's back. Prätz was lying fully dressed on my bed with bent legs and didn't stir.

His back looked like an instruction, perhaps a music program, I thought, that on the one hand attracts the newcomer and tempts her to try it out, on the other hand puts her off by giving no information on how to activate it. I took so long to learn to use these programs, to try more and more often, and to try blindly even if I was hoping for beauty – not only in black, angry nocturnal moods where nothing could go wrong because I hoped for nothing. I learnt to attempt thoughtless forays, the way Prätz speaks. When he speaks, it is as if joy spewed a satin ribbon out of his mouth and it hung in the air, blown upward by amused zephyrs. Then again he will spit and mumble, address the ground, and sometimes he is, understandably, quiet. Prätz' curse is to be so beautiful that one hardly cares how he behaves and whether or not he works.

Prätz lay there waiting. In front of me was the white alley of his pelvis, a sweet firewall running into the top of his jeans. The covered part of his hip seemed as far away as a place high up on the side of a building across the lot, shone on in pink apathy by the morning light. No hint of a psyche to hold on to. A fold of his T-shirt gave off an idle comment, explaining nothing but itself, the fold. Prätz's nape, confusedly focussed in form, stopped any play and seemed to channel my attention like a regulated brook full of long streaming algae, like the thought of death, to avoid which rivers are channeled. Like the clouds in a dramatic sunrise, the nape hung between his head and the upper end of his torso. In front hung the belly, softer than usual, almost a little into my hand. Farther up it was more stoney, like the narrow flying buttresses of a cathedral. All centimetre-close, touchable, all completely unattainable because of the silence of the program. I spoke. It murmured: mhe. I asked,

"You aren't sleeping, are you?"

It answered one syllable.

"m."

I threw myself grimly onto the other side of this grey entity and saw dark eyes under pink eyelids. Something like a reproach in the question that left my eyes, too much searching, made me start back, I apologized and gave the backside of the entity a push, catapulted myself onto my legs and went off to do something useful.

This strange program Prätz lies in me like a heavy, not very nourishing dish. It is good that dodos exist, good that platypuses exist, one shouldn't slaughter them and shouldn't ask what kind of animals they are. One should make them breakfast and ask them, once, then later once again, one should be more serious and ask differently, I told myself. The sun shone on, it was late morning, early afternoon, late summer, early fall, I had a lot to do, I had done a lot, I shuffled, playacting, through my apartment like a Japanese secretary, I sprang with heavy trumps through my apartment like a slap-happy jaguar in a tree, *pounce, pounce, pounce*. Grabbed some headphones, put on some music, Gruppa Leningrad, oh no, T-Rex, oh no, Can, checked my emails, wiggled my legs, went to get eggs, still awfully confused.

You should have seen Prätz's face when he appeared in the doorway among the flycatching streamers, as if in pouring rain. Face of lead, above it hair like kelp, tired, friendly and more in tune with the air above him than with himself. If one has traitors on one's head, one must always sally straight upward, that is how I understand Prätz, and that is enough information, one shouldn't overtake others in understanding themselves.

Later, in the night bus, I forget to count the strokes that Prätz' fingers lay down on my arm. With surprise I acknowledge that it is far from being unpleasant to me, although it is exactly the same thing that Krassa was doing, I think, and draw Prätz's long white arm in front of my eyes. His face goads me on, throws me up in the air, rather than pushing me along in front of it like Krassa's. I had become a wheelbarrow and in my imagination pulled rubber boots onto her feet. That was mean of me, in her own view her feet were princess feet. I look up at Prätz, he looks up at me, we receive joy, somewhat more than one can get by looking up at the sky on an almost random day. As if his traits were a kind of code that once I would be able to understand, I try to learn to read them, today his face looks like

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(ima, now).