

LOVE IN THE TIME OF THE MAHLSTADT CHILD

BY CLEMENS SETZ

TRANSLATED BY ROSS BENJAMIN

ENGLISH TRANSLATION COPYRIGHT © 2011 ROSS BENJAMIN

Do you know what it's like to care too much  
'bout someone that you never gonna get to touch  
Hey man now you're really living

*Eels*

- And you'll really be so kind and look after the apartment while I'm away?
- Yes, that's why I'm here.
- And you have everything?
- What do you mean everything?
- That you need.
- I have mineral water, yes, if that's what you mean, and those funny little cookies. I don't actually need anything else. And there's a fire extinguisher in your room.
- Really?
- On your bookcase, at the very top.
- The hydrant? Yeah, maybe, that might be a fire extinguisher. But I don't think water comes out of it...
- There's tap water too.
- Yeah.

- And mineral water.
- Yeah...You know, Kirill, I'm sort of nervous.
- How come?
- I don't know. I've never done this before. Are you sure you have everything, I mean, because the apartment is somewhat unfamiliar to you...and the cat, maybe it's irresponsible for me to just leave it alone for a night.
- But you're not leaving it alone at all, there's someone here with it.
- With him.
- Yes, I know, Magister Perotinus Magnus.
- Just Pero, he answers to that, I think.
- Cats don't *answer* to anything.
- But he comes whenever he hears my voice. Even if he's been sleeping. You can't even imagine his attachment.
- He'll manage, he has me.
- Yes, he always purrs when you hold him. Although I've also heard that cats don't purr only when they're content, but also when they're in danger. Or when they're dying.
- Maybe so, but he'll see that I don't pose any danger. I'll be calm, will probably be sitting in front of the television all night and shoveling those cookies into me – what are they called?
- Limiti.
- Right. I never remember the stupid name. Do you have everything?

– My jacket is black, that’s probably as it should be, so everyone doesn’t see me right away. I have gloves, two pairs actually, in case one rips...The chain I have back here.

– You’re taking a chain with you too?

– Is that too extreme? Do you find that in some way...

– No, it’s your decision. As long as you don’t lash out at a person with it.

– I would never do that! Why does everyone always say that in the same breath? Always the same thing: As long as it’s not a *real* child, a *real* person, as long as I don’t *really* kill anyone –

– People just like to make others feel guilty.

– That’s easy to say. Sometimes I’d like to stand above everything like you, Kirill.

– That’s not true, I don’t do that.

– Oh yes, you do.

– Well, I don’t find it too extreme at all. The chain thing.

– No? All right, then I’ll take it with me. I can still decide once I’m there whether to use it. It will definitely work without a chain too.

– Some people even take pipes and clubs, I’ve heard.

– Ah, you’ve heard...

– I’ve never been there.

– You mean at night?

– Yes, during the day I have, of course. It's impossible to avoid passing by the child. Besides, these days one out of three rallies and almost every concert are held in front of it. The whole thing is already getting a bit boring, if you understand what I mean.

– Boring. Yes, a good code word. Well then – off to the boredom.

– Have fun.

– Yeah, yeah, right...

– What?

– Take good care of my Pero. By the way, he doesn't like loud noises.

– You mean like beating clay with iron chains? Don't worry, I don't think he'll hear that.

– Now what do you mean by that? So you do find it extreme? Sick?

– No, just kidding. Have a good time. By the way, you look pretty in that jacket.

– Yeah? That's rich, coming from you.

– I didn't mean that you –

– Stop, don't say things like that in front of my cat. He's neutered.

– Like what?

– Dream on.

– All right, whatever, again: pretty jacket.

– Goodbye, have a nice night.

– Have a nice night, Lea.

The woman slipped through the door and locked it from outside. The man stood in front of it for a while and looked at the i-shaped door lock. I have no key, he thought,

no key with which to escape. But, contrary to his expectations, no claustrophobia came over him. Perhaps because the long conversation had exhausted him.

*Exhaustion is precious and sublime / honor it always as a gift divine.* From the farmer's almanac for apocalyptic fantasies prompted by failed harvests. Death, the lurking coldness of the universe. A lone bloody glove on a fence post, the border guard of a mutilated culture.

The pathos of the images did him good, calmed him.

In the living room something fell over. The cat ran guiltily past him and disappeared into the bathroom, the floor of which was heated. It was a beautiful, sleek animal with proud, slender paws and eyes of translucent, dark amber. On its white snout, which had been left out by the stripes otherwise distributed over its whole graceful body, there was a single dot of black fur, a beauty mark.

In the living room he rummaged through Lea's CD collection. Bach. Hindemith. Even Ligeti. Bill Evans. Egberto Gismonti. Hun-Huur-Tuu. Radiohead. Nine Inch Nails. A very broad taste. Bob Dylan was there too, almost all of that poet's albums. *Take me on a trip upon your* – And what was this? Hilliard Ensemble: Perotin. He inserted the CD. The first syllable of the song sounded: Viii...

– Hey, do you hear, you composed that, he said to the cat, who had just come back into the room to take a closer look at the stranger. It paid no attention to the music, but only marked the wooden doorframe with its chin, then with its flanks, to show him that all this was its territory and it expected him to behave accordingly.

– Yes, I know, he said to the cat, I won't touch anything.

The cat placed its front paws neatly side by side and lowered its hindquarters to the floor. Like a Buddha statue that constituted the center of universe, he sat there and stared at the visitor. What was more polite? Kirill thought, to look away or return the gaze?

He sat down in the television chair. The Hilliard Ensemble sang around on the syllable *deeh* or *daay*, eventually they would have to come to the next syllable. The slowest music in the world. People in those days probably had another form of patience. It didn't come from within, as it did nowadays, thought Kirill, but was simply assumed in the course of life like a necessary lying position or fencing stance.

For a moment he let the thought melt on his tongue. It was probably nonsense. Though it sounded quite good, lying position, fencing stance. Or perhaps *riding stance* was better, who knows whether people fenced back then the way they do today, with step sequences and all that goes with them.

He noticed that the cat had taken a seat on the sofa next to the balcony door. It had curled up its front paws so that it looked a little like a rubber boat, and stared at him with seemingly sleepy eyes. Perhaps it was better to look away after all. Being polite by ignoring.

The first word of the song resolved to his relief into a *-ruuunt*, and the next word, *omnes*, was about to begin. Before it came to that, Kirill turned off the machine.

\*

The *Mahlstadt Child* had come to the city two months ago. After some back and forth (various institutions lay claim to the artwork) it received its final exhibition site at the end of a short dead-end street between two abandoned buildings on the edge of the park. The buildings had long been slated for demolition, but now that plan was postponed until further notice. At the entrance to the street there was a natural, pedestal-like elevation. No one remembered why this platform had once been built. Anyone who wanted to turn onto the street (for a car this wasn't even possible) virtually had to climb a step. It was only a single step, but nonetheless it seemed like a barrier. Beyond it, a narrow passage led for a few meters directly to the sculpture. You approached it shielded from street noise and wind, to the right and left the blinders of the old building walls, on which a few provisional markings for the imminent demolition had been made.

You walked along the cramped walls toward the sculpture without being tempted to look around constantly or keep an eye out for something else. People could gather in front of it, as the newspapers noted with some resentment toward the city government, only packed closely together.

The country's most famous work in progress was by a sculptor meanwhile known everywhere by name, but living in complete seclusion. When fame first arrived and universities and cultural institutions invited him with increasing frequency to panel discussions and symposia, he relocated to the countryside.

The artist's only known statement on his work was a speech he held in his hometown marketplace the day the figure was first publicly exhibited. The speech was reprinted in all the newspapers whenever the artwork changed its location.

The reasons for his fame and that of his sculpture *The Child*, generally known as the *Mahlstadt Child*, might indeed have been clear to the sculptor from the start, for he had taken great care to orient his artwork toward a broad impact: From a clay mixture and a pliable skeleton of little watering pipes, he modeled a large sitting child with its head lowered, as if it had just shaken it incredulously at a certain absurdity. A small hole in the roof of the child's skull allowed the skeleton to be filled with water, thus keeping the figure soft and malleable. A small, boldly written plaque was attached to it as a sort of instruction manual, declaring that no artist could ever claim a monopoly over the completion of his artwork and everyone interested in art was invited to use blows, kicks, tools or, if necessary, even weapons to bring the child's physiognomy into what is generally felt to be the perfect form of a child.

\*

Kirill sat in the large, fluffed-up armchair. He didn't want to make a bed tonight, on the one hand, because he hated strange beds, on the other hand, because he didn't intend to sleep anyhow. At least not *on a grand scale*. He would simply spend the night in the cozy armchair, a cat blanket draped over his legs, looking alternately at the television or through the wide skylight, which continued the glass of the balcony doors in a clever way. Over the last few somewhat cooler days the city had forgotten to put on its usual pall of haze, and thus one looked directly at the naked starry sky. Even the Milky Way could be seen, of which this planet, the apartment and Kirill himself were a part. *No one knows where this galaxy is heading.*

Pero the cat patrolled past him again. He grasped the situation with a glance: The stranger still occupied the blanket and the armchair. Once again he rubbed a corner with his chin as he left the room.

Because the television was on without sound, it was very quiet in the room. For a brief moment Kirill thought about how to make a lock pick out of wire. He had read about it once, but scarcely recalled the article. He couldn't simply smash a window, not at this height, and the police, if they came, would think he was a burglar and beat him then and there.

*Beating*, that's what Lea might be doing right now too, at this moment. An absurd thought. Kirill could not imagine Lea being violent at all. That was almost like trying to picture someone being strangled with a flower stem.

The one time he himself had used his fists – he found it almost unpleasant to follow the general trend at this moment and think about *that*, of all things – the one time, up to now, had happened when he was seven years old. It had all started with the prohibition against entering his grandfather's attic on his own. All right, then accompanied by an adult. But no one could be found who was willing to go up there with the child and spend hours watching him rummage in the sea-chest-shaped, partly overturned cabinets and drawers, try on old clothes and scrape off the porous labels of various ancient records, making them unrecognizable for all time. No, there was no one who wanted to take that on. So he had crept up the steps by himself after all. In one of the empty boxes you could play Houdini excellently.

Not until evening did they find Kirill, crying for help and half mad with fear, in his dungeon, which stank of moldy clothes and mothballs. They scolded him a little, but

soon left him alone, for the child threatened to pass out with every touch and went at one-minute intervals from one hysterical state into another. Later, when he was lying in bed, his mother came to him and wanted to give her son's conscience a few more admonishing words to take along into the sound-insulated realm of his dreams. She didn't utter one syllable about what had happened in the attic, but asked, as she ran her hand over the boy's still-feverish forehead, why he had shed all the blankets, for it was winter after all – was he perhaps afraid that the blankets would suffocate him in his sleep?

For the second time that day, the occupants of the house had to jump up from their usual activities and rush to the aid of a screaming voice. Kirill had injured his mother. In a fit of mysterious self-defense he had given her a bloody nose. His father wept half the night over the incident.

Kirill switched back and forth between the soundless channels. On one there was a close-up of dough being worked on by two pliable mixing rods as by synchronized swimmers. On another channel there was a chess game. A single sweaty hair stuck to the forehead of the opponent on the left. It made Kirill nervous to look at it. Since he couldn't reach into the screen and brush it off the perspiring grandmaster's forehead, he changed the channel again. An American series about demons that had taken control of all the taxis in New York. Whoever walked didn't notice what was going on at all, and didn't appear in the series either. All the important characters were constantly taking taxis.

He thought up imaginary conversations for the voiceless characters. A policeman was talking to a girl who had narrowly survived an attack of the demons. She sat in the

open back doors of an ambulance, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and held a cup of steaming cocoa in her hands. Kirill murmured:

– You’re holding the cocoa wrong.

– Yeah, I know.

– The cocoa won’t put up with that for long.

– Yeah...

– It will get colder and colder (the policeman was suddenly incongruously reading something out of his notepad), until one day it leaves you – by the rear exit.

(The woman jumped up.)

– No! Noooooo!

A demon approached from behind and attacked the policeman. It pulled the wriggling man into a taxi that appeared out of nowhere and hurtled away. The distraught face of the woman. The cocoa went on steaming.

During the commercial break, as a half-naked woman stretched out on a beach and poured coconut milk on her bellybutton, Kirill changed the channel. For a moment he closed his eyes. The buttons of the remote control in his hand were very warm.

\*

*The general, perfect form of a child.*

The silent, indeterminable consensus.

It took some time before things really got going. At first – as in every city – the sculpture stood in its spot like a misplaced memorial. Children played around it, climbed

on it or hid behind it. Children and art lovers. But aside from those two groups there were not many people who abandoned themselves to the presence of the figure for a long time or even wanted to reflect on its significance. Of course, some read the plaque on the wall and often stayed for several minutes with an umbrella leaning on their shoulder or a hand on their backpack strap. And the next day a few came back, with company or alone, and stood there again, for one or two minutes.

This grace period of natural shyness lasted roughly two weeks.

The first to take the initiative were some political scatterbrains. That too was normal and to be expected. It happened that way in almost every city. They called for the fulfillment of the artistic purpose, presented flip chart designs of what was, in their view, the generally recognized figure of a child. Depending on the school of thought, the ideal child either had an especially large head and fast legs, with which it could escape ignorant people, or it was muscular and its head resembled a dented billiard ball. With firework displays that outdid one another, the various political groupings hailed their respective visions of the great, eternally unfinished artwork.

Next came the pedagogues. They published articles in professional journals, gave interviews on television and wrote books that fell like Tetris pieces into the bestseller lists and lingered there for a long time. They compared *art in itself* with the *child in itself*, came to the conclusion that neither existed, and ultimately shifted their interest to the most effective forms of rods and paddles with which – in the distant barbaric past – children were compelled to learn. But a child made of clay was obviously another matter, and knowledge about the corporal punishment of pupils, relegated to the archives decades ago, reappeared overnight in people's consciousness.

\*

Kirill walked through the room and imagined the gratitude with which Lea would greet him in the morning. Sleep was unthinkable. Even though he had been on the brink of falling asleep a few hours ago, he was now excited, talked a little to himself, to the cat and the baby-doll faces of the small portrait photos on the piano and television, and every few minutes went onto the balcony that looked down on the dark courtyard. The neighbors' windows were already asleep, only in a very few could light or movement still be seen. On one illuminated balcony the silhouette of a wind wheel rose into the night. It was getting quite cool now, and Kirill searched in the apartment for something to put on. At first he didn't dare to open Lea's closet, but once it was done, he examined everything in it with almost expert meticulousness.

A scarf, no, that was probably nothing. A vest, good.

And not even too feminine. Large buttons. But it fit.

He walked back and forth in front of the narrow mirror. She'll praise me, he thought, and ask me to stay with her a little longer. She'll definitely come back alone, without the peculiar man with the circus director mustache. Bald head. Unpleasant gloves.

No, he thought, she'll definitely come alone.

He hated Lea's boyfriend. He had met him only once and both men had immediately sensed that the other was an enemy. Evolution had equipped them with that sort of antenna, so they made use of it.

On one of the cooled-down heaters he discovered a sleeping moth and chatted with it.

– Go ahead and sleep, he said, I won't do anything to you.

He noticed that he was overexcited. He confessed it to himself, said it a few times aloud, but it was no help.

In the kitchen it was dark. He turned on the light. Now the whole apartment was brightly lit, every single room. Someone down on the street would probably think there was a whole gathering up there. But recently there was strangely little traffic in this area at night. Everything was deserted. Kirill looked for a long time, but there really was no one to be seen. The light of the streetlamps made it a little cooler still in the apartment, he found. He pulled the purple vest tighter around his wrists. Thin, watchless wrists. The joints of the marionette artist he would have liked to be. *On the Marionette Theater*. Last chapter in the history of the world. In his head the nighttime danced clumsily away.

He played through a few greetings he would perform for Lea the next morning. What do you say to someone who was awake all night – and not only awake, but also active? What do you say to a woman who is in your debt but has just spent half the night laying into a child made of clay? She's basically still very young, thought Kirill, at least younger than he felt. She always considered herself *underdeveloped* – that was her word for young. She readily saw in everything the depressing, the disappointing. The dark side of the spinning top.

Kirill stood up. He couldn't sit still for five minutes. It must have been the impatience of the apartment itself, a sort of confined anticipation hung in these rooms, an expectation, the object of which had gotten caught somewhere in the window crosspieces.

So back onto the balcony.

He held on to the vest with both hands, for it was beginning to get really cold outside. Always a little colder. And then at midnight everything freezes. And from his nose hangs a large icicle. *One must have a mind of winter.* To comprehend everything, one must become the thing itself. To see the winter, one must oneself become winter. To comprehend Lea's slight madness – in short, he had to prepare himself.

Perhaps she hadn't planned anything brutal at all, perhaps it was more of a study, a behavioral analysis of her friends. He knew Lea, she was capable of something like that.

He returned to the room, closed the balcony door and sat down in the deep leather armchair. This environment really was a little unfamiliar...Like every man, Kirill was calmed by fantasies about a harem made up of all the women he knew. He imagined they were under a sort of immobility spell...Lea, Annelies, Andrea, his father's nameless secretary...and they were kneeling naked in front of him on the carpet. Eyes closed. And he, Kirill, went through all of them one by one.

\*

This city was not the first to be paid a visit by the *Mahlstadt Child*. But despite everything each time was the first time, as many articles and books as desired could appear in advance.

Politicians and pedagogues had long since worn themselves out, awarded one another prizes, honors and commendations, but the true bearers of the *Mahlstadt Child's*

secret were the intellectuals. Naturally it took them the longest to warm to something, but once they had done so, nothing could stop them. They were the ones who had first mustered the courage for collective, organized art initiatives at which large crowds could encounter and marvel at the *Mahlstadt Child*. There were evening meetings, readings that lasted until late at night and sometimes until morning, concerts were held in the nearby park – all the city’s otherwise only slow-moving cultural efforts enjoyed an unexpectedly strong engine.

An influential columnist wrote about it: *Here one has the chance for the first time to witness art as it happens, as it creates a space for itself in which to unfold and emerge. For with language and through language we cannot say what exactly art is all about, because the inexpressible is not pronounceable and by definition happens only within us. But in the presence of the Child we feel like the children of Laocoön: We cannot wriggle out. We can only wish for more artworks of this sort in our country – and in our heads!*

Even though no one understood exactly what the columnist meant by this, everyone knew it was along the right lines. His words were repeated at every opportunity, and his name appeared on the list of speakers at the most varied events, but rarely did anyone set eyes on him. Ultimately it was said that he had suffered a splinter fracture of his wrist doing his research.

\*

A tongue of land, a shell collection on a soft beach. Arranged according to beauty and size, the curled, smooth forms lie side by side in a row, and anyone who dares can try to

balance across them. A small girl stands for over a minute with her toe on the tip of a snail-like shell shaped like an onion tower and imitates various angel poses: the innocent trumpet, the listening toward the motionless heavens, the cupid, the harp player, the cupid again, the hyperactive child prodigy –

– Stay, just stay –

But Kirill startled himself and fell out of his dream directly onto the floor and under the table. He swore in a daze. He had hit his head on the edge.

– You were asleep, I didn't want to wake you.

Lea's voice. Kirill crawled out from under the table and greeted her. Lea had wet hair.

– Is it raining?

– No, I already took a shower, she said. At first I couldn't find you or the cat at all. Everything was completely silent when I came in the apartment.

– It was a quiet night.

– You sleep pretty deeply.

– It's probably the only thing about me that's deep.

He took a closer look at Lea. Even though he didn't permit himself any curiosity about the art brawl creeping into all areas of life, he wanted to see whether a change could be discerned in her, perhaps something like a mark, a superficial scar only insiders knew about...But Lea covered her face with a dark green washcloth, which she held alternately on her ears and on her forehead. Perhaps she was injured and was trying to hide it from him.

– How was it? he asked.

– That you of all people are asking this question –

– You're right.

He was trapped in his own integrity. Pero the cat rubbed against his owner's legs in greeting. She bent down to him and made something like an attempt to stroke his back, but then held her hand in front of his nose. The cat sniffed it intensely.

– Do you like it there on the floor? Lea asked.

Kirill stood up. The cat came toward him and caressed his legs too. Kirill noticed with relief that the borrowed vest was lying on the armchair. He must have taken it off in his sleep before he had slid onto the floor.

– Has the cat been fed? she asked.

– Yes, of course.

– When?

Where was this tone coming from all of a sudden?

– Yes...around ten o'clock in the evening...that's when he was begging the most.

He's a bit greedy, the old master Perotin.

– Greedy, yes, greedy. Exactly. An insatiable beast.

Though Lea was no more lively than usual, there was something looser about her. Something that rearranged her movements and lent them a certain irrevocability they didn't usually possess. Well, thought Kirill, when you've stayed awake all night actively talking with other enthusiasts about art and society and God knows what else, it's no wonder.

There was a hard knock at the door. Lea was startled and rushed to open it. She apologized softly to the man who entered.

She introduced the men to each other.

– Albert. Kirill. We met last night at the *Child*. Chance.

Kirill bowed inappropriately. He immediately turned red. The other man recognized him. Their antennae extended and vibrated hostilely.

– Yeah, so, said Lea, thank you very much for watching and feeding and everything...

She pulled out her wallet.

– No, stop, said Kirill, I was happy to do it.

– Okay, good. That's fine too.

And she put the bill back in her pocket.

– Did I do something wrong? Kirill asked, trying to steer Lea away from Albert.

He took a few steps toward the kitchen. But Lea stayed where she was.

– No, it was only one night. What could have happened?

– I just mean, because...

– It's damn cold outside, said Albert.

His voice sounded impatient. Lea turned around. Kirill saw a few red spots on her neck. Bite marks? He quickly shook off the idea.

For a moment he remained standing indecisively, watched the cat round a corner, and then walked past Lea to the door. He tried to brush against her, but it didn't work.

Only now did he feel the exhaustion of the previous night.

\*

No way that was chance. Kirill was aware that Lea and Albert had already known each other for a while. But only recently had they apparently gotten closer. Albert smoked cigars. He trained every afternoon in the park, rode around on a somehow cramped-looking bike, and supposedly played chess and piano really well – both, as Lea said, the noblest inventions in existence with white and black fields.

Those were the facts.

The realm of speculation began with Albert's work – Kirill believed that he had a degree in a social services profession, perhaps even a doctorate, psychology, pedagogy, something like that – and ended with the things he would rather not imagine. Lea's chest smeared with fresh clay, being cleaned by a trembling hand. Yes, Albert is no doubt quite adept at things like that, washing people, physical closeness, washcloths, fever thermometers. Kirill imagined him as a nurse, walking broad-shouldered and enveloped in a cloud of after shave through the corridors and frightening all the patients. Or he thought of him as a teacher amid a flock of monochrome children. In Kirill's imagination the children's eyes looked like a 9 lying on its side.

On the way home Kirill passed the park. In the trees hung hundreds of colorful balloons, and on some especially load-bearing branches there were also spotlights with their eyes closed during the day. Autumn was on its way to the city.

Kirill felt weak, squashed, bleary.

*I slept in a small hotel / inside a box by Joseph Cornell.*

He entered his favorite pub, which was open until noon. There was an uncomfortable atmosphere in the pub, as after a brawl. Jules, the bartender, greeted him and asked him about the success of his plan.

– No plan, no intentions, no success. And how are you doing?

– I don't know...I love all women.

– Yeah, all women. And whom do you mean by all women?

– I'm married.

– Good. At least you're honest.

– Yes, Jules said with satisfaction. But you still shouldn't make that face. Just because you watched her apartment for one night and she didn't immediately send you packing, you don't have any right to, right to –

– Right to, shot at –

– To you know what. You can tell by looking at your teeth.

– At my teeth! And how's that supposed to work?

– When you grin – like that – it looks more like a cramp in your jaw and not like joy.

Kirill thought for a while.

– That's really the stupidest thing you've said today.

– No, the stupidest was hello. I shouldn't have started a conversation with you in the first place.

– Too bad for you.

– Yeah, too bad for me. Ape.

– Baboon.

– Monkey.

They burst out laughing. They toasted with the burning hot coffee to something hanging in the air. Kirill looked at the clock. It was nine o'clock in the morning, and he was horribly tired.

*I slept in a small hotel / small hotel, small hotel...*

\*

On television there was a report about the *Child*. During the report, a school class could be seen standing in front of the downward-looking sculpture and waving at the camera. One of the schoolgirls held a stick in her hand and pretended to be brandishing a flag. Behind them was a wheeled structure with a ladder, the point of which was hard to determine.

Kirill turned the television off.

Now two days had already passed, and Lea still hadn't gotten in touch with him to thank him for his favor. Of course, it wasn't such a heroic deed. To watch a cat for a night. A nice apartment, though...Kirill toyed with the thought of just calling her. Perhaps a walk would do her good, clear her head a little...

In the afternoon the telephone rang, and it was Lea. She had a problem. Kirill pressed himself very close to the receiver. A problem with the cat. He had climbed from the balcony onto the roof, and now she couldn't get him back down. She sounded a little drunk, at least when she spoke some of her consonants got caught like scraps of newspaper on a sewer grate. Kirill immediately dropped everything and took the

streetcar. He missed the first one by a hair and kicked the door furiously. An older woman standing next to him laughed appreciatively at his angry outburst. Her face and hands were clay-smearred.

Lea was indeed drunk when he arrived. She ponderously told him the whole story. She had discovered a beauty mark on the cat's face and tried to wipe it off. Of course the beast had run away from her and hidden. Kirill was now to get it down from the roof.

–If you need a ladder..., said Lea.

But then she lost the rest of the sentence and had to look down at the floor to find it.

– It must be in the closet, she said. It's only a small one...ah, the damn animal. I really have enough problems already, the last thing I need is to call the fire department to...

– Don't let it make you crazy, said Kirill.

The advice backfired:

– Crazy? If I remember correctly, *I* left *you* in my apartment. Alone!

Between the pronouns her index finger leaped from person to person.

– And? Did I smash...treat the apartment badly?

– Smash up? Is that supposed to be an insinuation? Aren't you starting to get bored of always trying to expose me?

– Why are you being so aggressive? asked Kirill.

– Stop it, I'm begging you, stop it! Just be quiet already! Aggressive, aggressive, that's all I hear anymore! Smashing things and aggression, I have it coming out of my ears.

– Calm down, what happened?

– He still won't stop it, he – he just won't stop! Nothing happened, nothing horrible or aggressive and definitely nothing I have to calm down from, get that through your head already and be quiet!

– All right, then I'll go.

– Suit yourself. But don't forget to slam the door behind you.

– First the cat should come down from the roof.

– You can do that from the window in the stairwell too. Much better actually.

She rummaged in her jacket pocket for the keys and put them on the table. Kirill still didn't grasp the situation.

– I'll lock up behind you, she said.

An irritating sentence. Irritating, but necessary. It was visible how much she had to control herself.

Kirill took the key and walked silently to the door. As he was about to touch the door handle, he recoiled. For a brief moment he thought it was a bug or another thick insect. A dark brown fingerprint, probably from a thumb, on the pale wood next to the door lock. Hastily, as if in a sudden panic, he unlocked the door and ran into the stairwell. The door behind him stood there indignantly with its mouth open.

In the stairwell Pachelbel's *Canon* could be heard from somewhere. The music calmed Kirill a little. He opened the window and tried to see onto the roof, but it wasn't a good angle. He climbed onto the windowsill, immediately felt afraid, thought of Lea's gratitude and stood...stood upright. The earth below him had an attack of vertigo and

began to wobble like a drunken waiter's tray. There was nothing on the roof. A television antenna, a dirty skylight, brown roof tiles. No cat. Kirill wondered what could have happened to the animal.

He clambered back into the stairwell. When he was almost out of the house, a figure rushed toward him:

– You! I'll smash your skull in!

– What –

Kirill tried to shake off Albert, but he had already dug his fingers into Kirill's jacket. Kirill yanked at the hands, but they were made of lead, completely rigid, and seemed not even to obey their owner anymore. He and his attacker turned once in a circle.

– You motherfucker! Albert shouted. Asshole!

He had let go of him and kicked a table that was next to the front door. It was only a table, but Albert scuffed it a bit.

– What the hell is going on? Kirill asked.

Albert looked at him, cursed to himself and then walked past Kirill up the stairs. Farther upstairs a door slammed shut.

\*

For a few days things were quiet. Kirill wandered in confusion through the rooms of his apartment and looked incredulously at the silent telephone. Finally he called Lea and apologized awkwardly to her. She seemed not to recall the incident and invited him to go

with her to the *Child*. Albert would come along too, she said. Kirill stood there with the telephone receiver in his face, a towel wrapped around his just-washed hair and in the uncontrollable wave of happiness that overcame him he agreed.

A little bit later he hated himself and threw the towel furiously into a corner.

– Give it a try, said Lea. It’s really soft.

– No, said Kirill. I don’t think it’s for me.

Why did he find it so unpleasant to look Lea in the eyes? Now she took his hand – she’d never done that before – opened it and put something cold into it, then she folded his hand up like a gift and gave it back to him.

– Are you crazy? I’m not going at a child with a knife. Here, take it back.

– Try it. Just once.

– No.

– It’s not a child, it’s only clay.

– Only clay, Albert’s sarcastic voice could be heard in the background, only clay, only clay. And the *Kiss* by Brancusi is only a piece of rock.

– Did I ask your opinion? Lea shouted.

Albert came toward her. As he spoke, he craned his neck until his face was a few centimeters from hers. His head jerked nervously forward and back. He looked like a lizard with a turned-up collar.

– Go ahead and play the lunatic, said Lea. But I saw you.

– Shut your damn mouth.

The gap between their faces shrunk a little bit more. *Shut. Your. Damn. Mouth.*  
Albert's lower lip shone wet.

– You just kneaded around on it, said Lea. With your little artist's fingers you bent something into shape, smoothed something out, but raise a fist to it –

Kirill got between them. Albert's gaze remained magnetically fixed on Lea. Kirill was able to force him to retreat only with difficulty. Lea took a few steps after him, he had to hold her back too.

– He'll kill me, she said, when Albert was gone. He's a coward. He can't even hit the *Child*.

In the distance they heard a large hollow object, perhaps a plastic garbage can, being maltreated by rhythmic drumbeats. A dog howled.

– He's a coward, Lea went on, and I'm the only one who saw it. He didn't even hit it with his fist.

– I didn't hit it either, Kirill reminded her.

– You probably have your reasons, she said. Principles. But he's just cowardly.

– Maybe he has his reasons too.

– Look –

A large rock was sleeping peacefully in front of them on the small patch of lawn. Lea bent down to it. The rock was oval, and she rocked it like a baby. The bottom of the rock was covered with wet earth, and she simply wiped her finger off on her jacket. Thick brown lines. Kirill wondered when this jacket had last been washed.

– Throw it. Just once.

– Why?

– For me, she said. A gift. A...

– But why is it so important?

– It's not. I'd just be happy. It would be best if you aim for the back or, from the front, for the shoulder, for the collarbone, the –

– No, I'm definitely not going to shatter a collarbone, said Kirill. I'm tired.

– Oh, it doesn't even *have* a collarbone, don't act so stupid, just once, please, then the rock bounces off and no one has seen you.

– No one except you.

– Do you want me to look away? Is that it? No problem, if that's it.

– Lea, just let it be for today. Another time.

He regretted coming along.

– Why another time? We're here now. And on another day there might be ten other people here. Today we have it all to ourselves. For God's sake, it's only a lump of clay!

– So? I see no reason to throw rocks at a lump of clay.

– There doesn't need to be reason, except that I'd be happy. Do it for me.

He hesitated. The rock slipped from her hand into his.

– Throw. No one is telling you to smash up your hand on the child or beat it for so long with the chain that –

The rock flew. It hit the wall of the building, grazed the base of the figure and lay there unconscious in the dust. A dull moment of silence.

– How hard can it be to hit such a large target? Lea exploded. That was intentional, right? You intentionally missed.

– No, I didn't. My eye for distances –

– Oh, don't give me that! You thought you could cheat your way past me, but I'm not so sick that I can't see that. Oh, damn coward, sniveling, disgusting –

She stepped rapidly across the lawn to the rock, picked it up and hurled it at the child's left knee. The rock left a small hollow.

Kirill turned to go. *Into what is generally felt to be the perfect form* was inscribed on the plaque. As he left, he strained to listen, but the bad beating Lea was giving the child as a punishment for his cowardice did not take place or was happening completely soundlessly.

\*

Lately there was a large map of the city hanging in Jules's pub. With a highlighter someone had circled particular areas on the map or marked them with an arrow. In the middle, at the edge of a large green-shaded area, there was a thick X.

Kirill pointed to the X.

– What's this here?

– Hm?

– This thing here.

– A map, said Jules.

– Ah. And why is it hanging here?

– Oh, what do I know. Art.

– Have you ever been there?

- Where?
- There.
- Oh, well. It's not for me, I think. I'm more the fire type.
- Fire type?
- Yeah, I'd rather set fire to people than make art with them.
- Makes sense, said Kirill.

And somewhat later, when he heard a very old song from the pub's loudspeakers, Kirill shouted:

- Hey, turn it up, that's good. That number.

\*

He approached the end of the street. The morning was peaceful and cool, like the inside of a cathedral. There were still a few stars over the city, but their light was unsteady and flickering. Soon they would dissolve. He wondered how many people might have come here already in a similar state, as pilgrims of their anger, humiliated to death by the art enthusiasm that had seized the city. Perhaps that was precisely the point of the lump of clay there under the spotlights. Its obliteration by someone wounded by it.

The watch on his wrist, he noticed, had shrunk to a microscopic size. He closed his eyes, the spell of dizziness passed. He took a few deep breaths.

As a high-school student he had once described in an essay on the problem of the oppression of women a small discovery he had made in the schoolyard. Of course not only in the schoolyard. The matter was as follows: Give a man a baseball bat and let him

smash a car with it, the windows, the body, everything, let him slash the tires and finally hack off the side mirrors like protruding ears. Afterward he will huff and puff, perhaps be somewhat tired, but he is in attack mode, a fighter, a warrior. If you now start a quarrel with him, he is capable of killing you then and there. On the other hand, if you give a woman the same baseball bat and the same instructions, she will carry them out with a shrug of her shoulders and afterward ask: So? What was that all about? He tried to remember what grade he had received for his shrewd observation. It didn't come back to him.

He looked at the *Child*.

So this is where Lea was drawn every night, she and her boyfriend, against whom he had no chance.

He had often imagined this scene. He had dreamed of it, last night too. The first blow on the jaw was always the easiest – and most of the time something small then fell from the child's head and slapped against the wall. The eyes or the nose or the roof of the skull. And full of horror Kirill stared at the small, humming brain in the head of the clay figure. Then he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out an octopus, a small, wriggly, greasy thing. He put the octopus directly into the figure's brain. Immediately the octopus began with small shoveling motions of its tentacles to work its way into the gray mass of the brain. Soon only a Tom Thumb head looked out from it and recalled a penis tip that had slipped out of the foreskin. At this point his eyelids began to flutter, he let out a groan, broke free of the terrible sight and fell out of the bed like a helpless bird.

– Damn heap of mud, Kirill tried to think.

But it was no help, so he said it aloud. His voice reverberated from the cramped walls. He stood in front of the *Mahlstadt Child*, in his hand he held a branch he had found in the park. The wind, which wafted around the corner of the dead-end street, was like an overheard conversation among strange beings.

He gave the child a light blow, then a harder one. It was really easy. He looked around to see whether anyone was watching him. He felt cold and pulled his scarf tight. He slammed down on the child with another blow, this time in the place where an ear should have been. That left a small dent.

His blows became heavier, and his breathing quickened. He had to get rid of the image of the octopus, the image of Lea beating the child, the image of his own helplessness. The child would help him do that. He dug his fingers into the stupid downcast clay head. It didn't feel like clay at all. More like a synthetic material. Probably clay was simply more poetic, thought Kirill. Maybe it actually consists of industrial waste. Maybe it's poisonous.

He sniffed his fingers.

No smell.

He kicked the child in the head. Then he realized that he had not even seen the face yet. You could see it only if you practically lay down in the child's lap. Since he didn't want to get his jacket dirty, he took it off and put it on the ground. His shirt followed.

The sound of overturned garbage cans startled him. But it wasn't nearby.

He lay down on the child's outstretched legs. His upper body and his face fit perfectly into the space between the *Mahlstadt Child's* hanging head and knees. It was

too dark to make out the child's features, so Kirill felt for them with his fingers, which had gone numb from all the blows. But soon he lost patience, wriggled out and searched his jacket for matches. He found a box, shook it to hear the reassuring sound and then went back to the child.

He shoved his body back between the sitting child's knees and chin, struck a match and looked.

He had not expected that.

The child's features were as fine as if they had been engraved in the crude substance with a razor blade. Not yet, it seemed, had a blow reached this spot. Of course, Kirill thought, somewhat confused, it's sitting so stooped there and hanging its head, how should a blow...

The child smiled like a Buddhist statue. Kirill cried out, the match had burned his fingers, and he dropped it. It grazed his cheek as it fell into the darkness.

\*

Lea sat exhausted on the ground. She was completely soaked with sweat, and there was blood on her hands. On top of that, she felt a little sick. Lately that was happening to her more often. Most of the time it started early in the morning.

She looked at her watch, nodded.

When she woke up in the morning, she had a big appetite for all sort of things. But then from one moment to the next she became terribly nauseous. That must have been due to the heat in her apartment. The heat crept up her back to her neck and from

there ignited her brain by using her spine as a fuse. She knew the heat, it was capable of anything.

She wiped her face with her dirty hand. But that didn't make it any better. She had to turn the sleeve of her jacket inside out and use the inner lining, which had stayed dry, to wipe her eyes.

All over her body were small clay spatters. On her pants, on her shoes, on her cheek. It felt good. She felt that she had not yet had enough. But she was too tired to go at the child again. Enough art for today, she thought. She had approached perfection long enough for today.

She wondered whether it would ever be completed. Perhaps the *Child* would one day be so nice and perfect, the form of the child so *generally recognized*, that no one would dare to touch it anymore, that any blow to its head and body would be considered a crime, a sacrilege. Or perhaps it would collapse one day, despite the elaborate mechanism that kept it supple and alive.

Lea dug her fingers into her thigh. The pain gave her enough energy to stand up from the cold ground in front of the park bench. If she remained sitting here any longer she would catch a chill. She had already been here since the morning hours, at a safe distance from the artwork, for she felt as if she were losing control. Now that she was standing up, relaxation seeped through her whole body. It was like an endless caring toward her own body. It was so fragile, she thought, it was so delicate. It had to be cared for and supported in everything. You had to show it how much you needed it, or else it would depart too soon.

She was tired, she wanted to go home, rest.

The thought of her warm, soft bed made her cry. I'm so foolish, she said to herself. She felt for the tears running down her face. Ever since she had been going to the child, she had been weeping more frequently again. In the past she had often gone years without crying a single time. Now she needed only the slightest trigger. She was on the way to becoming a better person, she thought.

On her way home she kicked over a few garbage cans.

\*

After the removal of the *Child*, the city groped around for a while in a cultural vacuum, now and then let itself get carried away into loud and disoriented protest rallies, and for a brief time redirected the suddenly aimless use of violence onto other things. But those things defended themselves most of the time or wanted nothing to do with it.

One night a school burned down to the foundation walls, but thank God no one was hurt.

Into the empty recess between the two unoccupied buildings on the edge of the park they first put – since no one could bear the yawning black hole that had emerged after the removal of the sculpture – a merry-go-round, that is, they transplanted it three hundred meters, from one end of the park to the other. At first some children rode on it, but after a few times around they let their disappointed parents lift them off the seat. After a week it already had to be closed down for good, because the horses and pigs and monkeys and dinosaurs on which you could ride in a circle were scarcely recognizable

anymore under all the scratches, dents and gashes that had been inflicted on them in various night-time operations.

Kirill went often to the old carousel. It interested him how it changed. Eventually it too would surely be removed again, and it remained to be seen what would take its place. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps a small sign.

Autumn turned out to be mild, on some days it was even as hot as it had been in August. Only the wind was different, a constant murmur that filled the air, like the scrape of a phonograph needle on the smooth inner circle of a record. Small seedpod propellers covered café tables and sidewalks, and on the railings of pavilions sparrows hopped around.

On one of those hotter days Kirill saw Lea at the carousel. She stood around there lost, as a pawn stands at the edge of the chessboard and waits to be exchanged for a more powerful piece. It was early evening and the sun had already sunk behind some tall buildings. As he approached Lea from behind, the first thing he noticed was the back of her neck. For a moment he thought it would be possible to greet her by grabbing her neck and pushing her against a wall. But then she simply turned around to him, brushed a strand of hair from her face and said:

– Hey, hello.

– Hello, said Kirill, raising his hand in greeting.

Lea was wearing a saddle-shaped bandage on the bridge of her nose. It looked cute. Kirill would have liked to touch it.

– Does that hurt?

– What? Oh, no. No, doesn't hurt anymore.

She started walking, and from the slight sideways stance of her upper body he could tell that she wanted him to accompany her. They turned their backs to the carousel and walked toward the park. The paths looked like stains on a painter's smock. Two people were crossing the small bridge, a blind couple, moving their two tapping canes in a slow rhythm over the cobblestones, carefully synchronized like two windshield wipers. The swiveling sound of the canes was pleasant. Kirill imagined taking the blind man's cane out of his hand and gently breaking it in two over his knee.

– Everything okay with you? Kirill asked.

Lea gave herself small, pensive pats on the belly, like someone who wants to indicate that he's stuffed.

– Well, she said, sure, I mean...It's never easy, change.

– No, definitely not.

– But you get used to it, said Lea.

– How's your cat doing?

– Who?

– The cat. Magister Perotinus.

Lea didn't answer, but took off her coat. The evening was really extraordinarily warm. She hung it over her shoulder.

– Well, she said, the advantage is, cats are very independent.

– Yes.

– They get along, you know.

Kirill nodded.

– And where do you think it is now?

– What?

– The *Child*, said Lea.

– Well, somewhere...In a better place.

At this phrase both of them had to laugh. Lea dropped her coat and picked it back up.

– I once...this is totally weird, but I once stuck a screw in it, Lea said.

– Huh?

– A screw. A little one. I took it and shoved it into that clay thing. And you know what the funny thing was?

– What?

– You'll never guess.

– What?

– There was already a screw there. Several actually. Crazy.

– Several screws, what...you mean, in the child?

– Yeah, nothing but metal. Little screws and such. Here, just under the surface of the skin...here in the shoulder.

Lea showed him the spot on her shoulder, and Kirill automatically reached his hand out toward her. Lea caught the hand. It hurt.

Later Kirill walked back alone on the park path. Now and then he stuck his injured finger in his mouth and sucked on it. A sweet and somehow ripe taste, almost autumnal.

Near the carousel he sat down on a bench and stayed there until it was completely dark. The air cooled rapidly, in the high rises near the park appeared the illuminated window squares, gigantic pixels of an image that could be perceived only from an endless distance, and over the city the first stars could be seen, like little carbonation bubbles that cling for a certain stretch of time to the inside of the water glass before they let go and spin away into the air.