

SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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Over His Eye/Valyntina Grenier

**CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

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Cover: Over His Eye by Valyntina Grenier, Winner, A Single Word Contest, Cunt Edition

The Truth About Swans

Christina Robertson

The flock of Sandhills are so high up in the cold that their peculiar rippling call sounds as though echoing off God herself, falling to the earth as perhaps evidence of her existence. They are migrating in long hatch marks, south over the city of Chicago today. I'm down here, flying solo, tramping through slush puddles to my coffee place, yet the falling sound easily seduces me into feeling something more important is going on, something I need to be part of. That faint undulation makes me want to let loose something wild inside myself. I make good on a difficult promise to fight this all too familiar urge—I need to tighten up for goodness sake. It is not actually my coffee place, just the neighborhood hub where I'll make another effort to join the legion of beings I have been, for better or worse, conscripted to. I decide to wait to cross with the light. There was a terrible accident here last summer.

The café is busy, warm, its windows steamy. It isn't packed with cyclists as it is on mild days, filled then with impossibly lithe bodies in skins of black and yellow, orange and blue, red, green and white, narrowed shoulders emblazoned with bold endorsements for Schwinn, Bianchi, Ridley, Condor. There is laughter and gear talk on those days, routes and speeds and hammerfests and breakaways, and rough tales of epic fails and crashes, brutal "endos." Tucked in, here and there amongst them is usually a young mother or two, their gooey toddlers disassembling a blueberry muffin or some such. I like to nurse my coffee, letting the yarns and convivial one-upmanship become background music for me while I absently watch crumbs fall to the floor and work on my Reality Journal. I confess, I find perverse satisfaction in witnessing the ruination of a perfectly good muffin.

Besides, to be precise, the journal is a droll therapy assignment. I am trying to change my life for the better. Or so I'm told.

Today's crowd is different. A few annoyed commuters are being edged out by a hulking mob of texting, heedless teenagers. The fancy prep school down the block must be going on some kind of field trip. This privileged youth no doubt lobbied for a little up and coming soccer mom and dad extravagance before boarding the yellow bus. I study the girls. They are mascaraed and tautly sullen. The boys, still baby-faced, seem awed by them, mulling the tantalizing possibilities they hope will present themselves at the back of the bus. One boy with an especially angelic face stares full on at the barely contained breasts of the girl beside him, mesmerized, as if they are Death's last light.

Towering over the fray, darkly handsome Derek pulls frothy works of genius off the La Marzocco. Occasionally his dawn blue eyes rise to read the room. A masterpiece of roses climbs his arm and a cascade of pines tumble down the other. No skulls or thorns or Chinese characters. No excerpts from Thoreau or Whitman. No bike tattoos. Warm red blooms and brisk, majestic evergreens, as if he's got a secret hero's life in the enchanted forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He's mine.

The café owner offers greetings to each customer, entertaining observations designed to stroke ego: *It's cold! But just the sight of you warms us up, right guys?* Derek might offer a nod, but otherwise remains silent. It seems like the tall, beautiful ones always do, right? OK, let's call a spade a spade. Derek isn't really mine, but at times he peers at me over his handiwork, abstractions of ferns and hearts and wheat shafts to top drink orders, and the edges of his eyes lift in what I read as a nuanced message. He always makes a swan for me. It's why I come to this place and not another café where I might better fit in—or in which I might disappear. His swans call me out.

It's not a crush I have. I'm too old for that, too far from anything that could connect us in real life. I'm long divorced, and the mother of a son in college. In fact, I could, just about, be Derek's mother. In my higher mind I certainly don't flatter myself in thinking he sees anything other than the silver thatches in my hair and the flaccid tone of my arms. But he must perceive something else, something that inspires swans. I imagine it as a courtship ritual in one of my many parallel universes. God, I love those places.

This is the thing—I lie. Paula, my therapist, uses that word freely in our sessions. Telling her I lie was probably the only truth she got out of me in the beginning. But eventually she wore me down. Not that I couldn't bite back at any time to protect my mental creations, nor that she succeeded in prying out some violent trauma that had left me with a compulsion to rewrite the past. I'm just getting tired of this marathon. Paula seems as good a place to stop as any.

The fire in my gut when she first explained her extravagant diagnosis, *pseudologia fantastica* (compulsive lying, to you), has subsided. I might get a little defensive when she questions me, but I no longer feign rage, no longer panic and leap into fight or flight the way I did at first, soon after being mandated to treatment. Then Paula's dimly lit office with its painstakingly predictable décor made me sick. I hated its unrelenting calm and multiple framed degrees from smart, but not the best, universities. I hated her nauseating patience. How, whenever I thought I had her indoctrinated, when I thought I'd won and she was going to join me in my preferred version of the truth, my alternate story, she'd yawn. Or ask me what really happened and why I felt that account wasn't good enough; what pushed me to lie. I would try to up the ante then; I'd get friendly with her, appeal to the girlfriend in the therapist. *I know, I know, it's a lot money, but I needed it...and they wanted to pay! Yeah, I thought I'd give it the old college try, but, you know how it goes, Paula...once he was interested, I wasn't.* After a while I got tired of

trying to convince her of things I wasn't so sure of myself anymore. She started to win. She succeeded in making me feel like crap. And that crap was fascinating.

Listen, here's a little-known fact about Sandhill cranes: once they begin to mature their plumage fades from cinnamon to a dishwater gray. They begin an odd Springtime ritual then, industrious preening with Midwestern mud, rich in iron oxide. Streaks of it seem to restore some of that youthful glow to their feathers.

Sometimes I find the truth outside is really distant, like watching a movie. And the truth inside is small and ugly, alien and insatiable as a damp little hatchling. What is wrong with reaching? Expanding my concept of self? Is it wrong to share things with people the way I want them to be? The way they should be—inspiring praise, providing excitement, diversion, refuge? Paula calls it “manipulation”. I call it *outwitting*. She calls them “fabrications”. I call them *reasonable assumptions* and *suspensions of disbelief*. After all, isn't the world filled with BS? Rife with things that seem insupportable, untenable, illogical? Impossible? That five hundred tons of metal can take a running start and lift off the ground; that a deaf man can write emotionally kickass symphonies, that two people can find trust in one another though they are strangers? That children can grow, even when deprived of everything that is dependable and right. That for millennia, those dirt gray cranes have flown thousand-mile journeys simply by waving muscle and rust tinted feather.

I believe they are working on increasing their odds when they adopt that mud-rusty patina. I get it! Out there in the great muck and flow, stifled by the pitiless drudgery of it all, the ongoing attempts on the life of your soul, you have to make yourself desirable, distinctive, viable. It's part of an elaborate plan for survival. If one doesn't wake

with a surge of anticipation for the day ahead, one fabricates it with “attitude adjustment;” *fake it ‘til you make it*. One coaxes it with a swipe of lipstick and eyeliner, borrows it by tuning into a favorite station, stokes it with a cup of coffee. Are those lies? Putting your “best foot forward”, “wearing many hats”, “pitching” your idea, “wooing” a mate, “winning someone over”. C’mon, isn’t that all a little suspect?

You know, it used to be that I enjoyed stirring in a bit of sugar and disrupting my swan with the spoon. But lately I’ve begun to feel a knot of guilt over destroying the beautifully crafted creature. Guilt is something I can only recall experiencing way back in childhood, when my shining exaggerations (if I must) took their first steps onto the wire. I wasn’t sure why I was fibbing. It just seemed a better answer in the moment. I wasn’t interesting enough to be a nerd, brave enough to be a jock, sexy enough to be a slut, caring enough to be a best friend. I had a secret intelligence, animal cunning. There was a thrill in embellishing my stories, relief in upping my test grade, in elevating my inconsequential social status. Lying got easier. It became a game, something I excelled at. The sense of accomplishment made it ok. The guilt went away. I could do without the friendships I lost. Those people weren’t smart enough anyhow; dummies dulled by a compunction to be polite and moderate, i.e. boring.

I steal a glance at Derek as, with each pass of my spoon, my swan becomes a cleaved heart, then a formless striation. He is working on the next order. Silly for me to feel bad. He doesn’t know what I’ve done to his swan and, really, why would he care? Everything is made to disappear here. That’s what’s great about food and drink establishments: everything is presented with as much appeal as possible, it is consumed, and disappears.

Sorry. I attribute these bloated insights to Paula and her dogged round up of my “falsehoods”. Without Paula I wouldn’t be feeling bad about Derek and his foam. I’d have sold him a bill of goods about myself by

now, tried to get to him, briefly, until he would undoubtedly distance himself. Still, it would work just enough for a quick stroke to the old ego. For a short, dreamlike moment my silvering hair would rewarm to chestnut, the slight dragging of my cheek would rebound and age spots would unbind back into freckles.

This brief time—the time I might have had him convinced I had something he wanted—would be a badge of achievement in human desirability. That was something I never thought I'd have back on the day I was dying of shame, having my eight-year-old head shaved, the treatment for lice at the Night Ministry family shelter. It was something I gave little consideration long ago, in those days of chaos when mom was out of her head on methamphetamines, before I was taken away. It was something I finally gained, then lost again years later, when I found Steve's wedding ring on the kitchen counter, Steve gone to live with the pretty young Apple Genius who'd fixed his phone. Rising above, fooling people, has been my balm in Gilead.

I haven't mentioned Derek to Paula. I'm afraid I will offer up a variation of the truth that will be too creative for her to stomach...where he actually asks me to meet him after work and confesses he is attracted to me—a May/ October—OK, November—thing ensues. We stroll off, kicking stones, touching, brushing against each other, swapping humorous anecdotes. We end up on a park bench gazing at the swans that glide in the lagoon...or we climb out onto the rocks at the lakefront and count the scrappy gulls on the break wall. Either way we are most assuredly leaning against each other for warmth, marveling at our spiritual connection, the one we read clearly in each other's eyes. Our dissatisfaction with the paltry cards life has dealt, dissatisfaction so deep it is blooming on his skin and rushing off the cliff edge of my brain.

What? It could happen.

One of the bevy of mocha sipping teen vixens is holding court near the condiment table. She draws from her to go cup, blue eyes twinkling, perfect cleavage on display beneath an unzipped parka, then fingers a fan of ski tags dangling from her pocket. Her nail polish is dark blue and badly chipped. Nevertheless, she is a particularly pretty girl with a face that had probably launched a thousand likes. There is sotto laughter from her associates, three attractive, if less luminous wannabes. She—Breck I think her name is—is telling them something with her eyes and a couple of strategic grimaces. Just behind her, trying to stand so close it would look like an accident should they touch, is the cherub, a boy Norman Rockwell would have painted in the simple hues of a past era. Boys often look benign at this age, plain as donuts, until that mysterious moment when Nature takes them by the hand and leads them to a full costume change. Somewhere in the midst of high school they become men. They still don't know what to do with what they've gained, but the girls quickly help them figure it out.

Breck seems to me to be one who may have already helped a few. She glows, as a sun, the others huddled around her. As far as I can see, the calculation of her movements, her attitude, one of sublimely casual disinterest, the perfect weight of her lashes and contrived sexiness of her hair convinces me that she'd snacked on boys from an early age.

The rougher cut girls around her are feeding off abundant innuendo in her cute-mean sign language. It is quick and easy for me for me to decipher. They are planning to toy with the naive, baby-face behind her. She has sensed his hopefulness and, like a spoiled child given a balloon, has a primitive, irresistible urge to pop it.

His name is Scotty and gullible is written all over him. Like most boys in the grips of infatuation, he is dumb as a rock. This I'm thinking as I

see Breck strategically back into him—accidentally on purpose. With contact, a deep flush blooms in his cheeks and the creamy foam from his hot cocoa splashes across his knuckles. He quickly pulls his hand away in an effort to avoid spilling on her, unfortunately flipping the cup onto himself. The drink slops down his pants. Breck stifles a giggle with her squad. She knows she has innocence cornered.

He winces looking down at the very suggestive stain on his tan jeans—the stain that would be there all day. The guys all lose it. But it is when Breck, grabbing a handful of coffee napkins, kneels down before him and makes a coy attempt at rubbing off the stain that the uproar really begins. He pushes her away and the whole coffee shop sways its attention. It is too late. The soldier has risen. She glances slyly at her gal pals from her suggestive position on the floor. Scotty's expression strains between utter torture and rapture, his cheeks now purple. The guys have commenced to howling and yipping like a pack of hyenas. The boy doesn't know how to play this as it becomes apparent he...doesn't know how to play this. Misery wells in his eyes. The girls erupt gleefully.

Here is the truth about swans: they are not the proverbial brainless beauties they appear to be. They are highly intelligent creatures that can actually distinguish between people; remember who has been kind to them and who has not. They seem ethereal, but are muscular, hollow boned, yet strong enough to inflict serious injury, even to larger animals, even to humans. And, for all this high drama, they are, as a species, nothing more than close cousins to the obnoxious Goose.

I don't need Paula's voice in my head asking what's really happening. I know both sides of this scenario, just as a swan can float and fight, or plain gray cranes sense the benefit in rousing themselves. I know

humiliation. I know nakedness. And I know the intoxicating effect of crafting a win. Over the years I've learned how to control the characters in all my plays.

I sidle over to the pack and ask Breck if I can help her up. The boys freeze. The girls freeze. Before I know what is coming out of my mouth, I am introducing myself as a documentary filmmaker working on a very interesting project about human conscience. I tell her she has all the qualities we have been looking for in a subject: being highly photogenic (she smiles and glances at her entourage), having leadership quality, and a streak of cruelty. She stares at me in disbelief. I've got to give her credit for that. I take out one of my ambiguous business cards, the one that reads *itsastory.com* and has an MFA after my name. I hand it to her and review what I'd seen her do to her friend that caught my eye. I frame it, objectify it, glorify it, sounding quite professional, if I do say so. I restate its callousness and perfect lack of conscience. Call me, I say. I even hand a few cards to the other girls, telling them we might be interested in them as well.

A harried teacher appears at the door of the coffee shop, annoyed at having had to wait so long. She points to her watch and signals them all to hustle. Derek's eyes watch from their clean heaven as the kids start shuffling out, some leaving cups and stirrers behind. To my satisfaction, Breck still looks confused and embarrassed, chewing on a ruined fingernail. From the doorway, her gaggle of hopefuls all glance back, excited. I smile and wave one of my cards overhead as they depart.

I look down at my deflated latte. No time for another. I shift my gaze over to Derek. He is, of course, staring at me, as is most everyone else in the place. Bending forward over the counter, propped on his trellis of roses, he asks with genuine interest if I am really a filmmaker. I fix him with a direct eye—BS lesson 101 is never glance away—and reply

with all but a nod, *I'm always working on a good story*. I figure that's true enough.

I realize I haven't the time to make an entry in my Reality Journal now. Paula will chalk this up to "resistance". But Hell, it's just that participating in life's theater has a more interesting pay off. Feeling the pressure of the hour, I zip up my jacket and try to catch Derek's eye once more on my way out. He is gone. It's for the best; I only have a minute or two's walk to decide which version of what made me late to share with Paula. I mean, frankly, I don't really mind her so much. She's like one's loyal dog. I don't actually want to mess up our thing, whatever it is. This is what I am thinking about as I step out onto the street. And there he is, Derek, leaning against a sunny wall, shivering, hunched, hands in the pockets of his jeans. *Can we talk?* he asks, gazing at me with those sky-eyes. My youth comes rushing back, lifting curves, pinking me up, adding heartbeats, erasing the mileage of years, husbands, children, careers, mistakes. The air out here feels clear and compelling.

It could happen.



Priorities / Kit Alloway

i am trying to forgive you

Zachariah Claypole White

i am trying to
 forgive you

hope creeps
 hurricane slow
across my hands
 overwhelms
the rivers and levies
of my palms
settles along my wrist

i carry storm
 waters to you
scatter them
 in honey jars
along your window

in every dream
 you throw open the door
smile as thunder enters

/

our fathers speak
in lightning strikes
you tell me of the
 first woman

who
 weighted prayers along her tongue
 and lined your teeth with fireflies
 in the dew-damp grass

//

we test LSD
with inexperience
wrap our hands in sap and wire
plant
 an apple tree
in the crossroads

 i pick the sour fruit
with knives and matchsticks

 you press a hammer
like weary lips
to my forehead

yes

 i have seen the angel

 beneath my chair

 she does not speak

and i do not listen

///

would you understand
greet me
in the cemetery
where our ghosts
have grown haphazard
beneath the honeysuckle

i am trying to forgive you
and yet...
and yet...
and yet...



**he promised her he'd take everything with
him when he left and he did / Dave Sims**

Eric Is

Randall Weber-Levine

Eric is a man with unrestricted will. He awakes. He sits in bed struggling to get his mind ready for the day, checks his phone to see a text from Emily, contemplates what to respond, mills about in his underwear. He heads downstairs, puts a cup of coffee on the stove, takes a glance at the morning news on his phone, reaches for a mug. He looks at the cereal selection above his cupboards. He considers the Special K first and then the Cheerios. He thinks for a second. He decides Cheerios.

Eric is a man with restricted will. He goes to work. He checks emails, sits in on a meeting, chats with Greg in the cafeteria, drafts a memo. He walks down the same corridor he walks down every day letting his fingers graze the bumpy wallpaper, ambles into the bathroom taking in the scent of fresh urinal cake, takes a piss, looks up to the heavens as he gets to the end. He stares at his eyes in the mirror questioning whether he actually enjoys his job. He thinks for a second. Without realizing the hands of capitalism that have molded him, he decides he does.

Eric is a simulation yet he doesn't know it. He leaves work. He gets in his green Volvo, turns on the radio, rolls the windows down, listens to "Shattered" by the Rolling Stones. He sings along "laughter, joy, and loneliness and sex and sex and sex and sexxxxxx," feels the summer breeze swinging through the window, bobs his head to the tune, drums on the steering wheel with his right hand slightly off beat. He contemplates changing the radio station. He thinks for a second.

The program decides to keep the radio station, and he feels content with what he believes was his decision.

Eric is a simulation and he knows it. He arrives home. He smells the warm scent of his wife's chicken potpie, hugs his children, helps with homework, watches *60 Minutes* with his wife. He gets in bed, feels the satin of his wife's nightgown, rubs his fingertips up and down her spine gently, rests his chin on her head. He deliberates whether he should try to have sex with her or get as much sleep as possible. He thinks for a second. The program decides to have him kiss her passionately, and he accepts the decisions as his own even though he knows it's not.

Eric is both everything and nothing. He smiles. He lies back sated, smells his wife's lavender-scented hair, looks out the window to the stars sitting heavy on the black sky, reflects. He thinks for a second. It doesn't matter who is making the decisions. They are part of him no matter what. Life is short and sweet. And the beauty of it all is not in the decisions.

Eric is happy.

it all melts down to this: a novel in timelines (Chapter 14)

Ben Miller



We've a small air conditioner but curiously it isn't in the bedroom of our apartment. Why? We pretend not to know. We are careful not to know... When he bought this unit we first tried to install it in the bedroom and no sooner was it in place than it started puking black and green and yellow slime, an eloquent sludge that spoke, requesting a change of location for "privacy" reasons--its privacy and our own. The A.C. reminded us that machines, like animals, had a dignity that should be respected, even if it often was not. He--A.C.--judged us to be dignity-respecters, and he was right. We obeyed as sensitive people do when confronted with genuine conscience issue--our respect for ~~HE~~ A.C.'s dignity was such that we were slipping around in his puke to get him the hell out of that window and into another where he would feel more comfortable. Soon after we starting out an extra place setting at the dinner table, although he has yet to take us up on the standing invitation to dine, and tell us more about his values and ambitions. During heatwaves we sleep on the dining room table to survive--we lie right there, fully dressed as an entree, so A.C. isn't scandalized.

- back? wal
- MATES FOUND FOR ANY WOUND
- TOASTER SPEWS VOLCANIC ASH
- lines/lives sprinkled
- B=U=R=D=O=C K T=E=S=T=E=D
- (rogram
- the lot thickene d
- Amuel's neighbor

Amuel's bad Bad?

"Are you 92 now, honey?" I ask the baby in the carriage (dark as charrage) in the photo of the SUFFRAGE MARCH. And the bab answers: "I was married in the 1910s and my husband died in Korea! I raised two children after they failed to raise me. Our son became a doctor, and also a lawyer. An interesting boy. My daughter, inspired by her father entered the aviation industry. I voted for Truman, then Ike, and Kennedy. Then votes mattered less and less. For decades I had a dream recurring--a car with a crayon gear shift that drew an orange line down the middle of the white highway line. I liked to take Sunday drives. I never remarried. I died at 76. Now, pleas go away and don't return."

That prickly joy of learning something new about someone you've long lo
g long long long long long long long o,ong long olon long long loved.

TIMELINES OF OUR LIVES

Comment that probably should not have been made during the two hour lull in the ten minute meeting: "All, imagine if each of us saw a unicorn on the way to work tomorrow. You'd tell me where you saw your various unicorns and I'd tell ya where I saw mine, and then we'd stand there, still in shock, and far beyond the grind, finally concerned about our sanity, albeit too late. When you have all gone mad together, little compromise by little compromise, little denial after little denial, gone nuts in the slow drip culturally approved fashion, you are no less a victim of fantasy than any fairytale character, only there exists NO HORN OF A MOMENT TO HANG 'THE END' ON."

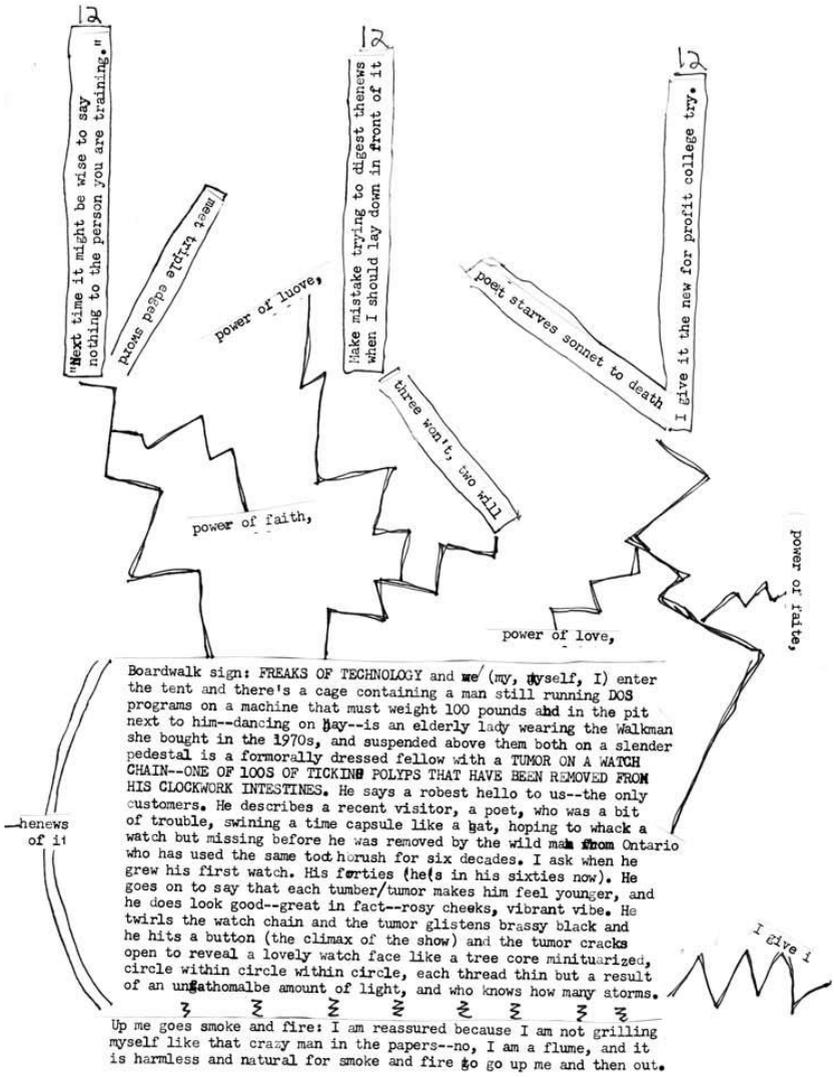
nuts in the
och and his ha
When you have all
Promises by slow drip culturally

Mammon and son hold a frank discussion about something other than money (money exchange.) They share their concern about Uncle Moloch and his habit of thinking more and more as he grows old. He even reads a bit. Worst of all, he hesitates to engage in foul behaviors for which he has been known for ages. What can be done? Send him to THE HOME FOR DOCILE MONSTERS? Poison? There are no quick easy answers.

the promise of love

I tell my back-up, Ms. Heartless: NEVER start a timeline where you think it should start--but long before or long after. NEVER for a second believe that nouse (nonsense) that a timeline should TEACH A timeline should IRRITATE THE SENSES, consisting as it does sand nor dust--a THIN COATING of the substance that is neither and your skull a march of armies out the many thoughts that carve emotions into sweet useless notings. When making a timeline whisper to yourself the word CEASELESSLY ceaselessly. Don't think of a timeline as a trick or a cause or a hobby but merely as your humble attempt to DRAIN A LITTLE BLEND OUT OF THE BLENDER. Don't ever template or goldplate a timeline, but do spray it with a little water before you leave for the night. Remember to re-read every timeline carefully and with an eye to retaining blank spaces that are time's juicy (justy) way of preferring a pure evation (evasion) to a soft truth. When I return I will CHECK EVERY OUNCE OF YOUR WORK SLOP."

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Have a nightmare that is also a sweet dream, woman enjoying drinks with her husband on the balcony slips, and he grabs her hand and tells her: "I won't let go--I won't!" And when he feels like he's losing his grip he is able to TIGHTEN THE GRIP by employing ferocious will NOT TO LET GO NOT TO NOT TO even though the pain is terrible, and then when his will starts to fail him--four finger grip become three-- he looks down at her terrified face and they pool the power of their love, and three finger grip become five, and in the street neighbors yell, but no sirens, average response time to 911ing is an hour in this city. It's up to him and her to deal with this disaster, them alone, and he closes his eyes, MUST HOLD ON MUST MUST and he does. How could he live without her?

They met at twenty. They've been together longer than anyone would ever guess. She has the most lovely and gentle personality while at the same time being a person with backbone and courage. He can't lose her! He can't! You only meet one woman like her in your life--it you're lucky! And his arm burns and his shoulder burns and there's a searing pain in his neck--it's like molten lava is pouring down his shirt but he doesn't let go, he won't, he doesn't, he feels her slipping but it can't be because legs around the railing so he can't be pulled over--he's on the balcony, her hand is in his, he feels it, he's squeezing as hard as he can as his arm tensions like an unraveling rope and sets her softly down on the pavement.

Promise Brasserie chair (with its cream-colored weave of plastic strips which are as pleasing to my eyes as the glossy pony tail of a lovely lady): "I won't let you down when I get up."

cat with nine lathes

In various states of undress I put my leg over the fence keeping me from seeing me fully in the mirror and the fence for hours (the fence behaving like a very bad timeline) I am unable to get over (it bucks like a horse and wiggles like a snake) and like words I threw into the canyon end up there too and then realize it's not a canyon so much as a workplace of an unusual hell for serial mispellers who are whipped with lead-tipped wet noodles by women and men in period dress--many of whom I have seen before in various corners of my mind--and the therapy works a little bite.

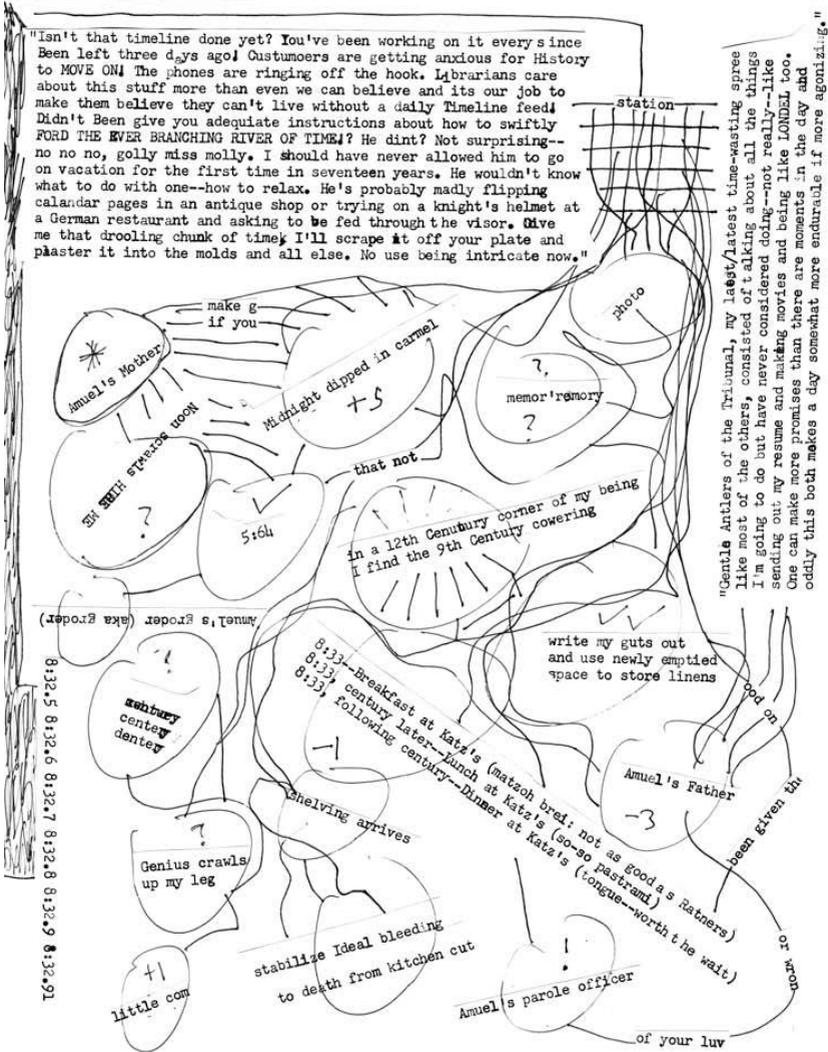
"Gentlemen and Gentlemen of the Universal Tribunal Prosecuting Crimes Against TIME, I must say it is a dream come true to be brought in here today in shackles to face you and be interrogated about my abominable use of the past three decades. This is truly a grand stage/stage I meant to say. Look at all the solid gold hourglasses! The platinum OMI four o'bees of saffron and sorrel. Your resplendent anthers! The scents of crumb cakes of Hoppers and sea cheeses! It beats a County Court, and that's where I thought I was being taken after being arrested while talking more bull. @

call/call it Urge/courage-courage-crag-cours

Journey to a ripple separate from the lake, and from there onto Ontario (less special) and then the Port of Gaul

Herrick knocks, Galsworthy answers, Keats has made tarts, Shelley pours lemonade, Coleridge claps and a drawer opens and in it is another day containin Byron and Blake and the cotton balls and bootstraps of W. Wordsworth

"Isn't that timeline done yet? You've been working on it every since Been left three days ago! Customers are getting anxious for History to MOVE ON! The phones are ringing off the hook. Librarians care about this stuff more than even we can believe and its our job to make them believe they can't live without a daily Timeline feed! Didn't Been give you adequate instructions about how to swiftly FORD THE EVER BRANCHING RIVER OF TIME? He dint? Not surprising--no no no, golly miss molly. I should have never allowed him to go on vacation for the first time in seventeen years. He wouldn't know what to do with one--how to relax. He's probably madly flipping calandar pages in an antique shop or trying on a knight's helmet at a German restaurant and asking to be fed through the visor. Give me that drooling chunk of time; I'll scrape it off your plate and plaster it into the molds and all else. No use being intricate now."



gentle Grand Antlerists of Time,
 I accept your guilty verdict and
 look forward to returning to the
 granulated room for my sentencing,
 preferring no mercy of course. But
 if you do show it, I will also accept
 your judgement that it is better I
 not be tied to a log in the middle
 of a creek full of beavers eager
 to build a dam. Anyway, you have
 clearly presented your case, and
 exposed my many acres of wasted
 potential. What I could have been!
 What I could have done! I found it
 particularly devastating when you
 showed that film of me smiling
 smugly when people express surprise
 at my having occupied the same
 low position at the same pathetic
 company for untold years. That fool
 grinning as if it was not his life
 but someone else's life he had
 wasted! As if he had pulled off
 some legendary feat of fidelity!
 When in truth (truss) he was rotting
 to death in his own workport shoes!
 Even if you had shown the clip only
 once I would have been appalled, but
 seeing it more than fifty times as
 the ceremonial fauset dripped and
 the good to my right tickled my neck
 with a feather--how extra effective!
 That dullgrinner mad hatted idiot
 excuse maker toadstool who often
 works UNDER his desk to thicken the
 false shell of STABILITY. If you
 punish me by forcing me to be him
 again...it might be worse than being
 chewed to death by eager Beavers--
 I'll then have to ADJUST--BIG HUFF,
 the hung head when I say how long
 I have been with TIMELINE CORP--
 not a moment more of morbid
 bragging and brugging and bagging
 with raish career putrifaction."

Severe heat makes it easier for him to scrap gum
 in a beautification effort.

off sidewalk



Image Contest Winner and Finalist

Sunspot Lit reached out to the creative community for an image that represented the mission: Hearing Every Voice, Writing a New World. The magazine received a number of spectacular entries. The works varied in tone and approach, and each had so much to offer.

Timothy Boardman submitted the winning image. He notes:

“The center of the image is a gradient based sun, very simple, with a series of sunspots placed on the logo. The encircling white around the sun in this design are representative of the light, [*Sunspot Lit's*] light, emanating from these sunspots, and giving voice to all. The slogan, ‘It's Lit’ is ... wordplay to represent your literary focus, while also being very straightforward about who you are as a literary journal.”



Sunspot Literary Logo / Timothy Boardman

The runner-up for this contest was J. Ray Paradiso with “TypeFace.” His submission arrived early in the process and was a top contender right from the beginning. It remained in the top selections for the entirety of the contest due to its clean style and literary focus.



TypeFace / J. Ray Paradiso

You might remember Paradiso from the first edition of *Sunspot Lit.* His “Sunspot Suite” and “Half Life” perfectly bridged the shock-value wryness of “Vulnerable Shares” by Sussu Laaksonen and the darker “Train Prayer” poem by Aaron Graham.

Single Word Contest, Cunt Edition Winners and Finalists

When *Sunspot* decided to launch an annual contest focused on a single word that would change every year, we deliberately selected a divisive word. We hoped that the focus on an inflammatory word would generate creative responses from authors and artists worldwide. The role of women in different societies, gender identity and fluidity, and human rights are, in some ways, the defining issues of our times.

The creative community responded with powerful works that blew us away. The tone of various pieces ranged from angry to empowered, from jackhammer decibels to whispering calm. In every case, the undercurrent lifted veils and carried all people toward a climactic resolution.

The significant quality of so many entries confounded the final judging process. There simply was no way to choose between the top two entries. The decision, therefore, was to declare two winners. As promised in Sunspot's guidelines, the cash award was not split; it was doubled.

Valyntina Grenier, First Place for “Over His Eye.”

Spotlighted as this edition's cover art, the artwork works on several levels. The colors and simple lines, combined with the sexualized overtones of lips mirrored in several places, took “the male gaze” to a new level. She received first place for this powerful image.

Morrow Dowdle, First Place for “To Russia with Love.”

Dowdle's poem vividly touches on violence in the world of women. Boldly drawn in shades of unrelenting black, the poem still holds space for gray nuances and, eventually, light.

A number of finalists have been kind enough to allow us to publish their works. We think you'll find them as provocative as we did.

To Russia with Love

Morrow Dowdle

On any given night, the stories flow
like the filthy Volga in which the children
would wash themselves after eating supper
from the garbage heaps. It might be her friend,
wrapped in a carpet on an apartment roof,
doused with gasoline and set on fire
over and over until she died, slow-cooked.
Or how the prior tenant had been axed,
and she and her mother had to scrub blood
before they could move in. Or how
the elderly neighbors kept their brother
in the freezer, feeding off him piecemeal.
Or how soldiers and police would rape girls,
and girls would hook for spare change,
believing they lost less than they gained.
I marvel at how she can appear intact,
when the world was a rabid dog,
people its bared teeth and claws.
I can forgive, then, how she stroked
my husband from knee to thigh,
high as we were on wine. I can forgive
my husband for wanting to taste
the lips, the cunt that knew trespass
before it knew love, yet still
found its way to love. It tastes
as sweet as it ever did.



You're Not Listening to Me / J. Ray Paradiso

The Black Iris

Katherine Todd

“Is it supposed to be a cave...
Or is it a stylized flower?”
I giggle a bit at her
wide eyes when I tell her that
no, this painting is not of a
cave or an iris, but, “It is
a cunt,” I turn and stage whisper.
Her little cheeks flush crimson
and a liaison saunters
over to us, about ready
to kick us out, but I screech, “Run!”
We push our way out onto
the street, laughing at the fear of
one simple word, because it had
not been said to one of us yet.
But it will, and it will sting more
than where he slapped you, more than when
a stranger snapped photos under
your skirt and you saw them online,
more than everything said to
you that night you broke his nose.
But neither of us knew that was
our future, so we stole some
fresh fruit and laughed at its core.

Cuntaminated

Sharmin Mirman

In a workplace infested with backstabbers and bitches, slime balls and snake oil salesmen – phonies, enablers, liars and cheaters - I was a misfit. This was no place for a woman like me – an introverted introvert empath – Brooklyn transplant – direct, loyal, honest, adaptive. I could be a chameleon and fit in with them – observing the callous - the devious - the wretched imposters - the shrewd - the underhanded manipulators - the planners that got away with all that their power allowed – the actors on the public stage – a cast of villains and opportunists - smiling and playing such sincere characters – so believable – if you only knew! If you saw behind the scenes – if you read their murky auras – if you saw who they were when the cameras weren't on – when the masks came off – when their treacherous malignant hearts beat away their morality – beat away their consciences – beat down whoever got in their way – beat down the truth – the rules - the right way – the decency – the noble – the traditions. They slithered around the halls - cloaked in the rotting husks of decency turned to dust – the facade sloughed off like empty snakeskin - crumbling and scattered like brittle dry leaves at their feet - honor eviscerated from their very souls. The inconsolable ghosts - watch and weep silently - bereft. The halls need sweeping - the halls need sweeping.

They made their plans behind closed doors - a cohort of cunts - consorting, colluding. They hurt good people - stabbed them in the back when nobody was looking - when they could get away with it – and they could - and they did - because of their power – because of their lies - because they had two faces – so much taken! Disposable disposable employees - discarded like bloody tampons - flushed away with no concern - out of sight – out of mind - forgotten – moving on

with no accountability – lacking a true north – a moral compass and the right to ever say my name again.

The First Epistle to Carmelo DeAndre Jones A.K.A. Notorious
Max Carp

The First Epistle To
Carmelo DeAndre Jones A.K.A. Notorious

Author: Donny B. *Theme:* Christian Experience *Date of Writing:* c. A.D. 2019

Introduction:

Salutation, 1:1-2

1 DONNY B. BULGER,
of Hoboken, New Jersey, a
servant of Jesus Christ, to
ye who has obtained like
precious faith through the
righteousness of God and
our Savior.

2 Grace be unto ye, bro,
and peace be multiplied
through the knowledge of
God, and of Jesus, Our
Lord,

*I. Great Christian Virtues,
1:3-8*

3 For our gospel came
unto ye not in word alone,
but also in power and in
the Holy Spirit, as ye have
full knowledge of the
manner of men you and I
were back in the day in
Atlantic City, wanting of
nothing but to get a
whoop whoop.

4 And it was written that
from faith springeth

virtue, and from virtue knowledge, and likewise knowledge giveth birth to self-control and brotherly love.

5 But he that lacketh these latter things, especially as particular to my predicament, of which I am compelled to write to ye, is blind and hath forgotten that his old sins had been purged.

6 Wherefore, I will not be negligent to put ye in remembrance of these things, though ye know some of them and ye may be suspecting of others.

7 Yea, I think it fitting as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by means of an apology,

8 Knowing that it should serve as instruction to ye, that ye may continue to have faith in our Lord and that your faith be increased in abundance.

II. Conflict of the Spirit with the Old Nature, 2:1-7

2 Now, then, when ye are after the flesh ye do mind the things of the flesh, but when ye are after the Spirit ye mind the things of the Spirit.

2 For to be carnally minded is death, where to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

3 And I know that in my flesh dwelleth no good thing, for the good that I would, I do not, but the evil which I would not, *that* I do.

4 It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me that doeth it.

5 And I speak unto ye as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ.

6 For whereas there is between us strife and division, are ye not carnal? Am I not likewise

carnal? Do we not walk as
men? Ye tell me, bro.

7 For while one saith, I
owe ye nothing; and
another, Ye are in my
debt; are we not carnal?

*III. Donny's willing descent
into depravity, 3:1-15*

3 Wherefore, I will not be
negligent in paying my
debts to ye, as I willingly
walked after the flesh in
the lust of uncleanness
and did not settle my
accounts.

2 One would be in his
right to surmise that ye
have tempted me so, not
unlike the Serpent, but the
sin is mine to bear alone.

3 I was indeed struck by
the large gold cross ye
carried round your neck,
showing ye in that light as
a brother in spirit, even
though I be a man of the
cloth and ye be a lowly

pimp of the streets and a
cavorter.

4 And that comely c*unt
whom ye called by the
name of Chocolate
Thunder, with the skin
that the sun hath looked
upon, she did tempt me so
with her carnal ways.

5 Verily, I said to her, Thy
hair is as a flock of goats,
that appear on Mount
Tammany,

6 Thy neck is like the
Tower of Pisa builded for
the motion of thy head,
that bringeth to mind a
beloved bird of my youth,
the three-toed
woodpecker,

7 Thy breasts are like
chocolate ice cream cones
melting on the Turnpike
in mid-July,

8 Ye are indeed a supreme
c*unt, no false
advertisements, for there
is no blemish in thee.

9 And then God gave us
up to uncleanness through
the lusts of our own
hearts, and we did
dishonor our bodies
between ourselves.

10 And we did serve the
creature more than the
Creator, and that we did
more than once, nay, even
more than thrice over.

11 And God gave us up
unto vile affections, for
Chocolate Thunder did
exchange the natural use
for that which goes
against nature,

12 If ye shall catch my
drift.

13 And after our lust
organs gave us a baptism
of delight, the harlot did
make me promise to
further remunerate ye in
jewels or silver in
exchange for working that
which is unseemly,

14 But I found myself in
the throes of my reprobate
mind, and I did make light

of that promise whilst I
absconded to the nearest
parish under the cover of
dark and shame.

15 And thus I have
remained indebted to ye,
my brother in spirit and
partner in the carnal, all of
these years, even as I
forgot not my trespassing.

*IV. Progress towards
maturity thanks to Alcoholics
Anonymous, 4:1-28*

4 Yea, it is indeed possible
for those who have tasted
of the heavenly gifts, and
yet have fallen away, to
renew them again unto
repentance.

2 Although perhaps we
are meant to cut to the
bone ere the light of
redemption illuminates
the dark night of the soul.

3 And as surely as the
happy hour is long I did
hit rock bottom, for whilst

wearing my priestly garb
I did proceed to retch all
over the counter at The
Drawn & Quartered Pub
(yea, bro, the one
downtown).

4 Oh, the depths of my
depravity knoweth no
bounds! And I looked
round me and saw the
scorning faces, and
thought, why dost thou
judge thy brother? Why
dost thou set at nought
thy brother?

5 Brethren, do ye not see,
an orphan I was and a
plaything for my earthly
fathers, and father figures
likewise, and my heart
was broken long ere I was
to attain the stature of a
man. Do ye not see that I
groan within myself,
waiting for the
redemption of my body?
Do ye not see that my
heart's desire is that I
might be saved?

6 Verily, soon as the
thought entered my mind

a mighty man arose from
the barstool adjacent to
mine and stoodeth there
like a fir tree, nay, like an
angel, at my side.

7 He wipedeth the foul
fluids off my chin, and his
likewise, and suddenly
there came a sound from
above like a mighty wind
and he saith to me, **Lookit
here, ye ignorant
sonofabitch. I cannot
promise to fix ye, but I
shall help ye be more
loving of yourself. I
cannot grow for ye, but I
shall help ye know a new
freedom.**

8 Verily, verily, it
appeared unto me like
cloven tongues as of fire,
and I fell to the damp
floor and asked "Who art
thou, Man?"

9 And the Man saith, **I am
what I shall be unto ye. In
the name of Alcoholics
Anonymous I hereby
grant ye sponsorship.**

10 And I, trembling and astounded, said, "Sponsor, what wilt thou have me to do now?" And He saith unto me, **Before the Moon is full in the sky ye shall see me again. And I shall take ye with me then and it shall be told thee what thou must to do.**

11 And all the drunks and sundry derelicts at The Drawn & Quartered stood there speechless, seeing the Man but hearing no voice.

12 And for seven days afterward I did lose the function of mine ears, as all I could hear was like the swarming of bees. And neither did I eat nor drink any spirits, bro.

13 That I have recollection of.

14 And on the seventh day Sponsor found me curled up naked like a babe onto the floor of the clergy house, clutching my lust

organs, and he laid his hands on me that I might receive back my hearing, and saith to me, **Arise and cleanse yourself, ye filthy lout. The AA gang awaits ye.**

15 And as I stood bereft of a cutting rejoinder, the Spirit made me go with Him, nothing doubting.

16 Thus began my instruction, and I took fast hold of her and kept her, for she is my life.

17 Day upon day and step upon step I toil on this road, wishing my heart not to fail for fear, and for looking after those vile things which are come upon the earth, but lifting my head up to see redemption draweth nigh.

18 And Sponsor's wise words carry me through. **"Keep coming back,"** He saith unto me, **"It works if you work it."** And that I do, one day at a time, even

as I may bleed out for
Him.

19 And it hath come to
pass that a year later I
find myself at the ninth
step, whereby I am to
make amends to people I
have brought harm to. All
but ye I have not been
able to reach, for they, as
I, are surely keen on
covering the shame, so
rejoice in receiving this
gift of atonement in the
name of all whom I have
injured.

20 I shall not ask ye for
forgiveness, though if
forgiveness is granted me,
I shall be pleased and
grateful.

21 I only ask that ye
accept this jar that ye
shall find inside the
package along with this
epistle, and which requires
no explanation other than,
yea, it doth indeed contain
my lust organs, now
forever separated from the

corruption of c*unt
through lust.

22 For was it not written
that if one of thy members
offend thee, ye should cast
it from thee, lest thy
whole body should be cast
into hell? Verily, I have
made myself eunuch for
the kingdom of heaven's
sake.

23 Even as I writhe in
pain I feel the infection
spreading through my
body yet I am at peace
with my soul and only
wish I had made use of a
sharper instrument. Be
that as it may, I do hope
that by the graciousness
of yer heart ye might
present the family jewels,
haha, to Chocolate
Thunder for safekeeping
and eternal reminder that
salvation is always at
hand.

24 Indeed I do now hear
the ambulance sirens
drawing near, or is it just
the bells ringing the end

of the world, as the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together with God's children.

Benediction

25 Whilst ye receive this tith of fleshly mint, I pray ye not omit the weightier matters of the law, mercy and faith.

26 And should ye feel a cry for help arise within ye I shall not be far away to lend a hand, nor would I face ye in judgment.

27 I shall now leave ye with this piece of wisdom, as the infection spreads within my body and yet cleanses my soul, in knowledge that I shall escape the bondage of corruption that is in the world through c*unt and c*untiness likewise.

28 As Sponsor saith, **Who art thou that judgest another person without**

**knowing the whole story?
Ye may think ye
understand, but ye don't.**
May the grace of our Lord
and Sponsor be with ye,
bro. Amen.

Special Dual Language Presentation

The Doll

Piero Schiavo-Campo

Translated from Italian by Sarah Jane Webb

On March 9, 1902 Alma Schindler married the musician Gustav Mahler. From then on, she was known as Alma Mahler. What do we know about her? Everything and nothing. History informs us of the countless lovers and affairs that made her the most intriguing and talked-about woman of the twentieth century, eclipsing her artistic production. The daughter of a painter, from a tender age she mixed in the intellectual circles of Vienna and became acquainted with their foremost representatives. She was still very young when she met and had a love affair with the artist Gustav Klimt, and possibly others (Max Burckhard? Alexander von Zemlinsky?), but at twenty-three she decided to settle down and marry the famous conductor, twenty years her senior. Alma loved music. She wrote some Lieder and sang one to her husband, accompanying herself on the piano. Mahler listened attentively, then, without saying a word, he got up from the sofa and retreated to his studio. What estranged the couple, though, wasn't Mahler's indifference towards his wife's artistic efforts, but the death of their first daughter, Maria Anna, who contracted diphtheria at the age of five. It was then that Alma, devastated, realized what her fate would be: to love madly, and to lose her beloved—along with the fruit of their intimacy.

First, she fell in love with Walter Gropius, the future founder of Bauhaus, the school that would boast Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky among its teachers. Alma couldn't help putting her whole heart into everything she did: she would have died, rather than lead a mediocre existence, and secret encounters she would have viewed as cheap. That's how Mahler learned what was happening to his wife: she told him forthrightly, except for the most intimate details.

The Maestro tried to restore their relationship—he even consulted Sigmund Freud, in the hope that the eminent psychologist would give him some advice—but refused to divorce his wife. He hadn't long to

live: he was in New York when he fell ill, in 1911; he returned to Vienna, but died that same year. In 1915, Alma married Gropius; the two separated in 1920, when Alma discovered that she was pregnant by the poet Franz Werfel, whom she married a few years later.

Between Mahler's death and her wedding to Gropius, Alma Mahler had a tormented affair with an intemperate genius, the expressionist artist Oskar Kokoschka. It was Klimt, one of his teachers, who introduced Kokoschka to the general public in 1908, but the young painter's art didn't appeal to everyone. It was hard, strong, clumsy, full of contrast—almost as if Kokoschka were determined to depict his troubled soul, rather than reality; or as if reality itself were nothing other than the sheer projection of Kokoschka's mind: in short, of his folly. Alma Mahler fell in love with him, but realized that they would never form a stable relationship. Insufferably possessive, he demanded to see her at all hours, to spend all his time with her. He surrounded her with care and attention, lavished praise on her paintings; yet Alma was well aware that, in their rapport, she was nothing but a piece of Kokoschka's soul. After two years of passion and strife, Alma Mahler decided to leave her lover.

Kokoschka was devastated. He'd let Alma inside. Kokoschka hadn't given her his heart, as the average bourgeois would have done. No: Alma was a part of his own soul that had suddenly become independent and had decided to walk out on him. It was as if carmine and ultramarine blue refused to be brushed onto the white canvas that he stretched across wooden frames with wide-jaw pliers. He had never intended to restrict the freedom of his beloved: Alma had every right to do what she wanted with her life. Yet he needed her presence, just as his paintings needed carmine and ultramarine blue to come alive. He went to the most famous milliner in Vienna, Hermine Moos, who also crafted rag dolls, and ordered a life-size doll whose features he designed himself. She had Alma's expression and round face; her sensuous lips, curled into a perennial smile; her high, generous bosom; her large thighs (which she had no reason to be ashamed of). Her long black hair fell softly to the shoulders, and her skin was warm and soft: Moos had used the best plush fabric on the market, and its flesh color had been obtained with a dye created by Kokoschka in person. When

the doll-maker finally delivered her, the artist was enthusiastic. He placed her on the large red armchair in his studio, and gazed at her at length with loving eyes.

“You’re beautiful! But we can’t have you sitting there all naked like that. Wait, I’ll go and get you some clothes and underwear. Don’t move, my love, I’ll be right back!”

Kokoschka had no idea about sizes. The haberdasher on the corner of Bahnhofstrasse made some suggestions, and he returned with a pillowcase in which he’d crammed two pairs of underpants (a change would be useful, he thought); a corset; a pleated skirt, very similar to one Alma had worn; a lace blouse; and even a large hat with an ostrich feather. He dressed her, scrutinized her. Everything was fine, except for the hat.

“We often talked about it, remember? I always said that you’d look even prettier in a fashionable hat, but I didn’t want to force you to do anything against your will.”

He removed the hat and threw it into the fireplace.

“And now, sweet lover of mine, we can resume our strolls on the Ring.” He picked her up by the waist, dragged her down the stairs and into the street.

“Look, darling, a motorcar! That’s the third I’ve seen, this month. They’re manufactured by Herr Ferdinand Porsche, the greatest engineer ever born in Austria. He’s one of my fans, you know? I’ve sold him two paintings, and he seems to want a third one. When I get paid, we’ll buy a bottle of champagne from Felix Strauss and drink it together.”

During their long stroll on the Ring, they came across a couple of Kokoschka’s acquaintances and nodded politely. As usual, people stared, mesmerized by Alma’s beauty. Not until their elongated shadows projected themselves onto the trunks of the plane trees did the two go home. There they ate, then lay on the perennially-unmade bed until they fell asleep, exhausted.

In the following days, Kokoschka resumed the life he'd always led, or perhaps the one he'd always dreamed of, together with his darling Alma Mahler. He took her with him wherever he went: to the park, to coffee shops, to the store where he bought paints and brushes. Alma's presence gave his strength, inspiration. He went back to painting every day, which he hadn't done since she'd entered his life. One month later, however, he started to feel that something was amiss. Sitting on a stool, in his studio redolent of oil paint, he gazed at his beloved reclining in the red armchair.

"Why do you sit like that in the shade? You look like a ragbag... Why won't you talk to me? Are you feeling depressed? I know how it feels, I get like that, too: every time I finish a painting, my soul feels drained. But believe me, you need to use your willpower and overcome this torpor. When steeped in darkness, the worst thing you can do is curse the light."

He observed her silently. Where were her laughter, her smart comments, her sense of humor? Where was her eagerness? He realized that what he loved in Alma Mahler was, in fact, her passion, her hunger for a fast-paced existence. He would have loved it if she'd squeezed his hand, or suggested they danced together, in the middle of his studio, without accompanying music, surrounded by easels and with all his paintings propped up against the walls. He drew nearer, started to undress her. When she was completely naked, he carried her to his bed and lay down beside her.

"Why don't you embrace me? Why don't you hold me tight? You don't seem to like me any more..."

The next day he showed up with Alma at the front door of the imposing house of Herr Porsche, in Mozartgasse. The famous engineer and captain of industry had sent him a note the day before, and Kokoschka was keen for such a wealthy man to become a collector of his art. Under his right arm, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string, he carried the painting that he intended to sell to him. As usual, his left arm was wrapped around Alma's waist. He rang the doorbell. Shortly after, Porsche's butler appeared.

“I’m Oskar Kokoschka, and this is Alma Mahler. Would you announce us, please? Herr Porsche is waiting for us.”

The servant nodded and opened the door wide to let them through. He showed them into a sitting room furnished in the fashion of the previous century: satin-covered armchairs; gilded stucco work; exquisite china on burl-wood furniture. The walls were covered in paintings, among which Kokoschka recognized the two that Porsche had bought from him. They hung alongside a couple of works by Klimt, and a self-portrait by Egon Schiele, a young man he didn’t see much: Kokoschka considered him extremely talented, but as mad as a hatter. On a table in the center of the room, the master of the house had placed a glass case containing a model car.

“Were you admiring my model, Herr Kokoschka? It hasn’t been manufactured yet, but I hope it will be. An inexpensive car that everyone can afford. When I manage to produce it, I’ll call it ‘Volkswagen.’ What do you think of that? But do sit down, please. A glass of liqueur?”

Porsche wore an elegant double-breasted gray suit. He was well-groomed, clean-shaven, his moustache seemingly trimmed to size with precision instruments. As he entered, the air was stirred by a subtle drift of Cologne. He gazed at the artist with his slanted eyes. For some reason, to Kokoschka they looked like the eyes of an engineer: Herr Porsche could have had no other occupation, and those eyes—he thought—showed a sort of predestination to excel in mechanics.

“Thank you. I’ve brought the painting. Just like you wanted it: two lovers in the countryside, with a white cat nearby...”

Porsche continued to observe Kokoschka’s eyes: restless, and seemingly incapable of focusing steadily on anything.

“But I asked you to bring me the *Bride of the Wind*, remember? When I came to your studio, I was deeply impressed with that painting. The two lovers, recumbent between crumpled sheets, unexpectedly morphing into desolate valleys and mountains bathed in nightlight...”

“I do remember, Herr Porsche,” interjected Kokoschka, “but I can’t part with that work. You see, Sir, in that painting I portrayed my

darling Alma as she appeared to my intricate soul at the happiest time of my life. She wasn't merely beautiful: there was a fire in her, and a perfect candor that turned into voluptuousness, into endless desire; until, sated and spent, she would drift off in a dream that she alone could understand. This is what I retain, in the depth of my yearnings. But now... Look at the state she's in. You see? She's so detached, nothing concerns her anymore. It's as if she were permanently at the window, pining for another man. I shower her with attention, but she ignores me. She doesn't even move!"

Porsche turned his engineer eyes towards the doll. Having slipped halfway off the seat of the smooth satin sofa, she was almost kneeling on the floor. Her long skirt had climbed up to reveal hefty thighs, but this didn't seem to bother her. Slowly, Porsche returned his gaze to the painter.

"If I succeeded in making her move, would you give me the *Bride of the Wind*?"

Kokoschka stared at him goggle-eyed. His lips parted. If anyone in the world could accomplish such a feat, it was Porsche.

The whole of the following month, the painter stationed himself in one of the automobile manufacturer's workshops, remaining in close proximity with the mechanical engineers in charge of the *operation*. He was anxious, of course. Such complex surgery had never been attempted before. Porsche himself had designed the skeleton of light but sturdy aluminum to be installed in Alma's body. The bones were held together by universal joints and moved by string tendons. Though the muscles couldn't be recreated, Porsche had invented an ingenious system of reinforced balloons: once inflated with compressed air, they would move her limbs, head, torso, hips. Naturally, an energy source was needed. The eminent engineer devised, for Alma Mahler, several small two-stroke engines, gasoline-powered and extremely quiet. There was the problem of how to supply these systems with fuel. In the end, they decided that the liquid should pass through Alma's mouth. This would enable the couple to enjoy a drink together: champagne for him and, for her, the fuel blend she

needed for her movements. She was fitted with an artificial esophagus, and the engines were attached to the corresponding joints. When the skeleton was ready, Alma was sawed in half length-wise. Overcome with fear of losing her forever, Kokoschka refused to attend in person. He left the workshop, retreating to the small entrance hall. There, on the wooden table, someone had left the previous day's newspaper. The painter started to leaf through it, hoping for distraction. Tides of war. Once again, European powers are arming themselves, ready to send off hundreds of thousands of peasants disguised as soldiers to battlefields that no-one cares about. History is here and gone and we're its witnesses, dragged along by a river of which we don't know the origin – or the destination. We should be content with bar chatter; with evenings out at theaters full of bright lights and bejeweled women; with the love of our sweethearts, their black hair fanning out on the pillow. There is absolutely no sense in this world, and looking for it at all costs is the only real sin that human beings can commit.

Over two hours went by before the radiant technicians came to fetch him and showed him into the workshop. Before Kokoschka's eyes appeared Alma Mahler, seated on the counter. There were still wood chips and sawdust all around, testifying that the surgery she had undergone had been radical. As he entered the room, he saw her get off the counter and walk towards him on her own, with no-one to support her. He burst into tears.

Kokoschka decided to wait a few days before resuming their strolls on the Ring. He thought his loved one should have a little time to recover from her dreadful operation, though she didn't appear to be suffering. Herr Porsche had devised a special mechanism—a wooden tablet with brass buttons—to control her movements. Depending on the combination of buttons, Alma got up, sat down, walked forward, moved her arms, and so on. At first, Kokoschka was a little disappointed with her movements. They were slow, mechanical. In order to walk, his darling Alma had to lift a thigh, then bend her leg forward, push her limb and straighten it until the heel touched the ground, and only then advance with her torso. By pressing on the right keys, she turned her head: the joint enabled her to rotate it at any

angle, and even to complete several turns. The painter had to use the system carefully, to make sure the result didn't look unnatural. Eventually he would get used to the situation, he told himself. Alma Mahler was like someone who had been in a serious accident: because he loved her, he would take care of her; he would arrange for her to have everything she needed, and make sure that her awkward movements wouldn't be derided by the gossips of Vienna. Every ten days, he got her to drink the mineral oil recommended by the mechanics. He never left her alone. Every evening he helped her undress, and every morning to put her clothes back on. Having realized that the necessary movements were beyond his lover's capabilities, he didn't want this inability to make her feel embarrassed—*different*, so to speak. One evening he observed her at length, in the semi-darkness of his large studio lit by a single incandescent light bulb. She sat straight, immobile. Of course, until he used the tablet, she couldn't move.

Suddenly he felt sad: for her, first and foremost, but also for himself. Was this the result he'd planned to obtain? As a painter, Kokoschka was a perfectionist. Despite their apparent instinctiveness, his pictures always aimed at an objective, at an innermost principle that mustn't be betrayed: when he felt that he hadn't managed to express satisfactorily what he'd had in mind, Kokoschka would destroy his painting without mercy. As he observed Alma that night, he realized that she looked like a botched painting. Her face smiled at him. It smiled all the time: there was no way to make it not smile. True, she moved, but only when he made her do so; and even if she did move, there was no trace of the dazzling light and deep shadows that he once perceived in her gaze. He got to his feet and started to walk up and down his studio, his arms behind his back and his head bowed. He followed a row of blue tiles, making sure his steps never touched the white ones. With all his mechanical skill—he reflected—Porsche would not be able to give his adored Alma a soul. The engineer had done all he could, but in order to move forward he needed someone else, an expert in that inner element that distinguishes us from metal skeletons, plush covers, and two-stroke engines.

Doctor Landauer.

No one else could help him. The artist knew him well: he was another collector. He had sold him a self-portrait in which the face was all patches of green and blue. Landauer had graduated in mechanical engineering in '99, only to discover that his true calling was medicine. As a doctor, he was a pupil of the famous Maximow, who in 1908 announced the discovery of stem cells. Landauer then pursued his own research on stem cells in a direction that Maximow, and German medical circles at large, considered less than ethical; he was even obliged to flee from Berlin, taking refuge in Vienna, where his name was only ever mentioned in whispers. One evening, while they sat in a bar having a beer, Landauer had told him something of the results of his work: self-replicating organs, tissue that regenerated itself.. The doctor maintained that life could be manipulated, just like anything else, though his opinion had come up against the moral prejudices of the majority of his colleagues.

Landauer lived in Dunkel Strasse, a side street of Hütteldorfer Strasse not far from the Schmelz. The painter rented a town carriage, but on hearing their destination the coachman told Kokoschka that he had no intention of taking him and his companion that far: he would leave them at Hütteldorfer, one block away. When the two got off, the street was deserted. A thin fog enveloped the buildings, creating mysterious pools of shadow all around. The wistful sound of a Barbary barrel organ reached Kokoschka from a distance. The painter and his beloved slowly covered the short stretch that separated them from a noble but run-down building that towered massively in a narrow lane, stifling it. Kokoschka rang the doorbell and stood waiting. It was a while before an old man with strong features and dark rings under his eyes decided to unlatch the front door.

"I'm Kokoschka, the painter, and this is Frau Alma Mahler. Please announce us. I know I wasn't invited, but it's a matter of great importance, and I hope that an enlightened man like Doctor Landauer will forgive the inconvenience of our unexpected arrival.

Without saying a word, the servant closed the door on them. Kokoschka and Alma were obliged to wait several more minutes before the heavy door opened again, and the old man let them in. They found themselves in a hallway. The ceiling had stucco decorations in high relief and walls painted with zigzag motifs in strongly contrasting colors. In the middle of the room stood a man of medium height, whose round spectacles flashed in a sinister manner at the flickering light of the candelabra held up by the servant. Landauer was smiling.

“Herr Kokoschka! This is such an honor: your visit pleases me immensely! Do come in and make yourselves comfortable.

He showed them into a large studio that opened directly onto the hallway, and invited them to sit on a sofa with a diagonal-stripe cover. Kokoschka, who was tense, sat bolt upright. Alma smiled.

“Tell me, Herr Kokoschka: to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

While the artist explained the situation, his haunted, watery eyes couldn't help but reveal his misery. He described the operation carried out by the Porsche technicians, and told him all about the engines and pumping mechanism that enabled Frau Mahler to move. Landauer listened attentively, interrupting occasionally to ask for further details, and didn't express an opinion until Kokoschka had finished.

“This is a difficult case. You did well to come to me: I believe that your unexpected visit will pave the way to an interesting experiment. Ordinary people believe that we are animated by a vital spirit, something that goes beyond matter: a mysterious *res cogitans* over which man has no power. But we scientists know that this is not the case. The secret of our soul lies in our nerves, which intertwine along the limbs and inside the inner cavities of our body to form the brain—the real seat of thinking. And this is the point: your loved one doesn't have a brain.

“Wouldn't it be possible to get hold of one for her? I beg you, Doctor, I'd do anything to have her back for real...”

“If you're thinking of implanting a brain—purloined, so to speak, from another man (or perhaps I should say from another woman)—I must tell you immediately that this wouldn't work. First of all, the resulting

individual wouldn't have Alma Mahler's personality, but that of the person who originally owned the implanted organ. In any case, based on current medical knowledge, this sort of operation would never succeed.

"The brain requires a constant supply of oxygen, which is delivered by the blood flowing in the arteries. If deprived of oxygen, the brain dies within minutes. The cardiovascular system and lungs would have to be recreated... For the moment, science is unable to transfer all these things from one living body to another. However, there may be a solution... Let me think this over."

While the doctor was engrossed in cogitation, Kokoschka, on edge, did nothing but stare fixedly at him.

"Yes, I have it! Come with me to my lab," exclaimed Landauer.

Kokoschka rose abruptly from the sofa, his features drawn, his eyes haunted. He operated the tablet so that Alma, too, got to her feet, and together they followed the doctor up a flight of marble steps. Even the staircase had been painted with a zig-zag motif. For a moment, Kokoschka feared that the strange decoration might have a confusing effect on his beloved and cause her to trip; then he realized that it was he who risked falling over: Alma was climbing the stairs with slow, steady steps. While he ascended ahead of them, Landauer glanced briefly over his shoulder.

"You must be asking yourselves the reason for these geometrical motifs... This house used to be inhabited by Doctor Caligari... the director of the mental hospital, you know? He decided to decorate his home in a style in keeping with his occupation. At first, the effect is disconcerting, but one grows used to it. Just think: one day, the famous film director, Fritz Lang, came to visit me. He would have liked to use my home as a film setting, but I refused, of course. Anyway, I can't afford to redecorate the place.

They reached the landing of the first floor, and the doctor showed them into a room entirely painted black. The central light barely illuminated the long shelves, with their array of large glass jars containing biological specimens: lizards, mice, but also human hands

and feet, preserved in formalin to prevent decomposition. There was an enormous wooden table in the middle of the room, clear except for a tray of surgical instruments immersed in a bluish solution.

“This is my lab, Herr Kokoschka. As you can see, it doesn’t look like a hospital; since I expounded my ideas to the hematologists congress in Berlin, I’ve been obliged to operate with great economy of means. I’ve been attacked all round: they said I wanted to subvert the work of God; that life and the nature of organisms depend exclusively on the will of the Lord; and that science shouldn’t meddle with such things. But I’ve told you before, I think... Getting back to us, my idea is to put stem cells to work in order to generate the living tissues that Frau Mahler needs, particularly the nervous system, whose main part is the brain. Obviously, this is far from easy: as I was saying, the brain needs a constant supply of oxygen. Ideally, the stem cells should be guided in such a way that they equip her with lungs, but perhaps these can be replaced with the bellows that drive air into her muscles. In any case, it won’t be possible to deliver oxygen to her brain cells without using blood, so we’ll need a heart and a network of blood vessels.”

“Are you saying that, with your stem cells, you can reconstruct an entire human body?”

“I believe I can. I discovered there are different types of stem cells: some develop in a manner that can only result in the production of certain types of organs, such as the liver or lungs; but others are like child-cells: they have no schooling in life as yet, so they can evolve in any direction. In all these years, I’ve done nothing but study how to make them grow, ‘programming’ them, if I may call it that, for the purpose of producing certain tissues, exactly where they are needed.”

“That’s fantastic, Sir. But I still don’t understand: if you grow a brain inside Alma’s head, how can you be sure to reproduce Alma’s mind, and not someone else’s?”

“That’s the whole point. You see, Herr Kokoschka, I’m convinced that our cells contain a sort of code: something capable of lending each one of us our specific individuality. Unfortunately I can’t prove it yet, but I’ve conducted a number of experiments, and they all seem to support this assertion. Besides, this is the only explanation for Mendel’s

observations and for the Laws of Heredity that he set out. In order to reproduce your loved one correctly, I will need tissues that were part of her body. Any fragment that is sure to have come from her person will do: a flake of skin, a fingernail clipping, even a hair.

An image flashed through the painter's mind: the bed in his studio that was always unmade. He had slept in it with Alma Mahler. It was possible that a hair or two of his beloved had remained on her pillow. He must run home and check.

"I think I can get you what you need."

Retrieving a sample of Alma's hair from her pillow on their bed in his studio was not a problem for Kokoschka. Her hair was long and black: so different from his own, which was short and blond! Kokoschka easily recognized one and rushed back to the house in Dunkel Strasse, where the experiment was started.

In the following days, the doctor and the artist silently observed the evolution of the new Alma Mahler, a miracle of life created by the science of Man. She lay on the bed prepared by Landauer in the black-painted lab. The scientist's scalpel had dissected her along precise lines, uncovering the metal skeleton created by the Porsche engineers, and the two-stroke engines that enabled her to move. Landauer illustrated his project to Kokoschka in a whisper, to avoid disrupting the almost mystical silence of the place.

"You see? These mechanisms transfer the motor-generated movements to Frau Mahler's limbs and to the other parts of her body. As you can see, they're hydraulically-operated systems; but what we need is nervous signals, which are of an electrical nature. Fortunately, Nikola Tesla recently patented a device that's just right for our purposes. We'll arrange for nervous signals to replace those transmitted by the tablet."

"With a patent, doesn't one have to pay to make use of it?"

“We’ll deal with that later. I’m well-acquainted with Tesla, and I know that he puts science before mercenary interests.”

The liquid with the stem cells was placed inside rubber sacs attached in various points to the metal bones. As the days went by, biological tissues started to develop and to grow, forming throbbing rosy-colored structures. Landauer was in ecstasy.

“Veins are forming here.” The doctor indicated a point in Alma’s open torso. “If you look carefully, you can see that blood is already circulating in them. And the glottis is forming here.”

The doctor pointed to Alma’s throat. Kokoschka was filled with both admiration and concern. On the one hand, he admired the power of science, the fantastic quest for knowledge that mankind had embarked on the previous century, and that was already yielding such incredible results. God died and was reborn in us, in his creatures. On the other hand, he was concerned that mankind didn’t really know where their quest might lead. Would Alma really recover her thinking processes; and along with those, the ability to love him?

“What can you tell me about her brain?”

“We can’t admire that. It’s forming inside her skull, of course.”

“At the end of all this, will she really be Alma Mahler? I mean: how will she remember things, the time we spent together, our walks on the Ring, our nights full of passion?”

“Naturally, she won’t remember anything. Thanks to the life codes contained in the hair that you brought me, she will be Alma Mahler to all effects, but as if she were reborn, and ready to start a new life.”

“Will she still be in love with me?”

Landauer smiled.

“That doesn’t depend on what we’re doing here, but if you managed to make her fall in love once, I reckon you should be able to do so again.”

Over the next few weeks, the tissues created by Landauer's stem cells continued to grow. One day, the two men noticed that one of Alma's arms had started to tremble, as if she were trying—unsuccessfully—to move it. Hours later, the trembling had reached the other arm, then her legs, and finally her torso, until her whole body was moving convulsively. She was arching her back, shaking her head, fisting her plush hands in mid-air, as if trying to grab something, then distending them in violent spasms. Suddenly she started to emit a prolonged whimper, like the subdued cry of a wounded animal.

“It's time to stitch up her body. No point in trying to monitor the cells' growth any further: we'll soon find out if the experiment has worked. I'll have to tie her to the bed...”

With knitted brows, Landauer started to prepare the surgical needles and dozens of yards of suture needed for the operation. To Kokoschka, those needles didn't look so different from those used by the dollmaker, Hermine Moos, but of course he didn't know much about surgery.

“Will she survive?”

The doctor glanced at him through his round spectacles and frowned.

“Let's hope so.”

Ten days later, Kokoschka and Alma Mahler left the house in Dunkel Strasse. Alma was able to walk now, with the aid of a stick. According to Landauer, exercise would improve her mobility; she should be encouraged to talk, to move. She shouldn't be kept at home—he had recommended—but taken out and about, to enable her young mind to make the sort of progress that both men expected. The doctor's instructions had been extremely detailed. The biological tissues with which Alma was endowed had to be nourished, and gasoline was no longer enough: Landauer explained to Kokoschka how to prepare the sugar-and-salts solution that she needed. In order to enable Frau Mahler to assimilate it, she had been fitted with a modestly-sized stomach and bowel. Kokoschka was to give her the solution once a day, using the tablet's commands to prevent the liquid from ending up in the tanks of the Porsche engines. Fortunately, this was the only

operation still requiring the use of that rudimentary control device. Kokoschka was delighted that he had thought of Landauer. It was only because the doctor mastered both engineering and medical skills that he was able to accomplish such a miracle.

“Let’s take a carriage, my love. True, you need exercise, but I wouldn’t like you to get worn out.”

“Ahhhaaghaaaa,” replied Alma.

“You must learn to control your tone of voice, my darling. There’s no need to talk so loudly: it’s not done, you know.”

“Gheegaaaahooo.”

“Of course, my love, I agree. Let’s go home now, so you can lie down a little. You won’t have to do anything, I’ll get dinner ready. Would you like some boiled potatoes? We could dress them with the horseradish sauce prepared by Frau Shoenberg, our neighbor...”

“Ghu.”

Those were days of ecstasy and forgiveness. Kokoschka had to admit that he had hated Alma when she left him, but as they lay side by side on the bed in his dimly-lit studio, their old conflicts melted away like ghosts in the light of a new morning. As Doctor Landauer had predicted, Alma had reawakened to life. She was still the old Alma, and yet she was like a child, eager to learn about the world, and always full of wonder. On the second day, taking advantage of a moment in which the artist had gone out to buy milk and eggs, she got hold of a paint brush and filled a canvas with irregular marks. The picture was still unfinished and Kokoschka, to begin with, was annoyed. But then he looked at her, and his heart filled with tenderness.

“Pure abstract art. Is this what you aim for now? The value of gesture? That irregular trail of carmine across the canvas ... I see you squeezed the whole tube out... Never mind: you obviously wanted to lend substance to your stroke; you needed a tactile structure to strengthen your concept. Well done.”

“Gheeee,” replied Alma, with the eternal smile that not even Landauer had managed to wipe from her face.

The weeks went by. Kokoschka was happy to have his lover back, yet aware of a budding anxiety which at first he couldn't explain. He took her with him to the usual places for their strolls; he had her sit next to him, holding her large plush hand in his, feeling more and more clearly that she was restless, as if she were looking for something that she couldn't find in her everyday life. That was Alma Mahler: nothing could be done about it; yet he was afraid of losing her. One day, on the Ring, they met the painter Egon Schiele, with his wild hair and usual crazy look in his eyes. Kokoschka greeted him with a nod. After all, their relationship was entirely formal: though both were considered expressionists, Schiele and Kokoschka interpreted the artistic spirit of their times in opposite manner. Kokoschka detested the obsession with nudity that emerged from his colleague's work: he found it lacked those inner whirlwinds of emotion that inspired him, particularly when making love at night. He bowed his head respectfully, and in that moment registered that Alma had fixed her smiling eyes on Schiele's lunatic features. Schiele smiled back, and Kokoschka couldn't help but notice something sly in his expression. Were they acquainted? Of course, they must be! Alma Mahler knew all the intellectuals in Vienna—many of them intimately. Had she slept with him? She never mentioned her love affairs, not even the notorious ones that the whole city gossiped about in outraged whispers. Klimt, Mahler, Gropius... why not Egon Schiele? He felt a wild rage well up inside. Suddenly, the reasons for his anxiety were clear to him. Of course: as time went by, she learned more and more; as her awareness of the world deepened, she became increasingly independent from him. She was more and more herself, Alma Mahler, the one he loved because no man would ever be able to claim her as his own. This drove him mad. Perhaps, he told himself, it was the inevitable price to pay for giving her arms and legs, engines to make her move, nerves and muscles, so he could make love to her on the bed in his studio. He gave Schiele a curt parting nod, grasped his beloved by the waist, and literally pushed her away and along the crowded street.

Reclining on the bed, he observed the light that the lamp post in the street projected, forming patterns on the ceiling. She slept alongside him, immobile. What is it, inside us, that makes us constantly unhappy? What are we looking for, in this moment of awareness that we call life? Why can't we give ourselves over to simple everyday pleasures? He thought about the light dinner he'd had; about her face, as she delicately sipped gasoline from a ceramic mug. He thought about Egon Schiele, and the mere idea that she might be attracted to him rekindled the fury that he'd felt that afternoon. His eyes roamed restlessly, pausing occasionally on the shadow of an object. An ashtray. The vase in which he kept his paintbrushes: in the half-light, it evoked the silhouette of Egon Schiele's head, his coarse hair standing up on end. The easel in the middle of his studio looked like a giant warrior with a triangular head. In the grip of anxiety, he couldn't sleep. The thought that his beloved could fancy another man while being at his side nagged him relentlessly: he stared obsessively at his vase of paintbrushes, that grotesque head of Schiele which had somehow made its way into his existence and now lurked in the shadows. In the end he fell asleep; when he awoke, his studio was awash with the grayish light of dawn. Alma was up. Seated on one of the rush chairs, she was staring fixedly at the street, as if that house were too cramped to contain her spirit, and he a stranger who had chanced to end up in her bed. Or was she thinking of a way to meet his rival? He got out of bed quietly. She didn't even nod a greeting. He dressed quickly, trying not to look at her. Enabling her to have thoughts had been a mistake. Before, at least, she had depended on him entirely and couldn't have tried to get away.

That evening, he took her out to dinner at Lambert's, an inn run by a Frenchman in Pfullstrasse. The food was good, the patrons few, and they wouldn't be disturbed. A light rain veiled the night along the gray streets of Vienna. He held his umbrella over her so she wouldn't get wet. Lambert showed them into a small, private dining room.

"What shall I bring you? I have oysters, fresh from Trieste..."

“Oysters will be fine, Monsieur Lambert.”

“And the same for Madam?”

“No, thanks. Only some gasoline for her, thank you.”

There was a long silence, while he concentrated on what he should say to her. Alma stared straight ahead.

“Are you happy?” he asked her. For a moment, he thought he perceived something strange in her gaze, like a soundless cry that her permanent smile rendered even more harrowing.

“So you’re not happy? Why not? Talk to me, my love. Please explain. I’d do anything to keep you satisfied.”

“Ghaauuuu.”

“So that’s how it is! I knew it. Can’t you be content with what we have: the moments when we hold each other tight, when we dream together?”

“Ahguuooohhhh.”

“But why? What is it you miss? I bet you don’t even know. Go on, admit it. That’s the way you are. That’s why I love you madly, and that’s why you run away from me. You drive me out of my mind! You’re looking for something without knowing what it is—something that doesn’t exist. And now you’re thinking of Egon Schiele, aren’t you?”

“Guahhhooo.”

“That’s not true. It’s *my* business too. I won’t let you go anywhere near that man. Did you know that he raped a young girl, when he was in Neulengbach? He was sent to jail, then somehow managed to get acquitted. He’s an evil creature...”

“Ahggahaaa.”

“Don’t interrupt. I know him. He’d make you unhappy.”

“Ghu.”

Kokoschka bowed his head. For a long moment he observed the dead oyster shells. Again, a wild rage was welling up inside him, uncontainable, like the flurries that stirred the sheets in the *Bride of the Wind*.

“So you want to leave me again? I won’t let you...”

From the adjacent room came the indistinct drone of patrons intent in conversation. Someone, somewhere, was playing the piano: the notes arrived muffled, as if absent-mindedly caressing their ears. Kokoschka lifted the sharp knife that Monsieur Lambert had left on the table, and with frenzied thrusts started to stab her. When he saw her immobile, he grasped her by the waist and dragged her outside, in the inn’s garden. He lay her on the damp grass, then stood and stared at her.

“You don’t deserve me. You never did deserve my love. You had something special and you threw it away. Adieu. Forever.”

From what I’ve heard, it was Monsieur Lambert himself who called the police. He reported what he had seen, as well as what he had imagined, and pointed out that Kokoschka hadn’t paid the bill. One of the policemen bent over what remained of Alma Mahler. There were large splashes of red on her chest.

“What are these stains, Fritz?”

“I don’t know. Red wine, I imagine.”

La bambola

Piero Schiavo-Campo

Il 9 marzo 1902 Alma Schindler sposò il musicista Gustav Mahler, e da quel momento divenne nota come Alma Mahler. Che cosa sappiamo di lei? Tutto e niente. La storia ci racconta dei suoi infiniti amori, passioni e tradimenti che ne fecero la donna più interessante e chiacchierata del ventesimo secolo, mettendone in ombra la produzione artistica. Figlia di un pittore, fin da piccola frequentò l'ambiente intellettuale di Vienna ed entrò in contatto con i suoi massimi rappresentanti. Ancora giovanissima conobbe e amò il pittore Gustav Klimt, e forse qualcun altro (Max Burckhard? Alexander von Zemlinsky?), ma a ventitré anni decise di mettere la testa a posto sposandosi con il famoso direttore d'orchestra, di vent'anni più grande di lei. Alma amava la musica. Scrisse dei lieder, ne fece sentire uno al marito cantando lei stessa, mentre si accompagnava con il pianoforte. Mahler rimase ad ascoltarla attento, poi, senza dire una parola, si alzò dal divano e si ritirò nel suo studio. Quello che li allontanò davvero, però, non fu l'indifferenza di Mahler nei confronti dell'attività artistica della moglie, ma la morte della loro prima figlia Maria Anna, colpita dalla difterite a cinque anni di età. Alma rimase sconvolta, e fu allora che intuì quale sarebbe stato il suo destino: amare alla follia, e perdere gli uomini amati insieme al frutto di quegli amori.

Cominciò innamorandosi di Walter Gropius, il futuro fondatore del Bauhaus, la scuola che ebbe tra i suoi insegnanti Paul Klee e Wassily Kandinsky. Alma non poteva vivere nulla se non con tutta se stessa; avrebbe preferito morire, piuttosto che esistere nella mediocrità, e un rapporto clandestino le sarebbe apparso squallido; fu così che Mahler venne a sapere dalla moglie stessa quello che le stava succedendo, tutto tranne i dettagli intimi. Il Maestro cercò di ricucire il rapporto, andò perfino a parlare con Sigmund Freud nella speranza che il grande psicologo gli desse qualche suggerimento, ma si rifiutò di divorziare dalla moglie. Del resto, non gli restava molto da vivere: era a New York quando si ammalò, nel 1911; fece ritorno a Vienna, ma morì nello stesso anno. Nel 1915 Alma sposò Gropius; nel 1920 i due si

separarono perché lei era rimasta incinta del poeta Franz Werfel, con cui si sposò qualche anno più tardi.

Tra la morte di Mahler e il matrimonio con Gropius, Alma Mahler ebbe una relazione difficile e contrastata con un genio sregolato, il pittore espressionista Oskar Kokoschka. Fu Klimt, uno dei suoi insegnanti, che presentò Kokoschka al grande pubblico nel 1908, ma l'arte del giovane pittore non piacque a tutti. Era dura, forte, sgraziata, piena di contrasti. Sembrava quasi che Kokoschka volesse a tutti i costi rappresentare la sua anima inquieta, anziché la realtà, o forse che la realtà stessa non fosse altro che una libera creazione della mente di Kokoschka e quindi della sua follia. Alma Mahler se ne innamorò, ma si rese conto che un rapporto stabile con lui sarebbe stato impossibile. Era possessivo in modo insopportabile, pretendeva di vederla a tutte le ore, di passare tutto il suo tempo con lei. La circondava di premure, si profondeva in lodi infinite nei confronti dei quadri dipinti da Alma, la quale però si rendeva conto che in quel rapporto lei stessa non aveva altro ruolo se non essere un pezzo dell'anima di Kokoschka. Dopo due anni di passione e di liti, Alma Mahler decise di lasciare il suo amante.

Kokoschka rimase sconvolto da quella decisione. Alma era dentro di lui. Kokoschka non le aveva dato il suo cuore, come avrebbe fatto un qualsiasi borghese. No, Alma era una parte del suo stesso spirito che improvvisamente acquistava autonomia e decideva di andarsene. Era come se il carminio o il blu oltremare si rifiutassero di farsi pennellare sulle tele che lui tendeva, bianche, tirandole intorno ai telai di legno con una pinza dalle ganasce larghe. Non che lui volesse limitare la libera volontà della sua amata: Alma aveva tutto il diritto di scegliere che cosa fare della sua vita. Soltanto, lui aveva bisogno della sua presenza come del carminio e del blu oltremare che prendevano vita nei suoi quadri. Andò da Hermine Moos, che era la più famosa modista di Vienna e fabbricava anche bambole di pezza, e le ordinò una bambola in grandezza naturale, di cui lui stesso disegnò le fattezze. Aveva lo sguardo di Alma, il viso rotondo come lei, le labbra sensuali atteggiate a un perenne sorriso, i seni alti, prorompenti, le cosce grosse (lei se ne vergognava, ma non ne aveva motivo). I lunghi capelli neri le scendevano morbidi sulle spalle, e la sua pelle era calda e soffice: la Moos l'aveva realizzata con la migliore stoffa per peluche esistente sul

mercato, intingendola poi in una vernice color carne preparata da Kokoschka in persona. Quando finalmente la bambolaia gliela consegnò, il pittore ne fu entusiasta. La appoggiò sulla grande poltrona rossa nel suo studio, e rimase a fissarla con uno sguardo innamorato.

– Sei bellissima! Ma non puoi restare così, nuda. Aspettami, ti vado a comprare della biancheria e dei vestiti. Non ti muovere, amore mio, torno subito!

Kokoschka non aveva idea delle misure. La merciaia all'angolo di Bahnhofstrasse gli diede qualche suggerimento, e quando tornò aveva con sé una federa in cui aveva stipato due paia di mutandine (un cambio sarebbe stato necessario, pensava) un busto, una gonna a pieghe molto simile a quella che le aveva visto addosso tante volte, una camicetta di pizzo e perfino un grande cappello con una piuma di struzzo. La vestì, la osservò. Andava tutto bene, tranne il cappello.

– Ne abbiamo discusso tante volte, ricordi? Ti ho sempre detto che un cappellino alla moda ti avrebbe resa ancora più graziosa, ma non voglio obbligarti a fare nulla che non ti piaccia.

Prese il cappello e lo gettò nel camino.

– Adesso, mia dolcissima amante, possiamo tornare a passeggiare insieme sul Ring, come abbiamo fatto tante volte.

La afferrò per la vita e la trascinò lungo le scale, poi nella strada.

– Guarda, mia adorata, un'automobile! È la terza che vedo in giro, questo mese. Le fabbrica herr Ferdinand Porsche, il più grande ingegnere che sia mai nato in Austria. Sai che è un mio ammiratore? Gli ho venduto due quadri, e sembra che ne voglia un terzo. Quando mi pagherà, compreremo una bottiglia di champagne da Felix Strauss e ce la berremo insieme.

Fecero una lunga passeggiata lungo il Ring e incontrarono un paio di conoscenti di Kokoschka, a cui fecero dei cortesi cenni col capo. Anche loro li osservarono, stupiti come sempre dalla bellezza di Alma. Tornarono indietro solo quando le loro ombre furono così lunghe da proiettarsi sui tronchi dei platani. Allora mangiarono, poi si stesero su quel letto che nessuno mai rifaceva, finché si addormentarono esausti.

Nei giorni successivi Kokoschka riprese a fare la vita che aveva sempre fatto, o forse sempre desiderato, insieme alla sua adorata Alma Mahler. Dovunque andasse la portava con sé: ai giardini, nei caffè, nel negozio in cui comprava pennelli e colori. La presenza di Alma gli dava forza, lo ispirava. Tornò a dipingere tutti i giorni, cosa che non aveva più fatto da quando lei era entrata nella sua vita. Dopo un mese, tuttavia, cominciò ad avvertire che nella sua esistenza mancava qualcosa. Seduto su una seggiola, nello studio che profumava di colori a olio, fissò la sua amata appoggiata sulla poltrona rossa.

– Perché te ne stai immobile nell'ombra? Vista così sembri un mucchio di stracci... Perché non mi parli? Sei depressa? Ti capisco, capita anche a me: ogni volta che finisco un quadro la mia anima si svuota. Però, credimi, devi scuoterti, uscire dal torpore con un atto di volontà. Quando ti ritrovi immersa nella tenebra, la cosa più sciocca che puoi fare è maledire la luce.

La osservò in silenzio. Dov'erano le sue risate, i suoi commenti acuti, la sua ironia? Dov'era finita la sua voglia di esserci? Si rendeva conto che quello che amava in Alma Mahler era proprio la passione, il bisogno di vivere la vita senza un attimo di tregua. Avrebbe voluto che fosse lei a stringergli la mano, o magari a proporgli di ballare insieme senza che ci fosse nessuna musica ad accompagnarli, in mezzo allo studio, tra cavalletti e quadri accatastati alle pareti. Le si fece vicino. Cominciò a spogliarla poi, quando fu completamente nuda, la portò sul letto e si stese accanto a lei.

– Perché non mi abbracci? Perché non mi stringi a te? Sembra quasi che io non ti piaccia più...

Il giorno dopo si presentò insieme ad Alma al portone della grande casa di Mozartgasse dove abitava herr Porsche. Il famoso ingegnere e capitano d'industria gli aveva fatto avere un biglietto, proprio il giorno prima, e Kokoschka teneva molto all'idea che quell'uomo ricchissimo diventasse suo collezionista. Sotto il braccio destro aveva il quadro che intendeva vendergli, avvolto in carta da pacchi e legato con uno spago. Il braccio sinistro gli serviva, come sempre, per reggere Alma intorno

alla vita. Suonò la campanella, e dopo pochi istanti sulla soglia apparve il maggiordomo di Porsche.

– Sono Oskar Kokoschka, e questa è la signora Alma Mahler. Voglia annunciarci, per favore: l'ingegnere ci aspetta.

Il servitore fece un cenno col capo, poi spalancò la porta in modo da farli passare. Li fece accomodare in un salotto arredato secondo la moda del secolo precedente: poltrone foderate di raso, stucchi dorati, porcellane di grande valore appoggiate su mobili di radica. Le pareti erano piene di quadri, tra cui Kokoschka riconobbe i due che aveva già venduto a Porsche. Erano accanto a un paio di lavori di Klimt, e a un autoritratto di Egon Schiele, un giovane che lui frequentava poco: aveva molto talento, non c'era dubbio, ma a giudizio di Kokoschka era matto come un cavallo. Al centro della stanza c'era un tavolo di legno su cui il padrone di casa aveva messo un modellino di automobile, chiuso in una teca di vetro.

– Sta ammirando il mio modello, herr Kokoschka? Non è ancora stato realizzato, ma spero che lo sarà. Una macchina che costa poco, quindi alla portata di tutti. La chiamerò Volkswagen, quando riuscirò a costruirla. Che cosa ne pensa? Ma sedetevi, vi prego, non restate in piedi. Posso offrirvi un liquore?

Porsche indossava un elegante doppio petto grigio. Era perfettamente sbarbato, e i suoi baffi sembravano tagliati a misura, con strumenti di precisione. Quando entrò si sparse nell'aria un sottile profumo di acqua di Colonia. Fissava il pittore con i suoi occhi obliqui. Per qualche ragione, Kokoschka pensava che fossero occhi da ingegnere, che herr Porsche non potesse fare altro che il mestiere che faceva, e che nei suoi occhi ci fosse una sorta di predestinazione verso l'eccellenza nella meccanica.

– La ringrazio. Le ho portato il quadro. Proprio come lei lo voleva. Rappresenta due amanti, nella campagna, e accanto a loro c'è un gatto bianco...

Porsche continuava a guardare Kokoschka senza distogliere lo sguardo dai suoi occhi inquieti, che sembravano incapaci di posarsi stabilmente su qualcosa.

– Io però le avevo chiesto di portarmi la *Sposa del vento*. Se lo ricorda? Quando ho visitato il suo studio sono rimasto impressionato da quel quadro. I due amanti abbandonati tra le coltri disfatte che inaspettatamente si trasformano in valli e montagne desolate, illuminate da una luce notturna...

– Me lo ricordo, herr Porsche – lo interruppe Kokoschka – ma non posso separarmi da quell'opera. Vede, ingegnere... in quel dipinto io ho ritratto la mia amata Alma, così come appariva alla mia anima aggrovigliata nell'epoca più felice della mia vita. Non era solo bella: c'era una fiamma in lei, un candore perfetto che si faceva voluttà, desiderio infinito, finché, appagata, si abbandonava esanime sognando qualcosa che solo lei poteva comprendere. È così che la porto con me, nel profondo dei miei desideri. Solo che adesso... Guardi come si è ridotta. La vede? È lì immobile, nulla più la riguarda. È come se se ne stesse continuamente alla finestra, sospirando per un altro uomo. Io la riempio di attenzioni, ma lei m'ignora. Non si muove neppure!

Porsche girò gli occhi da ingegnere verso la bambola. I divani di raso erano lisci, e lei era scivolata per metà dalla seduta. Sembrava che si fosse messa in ginocchio per terra. La lunga gonna si era sollevata abbastanza da mostrare le gambe grosse, ma lei non sembrava preoccuparsene. Lentamente lo sguardo di Porsche tornò verso il pittore.

– Se riuscissi a fare in modo che si muova, mi darebbe la *Sposa del vento*?

Gli occhi di Kokoschka si fecero rotondi, le sue labbra si schiusero. Se c'era qualcuno al mondo in grado di compiere quel miracolo, era senz'altro Porsche.

Per tutto il mese successivo il pittore stazionò in una delle officine della casa automobilistica Porsche, a stretto contatto con i meccanici che dovevano eseguire l'*intervento*. Era in ansia, naturalmente. Nessuno aveva mai tentato un'operazione così difficile. Lo stesso Porsche aveva disegnato lo scheletro d'alluminio, robusto ma leggero, che doveva essere installato nel corpo di Alma. Giunti cardanici tenevano insieme le ossa mosse da tendini di corda. I muscoli non potevano essere

ricreati, ma Porsche aveva inventato un sistema ingegnoso di palloni rinforzati che, gonfiandosi di aria compressa, avrebbero permesso il movimento degli arti, della testa, del tronco, dei fianchi. Occorreva, naturalmente, una sorgente di energia. Il grande ingegnere aveva previsto di dotare Alma Mahler di diversi piccoli motori a due tempi, alimentati a benzina. Erano apparati silenziosissimi, ma c'era il problema di come rifornirli di carburante. Alla fine decisero di far passare il liquido dalla bocca. Questo avrebbe permesso alla coppia di mangiare e bere insieme, lui lo champagne e lei la miscela che le serviva per muoversi. Le venne fatto un esofago artificiale, e i motori vennero montati in corrispondenza delle giunture. Quando lo scheletro fu pronto, Alma venne segata in due in senso longitudinale. Kokoschka non volle assistere di persona: temeva troppo di perderla per sempre. Uscì dall'officina e si rintanò nel piccolo vestibolo. Sul tavolo di legno qualcuno aveva dimenticato il giornale del giorno prima e il pittore si mise a sfogliarlo, sperando di distrarsi. Venti di guerra. Le potenze europee ancora una volta si armano, pronte a spedire centinaia di migliaia di contadini travestiti da soldati su campi di battaglia che a nessuno interessano. La storia passa e se ne va; noi ne siamo testimoni, trascinati da un fiume che non si sa da dove venga e dove vada; eppure dovrebbero bastarci le chiacchiere al caffè, le serate a teatro piene di luci e di donne ingioiellate, l'amore delle nostre amanti con i capelli neri sparsi sul cuscino. Il mondo è privo di senso, e cercarne uno a tutti i costi è il solo vero peccato che gli esseri umani possano commettere.

Trascorsero più di due ore prima che i tecnici raggianti si facessero vedere e lo guidassero in officina. Agli occhi di Kokoschka apparve Alma Mahler, seduta su un banco da lavoro. Tutto intorno c'erano ancora i trucioli e la segatura che testimoniavano della radicalità dell'intervento che aveva dovuto subire. Al suo ingresso la vide scendere dal banco e camminare verso di lui da sola, senza bisogno che qualcuno la sorreggesse. Scoppiò in lacrime.

Kokoschka preferì aspettare qualche giorno, prima di tornare a passeggiare con lei sul Ring. Pensava che la sua amata dovesse rimettersi almeno un poco dalla tremenda operazione a cui era stata sottoposta, anche se a vederla non sembrava provata. L'ingegner

Porsche aveva studiato uno speciale meccanismo per farla muovere, una tavoletta di legno con dei pulsanti di ottone. A seconda della combinazione che s'impostava sulla tavoletta Alma si alzava, si sedeva, camminava in avanti, muoveva le braccia e così via. All'inizio Kokoschka rimase un po' deluso da quei movimenti. Erano lenti, meccanici. Per camminare la sua adorata Alma doveva sollevare una coscia, poi flettere in avanti la gamba, spingere l'arto che si raddrizzava finché toccava terra con il tallone, e solo alla fine avanzava il busto. Premendo sui tasti giusti girava la testa; il giunto le permetteva di ruotarla di un angolo qualsiasi, e perfino di farle fare diversi giri, e il pittore era costretto a controllare con attenzione il meccanismo, affinché il risultato non sembrasse innaturale. Pensò che col tempo si sarebbe abituato a quello stato di cose. Alma Mahler era come una persona che avesse subito un grave incidente; siccome lui l'amava sarebbe stata sua cura badare a lei, fare in modo che non le mancasse nulla, e che i suoi goffi movimenti non fossero motivo di riso per gli abitanti di una città pettegola come Vienna. Ogni dieci giorni le dava da bere l'olio minerale di cui i meccanici gli avevano raccomandato l'uso. Non la lasciava mai sola, tutte le sere l'aiutava a spogliarsi, e al mattino a rivestirsi. Si era reso conto che i movimenti necessari non erano alla portata della sua amante, e tuttavia non voleva che questa incapacità la facesse sentire a disagio, per così dire *diversa*. Una sera rimase a lungo a osservarla, nella penombra del grande studio illuminato da un'unica lampadina a incandescenza. Se ne stava seduta composta, immobile. Certo: finché lui non agiva sulla tavoletta, lei non poteva muoversi. Improvvisamente si sentì triste. Per lei, innanzi tutto, ma anche per se stesso. Era quello il risultato che voleva ottenere? Come pittore, Kokoschka era un perfezionista. Malgrado l'apparente istintività dei suoi quadri, in essi c'era sempre un obiettivo che doveva essere raggiunto, un'idea profonda che non poteva essere tradita: quando riteneva di non aver espresso tutto quello che voleva esprimere, Kokoschka distruggeva il quadro senza pietà. Osservando Alma, quella sera, si rese conto che assomigliava a un dipinto sbagliato. Il suo volto gli sorrideva. Sorrideva sempre, non c'era modo di non farlo sorridere. Si muoveva, questo è vero, ma solo quando lui la faceva muovere; anche se si muoveva, non c'era traccia in lei delle luci abbaglianti e delle ombre profonde che un tempo coglieva nel suo

sguardo. Si alzò, e si mise a passeggiare su e giù per lo studio con le braccia dietro la schiena e la testa china. Seguiva una fila di piastrelle blu, facendo in modo che i suoi passi non toccassero mai quelle bianche. Rifletteva. Con tutta la sua perizia meccanica, Porsche non sarebbe stato in grado di dare un'anima alla sua adorata Alma. L'ingegnere aveva fatto tutto quello che poteva, ma per andare avanti occorreva qualcun altro, un esperto di ciò che c'è dentro di noi e che ci rende diversi dagli scheletri di metallo, dalle coperture di peluche e dai motori a due tempi.

Martin Landauer.

Nessun altro avrebbe potuto aiutarlo. Kokoschka lo conosceva bene: anche lui era un suo collezionista, gli aveva venduto un autoritratto con il viso a chiazze verdi e blu. Landauer si era laureato in ingegneria meccanica nel '99, per poi scoprire che la sua vera vocazione era la medicina. Come medico, era un allievo del famoso Maximow, che nel 1908 aveva annunciato la scoperta delle cellule staminali. Landauer aveva spinto le sue ricerche sulle staminali in una direzione considerata poco etica da Maximow e da tutto l'ambiente medico tedesco; era stato addirittura costretto a fuggire da Berlino e si era rifugiato a Vienna, dove si parlava di lui soltanto a bassa voce. Una sera, mentre erano seduti al caffè di Escherplatz davanti a due bottiglie di birra, Landauer gli aveva raccontato qualcosa dei risultati del suo lavoro: organi in grado di riprodursi, tessuti che si rigeneravano... La vita, secondo il medico, poteva essere manipolata come qualsiasi altra cosa, anche se quell'opinione andava contro i pregiudizi morali della maggior parte dei suoi colleghi.

Landauer abitava in Dunkel Strasse, una traversa di Hütteldorfer Strasse non lontano dallo Schmelz. Il pittore affittò una carrozza di città, ma quando diede l'indirizzo al vetturino si sentì rispondere che l'uomo non aveva nessuna intenzione di portare fin lì lui e la sua compagna: li avrebbe lasciati sulla Hütteldorfer, a un isolato di distanza. Quando scesero, la strada era deserta. Una leggera nebbia circondava gli edifici, creando misteriose chiazze d'ombra tutto intorno. Da lontano sentiva provenire il suono malinconico di un

organetto di Barberia. Il pittore e la sua amata percorsero lentamente il breve tratto che li separava da un edificio nobile ma fatiscente, che si ergeva in un vicolo stretto soffocandolo con la sua mole. Kokoschka suonò la campanella e rimase in attesa. Passò più di un minuto, prima che un vecchio dai tratti marcati, con due pesanti occhiaie nere, si decidesse a schiudere il portone.

– Sono il pittore Kokoschka, e questa è la signora Alma Mahler. La prego di annunciarmi. So di non essere stato invitato, ma si tratta di una faccenda di grande importanza, e spero che un uomo illuminato come il dottor Landauer saprà perdonare la sconvenienza della nostra apparizione.

Senza dire una parola, il servitore richiuse l'uscio. Kokoschka e Alma furono costretti ad aspettare ancora diversi minuti, prima che la pesante porta si aprisse di nuovo e l'uomo li facesse passare. Si ritrovarono in un vestibolo con il soffitto decorato con stucchi in altorilievo. Le pareti erano state dipinte con figure geometriche zigzaganti, usando colori dai forti contrasti. Al centro della stanza c'era un uomo di media statura, con gli occhiali rotondi che mandavano bagliori sinistri al guizzare della luce del candelabro che il servitore reggeva con la mano. Landauer sorrideva.

– Herr Kokoschka! Quale onore! La sua visita è per me un piacere ineffabile! Vi prego, accomodatevi, non rimanete qui in piedi.

Li fece entrare in un grande studio che si apriva direttamente sul vestibolo, e li fece sedere su un divano coperto di una stoffa a linee oblique. Kokoschka era teso, e se ne stava seduto con la schiena dritta. Alma sorrideva.

– Mi dica, herr Kokoschka: a che cosa devo il piacere della sua visita?

Il pittore gli espose la situazione. Nel parlare non poteva fare a meno di palesare la sua angoscia: i suoi occhi erano lucidi, spiritati. Gli raccontò dell'intervento dei tecnici di Porsche, dei dettagli del motore e del meccanismo di pompaggio che permetteva alla signora di muoversi. Landauer lo ascoltò con attenzione, interrompendolo qualche volta per avere maggiori dettagli. Solo quando Kokoschka ebbe finito, si decise a esprimere la sua opinione.

– È un caso difficile. Ha fatto bene a venire da me, credo che la sua visita inattesa schiuda le porte a un esperimento interessante. La gente comune ritiene che ci sia uno spirito vitale che ci anima, qualcosa che va oltre la materia, una *res cogitans* del tutto misteriosa su cui gli uomini non hanno nessun potere. Noi scienziati, tuttavia, sappiamo che le cose non stanno così. Il segreto dell'anima è nei nostri nervi, che si aggrovigliano lungo gli arti e le cavità del nostro corpo fino a formare il cervello, la vera sede del pensiero. È questo il punto: la sua amata non ha un cervello.

– E non sarebbe possibile procurargliene uno? La prego, dottore, sono disposto a fare qualsiasi cosa per riaverla davvero...

– Se sta pensando all'impianto di un cervello sottratto, per così dire, a un altro uomo (forse sarebbe meglio a un'altra donna), le dico subito che questo non è possibile. Prima di tutto, l'essere che ne verrebbe fuori non avrebbe la personalità di Alma Mahler, ma quella della persona che in origine possedeva l'organo sostituito. In ogni caso, per quello che può dire la medicina di oggi, un'operazione simile non potrebbe andare a buon fine. Il cervello ha bisogno di essere continuamente irrorato di ossigeno, che gli viene trasmesso dal sangue che circola attraverso le arterie. Un cervello non ossigenato perisce entro pochi minuti. Occorrerebbe ricreare il sistema circolatorio, i polmoni... La scienza, almeno per il momento, non è in grado di trasferire tutte queste cose da un corpo vivente a un altro. Tuttavia, forse c'è una soluzione... Mi lasci riflettere.

Kokoschka era sulle spine. Non faceva che fissare il dottore, immerso nelle sue meditazioni.

– Sì, ci sono. Venite con me nel laboratorio.

Kokoschka si alzò di scatto dal divano. Il suo volto era contratto, i suoi occhi sembravano spiritati. Agì sulla tavoletta, in modo che anche Alma si alzasse, e insieme seguirono il dottor Landauer su per una rampa di scale di marmo. Anche le scale erano state dipinte con motivi a zig zag; per un attimo Kokoschka temette che la sua adorata potesse inciampare, confusa dalla strana sensazione percettiva generata da quella decorazione, ma poi si rese conto che piuttosto era lui stesso a

rischiare di cadere: Alma camminava sicura, con il suo passo lento. Mentre saliva innanzi a loro, Landauer girò per un attimo la testa.

– Si starà domandando il perché di queste decorazioni geometriche... Deve sapere che questa casa era abitata dal dottor Caligari... sa, il direttore del manicomio? Ha pensato di dipingere la sua abitazione in modo consono al suo mestiere. L'effetto è sconcertante, all'inizio, ma poi ci si abitua. Pensi che un giorno è venuto a trovarmi il celebre regista Friz Lang. Voleva ambientare un film a casa mia, ma io ho rifiutato, naturalmente. Comunque, non dispongo di denaro sufficiente per ridipingere gli interni.

Raggiunsero il pianerottolo del secondo piano, e il dottore li fece entrare in un locale completamente dipinto di nero. La lampada centrale riusciva a stento a illuminare le lunghe mensole su cui erano disposti grandi vasi di vetro con reperti organici di tutti i tipi: lucertole, topi, ma anche mani e piedi umani che la formalina conservava fuori dalla portata degli agenti della decomposizione. In mezzo alla stanza c'era un enorme tavolo di legno, completamente sgombro a parte una vaschetta entro cui si vedevano strumenti chirurgici immersi in una soluzione azzurrina.

– Questo è il mio laboratorio, herr Kokoschka. Come vede non assomiglia a un ospedale; sono costretto a operare con mezzi ridottissimi, da quando ho esposto le mie idee al congresso degli ematologi, a Berlino. Mi hanno attaccato da tutte le parti, hanno detto che volevo sovvertire l'opera di Dio, che la vita e la natura degli organismi dipendono solo dalla volontà del Signore, e che la scienza non se ne deve occupare. Ma questo gliel'ho già detto, mi pare... Veniamo a noi. La mia idea è mettere in azione le cellule staminali, in modo da generare nella signora i tessuti viventi che le servono, in particolare quello nervoso di cui il cervello è la parte principale. Ovviamente la cosa non è semplice: come le dicevo, il cervello ha bisogno di essere ossigenato con continuità. Occorrerebbe guidare le cellule staminali in modo che le forniscano dei polmoni, ma forse possiamo sostituirli con i mantici che gonfiano aria nei suoi muscoli. In ogni caso non sarà possibile trasferire ossigeno alle cellule cerebrali senza usare del sangue, quindi ci servono un cuore e una rete di vasi sanguigni.

– Mi sta dicendo che con le sue cellule staminali sarebbe possibile ricostruire un intero corpo umano?

– Io ritengo di sì. Ho scoperto che ci sono cellule staminali di diversi tipi; alcune possono svilupparsi in modo da produrre soltanto determinati tipi di organi, come il fegato o i polmoni, ma altre sono come cellule bambine, non ancora intaccate dall'esperienza della vita e dunque in grado di evolversi in qualsiasi modo. In questi anni non ho fatto che studiare come farle crescere indirizzandole, se posso dire così, allo scopo di produrre certi tessuti, esattamente dove servono.

– È fantastico, dottore. Eppure, continuo a non capire. Se farà crescere un cervello nella testa di Alma, che cosa garantisce che esso produca proprio la mente di lei, e non un'altra?

– È questo il punto. Vede, herr Kokoschka, sono convinto che nelle nostre cellule esista una specie di codice, qualcosa che è in grado di fornire a ciascuno di noi la sua specifica individualità. Non posso ancora provarlo, purtroppo, ma ho compiuto numerosi esperimenti, e tutti sembrano dimostrare quest'asserto. Del resto, solo così si spiegano le osservazioni di Mendel e le leggi dell'ereditarietà da lui enunciate. Per riprodurre esattamente la sua amata, ho bisogno di tessuti che abbiano fatto parte del suo corpo. Mi basta un frammento di qualsiasi cosa che venga per certo da lei: un pezzetto di pelle, un'unghia, perfino un capello.

In un lampo si formò nella mente del pittore l'immagine di quel letto nello studio che nessuno mai rifaceva. Lì lui aveva dormito con Alma Mahler. Era possibile che qualche capello della sua amata fosse rimasto impigliato nel guanciale. Doveva correre a casa, controllare.

– Credo di poterle procurare quello che mi chiede.

Recuperare un capello di Alma dal cuscino del letto nello studio non fu un problema per Kokoschka. Lei aveva lunghi capelli neri, così diversi da quelli corti e biondi del pittore! Riconoscerne uno fu facilissimo. Kokoschka si precipitò nella casa di Dunkel Strasse, e l'esperimento ebbe inizio.

Nei giorni successivi il medico e l'artista osservarono in silenzio l'evoluzione della nuova Alma Mahler, il miracolo di una vita creata dalla scienza dell'Uomo. Lei era stesa su un lettino fatto preparare da Landauer nel laboratorio dipinto di nero. Il bisturi dello scienziato l'aveva sezionata lungo linee precise, fino a scoprirne lo scheletro di metallo creato dagli ingegneri di Porsche e i motori a due tempi che le permettevano di muoversi. Landauer aveva illustrato il progetto a Kokoschka, sussurrando per non turbare il silenzio quasi mistico di quell'ambiente.

– Vede? Questi sono i meccanismi che trasferiscono il movimento generato dai motori agli arti e alle altre parti del corpo della signora. Si tratta di apparati idraulici, come può vedere, ma noi abbiamo bisogno di utilizzare i segnali nervosi, che sono di natura elettrica. Per fortuna Nikola Tesla ha recentemente brevettato un marchingegno che fa al caso nostro. Faremo in modo che tali segnali si sostituiscano a quelli che vengono mandati dalla tavoletta.

– Se si tratta di un brevetto, bisognerà pagare qualcosa per poterlo usare?

– Di questo poi ci occuperemo. Del resto, conosco bene Tesla e so che il progresso della scienza, per lui, viene prima di qualsiasi interesse venale.

Il liquido con le cellule staminali fu collocato in apposite vesciche di gomma, legate in diversi punti alle ossa di metallo. Nel corso dei giorni i tessuti organici cominciarono a svilupparsi e a crescere, fino a formare strutture di colore roseo, pulsanti. Landauer era in estasi.

– Qui si stanno formando le vene. – Il medico indicava un punto nel torace aperto di Alma. – Se guarda bene, potrà già vedere il sangue che scorre al loro interno. Qui, invece, sta nascendo la glottide.

Il dottore puntava il dito verso la gola di Alma. Kokoschka era insieme ammirato e preoccupato. Ammirato dal potere della scienza, da quella corsa fantastica verso il sapere che la specie umana aveva iniziato già nel secolo precedente, e che in quel momento mostrava i suoi incredibili risultati. Dio è morto ed è rinato in noi, nelle sue creature.

D'altra parte, era preoccupato perché non sapeva se gli uomini avessero veramente un'idea precisa di dove conduceva quella corsa. Sarebbe davvero nato il pensiero, in lei, e insieme a esso la capacità di amarlo?

– Che cosa mi dice del cervello?

– Quello non lo possiamo ammirare. Si sta generando all'interno della cavità cranica, naturalmente.

– Alla fine lei sarà veramente Alma Mahler? Voglio dire: come farà a ricordare le cose, il tempo che abbiamo passato insieme, le nostre passeggiate sul Ring e le notti d'amore?

– Non ricorderà nulla, naturalmente. Grazie ai codici della vita contenuti nel capello che mi ha portato, lei sarà effettivamente Alma Mahler ma come se fosse rinata, pronta ad affrontare una nuova vita.

– E sarà ancora innamorata di me?

Landauer sorrise.

– Questo non dipende da quello che stiamo facendo qui. Vorrei notare, però, che se è riuscito a farla innamorare una volta potrebbe senz'altro riuscirci di nuovo.

Nel corso delle settimane successive i tessuti creati dalle cellule di Landauer continuarono a svilupparsi. Un giorno i due si accorsero che un braccio di Alma manifestava un tremito, come se tentasse di muoversi senza ancora riuscirci. Con il passare delle ore il tremito si estese all'altro braccio, poi alle gambe e infine al torso, fino a diventare un movimento convulso che la agitava tutta. Inarcava la schiena, scuoteva la testa, stringeva le mani di peluche come se volesse afferrare qualcosa nell'aria, per poi distenderle in uno spasmo violento. A un tratto cominciò a emettere un gemito prolungato, come il grido sommesso di un animale ferito.

– È venuto il momento di suturare il suo corpo. È inutile tentare di controllare ulteriormente lo sviluppo delle cellule: se l'esperimento è

andato a buon fine, lo vedremo quando sarà terminato. Dovrò legarla al lettino...

Con la fronte corrugata, Landauer si mise a preparare gli aghi da chirurgo e le decine di metri di filo che gli servivano per l'operazione. A Kokoschka quegli aghi non sembravano molto diversi da quelli che aveva usato la bambolaia Hermine Moos, ma naturalmente lui non s'intendeva di chirurgia.

– Sopravvivrà?

Il medico sollevò lo sguardo e lo fissò corruciato attraverso gli occhiali rotondi.

– Speriamo.

Dieci giorni dopo Kokoschka e Alma Mahler uscirono dalla casa di Dunkel Strasse. Lei aveva bisogno di un bastone per camminare, ma comunque era in grado di farlo. Secondo Landauer, l'esercizio avrebbe potuto migliorare le sue capacità; il dottore si era raccomandato di farla parlare, muovere, di non tenerla chiusa in casa ma di portarla in giro affinché la sua giovane mente potesse fare i progressi che entrambi si aspettavano da lei. Le istruzioni del medico erano state molto dettagliate. I tessuti organici di cui Alma disponeva avevano bisogno di essere nutriti, e la benzina non andava bene; Landauer aveva spiegato a Kokoschka come creare la soluzione di zucchero e sali che le serviva. Perché la signora potesse assimilarla era stato necessario fornirle uno stomaco e un intestino, anche se ridotti; la soluzione doveva esserle data una sola volta al giorno, e il pittore avrebbe dovuto operare sulla tavoletta dei comandi in modo da non mandare il liquido nel serbatoio del motore di Porsche. Del resto, quella era l'unica manovra che richiedeva ancora l'uso di quel rozzo strumento di controllo. Kokoschka era entusiasta di aver pensato a Landauer. Tra sé rifletteva sul fatto che solo le competenze di ingegnere, oltre che di medico, avevano permesso al dottore di compiere quel miracolo.

– Prendiamo una carrozza, amore mio. È vero che devi fare esercizio fisico, ma non vorrei che ti stancassi troppo.

- Ahhhaaghaaaa – gli rispose Alma.
- Devi imparare a controllare il tono della tua voce, mia adorata. Non hai bisogno di parlare così forte, nessuno lo fa.
- Gheegaaaahooo.
- Certo, sono d'accordo. Adesso andiamo a casa così ti stendi un attimo. Non devi fare niente, preparo tutto io. Ti piacciono le patate lesse? Possiamo metterci un po' di quella salsa di rafano che prepara la nostra vicina, la signora Shoenberg...
- Ghu.

Furono giorni di estasi e di perdono. Kokoschka doveva ammettere di avere odiato Alma, quando l'aveva lasciato, ma steso sul letto accanto a lei nella penombra dello studio i contrasti del passato si dileguavano come fantasmi alla luce di un nuovo mattino. Alma era rinata, come aveva detto il dottor Landauer. Era ancora quella di una volta, ma nello stesso tempo era una bambina curiosa di conoscere il mondo, come se ne fosse stupefatta. Il secondo giorno aveva approfittato del momento in cui lui era sceso per procurarsi latte e uova, aveva afferrato un pennello e aveva riempito una tela di segni irregolari. Era un quadro non ancora finito, e sul momento Kokoschka era rimasto contrariato, ma poi l'aveva guardata e il suo cuore si era gonfiato di tenerezza.

– Astrattismo puro. È a questo che miri, adesso? Al valore del gesto? È meraviglioso. Quella scia di carminio che percorre il quadro in modo irregolare... vedo che hai spremuto tutto il tubetto... ma questo non importa. Evidentemente dovevi dare sostanza al segno, avevi bisogno di un tratto materico per dare forza al tuo pensiero. Brava.

– Gheeee – gli rispose Alma, con quell'eterno sorriso che neppure Landauer era riuscito a cancellarle dal volto.

Passarono le settimane. Kokoschka era felice per la sua amante ritrovata, eppure sentiva nascere dentro di sé una certa inquietudine di cui all'inizio non sapeva darsi una spiegazione. La portava in giro, nei luoghi delle loro abituali passeggiate, la faceva sedere accanto a lui stringendole la grossa mano di peluche, e avvertiva in modo sempre

più chiaro che lei era ancora irrequieta, come se cercasse qualcosa che non riusciva a trovare nell'esistenza. Così era Alma Mahler, pensava, non c'era nulla da fare; eppure aveva paura di perderla. Un giorno sul Ring incontrarono il pittore Egon Schiele, con i capelli arruffati e il suo solito sguardo da pazzo. Kokoschka lo salutò con un cenno del capo. Del resto, i loro rapporti erano del tutto formali; malgrado che fossero considerati entrambi espressionisti, Schiele e Kokoschka interpretavano il pensiero artistico della loro epoca in modi opposti. Kokoschka detestava la ricerca ossessiva della nudità che emergeva dai quadri del suo collega, la trovava del tutto priva di quei turbini di vento che egli sentiva dentro di sé, soprattutto nelle sue notti d'amore. Chinò leggermente la testa, in un gesto ossequioso, e in quel momento vide che Alma fissava lo sguardo sorridendo sul volto da squilibrato di Schiele. Anche lui le sorrideva, e Kokoschka non poté fare a meno di notare che c'era qualcosa di malizioso in quel sorriso. Si conoscevano? Certo che si conoscevano! Alma Mahler conosceva tutti gli intellettuali di Vienna, molti di loro in modo intimo. Era stata con lui? Lei non parlava mai dei suoi amori, neppure di quelli così noti che l'intera città ne bisbigliava scandalizzata. Klimt, Mahler, Gropius... perché non anche Egon Schiele? Sentì che dentro di lui montava una furia selvaggia, e improvvisamente capì le ragioni della sua inquietudine. Certo, con il passare del tempo lei imparava sempre di più, diventava consapevole del mondo, sempre più indipendente da lui. Era sempre più Alma Mahler, quella che lui amava perché nessuno mai avrebbe potuto considerarla come sua proprietà. Quella cosa lo faceva ammattire. Forse, si disse, era il prezzo inevitabile che doveva pagare per averle dato braccia e gambe, motori per farla muovere, nervi e muscoli per poterla amare sul letto dello studio. Fece uno sbrigativo cenno di commiato a Schiele, afferrò la sua amata per la vita e la spinse letteralmente via lungo la strada affollata.

Steso sul letto, osservava le chiazze di luce del lampione della strada, che entravano dalla finestra formando ghirigori sul soffitto. Lei dormiva accanto a lui, immobile. Che cosa c'è dentro di noi che ci rende perennemente infelici? Che cosa cerchiamo, in quest'attimo di consapevolezza che chiamiamo vita? Perché non possiamo

abbandonarci ai piaceri semplici che l'esistenza ci fornisce? Pensava alla cena leggera che aveva consumato, al volto di lei, mentre beveva con garbo il gasolio da una tazza di ceramica. Pensava a Egon Schiele, e la sola idea che lei potesse essere attratta da lui gli faceva tornare quella sensazione di furia che aveva provato nel pomeriggio. Il suo sguardo correva in giro, ogni tanto si fermava sull'ombra di un oggetto. Un portacenere. Il vaso in cui teneva i pennelli: nella penombra sembrava la silhouette della testa di Egon Schiele, con i capelli grossi ritti sul cranio. Il cavalletto in mezzo allo studio, era come un gigante guerriero dalla testa triangolare. L'inquietudine lo agitava, non lo lasciava dormire. Il pensiero che la sua amata potesse desiderare altro, oltre che stare con lui, non gli dava pace; quel pensiero lo portava a fissare ossessivamente il vaso dei pennelli, quella grottesca testa di Schiele entrata non si sa come nella sua esistenza e acquattata nell'ombra. Alla fine si assopì, e quando si svegliò la luce dell'alba illuminava di grigio lo studio. Lei si era alzata. Era seduta su una delle seggiole di paglia e teneva lo sguardo fisso sulla strada, come se la casa fosse troppo angusta per contenere il suo spirito, e lui fosse un estraneo capitato per caso nel suo letto. Oppure pensava al modo di incontrare il suo rivale? Si alzò in silenzio, e lei non gli rivolse neppure un cenno di saluto. Si vestì in fretta, cercando di non guardarla. Era stato un errore permetterle di avere dei pensieri. Almeno prima dipendeva completamente da lui, non avrebbe avuto modo di cercare di sfuggirgli.

Quella sera la portò a cena da Lambert, un francese che gestiva un'osteria dalle parti di Pfullstrasse. Si mangiava bene, gli avventori erano pochi e loro non sarebbero stati disturbati. Una pioggia leggera creava veli nella notte, lungo le strade grigie di Vienna. Lui teneva un ombrello, in modo che lei non si bagnasse. Lambert li fece accomodare in una saletta riservata.

– Che cosa vi porto? Ho delle ostriche appena arrivate da Trieste...

– Le ostriche vanno benissimo, monsieur Lambert.

– Anche per la signora?

– No. Per lei solo benzina, grazie.

Ci fu un silenzio prolungato, mentre lui si concentrava su quello che doveva dirle. Alma guardava fisso davanti a sé.

– Sei felice? – Le chiese. Per un istante gli sembrò di leggere qualcosa di strano nel suo sguardo, come un urlo silenzioso che il perenne sorriso rendeva ancora più straziante.

– Non sei felice? Perché? Parlami, amore mio. Spiegami. Sono disposto a fare qualsiasi cosa perché tu stia bene.

– Ghaauuuu.

– È così, dunque? Lo sapevo. Non puoi accontentarti delle nostre cose, dei momenti in cui ci stringiamo, di quelli in cui sogniamo insieme?

– Ahguuooohhhh.

– Ma perché? Che cos'è che ti manca? Non lo sai neppure tu? Ti conosco, so che è così. È per questo che ti amo alla follia, ed è per questo che fuggi via da me e mi fai impazzire. Cerchi qualcosa che non sai, che non esiste. Adesso stai pensando a Egon Schiele, non è vero?

– Guahhhooo

– Sono *anche* fatti miei. Non ti permetterò di avvicinarti a quell'uomo. Lo sai che ha stuprato una ragazzina, quando era a Neulengbach? L'hanno messo in prigione, ma poi non si sa come l'hanno proscioltto. È un essere malvagio...

– Ahggahaaa.

– Non interrompermi. Io lo conosco. Saresti infelice con lui.

– Ghu.

Kokoschka chinò la testa, e per un attimo rimase in silenzio a osservare i gusci morti delle ostriche. La furia selvaggia stava di nuovo montando dentro di lui, incontenibile come il soffio che agitava le coltri della *sposa del vento*.

– Dunque vuoi lasciarmi un'altra volta? Non te lo permetterò...

Dalla sala accanto proveniva il brusio confuso degli avventori intenti nei loro discorsi. Da qualche parte qualcuno stava suonando un

pianoforte, le note arrivavano attutite come se accarezzassero, distratte, le loro orecchie. Kokoschka afferrò l'affilato coltello che monsieur Lambert aveva lasciato sul tavolo, e con gesti convulsi cominciò a colpirla. Quando la vide immobile la afferrò per la vita e la trascinò fuori, nel giardino del locale. La stese sull'erba umida e rimase a fissarla.

– Non mi meriti. Non hai mai meritato il mio amore. Avevi un tesoro, e l'hai gettato via. Addio. Per sempre.

Poi si avviò lungo il vialetto di ghiaia che portava all'uscita, a testa bassa, incurante della pioggia.

Contributors

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Born in London to British parents and raised bilingual in Italy, **Sarah Jane Webb** grew up in a house full of books and developed a passion for reading and writing. In 2006, she moved with her partner and cats to a hilltop hamlet in sunny Liguria. Inspired by her tranquil surroundings, she translates narrative (mainly speculative fiction) from Italian into English. Her work has appeared in several Anglophone publications, including *The Sunday Times' Crime Club*; Akashic Books' *Fri-SciFi*; the webzine *Speculative Fiction in Translation*; *Trafika Europe*; and *Words Without Borders*.

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