

Apollo Breaks His Silence: A Tale of Dead  
Birds

&

In defence of theia mania: a preliminary  
study of the sacred libido of poetry

by

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## **Abstract**

The creative portion of the PhD focuses on the story of three protagonists, Gaspar, Kevin and Johnny, and their journey to discover their true selves in an authoritarian reality. They start as ordinary citizens of the Republic, and then as the truth of their surroundings and themselves begins to be revealed to them, they begin to awaken politically.

The critical essay explores the themes of poetry and truth and their potential impact on the world of political ideas. It argues for political usefulness of poetry, broadly defined as inspired speech, as the medium of social, ideological and aesthetic renewal, and for Dionysian elements of mystery and ecstasy as necessary to complement the Apollonian, reason-based aspects of conduct. To do so I have used the case of Pythia as an inspired speaker, and Plato's *Republic* (2007) as the telos of political development, supplemented with insights of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* (1998). I have referred to a wide range of philosophers and critical thinkers, chief of them in spirit if not in the particular themes I investigate, Nietzsche, to see how the inspired speech and the telos of the *Republic* interact and how they might reach synthesis.

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Apollo Breaks His Silence  
*A Tale of Dead Birds*

*To Apollo the Luminous*

## Chapter I: Eutopia or the Comedy of Folly

Διὸς δ' ἔτελείετο βουλή

Iliad, Homer

There is a state of nature into which any real change, any real life-bud is always born; a testicle where the caviar of Cosmos is stored, where it needs to gestate for angels inside to grow beaks to burst into reality wherever the shell is thinnest. The asphalt is wet and the air is dark-grey, shades of light dance on the micro-lakes with rainbow legs. It is warm and fresh, and the newborn future welcomes you with a smile. It, the future, has already begun, but no one around you knows it yet. You are its sole initiate, and you cannot hold back the smile that forces itself outside your mouth like larvae for just a moment, for a moment that flickers in flames and blackens...

## *Baptism*

*O sweet cautery,  
O delightful wound!  
O gentle hand! O delicate touch  
that tastes of eternal life  
and pays every debt!  
In killing you changed death to life.  
— St John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love**

Looking at his naked body covered by water, Johnny admired the man he now was. He felt almost completely comfortable and content. Only at the back his mind there was a slight, almost imperceptible, buzzing irritant, calling to him. It all began when he moved his leg and his genitals brushed over his thigh under the water that a memory emerged from the black new moon ocean of his mind like a bubble bursts on the surface of a remote swamp. It was a memory concerning his father. It was raining that day horribly, so much so that Johnny was almost as wet under his clothes, and the clothes chafed his skin raw that day. This was the first time Johnny's father took him hunting. They were hunting a deer. It was only partially legal. Well, it was not legal at all, but no one would catch them, not this high up in the mountains, not this far from the life blood of the state bureaucracy, not with the villagers down the slope benefitting from the contraband meat, the surplus of which his father sold them; and paralyzed by the superstitious fear of his mother, the witch, as they called her, the villagers never thought to report them. From his father Johnny learnt, despite himself, that wind was his friend. You could use it to prevent the beast from sensing you.

He would, Johnny decided, go into the streets every day and walk around for six or seven hours until he happened to meet his destiny. It was a modern version of a journey undertaken by heroes of yore. That was very wise: the young blood did not have the chance to curdle, the young flesh would not begin rotting on its bones by the tender age of twenty five, as it commonly happens today: the hair was thick, and the bones were hard. Johnny would make an adventure of this wretched city.

Johnny submerged his face in the celadon water of the bathtub. From above, he imagined, it looked androgynous, plastic-perfect, lips marked with a tinge of faint pink, stained with trickles of black, as if shooting from the oil well underneath.

The face tensed up, and so did the water: a barely visible reaction of the commotion of spasm. Waves hit the tiled wall, and a droplet was catapulted over the rim onto the bathroom floor, but Johnny didn't see that.

A storm, as if by the will of Poseidon, depressed the domestic sea. Any Titanic would have sunk — sunk, and have been devoured with all its music, hopes and steel. Like a basket of straw dogs. Charybdis has awoken.

A vision of primal terror: a naked humanoid figure raised above the water, waterfalls off every slope shooting into the abyss of space, desperate for the embrace of gravity, shooting downwards like cannon balls blind bombing the empty space. A fly gets washed off the wall into the whirlpool. Its tender wings wet and wrecked; a casualty in the war of movement.

It is unbecoming of kings to lower the eyes. Johnny was still sleepy and the unfortunate passing of a housefly went by invisibly. He stepped out of the bath and grabbed the purple towel off the battery. He enjoyed every curve of his body, as the towel massaged his skin vigorously so that it even reddened a little.

It was late enough that no one else was home. Johnny enjoyed his recently discovered liberty, his burning innocence: he was young once more, and the last couple of years he was thinking he was already old. Were it a different time, he would have died in a war with a boisterous song salty on his lips: the taste of blood, tears, and sweat. Bodies are salt caves.

It would take Johnny at least twenty minutes to cleanly shave, slather himself with citrus body butter, to apply the necessary salves to his face and spray his wrists and sides of the neck with the mixture of perfumes he applied every day, as the most optimal choice. It was to him like a favorite undershirt, except he could wear it everyday, and only smell nicer for it.

Really: a walk is always a journey. If you have not yet died inside, you know this. Every time you go outside you can die, you can make friends. To make friends is give opportunity for disaster to enter your life. In this sense disasters make life meaningful, worth living. Every time you live in your life, every time you choose to be, you put everything on the line. The cowardly, lesser folk want a safer world. They want to neuter God, but they only neuter themselves.

Johnny had little but disdain for that kind; for people who are simply waiting for their deaths. Let them die, if they refuse to live! Johnny was still fresh, at twenty-three, headless, with a hurricane in the place of his handsome head. He would rather be burnt alive than become like all the walking corpses. He belonged to the wilderness of mountains, and he brought them here, to the city. He was getting a little stiff thinking about the exciting life that awaited him. He was drunk on opportunity, on his pulsating potential.

Johnny was not worried. He was ready to die at war, like any noble young man. Johnny had little ambition. It is ambition that tasks you with the fear of death, with your commonness and rudeness. Johnny wanted to fuck life.

Some cunning folk found Johnny stupid and simple, especially when he was younger, before he developed a vague air of precariousness to him that kept the vulgarians away — for a vulgarian and a coward are one and the same. His eyes, their murderous purity were unbearable for chameleon-tongued rats, like the water of the North Sea. Behind his back though, he knew exactly what they were saying. They were not incorrect. Johnny was simple: like a child of the forests who enters Rome for the first time.

Johnny knew he was to enter a new phase of life that would challenge his innocence. It would be his first labour, he had decided: to provide for himself without

betraying himself. This is where most fail. Most foolishly divide life into high and low, but it is all one space, and even valleys drink the grace of thawing ices from the pinnacles of the mountains, especially the valleys...

And many, so many, more than in any war, young men and women were felled dead by dirty laundry and dishes, by the need to make a living. They misunderstood the compass and the clock, and their orphaned souls are still wondering within their beings, denser than the densest forest, more obscure than the harshest fog, more hopeless than any war-torn wasteland.

Johnny did not give his future occupation any real thought. He had decided to imitate a kite, and instead follow the directions of his wind-destiny. Most people who get trapped in their lives are trapped not because they were free spirits, but because they had chosen a golden cage. With time, the gold blackened, and all they were left with was a dungeon.

From his mother Johnny had learnt not to let the course of the mob control his direction. When she was being forced by the Plebiscite to mutilate her very heart to fit in, she instead left behind the comforts of civilisation and modern technology to live in the wilderness.

Johnny made his way into the kitchen: the room was spacious and white. Air flowed freely and it smelled fresh, undoubtedly because it was hardly ever used. The room was not lived in, and though Johnny had moved here some months ago, he was otherwise occupied until now to even consider using it for its proper purpose. Johnny was not a novice cook. After his mother's passing, he was the one whose responsibility it had become to placate his father's wilderness, as his mother used to call it, with food. With years his father seemed to have assumed certain characteristics of his main competitor in those mountains, the wolves, and if one is wise, one does not withhold food from a pet wolf.

The kitchen, like the rest of the rooms in almost all for rent apartments, was dreadfully decorated by cheap furniture with a conceited flair of elegance that only accentuated its garish poverty and the sterile calculating, factory-like attitude of the housing departments. To save money, rather to redirect money towards bonuses they

designed apartments were more like movie sets. Besides the false lustre, some things just did not work: in Johnny's apartment there was a dishwasher but not enough water to use it. He complained many times and his complaints were always politely acknowledged. A contractor even visited his apartment a couple of times, but nothing was getting fixed. It was as if the managers of the housing department could not really see the glaring ridiculousness of the situation. It is the same attitude many display in the face of the homeless, Johnny felt. They hope that their little ignobilities would be overlooked if they avert their own eyes. Certain birds, he had once read, have a similar attitude. But there were not any homeless on the streets of the Foam City anymore.

The furniture didn't do the room any justice. It was pale beige wood and plastic with spots of dirty grey upholstery. Johnny detested it. It was, in fact, cruelty to those walls, and those floors but especially to the giant window on the wall facing East. It was not yet ten, and the sun shone brightly into the room. Every morning he was greeted with the biggest optimist in the system.

The building where Johnny lived was on the very outskirts of the town, and it so happened that there was literally nothing but green fields and greener hills that faced the window.

Johnny liked to stand there in the morning with a cup of coffee and look out for five or sometimes ten minutes, especially when the sky was cloudless, which was rare and therefore ever dearer. In those times Johnny would admire the entire sea of blueness, and for the moment he would wish that he could partake of it, that he could somehow become part of that blueness, become privy to its mysteries, like a bird, naked like a bird. In these moments he would wish he could fly without a machine's help, even if just for a couple of seconds, even just in the fall, to enjoy the ultimate freedom, to breathe that intoxication of empty space, with a rasp that would sound like an enchanting flute. Johnny dreamt of becoming a flute.

Not many birds were left in this land, and Johnny was perhaps one of the few young people to have ever seen a live bird. Several decades ago birds were declared enemies of the people, the Plebiscite and Progress, and consequently they

were marked for elimination. At first, they said that birds were carriers and distributors of dangerous diseases and parasites, then they targeted seagulls, which used to be one of the most common birds on the island, for their antisocial behaviour and rude cries, and by the end of the Celestial Purge the government officials were saying that the remaining birds were familiars of witches and witches themselves, hypnotising the population into degenerate behaviour (this was often followed by a strict warning to parents not to let their children do any birdwatching). Nightingales were targeted particularly for their beautiful song. They were said to steal men's virility and turn women barren.

It was a miracle that Johnny got into the University, as he had hardly attended school, and the school he did attend was a sad excuse for one: there was one classroom and one teacher for all the children of the mountain. It was little wooden hut, and most of the time it acted as daycare. There were several old textbooks but no tests and no program to speak of. Private education has long since been illegal, but the constitution guaranteed education for all. This is how this little institution got licensed. The Plebiscite officials had decided that the expenditure of sending a real teacher was not worth it, so the most educated of the village, Susan Battlebee, who had graduated from the University some twenty five years ago, tutored all the students, mostly in rudimentary grammar and maths. Most villagers preferred their children helping them in the field. This was technically illegal, but no one including the headmistress, Mrs Battlebee cared.

It was perhaps Johnny's luck that around the time he had reached the age of eighteen there was a program run by the local authorities where those they called the 'wild children', those in other words who lived a considerable distance from any proper primary education institution were eligible to sit a test that would determine if it would benefit the Plebiscite to pay for that child's relocation in order for him or her to complete a degree and contribute to the community. The program was more a gesture to respond to some discontent about how the children of farmers were often locked into the life of farming and how this betrayed the original promise of the Progress.

Johnny applied and ended up qualifying. The test was based on logic, as it was presumed that the subject would be ignorant of the proper conduct, history and culture of Progress and Plebiscite. Johnny was then required to attend two extra years of preparatory education where he would be taught what he needed to know to attend his chosen course, Aviation and Piloting.

Childhood spent in vigorous games in the mountains prepared his body enough that Johnny had easily passed the physical aptitude tests, but much of the history was new, and very different to what he had learnt from his mother's tales she told him each night before sleep up until the day she died. There was some gossip he learnt about the outside world from the villagers but little and few of these things were good. The Plebiscite was mostly irrelevant on the mountain.

Johnny had to cover school syllabus from Year 4 onwards in the two years of his preparatory education so that his knowledge of the past was correct and up to the Plebiscite's standards. While not specific to his discipline of choice, the University bureaucrats, Philistines, made a point of its students holding the correct view of history, and therefore a correct view of the future. Barely able to resist the enchanting call of freely roaming air outside, Johnny spent those two years as if in a prison, within the four walls of a shabby accommodation, gradually wasting away in his new city environment. For a short while he had even developed asthma, which the return to his more natural rhythm at the end of his sentence quickly cured.

A few weeks ago this degree would have all but guaranteed him a job, but history tends to interfere with life plans nonchalantly, like a giant stepping on the path of hopeful ants, like a child fucking up an anthill and destroying all the ants held to be certain and solid for generations in one single jump of play. There was no longer a need for pilots because no plane left the ground. This was the result of the Day the Sky Fell. Before, planes, airships, and helicopters were warships to conquer air from the filthy flying rats, now they became a suspect. Perhaps air could not be conquered. Perhaps it would be better to just keep away. Perhaps it was not only birds but the clouds that conspired to freeze the march of Progress.

Disasters untie tongues, because disasters remind us of our own mortality. For a moment following the disaster we are no longer cowards clutching our teddybears, be it our reputation, money, friends, nationality; for the moment we are reminded of our inborn nobility, and we cannot remain mere puppets. In the wake of a disaster we live, if only for a short moment, before the parted sea settles, before we are faced with conveniences of our sheepish stupidity, for that moment we are reminded that to be alive is to be a laughing valkyrie on the edge of death — that this is what it is means to be authentically, truly living.

This is why tyrants are terrified of disasters more than anyone else. One must not confuse this for concern for anyone's wellbeing. This would be a terrible mistake. For a moment, the tyrant loses all of his power, for a moment the people are free, in their lucid awareness of death, theirs and the tyrant's, for a moment whatever trickery the tyrant employs, loses its sheen, and becomes a laughingstock. One can only be a tyrant amongst slugs, never amongst lions.

Johnny looked out of the window again. Since the incident that reshuffled Johnny's life and so many others, he had become acutely aware of the space that the sky was. It was pure blueness, the blue fire of sound and possibility. It was the vastest distance, so vast that the question 'where to', was neither important, nor even applicable. In space you were always lost. Something akin to the arch of a church, those ancient cites some of which Johnny had visited over the past five years, but infinitely more, almost incomparably so. Something cried, something laughed within Johnny's chest, like it did sometimes in the mountains, when he would look up and see the blue embrace, excited and terrified, as if he were being sucked into infinity. To think that God or gods or whatever divinity can reside within a temple is utterly idiotic. Who would believe that but the rudest, crudest, most vulgar creature? What an insult! Such an affront to God, to limit that being to a building! No, the purpose of temples could have been worship. Humans have nothing that gods may need, Johnny sipped a little sweet, honeyed tea and his mother's ring with a cat's eye glistened in the light, as if the cat's eye blinked at him, as if his mother...

Temples only exist to remind people of God, to make him obvious. Humans are a little degenerate, a little senile, constantly forgetting something that surrounds them inside and outside. You really have to be exceptionally stupid to forget something so obvious, but it happens, and this is why temples were invented by the wise of yore. Those wise of yore, however, could have been very smart themselves, or maybe humans have become stupider as time went by. Now humans have forgotten the purpose of temples!

The Day the Sky Fell was an exceptional day for Johnny. For most this was only a catastrophe — so many died, so many lost their beloved in the fire, many their livelihoods and homes but Johnny felt like he had been transformed by the fury of the element. He took another sip of the tea. Johnny felt so remarkably well, such remarkable calm. He observed the tiny tea leaves that slipped through the strainer. They danced at the bottom of his cup without a care in the world.

The falling heavens heralded a period of remembering for Johnny, a remembering that burned through his dust and webs. For the first time in so long, certainly for the first time since he came to the city, but perhaps also for the first time since his early childhood, he would breathe like a newborn with a full chest, with a full diaphragm, like a blowup fish.

It happened in late summer. The Festival of Falling Stars was in full bloom. The city was entirely transformed for the week: restaurants and cafés put out fire sculptures: devices that would release streams of flames unevenly so that the fire took on a shape. Fiery horses rearing up, and emerging baby dragons, and sinners tormented by their sins, among many other shapes, entertained passers by and lured customers. Many shops put out stalls along main city streets and in the squares. These served their signature drinks and foods, as well as seasonal treats, such as peppered baked apples and frozen sugared milk popsicles.

Heat would almost burn the hairs of the skin as bartenders set fire to the Devil's Water, and then put it out with a juice or iced tea of the customer's choice, often seasoning the drink with syrup for extra taste and sweetness.

Johnny had one made with plum juice and peach syrup. The glass was still hot in the hand. Though he had barely had two sips, the alcohol had already begun relaxing him. The heat, the sweetness, and soft burn of the Devil's Water made Johnny very amicable and very positive. An occasional stink-bomb of an unwashed armpit could not disturb his composure. Right in time a whiff of white musk incense from a stall nearby would again restore balance to his world, or enchanting aromas of roasting meats, along with vegetables and berries would call to Johnny, and he'd begin salivating profusely.

It was nearly time for the main event of the festival: The Final Dance. This year Johnny was resolved to catch it. It was easy to get sidetracked in the abundance of attractions that the city-wide festival had to offer, so Johnny had never seen the Final Dance himself, even though it was his fifth year attending. He took a large, long gulp and swallowed the drink whole. Almost immediately he regretted his greed. More moisture appeared on his forehead, and everything was as if in invisible fog, but the dusk air had the most charming perfume to it, that Johnny was not sure it belonged to the sense of smell. His lungs suddenly felt taut and light, like if they were being filled with helium. He was ready to take off and be like one of the airships above, like one of the airships he had been learning to pilot for the last half a decade.

Johnny was on his way to the Progress Square, the most gorgeous square in the city, with old pre-historic, that is, pre-Progress, pavement laid out with exquisite care and taste, variegating different colors of stone that, if one looked from far above, a pattern would emerge like on a Persian rug.

Of course, none of these things were decipherable with the drunken jolly crowd and the endless stalls. Johnny was about two-three minutes away from it, under normal circumstances. He could already see the flying leviathans, preparing to spawn, but he had not taken into account the number of people who longed to see the spectacle. Desperate not to miss the event fifth time in a row, Johnny, nevertheless, pushed through the crowd, for which he had been awarded several elbow shots to the ribs, that, he conceded, he may have deserved.

Indigo was bleeding out of the sky, as if someone knocked over an ink well. The warm colors of the West were rapidly sucked out through a magical straw by a giant crocodile. This was the sign that the Final Dance was about to begin. It began as the sunset was ending so that it was as if the sunset flared up again and blossomed like the flowers of the flame tree all over the celestial dome. Desperately Johnny was clawing through the crowd, but soon he tired of the futile struggle. He then found a pocket just large enough between two stalls from which he could observe the sky mostly unimpeded. To himself he quietly noted that the stall with seafood barbecue was nearby, and that perhaps after the Final Dance was over, he could snack at it, if the immense congestion of people began to dissipate.

The faint apparition of the moon adorned the sky like a beauty mark. To the cheer of the intoxicated crowd, the airships opened vaults and a myriad of red paper lanterns were released into the darkening sky. It was as if space beasts were giving birth to a spawn of stars that whirled dizzily in the sheer joy of celestial ballet.

Suddenly larger, lighter paper lanterns were launched from beneath, from the Earth, from hundreds of secret locations, always close but too far to spy, like the birthplace of rainbows. In a hurricane of fire and paper the second batch of lanterns rose to meet their older brothers.

And then a mere second later, the whole sky was on fire.

At first it was only one airship that was aflame. It was like watching a dragon catching fire. No one could hear the explosion here on Earth, and the fire consumed the entire ship almost immediately. The night was interrupted. Once more it was light as day.

The airship was tilting and quickly, like the flame before, the mood of panic spread amongst the crowd. The tide was reversed and now, with desperation, people were pouring out of the square, trying to run away from the fiery nightmare above. It was as the phoenix bird was hunting for prey. It all happened very quickly.

Many died that day. Some were consumed by fire, like the crew and the pilot of the fallen giant, some were crushed by the remains of the airships, when it finally hit the Earth, but many more were stampeded to the death by herds of their

compatriots, scared of fire, scared of death so extremely that they trampled anyone who fell, be it child or an elder lady. This is the cruel justice of the afraid.

Johnny was very fortunate. His location was far enough from the centre of the square where the first airship's body fell that flames have not immediately reached the stall until after the square emptied, and the stalls that surrounded him offered ample protection against the herbivore cruelty of the mob.

When Johnny would later tell this story, he would say that there was a definite point at which he had decided not to join the torrent of running people, but rather take his chances stationary. He would say that this determined his survival, and the events that unraveled shortly after the disaster that came to be known the next morning in newspapers as the Night the Sky Fell.

By the time the metamorphosis was complete, the sky was entirely dark, darker still for the raging fire underneath. The infuriated light had claimed the streets from the people, imprisoning them into a deadly labyrinth, like a god who had turned his gift into a curse for careless and mortal irreverence.

Incinerating flies frolicked from one stall to another reproducing lustfully in their gluttonous consumption of what mortals deemed valuable. Fire has no patience for pleasantries: he sees things for what they are: little stashes of energy he liberates from form. If you think about it, fire is the lover you had always dreamed of.

It was quickly becoming unsafe for Johnny to remain in his little pocket. The termites of the sun were nearing, and he could sense their body heat on his skin. He recalled how not longer than fifteen minutes ago he had a similar sensation but under entirely different circumstances. For what it's worth, the mob was gone, for the most part, with only bloody messes here and there, that Johnny could not force himself to look at, and someone screaming in the distance.

Johnny began to make his way out, away from the stalls, whose burning carcasses seemed to have been the main source of danger at that point.

Unpleasant souvenirs were left in the alleys between the rows of stalls. Already derelict, but somehow obscenely personal, they stank of the dreadful realization of death's incessant, unavoidable reality. It was a thing that was coming

for Johnny, too, he knew; a thing just like broken glass and amidst them a pacifier that transfixed Johnny's attention for what could not have been longer than a second or two but which felt to Johnny like an entire conversation. He saw that the plastic on the blue pacifier was torn. The baby must have already had teeth. Could the baby have bitten through the plastic when the leviathan fell from the sky?

It smelled oddly nice. The fire was fumigating the night sky with the sacrifices of meats, fish and vegetables. For a mere second Johnny managed to forget the horrible actuality of what surrounded him, and let the delusion of comfort sneak in. It felt as if he had taken something.

Then he heard unpleasant, quiet moaning. He looked in the direction from which the moaning came, and what he saw hit him with a shudder. There was a mass of what once was a woman, and soon was not to be. She must have been in her early sixties. Judging from her dress, the fashionable pink hat with a light flirtatious veil, and the costume dress, she was one of those ladies who had lived a life of propriety and had decided recently to become a little more adventurous, seeing how years go by never to come back.

Johnny noticed that the woman did not have a purse on her. It was better to concentrate on something like this rather than on the horrible shape of what was left of her. Her face was disfigured so much that it even didn't quite register as a human face at first. Her arms, hands, knees and feet were all bent out of shape like she were a broken barbie. Johnny surmised that her throat must have been crushed. This is why she was not calling for help. This is why her screams were reduced to slurping and hoary groans. One would easily miss her sounds in this commotion, and Johnny wished he had never stopped long enough to discover their truth.

Johnny thought of his own mother. She would have been about her age. This woman in front of him did not inspire as much pity as horror. She was in the clutches of death. She was embarrassed about it, and she wanted to live. She wanted just a little vanity to remain with her desperately. Johnny could see this in her eyes: the hurt pride. This is how demons are born.

But there was nothing Johnny could do. The stalls, already afire, were creaking threateningly. Johnny's vision was blurred from the liquid he felt his eyes to his astonishment. His eyes felt irritated: he was now very thirsty. His body felt dehydrated: his lips dry and chapped. Johnny turned around away from her, unsure whether what remained of her face would ever leave his memory in peace, and started in the direction away from her. It occurred to him that for short while the groans grew a little louder, a little more desperate. He tried to concentrate on the crackling of wood.

Johnny headed for the square. Right now it was the safer bet. The rest of the town was rapidly turning into a flaming hell. Johnny noticed himself running, with no exertion. He was light like the wind, as if his despair powered him and propelled him onwards, like an arrow.

Soon he saw the great bonfire. The flame rose higher than the surrounding buildings. It was as if a dragon was being born out of the egg of the airship. It was majestic, even despite the suffering it had caused. Johnny found himself thinking that fire, as divine as it was, could never be truly ugly, even when it caused indescribable suffering. It was suffering that one found most unsettling. If only people could not suffer! If only people could not be afraid! If only people had learnt how to die with dignity!

His thoughts simultaneously disturbed and fascinated Johnny. He felt a horrible kinship forming between himself and the fiery dancer, as if he had finally met his one brother, his groom.

The tranquility of Johnny's meditation was interrupted by a skull-splitting screech. Johnny hadn't noticed the black figure-stain not too far removed from the heart of the disaster. At first Johnny thought it was some manner of monster, but upon closer examination, he saw it was a structure, not unlike a portion of human ribcage, that had been thrown from the airship in the course of its fall. Underneath it was the source of the commotion.

It was a blond young man in his early twenties. Most of his body was covered by the structure. He must have been running away, as he was hit from

behind and nailed to the ground by the merciless mass of metal. His head was bleeding so that only a little tips of his hair were still of his natural color the rest of it died messy black, as if a demon's hand was holding the man's head from behind. His eyes were filled with suffocating fear, and his face contorted in despair. His hands were unnaturally tense, as if the young man's entire unlived life was oozing from his pores.

Johnny again was frozen in place. A sort of quiet desperation came over him. It physically hurt him that he kept encountering these human creatures, the nobility of the world, disfigured and dishonored by agony. Johnny was getting exhausted from so much destruction and suffering around him. He was tranquilized by the overload of his senses, external and internal, and he could not find the wakefulness to react as fully as one naturally expects himself to react.

In his daze Johnny barely noticed another person's approach. Hurried steps of heeled boots were almost completely drowned by the crackling of the city-wide fire and the young man's dreadful screams, his youthful energy trying to escape his body in the form of sound. The approaching figure had about it the sort of grace that only martial artists and great spiritual masters do: every movement was taking place as if in accordance with some inaudible music, in harmony with a platoon of aerial dancers.

An echoing thunder and following it, an unsettling silence. The boy now lay prostrate on the pavement. His figure was peaceful, his hands relaxed, like a great pain were just removed by the ultimate painkiller. The fiery eye of the storm was reflected in the pool of blood leaking from the hole in the young man's head.

Above him stood his savior. A tall, strong-looking man, from what Johnny could see, which was not much, but the man's neck was powerful. This betrayed intense training that he must have undertaken. The preciseness and decisiveness of the shot all meant that this man was related to some sort of military and punitive organization. Johnny for a minute was not sure if he should be running towards or away from the stranger.

The newly arrived angel of death, however, was so handsome. He lacked the rude, unpolished quality the type often possessed, retaining a degree of gentleness and elegance. An air of sweet-scented danger slithered around his leather gloves like a pet serpent. His blond hair was of the shade that agreed with the glistening of the flame exquisitely, as if it had absorbed the fire and became part of the great burning that engulfed the city. His face was handsome, but the expression on it was unnerving, as if he were enjoying what was happening, as if he were relishing in the monstrous roundelay.

The knight shot his gaze into Johnny and hit him. Suddenly Johnny felt like he was alone with the man, in the whole of the fiery world, while just a moment ago he still imagined himself as an observer, apparently invisible to the man who emerged from the shadows cast by the fire. He felt seen, he felt exposed.

He felt trapped, but a part of him was happy that that the choice was taken away. Johnny tentatively approaching the stranger, who was now smiling amiably at him. There was something strangely disarming about the man's conduct. Johnny found his heart trusting him without reservation. Above midway in Johnny's plodding, as he were making his way through swamps of weak-kneed infatuation and throat clenching presence of death, the man moved to march to meet Johnny halfway.

— My name is Kevin. I'm with the rescue team. We have been ordered to scout the affected area for survivors and to bring peace to those who could not be saved. Are you wounded?

— I'm Johnny. No, I've managed to avoid injuries so far.

Kevin's eyes semiautomatically scanned John's body to confirm his words, and having found nothing but a couple of cuts and ruined clothes, smiled in relaxation, which seemed to Johnny almost inappropriate. The formidable quality Kevin had before all but disappeared. From an angel of death he transformed back into a human. Later Johnny would learn that this is how Kevin reacted to stress: he became weirdly aloof and fearless, gloriously inhuman. He had learnt to enjoy the commotion of massacre in the army. It was really something like an alter-ego that sometimes possessed him.

— I think I have seen one more person who could use mercy.

Something of the previous, divine ruthlessness returned to Kevin's countenance. He was beautiful like a leopard about to pounce.

— Show me.

Johnny led Kevin towards the inferno he had escaped not ten minutes ago with a disturbing joy in his heart, that he could help. He had already gotten used to the state of calamity. Right now he was only happy that he would get to spend a couple more minutes in the company of the peculiar savior, and even be of use to him. At that moment, Kevin meant to Johnny all the certainty in the world. He was an agent of order in the world of murderous chaos.

Soon they neared the place from which Johnny had escaped. The way back felt almost like coming home after a long absence: everything was familiar yet different: the fire had ravaged the stalls even more than before. Johnny blessed the impulse that forced him to abandon his refuge, as he looked around. The stalls were now smoldering coals, mostly black with grey falling off, like an old man's hair, and fiery orange breathing on the inside. It seemed like those coals should be cool by now, but from the heat that emanated from them, Johnny knew the unnerving truth, that the wood was now burning on the inside. The surrounding constructions could falter and fall at any moment.

The night sky was blinded by the fire that raged effulgently further on away from the square, towards the living quarters of the city, though first stars were timorously showing themselves like poor and lost children.

Johnny stared at city disappearing, matter ascending, as someone would maybe say. Matter, the lower emanation, marrying fire to produce light and heat, to release energy back, to create space for new buildings and people, to become creatures of light and pure energy, unrestrained by the petty inconveniences of a mortal body, mindless but fully present like planets around, like atoms. All these people are joining the honorable club of the dead, whether in this world, in the released energy, or in the next, gloomy wanderers on luscious metaphysical planes of forgetfulness and obsession. It is interesting how remembering becomes a prison,

even if you are free to roam like a wild horse. It would, perhaps, be for the better to forget entirely once the brain is switched off, one way or another, either baked or punctured by a bullet.

Is there anything more to death than the waltz of energy, of clusters exchanging particles, like parcels? In the end, if God does exist, it is very clear that He is a light so bright that anything we call humanity is enough of a stain never to survive his presence. In a manner of speech this fire is God, but so is what which is being released by its means. So is the darkness. Especially, the darkness, for it is the brightness light that cannot be seen. What, then, are you, as a human being? Are you not only your own ignorance? But what is ignorance if not merely a pre-requisite for wisdom? Why are you so greedy, clinging to that which was never yours? Why are you trying to hog that delicious, delightful light? Why are you trying to hold your breath, with some prideful desperation? Can't you feel your face is turning blue?

Shameless moans of what remained of the poor woman interrupted the flight of Johnny's thought, so much that he was even a little annoyed at her, and also at himself for being annoyed. Kevin appeared even more handsome. He was close enough that Johnny could have a good look without betraying his goring infatuation. There was something faintly familiar about Kevin, as often appears to be with people whose appearance strike us, especially if they strike our heart heard enough with the spears of their grace and charm, that the wound may not heal for a lot longer that we may have had the chance to know them. And it would fester gorgeously.

Beads of sweat looked like a glass necklace that grew into Kevin's neck, like mushrooms, or as if soldered in with the heat. He looked almost alien, like some kind of a beautiful insect, a cross between a praying mantis and a blue butterfly. As Kevin moved, the little drops jiggled and one or two slid downwards like little children on a water slide. Kevin's strength shone through so brightly, Johnny thought, because he was being taxed.

Kevin's stubble looked like it had not been shaved for a couple of days. Perhaps it was lighting but the hue of the beard was unusual. It was pale, like diluted black ink, at which point black turns to grayish blue. Now Johnny could think of a

specific butterfly Kevin looked like: *Polyommatus icarus*. He saw many of them in the village. One of the books that were gathering dust on the shelves on his mountain school was an encyclopaedia of insects, with pictures, and since there were not many other sources of entertainment Johnny would look at it when he was tired of games outside and memorised many of the names.

These ghostly figures had fluttered around, looking almost carnivorous, not like other butterflies. This was the butterfly that the other butterflies dreamt of in their nightmares. They had blue fur not dissimilar to that of a moth. Almost unpleasant looking, the queerness of its appearance only amplified its otherworldly beauty. It was not like a beautiful maiden, but her ghost that would lure strangers to their death in the marshes. How could an ordinary girl of flesh and blood compete with that? Johnny was sure: ordinary men had never been able to compete with Kevin.

As two icari Kevin and Johnny moved farther and farther into the palace of flames, and there she was: the woman who begged to be killed.

Now Johnny had a better look at her. With Kevin at his side, Johnny could not afford to avert his eyes. Her limbs were not like limbs should be: sausages of minced meat, viscera and pieces of shattered bone, protruding here and there like little white fangs. Her lower jaw was mostly missing, holding by a thread of muscle or some connecting tissue, her tongue panicked like a worm stepped on by a heavy boot, wriggling in agony, frantic in his gripping for life. One of the eyes was so badly damaged, it may have as well been removed: messy, undifferentiated goo, a bowl of primal soup. Her chest looked bluish. The fire managed to do some damage of its own, since Johnny had been here last: most of the woman's hair was replaced by a black and red crust, like a pig roasted on an open flame.

The woman's one good eye stared blinding at them. Johnny was not sure she recognized him, of whether she knew what was going on at all. Sanity appeared to have mercifully abandoned this poor thing, whose entire life was now suffering and nothing but. Her continued survival could not be anything other than a twisted punishment from a spirit for some ancient and dreadful affront.

Her sentence was, however, nearing its end. The woman's savior had arrived, her very own angel of death, this handsome man of muscle and will, Kevin. Johnny watched him closely. He could not see any fear, any disgust on his face. All that was there was compassion. For Kevin, this woman was everything she had once been, not the goo of suffering she had become — a lesser person couldn't look straight at her, for she revealed in her unbearable pain something of the terrible truth of all of us. The clarity and elegance of Kevin's actions, as before, were liturgical.

Kevin held the black, metal pistol in front of him like a cross. After a very loud noise, it was over. The woman was liberated. She had finally received her invitation to heaven.

The toll was paid and the woman was no longer there; Kevin paid for the ticket with a coin of lead, and divine fish had taken her from the fiery nightmare. In the wake of the loud boom, the fireworks that accompanied her departure, the crackling of wood appeared to have grown louder, almost too loud for ears to bear. Johnny looked as Kevin, whose face reflected unbelievable peace. It must have been the funeral mask of Thanatos, the tranquility only familiar to that which kills kindly, despite the vicious rumors his benefactors spread about him, despite horrible lack of gratitude.

Kevin, for sure, was like Johnny's father, Johnny thought. He was a wolf, but they were of different colors. Kevin was a city wolf, a hound of the Republic, the graceful executioner, the bringer of last rites and peace, but Johnny's father was a wolf from the top of the mountain, a wolf that howls at the night sky and may be privy to the company of hiddenfolk. They were so different, and Johnny was glad. Kevin had enough of his father in him that he excited univocal admiration in Johnny, but not enough that Johnny may hate him.

They roamed the ruins the city had become after. The streets were deserted. To be precise: there was nothing alive remaining. It was getting cooler. Johnny felt the caress of night on the skin exposed abundantly by his polo shirt. Kevin's eyes appeared to be getting darker, as if he was sucking the night in through them. It was time for the evening to end, but neither of them was particularly comfortable with the

idea. In the midst of carnage something more than a conversation can transpire between people, something that does not need the formal criteria for closeness that most people hold so dear. Disaster liberates.

They were back to the square. It was dark, and the stars shone brightly in the sky, brighter than they had in decades, maybe centuries, since the city square became polluted by unceasing light. The stars no longer looked like frightened orphans. From the cosmos gods and goddesses of great stature were appearing with kind and imperial smiles to make acquaintance of two noble apes below.

— I will be a civilian again tomorrow.

— How so?

— I've been in the military for six years. But I've gotten very tired. Tonight is my last day. I have been urgently summoned because of this disaster. I was not expecting to be in service again, but tomorrow my resignation is final. I am to be reassigned to a civilian position.

— Have you grown tired of violence? Of the constant struggle?

— I don't know. Maybe. I am tired of seeing people in pain. I like testing myself, but it's been so long since... I am tired of the sight of blood. I am not sure what the alternative is, but I have realised that staying in the military will inevitably lead to death, probably sooner rather than later. I am not scared to die, as far as I understand myself. No one can be sure, but I do not think I am scared to die. I would, however, like to see what else I can do. Since death is the one certainty, I see no good in hurrying towards it.

— It seems like I must congratulate you, but it feels silly to do so in such a place. Words seem foolish to me right now, but there is much I would like to tell you.

— Don't worry. This whole city became my funeral pyre. I think I, too, died tonight.

— There's really little difference between dying and being born, isn't there?

— Both happen to screams.

Johnny looked at Kevin intensely. The two were mesmerised by each other: they were falling into the kind of love that knows no social conventions, no shyness,

no grief. It was a perfect moment. Johnny's chest bloomed like a flower of flesh: everything about Kevin had a magic quality. It was like observing a unicorn or a dragon. The man before him was not like all others: he was a prince.

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Johnny looked at the large rectangular clock by the TV, white, and styled to be antique, and his time journey to the past was cut short. As the result of the Day the Sky Fell, the government dramatically cut funding to all the air faring programs, which effectively meant that Johnny had a useless degree. He was twenty-three and without a profession.

If he had not found his companions, the day of the Day the Sky Fell would have been the worst day in Johnny's life, but as it happens, calamity brings wondrous gifts.

Johnny was heading to the unemployment centre to find some occupation and, if he was lucky, permanent employment, at least until air travel became legal again. He grabbed an old leather bag, that once belonged to his father, back when he was a student. It was made of the sort of leather than only got better looking with age and wear. The bag reminded him of who he was, and that the mountain air always sat inside his lungs as a daemon of liberty.

It was one of the kinder, sunnier days of late September.

## *The Howl of a Princely Werewolf*

*The luckiest men die  
worthwhile deaths.  
— Heraclitus*

Kevin's suit was taut with the mass of muscle underneath. He looked a little out of place, like a hound dressed up in a frilly dress, comic in an unsettling way, surreal and vaguely sacrilegious like a lion, desecrated by the filth of the middle brow decency that does not know when to stop and holds nothing in awe. Kevin felt like he were in a circus. Everything seemed unreal yet cruel, perverse with a forced sense of fun. Everything seemed for show, and he could not believe that he was working in an office now.

The weather was still sunny and pleasantly warm. In fact, it was probably one of the last warm days of the year. Such days always poison their lushness with a drop of bitter certainty of their imminent departure.

Two-storey tall windows heated up the office, like a magnifying glass, and the dust danced playfully under the projector, broadcasting minute films of flickering shadows.

Rustle of endless leaves of pointless reports and documents, a chronicle of futility, filled the building with a sense of quiet desperation.

No wonder office workers had been known to jump from the top of this building, Kevin thought to himself, recounting stories he read in newspapers over the past year, that blamed the suicides on the spreading of the virus of moral degeneration and warned readers to be vigilant. The economy slowed down. There was mostly enough money, but the glimmer of bright future dimmed. This took away the promise some people needed to survive: that their lives, their leisure, their pleasure, were not all sacrificed for naught.

Though Kevin had only worked in the office for a little under three months, he understood the sentiment. Soldiers are frequently frustrated by the commands of their superiors, who may see better from their regal heights, but who lack the earthy insight of common infantrymen, who water forests and fields with their blood. At times, nothing is so heartbreaking as an order to retreat, not even the deaths of friends. Retreating feels like a betrayal of all who had rejoined the cycle of nature, and it is much better to be madly aggrieved than to be a traitor of fraternal bonds. The ghosts of brothers visit you as angry wraiths in your sleep, instead of being the sacred wall that protects you from fear and wounds, from exhausted, damp nights. In the end you make peace, if you survive and therefore kill, if you take someone else's life for yourself; and then your fallen perhaps become your allies again; but it is all the hardest thing.

Kevin had never been on the losing side. He could only imagine how hellish a defeat would be, and how furious would be the fallen. It is better not to survive than to return without your shield to a nation now subjugated to a foreign rule.

The Vikings were right: one must die in battle. It is the kinder death. Kevin half-regretted coming to work here, but he could no longer stay in the army. This was the only option: the government companies were forced to take in veterans and Kevin qualified. The call here was: to learn how to be a warrior without war. There was also something homeless about this feeling: like a musician without a lute, or a gardener without a garden. And yet Kevin refused to give in to this manner of anxiety. It was possible, he thought, that a musician without a lute would make the whole world his instrument, and a gardener the entire existence his garden. Kevin without bloodshed would make of his life a battlefield.

Modern man was too soft, too pessimistic, Kevin thought as he wrestled with the angels of war inside his chest. To the modern man, war was violence, torture, rape, and looting. Modern man, in other words, was a savage, he concluded. Whether he would perpetuate the atrocities or abhor them, made no difference. If this is all that you think war is, you misunderstand its nature, you are rejected by its gods. Ares scoffs in your direction with derision sharper than his swords. Athena pretends

she does not see you, and when you call for help she remains deaf. Valkyrie beauties mock you, like a young nymph mocks an old man for his lack of virility.

War is a great test, a great labor, a great alchemical process. You learn the mettle, yours and your brother's. You see people fall, people who *must* fall to give a better crop: rose buds are cut down so that bushes bloom better next spring. There can be no grievances. You must love the one you kill for his blood is your blood, and his flesh is your flesh. Life is one. It is a great honor to fall, and the dance of slaughter is performed out of love. If your heart is right, you join the ranks of spectral battalions.

Some people are weak and ugly, and they are uprooted. They decompose and out of the seeds of their fermenting hearts grow better heroes of tomorrow. This is the other way to die. It is for those not ready to perish beautifully like moths or butterflies. People are like gods, gods who bleed, gods who bleed heavenly seed that turns derelict wastelands into sacred gardens. Nothing goes to waste. War is love.

War, like any craft taken to the heart, never leaves you so long as you breathe. She is there for you, your iron nurse and gunpowder-perfumed comforter, your lover who is indistinguishable from the brutal grandness of a camp fire. Strife is love.

Kevin brought war to this temple of boredom, and the boredom of that place had also entered Kevin. A battle was going to happen. Which side would win, Kevin wondered. Though Kevin was an infiltrator, a shadowy assassin, right now he was fully in the grasp of the soullessness that is office work. His limbs felt sluggish, his eyelids heavy. He was fighting the yawn perpetually.

Kevin had been sitting behind his desk for seven hours now. At this point his eyes could barely read the nonsense that he had to review, approve or send for correction. Nothing made sense anymore. Kevin's mouth was dry, no matter how much water he drank. His whole being was in the state of a draught, and the water evaporated as soon it touched his skin.

Kevin looked around at his co-workers. Most of them seemed so painfully stupid, Kevin could scream. Their stupidity, not in the head but in the heart, which

was worse, Kevin thought. He wondered if their hearts were sterile but refused to believe that. There was a part of him that wished to torture one of them to see if their pain would have been real — their smiles were all false. Pain, in Kevin's experience, had a tendency to make things very real.

Kevin remembered some of his fellow soldiers. Few of them were wise. Many were cruel, but they were so virile, they were so strong. Their bodies were full of youth, full of arrogant celebration of spring. Cruelty is more forgivable when it is bestowed by a handsome prince.

Of course, most of them wilted quickly. Their bodies were beloved by the gods and their minds hateful to them, so they were to be separated. Those who had some inner nobility were reaped on the battlefield like the juiciest of fruit that seduces the gardener to give in to temptation and taste of it in the field. Those less fortunate died in other ways, in worse ways, back home, as they mellowed and festered, haunted by the scornful ghosts of their youths, lacking a limb or an organ: what a terrible medicine.

Kevin did not mind hearing of his old friends, but he could not stand meeting most of them. As a tale, there was a delicate grace to it, desperate, despairing grace, but face to face with his brothers-in-arms Kevin would observe his own reflection in their pupils too vividly. How did he himself know that he was not fading, just like them, that he would not fade, that he would not grow lazy and fat? Did they know what was happening to them? Have his muscles mellowed, became weak, became of no use, like those shades of men he once knew?

A fly landed on a heap of forms Kevin had completed since the morning. It looked a lot more impressive that it was: all Kevin had to do is fill in some gaps, check a few pieces of data and stamp them. It was energy consuming, but felt fundamentally useless. It was in times such as these, when boredom was so sick it almost physically hurt him, that he wished for the fresh air of war. Kevin did not like feeling that way. He didn't really want to be back here and have to face all the risk and all the death. He wanted to *live*, but in peace, but he didn't know how.

Two of his brother-in-arms stood out for Kevin: Jacob, his only army friend who had not departed from his side, a very gentle man, rare for the army, with the quiet stoicism of old intellectuals, strong without display, brave without bravado, a man who never flinched or whined in the face of danger. Kevin remembered especially well that Jacob smelled of dandelions, and had an astonishingly long foreskin that he could tie in a knot which he did sometimes to entertain his fellow combatants.

And another: their lieutenant, Lt. Synge. He was a handsome man of a hero's stature, of such they always say "in his prime". Nothing was out place in his face or clothes. His fingers were perhaps thicker than rest of his hand would agree to, and his eyes a little too poignant, such that passionate characters have, despite however cold they may pretend to be. Other than that he was the perfect genetic specimen. His semen could have been freely distributed amongst women as a women's day gift and not even the husbands would mind.

Lt. Synge was a little stern but rarely looked down on his subordinates. He almost never yelled and only punished when it was absolutely necessary. Once in a long while, he would have what many referred to as an "episode". Anything could be a trigger, a letter from home, or some minor insubordination. He would burst out in flames of rage and a few times he would beat the soldier viciously. Overall, he was well-liked and not once reported. Like others, Kevin thought nothing of these episode, other than that he was a human too, and the stress must have been enormous. When you see your comrades blown apart on weekly basis, these really were not a huge deal. Other lieutenants would also occasionally beat their soldiers and many even resorted to more inventive forms of physical punishment that made Kevin and, he assumed others in their barracks too, shudder and thank fate that Lt Synge was their commander.

Kevin rather liked Lt. Synge. He would go to battle with the rest of the squad and he would risk his life bravely and artfully. More than once he saved Kevin's life by providing cover in the right moment or by vigilantly shooting an enemy whom Kevin had not noticed and who would have taken Kevin out in the

second couple of seconds. Kevin admired this in a commander and back in the barracks would do various things to accommodate his lieutenant. He would clean his shoes without being asked, and would seek out errands to run for Lt. Synge. Once he caught a rabbit in the forest near the barracks and cooked a meal just for the lieutenant. He almost fell in love with him and he would have if it were not for Gaspar back in the Foam City, pursuing his doctorate in Truth Engineering.

Gaspar was the reason Kevin was not really afraid of death. Of his parents Kevin only had ancient but cherished memories, Gaspar was the only one waiting for Kevin at home, and Kevin knew that were he to die on the battlefield Gaspar would wear his honourable death with dignity like a martial, marital diadem. For that reason, perhaps, Kevin was left untouched by the spirit of Death who prefers those who avoid him.

It was one of the last operations of the Lowlands Campaign. The stubborn barbarians refused to join the Republic, and had to be invited with fire and lead. There was little that they could do. The villages were plundered, their cities razed. Anyone who wished to surrender was accepted by the Republican legions, and were guaranteed sanctuary but many did not make it out alive from their villages — their compatriots did not take kindly to treachery. It was not uncommon to see gutted hangmen and hangwomen of Republican supporters.

The only thing these barbarians who were adamant not to give in or die purposelessly could do and did was form a guerrilla army, and strike the Republican forces when they did not expect an attack, and then rapidly retreat. More than anything, it was a tactic of desperation and deathly hatred. The barbarians could not win, and their cowardly assaults only angered Republican legions, who then competed in cruelty with the guerrillas, and won. The war was getting ugly, and few warriors remained on the battlefields of raging peasants and potters.

That day breathed with freshness. It was a sweet day to be alive, and Kevin remembered thinking, that it was such a pity to have to die or kill on a Sun bathed day like that. It was basically the calendrical form of a church, but a few officers

were assassinated by the guerrilla in the area, and thirst for blood and revenge was high.

Scouts caught a youth from a nearby village, at most nineteen years of age. He was brought to Lieutenant Synge for questioning. Lieutenant Synge liked to conduct his special questioning sessions in a field. It was Kevin's first time present during one of these. There was a dark rumour that the reason why these were done so publicly was so that the rebels could hear the screams.

The youth was blond and blue eyed. He had some freckles but not too many. It looked like he was going to cry. His simple cotton clothes was ruined with mud. His eyes, Kevin thought, were bluer for the fear he was experiencing, but there was hope there yet. Kevin caught himself hoping too, that the boy's hope was not terribly naive.

Officially, the questioning had the goal of determining whether this young man was a spy or a refugee, but Lt. Synge was in one of his moods. The boy was saying again and again with crying stifled in his throat that he was a defector and that all he wanted was to become a Republican. He said that as the Republican legions were nearing the village, his father voiced some concerns as to whether it was worthwhile to resist such an overwhelming force. The neighbours did not take to that kindly and strung his parents and little sister up in the central square of the village. Jeremy, as the boy introduced himself, was just coming back with some firewood from the forest, as he saw what was being done. The boy continued whining that there was nothing he could do, that he ran into the forest. He said that he wished to join the Republic army and slaughter every one of the villagers, if they allowed him.

Lt. Synge seemed untouched by his story. He put on gloves of thick robber the colour of elephant tusk.

— Undress.

— What?

— I said, undress!

The boy was extremely confused, but the lieutenant's voice was difficult to resist. It was an absolute, cold order. It felt almost as if he were pointing a gun at

you. Jeremy, though Kevin tried to resist remembering the young man's name, started sliding his clothes off himself. They were hard due to mud and appeared to be moist due to the sweat. Jeremy's skin was lighter than his attire but in a similar colour scheme. Jeremy's wasn't a warrior's body. It was too soft — only enough muscle for daily tasks required in the life of a villager.

He stood naked in front of the lieutenant and Kevin now. All that time Kevin had his hand on his gun. This was the procedure. There weren't any other guards — Lt. Synge preferred a degree of privacy from fellow soldiers. Kevin tried not to look but he had to follow orders — he could not avert his eyes. This would mean to endanger the life of his commander which was tantamount to treachery.

Jeremy's skin was fairly light. His body was not very hairy, but some hairs on his chest and surprisingly dark bushes in the armpits and in the pubic area. He stood how someone who has never stood at attention imagined one should stand at attention. His penis was not big, but his foreskin looked like a large earlobe, and he had impressible large testicles for someone his size that swung to and fro like an odd metronome. Jeremy was shaking either out of fear or cold.

— You know, the Republican army does not look kindly at cowardice. Don't you think it would be wrong to reward your abandoning of your family that took care of you your whole life, that loved you. If you were a real man, you would have died with them.

— I... They wouldn't want that. It wasn't easy for me to leave them. Please, give me a chance. Let me prove myself to you. I didn't have any weapons. I had no chance. I didn't know what to do.

The boy was beginning to cry.

— These are pathetic excuses, all of them. I don't need cowards. The Republic does not need cowards. You will wish you died from hanging.

— I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.

Jeremy was sobbing now. His face was distorted by his desperation, by a terrible amalgamation of feelings: of terror, of hopeless, of sadness and of grief. He

kept repeating that phrase: “I’m so sorry” over and over again like it were a prayer, in a agonising attempt to turn back time, to escape from the hour that was upon him.

Lt. Synge came up to the body and pushed him onto the tall grass behind him. He then kicked the boy a few times in the stomach. Jeremy was now lying in the embryonic pose. He was crying silently. Kevin could feel the fear that paralysed Jeremy. On top of the recently bent grass he almost seemed like a beige egg in a nest. It then occurred to Kevin that the reason why Jeremy cannot defend himself is because of him, Kevin, standing a few meters away with his hand still on his gun.

Lt. Synge took a folded knife out his pocket and unfolded the blade. It reflected the sunlight joyfully, as if nothing was happening. He turned to Jeremy and grabbed him by his hair.

— I will give a coward like you a worthy death. I’ll cut off your cock and feed it to you.

Jeremy was now screaming into his arm.

— Then I will cut off your balls and feed them to you too. If you don’t die out of pain, and you should pray that you do, I’ll make sure you bleed out. This is the death you deserve.

The trees and sky stood witness to Lt. Synge’s transformation into a demon, a sight they have unfortunately grew accustomed to in the last several years. Kevin knew that terrible things happened at these questionings but he could no longer recognise his commander’s face. It seemed to Kevin like there was an unpleasant but subtle smell of singed skin.

Good lieutenant was gone. His place in this world was taken by a demon, straight from the bone-breaking, gut-opening chambers of hell’s brothels. His face was red, like it was sunburnt or reacting to an allergen. It was swelling, his nostrils bull-like. The newcomer’s teeth broke the light and appeared crooked. The imposter terrified Kevin. It was a fear without a name, a basic fear that makes you jump away.

Jeremy was squiggling in sheer animal terror, keeping his legs locked, as the Lieutenant appeared to be teasing him into grave. It seemed like he wanted to drink Jeremy’s terror to satiation before he would start feasting on his pain.

Memories of Lt. Synge rushed into Kevin's mind like a rabid mountain river, uprooting trees, razing houses, and crunching people like peanuts. Until now Kevin had no idea of the role Lt. Synge played in his life. He saw him almost continually from the reveille to the moment when he would close his eyes at night. They greeted the Sun together and the moon, they ate and showered together. Kevin could not hate Lt. Synge. This man in front him was not Lt. Synge. Lt. Synge was dead, and this thing had killed him, perhaps a while ago. He wasn't sure when exactly but it could not have been the same man with whom Kevin shared so much.

He had decided he would remember Lt. Synge the way it was before all this started. He wouldn't let this corruption destroy his friend completely.

Once the decision was made, everything else was simple. Kevin had been trained well, by late Lt. Synge. He swiftly moved sideways, so that the forest was behind him, and he was between Lt. Synge's back and the silent centurial witnesses. His hand had been on his gun all this time. It was easy, extremely simple, a matter of muscle memory and sharp reflexes. The sound appeared to have followed belatedly like thunder after a lightning, and there he, Lt. Synge was lying on the grass. About a quarter of the lieutenant's head was missing. A flock of birds ascended into the orange sun, frightened.

Jeremy looked at the corpse of his torturer and at his knife was slipped out of the lifeless hand. With wild fury he took the knife and started stabbing the corpse. The lieutenant's white uniform was now almost completely red.

— You need to run now.

But Jeremy could not hear Kevin. He moved the corpse on his back and started unbuttoning the trousers. Kevin wasn't stopping him. If the demon was not his friend, then the body could not have been his friend either. It was just vanquished golem.

— You need to run. Soon they'll..

It was too late. I heard voices. Soldiers who were waiting close by were running because they heard the shot. Kevin was still holding his gun in his hand.

— Stop.

Kevin yelled at the boy who appeared to have been deaf all that time. He had just pulled down the lieutenant's trousers and, seeing that he might not have enough time, just stabbed the corpse into the groin area a few times.

The tin soldiers came running from the around the hill. Commotion rose all around and flooded the scene. Kevin did not have to say much. He was well respected and liked within the division. He did not even have to make a story up. Instead it was offered to him by the communal verbal labour of his division. They said, he must have been on the look out for the guerrilla fighter who killed Lt. Synge and that was why he couldn't protect his body from desecration. Apparently the time that it took for the soldiers to arrive after the shot was around forty seconds. It seemed like so much longer to Kevin. He was not quite himself, as they dragged the poor boy out of sight. What would come of him now? When Jeremy was taken away, he seemed like a changed man, a lot older. His eyes were dimmer. He briefly meet Kevin's gaze and life seemed to have sparkled in his eye again, but only for a moment.

Jacob had to unclench Kevin's fingers and withdraw the gun, strangely heated by the intensity of Kevin's grasp and his burning turmoil that warmed his skin. Jacob then took Kevin into his hands and let Kevin shake. In the helpless, mechanical tremor the body released his grief, and soon color returned to Kevin's face. Once more he could breathe and taste the freshness of air as one can after having wept bitterly. He revealed the terrible secret to Jacob a few weeks later. Jacob convinced Kevin not to turn himself in.

Suddenly Kevin's thought wanderings were interrupted.

—— The floor manager told me to ask you how is your progress on review batch R89t5xx21L is going. He said he needs it by the end of the day.

The Sun hit Kevin in the eye with its luminous spear, and broke his plunge into the morass of memory. Jacob moved his head, and now he was blocking the sunlight, sheltering Kevin within his shadow. His face was barely visible, obscured by the golden oriole of the pagan nimbus.

This was a welcome interruption. There was more to what Jacob had said that you would hear, had your ears been trained in deciphering the notes of omission. Jacob's casual appeal bore more meanings than most of the conversations you have ever had, deeper, much deeper too. Jacob had kissed Kevin's heart, deeper, he reached deeper than the heart, with a very utilitarian phrase. He took something so ugly, office speak, and gave it the nobility of poetry.

This sort of communion is often met amongst people who survived death together, who danced with Thanatos, and charmed him enough that merciless god had let them go. Ancient couples who still love each other are like that: they are also lovers-in-arms. They need not speak. A nod of the head can be more eloquent than tirades of shallow rhetoricians.

Kevin stared into the gleeful blackness of Jacob's eyes, the only constant that was with him in the months of bloodshed. One thing that you do not expect to learn and memorize in war is the smell of your comrades. You distinguish between different people. You can tell difference between fresh and stale sweat. You learn to like their scent. You see that all your comrades are really flowers, and when you share a moment, it is like two roses that share nectar. In that scenario, your eyes are bees.

Kevin shuffled the pages in front of him. The reviews would be ready, he decided. While the monotony of the work was cumbersome, Kevin was glad to have at least received his boss's orders from his martial brother. He liked to pretend to himself that this job and this new, peaceful life was only a ruse, that he and Jacob were on a mission, like in the olden days, but this time instead of a forest, it was a city, and instead of barbarians: insurgents, sectarians, what did it matter, and that come the right time, they would bathe in their blood.

People they worked with were not unpleasant, were not particularly vicious, but they were awfully bland. When you spoke to one of them, you had that unpleasant sensation that your words were water and his eyes were water insoluble. You could see the dew of your sentences set upon them, with no hope of penetration. They were all private castles, and therefore horribly boring. A good man, like Kevin,

cherishes a good enemy, but he kills with no care a grey shadow of a human being. Scenes of carnage that ran through Kevin's mind were the only entertainment he had in the frigid place.

—— Tell Mr Conner I'll be sure to get it done by the end of today.

—— Ok! By the way, you haven't been avoiding me, have you? Very soon we need to go to a bar, and do what we did in the trenches.

—— Will we be killing the guilty and the innocent alike?

—— Sure, if it comes to that.

—— That sounds like fun. I bet I can outdrink you. This is so boring, I can't wait to forget this day.

—— Don't be so gloomy! How're thing at home?

—— Good. I met a guy and we're trying the threesome thing with Gaspar.

—— That sounds exciting! I'm a little surprised that you're trying new things in bed already. You haven't even been back from the service very long.

—— I guess, some straight people gets children, and we get creative! I think it's going well. It is difficult to say yet. Sometimes I wonder if for Gaspar other people are merely shades on the wall of his mind. But the sex has been great. Two cocks are usually better than one; but so are two hearts! I hope this goes beyond sex. I really do like Johnny. We have fun conversations. I think in his cold, inhuman, ice queen way Gaspar likes him too. How's your home life treating you?

—— Eliana recently went back to work. She is very excited. Elah is now old enough to attend kindergarten. He is learning to read. He is very studious!

—— That's awesome. It's difficult to believe that you've been a father for almost five years now.

—— I know. Tell me about it. I am not sure anyone is ever ready to be one. But Eliana has gotten more beautiful since she bore our son. Motherhood suits her so well. she is flourishing in strength and power, like a man at war. She's really blooming.

—— She has always been very pretty.

— Pretty yes, but now there's something majestic about her. She's not just a girl, but a mother. I know I keep talking about it, but I'm in love with my wife. If we could afford it, I'd have ten more children with her.

— The question is, would she have ten more kids with you?

— You know she loves me senseless!

— She must, look at your face.

— That's s cruel. I'm know I'm pretty too. I've seen you looking when we showered together in the army.

— You got me.

— Well, I've got to go, finish up my work. When we're both done, we can have these drinks.

— Eliana doesn't mind?

— She's taking Elah to see a puppet play tonight, but we couldn't get an extra ticket.

— So I'm your safety choice?

— You bet.

Until a few weeks ago Kevin had not seen Jacob in months. He needed some space to learn how to live, back in civil society. Presence of his combat comrade would have hindered that transformation. They had to part a little, and be with their families. Jacob had only been transferred to this floor of the office citadel several weeks and this was how they reunited. Without knowing for sure, Kevin was certain the transition must have been easier for Jacob than himself. The joy of Elah and the sweet kindness of Eliana, a strong woman, but so wonderfully gentle, was really the best team to get a soldier off the Ares' blues.

Gaspar, as much as he cared for Kevin, was not made to give comfort. He was a creature of winter, and while he was a loving witness to Kevin's agony, how could he heal his wounds if his skin was not unlike the surface of a frozen river. In his own way Gaspar did what he could. Kevin knew that Gaspar would never leave. This was the power of his love: his was the nature of smoldering ice.

Johnny's sudden appearance was therefore very welcome. It got Kevin out of his hell in a way that Gaspar simply could not. Johnny and Gaspar synergized together, and now, a couple of months later, Kevin could not pick just one. It would be like choosing a left arm over the right, or one lung over the other, impossible. One was a lion, and other other was a unicorn. One was an eagle, and the other a swan. One was the frost of clarity, and the other the comfort of dawn.

The black telephone on Kevin's desk rang unpleasantly, not unlike an alarm. He picked it up with a trained, sure gesture, almost like reaching for a gun.

—— Mr Paine, we would like to request your presence in the conference room H-7.

—— What is this regarding?

—— Please, come as soon as possible. There is no need to worry. Just a routine interview with a security commission.

—— Alright. I'll be right there.

—— Thank you.

The call was unsettling. Kevin was well aware from his time in the army that there was no such thing as a routine interview with the security commission. Questionings are not performed without a purpose in mind. Either Kevin or an associate of his had attracted the commission's attention.

Trouble often followed such interviews. There was a plethora of laws impossible to keep. Every single citizen has broken at least one some time. This meant that there were no innocents in this country. Everyone was a criminal. Everyone could be charged and sent away, given enough motivation on the part of the commission. It was a clever device invented by Plebiscite administration to keep everyone on their toes. No one is so irritating to a despot as a righteous individual armed with dignity.

Familiar corridors darted by, as Kevin walked to the conference room H-7, adrenalin rushed through his veins. His ears popped, like he were descending into the oceanic depths. His breath constricted, as if a collar of strangulation sat upon his neck, as if an unholy imp sat on his chest, pushing the life out of him. This was

nothing like going to battle. This was nothing like the noble, steel-like clarity and purity of a warrior prepared to die and kill, prepared to hand out deaths generously and to accept the gifts of pain and oblivion. This was different. Kevin felt like a coward. He felt an intense fear that froze his perineum painfully. The ancient Chinese called this spot the Gate of Life and Death. Life was leaving Kevin, and death entering, but not the cool, early morning handsome death elated by Valkyries, but the stinky, necrotic decay of bureaucratic plague. Kevin missed that first Death, like a dear friend.

Much earlier than Kevin would have wished he had arrived at the door of conference room H-7. Nothing could be done now to postpone the inevitable, and thus Kevin knocked on the heavy wooden door. A click announced that the door was now unlocked. Half-consciously Kevin sighted a security camera in the corner. He grabbed the handle, trying his best to appear confident, to make the best display of purity, of his natural soldierly purity that he felt he was losing at that very moment.

Inside was an unremarkable room, one of many such rooms in the building, used for every kind of purpose. This room was prepared for questioning. The tables were moved in a such a way that the interviewee would face a panel of three interviewers in such a way that his body language was fully visible, in such a way that he would feel as uncomfortable as possible and exposed to the inquiring eyes of the security commissars.

The three faces looked almost identical: colorless, featureless, empty of wrinkles. No one knew for sure how this was achieved but all high commissars looked alike. They represented the Republic's Doctrine of Mediocrity, molded in the same shape, thinking in the same, they would coldly pursue the Plebiscite's agenda, and stamp the seal of their justice on the forehead of every individual with red iron if necessary. Commissars were not as popular as before, and in this day and age they were mostly used to inspire fear. All the real work was carried by the secret police, the army and other hands of the administration, but in earlier times commissars had executed hundreds of thousands.

As Kevin followed the invitation to sit down, he studied the three faces. Each was unpleasantly smooth, mask-like, rubber-looking, with the exception of the area of the eyes, that was wrinkled beyond measure, and also deep, dark blue. The rest of the faces were the color of dead skin, pale green-yellow. The inside area of their lips were bright red, though the rest of the lips were pastel purple. Their eyes were very shiny, like they were made out of glass. The color differed from face to face: one was green, another blue, and yet another brown. They all had to have gone through intensive surgery, especially on their faces. It had to be moulded into a very specific shape, unrecognisable and inhuman. Different rumours existed about the process. Some said it was to erase the original identity of the person. Others, that it was to confuse would-be assassins. They could never change the colour of the eyes though, no matter how much they tried. Many were blinded in the attempt before the administration conceded that eye colour was the one thing that cannot be changed at the current level of technology.

—— Good afternoon, Mr Paine. Thank you for answering the call.

—— Good afternoon. I am honoured to be of use to the committee.

—— We are certain you must be wondering as to the reason why you had been summoned before us.

—— I was told this was a routine interview.

—— It is a routine interview. But it is regarding an exceptional matter. We believe that the disease of deviance had spread to this office citadel. The bane of egotistic individualism is festering within these very walls. There has even been a report of possession of illegal, dangerous texts by an individual or a group of individuals within these walls. Do you happen to know anything about that?

As the three puppets spoke, their lips trembled tentatively and tiredly, like lips of very old people. Perhaps these were some of the original commissars. Little drops of saliva formed in the corner of their mouths, and bubbled up as words left their lips.

—— I know absolutely nothing about any such thing. As the venerable committee must be aware, it hasn't been long since I attained a position here, only

about three months. My biography must also be well known to you. I had served in the Republican army and in the glory Progress I pacified many barbarians. I showed remarkable performance on the Day of Heaven's Conflagration or, as the common folk call it, the Day the Sky Fell. Then I was honourably discharged and assigned to this office citadel.

— This is precisely why you are here, Mr Paine. Your biography is stainless, and your loyalty to the Republic is beyond doubt. Despite your wretched ancestry, you have proven yourself loyal beyond any reasonable doubt, and despite what corrupt tongues say about us, we are not paranoid beyond reason. Few have spilt as much blood as you have for our common cause. You are here, so that we may recruit you to aide us in this investigation. The rot of deviance that has assailed this office citadel hinders some of its employees from being entirely honest and fully cooperative with this committee. Keep your eyes open, Mr Paine, and your ears ready. When treacherous words are said, remember, and come to us. Deviant, dangerous texts are about, so keep your wits about you, and if you see anything, come to us. Once we have your testimony, our hands will be untied, and the righteous sword of the Republican administration will be lowered to sever the apostates' heads.

— But surely, there must be other loyal subjects in this citadel. You cannot possibly suspect the entire office citadel of treachery?

— Of course, not. If we did, it would have been purged. The problem is to know for sure who is the enemy. You are the only one we believe to be loyal to the cause without a shadow of a doubt.

— But I'm also very new here. Few trust me, few would reveal their wickedness in my presence. They watch what they say when I'm around. Someone, like my friend, Jacob Perel another former soldier of the Republic's noble army, has been in employment here much longer than I have and is well liked by the rest of the employees.

— We regret to say that we are not as certain of Mr Perel's innocence. In your simple purity, Mr Paine, you do not yet know how insidious harmful ideas can

be, how corrupting the dangerous texts are, and how complete is the degradation of deviants. Those we once called friends sometimes end up traitors. That is the burden of a loyal subject. What you say is true, however. It will take months for your co-workers to feel comfortable around you, but this business, albeit of dire importance, isn't completely urgent. We will wait. It goes without saying that our rendezvous must remain entirely secret. Information of this meeting getting out would jeopardize our efforts and help culprits hide. That would constitute treachery. And as for people outside this office citadel, you would only be putting them in danger.

—— I see. I'll be sure to keep this meeting secret. How can I come in contact with you, should I need to?

—— For your own safety you will be observed until this operation is complete. This committee cannot allow harm to come to someone like you when in association with us. We cannot observe you at all times, you understand, but outside we can, and this is where the enemy is most likely to strike. The sign you must give is simple: you must open your umbrella when the sky is clear, then you shall be summoned. If your observation will have availed nothing, you will be summoned here in a few months and interviewed again. An innocent simple soldier-soul like yourself may not always know what he sees, may not always see the depravity of others, and therefore an interview like this may be necessary to draw the villain's identities out.

—— I understand. I'm glad to serve this committee! Hail the Republic!

—— Hail the Republic!

Kevin, dismissed, stood up and left the room without looking back. His back straightened and his head held high, as if by a little thread, like in the past, back when he was in the army. He felt tired, a lot more tired than he should have. His undershirt stuck to his body invisibly but unpleasantly. His bladder was tensed with fullness. Kevin headed to the nearest bathroom.

The journey was both long and short. He must have gotten there within twenty-to-thirty seconds, and the footage of the way there rolled before his eyes with great acceleration, and yet, it felt much longer. A lot seemed to have happened in the

half a minute distance of time. The tension around Kevin's public glade crystalized the thinly veiled threats of the committee. The meeting violated Kevin. It has violated his peace in a way that a war never could: a truce is a truce. Even then you are a little tense, of course, but there is also that 'other' place and time, 'home', that affords rest and comfort to a soldier. The committee went straight for that sense of security. Kevin was glad that, at least, they did not mention Johnny and Gaspar by name, but no doubt, the committee knew how to manipulate Kevin. He was within their clutches, firmly and hopelessly.

A part of him desperately hoped that nothing useful to the committee would meet his eye, but this was doubtful. Everyone is a criminal, when a crime is so easy to commit, as easy as saying a sequence of words, mentioning the wrong name, keeping a namesake, reading something unsavory. From Kevin's experience with similar structures within the army, the committee's interest was not general, despite how they tried to posit it. Someone particular has roused their interest, but they needed evidence. They needed something like a testimony to untie their hands completely. It is more convenient if you have witnesses from outside the Department of Internal Defense and Healthcare. That way it looked more legitimate. None of these things were unusual.

What worried Kevin was the reason the committee held behind his own recruitment. No one was enthusiastic about cooperating with the Department. If it got out, you became a pariah. If you slipped, you disappeared in the night, or worse, were found insane, then taken away and made insane with medications. And yet, no one ever said no to the Department's committees. This was the definition of treachery, and treachery carried a death sentence, of course, in case you lived long enough for the official pacification ceremony, if you survived advanced questioning methods.

Reputation did not matter to the Department, neither did the Department have a reputation for thinking highly of the military. The attitude was that of general condescension towards an older, but simpler brother. Kevin was a bad candidate for the role of an informant. He was yet to be accepted by his coworkers. It was unlikely

that the committee was after Johnny or Gaspar. Going after those engaged in romantic relations would not be very effective. One is reluctant to betray those he is connected to with amorous bonds. It would be a lot easier to recruit their coworkers or distant friends.

If anyone, Johnny would have been a much better candidate. And the committee claimed it was about the office citadel.

Kevin finally found the door to the toilets and entered. Without much ado, he darted to the urinals and unzipped his pants with rigor one would under different circumstances confuse for passion.

For a minute Kevin turned into a waterfall. Thoughts disappeared. Like a real waterfall Kevin had no thoughts. He had only bliss, like he were not just a man urinating, but a majestic down-pouring of water, sacred in many religions, deadly and necessary for life in the valley, musical: a symphony of shattering wine glasses of drops.

Then he felt a shadow to his right. It was a worrisome sensation. He opened his eyes and saw a familiar face. He could not quite put a name to it, but he had seen this man around the office. The man had an actor's face, very easy to remember, very expressive and charming. He was difficult to ignore in the way a hyacinth is a difficult to ignore, as all truly beautiful people are (Kevin had noticed a long time ago that their looks were more scenic than anything, and that 'attractive' was a shallow misnomer insofar as it presumed desire).

The stranger met his eye and smiled, ostensibly entirely immune to the inherent awkwardness of their situation. His facial features were completely controlled and projected amicability.

— If I'm not mistaken, you're Kevin Paine, Jacob's friend, aren't you? You're new to the office citadel! Welcome! How're you enjoying it? I don't believe we've met yet. My name is Jack. I would shake your hand, but right now doesn't seem like the most appropriate circumstance for that.

— Yes, I'm Kevin. Nice to meet you, Jack.

Kevin felt unpleasantly exposed, even though Jack did not seem concerned about the inappropriateness of that conversation, but perhaps it was not so much his own nudity that unsettled Kevin much, but the assertive friendliness of Jack, whose pupils glistened like scalpels as he appeared to dissect Kevin's reactions to the situation he had been put in. Having recovered from the initial surprise and caught up to Jack's tentative analysis, Kevin tried to recall whatever of a soldier was left in him.

He was not a shy boy, who could be intimidated by these sort of tricks, and he was certain that the hand of friendship proverbially offered by Jack was only a ruse for some sort of a game that was being played. In the army he had seen his comrades blown to pieces on mines. He saw mutilations, blood-chilling crimes and sights of horror and grief in abundance. There was no way a conversation at the urinals should set him off balance.

— I do remember seeing you around office, Jack, but until now I haven't had the opportunity to make your acquaintance. Are you a junior general goods administrator, like most of us in Chamber G?

Kevin made a point of being as nonchalant as possible and even lingered at the urinal beyond necessary, concluding the ritual with relaxed confidence.

— Oh no, not me. I'm a junior officer under the administrative secretary of citadel recreation, responsible for Chamber G. Had the good fortune not crossed our paths here, we would have met two weeks on during the cupcake day, during which the office citadel, or at least our floor, celebrates cupcakes. It was idea. I love cupcakes.

Kevin zipped up.

— It's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Jack, but I'm done here.

Jack zipped up too, without having urinated.

— I found our little chat most exhilarating. In ages past, you know, the tradition in this citadel was to hold occasional outings to the spa, where nudity would be expected. They used to think that when you're naked you have nothing to hide,

that when you're so completely exposed, you lose your arrogance, your resistance. You become entirely transparent and vulnerable to your comrades. They were primitive, of course, and yet, one wonders, if they had a point.

Jack smiled widely, as he was washing his hands next to Kevin.

— You know, you may be right. There is something to be said about camaraderie built of nudity. Back in the military, there was no privacy, no place for shame, and we were close as brothers. Is this what you have in mind?

— It's difficult to say, my friend. Let us continue this conversation soon. I'll let you return to your honorable toils.

Kevin spent a couple more minutes washing his hands, and in the tranquility of the rushing water he attempted to drown the memory of the conversation. Jack was not altogether unpleasant, but chatting to him felt like a balancing on a rope suspended above a chasm. Jack, he felt already, was a human minefield, and Kevin prayed that it was only eccentricity that had aroused his suspicions.

It had been many months since Kevin felt this sort of fatigue. It reminded him of an evening that led to the end of his military career, the evening of his willful execution of Lt. Synge. It was the last he heard anything of that little rebel girl. A battle comrade of his mentioned that she would not be of any danger to anyone anymore, and that there was a rumor that rigorous questioning had driven her mad, but it could have been just a rumour. Though no matter how hard Kevin tried, he could not image a pleasant destiny for her after her capture. Kevin was back at his desk.

The sun was unusually big on the horizon: a discus burning the earth underneath and the limitless cosmos above. Sizzling purples and oranges were shadows cast by the ferocious explosion that sought to devour the world. It was as if time had stopped, a mere second before the world disappeared into incandescent oblivion. Kevin was not particularly sorry for the world, and how could he be? He wished he were swallowed by the majesty of the sunset. He still had work to do, and then, when the world was completely swallowed by the night, Kevin would go and

drink forgetfully with Jacob, and he would be careful not to say anything suspicious.  
Tonight they were definitely going to be watched.

## *The Pollen of Purity*

*When we are marching in the mud and cold,  
And when my pack seems more than I can hold,  
My love for you renews my might:  
I'm warm again, my pack is light*  
——Marlene Dietrich, Lili Marlene

The damp, sweetly rotting smell of nature attracted Johnny like pheromones and aroused him like an aphrodisiac. It smelled almost like home. It smelled of his youth. Johnny found himself missing the ghostly flight and haunting melody of a sparrow, a sight impossible even this deep into the wilderness, still too close to the city. Yes, the wilderness here was deceptive. The booming city was only fifteen minutes by barely discernible footpaths and about thirty minutes on a cross-country train.

Johnny had not been this far out of the city since he left home. Until now he had no idea to what a titanic extent he missed wilderness, how much he missed the holy privacy of the Green Lord's abode, where the Republic and Progress were so entirely irrelevant. Different, ancient, prehistoric laws govern this land, still, despite the mutilations, and all this made Johnny feel like he had reacquired a body part he had once lost.

He recalled a vision he saw on the mountain slopes just some weeks before he left home, a strange vision that he was not sure was even real. Many times afterwards he tried to convince himself that the memory must have been dreamt up, that it was simply impossible. Water birds almost never made it to the mountains before being eliminated by the Department of Ecosystems. In the vision there was a sparrow, killed and brutalized by a seagull, which was now devouring its dainty body. Nothing is as disturbing as seeing what is inside a still recognizable creature.

The forest around the tree was growing so thick the sunlight barely made it through the greenery, as if they were not at all outside, but rather encased in a tall temple born out of the abyss of nature's womb. So close to and so far from the commotion of everyday life, it was a sanctuary. It was as if they had unknowingly entered a portal spread between two trees, like a net or wet laundry, and passed to a more innocent, to a purer universe, where no one had ever been expelled from paradise. Occasionally through a window in the mosaic of leaves and branches sunlight spilled unrestricted, and contrasted with surrounding calm and darkness, it created a most awesome impression. One would image that tiny fairies danced within the rays, or that the torrents of light were sent by a deity to inspire mortal flesh. Regardless, Johnny was very tempted to step into one, for they always seemed to be in a distance.

Their steps were soft. Any noise was consumed by the green carpet of moss underneath, that greedily sucked up any sound. Johnny felt like a wild cat, if not quite as gracious. There was something carnivorous, something warlock-like in how the three proceeded into the depth of this magical forest fortress.

Few words were exchanged: the surroundings were too beautiful and pristine to disturb them with words. Only the finest of poets could speak here without offending the forest's nobility in their mansions of trees.

The farther they went into the forest, the darker it got, as if they were descending into Gaia's dungeon, where her children were imprisoned, within her, next to the chamber where they were born. Her dungeon is a mother's dungeon for her children, full of sadness and regret; it is more of an armoured cradle than a prison. This would explain why Johnny felt so perfectly serene.

The ground was getting softer. It would seem steady before on placed the foot, but then it would just collapse, and the shoe would leave its imprint, for God knows how long. The slithering scent of moistness hissed through the air. Their steps were audible now, as they strode, and opened yawning mouths of muddy earth.

There was no pathway, but it seemed like Kevin and Gaspar knew the way. Reeds grew high to the sides. To Johnny, they almost looked virile.

Soon he could see a bright, burning light ahead. Despite his lazy concern over where the newly met acquaintances were leading him, a feeling of disappointment set in. Johnny was now worried that the adventure was at its end, with dreadful, cruel prematurity. He did not breathe enough air: his lungs were lusting for more, his skin was longing for trees' caresses, his heart wished to remain in the forest, like a princely hobo.

As they moved closer, the bitter sense of disappointment grew like a tumour, and yet, something was off: the serenity of the forest did not dwindle, the noise of civilization was as exiled as ever, and only the gentle symphonic orchestra of nature was audible. Soon Johnny could decipher what was hidden behind the wall of light, and it was the farthest thing from the obscene crudeness of civilization. Soon something joined into harmony of the orchestra. It was like thin crystal glasses being broken against a bare frozen lake. Rapidly Johnny realized that it was the music of running water, and its occasionally conflict with smooth round rocks.

Soon they reached what Johnny inside himself named the Forest's Heart, a magical glade with a river running across it. The wall of trees was so high around it that really the glade felt more like a grotto, where light fell in the manner of a waterfall from a giant opening in the roof. The entire well was filled with the rarest, purest type of light, and the river was as if made of crystal. It was so shiny, it looked like thawing ice, and it broke and reflected the falling light so that one could observe many, many rainbows about the river like bridges.

The herby aromas of the surrounding swamp were quickly replaced by the floral perfume of flowers within the glade. As Johnny's ears and eyes adapted, he could first hear, then see, drones of bees peacefully jumping from flower to flower. The bees were not worried, and in fact seemed rather nonchalant about the intrusion of strangers. Johnny stared at the surrounding beauty with regret. He would have liked never to leave. This place felt like home, even more so perhaps that the reclusive remoteness of his mountain peak, which was now too distant, almost unreal, as if Johnny had only dreamt it.

Another detail that at first escaped Johnny but then stared at him, relentlessly conspicuous, was a bridge across the river. The bridge was old, with absent railing, mostly rotten to the core. This means that this glade and this forest was once populated, and not too long ago, perhaps twenty years or so, otherwise the bridge would have probably decayed entirely by now. He came closer to look, and saw mysterious holes in the bridge's rotten surface, that could not have occurred accidentally, as they were almost perfect circles. Mystical shimmer of water underneath the bridge played as luminous beasts on the plains of diamond jewellery.

Johnny turned around and looked at his companions. How different they were! They *сидят* were less alike, but somehow they were in communion. They were different like bees and flowers and yet part of the same. Kevin was a Spartan. His muscles bulged under his clothes. His back was straight, and it seemed like it was impossible for it to be any other way. His eyes were clear and honest. His facial features straightforward and very handsome. A good man would be happy to die to such as he, covered in the almost amorous sweat of battle. Gaspar, on the other hand, was flowing. His every movement was dance-like. He was a little feminine in the way old aristocrats were. He was refined. He had long, thin fingers perfectly suited for playing a musical instrument, especially piano. His mouth was always in a barely perceptible grin, like a magician's, often mildly disgusted or amused, it was difficult to tell for sure. His face was a vision of a nymph spied in the running water of a mountain stream, and his eyes deep like abyssal wells. If you got lost in his eyes, Johnny wasn't sure they could get out.

The whole place felt like it replicated some forgotten dream, some ancient premonition that came to Johnny long ago, when he was a child, or possibly, even before that, when he was still old. It was difficult to believe one's eyes, for the glade sparkled too brightly like a diamond that absorbed the sun. The sense of *deja vu* was increasingly unsettling. It was as if all the grass, the trees, the bees were all enchanted. Johnny felt like he could almost reach outside of the ordinary boundaries of perception, and perceive something forbidding, something otherworldly, of the

world of fairies and ancient gods, slumbering in this wilderness like bears or nests of snakes.

Kevin stood like a statue, unresponsive and absent, with eyes gazing into obscured distance. He was seeing something: perhaps a dryad flirtatiously lap dancing a tree, or Daphne yawning, bored of her endless flight, or a rebel hiding in the leaving with a sovereign and saintly look, like that of an eagle.

Gaspar tacitly observed Johnny. The fish in the river played in the sunlight, and occasionally one would jump out, and sprinkle the surrounding grass with crystal drop of water, ameliorating the stifling heat that smoldered a little the weeds of the meadow.

Johnny had already got used to his companions' manner of staying quiet. He sensed deep in his guts that something important was brewing. He resolved to trust the two. Kevin had saved him from fire, and he had no reason to doubt Gaspar, and he himself despised the suspicious. It is a face of cowardice, he believed, and every mask cowards wears is quickly soaked with its puss.

He had taken the risk and stepped onto the bridge. It could have broken under his weight, but the planks were sturdier than expected, if black. They were also surprisingly smooth, that Johnny's main concern quickly became resisting sliding off either way. He was in no real danger, of course. The small river beneath could not be dangerous, and at most he would dislocate a limb, though given their location that in itself would be unpleasant enough; but from the top of the bridge Johnny had the chance to really study the other side. It was even more familiar. It was as if some repressed memory resonated in Johnny's head powerfully like migraine. He remembered a blue bird flying across this meadow. With it the bird carried its smells and sounds, that now overlaid what Johnny witnessed, like two fingerprints meeting each other line in line, and those possibly separated by distance of many years recognizing in each other inexorable kinship.

As the rose of memory unfolded, things fell into place. All aspects of the meadow, though uncannily different, were familiar to Johnny, like people one had

not met in years, although transformed by the trials of time, are still the people you once knew.

— This is going to sound strange, but this meadow is oddly familiar to me. Tell me about it. How did you discover this meadow?

— We stumbled upon it, you can say, but not entirely accidentally.

— What do you mean?

— We, too, found this place very familiar. What is it exactly that you feel about this place?

— I do not know. I feel like there must have been an area just like this one where I grew up, maybe on the mountain, though if a meadow like that existed, I no longer visited it as a teenager. But the bridge is also oddly familiar, though of course, it is a lot older. It's an uncanny feeling. I get the sense that there used to be a well around there, on the other side of the stream. It is insane, but I'll go and see. It's like I'm in a dream.

The two very different figures, like water and wind flowed as two rivers, one deep and regal, the other restless and explosive, followed the direction of Johnny's call, like the trajectory of a fortune deciding arrow.

— Just behind this first line of thicket, there is another smaller, shadowy meadow, almost entirely occupied by a large spurious tree that must have been there from times immemorial, adorned with brooches of wood mushrooms, we used to use like little steps, when I played there with other kids. But if it is somehow that place... Humour me, please.

With child-like enthusiasm Johnny jumped off the blackened bridge and ran through the tall yellowing grass towards the edge of the meadow. Gaspar and Kevin followed the trail of fell grass he left in his wake. Bees buzzed in commotion, but it seemed the three travelers fell short of offending the little yellow-black pixies.

To the satisfying crackle of branches under Johnny's feet, he finally made it to the other side of the wall of trees. His prophecy came true: a large octopus of a trees sprawled its tentacles and claimed the whole meadow. Some of the tree mushrooms were now as big as steaks, though many seemed to have began falling

apart, rotting away. The entire tree, the titan of the forest, that perhaps had been there since its very origin, for God knows how many centuries, was now falling apart. The bark was black, as if someone had burnt the heart of the oak out, and branches lay lifelessly but importantly on the forest floor, like graves of princes and princesses.

To Johnny seeing what had become of his childhood playground was like reading an obituary. The memory of its former glory was immediately overwritten by the dumb ruthlessness of fact, like a beautiful face is erased by age, no matter how much botox is injected into it. Death is never late.

Johnny marched decisively through the debris of the old giant's body without stopping to wait for his friends. Before he could make it far, his companions appeared from behind the curtain of greenery.

—— This tree used to be so majestic. It is sad to see it withered. It reminds me of all the things time has taken away, from me, from everybody. It has to be the same tree. It is so unusual. Father told me that I was very little we used to live somewhere, that we've only moved to the mountain when I was about five years old. But this tree, I think it's dead.

—— It's not all bad.

These were amongst the first words of any significance Gaspar had ever said to Johnny.

—— If you approach the centre, where the rot had taken the oak, and look around, you will see that, like any ruins, these ruins are, too, pregnant.

Johnny hurried through the web of dry twigs, some of which had enough life in them to sting viciously. The smell was wet and swampy. It smelled a little of toads. In the depth of the friable blackness, with bugs and little worms like jewels on a richly adorned dress.

Amidst the filth of decay, however, three little stems of the brightest green towered above the crawling grave.

—— How did you know these were here?

—— The tree is familiar to us, too, Johnny.

—— I think we used to come from the direction, down this path that looks like it is covered by arches of tree branches. I think that was where I lived. This was where all of us lived. We used to all come here to that tree and play. My parents had a cow, I think.

He ran deeper into the forest. Johnny had not ran like this in years, not in the way when joyful airs of childhood merriness filled the lungs like helium balloons, and the chest was taut with flight. Johnny was a human Hindenburg, but then, nothing met his eye. Johnny stood confused, doubting his mind, doubting his memory, suspecting it of forgery.

—— The village was razed. Those who lived here were resettled, most of them. Something to do with environmental legislation. They have decided to move all the people from the villages in the area to the Foam City.

Johnny turned around. Gaspar stood a few feet behind him in serene repose.

—— Kevin and I used to live there too. During your ordeal in the fiery hell, Kevin thought he recognized you. He and I were both, after all, a little older than you, and we remember a little more. As soon as I saw you, I was certain that you were the little boy who used to tag along with us, but we had to make sure. This is why we took you to the meadow, and then, you proved it to us that you are indeed the little Johnny who almost drowned in the crystal baby-stream, but even so, continued to play in its crispy, chinking water every day of the warm months. Other kids used to say that you and the stream were friends, and the day you almost drowned, you were merely roughhousing. You would bother us mercilessly, but soon we recognised the special heart that beats in your chest and we became close friends.

—— I remember! You, Gaspar, had a collection of butterflies right?

—— Yes, I did.

—— You were not like the other kids who tried to catch butterflies and ran after them with the clumsiness of baby bears. You almost looked asleep when you were on the hunt, and as an unsuspected butterfly flew close enough, in a single, ruthless strike, it was was captured in your net. Lizards hunt like this. I could barely

see you move. I ruined your hunt more than once, but it was irresistible to watch you like that.

—— You have, I remember. I was a moody child. Very brooding. I'm embarrassed by how angry I would get. I'm very grateful for Kevin and you. Neither would give me peace, and peace was the last thing I needed. It was a harmful whim, which I am glad was denied. It is interesting how much you can remember when you try, no?

—— I remember you too, Kevin. You always made me feel safe.

—— He also used to gnaw on the wood of his house, don't you remember? You looked perfectly stupid and happy, Kevin, as you dug your teeth into your parents' home to yells of your mother. I'm sure if the authorities didn't do such a good job of destroying our houses, there would be still be teeth marks on yours.

—— You know, you can be terribly unpleasant at times, Gaspar. I'm surprised I'm still your friend the way you treat me!

—— I am yet to find anyone more adorable. You are still just like you were when you were a child, though no longer a pup. You're a beast now, and as adorable as you still are, you are so very strong.

—— Johnny, I hope you will accept our offer. We're searching for a roommate, and ever since I met you at the fire and thought I recognized you, I harbored the thought of recreating our old trinity. If I remember correctly, the three of us formed an excellent company. Like three sounds in an accord, we have been distinct notes and yet we'd come together in communion of joyful synergy.

—— I would love to be your friend, but give me a few days to think about moving in. It's very unexpected, but I like the idea. I have friends, but not like *we* used to be. A good friend comes around once in centuries. I just hope that we are sufficiently who we were back then, in near infancy, that we may replicate that harmony.

—— I have an idea, actually. There are few better ways to learn about someone's character than through games. We reveal our innermost currents when we

are free of evaluation and judgement, when we are not ourselves. In the heat of a game, masked, we can truly afford to be ourselves.

—— What do you have in mind?

—— A game of hide-and-seek in the vicinity of the razed village. Do not go too far out. The border will be the stream on one side and the river on the other. Do not cross it. There should be enough bushes and trees to conceal yourselves and make the game fun. Call out occasionally and give hints. Climbing the trees is fine. Leaving false trails too. Few rules, really. I'll be it.

—— I haven't played that game in so long! Let's do it!

—— I'll count from a hundred. A hundred, ninety nine, ninety eight, ninety seven...

The forest all but swallowed Johnny as soon as he turned around. Trees encircled him like enemy soldiers or strange savages performing festive and terrible rites. Like a butterfly, suddenly released from a captor's net, revels and rejoiced in her cherished liberty, Johnny all but felt wings grew out of his shoulder blades and carried him where he did not know, but welcomed with the full trust an infatuated virgin invests in a stationed officer.

It was as if an enchanted piper played his flute and lured Johnny for some incomprehensible purpose to a place of power, a home to old gods, whose names are forgotten, and those of them still remembered uttered only in gravest curses, with heart-tripping awe edging on terror.

Scenes both alien and familiar unfolded before him, as the counting slowly descended with a metronomic rhythm in Kevin's brilliant voice. With such a youthful, manly, handsome voice he could enchant millions, raise them to love or hatred, to contentment or fury. His was the voice of a movie star, but also of a propagandist. Had Johnny not been driven forth by rustling music of wilderness, he would be compelled to stop and sit under a tree nearby just so that he could hear Kevin count down, with a hypnotist's certainty and assurance. To the sound of that voice, one would prepare himself to die gloriously. One would go towards death, like

it were the greatest celebration, all the birthdays combined into one, perhaps as it truly is.

It appeared to Johnny that he was not running randomly, but rather followed something like a path. In the overall greenness and splendor it was easy to overlook the detail: the swollen grape, so full with purple juice they were almost bursting out of their dark, inky skins, displaying their semi-transparent flesh coquettishly, like a cabaret dancer. With every stomp of his feet, Johnny was dreading that one or more of these berries would explode, and wound him in some imperceptible manner, curse him perhaps, terribly, make of him a tree or a forest creature, or indeed a butterfly. He was in such terrible awe of the tiny fruits, that not once had a thought occurred to him to pluck one and eat it. A mere suggestion would have been sacrilegious. These were relics of a new faith, of new mysteries.

Johnny was carefully guided by the stars of grapes, but even more so, by the webs of the vine that threatened to entangle and strangle Johnny like a fly, should he misstep, if not with his feet then his heart.

Soon Johnny could smell something, a familiar and yet alien smell of freshness. It took him a second to identify it by the accompaniment. The murmur one does not often expect to find in the depth of a forest. Very shortly, the composition was complemented by the visual. It was the river. All of a sudden, Johnny remembered it well. Before, he would have sworn, the most he could muster would be like a faded photograph burnt out by the sun, whitened like glistening snow, but now it was clear again, clear as day. It was like he had never left it. Like he were a mere child again, full with volcanic innocence.

His feet slid down the muddy slope, like he was a mountain ice dancer. The land greeted Johnny like an old friend, and accepted him to sit on her lap, like on a moist throne. Johnny's shoes were submerged in rapidly running water, their soles kissing the mud and almost merging with it, but he didn't feel cold. A strange, unearthly comfort lulled Johnny, like the entrancing howling of waves.

Out of the unceasing allegro of the stream emerged what felt like a voice. At first it was mere humming, but soon words began to emerge, first, apparently

disconnected grammatically, orphaned and barren, but soon they were strung in sentences and verses, so indecent they would have Johnny wince, if he were not so at peace:

A magic cunt  
that faced the sun  
made weeping mother chuckle.

In crimson foam  
a maiden's born,  
with pearls on her lap.

As if by itself, Johnny's gaze raised. Across the stream he saw a ghostly figure that sat there in mud, almost as if it were mimicking Johnny, intensely perceiving him, he could tell, but not sure how, for Johnny at first could not spot any sign of eyes.

The figure was blue, and semi-transparent, like the deepest, most bubbling depressions on the running surface of the stream. There was no sign of features on what would have been its face, like a mask of blue latex enveloping somebody's head. The figure's feet were invisible, apparently dissolving in the body of the stream. Johnny spotted large, heavy looking genitals, bluer than the rest of the body: darker and deeper in color than Johnny, to his embarrassment, found himself staring at them for a few seconds. With the sound a cocoon of a butterfly makes, as it crawls out of its captivity, a little mouth opened on the figure's neck, where his neck met the chest, and the unpleasant ditty resumed:

A peacock sits  
atop the cock  
a poet has for tongue.

The peacock  
smiles like a cat  
and dies with sunset.

A thousand eyes  
blink like a million poppies  
and shrink to slumber.

They dream  
the savage scenes  
old whores relay.

And hear coarse screams  
dumped angels make  
in the machinery of time.

With this the gentleman of the spring gesticulated. It was as if the creature tried to dance with his fingers to the melody of his voice, but there appeared to be more to its movements. Johnny had a distinct feeling that gentleman's hands would shine in a dark room, and then moving to the directions of odd fingers, shadows would tell disturbing tales only eldest trees yet remember.

Johnny observed the spring's owner's fingers in some detail, and noticed something awfully odd about them. They had no nails. Instead tips of his fingers were covered by semi-transparent petal-like skin, that would from time to time reveals bud-like tips of deep, oceanic blue. The monster continued:

Grandfather's clock.  
It grinds white feathers  
and soft skin.

It is aggrieved  
for want of sweet defeat;  
it longs for fall on pendulum of tarp.

The poet dresses up:  
a boy dressed as a girl,  
Joan of Arc.

Grandfather's cock  
is small and limp.  
He's tired of the itching tick.

The hero's puffy dress  
fans in the wind.  
It bulges in the front.

The hero's prettier than many women,  
and stronger than a mortal man.  
He takes the time.

Atop the endless cock  
of marble, ashen god  
erected a new crown  
that rings with silent sound.

The knight of the stream stared at Johnny. His blue nipples swelled, as if torn by amorous tumours. Eyeballs emerged, like solid, ice-hard milk, from within, and stared at Johnny with unblinking inquisitiveness, as if asking some question

understood by them alone, a question that would have to be answered likewise, impossibly, played on a stringless viola.

A wrestling match between angels of air, and a lush and voluptuous branch of a nearby tree on the shore waved at Johnny, drawing him attention. A toad cried like it was being popped by a juvenile degenerate, a little dwarfish god too innocently stupid to know of drumming of pain, too wise to grieve.

—— We thought we'd be here.

On top of the shore, above Johnny, Kevin emerged from the thicket. Behind him stood a shadow, Gaspar. Johnny's eye saw everything with a tinge of blue, like he were wearing blue lenses. With a mood of delicate melancholia Johnny threw one glance across the stream. The fairy was gone, though he was certain he could see marks of the clay left by its blue behind. There was not much to say.

—— I would have found you ages ago, but this place has always crept me out a little. We were never allowed to cross this river, remember? We were told some dreadful tales by our parents to scare us in obeying. They used to say that this was a border between the human world and the world of others.

—— Come, now. We've brought some snacks. Let's go back to the glade. We've left the pack there. It's a great place to have lunch.

—— I'll go set everything up. Why don't you show Johnny the berry bushes? Collect some, and bring them over. I'll get the meats out and pour the wine.

The shadow behind James melted away. There was something uncanny, something ghostly about Gaspar that would have unsettled Johnny, if all that overall creepiness was not bizarrely dear to him. Even Gaspar's cruelty, that apparently got a lot better with age, didn't scare Johnny. He found in it security and indeed endearment.

Kevin reached down to Johnny to help him up. Muscles on his hand bulged beautifully, and disturbed the butterfly of Johnny's heart, which fluttered towards the stupefying heat of Kevin's body. Johnny tried not to reveal the fluttering, but his pupils must have dilated like he were in complete darkness, which Kevin accepted like a gracious actor accepts bouquets from infatuated fans, like precious gifts.

— You've ruined your shoes! You must take them off! You'll get a cold!  
And your trousers are filthy with mud.

It was true, though Johnny had no real awareness of that until Kevin said so. He was still hypnotised by his vision. As Johnny was clumsily getting rid of the heavy shoes, and socks bloated like drowned flesh, Kevin held him tightly, and laboured at scrubbing off the clay, some of which had fortunately already begun to dry up. Though they only had about several years of age difference, and Johnny was himself normally a very ripe and even decisive man, he could not help but feel the difference in maturity between the two. Kevin was miles ahead of him. He had seen death more times than Johnny watched seen other men naked. Kevin was an altogether different species. How could Johnny compare? He felt both helpless and protected. He also felt inspired. He wished to drink from Kevin, to lap up his essence, his titanic nobility. Johnny desperately wanted to learn from Kevin, nothing in particular, but the most important thing: the art of being, the art of being a hero from prehistoric tales. Looking at Kevin's face was like staring at the sun that ravished you magnanimously with its annihilating luminosity.

— You may need to walk barefoot for a little while. I'd really like to show you something before we join Gaspar, and frankly, unless you are fond of gore and blood, it is best not to disturb him now.

Johnny trudged behind Kevin, barefoot, his feet immediately painted with the paint of the earth. It was cold, but not unpleasant. There was something satisfying in having feet massaged by malleable earth, something very natural. It was a feeling Johnny had remembered from before he moved to the Foam City. On the mountain it was not unusual to walk barefoot on earth, of course, not high up on the mountain, but where trees still grew. Since he moved to the city, not once had he had his feet touch the naked ground. It was a pitiful custom: to blind the feet like this.

Kevin plucked something from the bush and ate it. Johnny then could see the black pearls of blackberry. They were huge, and reminded Johnny of the clusters of grapes he saw earlier. He reached out and plucked a berry. He hardly had to apply any effort: it readily fell into his hand. He barely touched it, like it was the tiniest of

songbirds, and immediately it stained his skin with its dark-blue generosity. He took it into his mouth, and the taste was nothing like he could remember from recent years. It was like eating a symphony. His fatigue, his insecurity were both ameliorated immediately, dwarfed by the grandiose opulence of the forest.

Kevin produced a white handkerchief and started gathering the berries. Each stained the white fabric like a drop of ink. It was as if the blackberry bush were writing them a letter. The handkerchief would surely be ruined, but who could think of such foolish things in that moment? Johnny, too, laboured until they have gathered so many that the fabric could barely hold them.

— The forest is happy to see you, Johnny. Your lips and your teeth are stained with the purple-blue blood of the blackberries. If floral creators are anything like their human counterpart, then there is nothing they would take more joy in than seeing someone revel in their fruits with no restraint or concern. It is a true sign of respect, a true mark of reverence.

Despite good intent and obvious sincerity, Kevin's words made Johnny feel like a berry devouring pig. With a newfound, embarrassing sense of shame, he hastily wiped his mouths with the sleeves of his shirt. In that minute he was more like a thief than a guest, and he could not help but feel like Kevin may have been just a little disappointed by this display, even if all he did was smile.

The eyeball of Sun darkened and now rolled to such a place in the sky that the shadows of the trees brightened, against the intensity of Apollonian firestorm. The entire forest was embraced by in chains of molten gold, smithed by Vulcan himself, as a horrible gift. Dryads danced, clinking and clunking their bonds like voluptuous necklaces and bracelets.

Perhaps due to the pleasant fatigue of late afternoon, perhaps to the awkward cooling off of first passions, Johnny and Kevin went on in silence, and each observed concoctions devised by his mind.

Kevin in every tree saw victims of dreadful torture. When you have seen one, you have seen all: each in its unique agony. Suffering is never shared. It is imprisoned within the thorny husk of a poor, withering body. It is difficult, even for a

Titan, to unlearn seeing suffering in each face encountered, seeing it contorted in dreadful torment, weeping from eyes and nose, betraying for the most humane reason, calling out, first to mother, then to God. In the end, the face is always your own. This is why warriors prefer to die fighting: it preserves dignity. Only a saint remains dignified in the butchers' domain. Johnny saw something else completely: the earth was erupting, the flowers of mounds were blooming, the Earth was returning home, it was, like in the past, becoming a fiery embryo in the cool womb of endless cosmos. Like Phoenix the Earth immolated itself; what for mortals was the end, for her was rejuvenation.

They now neared the squashed spider of a tree. In the nascent twilight, the tree appeared more like an octopoid monster than before. Its crooked tentacles crawling out of a hole in the ground, from some ancient, cursed cave, awakened by paints of flames, ever in the state of readiness, frozen in the instance before the murderous leap. The vision was desecrated as the two strolled by it, and their feet innocently broke some lesser of the beastly limbs. A delicious burning smell reached them, as if the forest had indeed been on fire.

As soon as the pair reached the glade, their doubts were erased. They witnessed smoke rising to the sky, and below fire with a spit, and on the spit several carcasses of charred flesh. By the orange dancers of fire sat a tranquil shadow. Gaspar probably smiled at Johnny and Kevin, but they could not see his face.

—— We've brought some berries. I see your traps availed plentiful results!

—— Wonderful. The rabbits are nearly done. Have you ever had rabbits, Johnny?

—— I don't believe so. I'm not sure My father is a hunter, but he mainly went for larger game.

—— You'll love them. They're as delicious as they are adorable. Their meat is the softest, softer than their white fluffy little coats.

To the side of a shawl on which Gaspar say lay four skins of bloodied white. The shawl itself more floral than even the glade, with star-like blooms and thick,

sculpture-like leaves, a magic carpet upon which Gaspar had placed some paper plates and cutlery in preparation for the feast.

Kevin emptied the napkin-full of berries into one of the plates. There was something almost carnivorous to them, like they were little larvae, caviar of an otherworldly monster, a hydra. With ghostly grace Gaspar approached the grilling meat. There was something babyish about the little bodies. Some rabbit-like features were still recognizable. They were almost done; the meat was a rich pink color, on the verge of red, encased in black webbing. Gaspar removed them one by one from the celery-colored stick, and each rabbit dropped on a plate with a delicious but also terrible sound: the sound of death and feast. The game stained the paper plates immediately with deep shades of animal fat.

Gaspar smiled at the dinner with the satisfaction of a conscientious host. Kevin grabbed his rabbit gayly, and bit into its leg. Before Gaspar or Johnny even touched theirs, Kevin's rabbit had already been devoured, and he reached for the extra one. Observing Johnny's hesitation, Gaspar reached for his flask and handed it to Johnny.

— Here. This wine has been made from the same type of grape you saw in the forest but from a few years ago, when Kevin and I first reconnected. It's a very special wine, for us, but also for you.

Johnny took a generous sip. The wine tasted like nothing he had tried before. It was a complex painting of grape shades, each note complementing another, the accord of colors united together by the steel hold of harmony. He felt as if he had tasted that species of grape before. It was like a memory of a childhood dream, that, once recalled, changes everything. Johnny found himself intoxicated almost immediately, and the twilight sky was grinned at him through cozy prison bars of the forest's green wreath.

Johnny was happy. Everything fit together: the rabbit corpses, that looked so much like newborns, the streaming river now black, devoid of light, shimmering with obsidian shining, columns of millennial trees, sleeping bees, the moon hidden behind a veil of clouds, like a princess dancer, two familiar strangers: one who

devoured the meat with the innocence of a royal beast, another who lovingly studied Johnny with serpentine patience. The wine boasted leathery, smoky notes that reminded Johnny of his father's hunting coat he used to be covered with on cold stormy nights in the dead of winter, when his father was home from hunting, but an instance later sweeter notes emerged, like bubbles in fine champagne: a delicate whiff of honeyed, baked apples, his mother's smell he remembered despite all the years that now divided them. It all fit together like a mosaic. Nothing was out of place. Within he discovered how what he thought he was was being washed away, like the mirage at the stream, his timidity, his shame, what made Johnny tolerable. Out of the deep darkness of his innermost prison a creature emerged ready to devour the lantern so many take for the Sun.

## *The overhuman centipede*

*If with tears, oh Hafiz, thine eyes are wet,  
Scatter them round thee like grain, and snare  
The Bird of Joy when it comes to thy net.  
—Hafiz, the Garden of Heaven*

Two roosters were pecking at the same blob of thickened rainbow, at a slug, whose jelly was trembling with pain or anticipation.

Gaspar lay on the bed like a platter of human sashimi laid out artfully as a darling, beloved sacrifice to elder gods. Sometimes it is difficult to see flesh. You look, and you see something altogether different. Where you expect to find mortality, you find evanescence. You never find death, only birth. And when you look at your beloved, and your heart quivers with a terrifying realization of certainty of your beloved's death, but you do not look away, you look into the purple eye cavities of death, you see his skin becoming translucent and falling off, bone showing and yellowing, worms feasting upon places you used to kiss; amidst that terror, the very terror that makes loving so difficult, you also see something else.

You see Adonis gored by cruel tusks, but you also see him dancing. He dances on the fiery planes of Tartarus, he dances on the tips of the boar's knives, he dances to the delight of Zeus, and for Halloween Zeus dresses up as him. Adonis is hurt and yet he cannot be hurt. He dies like you used to die in games as a child. He is gored again and again. Why does he return? Only an ignorant, petty man would ask that question. The voices of gods that come through your lover's moans and convince you not to be too afraid of pain.

A grain of liquid rolled down the skin. The triumvirate of amorous labourers were certainly fatigued, but also lured on, like a traveller by the promise of

adventure. It was strange how everything always found its place when the three were together like that, performing rites of Aphrodite, praying with their cells, lit up with pleasure, praying the way deep water fish prey. Love is a good choreographer. It really cannot be faked. To touch correctly at the right time, at the right place, with the right protrusion: three pianos were playing three pianists.

No one was sure who was where. Sometimes when Johnny was painting invisible murals on Kevin's thigh, it was as if Kevin were Johnny. It wasn't theoretical or metaphorical, but he felt the tingling softness of his tongue, with his own skin he saw the tactile fresco, and sensed Johnny's intention.

At times such as these Gaspar particularly liked the way Johnny's Adam's Apple responded to the movement of his tongue. It was so masculine, Gaspar thought, to have such a prominent Adam's Apple, such a responsible Adam's Apple. He wondered how it would vibrate if Johnny sang.

The pleasure was long, not so much sexual, but bigger, larger. Johnny somehow reached Kevin's heart and touched it directly. Kevin was ready to cry. Old pains, things he hadn't remembered in so long, were flying away, finally leaving him. He felt such an agonizing love. His entire body, no, his thoughts also, all of his skin, all of his mind, heart, everything, became sensitive like the head of his penis. He was the entire world, without borders and without distinction. Gaspar was no longer there. He was the whole planet, infinitely sensitive to every touch, to every step. He was the entire galaxy, a cauldron of boiling creation, exploding with the sort of ecstasy that would burn any mortal to a crisp.

The galaxy's endless orgasm soon filled the room. Love, not only sex, was in the air. A cynic, what they call a cynic today, would have a heart attack, as his heart was jolted awake. Furniture was coming to life, and was considering joining in. Stars looked at the three lovers with innocent, inquisitive eyes of aliens, unfamiliar with earthly shame.

The taste was unusual: a little salty, but full of an exquisite, unique aroma, like personal, god-given perfume, a signature of internal chemistry the three were sharing generously.

Is it a wonder that enemies of liberty tried to kill sex?

Nothing could be more democratic. Sexual pleasure and love, its ascendance, is available to every single individual. It can be shared easily. It is harmless and it opens the gates to God. It's a medicine, too. At the hands of a good doctor what makes us us is made disappear. You are an avatar. An avatar has no problems. Sex spreads out, too. Soon it is no longer about sex and genitals. This is the source of any true morality. No wonder that people who tried to turn God into business hate sex so much! Nothing terrifies liars with giant swollen erections for power more than purity. If there are demons, they wear cassocks and uniforms.

With every flicker of the tongue, with every thrust the triumvirate were fathering a revolution, the last revolution.

## *Le Grand Envoûtement*

*If you want to spare your eyes and your mind,  
follow the sun from the shadows behind.*

— *Friedrich Nietzsche, Gay Science*

A faint whistle pierced the sleepy air of the university. The campus was slumbering. Busy students, busy professors trudged around in a hypnotic daze. The winter had the city in its grasp, but the city was not quite aware of it yet. It was winter's first date with the city. It lulled Gaspar into a cozy and cold hibernation.

The sound grew more and more varied. Gaspar deciphered vacillations in tone and mood, and then even a melody. A flute of some kind, perhaps, Gaspar thought. The music was disturbing, inhuman, impossible. It was as if some trickster god played it with the intention to lure an unfortunate soul to a deadly adventure, for his own entertainment, as is a god's prerogative.

The melody jumped up and down like a gentle, delicate, firefly-imp. The music resonated with something inside Gaspar, with lymph, perhaps, he thought.

Gaspar looked back down onto the yellowed pages he was studying. The book was at least fifty years old. It had the most complex smell: a sweet, nearly pleasant concoction of dust and mould with a hint of rat feces. That is the smell of history. When Gaspar smelled it for the first time, — for he had an innocent, if slightly bestial habit of smelling interesting books before reading them — his throat almost closed up, immediately polluted by so many muted memories.

Melancholia and agony seeped off those sad ancient pages in streams of tears and blood. Words written by a noble hand in an hour of humiliation and degradation, stared at Gaspar with a promise of disruption and salvation. The book on his desk was in some sense a saintly relic. Gaspar could not conform to his colleagues' methodology of drowsing through life, not animated enough even to die properly.

The invisible performer sharpened the music, like a reveille for fairy soldiers. Gaspar could not help but picture little uniformed elves dancing together like snowflakes: their battlecries — sweet, sharp notes; their strikes — softest, melting kisses.

He could no longer muster the misery he felt he needed to honour the man whose dying words he was reading. This was when he finally realised what the dead man was really trying to tell him. The tale the diary held was not just that of brokenness and suffering. It was about finding the special place within you, your last stand, your secret garden, your crystal mansion, the God's City.

It was as if the melody reached Gaspar from the very heart of the tortured king, the king who pretended to be a prisoner, to show him the way, like the lily blossom of the moon.

Clouds, the color of wolves's fur, flooded the sky above the campus, as if in rhythm to the calling sound that flooded Gaspar's office and drowned him therein. With relief, effortlessly, droplets began falling from the sky. The light got dimmer, the asphalt darker, and the grass richer. Soon vision from Gaspar's office was obscured by abstract liquid sculpture of cooling water. Gaspar admired its sleek elegance, the cold beauty of icy water, ever rushing to become ice, never failing to warm his heart. He leant his face against the window, and the frost from his private winter pleasantly burnt his cheeks, and then lips. His breath, as if reflected by the cooled surface, resonated in freshness, like winds from that place where nothing ever rots, where only absolutes exist: health and death in mesmerizing purity of terrestrial paradise.

The pack of clouds howled at the fleeting moon. Gaspar felt desire lit up in his pores. His reptilian fingers clenched the soft silk of air in between. He could not stand it anymore. He rose and marched to the door, and even when Gaspar's movements were harshest, there was fluidity, like contortions within the womb of a thundercloud, those tunnels, castles, and mounts twisting together, kissing painfully, piercing each other like the most venomous lovers. This same smooth violence bloomed forth from Gaspar's very heart. When Gaspar was little, his mother always used to say that he was born in a storm, that storms were his true home, his true fatherland.

Outside his office was a dusty corridor. Academia has lost much of its prestige almost forty years ago, during the Cultural Clashes. This was then when the Plebiscite had secured its hold over the country's destiny, and other elites were dealt with. Economic and technological elites were exterminated. Most free enterprise was outlawed and the remaining were closely regulated. Cultural elites were forced to remain within these little enclaves. The Plebiscite decided to spare the bullets. At first they only killed the most prominent and the most outspoken. You could survive within these walls, because culture can do no harm if no one cares about it. Excellent success has been achieved. Very quickly people stopped reading. Very quickly debates became barren. At first few panicked. It seemed like everything would mostly continue the way it was before. There were little things you could not say anymore, but they were not too difficult to avoid. At first it was not so bad. You could still watch your favourite films at home. Television was completely taken over by the Plebiscite and they had introduced a new peculiar type of a program. It was usually a mini-series centered around an enemy of the state. They would show him or her sabotaging production, spreading disinformation, then beating and raping, then killing and torturing. This would escalate for several episodes until the enemy of the state was captured and publicly executed to the cheering of the public.

These shows quickly became very popular. For a few years after the civil war there was even a fad where youngsters would organise themselves into bands of vigilantes and would hunt those they considered enemies of the state. This led to a

few cruel murders of innocents, even in the eyes of the Plebiscite. No one was arrested, however; the judges claimed that the youth were acting in the best interests of the state, if blindly and misguidedly. Some were reprimanded, but very quickly after that those bands were taken under the wing of the security services who entrusted them with patrols and enforcing conformity among the young. Gaspar was glad that these time were long gone.

Almost everybody went to the university now to learn a set of skills, but one would be hard pressed to find anyone remotely educated. Philistines, academic officers of the Plebiscite, had the final say in approval of syllabi, and venturing too far outside was considered corruption of the youth, a crime punishable with dreadful ordeals. It was customarily compared with pedophilia. Very few cases of the law's application took place every year, but one's life was as good as done after that, so no one risked angering the Philistines. As the range of prohibitions expanded annually, perhaps in the Philistines' effort to meet some secret quota, lecturers were more and more rigid in what they dared to say.

The corridor had, nevertheless, a kind of faded nobility, like an estate on the verge of ruin in times of war. Walls yellowed in places, and the floorboards began to peel off. There was a beautiful carpet running through the floor, a sign of former opulence, its colors now faded. Flowers and stems dirty with age. This was the History and Literature department, still open by the will of providence.

If it were not for the propagandist application of these subjects, even these ruins of former glory would have been made completely extinct.

The walls, once adorned by fine art, as Gaspar had learnt not too long ago from another forgotten book on pre-current era history, now sported posters celebrating glorious affairs and accomplishments of the Plebiscite and the Republic in the name of Progress. Among them, one was dedicated to the Transitional Age of Platinum Medium, that sought to equate the abilities of the population, showed ten identical men in their underwear standing side by side, precisely the same. That reminded Gaspar of a car road made out of human bodies. There was one dedicated to the Fall of the Ivory Tower, which celebrated prohibition against academics

holding administrative and bureaucratic offices and freely spreading their findings without the seal of the Central Library, which showed simply a white tower stricken by a lightning, with several caped imps falling out of it to their death. Another one, still painful for Gaspar, was dedicated to the program called Coming Home. The poster showed a heart-like nest that harbored joyful children against an abyss below. This was the program from about twenty years ago, when the government relocated villagers to cities, leaving alone only the most remote regions, mostly in the mountains. The plan to relocate the population was hindered by it being much more expensive than originally anticipated, but within 50-70 miles of the Foam City no village remained that was not brought down and whose population was not absorbed into the metropolis.

Gaspar continued down the corridor, led by the voice of music that precipitated like nectar of hope on the inside of his mouth, filling his throat and the nasal cavity with delight. His pace was like a dance, a gracious swan-like ballet of a king cobra feigning a strike. Right before the turn to the stairs he paused to look at the largest poster in the entire corridor. It was dedicated to a program called variously the Great Hunt or the Conquest of Heaven. The poster showed a flying feathered monster struck down by a knight clad in golden armor. A couple of arrows were already stuck in the creature's chest, and a third one was aimed at its hawk-like head. Whenever Gaspar looked at that poster, an unpleasant sense of desperation crept into his heart and attached itself to its walls like a leech, but today he was impervious. He followed the flute.

Acupuncture needles of cold droplets fell and pricked Gaspar's skin. The rain appeared worse from the inside. It appears that I have forgotten the umbrella; Gaspar recalled his black umbrella with a lacquered handle that looked a little like two bats mating in twilight. He took steps away from the buildings towards a line of trees. Soon he was effectively shielded by the yellow-red greenery above from the assaults of the weather. This was his favorite spot under these sort of weather conditions. He pulled a cigarette out of a stainless steel case with a royal lily etched

into it. He was trying to quit smoking but could not help himself wanting a cigarette when it rained like it rained that day.

Gaspar could still hear the music with his skin, a soft knife of sweet vibration, how flesh must quake under talon-like fingers of angels. A couple of drops bruised the pallid skin of the cigarette with dark grey. The serpent of the flame bit of the tip of the cigarette and it bled like a lantern bleeds light, underneath which two lovers infallibly meet as the crocodile of eve devours the city, to part the next morning and pretend for the rest of their lives that they had forgotten each other.

The taste of tobacco in adjacency with humid dampness of autumnal earth in rain reminds one of lukewarm herbal tea. A very different taste to cigarettes under normal conditions, more livid, more burning, like a monstrous airy rat biting the throat and poisoning the blood. Gaspar would retch, but instead he grimaced a little and took another puff.

A couple of students went by, a boy and a girl. The girl was too proper, in bad taste. She diligently hid her breasts under layers of wool and two dog ears of hair. She looked at the boy with scared admiration, a sure sign of unrequited love. It was easy to determine that the girl was damaged in some way. She did not enjoy even the sweet torture of love. She was terrified of her own feelings. She seemed like the kind of person who tries to ignore whatever she feels as a whimsical peculiarity, too terrified to face herself in the mirror. This kind of girl dreams of a prince, because princes are unlikely and rare, but should she ever encounter a prince, what a disaster would that be!

The boy appeared cold. He ignored the girl's fluttering heart very well. He seemed perceptive, but perhaps a little cruel. The curve of his mouth had a subtle disdain to it, a subtle yet enduring hatred. His eyes shone intelligently, as if they were two space probes that studied their surroundings without repose. The young man's fingers were a little tense, as if he were expecting an attack, a mugging perhaps or a police search, two things very similar, in essence, to strike the interloper desperately, preferable in the throat, to die like a hero, a martyr-warrior, desperately. Gaspar

smiled at the naive seriousness of that young man, and thought that one day perhaps a creature of dignity and beauty may be born out of that shabby shell.

— Professor Kaligari!

Gaspar turned his face to face the source of the girly voice. It was a remarkable student from Gaspar's lectures on the second year of Canonical Literature, Marie LaLaurie. She would sit in the front row, and listen intensely, while her clique slumbered on. Gaspar did not normally remember the faces of his students very well since most of them never really talked to him, but Marie was memorable. The rest were muddy ghosts, impatient to graduate, like wavering goats leisurely chewing on pages like on grass, but Marie was a carnivore, not as nervous when confronted, but a lot more heedful, like a lioness vigilant for a prey. Gaspar did not mind the disinterested attitude of most of his students. Theirs, at least, will be lazy violence. Abhorrent still, but ineffective.

Marie, however, attended his office hours almost every week, and they would have become friends if it were not for the chasmic difference in their levels of being. Her mind was lively like a hummingbird with a collar of pink scales. One day, he had no doubt, she would either become a catastrophic force of freedom, or a bane to all of freedom's friends, which was much more likely. Marie had the ambition of becoming a censor, but her eyes were not fishlike like those of most censors. She was sharp. You could cut yourself on her gaze and on her analysis. People like this do not live their lives without leaving a trace. They are often both hated with a demonic rage and loved like flowers.

— Prof. Kaligari! Hi, I'm very happy I ran into you. I need to prepare a project for the Methodology of Censorship. We need to write a paper on a prohibited text, where we discuss the criteria of recognising toxic, dangerous thinking, whether in fiction or non-fiction. We've been given license to possess one such text in an unedited form and mark it like we were the censors. It's linked to the theory of Rabbit Hole Thinking, and ways to thwart it in service of the Republic and the Plebiscite, such is the duty of every loyal citizen.

— Yes, have you been given a list of texts from which to pick?

— No, we've pretty much been given complete freedom with that, within limits, of course. The license only allows us to possess prohibited texts of the lowest level: the Level of the Wet Egg. They told us we could try to get a special permission to apply for a text from the Level of a Tadpole, but then we could not pick the texts. We would have to be content with whatever the library grants us, so I've decided against it.

— I see, so you're having trouble picking?

— They want to really test how well we'd be capable to work under conditions close to actual. I've been wondering, if it's not too much to ask, could you maybe suggest something that would help me stand out? Censorship is one of the most competitive modules and a good mark on this project would all but guarantee me a good job after the degree. So is there something that no one else would do that I could still access? Something that could show both my skill and my loyalty to the Progress, to the Republic and to the Plebiscite very clearly?

— I'll think of something for you for the next class. It can't be anything recent, but if I give you a text that had been censored in the past, it would show that you can apply your understanding of the Plebeian Republic philosophy even in an unfamiliar context. You would need to do a little extra research so that you are not be swayed by cunning rhetorics or careful language, that you'd be able to look through all that. You will need to refer back to the Common Code to understand the essence of censorship. Because the text would have been censored several times in the past, as the Progress progressed, you will need to be very thorough. Of course, about sixty percent of the mark is rationale anyway. It will be challenging work, but if anyone can pull this off, it's you, Marie.

— Thank you so very much, Professor Kaligari. Well, I'll leave you to have your cigarette, Prof. Kaligari. I've got to run to my next lecture.

— Glad I could help. Have a good day.

Marie speedily paced away from Gaspar in the direction of the Arts building. Her blond wavy hair shuffled royally and, apparently, brightened the atmosphere around her, emitting a soft aura, like a fireplace. Her bright blue beret

and coat accentuated the sun of her hair like that dark vastness of space brightens up the actual sun.

In the rain cigarettes emit so much more smoke than in drier weather. It feels like you are one of the old-fashioned coal fed trains. One cannot help but feel like a useless factory, solely poisoning the atmosphere. Gaspar was not thinking in terms of the entire planet. That is too big; but rather, poisoning this sweet little campus park, and this morning. His urgent need was satisfied. Gaspar leant onto the tree so that his face almost touched the bark, as if the tree were his lover, and then slowly put the cigarette out on one of the plates of the tree's bark. He winced, as if he had put out the cigarette on his own skin. He looked at the tree with love, and almost kissed it.

Gaspar had a peculiar relationship with trees. He felt like they were his friends, and not in a superficial way. His very heart, like a flower, desired communion with them. He wished his chest were buzzing with bees.

The rain got worse, and yet rays of the sun shone from above, as if plucking this string or that. As if a flute became a lute, and Gaspar wandered inside it. He was now a captive in the whale of music. From the North an invasion of black-grey horses of clouds rapidly galloped towards the South-West's city of gold. The horses had thunder strike manes, and looked fiercer than Gaspar could recall seeing before. Before he knew it, darker tones overcame the stage of the sky. The thunder of requiem overcame the frivolous dancing music of just a moment ago. Now the wall of rain was forbidding, and Gaspar's refuge was quickly bombed to uselessness. Yet he stubbornly remained in place, defiantly facing the raging chariots of the gods. Defiant with a lover's defiance, for a good lover is difficult to frighten and drive away.

A spear of pure light was thrown into Gaspar, and hit the tree near him. Gaspar was not afraid. He knew the signs: God was so excited to see Gaspar, he wished to enter his being so that all the impurity of mortality would be burnt away in the passion of the great slinger of thunder. Resistance would be futile, insulting, common, arrogant. If ancient history teaches us anything, it is that when one is

courted by gods, one does not say no. Gods know better. Dissolve in the embrace; there is no need to swim anymore. It is time to trust. The trusting become gods' emissaries, the suspicious are cast into Tartarus by annoyed Olympians. If you are nothing but a straw dog, at least let yourself glimmer. A straw dog cannot become a real dog, but it can be a good straw dog and delight her creators by burning well. Humans' job is to delight cosmos. This is the highest meaning. In throes, in thrashings of father's amorous rupture Gaspar knew this, even as he tasted thunder on his tongue and in his throat, with the electricity's delightful caresses burning root-like flowers under his skin, even as his lungs relaxed as if in the kind of peace that is gifted by handsome Thanatos himself, even as his brain went gracefully silent, even as all nerves in his body rang in agony of disintegration and creation, even as his legs weakened and his body leisurely fell on the paltry bed of wet grass, even as his shutting eyes paid farewell to the large torch, as his old sturdy friend was now graced with a higher honor, the highest honor of Prometheus, tempered by gods like the finest blade, to give their children as a gift of maturity.

Piercing cawing exploded in the sky. Gaspar opened his eyes. A giant eagle floated above him. The bird of that size could catch and carry away a cow. It threw a glimpse at Gaspar, but Gaspar did not feel any threat in the gaze. Neither was there much love. Gaspar knew that if an eagle truly loves you, he will devour you. This is how eagles show love. This is how they make love.

There was the mood of lethargic, wary interest in its gaze, as if the bird had been disappointed too many times. Some old women look at men this way, after they had been let down more times that they could count, when to muster the strength to trust another one is almost not worth the prize. But the cawing was not what woke Gaspar up.

It was actually a smell. A smell that, Gaspar imagined, would have been very pleasant, had it not been as strong. It irritated Gaspar's nostrils and even reached further into his throat, that tickled and swelled up a little, and even deeper, on one side, into his skull where it reverberated as a mild migraine, on the other, into his stomach, as if it were trying to grab hold of it and turn it out like a pocket.

Gaspar looked around and found that he had been sitting inside a flower, on a bed of the flower's very core, surrounded on all sides by petals that were, nevertheless slightly lower than Gaspar's head. He was mesmerized by the curious beauty of those petals. They were pink, semi-transparent, as if made out of glass, but not so cold, all the little veins, on normal flowers practically invisible to a naked eye due to their negligible size, teemed with life. There was a pulse, as if this flower had a heart. Perhaps it was not a flower at all, but what did it matter?

It appeared that Gaspar woke up in the cradle of that flower amidst a sea, but what manner of a sea was this? Gaspar at first did not believe his eyes. He thought it must have been an optical illusion, and he tensed his eyes until they hurt a little, but it was a sea of white liquid. Unable to resist his feline curiosity, Gaspar stretched out his hand and scooped some of the white fluid. Not much remained in his hand, most of it ran through his fingers, but Gaspar tentatively tasted the drops remaining on the skin. It was milk, but better and richer than any he had tasted before. Its taste was gentle and smooth, and yet complex, one that opened gradually, like the taste of fine wine or the scent of an expensive perfume. At first it was like sweet milk, then floral notes bloomed, like a few drops of rose water were added to the mixture, and then it became a little salty, something in between good cheese and seawater. As far as he could see, no fish appeared to inhabit these otherworldly waters.

After Gaspar recovered from the initial assault on his senses, he looked up again. The eagle was nowhere to be seen. Gaspar experienced a mixed feeling of relief and regret. The sky was eerily empty: there was nothing in the whole blue vastness but the sun. Gaspar let his already inflamed eyes wander toward it, and they, blinded by the imperial glory of the celestial lantern, became a thing of fire.

Then something astonishing happened: the sun opened. The usual yellow surface was nothing but eyelids, and within was blueness bluer than the sky, the shine of deep, maddening cosmos, and in the very centre of the abyss was a deeper one, a spot of total blackness. Eyes could not look at it directly. It was as if bizarre, primordial insanity were gleaming, trying to seize Gaspar's mind and rend it, to

make something entirely other of it, inhuman, like a mouth of a beast, trying to suck Gaspar's mind out of his eyes, inviting him to a world where dead gods live in animate palaces of howling beasts.

Suddenly Gaspar realized he had been naked this entire time. The whole world was engulfed in a deluge of blue fire. It was not cold, but it was a different soft of warmth, not the kind that lets you relax and enjoy a sunbath. This warmth was the warmth of a bloodshed. It was like it were coming from under Gaspar's skin, rather than falling from above. It was the heat of melanoma.

Gaspar stood up. For the first time in his life he was not ashamed of his nudity, not at all. Somehow that was meaningful. Somehow his form was a relative, albeit a distant one of that which was studying him from within that place from which nothing leaves. He felt an easy and joyful arousal, that was not sexual in nature; it was arousal from that time when all arousal was religious, the time where sexuality had not yet been created by shame, the time where innocence was the root of all piety, back from before the man had fallen. Men in these tales confuse themselves with angels. This is the extent of the difference, the magnitude of the fall. Gaspar saw that now with pristine clarity.

Satisfied, the eye closed, and everything seemed to return to what it was before. Gaspar admired his body in the usual light of day, having found deeper respect for it, like one would respect his father. He noticed that every defect, every ugliness disappeared from his body, but instead there was now face, painted in dark brown where his heart was, an enigmatic visage of uncertain expression, neither sad, nor angry, nor happy, but all these things at once, and more: it was an impossible face, a contradictory face, perhaps the face of his heart. A scar, perhaps, or a mark.

He looked around, and noticed an uncanny change. The sea of white was being deprived. Little stains of what Gaspar was certain was blood, appeared everywhere, as if the teats of the Mother were bleeding, as if springs of blood burst somewhere in the depth of the white that would make ivory look like smokers' teeth.

A Northern breeze breathed in a torrent that made the bellflower wave. The ripple cut the sea, and from the wound a terrible treasure started to emerge. At first, it

did not look like anything, an undifferentiated mass of redness, blueness and beige. And horrible green, the hue of bad bruise, the very opposite of the sea's green that has also a claim to blue, as the child of blue and green; no, this green was born out of corruption of colour, a bruised green flourished on the curious skeletons of the emergent coral.

There was also a smell. It only touched Gaspar a little, and that was enough for him to retch. The poisonous sweetness of his flower-cradle protected him like a lullaby. He knew that this was flesh. A giant sacrificial ridge of at first unrecognizable remains. They did not appear to have rotten; fresh, they were still bleeding and dying the milk red.

Soon a monstrous pink emerged. So juvenile, so light-hearted, looking so delectable, it reminded Gaspar of strawberry milk he fell in love in as soon as they moved to the city. It soothed the ugly wound of separation somewhat in the way only children and the simple can be soothed.

The more Gaspar looked, the more a bizarre beauty emerged in the queer architecture of red death. He wondered if they felt any pain, but who were they? Does one still feel pain when he is this dismembered? That would be so cruel, but what if this is the point? The more he looked, the clearer he saw. What was undifferentiated before, now had a definite shape and colour.

He saw there was a lung still breathing and making sanguine bubbles, there was a heart beating touchingly; Gaspar longed to hold it in his hands gently like a vagabond birdling and protect it from everything, and warm it with his heat, and never had it hurt; he saw a palm the fingers of which moved in an ostensibly wandering fashion, without purpose or consciousness, like severed tentacles of an octopus; he saw the hips of a man cut sideways like in an anatomy textbook, but the blood still ran, and all the little clumps twitched nervously.

Bodies just like his as far as the eye could see were all in the state of perpetual death. How cold they must be, how exposed they must feel. Gaspar looked at his body again, with yet newer eyes. He saw his organs like if his skin were transparent. Everything was clear. His every cell exuded life, but also: death. He was

on the border of it, always. All are, just like those in the sea of milk are on the border of life. Gaspar doubted that they would really die, not in an ordinary sense. What mortals call death is really separation. But perhaps death is also about meeting again. On the day of your death you are taken like a bride. If you had been loyal and loving you meet your bridegroom with honor and hotly, and if not, you cry and tear off skin, when you are reminded of his splendor, and he forgives you before leaving again.

It occurred to Gaspar that perhaps he was in a giant pot, used by a strange titan to make a stew with milk. A cooking process that lasts millennia. Or perhaps it was that time for him was slow, not vice versa. Could it be that the sun is the cook? Then he is not cruel or kind. As any good cook, he treats his food with respect.

But a god does not eat. Then a potion, perhaps. This makes sense. A god has nothing to desire. This is therefore a love potion, not to evoke love, but rather a preparation of love out of death. Love is always born out of carnage, but carnage is a weighed word. It is imprecise. For gods there is no violence. There is ritual, and pain is only a spice. They are not so weak willed as mortals are.

This is metaphysical kitchen, and no one is exempt. How insignificant, yet how regal you are, Gaspar! Like a frog prince sitting on a lotus flower upon an endless sea of milk, observed by an artist's eye, withdrawn and so close that it sees even shades of your half-thoughts.

Gaspar looked down again. He felt naked, and yet no need to cover up his nudity. He was where such immature concerns cannot disturb the mind. He was sacred, he knew that now, and his body, too, was sacred, and if he had to sacrifice it, this is precisely why. Its use was accidental; it was created for the purpose of an elaborate sacrifice, an elaborate ritual, an elaborate play that sometimes takes life, takes an eye, or something even more cherished. You lose nothing.

He finally saw, that flower, too, had changed. The bed of the flower's heart was now floating around Gaspar's body like dandelion fluff and colored his skin pink and yellow. It must have been the breeze, Gaspar thought.

Gaspar found himself standing on top of a nest. Under his feet was the white shell of eggs. In the light of the sun they were iridescent like the mother of

pearl. Gaspar tried to be careful. He wobbled in a futile attempt to maintain balance, but the husks were slippery, and he tumbled down. It was the longest fall Gaspar remembered. The distance was short. He knew that very well. It was only his own height, but it felt like he were falling from the second or third floor.

He landed with a loud and multitudinous crack. Sharp shards pricked his exposed skin, but apparently did not break it. He looked around hastily. He was not sure what he expected. He thought perhaps he would fall through into the sea of milky blood. Perhaps he would end up lathered with raw egg, its somber yokes and saliva-like white. He heard a choir of hissing. Green, emerald snakes, freed from their prisons, now slithered on Gaspar's skin. They encircled his limbs. He was sure: they were either trying to hold him down and make love to him. One of the those, bigger than others, and bluer, as if made of lapis lazuli, slithered across his belly and then chest, and circled his neck. It hissed into Gaspar's ear, and he could feel the fluttering tongue reach near his brain. The snake's head moved closer to his face, and kissed him on his cheek painfully. It only hurt for a second. His face was numb and entirely relaxed. His eyes would not close, his mouth was open.

Gaspar should have been afraid, but whatever drug the serpent injected him with calmed his nerves, slowed his heart rate and breathing. It was as if he were being lulled to sleep. Was he dying? But even if so, Gaspar thought, what is the hustle? One must be hospitable. If you know that death will come, tidy your home, wash you body, prepare for the date, for the summit of your life.

The kind snake, then, danced around his open lips, like it were aiming, but Gaspar knew it was bot. How could it? He could not, would not move. Perhaps it is snakes' language, a body language, he thought.

And then the snake entered his mouth and then throat. It was uncomfortable initially, but Gaspar relaxed his throat. Saliva was excreting abundantly. Or perhaps it was something else that was coming out from between the snake's scales. Gaspar did not breathe. The snake's tale finally disappeared within his throat. For the first time, Gaspar thought, he felt complete.

Cawing of an eagle again disturbed the sky. Strange symbols were being drawn on the blueness by an invisible hand. Gaspar could not place them culturally or historically. There was something from every country, from every epoch. Like an arrow of Boreas the eagle was upon Gaspar, who, unmoving, had by now absorbed every snake that were born off his fall. He was now ready, Gaspar thought. The eagle knew. It had been waiting. Perhaps this eagle is God, was the last thought, before utter silence, pregnant silence swelled in his mind like an amorous organ.

The hawk clutched Gaspar, and it was as if he had been struck by the lightning. His limp body, with a content and honest smile on the face that now could not help but smile, was high up in the air. It beamed with joy, like sun itself.

The hawk opened Gaspar with its talons, and a waterfall of white fell into the sea of crimson, like he were a bottle of milk, and the liquid reacted with the blood, and the entire sea lathered like it were boiling, and the white dissolved the red, and the entire sea was now like a sheet, a perfectly fresh sheet, a canvas of winter, perhaps, hiding so much, safeguarding spring.

## Chapter II: The Tarantella of Water Circles or Tarantula of Revelation

*Which error Phœbus pleas'd to urge on Mars himself in scorn:*

*"Mars, Mars," said he, "thou plague of men, smear'd with the dust and  
blood*

*Of humans, and their ruin'd walls, yet thinks thy Godhead good*

*To fright this fury from the field, who next will fight with Jove?*

*Homer, Illiad*

You know it's coming for you. The Thing is coming for you; that thing you hid in a carton shoebox under your bed. That thing you wish wasn't there. That box, covered in layers of dust like a glamorous lady in her eighties wondering whether she still has that glimmer she used to have in her twenties when her black and white pictures used to hypnotise the crowds better than politicians could. She will no longer just be there, wasting away. Everybody has a secret like that hurting under their bed. Wherever you sleep, it will be there, under your bed, that chest that mustn't be opened. It will lie there for decades, until she snaps, until she finally gets you in your sleep. Under my bed there is no chest, no box, no closet door anymore; there's only a dashing boogeyman who smells of apples, sweet and golden like autumn.

## *Noondreams of Laconia*

*A leper has a son born at night-time and he rushed to find a light to look at him. His eagerness to see is based on his fear that the child will look like him.*

— *The Book of Chuang Tzu*

It was a valley of robotic insects, almost still as rocks, but always threatening movement. A barely perceptible tremor, a loud noise, a gust of wind, and commotion commences violently, the entire mountain quaking like an epileptic. Only these steel monsters were domesticated, held in an indoor pasture, where they feasted on kinetic energy of tensed, burning muscles and gentle yet overwhelming condensate of sweat. They would then move lazily like lizards on a summer morning, groaning like metal moans sliding against metal in a drama of inanimate copulation.

— Remember, what our St Synge used to say: «Cowards don't go to heaven». He would add that if you're going to die anyway, you might as well do so with dignity and with a shot at ascension. Death is everywhere, he used to say. It is a trivial thing.

Kevin was too preoccupied with his chest presses to answer, lifting the barbell dressed up with 20 kg disks, four on each side, like giant, moderately garish hoop earrings. His chest bulged out and made an impression that you could see the weave of muscle under the skin even through the T-shirt. Jacob stood behind Kevin's head insuring that the barbell had no chance of squashing Kevin's skull like a squash.

In moments like these he would plead with his body, especially the muscles, as they tend to be the moodiest when hungry: "Nobody and no body part has to get hurt! If you just hold on and stick with me until this workout is done, you will get

more than you expect. I will pay you back with interest. You and me, we don't have to be enemies. In fact, our interests coincide, don't you see it, and if we work together, we can double, nay, triple our profits!"

His body begrudgingly acquiesced and hesitantly spared his teeth. He smelled of sandalwood, as an invisible rush irritated his pores. Kevin very seldom sweated. First, the pain of a million ghost bees would come and rest on his skin, covering it entirely like a latex suit; then a drop or two of poisonous sweat would pour over.

The liberal fabric of Jacob's shirts would have seemed almost immodest, but Kevin couldn't see that. He knew Jacob's body as well as his own, and there was never anything sexual. It was the knowledge two twin brothers share, only in this case the twinhood was not inherited but developed, even forged in the smithery of war and carnage. Jacob's wounds were Kevin's and vice versa. Most lovers know each other's bodies in a very narrow set of circumstances, but Kevin had seen Jacob's in every possible one, except perhaps in the hungry embrace of his wife. He heard that embrace though. With only a night to spare, and a tiny little compartment shared by two more soldiers, modesty is a lavish luxury. It wasn't allowed for soldiers to leave their rooms to prevent, or at least limit, nocturnal adventures around the train, that is: drinking. Kevin tried not to listen, but there is something about this sort of noise that naturally attracts the human ear. Eliana couldn't look Kevin in the eye for months after that.

— But it's so difficult to believe that thing on a day like this, isn't it? In war, on the battlefield you sense the breath of the lady death on the skin of your neck as a bullet flashes by you, missing just a tad. On such a lovely day as today, however, does death not seem infinitely far, nearly impossible?

— This is how we live our lives now, in ignorance of our most loyal lover. I think this may mean that we've gotten old, my dear friend, badly old. On the way here I saw a wing of some bird on the pavement. It was mostly bones and feathers, almost no flesh. I didn't even stop. But the wing swept my confidence away. I could see birds flying overhead. In the civil world we forget about death, but in truth, she is

as close to us here, as she was on the battlefield. And the birds, what are they doing here? They've come to die.

— People fall dead all the time, huh? Invisible bullets fell them like bowling pins. Yeah, you're right. Does that bother you?

— I'm not sure. When you're at war, you dream of a time and place far away, a peaceful place, a family. You imagine it like the pearly gates as you fall asleep knowing full well that you might never wake up. Now I am in heaven, but anxiety, a sense of obscure but certain dread haunts me day and night. I look at my son, and wonder what will become of him. He may not return from school. He is so young, so weak, like a baby bird. Any vulture could snatch him away, when I am not around. I look at Elaina and notice traces of time's chisel on her face, crow's feet around her eyes. This is why husbands leave their wives. Their faces remind us of our own mortality. I could never do that to her though. She stood by me like a Spartan wife at times when my station was lower than a dog's, and when I spent long months away, always in danger. She never reproached me, not even a little. But it pains me greatly to see a dear face aging, reminding me that soon it, too, will be only rot; the rosy beige of her cheeks will become black and indistinguishable from filthiest mud.

— I have these thoughts too. So many of our friends have died. When I am with somebody, and I notice furtively how breath enters and leaves his throat and chest, how he is animated, I cannot help but recall them, and how they no longer moved. The semblance remained, and somewhere deep within the childish part of the brain, someone expected, hoped for that slight movement to come, but they soon their skin would darken. Their bodies were so heavy, remember?

— So why are we here? Why do we even come to this gym? Is this just an old habit? Why not spend all our time with those who are destined to perish?

— If you take a bird in your hands and hold it too tightly, you'll break its bones. You'll kill it. Death helps me to love, actually. I love them not despite their inevitable end but because they will with absolutely certainly die. This is why you admire a lotus flower, or any flower, a rose even.

It was time for another set. Kevin put his hands back on the metal bar. The ripple on the metal guided them into position. The bar was colder than ice, and had pleasant gravity, when Kevin tore it off the safety hooks with the movement that was not unlike throwing something away, maybe, an attacker.

— It is easy to say this, but do you really feel this way? Our friends who are no longer here. You know, better than most, that there is little beauty in death. It's all shit and piss, and soon that sickening smell of plague. But this isn't the worst thing. The silence. The horrible aloneness, like you are child locked in a dark closet at night for some minor misdemeanour. When I think about this, I want to tear my chest with my bare hands, just so that I can breathe.

The movement down was a controlled fall. Kevin went along with gravity, checking her here and there, lest the fox decided to crush him. The upward movement would start at his belly. A wave of air and force travelled towards his shoulders and sprang up into his arms like two geysers. The only difficult part was at the very top. An old injury threatened. Doctors assured Kevin, but his body remembering the pain, suspected a danger that it would snap and let the weight tumble down. He probably wouldn't be hurt. Jacob was there. He would catch the bar, if he managed to awaken from his existential musings in time. But if it did fall, would it help Jacob to face death or would it traumatize him into paranoia? Whatever happened, Kevin needed to survive.

— My own death, Kevin, doesn't scare me. I've more or less come to terms with that back in the military. We all have. This was the only way to survive. Maybe I'm lying. Have we actually come to terms with it or have we been deceiving ourselves? Will we be able to support our words with blood and darkness when the times comes or are these empty declarations?

Fiery ants of irritation began to sting Kevin, as he noticed Jacob wandering off to the side. It was very unlike him. Jacob wasn't himself. Kevin's body tensed up in a vague anticipation. The bar landed on the safety hooks.

— My friend, sweat it out. Your mind is a runner running endless circles within the wheel of your skull. Death happens. We've seen it. We've seen proof.

We've also seen that the world continued. People die. Good people die. Bad people die. This is why we call her our most loyal lady. She always comes. She's our lover, old man. You and I are brothers. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, but you don't need these ruminations, Jacob. They will ruin you. You need to awaken the fire, the virility in your muscles. Let's sweat, and have this melancholy drown in it.

It was difficult to read Jacob's face. It was tense with exertion from the exercise. His curly black hair agreed with the hairs under the arm Kevin saw through the sleeve-holes of Jacob's teal tank top. Jacob was a little older than Kevin, in his mid-thirties, but looked not a day older than twenty nine. Testosterone pumped through his veins and turned all air that touched his skin into a pheromone-charged bioweapon. It was difficult at that moment to comprehend how a man like this could be afraid of death, his or anyone else's. Jacob was the closest thing Kevin ever saw to an ancient hero, a prince by nature, by disposition and by habit. Some people appear to be born to be admired. Everything about these nature-blessed nobles is godly and divine, and compels everyone else's heart to worship them with the humility of a loyal servant, content with his inferiority, glad to merely bask in his master's light. Jacob was really this sort of star of a man.

After Kevin's parents were declared traitors and thereby enemies of Progress, the Republic and the Plebiscite, Kevin was put into the system, as it is called, an orphanage. He wasn't even allowed to mourn his parents' destiny. If he were caught crying, he was beaten by the wardens. To lament the demise of the state's enemies was in dangerous proximity to having sympathy with them, and that would quickly put one in a worse place than an orphanage. Under the circumstances Kevin desperately needed a friend, needed to show the surveilling eye of nannies and tutors that he could laugh, that he still had a chance to be a loyal citizen of the Republic. Kevin only understood this many years after, but Jacob sensed this precarious situation. Unlike Kevin, Jacob had never known his parents. His early years were full of torment and hardship, but he endured them all with a smile on his face, a stoic heroic soul one would not expect to find in a such a young little body. His reputation was also good. Unlike Kevin's, Jacob's parents were rumoured to

have fought on the side of the Plebiscite in the Righteous Revolution against the Peony Aristocracy, and died in the course of service.

Jacob's optimism was contagious. It is a Herculean task to raise one who had lost absolutely everything from the depths of despair. At first, Kevin strongly disliked Jacob, because the latter wouldn't leave the former alone and because of his illustrious parents, but Jacob would pester and pester Kevin like a dumb annoying fly, impervious to Kevin's attempts to get rid of him. Later, when they were in training in the military together, Kevin had asked Jacob why he had persevered in making him his friend. Jacob said that he recognized the mark of deepest despair, that he himself had carried it a little earlier, and that he had an aura. This is why he had endeavored to erase his suffering and end what seemed like an endless night. In the years to come they have come to know each other closer than most human beings come to know anyone. They've been scolded and beaten together, they've broken the rules and even the law together, they've sneaked out of the orphanage at night together, they have joined the military and gone through the basic training side by side, they have risked their lives next to each other and for each other. Kevin had always considered Jacob to be the stronger one. He could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times Jacob needed consoling, and they both shared a life that would have crushed the spirit of a lesser individual many times over. To hear a man such as he recount these tormented thoughts, his fright at the sight of a dear one's death, was an unsettling revelation, an ominous portent. This time Kevin needed to be Jacob to Jacob. The metal clunked again.

— Is this how you dealt with it when Gaspar was struck by a lightning?

— Mostly. When I work out, it brings me back to my body. The body is not very afraid to die. At least, not abstractly. It doesn't make long-term projections. The body is simple. Gaspar lived. He's been charred only a little, on the side. He has a scar around his navel from the burn. It's peculiar, but not hideous. He regained his consciousness after only two days of coma. I have enough faith in him to completely recover. He has enough faith in me to know that if he hadn't, if he were even to die, that I'd survive. This sort of trust makes dying so much easier. And convalescing too.

— I wonder, if it's because you're men. Whether men are somehow programmed to take these things lightly. We do not give birth. We do not know, on the level of our flesh, what it takes for a human being to be formed within our wombs. I look at Eliana, and see so much vulnerability. She's like a rose. I would like to be the bulletproof glass that wards off all the adversities.

— And then you would suffocate her. Perhaps women are a little different, but you do not give Eliana enough credit. She's vulnerable with you, as you are with her, but I've seen the resolve in her eye. She's not soft. As you said, she is a Spartan woman. Find absolution in her strength. If you die, she'll do all she can to survive, and if need be, she'll sacrifice her life without a shadow of a doubt for your son. This is a mother's duty. She's the last line of defence.

— I bet, Eliana would be so disappointed if she heard what I said just now.

— She may be hurt if she'd heard, but occasionally, everybody has a time when they're not quite themselves. Maybe you're a little under the weather.

— Maybe.

They approached a large window, part of which was thrown open. The moisture on Jacob's body plummeted in temperature like it were to form ice crystals out of his hairs, stiffening them into microscopic pricks of a snowflake's legs.

It was satisfying to feel the heat leaving the body, like dropping a scoop of vanilla ice-cream into a steaming coffee.

— I have been feeling strange lately.

— How so?

— I began doubting the most basic things. I think I may be going insane. Unwelcome thoughts come and come, and the more I try to get rid of them, the more persistent they are. These are disturbing thoughts, my friend. I wish I hadn't had them. I wish I couldn't think at all if that's what it'd take. They are ruinous thoughts, vulture-like thoughts, circling round and round, impatient to feast on my lifeless body.

— This happens sometimes to former military. I'd lie if I said that my mind was exemplary.

— What do you do?

— Nothing, really. I can't help them, so I just live on.

— I can't do this. Something is very wrong. I begin to feel like I don't belong, like I'm a fraud. Even with you or Eliana, sometimes I wonder if you like me only because you see this facade I put up, but what if you saw me totally, like I see myself, like I really am? Would you recoil?

— Jacob, my dear friend, you are like a brother to me. I would stand by your side, if it is the last thing I do. You can rely on me. I'll never leave your side, no matter what. I cannot imagine Eliana giving you a different response. In these days, my dear friend, people tend to be fickle, but you're a rich man. You're married to a woman who is like the women of yore, steadfast in virtue and loyalty. I wouldn't be surprised if one day you found out that many, many centuries ago her ancestors were kings and queens of some island in the Mediterranean.

— You always help me. I cannot burden Eliana. She needs to take care of Elah. I cannot distract her with her husband's distressing musings, but you, my friend, broke the string of my nightmares. In you I have as much certainty as I do in gravity and the ground to which it attaches me.

— I'm always happy to help. It is a friend's honor to help a friend. It was generous of you to confide in me. As they say, for a friend it is a greater pleasure to be of help rather than to receive it. And when you receive help, you relieve the giver of a drop of his bursting wealth. Receiving is also a gift, is it not? Sometimes what a hero of great vitality needs is a little bloodletting.

— Well, I'm always there for you, I hope you know this.

— I do.

Kevin's gaze froze upon a stand of black discs. Someone has just placed one on one of the poles, and it rotated slightly. This reminded Kevin of a slowing wheel torn off a race car. Simultaneously, he thought how those weights look a little similar to throwing discuses, and what great armor of meat does one needs to remain on his feet, as he rotates and swings his arm, and the discus is cast in a direction of the goal.

A faint sense of nostalgia pricked Kevin's heart. He was going to say something, and even opened his mouth, but then realized that what came over him could find no shape in the words he knew. There was longing. An insatiable longing most people mistake for this desire or that. Perhaps the entire idea of desire had been invented to avoid facing that one longing. He felt a dreadful hunger. Every cell of his body was crying for nurturing. Each cell was a stranger lost on a deserted road in a Southern land, moved forth by the thirst alone.

He looked at Jacob. His eyes were filled with the morning light. They were grayer than usual. There was something of a stormy day at sea about them. Something sublime, and yet strangely vulnerable. They were, Kevin thought, perhaps a sailor's eyes, two crystals of salt grown on heavy ropes of a ship's mast. His lips were a little tense, but the habit of smiling came through in faint folds around his mouth. Kevin couldn't believe that Jacob's suffering is long-lasting. He knew the man too well. Even covered in blood and meat of friends and enemies alike, Jacob wasn't known to despair or lament too much. At war you treat blood like dirt, or you go insane. How could a man like this be unsettled?

It was almost half past seven. At nine they had to be in the citadel ready to start the work shift.

— Let's do a few a pull ups and then hit the shower?

— Sure.

Jacob had a proclivity to walk with gravity. He would put effort in his movements but very little strain. He would let gravitation carry his bones onwards. Jacob would try to only redirect the Earth's pull instead of resisting it. He was also looking for the most natural and effortless posture. Overall, this manner gave the impression of relaxed effortlessness. It was a warrior's art, to maintain a facade of repose, even on the eve of a major battle, even facing death. You could only gauge the degree of alertness by the subtle way the air vibrated around his skin with preparedness to kill or to a die at a moment's notice.

The spine decompressed as Kevin's hands grabbed the bar above his head and pulled. He liked that feeling. He imagined that this was what a snake feels like as

it moves throughout the forest in search of asylum and prey. He recalled what it was like when he was a boy, back in the village, how he would climb the wide-limbed trees, along with Gaspar and Johnny, and they were all lost in a communion with the forest's most distinguished citizens. Though this branch was of metal, and therefore cold and soulless, Kevin's muscles remembered the juvenile joy of those early days' recreation.

— You know, Elah is really becoming a tiny little man.

— He is?

— I think he's entering that age when it could properly be said that he already has a personality. For the first year, a baby is something completely out of this world. It can't even speak. For the second it does speak, but it's little more than a human lookalike, a kind of a parrot. Now that he's gone past the age of three, I can really tell that he's a person. I'm astonished that he came from me, an actual human being that I helped create. It's the strangest feeling. This may be why I feel so anxious. I have just now realized the gravity of my responsibility. I remember the horrors of war, and even the stories you hear of peacetime when you are on the frontier. You know as well as I do. To think that my Elah, my dear son, could be subjected to such suffering, even the suffering we've been introduced to. It's not as bad as some have had it. We, Kevin, were lucky. You know this as well as I. But I'd hate Elah to go through our ordeals. I look at him. His face is so innocent, so unguarded, so trusting. He has not yet tasted men's treachery. He has not yet tasted the torments of this world's injustices. I would give up anything to protect him. Without any hesitation I'd have myself subjected to the vilest torture so that he, my Elah, may live in peace and contentment.

— I'm sure every young father feels this way, but your boy will be strong, like his father. Perhaps it's more difficult for someone like us, for orphans, because we don't really know how it's done. But you are the best of the best of the Republic. Trust in your son, in your genes. One day, before too long, he'll surpass even you. Let him. Your anxiety will then be dispelled. You've fathered a little Hercules. That much is certain.

— I can't wait for him to get old enough for me to teach him the arts of combat. I'll teach him everything I know, how to disarm a man, how to maim him, how to kill. The tricks for tolerating a great deal of pain and continue moving, when your life depends on it. How to find provision in the wilderness, how to fashion primitive weapons and how to read the landscape.

— And Eliana is fine with all that?

— You know how mothers like to protect their sons, even mothers like her still do, secretly so. They won't say it outright. I could tell though. We made a deal with her when she was still pregnant, that we would teach whatever we knew to our child. My wife would teach a girl, if we had one, how to fit in in this society as a girl, whatever womanly arts there are; and I would teach a boy. Eliana won't mind. She knows the needs of our time. This is a difficult time, and not the time when one is allowed to disagree. She knows that there are some things men need to do, just like there are some that women must do, to survive. Otherwise calamity appears at your door. A daughter will suffer in birth giving, a son in battle. This, however much we hate it, is the way of the world. At least, unlike our parents, we can ease their burden, we can, if we be so fortunate, take some of their burden onto our shoulders. It's every proper parent's dream. And times are better, they are better.

— Elah will make a fine warrior, I'm certain. How can he turn out otherwise, given whose son he is? I cannot imagine anything but a son of the most stoic virtue to come by you.

— I do worry, Kevin, as I think every father does, about my son's mettle. You know as well as I do, in our time it is very easy to have an unfortunate disposition. You question something in the heat of the moment, and at once your destiny's forsaken.

— There's always this risk, but I believe in nature. You are here because your ancestors were adaptive. There is no reason why your son should be any worse than you. Eliana is a brave and sensible woman. Between you and her, I cannot see little Elia being anything less than a little grey-eyed, curly-haired demigod.

— It is difficult to imagine that a babe will one day be a man and hopefully have babes of his own. You've alleviated much of my distress, dear friend. The rest left my system with sweat, as you predicted. I will face what's to come like a caveman faced a beast, with an opened chest, without thought, blissfully blank.

— This is the only way to wage battle.

An orangutan of a woman swung from one steel branch to another: she was determined, and there was an optimistic softness on her rosy cheeks. A baboon stared at his armor of muscle in a huge wall-sized mirror and could not take his eyes off. In another corner of the gym a teenager, frail like a cricket, was being trained by a lady who must have been a professional sportswoman, for she looked ordinary, as if purposefully striving to conceal her skill, a ruse betrayed by the little things, such as the certainty of her movement both in lay activities and in exercise. This sort of thing cannot be faked. Clumsiness is a sure sight of an untrained body. The boy was desperately struggling. He must have been spared physical activities up until now. The hesitation and sluggishness of his movement betrayed the boy's subtle resistance to his trainer's efforts. The loose oversized T-shirt, slightly moist with the mist of his sweat, made him look clumsier and clunkier than he probably did in a more customary attire of his sedentary lifestyle.

The sunlight began losing its pale hue, and this was a sure sight of impending daytime. Jacob's body was heated up, bursting with vitality and wakefulness. The muscles were cuddling with the bones amiably, the sinews were all stretched and relaxed. The mounds of muscle on his chest stood out as a medal of physical fitness. A trained eye could see that Jacob could be explosive, despite the boyish smile that would open your heart like an oyster. A hunter's eye is never deceived by tranquility of a majestic beast. Great water may be calm, but it takes little for abyss to open its mouth and release carnage of water and winds, when the soft becomes hard, and silk cuts like a sword.

In the shower room the clouds of steam made Kevin feel safer, more sheltered than he had in days. It looked like there was no one else there but Kevin and Jacob for the moment. Kevin expected more people to pour in very soon. He

couldn't afford to waste any time. The stream of hot water embraced Kevin like folds of a duvet warm with your and your lover's body heat on a winter morning. Jacob was soaping his hair. He could have been a sculpture or a model or a porn star, depending on the perspective. For Kevin Jacob was definitely a Grecian sculpture. Lust is something that exists between people who barely know one another; desire between those whose hearts are married. What Kevin felt was more like pride, pride that this majestic beast, this creature of prey deigned to be his, Kevin's, friend. Lion tamers must have similar feelings about their feline friends — not pets; a truly wild beast must never be domesticated, and those who confuse tranquility for toothlessness will be cruelly punished for their ignorance.

— I think I may be being watched, Jacob.

— What do you mean?

— I've been seeing the same person whenever I'm outside. Never too close, always at a distance. I think he wants me to know that he is watching, but also think that he did not reveal himself on purpose. I'm certain that I could have been surveilled in a much more seamless way. They're using this to intimidate me.

— Who're they?

— I am not completely certain.

— Why?

— I don't know. I've mostly stayed completely apolitical.

— Then you have nothing to be worried about. I'm sure it will just go away.

— But what if they're looking to induct me?

— I don't know.

— I had a strange meeting about a month ago with the security committee.

They mentioned you by name.

— What did you say?

— I said nothing, of course. Is there anything I should know? If you're trouble, we could all make a run for the mountains or the forests. Between the six of us we should have enough skill and will to survive.

— God, Kevin, Elah is only a baby. How could I make a fugitive out of him?

— Better a fugitive than, you know... The system is a meat grinder. I hear things have only gotten worse since we joined the army. They use cunning techniques now, hypnosis, suggestion, negative and positive reinforcement. They limit what children are allowed to think. You are not given a chance. There is a lot less outright torture, but torture leads to resistance. They're raising zombies. We were luckier, despite the caning, and damp solitary cells, and the hunger.

— I have nothing to hide, Kevin. Don't worry. We know everything about each other.

— You know that they do not need a crime. They can easily manufacture one. And in our case...

— I cannot run. I'll stand my ground. And be quiet. What did this man look like?

— Very ordinary, too ordinary. He really stood out: a long coat the color that must be right in between beige and grey; pallid blond hair, almost white, of that lab mice quality, and a strange crooked nose that must have been broken at least a dozen times.

— They're not being subtle. This is good. This means that they are not hoping to find anything. They want us to panic, to run. If we stay put, we will be safe. They cannot go around arresting just anyone anymore. The times have changed. The public won't stand for it.

— Yes, I hope so. It's just that, they need... Nevermind.

— But if anything were to happen, Kevin, forget about me. Forget even about Eliana. Save Elah. My wife and I will gladly die so that our son should live. Then go for the mountains. Johnny knows how to survive there. The police are weary of those regions in their superstitiousness. Many of them still believe that those are sacred, forbidden grounds, that wrights, demons and gods roam that land freely. Use these myths to your advantage, as I know you would. Remember, save Elah, if anything does happen. Save him, and your fraternal duty to me I will consider

fulfilled. But nothing will happen. There're spies everywhere. It doesn't mean anything.

A group of three young men entered the shower room. There was something defiantly apish about their faces, reminiscent of Neanderthals. Their nipples were disproportionately dark, like they were two symmetrical moles. The men must have been brothers. They noticed Kevin and Jacob standing closely together in a shroud of mist, and tarried near the entrance before moving to a remote part of the room. It occurred to Kevin that perhaps he and Jacob were standing a little too close to each other, but better that these strangers assumed an indecency than knew the real root of their proximity.

He looked at Jacob. His face was both calmer and more agitated than when they had met just over an hour ago, but despite all, Kevin could now clearly see the aura, the crown of courage Jacob had worn continuously on the battlefield, and before — in the orphanage, when Jacob was the brave one, and Kevin was the timid, scrawny child, ostensibly sentenced to an early grave at an end of a miserable little life.

Even if disaster should strike, Kevin resolved, he would stand by his friend, until the last drop of his blood had been spent. A part of Kevin wished there was never an opportunity to prove his loyalty in such a desperate way, but another, a nobler part was excited, like a little chick the moment before she takes her first flight.

## *Inside a glass cage: a painting in rime*

*Each time I blundered into sentries or troops who had lost their way, I had the icy sensation of conversing not with people, but with demons.*

*— Ernst Jünger, Storm of Steel*

Everything was just as Gaspar had left it in his office, yet nothing was the same. It had only been two months since he had last been there, when he heard the strange enchanting music emanating from nowhere, played perhaps by an elf, perhaps by psychosis. The papers, the books, all covered in a layer of dust reminded him of a different kind of time, a different life. Practically, almost nothing had changed: only a scar on the side of his belly, where the celestial fire had burnt him. Fundamentally, everything was completely different.

It was unbearable, the banal futility of all this, but something had to be done. A funding application must be filed and classes must be taught. Gaspar wouldn't let all he had worked so hard for slip out of his hands due to a mere injury. They would have to pry his job from his dead fingers, breaking one of them at a time. Triviality tends to push herself to the forefront even and especially in times of distress. If she dies, she dies suddenly, immediately from highest favor and into the mud.

He brushed the dust off one the greyed sheets of paper he had prepared before the accident, that were to be filled that very same afternoon he ended up spending in a hospital in the twilight between life and death. You cannot really dust paper. It remains filthy, as if it had absorbed the grey into its very roots, like the hair of an elderly lady.

There wasn't much time for reminiscence. Gaspar had a lecture at two. It was already twelve. His return to the University on this particular day, December 4th, was by design. He needed to complete an application for funding and drop it off at the administration before the end of the day. The application was that he may continue his tenure. He could probably get an extension due to the highly respectable

circumstances of his absence. In theory, there was absolutely no need to worry, but lately the Plebiscite made further cuts to the academy. Money was scarce like water in the desert. Many academics would have agreed to work nearly for free, but due to government regulations there was a minimum standard of living expected of an academic as a matter of national pride. Gaspar wasn't ignorant of all this, and struck by lightning or not, neglecting his responsibilities at the University would raise questions when the board considered his application.

The University administration, and its policy makers, the Philistines, had no particular liking for Gaspar, but neither had they much affection for most other academics. There was an inherent distrust of intellectuals, but it helped if they couldn't call you a parasite. Philistines have little regard for academic labor, and for them taking a sick leave is like taking a holiday from a holiday. Gaspar couldn't afford to risk it. As it was, he had missed two months, but it should be fine. Other academics filled in for him, and after all, he barely escaped death, but it was better not to risk the moodiness of bureaucratic concession unless absolutely necessary. If some frustrated Philistine had to spend a couple of hours going through an extension application, that's just asking for trouble.

Fortunately, Gaspar had filled that application a few times before, and he knew by heart what his research problematic was and how it may be beneficial to the University, the Plebiscite, the Republic in furthering the cause of Progress, at least on paper.

Name: Dr Gaspar Kaligari.

It was as if there were some oil in the dust. The ink didn't lay on paper the way it normally would. The line was thicker, clumsier. It reminded Gaspar of his school days, and the immense difficulty he had with running pens. They were running because Gaspar would bite them incessantly, and once he completely destroyed a pen with his teeth: the plastic was broken into many awkwardly shaped shards. He then tried putting it together, like pieces of ice, to spell a word, until the teacher assaulted

him with the ferocity of an exhausted traveller, and gave him a weeklong sentence of spending lunches and an hour after school in the detention room.

Gaspar got another copy of the form from the drawer. It hadn't changed in years. To save himself trips to the administration Gaspar got a stack and kept it in the lowest drawer on the left of his desk. The desk was there before Gaspar moved it, and might have been older than him. Discreet scratches, marks and cuts, the kind you only notice after getting to know an object like a good friend, revealed that it's like the desk may have seen more than Gaspar, and may have heard mortal secrets, may have been a prison for papers that resolved destinies and sentenced with imperial ease.

Title of your current project: History as a medium of propaganda: the use of the past.

Rationale: The past often becomes a source of anxiety and troubling thoughts, but this is due to a drought of understanding where the true potential of the past as a category or history as a discipline, lies. An event is by itself meaningless. Meaning is whatever an observer projected upon the event, thus interpreting it as good or bad. Meaning is formed by a story that surrounds an event and how the observer, along with his values, is related to it. A mystery that may be leaked from the archives will render us powerless at the mercy of the enemies of Progress and the Plebiscite. Our enemies will invent the story to hurt the status quo. A second interpretation is always less assuring and leaves place for doubt. If however, we study what are now considered the state's secrets, and then form a convincing interpretational framework of the event and then release it to the masses, then we will remain proactive, one step ahead of delinquents that are threatening to destabilize our utopia. As can be clearly seen, this manuscript will have direct practical applications for Plebiscite's officials to use on a larger scale, following my formula, to cleanse and reform history of this new world that no shadow is

cast on it, and no doubt about it is held, by any of the reasonable folk, at least, regarding the Plebiscite or the Republic's past or future.

The letters looked so very pretty on the paper. For about five seconds Gaspar stared at his penmanship. The elegance of every line, of every stroke superimposed upon the meaning of the words. A good academic feels filthy when he is forced to justify his research, to degrade it with practical applications, especially if they may have titanic consequences. Intellectual pursuit is a value far above the profanity that lesser people think of as profit. They do not realize that genius cannot be forced. By its very nature it's free. It's a spirit, a demon, not a man. Presumption, goal-orientation, concern over profit or publication, concern over anything other than the holy trinity of truth, beauty and liberty, repulse it. At times like these, when Gaspar had to write something like that, and that was often, he took particular care that every loop, every curve, every point is exactly where it must be, in agreement, in harmony, like notes on a music sheet.

Biographical justification: I have been a member of the academic staff for close to six years, and in that time not a shade had landed on my name and no doubt had been cast on my loyalty to Progress and the Plebiscite. In my academic career I have been loyal to the cause, and dedicated all of my faculties to developing better methods of propaganda that not only will cement prosperous present but also insure a glorious future, to prevent enemies of the state from undermining our effort not only in the foreseeable future but in decades to come. I do not have as much experience as some of my colleagues, but I have the freshness of youth, the new vision. It has been said that a general prepares for the last war; because I am much too young to be a general, I am preparing for the war to come, to strike down the ideological enemies of the state that have yet to come into view of security committees across our great country. I am rooted enough in knowledge and experience to already be of use and not yet dusty and stale to be outdated.

Dangers face the Plebiscite and our Republic of previously unknown nature.

This summer's Day the Sky Fell, a possible terrorist attack, or sabotage by either a criminally insane degenerate or a group of malignant sociopaths, or both, if proven not to be an accident by the secret services, means that the poison hitherto undetected has infiltrated the bloodstream of this land, and new medicine, new antibiotics will be needed to purge the hostile bacteria.

What I offer is not a cure. For that you will need the surgical skills of the disciplinary faction of the Plebiscite. I offer a vaccine, a preventive measure that should stop the virus of dissent from spreading further than it already has. To conclude, I would like to add that I published a number of works in recent years such as "Children Books: Manufacturing a Pavlik Morozov", "Libidinal Politics: the Plebeian Use of Psychoanalysis" and "Scare Me Loyal: Measures Preceding Corrective Surgery" and "The Device of Obscure Rumor to Keep the Wavering in Line: Pros and Cons" in the classified government periodical "Poetics of Propaganda". In addition, I have completed all my degrees with distinction, and for my doctorate I was awarded the Ziegler Ribbon of Distinction.

Additional resources: In order to continue with my work I will need access to archive files that contain classified materials from ages past, from around thirty years ago and earlier. I will study the materials, and devise a way to spin them in a positive light so that eventually, after work is complete, some of these archival documents could be released to masses within the interpretative framework pre-approved by the appropriate committees of the Plebiscite. The risk for the state is minimal. As an academic there are no ways for me to release any material without previous approval by the Philistines. I have no association with the degenerate groups, nor do my associates. I live in an apartment with two roommates, one of whom was a warden of the state, and served for many years in its military, to have returned to civil life only some eight months ago. His name is James Paine. He has medals of distinction, a fact that could be clarified in the database of the Philistines with

ease. Another is John Engel. He received his avian license a month before the Day the Sky Fell. Since then he has been seeking to apply himself to various jobs to be of use to the society and state, having denounced his professional ambition for the common good. Both are available for interview, should the Philistine accessing this application doubt my words. Either way, my roommates are irrelevant. I have dedicated my life, my mind, everything I hold dear to the Progresss of the Republic, to the Plebiscite and the noble art of propaganda. Had I any suspicion of my roommate's involvement in illicit affairs, they would not be breathing the air of liberty, but instead the confined and medicated scent of our most humane corrective facilities, until they be cured of their degeneracy.

A gust of wind whistled through the window pane. It appeared as if Gaspar's entire office was a lot like an organ, with multitudes of tones produced by sighing winds, by a lover's breath, timid at first and thunderous when it reaches the precipice of the pipe.

Distracted, Gaspar looked towards the window. It was completely opaque. Only blots of colors, flowing and intermixing with each other: a flooding on a messy artist's pallet. Gaspar, then, shifted his gaze, and instead of looking through the window, he looked at the glass. Against the background of abstractionist mess was the careful needlepoint of frost. Most of it was nonrepresentational: elegant, flowing geometry looked like early Islamic art, but one fragment of the glass struck him particularly. It was as if Father Frost was looking through the window. His icy features imprinted into the glossy canvas, with a beard like a stack of tiny pikes, a bed of needles; his eyes murky, blind, and all-seeing. The expression on his face was concerned, thoughtful, unmodern, so very broody. Gaspar felt a geyser on annoyance bubble up and shoot from his diaphragm to the solar plexus and back.

The form was basically filled. Gaspar looked at the watch. It was half past one. Another thirty minutes until his lecture. It couldn't take him longer than ten minutes to get there, but Gaspar had decided against staying in the room, and instead

he'd just take a very slow stroll. He shoved the form into his brown leather bag with enough care not to crumple it too much, but without showing any real regard. The illness was still strong in his bones, that sensation of being unwell, the overall fatigue, a sign of the body's effort to repair itself and the associated expenditure of resources, that thirst for rest. Despite bursts of energy, most of Gaspar's time was spent in the manner of a lizard on a chilly morning. In these times it would feel as if color was being sucked out of Gaspar's life. He was desperate to convalesce. It's a hunger one has no means of quenching.

Gaspar stood up with the bag swinging from his shoulder a little inappropriately and playfully, and stormed towards the door, and down the corridor, then down the stairs and out, where the fresh frosty air seemed to ease his ailment, burning his cheeks with a kind of heat. Alertness returned to his mind. His eyes fully opened. Out of his mouth exploded a cloud of vapor, which reminded him that he could have a cigarette, an excellent way smokers have to waste time and yet appear employed, business-like, not at all like vagrants.

The frost smelled of watermelons. Something about the mixture of tobacco and watermelons made Gaspar feel like he was on holiday, somewhere up North, in the great white North, where everything appears sterile until the eyes adjust and you see that even there life is, and that little bear cubs can be happy in the eternal winter, and you think about life back home, about all the incessant whining, and find that home is fine too, that the problem is not in the land, but in the petulant parasites who live off it, and think that the land could be better off without the ingrates, if it were not for a rare artwork of an individual, for the rare moment when even the crudest, the commonest, the meanest reveals his nature, her nature as God. All disgust then disappears.

The new students who were roaming the campus were wearing thick, woven jumpers, red, green and blue. One wasn't even wearing a coat over it. Her jumper was blue, of particularly large weave, almost as if it were a giant's fingers that wove such a thing for a little doll.

The naked trees reminded Gaspar a little of death, or maybe really more of sleep. He couldn't help but hear the trees' hearts beating underneath the bark. The branches looked cold. Gaspar wondered if it wouldn't be a bad idea to dress up those trees in clothes like some old ladies do to their dogs. If anything, it seems much more appropriate.

Gaspar's throat was a little sore. The smoke from the cigarettes was really the only thing that helped. It soothed the inflammation with its warm poison. Perhaps, a tea would have made a better job. Gaspar wondered if he'd be able to deliver the lecture well, given his throat's condition. It was a sizzling gash, Gaspar thought, as if from hot sword swallowing. If so, it is for the better. It is smarter to swallow a white-hot blade than to suffer from many cuts for many lives. This is how a voice cuts through the miasma of doubt, of filth, of sin, that is: shame.

He'd have to deliver the lecture one way or another. He would whisper, if need be. That could be appropriate.

A pallid gentleman, dressed in an old-fashioned jacket, with sensitive, languid eyes, the eyes of a serial unrequited lover, very handsome in the way phantoms are, passed Gaspar on the way to the train station. It made Gaspar think of home, and how much he'd rather be in the soft coffin of his bed, where he had spent the last month and a half, than here. He missed Johnny who made his recovery as enjoyable as possible. They discovered sides of each other hitherto obscured by pretence, mannerisms, and clothes. Kevin, too, of course. He wasn't there much, but his thoughts were always with Gaspar. Gaspar could feel them like rosy little angels, guarding his rest jealously. Kevin looked more tired than past month and a half than before. It must be the weight of winter. To some people, this time of year is like a leech attached directly to the heart.

Now completely dead, dark brown, earthen leaves danced in a whirlwind, like locust corpses juggled by an invisible gnome. In the opacity of winter's diurnal twilight for a second Gaspar thought he saw a white butterfly emerging from the half-rotten arid dampness of yesterday's greenery that was by now, by mid-December, on the verge of transformation into compost. The butterfly clapped its

wings two or three times before disappearing into thin air, like a needle. One of the leaves landed near Gaspar's foot. It was all shrivelled up like a husk of a walnut, blackened on one side, where it had completely decayed, but most of it, still hard and frail, stood to attention, about to brittle.

The building where the lecture was to be held was nearing dangerously close to Gaspar's footsteps. The time to hold the lecture was also drawing awfully close. It was almost time to go in. Gaspar straightened his back and lowered his shoulders. He needed to look dignified in case any of his students were already around. He put the cigarette out on top of the bin, and the helpless spark died therein, torn into three parts like a victim of an airplane crash.

The Sun was coming out from behind the duvet of clouds, unwillingly and lazily, just like Gaspar earlier in the morning. The Sun, too, is not a fan of winter reveilles. Even the Sun is cold-blooded on a day like this, Gaspar mused.

It was time to go in, before the majority of the students got there. With the sense of purpose, very un sentimentally and business-like, Gaspar made his way towards the lecture hall, like ice breaking along a thawing river.

Inside, the building was decorated with wood, as had been the fashion sixty years ago when the building was new, new like those new natural science buildings today, those cubes of glass and metal, boxes of never-to-melt- ice, easy to bring down or up, pieces of a lego, adjustable at the whim of the Philistines and needs of Progress and the Plebiscite. There was something half-treacherous about just being in a place like this, a place from the old age, when the ideas of the Plebiscite were still laughable. Gaspar reminded himself of the need to watch his words. His students were not his friends. They were no one's friends. They were all willing, fanatical slaves to the course, bodies pliable to the Plebiscite's will entirely: minimalistic pragmatic minds that long to learn what they know, but in better detail, who were there to learn the how, because asking the why is beaten out of you in kindergarten.

Gaspar's fingers could barely move from the frost. They clumsily unbuttoned the bag and reached for the notes. His skin was rougher and whiter than

in his study. It was also a lot less elastic. Poked, it held the shape. Gaspar prayed he wasn't frost burnt.

He pretended he was busy preparing for the lecture so that he could avoid looking at the students flooding the lecture hall like the crimson stain of tomato juice on the porous surface of a brown cashmere sweater. He allowed himself one or two photographic gazes. More, he thought, would have been inappropriate. Gaspar couldn't help but be hopeful. He searched, most often in vain, for a slight hint of intellect on dangerous dumb, cow-like faces, incessantly chewing on chewing gum, which made the resemblance to cattle uncannily apt.

He had almost come to terms that the University was a place that produced functionaries, a poorly disguised factory of censors and other parasites. If anything, it would squash the living thought out of you like it were a pesky fly. And yet, Gaspar had hoped to see on one of those blank, bland faces a glimmer of divine light that would reveal an immortal soul inside, a glistening of true, genuine feeling in the black of the eye, like light tentatively reflected on the surface of water at the bottom of an abandoned well.

The sheets with his notes were out, lying on the desk in disarray. He didn't really need them. The material was straightforward and he had delivered it time after time. He sat in the chair and glanced at the students' shapes and colors almost blindly, like one would see a multitude of green leaves on a tree, seeing the whole, but remaining insensitive to each individual leaf, until his reached one he knew by name.

It was Marie LaLaurie again. It was difficult for him to forget her. She was without competition the most hardworking, painstakingly diligent student of the entire class, perhaps of all the classes he ever taught. She was a special kind of degenerate. Miss LaLaurie was very clever but without a hint of that intelligence that stops you from reporting your neighbour to the authorities for possessions of forbidden texts or records. She was a particularly dangerous drone, because she was so much smarter than her fellows. They brainlessly followed whatever they had been taught by the authoritative voice, whether on television, at school, or now here,

Gaspar's own voice, for an hour borrowed by the Plebiscite. Marie LaLaurie had zeal. She pursued her studies of censorship with obscene zest, and Gaspar had shuddered when he thought about what she may do after graduating. Without doubt Miss LaLaurie would pursue a political career. Without doubt she'll succeed. Without doubt she'll start another disastrous campaign that will bring misery to millions of lives, and end thousands.

It was time. «Welcome to «Curing Hate Speech», a lecture where I will present you with research that had been done in the field of Censorship Studies regarding medical applications for curing degenerate thinking patterns that, as you well know leads, to Hate Speech.

“The Plebiscite respects and encourages its citizens to speak their mind with the intention to improve the functioning of the system, its justice and humanity. Some, however, abuse these rights. These malignant, or as some would argue, sick, individuals use the excuse of free speech to sow doubt and discontent amongst the vulnerable and the gullible. They seek to corrupt the morals of our nation, to undermine its very foundations, ideological and spiritual. These criminals distribute dangerous materials: falsified, obscene images that insult high-ranking members of the Plebiscite's bureaucracy, the mere possession of which is now strictly illegal, suggestive of various vices such virtuous individuals would never participate in; documents allegedly stolen from various arms of the government apparently exposing one imaginary violation or another; even whole books that advocate ideas alien to our culture: degenerate literature that breeds degenerate people; CDs with songs of unbecoming content. All filth.

“It is unfortunate that some of those culprits are savvy and are, therefore, capable of avoiding the secret services' careful gaze. This grassroots activism is the last recourse of their harmful ideology, of their malevolent sabotage.

“For decades now the Academy has been struggling to come up with a final solution that would secure the golden city of our utopia. Secret projects have been launched in abundance and hitherto their details have not been revealed to almost anyone, because, and you must remember this well, any one, your teacher, your best

friend, your parent, your lover could be an enemy of the state in disguise. You must be forever vigilant, if you loathe to be an accomplice to such a horrid crime. An apparently innocent joke may be in fact an instance of hate speech, if it is intended to make fun of those who have dedicated their entire lives to serving the people. Be vigilant. Crime starts with a small thing, with a detail, and remember, if you do not report it, you may be found to be an accomplice and end up in one of the correction centers, along with the original offender, and frankly, you would deserve it.”

Gaspar tried not to look at any of one his students as he was reciting the sermon. He dreaded to see a face, whose expression would reveal a squashed worm of liberty, squashed by Gaspar’s own words, those borrowed words, horrid like the screech of sharpening an executioner’s axe. One face was beaming with sadistic joy, and it was Marie LaLaurie. There was no fear. What others felt, on some unconscious, instinctive level, as heavy, iron bonds on their limbs, she saw as an opportunity. She was hungry for it, full with excited anticipation of a surfer.

“Without revealing any classified information, I will explain some of the general approaches that can be taken when applying medical tools to correction of degenerate thinking patterns or instances of hate speech. There are two main approaches: preventative and punitive. Preventative is one that takes place before the crime, and punitive is one that’s applied after the crime has already been committed.

“The preventative approach can be furthermore subdivided into discriminatory and non-discriminatory. Non-discriminatory preventative approach seeks to apply measure to the entire population that would make rebellion and discontent less likely, whereas the discriminatory approach seeks to pick out potential or likely offenders and neutralize them before they have the chance to commit the crime.

“There are also two types of punitive approaches: inquisitive and group-based. When the security services catch an offender, they can either determine that individual’s cluster and investigate them as likely suspects, which would often involve family and associates of various kinds, anyone he could have shared information or his vile ideas with to eliminate the danger of the disease spreading

any further; or they can apply advanced interrogation techniques to the effect of the perpetrator revealing all necessary information of his or her own accord. Of course, the latter approach is more precise and does not waste human resources, but it does take valuable time of specially trained security officers who would need to apply physical, psychological and chemical techniques to extract the information from the traitor. There have been cases when such treatment lasted for up to five years. The nature of techniques is, of course, a little different in such cases, but this is a complicated area that does not directly concern us right now.

“Your job, as future propagandists, is to know enough of these somewhat unpleasant but necessary and therefore good realities of the Plebiscite’s functioning to portray them to the public in a way that would enhance their understanding of the overall situation and to the sympathies with the labour of secret services. Disloyal elements, for instance, often complain that the group-based punitive method violates something they call individual liberty. You see, of course, how such filth is circular. They imagine this idea, individual liberty, and assume its goodness, and they use it to justify everything they say or do. No citizen of the Plebiscite would resist becoming fuel for the clockwork machinery of the state. None of us would ever willingly violate, knowingly or by neglect, the higher cause. These degenerates say that the secret services are curing, or to quote the word they use ‘punishing’, healthy, or in their lexicon ‘innocent’, people. If your devotion to the Progress and the highest council of the Plebiscite is as sincere as mine, you know, that none of those people are innocent or healthy. A good subject is ever vigilant, and a lack of such vigilance is already half a treachery, is already a telltale sign of moral degeneracy.”

He looked at the classroom. All the students were hurriedly taking notes. Suddenly and with horror it occurred to Gaspar that they were writing all this drivel down. They were trying to memorize it, to learn it, to absorb it, to digest it. They were orphans with outstretched hands and Gaspar was placing hardboiled candy with a needle inside each one in their pallid palms.

Something had to be done. This couldn’t continue. Despair swelled up inside him like heartburn. But he couldn’t leave the academy, could he? It would do

more harm than good, but how do you do more good than harm when your very job is to poison young minds? Such a horrible crime that is, perhaps even worse than if he were harming their bodies. When you hurt someone's body, they remain innocent, shielded lovingly by their martyr wounds: they grow through scar tissue and, if their spirit is right, become impossibly strong, but when you corrupt their minds, you destroy their soul. They become villains, beastly and godless. Marie was writing diligently. Gaspar imagined, she must have a beautiful handwriting. Girls like that always do. They try very hard, and even without that there is an inborn tidiness to them. It's a pity Marie LaLaurie was more Juliette than Justine.

“A great example from recent years of how current propagandists of the Plebiscite handled growing discontent over some unpleasant details of an interrogation of a former party functionary leaked by disgruntled officials to whom he had given that abhorrent disease of doubt. They were all caught and apprehended, of course, in due course, but at the time the risk was a widespread epidemic of mental disorder. The secret services function as surgeons. They must focus on particular malfunctions. They uncover plots and cure degenerates, but cannot treat large chunks of the population. We, propagandists, proscribe the antibiotics. We circulate around the entire body and correct the miasma of the disease. We cannot fight a gangrene, but several lesser inflammations easily.

“What our savvy comrades did was launch a TV series dedicated to lives of inquisitors, and how they struggle in their daily and professional lives. It used to be thought that agents of the state must always appear entirely steadfast, inhuman, almost mechanical, but recent research shows that, while there's time and place for this old-fashioned approach, manufacturing of sympathy affects the population to a much deeper extent.

“In the documentary series they have taken interviews and made shots of the participants' lives, their families who testified how they struggle with workaholic spouses and parents and how they beam with pride every time she or he comes home, their loyal servant of the Plebiscite, its vanguard, our loyal wolves. They tell how much it hurt them when their loved ones were accused of being torturers or butchers.

The inquisitors themselves, then, would explain how they go about their job in the most humane way possible, citing studies and calculations produced by academics and party officials, regarding positive effects of advanced interrogation techniques on the psychological wellbeing of a sick individual. To completely eliminate any shadow of a doubt in the heart of any ordinary householder they likened the interrogation procedures to familiar medical ones that may harm a healthy individual but benefit the ill.

“I remember particularly well one of the inquisitors, a very pleasant man, the sturdy army type, simple but with honesty and taciturn kindness in his eyes, said that the most difficult part of the job was seeing how ordinary people, good people were so horribly afflicted by dementia, and how every morning what inspired him was that he could contribute directly to stopping the pandemic.

“Never underestimate the value of entertainment. There is no better way to install certain ideals and thoughts in somebody than by making the experience agreeable and enjoyable to them. In that case they’ll be asking you for more of their own accord, and all you’ll need to do is provide them with suggestions, fashions and fads. This is the highest attainment of the art of propaganda.

“So you see, our brother and sister propagandists allowed the subjects to know their saviors and therefore develop sympathy for them, because you like what you know. Our job is to reveal the truth, the only truth, the truth that serves the higher purposes of Progress and the Plebiscite.

“For next week prepare the presentations on notable examples of propagandists diffusing crises that would otherwise demand widespread military operations of critical proportion. I would like you to concentrate on cases that interact with the work of secret services and focus on the synergetic relationship between the two. Thank you.”

The uneasy slumber of the lecture hall was disturbed by the lively commotion of aspirants agitated by the promise of leisure. In the white noise of life Gaspar found something that felt like salvation for the dumb creatures before him. Of course, for *them* salvation isn’t difficult. Fools and idiots are tenderly beloved by all

gods. Even ignorant fools who tear the wings off a fly just to see what it'll do, they are forgiven, by God and the Lord of Flies alike, for what can be done?

Will I be forgiven? — that is the question that wouldn't let Gaspar respite. His throat was still tense as if he were still speaking — lying, deceiving, brainwashing with no lightness of a joke at heart, but an inflamed feeling somewhere in his hips, perhaps right in the centre, in the sacrum that he had, for some reason, always imagined to be like a little brain for the down-below.

What shall do I to earn any sort of forgiveness? — Gaspar desperately tried not to think. He wasn't afraid for this lifetime. No, no one would judge him now, but he would be judged. Who will be the judges? Gods know he knows, only half-aware until only recently, but now he knows for sure, but gods also know his weakness, his frailty of constitution, his particular type of lazy cowardice, the cowardice of many intellectuals, especially academics. Will they be so cruel as to punish him? Gaspar had no doubt: he deserved the fiery tongues of hellhounds leaking his body red and raw, his skin like plastic against a candle, melting immediately, retreating in awful fright like a vampire before daylight.

Gaspar had enough faith however, that gods are merciful. They who see him in all his pathetic nudity, with no lie or pretence whatsoever to cover any of it up. Gods will understand. They do understand and pity him. And yet, there is something that judges more readily, something that's more generous with punishments and torments than the luminaries in heaven. Gaspar was scared of history.

Some day, maybe in a hundred years, maybe in five hundred years, all this, the Plebiscite, the Republic itself, these halls will collapse and fall into the mutest obscurity. This is the way of time, and no mountain, no planet, no star can withstand this law, the only law, perhaps, that is indisputable for the slight and the grand alike. Gaspar's only hope was that his name might be erased from annals of history, that he be entirely forgotten as someone not worth remembering. History is not forgiving. She will never understand his fear. She won't see the trembling of his jelly-like insides, the clenching intestines, the arrest of his breath. No, she'll only see his weakness of character, his respectable humiliation, ordinary cowardice.

But I am different. I am not like them. His mind insisted on protesting. But what was the difference? Gaspar felt nauseated. He had to get out of this accursed lecture hall, out of his wretched building, into fresh air. Space in the room felt heavy and it was pressing onto Gaspar with the weight of ten atmospheres, like he were underwater. He would be crushed by this invisible mountain held above his head by a God who'd exhausted every other avenue of convincing. He hurriedly pushed the papers into the leather bag, and was about to dart for the door.

A figure waddling like a young female horse approached the desk, conscious and confident of her charm and intellect. It was Marie. In the hypnotic trance of a quiet panic attack Gaspar heard the calm, steady part of him remark that her brunette hair was richly thick and voluptuous in volume and color, her curls truly deserving envy and admiration. She was awfully pretty, like a porcelain doll. Not many girls attempt the look, and even fewer can attain it without too much makeup to retain the natural grace of beauty that in the end is the greatest weapon in the arsenal of seduction and impression. Mastery in the art of appearance can be recognized by its effortlessness. There was no strain in Marie LaLaurie. Her face was pleasantly relaxed with a soothing smile. Her eyes wide-opened and well-rested. Even her hands that were holding the folder full of papers covering her chest did so without clenching, as if she were giving the folder the shiest of hugs.

— Professor, I'm very glad you're back. I heard about what happened. How terrible. I loved the lecture, by the way. It is as if I had lived merely to hear those words. You preach the truth; and so artfully. I wouldn't even know where to begin.

— Well, thank you. I hope it was informative.

— Yes. I intend to be a loyal disciple to you, and master your methods and shall serve the Progress and the Plebiscite to the utmost extremity with my mind and body. I am willing and ready to dedicate my body, my mind, my womb and my very life to the service of Progress.

— The Sun is out. How's your project going, by the way?

— Wonderfully! After the unfortunate incident that befell you, I was assigned to a different professor. Professor Verloc. He may not be as inspirational as

you when you deliver your lectures, but he is wonderfully methodical. At times I feel like I'm a real censor.

— I'm glad it's going well.

Gaspar hurried to leave. Marie was too awed to be disappointed. By the way her chest heaved, it was doubtful that she took Gaspar's relative frigidity as either a personal offence or dislike of what she was saying. It seemed that she took it as an ordinary, expected haughtiness of a Professor when hassled by a student.

Air was scarce once more. Of course, it was there, but to Gaspar's lungs it felt as if all the life had been sucked out of it. He breathed and breathed, and yet no chemical reactions appeared to be taking place, as if his lung were rejecting the life-giving gas, resolved to commit a seppuku (not many know that lungs are the samurai of the body). He had to get out.

Nearing the heavy oaken doors with carvings of cupids and lilies, as Gaspar felt the flush of real air, only just exhaled by the trees, and cooled by the motion that guarantees if not life then prosperity, maybe not only of you as you are, but to what makes you up. Motion is the key to life, Gaspar thought, just not necessarily my life. How egotistical must you be to be afraid of death. A noble vase loves her brittles and her shards.

Marie is now working with Professor Verloc. There is no way to free her now from her obsessions, from her monstrous delusions. Gaspar wondered in his mind, that perhaps he could have done something, step-by-step to show her that her ambition is not only foolish (for the Plebiscite even the highest members of the party are expendable; it is purely collectivistic; fallen officials are routinely exposed as perverts of the vilest kind), but also greatly monstrous. She may not truly know how many innocents are sacrificed out of obscurest suspicion. But she'll never think of them as innocents. It'd be best if she died.

Professor Verloc was disliked by Gaspar too much for him to fear him, as did his less soulful colleagues. He was an old frail man, with thin, long and spare hairs on his head, and with a little hunch in the back. His face was so wrinkly from a fortuitous angle it looked like an asshole. How easy would to be knock his skull with

a hammer! Gaspar pictured it would be something like breaking an egg's shell with a teaspoon. A crack, and it's done, no more Professor Verloc. The rumor had it, venerable Professor Verloc was irreplaceable in subjugation of academia under the rule of the Philistines and its sanguine cleansing forty years ago of all who had either the reputation or the temperament to rebel against the hold of the Plebiscite. To think that this pathetic, ugly old geezer was guilty of so many deaths and mutilations, of so much suffering, too much really for the entire country... It was disheartening that Professor Verloc was still alive.

The sky above was imperturbably blue with only enough clouds to fill up a giant's hand. All of them were so innocently white, like freshly washed bedsheets. One attracted Gaspar's attention in particular. It was lower than all others, so low that one could suspect that it was a reconnaissance plane sent from a far-off land in the clouds. Gaspar stared at it hopelessly. It looked like a moth or butterfly, he thought, only fluffy and white like cotton candy. The sight filled Gaspar with desperate longing for the time when he used to believe that the people of the clouds could one day descend and take him to their kingdom where even night was only blue.

## *The diary of a free man*

*It often happens that I wake in the night with a thumping heart—a jab in my memory and an instinctive movement of my arm to the side.*

*—Peter Moen's Diary*

### Day I

Today was probably the last warm day of the year. To see nature so jovial on the threshold of winter is unusual. If one forgot the calendar, one would conclude it were spring by merely admiring the air, and especially smelling it. That characteristic hormonal smell is the true herald of spring, nature's puberty.

I felt it in my own body, this excited uneasiness. The whole day was spent in solitude. Kevin and Gaspar were busy at work. I was too full with electricity to even move, as if afraid that the slightest tremor would disturb my carefully maintained equilibrium, and I'd explode. I don't understand this myself.

Deceived by the pheromones in the air I, the fool I am, dressed light, when I took a walk earlier today. I should have bought groceries, but was much too chilled. This was when everything went wrong for the day: I came back, changed into my pj's and buried myself under the igloo of my duvet. Soon the heat of my own body erased the traces of outside frost, but yet I had no desire to get out from underneath it whatsoever.

I still can't find a job. It's so irritating I could scream. I cannot wait to be grown-up. I cannot wait.

I was going to make dinner for Gaspar and Kevin. Originally, it was going to be roasted chicken. I was going to keep it in the oven for at least three hours. After that treatment the chicken is so tender, the flesh falls off its bones with the timidest poke of a fork, and delicious vapours tantalise the nose. They ought to be home in less than an hour. They will be hungry. It's high time to get out of bed and improvise.

## Day II

I sometimes have a dream, where I am all naked back at home. Like some wild mowgli roaming the mountain slopes alongside nine-tailed foxes. I am grown up, older than I was when I left. My body is in a great shape. In the dream I am not ashamed of my nudity. I'm a little proud of it. I display it to no one, except maybe the silent mountain echo.

I run for the joy of running. I know how to move. I don't run the way humans do. That would be impossible given my vulnerability and the roughness of the terrain. I run like a monkey, one of those mountain monkeys that stay off trees. I'm all alone, but not cold. The earth exudes heat, but not scorching heat; gentle, lover's heat, as if it were breathing.

In the dream it occurs to me that male genitals were not made for the purpose of hiding. They're enormous, unnecessarily so. They developed for display, like a peacock's tail, and like the peacock's tail the colorfulness and beauty were bought for the price of convenience. This is the nature's way. She's an Empress, not a beggar.

I run through the forest as if guided by some cryptic, irresistible desire. I remind myself of Apollo chasing Daphne. There is no one in front me, but a thirst is guiding me, calling me forward with the leash of lust, by the glimmer of Olympian pheromones.

As if responding to my thoughts, a bird descended from above the leafy green of trees' crowns. It was a parrot, I thought, though I have never seen one, but I knew that no other bird would be so lush with color. That parrot burnt with every possible color. It would have been garish, were it a person, and yet nature has a keen eye, and often balances on the verge of disharmony, like a genius pianist finding accord in disorder. The rainbow bird then led me on through the forest. I must have

ran for miles, but my body was so strong, a wild body, that I was barely tired. Running was simpler than walking.

The mountain forest grew darker. The sky was now mostly obscured by leaves and the light was coloured green. It was an Emerald City of sorts. My skin was jade, and I marvelled at it as I traversed increasingly confounded weaves of ancient roots. The bird flew so low I was afraid it'd hit a branch or a trunk, and then, then the magic would end, in a humorous disappointment; the worst sort of ending: really, the only bad ending. Because then the bird wouldn't have been a sign from the gods, then I would have been a fool with a very silly secret. I'd probably die of embarrassment and my young body would decay and its juices would fertilize this moss-covered soil and feed those elderly trees.

I was sure that if I were wearing I shoes, I would have slipped and fallen long ago, but it is as if in the middle of my feet were suction cups that attached themselves to whatever was underneath with the dead grip of gravity, and then shot off like a spring.

The whispering of running water now overpowered the whispering of trees. When I felt the penetrating, soothing coolness I knew that I had arrived. I was thirsty, but approached the river tentatively. That place seemed enchanted. I expected to see nymphs bathe in the stream, but there was no one. Only the soft singing of water, the singing of a longing bride was heard.

I lowered myself to the ground, and bent forward across the river's shore, to gather some water into my palms. This was when I saw a reflection of a woman instead of the body I was used to. She had short blond hair, wavy and bright like gold reflecting the sun. Her eyes were grey, pensive and in the pensiveness almost cruel; but lips were soft, full of kissing. My breasts were small and delicate, but beautiful, a noblewoman's breasts. I felt how my penis stiffened. It was peculiar, because I have never found women very attractive, but this woman in the river's mirror, my woman, this woman who lives within, something about her kindled my desire. But then, it wasn't really desire. I penis was full of blood and sensation, but I did not nothing

with it. It stood like a flower with no intention, calling to no action, blooming with heat.

The lady in the river smiled, but not suggestively. There was nothing of a whore or virgin in this woman. She had no coyness, no shame, no desire to cover herself, no desire to seduce. We looked at each other not like lovers do, but like you look at your reflection, when you don't try to evaluate. As if you looked in the mirror for the first time.

This is when I would usually wake up. I came to call her Frau Regina von Licht. One day, if I remember, the next time I meet her, I will ask if this is truly her name.

### Day III

I am looking for a job. This makes me think of death. I don't want to die. Death really scares me. When I was younger I didn't used to believe in death, but now I am old enough, especially after the Day the Sky Fell, that I know for a fact that it'll come. I am not sure that people survive death. Maybe I'm weak-willed, but I don't want to become nothing.

I want to live, like beasts fight to live. Desperately. I want to eat, to fuck, to sleep, to laze about. I want to make people fall in love with me, to admire me. I want to admire others. I want to feel kisses, Gaspar's kisses and Kevin's. Again and again, but lately every time they kiss me, I can't help it, I think that what they kiss, my soft, silky skin, and their lips, their fingers; all of this will soon be worm food. This occurs to me while we're making love. I want to run then, away from everything, forgetting myself, as if my hair were on fire, as if my skin were doused in acid. I want to run from time.

When my cock gets erect, it feels like a candle, and at the end of the wick is the end of my life.

## Day IV

My people are strange dancing ghosts of ancient forests; are gluttonous monsters of secluded mountains; are the beauty kings and queens of swamps; are the shades from vivid nightmares. I am with my people, even today. I hear their voices the moment mortal steps quiet. This evanescent silence after the step boomed is the gateway.

Something in me misses the night right before they banned air travel. I miss the Day the Sky Fell. There's a part of me that longed to be in that airship. To die in fire, in blue flames; is this what they call purity, baptism by fire?

## Day V

Gaspar was struck by lightning. It is either a curse or, most likely, a gift, a blessing (why would the Heavenly Father curse Gaspar; Gaspar could only be a chosen one; he isn't wicked — he is Noah). I am quiet about this. Kevin would be angry, if he read this. He scares me when he's mad. He doesn't yell; but his eyes becomes dangerous, like a tiger's. At moments like those I remember that he killed people. I remember that with precarious clarity. I admire his ferocity. I don't think I would have fallen in love with him without it.

## Day VI

I spend much of my time next to Gaspar's bed. He's getting better but is still very weak. I bring him tea. He says he likes it. It's chamomile with some tangerine peel, so not strictly speaking tea. It's both invigorating and calming.

We sit quietly in the same room. Gaspar mostly reads and ruminates. I just sit there. I enjoy his presence. It's soothing even now that he's unwell, he's still steady like the sky. It is as if such closeness to death taught him to be even more even, like a metronome.

But occasionally this duty of sitting by his bedside becomes unbearable. I love him dearly, but I worry that people will come and find this diary and take us all away. I am a criminal for writing this. I am putting all I love in danger with every word. These aren't entries of a loyal servant of state. These are entries of a deviant who invites calamity, who invites plague into our home. I should burn all these pages and then wash away the ashes so that no technology, no magic can bring these words back together.

#### Day VII

I burnt all the earlier pages, but yet I have found myself writing again. It's an addiction, a compulsion. I would have asked for help, but the currently popular theory of contagion means that Kevin and Gaspar would, too, be taken in.

I cannot allow this. I'm surprised that Gaspar said nothing about my writing here, by his bedside. It is as if he doesn't see it, but I know how perceptive he is. He is being permissive. Perhaps if he yelled at me, if he hit me, I would not continue. Woe is me. Woe is me.

#### Day VIII

I showered with Kevin this morning. Gaspar was too weak to join us. Lately, since Gaspar's accident, we haven't had the time to partake of carnal delights. I forget how strong Kevin's body is. He is barely a human being: a werewolf. This is what you get when you train your body as much as he did. His is a work of art, but

also a weapon. How perfect is this! A work of art very capable of killing you dead! Is this not every proper artist's dream?

Day IX

I hate...

I want to be free. I want to take off this skin, slide it off like a chicken's, with force and characteristic crackling of connective tissue underneath. I want to skin myself. I imagine it feels good to be skinned, kind of like when you draw your foreskin back and just let the air envelop the naked head that it feels like an internal organ is exposed to external forces.

No, this is not why I want to skin myself. I imagine in my mind's eye that one day this skin will fall off like a crust over an old cut, and within will be only a bird, a crow perhaps. Yes, I like crows. I'll be a crow, and fly away. I would be a smart crow. I would hide in the clouds from the Plebiscite, and if the sky is clear I would fly into the forests and hide underneath some branch. No one will find me. Clandestinely I will make it back home, to the mountain where some birds still survive. I will be under protection of those inhospitable rocks that promise only death to travelers, all of those who have just a taint of impurity in their heart.

Day X

~~I've burnt yesterday's entry. I do not know what came over me. I mustn't say such things. They are to troubles like honey to flies. I feel beastly, like a beast in a zoo; trapped and caged. Oftentimes I find no air to breathe.~~

No, Gaspar is much better today. He and I went outside. I try not to write. I write and cross out. I cross it out with like you would something illicit, ashamedly,

richly, so thoroughly that the paper is wet with ink and crumpled with the frontage of quill. I'll probably burn this entire sheet.

## Day XI

Gaspar ate at the dinner table with Kevin and me for the first time since the accident. I made smoked haddock with curried mayo and beansprouts on a bed of steaming rice. Kevin doesn't speak very much at dinner. He is very concentrated on the food. Must be something to do with the army background. He takes food very seriously. You can speak to him, but he won't reply with much more than grunt. In the month when Gaspar was ill we dined in near silence.

It was nice today to have a change of pace, and with dinner consume not only food but also pleasant conversation. Gaspar isn't chatty, but he always has something to say. It felt like a family dinner, from before my mother's death. Though it's the middle of winter, I feel hopeful like in the spring; and as if the sun is warmer and brighter. In this light, my angst, my anxiety seems not only unjustifiable, but a dangerous folly. I have all I need right here. To ask for more is greed; and greed only leads to loss. If I ask for more, I will lose my private heaven. I may even lose one of my private angels. For what? To quench the thirst of melancholia?

Would they go back home with me? Would they live high up on the mountain with me? In my hut of blackened wood? Perhaps. But once you return there, there is no way of coming back here. You leave the city. You enter the unconquerable realm of gods; and humans shun you, like they shunned my mother, like they would have shunned my father, were they not afraid. If you come back, you could be a problem. Even if you leave, the mountain stays with you. The Plebiscite dislikes recluses.

But burn these pages, burn these pages too.

## Day XII

Lately I write and burn. It is as if I am writing a wish and burn the sheet so that it comes true. I hear in a distant land they burn money as a way to send it to their dead ancestors.

It is as if I'm sending letters to fire; but fire doesn't respond. Fire is a celebrity. Celebrities never respond to fan mail. Perhaps I am infatuated with him. Perhaps I felt in love. I only really got to see his majesty the Day the Sky Fell for the very first time. I imagine seeing a movie for the first time is almost as glorious.

But this too must burn, my love letter to fire. This is enough to end my life and lives of everyone I hold dear. Burn, burn, burn, my secret passion.

## Day XIII

It is very easy to be a criminal. Well, I suppose what I mean is, it's easy to become a criminal. It's hard to survive being a criminal. I wonder if I am one, but until the men in black come to take you away, you can never be sure. You may be certain you are a respectable gentleman, and the next day you are disgraced, humiliated and tortured. Destroyed is the word that comes to mind, not only physically, but even your very name is mixed with shit so generously, it cannot be said without invoking a foul stench.

I've been roaming around the canals. I should really find a job. Or cook better food for Gaspar and Kevin. They work very hard so that I have something to cook at all. I am a burden. I know this, but right now I'm myself burdened by grave, grave thoughts. Until I'm free...

All I can do now is sort it out, this unbearable crushing weight on my chest, lest the burden of me becomes too heavy to bear. Danger is lurking within me. I'm scared of what I might do, of what I might have done. There is sickness in my mind

and body. What's dear to me is poisoned by a shade of looming death. I see blackened, soft corpses where I should see loving faces.

The canals are vast. I forget how great they are, and every time I go down there it dawns on me anew. It is a true underground. The state doesn't bother to monitor it too much. They span miles and miles. Many graffiti, especially of cocks and vaginas. Nothing in the traditional sense political. The canals may not be well monitored, but you can never be sure. Spraying a cock on a brick wall is at most hooliganism, but speaking out against the Plebiscite or the Republic is treachery, and traitors cannot be forgiven (only fixed).

Some places were spooky, some smelled of piss, but many were beautiful. It was like looking at a different time, as if some sort negative of the past remained in that wretched labyrinth, a faint glimmer of hope, of humanity. If I relax your eyes and forget that the entire structure is manmade, the aura of the place reminds me of home.

I wish I could just take Gaspar and Kevin and go, high up in the mountains, where they'd never find us. I'd spend days gathering herbs, berries, roots, checking traps for hares and other game. Kevin is a hunter. He'd bring home the main meal: a deer, maybe. He has the dexterity and ferocity for it. He could well be a mountain lion. Dad could teach him the rest. Gaspar would garden. Carrots, potatoes, whatever we could grow. Plants would be sympathetic to him, I think. They recognize kindred souls; these green creatures of grace and beauty; the slender stalks, the blooming, erotic buds, the perfumes they wear. Plants are dandies and flappers. But they're more delicate, more open. What can you say about creatures that live perpetually exposing their genitalia to the world? That's the gentlest, most exquisite part of them — they're all saints.

#### Day XIV

I've been down to the canals again. It's been five days since my last expedition there. I promised myself I'd avoid that place, but it calls to me, even despite its

dampness, its misery. It's the mystery of a free man, the misery of a sovereign. You can be ousted. You can be killed, or worse, but you do not have to submit inside. This is the message of the canals. It's the wilderness inside the city, a blind seat of unconsciousness, where repressed shadows lurk.

I went a step further today. It worried me, this escalation. I went close to what we now call the Old City. This is where the Sky fell and scorched the Earth, where I met Kevin, where he saved me, from fire and the sort of loneliness that drives caged parrots to beat themselves against the cage, until they lose feathers, until they die.

I don't think Kevin knows how much he's done for me.

I was at the border to that place. No one is allowed in. It is not banned as such, but it throws suspicions. To be investigated means to be found guilty in this world of ours. Suspicious is as bad a conviction. Various officials are anyone's worst nightmares. You are guilty until proven innocent; and go ahead, try to prove your innocence! But the most perverse thing is that they themselves are glass cannons. Any police officers, any official, can be brought down just as easily as myself, almost a stranger, almost a wolf boy. No one is protected. Life is worth nothing. Pain is the currency of the day. Death is a constant threat. Worse-than-death is ever imminent.

I saw a building with all windows and doors bricked up. The building is the last frontier. I remember watching a broadcast that warned us not to go the Old City. She said it was dangerous. Death, she said, has a tendency to enter your bones, and you may return different. She said, some sort of trouble was brewing in there. Some sort of virus, I think, and periodically they bomb that place to keep it the problem from getting out of control.

I wonder if any of this true. They also say that mountain people eat their meat raw and drink their own urine. If they lie about us...

I must go now. Gaspar and Kevin will be home in an hour. I need to cook them something. I was thinking beef stew, but I need to hurry. Kevin will be after gym. He's so hungry after a workout, beastly. You can practically see testosterone

coursing his veins and demanding in a candidly primal way protein. He reminds me a little of my father, but the happy days. I think I remember his purring as he ate the food my mother would make him, but this cannot be right. A child's mind exaggerates. Childhood memories can't always be trusted. My father was god to me. This is the way mother raised me.

## Day XV

I have resolved now. I will write and burn. Writing helps my understanding. Burning keeps myself and my darlings safe. I've decided to embrace the pattern that until now I considered a testament to my weakness and pathology, my aberration. Perhaps it was destiny's way to show a path to sanity instead.

It's Friday today. I made a Puttanesca risotto. It's Gaspar's favorite. He likes the subtle fishiness of anchovies and the rich sweetness of tomatoes. For desert I made spiced pears. They were red with wine and aromatic with herbs, especially the cinnamon. It's Gaspar's first week back to the University. This dinner was catered to his taste entirely. He hasn't been quite himself since the accident. I think it shook him. I wanted to show him that life isn't necessarily terrifying and majestic, that some of it is homely and cosy, and that spiced pears are as much part of it, as the thunderbolts or the Plebiscite.

I think it worked. By the end of evening, some of the joyous air of before returned. Once more we were simply happy to see each other, we weren't taking each other's company for granted, we weren't each other's furniture. I felt great warmth inside; my heart smiled, its red cheeks squished by the muscles that contorted uncontrollably in joy. Nevertheless, it wasn't quite like before. In Gaspar's eyes and in Kevin's I saw concern, very deep, like a corpse at the bottom of a well, I saw something that bothered both of them, something they couldn't share, something they wouldn't admit. I wonder if they saw that same shadow on my face, which from my perspective was an icon of adoration for my two companions.

Something is happening. It feels like the moment on the rollercoaster, when the cabin is drawn up to a peak with a steady, unnerving clicking of something underneath, when your whole body is tense with anticipation that perhaps with this next click will come the fall.

I do not know if the fall represents something good or bad; and perhaps only very shallow people can look at life in such a simplistic way. But I foresee scorpions crawling out of its skin. I foresee a whirlwind that will tear us from this place and land us in a land of adventure; dangerous — perhaps; but only as adventurers can we survive.

## Day XVI

Today was the first time I met someone down by the canals. Sort of. I met him, but he hasn't met me. It was a hobo. At first, I thought it may have been a corpse. Something pink against the mud-and-khatti palette of his clothes attracted my attention. In a second I realized that his penis was protruding through his fly.

I drew closer. He was breathing. His penis was very hard; the unconscious virility of the morning wood (of course, it was afternoon). The foreskin was drawn back and the tip reminded me of a plum after a summer shower in colour.

As I was moving past him, I wondered whether this transpired naturally somehow, or whether someone's exposed him doubly like that. Perhaps it was one of those erotic pranks that sometimes lead to accidents. Perhaps his friend was an artist, and seeing this man's lowly state, he tried to make him most beautiful (the stench around him testified to abuse of warming beverages and lack of proper hygiene, though the water was right there, and was it really so cold that even a whore's bath was out of question? To be honest, his dick wasn't filthy — another detail in favor of the artist-friend hypothesis; before ushering the flower forth, he watered it). The old man's penis (hobos almost always look old, even in their twenties; something I learnt in the city; there aren't any hobos in the mountains; there are vagabonds, but not

hobos) was good-looking and quite large, well-proportioned and extremely humane. It was probably the most exalted feature of this man.

I was tempted to cover him up. It was a little bitter, but how do you help a man like that, without disturbing the balance of the composition. But then I was inspired, like a gothic architect who is admiring his predecessor's work. I took off my glove and carefully ensheathed the stranger's member within, very gently (I couldn't allow him wake up). I left it there.

A while later it occurred to me to throw the other glove into the canal's murkiness. I could have something connecting me to something like that. I suppose it would reveal me as a kind person (what greater kindness could there be?), but I have to keep it a secret. It's only mine. It's a secret between myself and God, not even the hobo knows. The hobo knows the least (his body may know, but when do we really listen to that sagely advisor? we prefer to twist her messages, until she has no choice but to kill us in our sleep). It's not the shameful kind of secret, maybe only a little bit, I don't know. I hide it like a treasure beneath my silence, as a wild, inhospitable forest in its silence hides an ancient temple.

## Day XVII

It's Sunday. We're going out for a walk. I think Gaspar and Kevin are a little concerned about me. I spent most of the days roaming the canals. I haven't seen the hobo again, but I cannot quite get him out of my mind.

They don't know that, of course. They probably think that I spend most of my days watching TV and jerking off, which frankly doesn't sound that bad either, but I can see why they'd be concerned.

I need to tell them about my investigation of the canals without telling them. Or maybe I should just confess, but that's chancy. Who knows how they'd react. Gaspar is an academic specializing in methods of quashing the sort of thoughts I'm having, along with the people are that afflicted with them; Kevin is ex-military.

He killed people who disagreed with the Plebiscite. He probably killed for less. I forget these things sometimes, when I look at them and see their noble, intelligent faces, radiating nothing but tenderness and love towards me. Doubting them hurts me deeply. I'm embarrassed of that, but how I would go insane if they betrayed me. That would be worse than any torture. I would keep that wound beyond even death.

## Day XVIII

I had a swell idea this morning. I will throw a dinner party in two-months time. I have most of the menu figured out already. For the first course it will be chilled tomato plasma consommé. It will look fancy, taste great, but isn't that difficult to make. Gaspar will love it.

For the second course will be a lamb joint baked in salt doubt with a side of terrine of baby carrots. The lamb should be delicious: the succulent meat-steam would be trapped within the dough and soak the meat through and through. I hope this will send Kevin in a trance of carnivorous appetite. I want to see him savage the meat with his hands, thick juice staining his fingernails, his teeth as greedy for the taste as his very tongue; teeth that can taste meat: a werewolf's teeth.

Terrine is like a pate but made out of, in this case, carrots and carrot juice jelly. While none of us are fanatic about carrots, I hear, they improve eyesight and should complement the meat well, taste-wise and also temperature-wise (terrines are served cold). I bet it'll also look pretty on a plate; these strange orange slices. I bet no one there will know for sure what it is that they're being served.

For desert, I think, summer pudding. Frankly, there is no time as good for the summer pudding as the dead of winter. This particular one will be special. I have some berries frozen in the freezer, berries I saved from our forages into the forests. No one else will notice but Kevin and Gaspar. These berries represent our secret place, more secret than the bedroom even, our secret and forbidden place, our common root, our connection to the earth and the past; our childhood, and especially

our innocence, once lost, and now, I think, more or less, perhaps regained. It will be the celebration of spring.

But of course, I don't know anyone here anymore. Usually, you know no one when you had just moved to a city, but it's the opposite for me: when I was younger, I would find friends lying on sidewalks and just pick them up, figuratively, naturally. It took me a few months to learn the shyness of city dwellers. After the graduation and our degrees in aviation being rendered useless by the Day the Sky Fell I stopped seeing my university friends. It is as if we shared a shameful, criminal even, secret. That life ended the day this one began, in the cauldron of fiery air, from which I had been rescued first by Kevin, but then internally, on the deeper level by Gaspar.

I don't think I could pick just one. I have already hated those sorts of questions. I remember when I was little I'd be asked whom I loved more, my father or my mother. Every time I got shy and I couldn't answer.

Today I would have said that I loved my mother like I loved the Sun, and my father like the Moon. Without Sun the year wouldn't move; without Moon the month would stay still. Without either the day would stand helplessly frozen in place under the magnifying glass of the present. It would be so painful to be that day, lost with nowhere to go and nobody to keep company.

Gaspar is my Moon, and Kevin is my Sun. To choose between them is to choose between my left and right eye. I would be lesser either way.

Either way, I'll ask Gaspar and Kevin invite some of their co-workers or friends. They spend most of their free time at home. We're really a rather self-sufficient family. It felt strange to write this word, but we are family: a brotherhood of Eros.

Day IXX

Nobody will read these words, and it makes me free. For the first time in my life I can truly be myself, because as I write this, not only am I alone, but I am alone

actively. I'm not just locked in a room somewhere. I am speaking in a way no one will ever hear. Why am I writing then?

It's like looking in the mirror. I stand in front the mirror, but verbally. I look at my zits, my scars, spots no one, not even Gaspar and Kevin know about. To ask why am I writing this is to ask who is looking at me from the mirror.

It reminds me of masturbation. People diss masturbation, but everybody does it. Really, more people jerk off than can read. There is nothing special and shameful about it, whatsoever, and yet, it is shameful. I wonder if people are jealous. Jealous of your solitude. Maybe it's like eating alone, animalistic?

This diary is like that. I am eating alone. I cook and devour my own thoughts, and then I hurry to clean up the mess so that nobody suspects what everybody knows. How can you not be a real person? Of course, you detest this reality. It is your nature, but you are trapped by your fear and fear of many others.

I see people outsides. I hear their conversations and something occurred to me the other day. People in this society all want to be eunuchs. Not really want to be, of course (who could ever want that? only guilt could want that; this is why I think that perpetual guilt is one of the worst emotions, also the foundation of a 'civilized' society), but they wish to be perceived as such, pathetic and lamentable. In times of crises rich hide their riches. This is why people hide their sex today. It's maybe the only thing they have left.

This diary, the condensation of my best thoughts and observations must be hidden alike, set alight. The moment of joy must be hurried and clumsy and the fruit to be discarded, all so that I could do this again, write another entry, tomorrow.

Day XX

I spoke with Gaspar and Kevin about the party. They seemed into it. They said they'd try to bring someone in. Gaspar is unlikely to invite anyone. I don't think he has any friends at work. He is magnetic, but not particularly approachable. I have

seen him talk to some of his students. It is different when he talks to Kevin or myself. When he speaks with them, he is perfectly pleasant, of course, but a transparent wall of ice separates him from whatever querent had braved it to approach him.

There is subtle poison in Gaspar's manner, that stems possibly from his delicate perceptiveness, his painful sensitivity. He had to learn how to protect himself from an overload, but Kevin is different. Kevin, I think, misses the barracks. He misses the boisterous humor and severe playfulness and ease of fraternities. Maybe he also misses the war. We don't talk about it, but I catch him sometimes with unseeing eyes, looking into the distance, eyes directed behind, towards the back of the skull, remembering eyes. I try not to disturb him when he's like that. I give him space, and when he is back, I give him love to remind that there are no shell bombings here. I know that this is a lie, but he doesn't know I know, and we can revel in our shared delusion together, like in a movie.

Kevin will finally bring Jacob. I have heard so much of him, but not seen him yet. It is peculiar, as if Kevin tried to keep his war-life separate from myself and Gaspar. I wonder if he does so for our or his own sake. Does he fear our judgement? But I would never judge, even if he killed scores, I would stand by him — for his sins are also mine, and Gaspar's. I mustn't pry, though I want to. I saw that Gaspar didn't pry, so I must follow suite. Or maybe Gaspar already knows? Either way, it is not the kind of question you ask; if Kevin will find it necessary to initiate me, he shall. I won't be impatient. I won't push; you never know who's right on the cliff.

My job is to make sure the dinner is as perfect as can be. My job is to create a home, and invite spring into that home; to propitiate the guests to bless our trinity. That is all I can do. Perhaps that's all that needs to be done.

## Day XXI

It's been a very queer day today. It was Saturday. Like every Saturday, we were going to fool around in the morning, but Kevin couldn't get it up (this happens

sometimes with former soldiers, I hear). Normally, we'd go around this sort of problem, and have a great time, but today the root of the problem didn't appear to lie so far in the past. This was bridge for a conversation.

Kevin asked Gaspar and myself to go into our bathroom. He switched on the shower, and sink and bath taps. The sound of the water was deafening, almost like white noise on the radio in the unholy, graveyard hours of the night.

Light twisted by the streams of running water danced cancan on Kevin's Adam's apple, as he began to speak in hushed tones, with eyes of a deer that thought it heard something, a broken branch, a bad omen.

He said something to the effect of: "I don't want you two to panic, but I've been followed these past several weeks. It's been known to happen to veterans. They're checking if we're blabbering any of their secrets or if our loyalty had been shaken by what we've seen. It all ought to go fine, but take care not to draw suspicion. They should go away soon, as long as we're careful."

I was going to ask him for something more, but he closed the tap. With such resolution, as if he were screwing the head off a chicken. Gaspar didn't say anything, as if there were nothing to say. I didn't say anything either, even though there definitely was something to say. But the water was off, and I had no desire to tell them I've been wandering about the canals. I was going to, at first, but... What good would that do? The tap was closed, and I remained as silent as the stifled stream of water that wouldn't come out. They would only worry in vain. Nothing could be changed now.

I was angry, too, at first. Why didn't he say anything earlier? But then, why didn't I say anything just then, in the bathroom? I suppose I understand. "They would only worry in vain". How was he supposed to know that I'm a little troubled right now? He can't read minds. He is very busy, and with Gaspar's accident... I was really, and still am scared, for myself, for them.

There is a good possibility we might be treated as likely traitors. I wouldn't be surprised if whoever was investigating, "checking up", as Kevin said, on us, has by now launched a full scale investigation into all three of us. When these things start

up, they're difficult to stop, but then, if as he said, it had been going on for several weeks, why aren't we all tortured somewhere, in a security facility?

Perhaps only Kevin had been tracked. Or perhaps the security services have bigger issues right now than an unemployed degenerate youth wandered around close to the old part of town.

Nevertheless, I should keep low for a while. No canals, nothing. I will write and then immediately burn, like before.

I am thankful to whatever good genius inspired me to stock my diary in the chest of fire, that no one can open, only gods, and from them I do not expect judgement. My heart is pure, even if my mind is troubled. But these are troubling times. Fear is intoxicating.

## Day XXII

It's often so silent — as if the air is made out glass, very thin, delicate glass. I'm afraid to breathe, because if it breaks, it will cut me. My kidneys hurt. I've remembered something terrible, not quite remembered. I remembered the feeling, but from where it comes I haven't deciphered.

Now I hear a neighbor opening their door, and suddenly I'm back in this world. I'm safe again, in my four walls. I'm grateful to the neighbor for this relief while it lasts, but then I remember. In this time, to be happy is to invite misfortune.

It's been two weeks since Kevin's revelation. Nothing has happened. I was very careful. I didn't even write after that day. Whenever I go grocery shopping, I always go at awkward hours, when I know most people are at work. So far I have not noticed anyone spying on me. I heard from Kevin once, when I tried to question him during a shower, that the security agents do not try hard to hide. They expect that panic will lead their change to make mistakes and implicate itself somehow. I didn't see anyone, when on my own.

I did, however, see the man spying on Kevin one Sunday afternoon, when all three of us went for a walk to a cafe nearby. I expected a shabby looking man, someone maybe in his late forties, dressed in various shades of brown and beige. Someone who would perhaps smell funny: of cigarettes, coffee and feline piss. In actuality it was a young man, maybe a year older than me, younger than Kevin and Gaspar. The spy was surprisingly attractive: high cheek bones, black short hair. None of his features particularly stood out; instead his entire face formed a sweet harmony that amounted to more than a sum of his parts (though to even think of a face like that in parts seems dreadful).

He really didn't hide. He made his observation of us quite obvious. I don't think he tried to really scare us. Instead, it may be that he was simple bored by a tedious assignment. At the cafe he sat two tables away from us. He had Greek coffee and some Turkish delight. This really must be a routine thing.

### Day XXIII

I really hope I didn't ruin everything. After that sunny afternoon walk when I got to meet Kevin's stalker and sort of liked him, I began to feel safe again. This could be my downfall. I'm not certain yet. We'll know by the morning. If that young man now suspects us of something, gentlemen in black will come under the cover of the night and take us away. When dawn blooms, I will know it's safe. I won't sleep tonight. This much is certain.

I relapsed. I went down to the canals again. It's like compulsion of sort. I cannot explain it. Something is calling me from underneath that murky water. With its every tentacle its spirit draws me closer and closer until I cannot resist the call.

Perhaps it's the lawlessness. Some would be put off by this sort of thing, but me, it reminds me of home. Up in the mountains there is no law either. The city is suffocating. My lungs are pushed together by the straightjacket of my ribs. Only by the side of the canals can I breathe.

I didn't spend long there. Must have been about twenty minutes.. How cheaply I may have sold all our lives! If we all go down for this, I will never forgive myself, not in this life, nor in the next. I will haunt myself insane. I cannot wait for daybreak.

#### Day XXIV

Kevin brought home a net of tangerines, bursting with color and virility like bubbles of caviar. Each little crescent was so full of taste, it was spicy. It wasn't unnecessarily sour: rather the perfume of the South, the far South; a little proof that a magical land does exist somewhere where Sun never sets, where nature is frightfully green and flowers are not shy of most garish colors, the land of my dream from which that divine parrot that haunts me comes. After I had eaten the first tangerine, I kept the peel between pages of a book, something from my mother would do, I think, in secret from Kevin and Gaspar (they'll tease). I wanted to keep something as a reminder of this happy experience. To keep a little Sun, a little bit of the South for a rainy day, as a secret, almost as a mark of promiscuous intent, a perfumed handkerchief.

Kevin also brought some news. At the end of this week we're invited to a poetry reading at a cafe that has a bohemian (that is, permissive) reputation. We have not been out, all three of us, in a while, and with all the stress and storm of last weeks (my private, innermost thunderstorm), I can barely hold back my excitement, even though I don't care much for poetry (it's dull and long, and superficial; it doesn't make my skin electrified like a lover's touch, my chest ascend like mountain views, and memories thereof; nor does it make me feel secure and almost at home like the stinky, swampy dumbness of the canals). There will be drinks! and people! (he's invited Jacob and Eliana) I am not nervous at all. Right now I just want life. I just

want to sense that lively commotion around, like the soothing buzzing of cicadas in the summer.

## *The overdose*

*The flaming day grows olden  
As the youth of glory wanes;  
And the sun-bird grows more golden  
And narrower his wings;  
He swirls around in rings;  
He bears the bloody stains  
Of all the sorrows olden  
Upon his bright gold wings.*

*Victor Neuburg, The Coming of Apollo, from The Triumph of Pan*

The invisible dragons of wind coiled around a smallish, ancient-looking building, and wrestled with crumpled sheets of old newspaper. Their breath was chilling to the bone.

Johnny was wearing a pair of mittens with a peculiar geometric pattern of white, black and ugly dark green with equally ugly, dirty orange. There was something juvenile about them, but Johnny wasn't going to freeze his hands off. The cold came back so suddenly. Like an obnoxious guest who's long overstayed his welcome, winter was almost out the door, only to come back and linger inappropriately.

Johnny loitered around the entrance in indecision. Then, finally, he pushed the surprisingly heavy door and entered the *Haven of Dead Jesters*. Behind it was a dark vestibule where a porter with unpleasant, cruel features, as if guarding a terrible mystery, took Johnny's coat. Soon Johnny was through to the main chamber of the *Haven*. It was covered in wooden planks, with garish, heavy red-green fabric, that strangely harmonized with Johnny's mittens that he left with the porter, tied around the bar columns and spread as a background behind the stage.

Johnny immediately spotted Kevin and Gaspar, who sat at a large round table right next to the stage. Eliana and Jacob aren't here yet, Johnny thought to himself. Then Johnny caught Kevin's eye and waved. Kevin and Gaspar waved back. By the looks of it, they were both drinking scotch. There was a lovely familiarity between the two as Johnny could feel even across the room, and it made him feel a little lonely. He headed towards the bar.

It was not very busy yet, but the torrent of patrons from the vestibule was spilling abundantly, with ever more vehement urgency. The only limit to the speed of their accumulation was the deliberate and dignified manner of the porter, who was usually interpreted as infuriating by the guests, but they were all cultured people so they would just stick up their noses and take their number with the quiet loathing of suppressed violence. Johnny suspected, it was one of the few forms of entertainment available to that gloomy man.

Johnny looked at the barman, whose hands danced as he poured liquids from one container to another and then to a glass filled to the brim with ice, like some sort of circus alchemist. His plump face was handsome, handsomer in fact for his dexterity. He must be the sort of man whose face is always a little full, despite his overall lean constitution, Johnny thought, as he leafed through the menu. Beautiful old-fashioned letters printed on white crisp paper, describing drinks exquisitely.

His eye stopped on a cocktail, Mauve Lake. The description said: "Transform yourself into Endymion gathering flowers on the New Moon for his ever virginal bride in the garden that opens its gates only on this day every month in a violet glow on the surface of a wild and misanthropic lake. For one night feel the security of remoteness and the aroma of divine gifts, of your very flowers of love, before a wild bore rips you to pieces the next morning (the hangover, of course!)."

Johnny didn't even look at the ingredient list, except that it had *creme de violette*. It seemed exactly like something Johnny needed. He felt the pressure of new arrivals behind him, the heat of their bodies, the sensation of their breaths on the back of his neck and the stink of their perfumes, all jumbled together (This is what the refuse bin at the flower shop must smell like, it occurred to Johnny.)

He caught the barman's attention and was served, possibly out of turn.

In about five or seven minutes he held the glass filled with liquid of various shades of purple, from very pale to very rich and a sugared violet under the surface, as if frozen in ice, in his hand, as he was heading towards Kevin and Gaspar's table. Johnny moved carefully. He wished to preserve the drink in full. It seemed like the bar was going to be very busy for the rest of the night. He couldn't afford to waste a drop. The chilled glass melted intoxicatingly against the tips of his fingers. It was as if he was already drinking, with his skin, through the glass, as if he were a snake imperceptibly consuming the violet's dew.

As Johnny neared Kevin and Gaspar, he felt them, as if they were in bed. For a moment the rushing mass of people, that could have suggested to Johnny desperate parts of a still alive but cut up centipede, disappeared in the loving glow. Kevin was sitting with his legs spread far apart, in beige trousers. His white shirt had denser and more transparent strips, that exposed only one sixth of the areoles of his nipples. The odd arrangement attracted Johnny attention briefly. Gaspar was wearing a woolen turtleneck so black it sparkled.

Johnny sat on the chair closer to Gaspar. He would have liked sit in between them, but that would have been facing away from the stage. Two more chairs remained empty. Jacob and Eliana would sit there. Jacob would want to talk to Kevin. The whole evening was really for them to relax together. Johnny, Gaspar and Eliana were more of an afterthought, a duty of familiarity.

— Good evening! How's your day been?

— Mine has been good. I saw ice-encased branches today, like hardboiled candy with chocolate inside. This winter is stubborn. As for the rest, you know how it is: the work at the University follows its own steady course. Step by step it goes forth, just like time. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Gaspar had a half-smile on his face that was neither bitter, nor jovial. It reminded Johnny of a half-moon.

— My day has been good too. I've been excited for this. It's been so long since we've been out like that, all three of us.

— And Jacob and Eliana, of course.

— Yes, I haven't had a chance to properly speak with Jacob in so long now. He is so diligent in helping Eliana take care of the little one. The days of us going to a bar once a week and getting absolutely obliterated on alcohol are over. It may be for the better, but as you know, I tend toward sentimentality. I guess I'm that kind of a soldier.

— Don't have too much drink tonight, Kevin. I expect you to ravish me later when we get home as a thank you. You know how much I hate poetry. It's a huge favour that I've come here.

Gaspar was purring like he did when he tried to pass off something as a joke that in fact was not really much of a joke. He sipped his whiskey to the click of ice.

— I promise you, Gaspar, if I don't fuck you tonight, I'll fuck you tomorrow, and I'll fuck you so hard that you will end begging me to finish.

— There is something similar in the unbearableness of physical exertion and pleasure, no?

Johnny looked at Gaspar, who pretended to think, which was always a good sign that he was vulnerable in some emotional way, and at Kevin who was happy tonight, which made him a little randy.

— Don't leave me out! I hate poetry too.

— Don't worry, little hummingbird. We'll make plenty use of that fragrant body of yours.

Gaspar leant in as he were to whisper something to Johnny, but instead sniffed the back of his neck ever so slightly, but it make Johnny feel a little turned on and also conveyed that peculiar feeling that puppies must have when they're playing.

Kevin's eye focused and he sat up a little bit. Johnny and Gaspar followed Kevin's gaze. Two familiar figures entered the room. The lady was wearing a heavy necklace, a spacious sweater and a woollen skirt the colour of the edge of a petal of a pink lily, gentle like candy floss. The gentleman was in sombre colours, with the exception of playful thin strips of bright blue running up his woollen trousers of a much more subdued blue. The whole combination reminded Johnny of spots of

brightness, that had leaked through a web of branches, onto a surface of a deep river on his native mountain.

They waved and proceeded to the bar. Kevin could not hold back a smile, and excitement was sparkling in his eye. It was as if Johnny could feel Kevin's heartbeat quicken its pace. The aura of his blond lover was a little like that of a young male dog at the sight of familiar face, but nobler, of course. Kevin was of a noble breed, Johnny marvelled to himself, but he was manly and secure enough to show his feelings, to be almost completely transparent. It occurred to Johnny that Kevin could not be having a lot of unbecoming feelings, then. This is why he saw no need to hide any of them. Many of the vices that haunted other people were simply absent from him. He had lived on the edge of death. It was as if he picked up some manner of readiness, some manner of clarity that made him completely clear like a reflection in the steel of a blade.

Johnny was even a little bit jealous of the intimacy, or at the very least, the longing Kevin appeared to have had for his army buddy. It must have been that bizarre lust for the uterine wetness of trenches or maybe abandoned mouldy cellars — really the cruel laconic clarity of war that seduced so many wisemen throughout history.

Johnny looked over at Gaspar. He did not seem bothered. He appeared to be consumed in observation of glaciers in his glass, having very briefly acknowledged the arrival of Eliana and Jacob. For a second his eyes looked taxed and heavy. Then Gaspar noticed Johnny's attention, and his former playfulness returned. It was as if he put on a fool's mask at the carnival. Johnny was going to ask if everything was well, but before he could, he was interrupted by greetings from Eliana, who sat to the right of him and Jacob who sat, of course, next to Kevin.

— This bar is so lovely. I don't get out much these days. I'm so very excited for the poetry, too. I feel like a savage suddenly exposed to culture. In similar awe, and similarly dumbfounded.

— It's such a pleasure to see you again, Eliana.

There was an unexpected, if implicit warmth, between Gaspar and Eliana, Johnny noticed. Gaspar never really mentioned her, but there was something like a secret understanding, built on shared ordeals. For a brief moment Johnny thought he saw the rainy days from before he ever returned to his childhood friends' lives reflected in both their gazes, from back when Eliana and Gaspar waited anxiously for news from the front and every letter, every call seemed the harbinger of the end, and both Gaspar and Eliana would secretly, perceptibly only to those with most acute, eagle-like eyes, hesitate before picking up the phone or gutting the envelope.

— How is the baby?

— Eliah is well, thank you. Healthy, strong and brave, like his Daddy.

School teachers say he might have the attention deficit disorder, but we're getting a second opinion.

— How old is he now?

— He'll be six in a month.

— How wonderful. How will you celebrate?

— We'll just invite his friends from school and their parents. I'd like to use this opportunity to bond with them a little bit. It's very useful to forge informal bonds with other parents for when he gets sick or anything like that.

— I bet he is the cutest, just like his mother! By the way, I don't believe we've been properly introduced. Everybody calls me Johnny.

— So will I then! It's a pleasure to meet you. Jacob's mentioned, you are Kevin's and Gaspar's lost long childhood friend?

— Yes, it's kind of a long story, but instead of moving into the city, my parents moved farther into the wilderness. I was completely savage when I first moved here, so entirely alien to the city way of life. Everything was new, even the indoor plumbing. We used to bathe in the mountain stream when it had been warm outside, and in the winter, you'd only warm a little water over fire and address just the priorities.

— What an interesting destiny. You must be very pleased with getting a degree, then, and being well on the way to a much more comfortable style of living for your children.

Jacob was completely absorbed in a quiet exchange with Kevin. It was sombre, but not morbid, in the way only veterans speak: of danger as if it were a trifle; you see a similar levity in nobler beasts such as lions and leopards. Jacob's hair was joyfully curly, and even a large mole right in front of his right ear did not ruin his appearance. His eyes were almost entirely black, and when they looked at Johnny, he felt the gaze tickled him somewhere deep inside. It was as if they were already friends, friends by extension, dear friends by default. As Jacob leant in with greetings and a handshake, Johnny could not help but feel embarrassment at his stifled jealousy and resentment. Jacob's warm smile, *just* like he smiled to Kevin, forced Johnny's face into an expression of sincere hospitality.

— And you, Gaspar, how glad am I to see you.

— It's been too long, hasn't it?

— Too long.

A smile of boyish confidence on Gaspar's lips glistened like red lipstick, but by the way his eyes moistened as Jacob hugged him, Johnny could tell that the hearts of the two were deeply pierced with sympathy, as they are for two people who both love a third person very dearly.

A ring rang from apparently nowhere. The ghostly apparition forced the crowd to visibly hasten. They were now panicking ants.

The light from the chandelier was soon after that dimmed somewhat as a testament to the seriousness of the call. The tone of the room changed almost immediately. Everyone was suddenly settled. The squabbles and other tiresome details of everyone's lives were expelled. The gates to the world of art were about to be open, the gate to a miraculous, fairy land, and everyone felt it, like one feels in the theatre before the curtain is lifted, stood in impatient anticipation like that of a puppy waiting for its owner to come home. The ugly, resentful, obscene, haughty and cruel faces, starving and of those of many chins, were granted grace that was not solely

due to spreading darkness. There was a look of hope, a glimpse of their inborn gifts they forgot they had. They lost themselves in the darkness and something much better showed its head from underneath the lily leaf.

— Look there.

Gaspar pointed to the entryway of the bar and spoke under the breath to Johnny, who immediately looked and saw another familiar figure, the uninvited guest with shining teeth. This was the spy that Johnny had hoped he would never see again. He dressed up. He looked so fine. It infuriated Johnny. He would have him killed. His presence was an insurmountable insult and a threat. His jovial appearance, his elegance, his confidence as he ordered something at the bar, were all unbearable to Johnny. Johnny's asscheeks clang together like he was holding back diarrhea. His diaphragm attempted to strangle him, he was sure. His throat was closing up like he were having an allergic reaction. He was perhaps falling in love.

Finally, the lights in the chandelier were dimmed entirely, only wall and table lights remaining. Due to the glass mosaic on the lamps, shadows were blue, green and red (the ordinary light ranging from yellow to brown encompassed the three colours as a background). Johnny found himself surprised that shadows cast by the red glass were the ugliest. They reminded him of dry, congealed bloodstains.

— Attention, the entertainment program for the evening is about to begin.

The voice amplified by the microphone turned all the faces to the stage. There stood a rather unpleasant old man, a thing of children's nightmares, with missing teeth, something Johnny had for some reason associated with cannibals since a very, very tender age. He was mostly bald, of course, with hair of dirty grey, not fully bleached like first snow, but more like snow in spring, when it is mixed with all the mud and filth it hid underneath for the winter months.

— Today we'll have the honor of listening to five poets I have personally handpicked. In between their spectacular presentations you will have the chance to refill your glasses and, of course, to share your impressions. In these times many call difficult, but I call easy — for I have seen difficult times and survived them, we have

the pleasure to assemble like this, us, the feeling folk. Believe you me, this is a luxury.

At this point the old man appeared to have almost stumbled, as if choked on his own saliva. He looked around like a wild, frightened animal and continued.

— But enough with memories, enough with the empty graves! Please welcome Elizabeth Thackeray.

A very pale young woman who looked anaemic and shared some similarity with a white, hungry praying mantis. Her eyes were semi-transparent. Word ‘bloodless’ occurred to Johnny. Her lips were dark red, nearly purple. Johnny had never seen lips like that on a person save lipstick. Her hands were a lot older than her face. In clothing she chose to wear shades of grey with only brushstrokes of light blue, like lapis lazuli insertions on an Egyptian statue.

— I hope you are having a pleasant evening. It is an honor to have this opportunity. The following is a eulogy my late mother.

Her voice was very faint, and much like a creaking step in the night. There was something of wailing in her tone, despite its low energy charge, perhaps not entirely unlike those sobs that come as an aftershock after every tear had already been cried out and the throat is sore: distilled and mute desperation.

Today familiar streets feel strange,  
like fallopian tubes of my mother,  
like her sunken face, which I saw  
times innumerable change from happy to sad.

A thought like a bird would fly in,  
and wreak havoc. The windows are shut,  
like her eyes, and another bird sits  
on her bedpost, like a black crown.

Today even the sky feels alien, like it were  
littered with flying saucers like chickenpox  
I had when I was little, and my mother

put salve on the red pimples to soothe  
it all away, like the time I now cannot wait  
to pass. I am holding myself together,  
by chance. Cold fire is eating my hands  
and feet; I'll join her today if I weep.  
Today even this body feels unfamiliar,  
like if it's dressed in a semitransparent veil of mourning,  
it is numb like it were molested, not its own, belonging  
somehow to some other, displaced  
by the sensation of chill in my fingers.  
Or was it, my heart? It is pumping  
a river of ice only just broken, with a crack  
that sounded like a step on virginal snow.  
My little, newborn blue tears are wiped away by cold, dry wind,  
like they were wiped off by her on the day I was bullied that first time,  
and the sky was different, and today

The woman froze. There was more, anyone could see: the page wasn't exhausted. Her face was funny, a little red. Then she quickly folded up the paper, took a deep breath, and said: Thank you.

As she was leaving the stage to an ovation, Johnny tried to brush the poem off. It was a little silly, a little amateurish, much too sentimental — and how banal, but it nonetheless affected him morbidly. He never saw his mother with a black crown. He never saw her at all, after she disappeared. Father said she fell off a cliff. There would be no remains, nothing recognizable, at least. Better let birds of prey and beasts take care of it, the old way, the economical way, before man became arrogant. This is what Johnny taught himself to think. The scary thing was he barely remembered her face. It was still the dearest face, but he could not recall it, only the feeling of love and then the agony of loss, no features. She had green eyes though. Or were they blue? Blue-green maybe? He couldn't wait for the next poet to take the

stage. He needed some fresh air, but couldn't leave. He wouldn't have Kevin and Gaspar worried about him. He would only show as much emotion as appropriate. Johnny was certain they were looking to check up on him. They must know how difficult it was for him to swallow that poem, but he was resolved to look nonchalant.

— What a miserable woman. I'm so sorry for her.

Eliana's eyes were a shade darker than normal, a deeper blue. This is the shadow of tears, Johnny thought.

— At least, she is transforming her misery. From raw muteness into words. This is transmutation. The common lead of suffering is in this way made into gold, made into poetry, or at least, this transformation is attempted. Like alchemists, poets fail a lot more often than they succeed.

The rhythm of Gaspar's words were calm and assertive. It was almost prophetic in character, something you say in the dead of night, something that is said besides you. This is what is properly called enthusiasm.

— But she still seemed so sad. It seemed to me like she hadn't even finished reading. She couldn't handle it. She had to quit.

— I noticed this too. She cut the poem off abruptly. In my opinion, this means that as a poet this lady is a failure. She put her vulgar, personal, private drama before her art. She would have made a cowardly soldier. How embarrassing. Embarrassing to even watch!

Gaspar held his glass and the ice swam in the whiskey and one of the cubes hit the glass wall melodiously. Eliana quietly disagreed with Gaspar, not any grounds in particular. He might have been right, she thought, but being right is no excuse to be so cruel. On some level Eliana wondered if she, too, would have been crushed by calamity like that, annihilated so that she forgot her legs, how to put one forward and to follow it with the other. She'd be drunk with sorrow if she lost Jacob or their son. Would she too lose all dignity? Would she have even the courage of this Ms Thackeray? What would Gaspar say then, so coldly, with such haughty righteousness. A cold, statuesque stoic he is, a work of art, a man of letters. But what of my life-blood, she thought, what about my pulses? How will I convince my heart

not to freeze? How would I convince the blood to flow? Would I cry out my dignity, my health, like Ms Thackeray?

— All the ancients said to know yourself. If you do, this will be your root. This knowledge will be your impenetrable bastion. If you are in your place, you shan't be moved, but so few are in their proper place. We are so ambitious. We pretend to be who we are not. This is why we break so easily, Eliana. Without self-knowledge we are porcelain dolls. Armed with it, we are golems.

The announcer came back to the stage. The old man's hair got even sparser and the scalp sweatier that the hair lay there on the shining surface like thick rat's tails. He spat as he spoke into the microphone with bizarre liveliness one would not expect from a body as frail as his.

— Next, dear guests, is Marlon Salvucci.

A muscular gentleman, obviously Italian, came into the limelight. He was wearing a very tight pair of jeans that his package protruded like a codpiece. Johnny thought that perhaps Mr Salvucci had a semi. Whether that was true or not, he was observed it jiggle with some fascination, as the gigolo of muses jogged onto the stage.

Mr Salvucci had the sort of a charming smile that was so endearing it could be weaponised. You can tell he is a whore, it struck Johnny, a very choicy whore probably. Mr Salvucci took the microphone into his hands confidently and had the sort of impression one has when he had just finished telling an indecent joke to a close group of friends. The public was already ready to applaud, and ask for autographs. He had the voice you would expect a young man loved by everyone to have, and his Adam's apple moved marvelously in tone with every word, like a little dancer.

— This poem I'm about to read to you all I called 'My Grecian Sumer'. It's been dedicated to the most magical time of my youth and someone I will always miss. It is a love letter, but one that is certain in the muteness of response. It is the sort of a love letter you put in a bottle and throw into the sea, for no reason. You share, but with whom? Perhaps with echo. Perhaps with tritons! Who better

understands the bleeding of undying and solitary love, of love in memory like on film, frozen throughout the years?

His voice sounded warm as he began to read.

Remember our Grecian summer?

Splitting peaches in vineyards,

sleeping and crying on each other's sleeves,

cut like Adonis from flesh and not marble.

Forbidden flowers on top of a mantelpiece.

Two deers, moving hips like Indian dancers,

coiled like death and sex

on a Persian carpet that tasted a lover's blood.

I could have accepted a thousand lashes

with you by my side, like you were the god

of opiates, but without, I die from a gust from a butterfly's wing.

My animal Sun, when I am warmed by the heat of your closeness

I'm scared of getting cancer, but my heart is a warrior,

so I plunge myself in like into a mineral spring,

and then we are both volcanic.

In the shawl of music you sat on the balcony,

and the stars listened to you, holding their breath.

This is when I knew. As much I loved you,

I would soon have to love you from afar.

How could I compete with him?

But my heart is not broken. My heart

is a warrior, and every scar from that time

he treasures like a notch from a night of his triumph.

And I will always have that Grecian summer,

a treasure I keep closely guarded inside my belly,

a celestial blessing expressed in the medium of a mortal man.

Throughout the poem Mr Salvucci grew more sombre, more tragic, and a shadow of true beauty, monstrous beauty, beauty from the times of cave fires, brightened his features. He had not only a cock but also a heart, and as he had been showing off the former earlier, he was now showing off the latter.

Johnny was certain that Mr Salvucci's cock and heart were both of the highest grade, and either deserved admiration. To be loved by a man like that, both in bed and in eternity... It might feel a lot like being loved by Kevin, but perhaps with fewer tears. Mr Salvucci is what Kevin would've been if he never went to war, if he never saw... And for a veteran, Kevin was light-hearted enough.

Johnny looked over across the table at Kevin and Jacob as they were laughing about something. From where Johnny sat, the two looked like a couple. He was almost jealous again. Who knows what may have happened between them during the war, and could you blame them? When Death knocks on the door, everything warm, alive, animal in you seeks its like. These bonds are that of brotherhood, but not brotherhood of blood or of wine. It's better: the brotherhood of semen.

The scene unravelled in Johnny's imagination. Somewhere in a dirt hut Kevin and Jacob covered with the sweat of fear and the grime of war, their bodies sore and in soreness all more sensitive, painfully sensitive and so very taut, so very hard and masculine. Kevin's golden curls and Jacob's black curls kiss like little snakes, ready for squeezing each other in deadly embraces, in a pre-historic passion on the verge of survival in the night of mankind. Apollo and David, perfect in nudity, even with the sweat and mud and the desperation of an unwashed savage body.

— I bet he'll fuck tonight with someone in this very room.

Gaspar said this very pensively, with lazy jealousy and amusement of a fat cat on a warm summer afternoon.

— You're probably right. If I were single, I'd fuck him. He was very cute, and I liked his poem. I think he really understands love, the way we do.

— I get the sense that this heart is not very spacious right now. It's full to the brim with his Grecian summer. I'm sure, he'll fuck well, sincerely and passionately, but when he is in bed alone, falling asleep, do you think he'd see your face or your cock, for that matter, in the mirror of his nascent dream?

— I guess, there's nothing wrong in a little bit of promiscuity, but it seems a shame that someone like him who may be capable of love, who may know what love for another truly is, would be so incapacitated by what in this past was the source of his virtue.

— To breathe in, you must breathe out. To fall in love, you must learn how to leave love. Too much loyalty is basically constipation of the heart.

The ancient old man coughed into the microphone in the manner of a body that expels last gasps of air for a while after her soul leaves for good. His voice was creaking, as if he had just had too much gin that drained last drops of life from his arid body.

— Julian Verdi, ladies and gentlemen! This night's debutant!

A thin, sickly gentleman of maybe about twenty came up onto the stage. His eyes were full of terror — not about reading, Johnny thought: this boy was always afraid. His demeanor was odd, as if he were trying to disappear, as if perhaps he did not wish to be there, or anywhere. His nervous hands unravelled a tortured sheet, and he began to read, first tentatively, then, as if forgetting that he was in front of an audience, his voice got hotter and moister, so Johnny thought.

I swallowed the dew dropped down  
from an edge of your sword,  
like the blade of a guillotine;  
was I meant to feel humiliated?  
I take it for honor to drink  
the wine of ravenous maidens,  
the white wine the color of bone marrow  
splashed with a slash of thinness.

I'm a vessel, and vessels have their own pride:  
emptiness that resounds like an avian cry  
of a woman giving birth at night.  
You are satisfied and hence bored.  
I feel again like I should feel humiliated,  
but I am proud of my insatiable appetite  
for beer drawn from a vein of a stone;  
I can't handle tropical juices —  
I get allergic: I need to be in danger  
to really feel safe... And I have seen deeper  
into your mind than your psychic evaluation agent —  
you have no place for tenderness —  
you are rock hard, and with you,  
I can never slumber; you're like  
a taut Cupid's piercing  
through my foreskin and heart.

Besides the saccharine ending, what struck Johnny as a little disconcerting was the bird line. What would this youngster (though only younger than Johnny by maybe a year, the gentleman on the stage was undoubtedly a boy, not a man) know about birds? There were none around the Foam City not for miles. He was city boy; no one who grew up in the country would be so anaemic. He was an urban cat. The poem didn't upset Johnny like the previous one, but left him concerned for the boy. It sounded like he had emotional issues, or maybe pretended to have them, which in some ways may amount to the same thing. With certain things it is easy to forget you're pretending.

The boy stepped off the stage and Johnny traced him to this seat. He was there with an older gentleman, maybe in his fifties. Not good-looking, grey-haired and balding, with an unpleasant, unkind face and hawkish, hook-like nose.

Gaspar was in his serpentine mood. Out of his tongue seeped poison, and this discharge was truly the only thing that made his disposition more humorous than misanthropic. This hissing attitude was sometimes the only thing that stood in between him and complete despising of humanity.

— Such a delectable degenerate, no? I bet he still blames his father for his perversions, for his hatred of himself. I'm the opposite of a moralist, but his young man is almost a priest!

— I feel so sorry for him. It seemed like every movement he made was painful for him, as if wearing close itself abraded his skin, as if earth burnt his feet by merely supporting him, as if his throat was filled with molten iron when it was only air. And the gentleman who I assume is his boyfriend. He looks so hungry, so predatory. There is a cruel lust in his eye.

— This is why I called him a degenerate. He is a slave of his weakness before evil. He is seduced by cruelty towards him like any heavy-hearted rock is seduced by gravity.

— I wonder if his foreskin is really pierced. This is odd.

— Metaphorically or literally, it doesn't matter, he's abdicated from his sex. His sex is too strong for him. Everything is too strong for him, too heavy, but especially his sex, like for *any* priest, whether of flesh or of spirit. Who cares if he really put a piece of metal down there? Listen to what he's saying? It has nothing to do with whether he's actually done it or not, but what does that piercing mean for him?

— You mean that his lover is the piercing, the guard in both senses, to keep the treasure in and defend it from evil winds, a prison guard and a guardian. This is the double aspect. This is his ambivalence. He cannot tolerate liberty and therefore consents to the lesser evil? And he sheds blood for his love... like in those savage and prehistoric time?

— His own cock is too heavy a burden when it fills with blood. He is so terrified! He us pulled by it down to the bottom of the sea. He is scared of his very blood, poor thing! This is why I called him a degenerate.

Eliana spent the entire conversation trying to find a position for her hands and fingers that would not be offensive to her, nor very conspicuous. She finally spoke.

— Should we really be discussing them like this? It seems a little bit harsh, and nearly unjust to judge this Mr Verdi. He may have only been very scared of public reading.

— You may be right, dear, soft-hearted Eliana, but what you're proposing would make for a tedious conversation.

— Excuse me.

Johnny moved his chair with a scraping noise that was immediately dissolved into the disheveled choir of chattering voices. His thighs felt tired of all the sitting and ass ached a little bit. He looked around the room and headed toward the sign with a little green man. The inside was done up in the same style as outside but more rustic. It made an impression of a toilet in a new diner somewhere the country. Johnny thought he could even hear moos coming from behind the walls. Toilet porcelain was incongruous. This smell of wood and piss oddly reminded Johnny of home, he supposed, of the outhouse.

As he unzipped and slipped his trunk out, a pensive mood came over him. He slipped his foreskin back as his Dad taught him when he was very young, exposing the red acorn. Johnny recalled all those times he pissed in the wood and the steam carried his smell upwards and how he secretly wasn't really disgusted by it, and the next whiff of wind would bring the fresh aroma of pines diluted with tender notes of spring that never felt very far off there, never as unreachable as here, in the city.

Johnny thought how much has changed since he left, at seventeen. How many days have passed and how much life squirted out... Johnny did not feel old, but he knew his prime was past. He was a very perceptive man, and perceptive men notice these things before they get to their late thirties. It takes a good eye. Johnny was going to be a pilot!

He wished he could feel like he felt when he was younger. Nothing scared him. He was going to pierce the world, but it turned out, his pierces was not quite large enough. Johnny's thoughts kept returning to that man who sat outside, the spy who held his and his lovers' lives in his hands, as hostages to him whim. He was toying with their idyll like it were a pen. He could destroy their happiness with nothing more than routine, paperwork boredom. Johnny's kidneys felt pregnant. If he could, he would squeeze the life of that man, that careless decider of destinies. Then, *he* would feel. Then *he* would fear. Then *he* would suffer. He would *die*.

Johnny was so afire that he could not even enjoy a piss, a simplest of tranquilities, without the rude intruder coming to mind. Everything he cherished could be taken away tomorrow. *No, tonight*. Everything. Johnny would normally marvel at the purple-red dawn-like hues of his glans when he urinated, but tonight, now, even they reminded him of the peace he no longer had. Johnny was hungry for forests, for mountains, for beasts who live with their simplicity, their perfect clarity. No beast spies on another beast unless it plans to eat it. Hunger Johnny could understand. He would not be too upset if his death was to satisfy hunger, to give life, but he was going to become papier-mâché, bloodied filth of paperwork! Tears of anger began to well up somewhere behind the eyes. He finished pissing.

Johnny looked up in the mirror, as he was washing his hands. His face was a little red around the eyes but no tears. It looked like he was maybe a little bit hot, but not really upset. Possibly a little angry. A man looking like this could kill for sure, but just as much he could be doing his taxes.

By the time Johnny got back to his table the lights were already dimmed and the people were gradually falling silent. The old man was staring into the lime light somewhat blindly with the mild confusion of an old hound.

— Dear ladies and gentlemen... Now welcome our next poet. You've probably heard of him. He's caused an uproar in the last months. Please welcome a visionary and a socialite, Leo Rush.

A suave young gentleman, dressed with deliberate carelessness, with messiness diligently crafted from matte golden curls, not unwashed but aged with

hair product. Sleepy yet cutting eyes sucked in the lime light and shone like two sapphires.

— This is very kind, George. I bet you didn't even know his name was George, huh? The old man is a little senile, but he is a veteran, and deserves our respect. He's been through hell and back. Let's give a round of applause for George, our gracious host.

The crowd followed Leo's example, as he demonstratively clapped, and accompanied him like a choir. The old man stood up from his chair at the left side of the stage and bowed a couple of times like actor at the end of a performance. Johnny wondered what scars may be hidden beneath the clothes. This whole ordeal seemed to cheapen whatever inferno mutilated the old man inside and out. The memory of pain enveloped his silhouette like a fog. It is easy to mock the old and frail, thought Johnny, without them even knowing that any affront had been made, to clown with their gods...

Leo was handsome enough, and normally Johnny was predisposed to liking good-looking men, but such cold calculation, such casual disregard for anything genuine, for anything that isn't a gesture to be shown freely. There is a reason why soldiers do not like discussing the war. Some things are not to be told. Some things are best kept covered up by layers of clothing.

— This little poem I wrote one time when I was at home all alone, and I was drinking wine. My girl left me the day before. I was lonely, but then I thought to myself, man, why don't you get naked? There is no one here but me, why not, I thought. If we can't be naked on our own, you know, this means something is very wrong. So I stripped completely, and continued sitting there. Seriously, man, if you're ever in my apartment, don't sit anywhere, my balls touched every single surface, even the stove, don't ask. It has to be a marking the territory sort of thing. After about half a bottle later I thought, hey, my bathroom is dirty, and the rest you'll learn from the poem itself.

It was Monday night,  
and I was cleaning the bathroom;  
I was scrubbing away orange stains on the wall of my shower,  
and gathering so many hairs you'd think I'd gone bald.  
Naturally, I was cleaning naked,  
with only rubber gloves, conspicuous like clothes on a monkey,  
or like plastic islands at sea.  
This is when I saw him: legs thin like needles,  
hairs like on the legs of men from the South,  
eyes indecipherable, deep like the eyes of the night.  
I was afraid he was going to jump, on my face or balls,  
and suck my blood or worse: bathe me in his digestive fluids.  
So I sprayed him with the cleaning liquid. He fell but was still alive.  
His legs ran on air. Of course it didn't make a sound,  
but I thought I heard it cry.

I remember I once heard of a forbidden writer  
who turned for a day into a cockroach. I looked at the suffering thing,  
and wondered if I had committed a murder. A dreadful feeling,  
a premonition of retribution torn into my heart like a crown of thorns.  
If I were a braver man, I would have finished it.

This is what a good driver does,  
if he happens to run over a deer.

Instead, I ran out of the room and shut the door in a hurry.

This was my second sin for the night.

I paced the living room, my balls swinging  
and slapping my legs, gloves still on my hands, my feet burning.  
I had a bad feeling, like I shot an arrow,  
and at the moment of the release of the string  
I saw someone besides the aim,  
and that someone looked just like me, too, naked.

It's too far, and you can't really see; at least, not well, but well enough:  
he collapses and then screams; maybe: moans. His pain shines so brightly  
that you avert your eyes. The string still sings,

and your fingers still feel the pressure.

What do you do when you pin yourself to the ground like a butterfly  
is pinned to a display by a German writer? This was perhaps my third sin.

I sat down in resolution. Eye for an eye;  
life for a life. My only solution would be  
to wake up as a parasite or an insect  
and be squashed by a boot from above.

Johnny was a little disappointed by the ending of the poem. It felt like a  
missed opportunity for something. There was almost a rhyme and yet there wasn't. It  
was a little like those times when you ejaculate without actually experiencing an  
orgasm: confusing and frustrating.

— Thank you very much for listening.

— Please, feel free to come and talk to me. I will also be selling my  
collection of poetry. It's called *Elephantitis*. It's only 8.99, and of course, I'd be  
happy to sign it.

— Fascinating how these days they write poetry about anything. I wonder if  
the ancients were not somewhat correct in limiting the range of acceptable topics to  
only a few. Next someone will write a poem about shitting. It gathers cheap  
admiration of immature cretins that never left adolescence.

Gaspar began whispering all this to Johnny before Leo quite finished  
speaking. His whisper was loud and energetic. He was highly irate.

— I suppose they like the nerve.

— Yes, you're probably right. The rabble who live the unexamined life can  
never tell poison from medicine. They mistake, I believe, nerve for courage. Nerve is  
a petty little thing. A modern man's courage, and this Leo has nerve... Plenty of  
nerve, too much nerve. He'd do better quitting reading in public altogether. Some

people need, desperately need for the sake of their health, for the health of their destiny — to shut up. Most people have nothing to say, but they're chattering, chattering, endlessly. Courage would be to admit you have nothing to say and to say nothing, not even that. Courage would be to go on an adventure, risk your life and sanity and learn something worthwhile, instead murdering trees with cheap egotistic triumphs.

— But the world is how it is. Nothing can be done. Everyone of worth is gone. This guy, Leo, is the brightest star in poetry today. The times have changed. The ancients are no longer here. These may be tough times, but they are our times, is there nothing here to support us?

— I wonder if everything is fundamentally the same as it has been for the last six thousand or so years. When you look from afar you see different things than when you observe from up close. We see only those who survived the obstacles. We see the Moon, in other words, but as for our own time we see the meteors. For the one is bigger than many. Oscar Wilde was a Moon, and the British were meteors. He ended up battered but in the end, who shines in mute darkness of time's night? Long after his captors were rotting in the grave and the British Empire itself was a distant memory, his name was still said with reverence like a name of a god.

— This is the opposite of what they teach us.

— This is the opposite of what I teach. This is, nevertheless, true.

Johnny's kidneys were on fire. He could not help but think of the spy sitting somewhere behind them. Nay, he felt him with his kidneys like he were a cruel gust of sandy wind, and his kidneys were dug out of his spine and kept attached to all the nerves. Johnny could feel the menacing presence in his testicles. He felt defenceless before the Fortuna, before all that this spy was, the handsome blond, blue-eyes killer, *his* killer.

Before he could say anything else to Gaspar the old man approached the microphone again. He had something a little like a smile on his face, but Johnny was not sure if he were irritated by Leo or flattered by Leo's apparent compliment. Johnny needed some air.

— If you let me, I will humbly finish this evening with a poem of mine.  
Some of you might know that I haven't written in years. The mind isn't sharp anymore. Can't do it. Not enough fire in my blood. But I found this poem, this one, in a book I've had since my very youth. The book is poetry my Mao Tsedong, . . . . Before they came for me, I glued this poem to the carton of the back cover, and then glued another sheet on top. They didn't find it. It was one of the few books that was actually approved by the censors, so they let me keep it. All of the other stuff they destroyed when they took me in, or maybe it's still in an archive somewhere, who knows. But this poem is not half-bad. I've got to be honest, the first time I read it after I found it a few weeks ago, I cried. So much had been lost, time, youth. This body has been wasted. It is no good. Even my mind, dull. But this poem I still have, and I'll share it with you now. I hope you enjoy listening as much as I know I'll enjoy reading it.

I have always had a peculiar talent:  
in the face of the clock I saw a face of a friend,  
and that friend spoke to me verses of poetry.  
In the ticks of his tongues he told me one little secret  
that since then I've confirmed time and again.

In youth people are not really jubilant:  
they are simply forgetful. Wait until time  
reminds them of herself like a distant relative.  
After that humans usually try to forget,  
confusing, again, forgetfulness with jubilation,  
until once again, like an ancient and weathered ache  
she reminds them of herself and arrives,  
as she often does, in the garments of death.

The first time I met time was when I was very little.

There was thawed but still freezing mud and a truck.  
I remember that day very vividly. It was the first time  
I saw grown men naked (though of course, I was a child,  
so I didn't really know what nudity meant).  
I stared as they were loaded; their faces and bodies  
almost like droplets of water; I stared around all of them.  
They were so young and so pale, men of conscription,  
so full of life, I thought, (without really understanding) and so dead,  
so intimate, exposed completely, mystery revealed so carelessly,  
so public, so inanimate; so bovine I almost cried (without really  
understanding).

I would like to say that I have, like others, forgotten the rendezvous,  
but that wouldn't be true. I remembered, at least,  
the exposed vulnerability, not only theirs, but also somehow mine.  
I remember my parents talking about the war, and how it was good  
that I was still so little, how there still was time.

I relished in all the time I had  
(if I only I knew that time rarely protected,  
that my bastion of infancy was not only frail,  
it was made of thin ice); I would spend it  
(or as parents said, wasted) by observing  
time as she strolled by; I looked at the clock  
and loved its ticking; somewhere inside,  
like inside a bank, I hid my secret stash.

The second time I met time I was twenty.  
I was only a year younger than twenty one  
(when your cock stops growing, and when

you reach the peak after which your virility  
and life begin to subside, first slowly, then rapidly).  
I woke up in tremendous pain, and soon started vomiting.  
I called the ambulance three times, and the third time they came.  
They looked with concern at the pills I've scattered around the floor,  
they thought I was suicidal, but really I was only looking for painkillers.  
They took me away for the night and gave me morphine  
(which I found out was a form of heroine; I didn't like it).  
Apparently I had a stone growing inside, like I were a cave,  
and it moved that night. It dislodged and moved down like a comet.  
The whole ordeal only lasted week. I peed it out, and it was beautiful:  
a pure crystal — a citrine. I felt like I gave birth to the most beautiful baby:  
a baby made out glass, a cosmic baby that'd kill all of us.

Like all mothers, after this I had changed.  
I started seeing my friend Time everywhere,  
on the face of my cousin who's also had a baby,  
on the face of another cousin whom I remember  
still very young. I remember her face change and grow older  
and how she's now an adult women, and soon she will be old,  
just like me. I remembered all those who lived in this place:  
the billions of lives, just like mine, that sparked and went out  
at the tick of a clock, most of them without any trace whatsoever.  
Weak people become faithful. I became inquisitive and defiant.

Soon I will be dead either way, so what's fear? what's a little suffering?  
No matter: nothing scared me anymore, and I opened my eyes  
for the first time and began looking, and I saw so much beauty,  
but little of it had anything to do with humans, with the world  
they created and cherish, with the world I would see in my sacrificial flame,

this world that's more like a prison than a home, their shack  
on my property, in my palace: the forest, the ocean, the sky...

— I need the bathroom.

Johnny needed some air. He stood up, and almost fell back down again. His legs were not moving properly. It must be all the sitting or alcohol, he thought to himself, as if he were trying to deceive himself. Everybody was looking at him, he felt their eyes burning his skin like lasers. The old man finished his poem but was still speaking into the microphone and every word he was saying cut Johnny on the chest, piercing the skin, crushing the bone and every time nearly reaching the lungs. He could not breathe. It stank with sweat and cheap perfume. He waded through. He wished the old man would just shut up.

— My introduction to the poem was a little bleak, and I admit, sometimes I'm a little bit bitter, a little bit resentful at my destiny, but I still stand by every line of this poem. I sign under every word. I regret nothing. Even on their operation tables, laying there naked, conscious, but paralyzed. In pain. You think you know pain! They opened up my... They opened up everything, my chest, my skull, my belly, even my scrotum, to find what was wrong with me, to see why was I rebelling. I was still free! They couldn't find what to enslave, because the organs of freedom are of the soul, not body, and they cannot operate on souls. They're soulless. So how could they... If they take me away now, let them! This rape of humankind cannot last long. At some point the rapist will be shanked. Right in the balls. A day will come when the Republic and the Plebiscite, all of them will be strung up by the free men and women of our inevitable future.

He then saw the spy. His handsome face looked concerned. He was writing something down, and he was looking right towards him, Johnny. An alarm went off all over Johnny's body. He knows, he knows, he knows. He saw me leave. He knows something shook me. This is enough. My life is over. Gaspar's life is over. Kevin's... Maybe even Eliana's, Jacob's and Elah's. His thinking felt drunk. His thoughts were dumb, fat, clumsy and smelly drunks. Despair enveloped Johnny like thick fog. He

saw the spy stand up and quickly leave. Johnny without thinking, without anything so specific like an intention followed him. He was going to plead, to beg, to seduce, to cry. This man with a handsome, starry face, that seemed more and more handsome every time Johnny laid his eyes on it, would he be so cruel?

The frost crystalized emptiness inside Johnny's mind. The spy was lighting up a cigarette. The warm light illuminated the full ruthlessness of the man's beauty, his carelessness, the vice of aristocrats, the sin of the best of us.

— A pleasant night, isn't it?

— It's alright.

— My name is Jeremy.

— Mark.

— You enjoyed the poetry reading, Mark?

— In a manner of speaking. Much of it was a bit like a freak show. The last poem...

— We don't come here often. It was actually the first time.

— We?

— Please. You've got to understand. How could we have known?

— Why did you say your name was Jeremy?

— I'm not sure. Would you spare me a cigarette?

The blond gentleman smiled and turned to get the cigarette packet from his brown leather jacket. Johnny's heart was beating so fast he was not sure he was going to survive this moment. He was squeezing his keys in the left hand with one of the keys protruding sharply from the gap between fingers. He was squeezing them so strongly that they would leave imprints in his skin for day.

The moment was right. The spy's neck was exposed. It was now or never. It was either survival or agonizing death to all Johnny held dear. Johnny struck the spy. It was a ridiculous plan. It could not have succeeded, and if Johnny were not so intoxicated with desperation and fear, he would have surely seen it, but sometimes, once in a million of moments there is a moment when something old and wild wakes up in an individual, and that individual becomes a master murderer, just for a

moment, he is *instinct*. Without knowing, pure like a tiger, he strikes with the tiger's precision, with the tiger's ferocity. And the moment after, you are back in a stranger's home, reaping the fruits of another's labors.

The key got latched in the neck of the handsome gentleman. The smile disappeared in the flood of horror, the pack of cigarettes fell to the floor, but the lit cigarette only followed a little later, as if it got stuck in between the man's fingers. There had been a brief spark of hurt on the victim's face, as if he could not believe what Johnny had done before the consciousness set, and the body fell the ground. Almost as an afterthought Johnny recalled the dreadful choking sound and some sort of rattling, insectoid noise: an unbearable testament to suffering.

Johnny looked down. The man's face had not yet changed. His blue eyes shone so charmingly like two moons above some alien world. His lips were still alive. Johnny wondered, whom did these lips kiss. His lush golden hair rested on his young, unblemished skin. What a waste, Johnny thought, and got scared, though not of the court of people — Johnny could not think of vulgar things like that at that moment, but of the court of gods. He hoped this man at least had siblings. Johnny felt like a kid when he breaks a beautiful and ancient, unique, irreplaceable urn. Gods of genetics would never forgive Johnny for depriving wombs of this man's sperm. What an unspeakable terror it is, murder; for when you murder one man who murder his children that could be and many generations of ancestors. You commit a genocide.

The Moon looked down angrily from the above. The night sky was cold and uncaring. Johnny found that comforting. At least, the Night did not care about his crime. People will be coming out of the bar soon, Johnny thought. He looked around. Stairs leading toward the canals were near. At this time and in these times few are likely to go down there. They lead in their endless labyrinth to the Old City. Johnny grabbed the corpse and quickly dragged it towards the stairs. Johnny had heard that dead bodies are heavy, but he found the task easy, as if he were carrying perhaps merely a plaster statue of a man. Someone was starting to come out of the bar. Johnny quickly shoved the body down the stairs. It slid downward towards to the

water like a snowboard. Johnny followed the spy's body nearly as quickly. In the darkness, it was unlikely that he would be seen or followed.

At the base of the stairs Johnny sat down to breathe. The air was damp. The water was black, but the sky appeared lighter from down where he now was. He was all alone, and yet he was not.

*Before the Rooster Crows Today...*

*And it grew both day and night,  
Till it bore an apple bright.  
And my foe beheld it shine,  
And he knew that it was mine.*

*And into my garden stole.  
When the night had veiled the pole;  
In the morning glad I see,  
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.*

— *William Blake, A Poison Tree* from *Song of Innocence and of Experience*

Like never before Johnny felt his ribs as his lungs strained against them, trying to break out of the bony prison. He felt a distinct urge to masturbate, like he often did in times despair, ‘to calm himself down’. It was not particularly pleasurable, just something to dull the pain. He had read once that sexual activity released a naturally produced painkiller, but where had he read it? Perhaps someone told him. Could it have been a dream? Johnny looked around at the black wet walls. Even if he did jerk one out right here right now, it was very unlikely that anyone would catch him, or anyone who could have followed him down here was unlikely to care, or at any rate unlikely to risk their reputation reporting it. The dead body next to Johnny, on the other hand, constituted a much more serious problem. He looked at the man. Coloured by the night, the man’s face was blue.

Johnny shuffled towards the corpse without ever fully standing up. The movement reminded Johnny of when he had been very little and they played hunters in the forest. This was a very old memory. He was so little his companions must have been Kevin and Gaspar.

He patted down the spy's body to find some sort of documentation. Johnny was not sure why. He was not sure he wanted to know, but an urge, a superstitious urge to know the name, as if the name of the one he murdered was somehow important for Johnny's own survival or salvation. As Johnny's fingers moved down the chest of the body, Johnny felt some sort of movement, as if the body was still breathing. The Moon must be playing tricks on me, Johnny brushed off the impossible and continued the patting down. As he was going through the pockets of the spy's trousers, he accidentally encountered his penis. It was very hard. Too alive to be dead.

Johnny's hands jumped like two toads thrown into a pot of boiling water. There was something unbearably intimate between the two, the dead and the murderer. There may have been papers in the trousers but Johnny would not risk getting cut, getting burnt on the deadman's penis.

All Johnny found in the safer area was the packet of cigarettes that Johnny used to misdirect the spy. If this man had not smoked, maybe I could not have killed him. Johnny reflected, with a sense of gratitude and a sense of regret. Johnny did not regret that he killed this man, but he regretted that it had to come down to this. He regretted, furthermore, that it was this particular man that Johnny had killed. He regretted, furthermore, that he had killed him with so much cowardice. He killed him in despair, swelling with fear. Johnny was sticky with sweat. Johnny felt cold. He regretted that it was only the beginning of what was going to be a very long night, of what was going to be a very arduous journey, and whether he would come back from it was far from certain, whether he would ever see Gaspar and Kevin ever again...

Johnny looked at the absolute darkness of the canals. He had never seen anything so black, and therein he found comfort, as if the insurmountable blackness were covering his naked body, like a black sheet covers a newborn, folded lovingly by a tired mother. He wished he could jump into the blackness and disappear, become one with it, to finally for once be perfectly content, perfectly soothed. My life has always been an itch, it occurred to Johnny. He knew, of course, that, alas, had he jumped into water, nothing of note would happen. He would be wet. He would

chafe as he were running away. He would bleed from all the tender places. At least he could bury his unnamed companion in the darkness.

— Take my place in my bed for now, brother. Warm up the grave for me. Taste the confections of death before me. Wait for me there. It won't be long before I follow.

Johnny was ready to throw the body into the water, when a sparkle attracted his attention. The key was still stuck in the man's neck. It occurred to Johnny that it must have been innumerable times that he saw that key in the keyhole to the door of his apartment. A cold-blooded murderer would have seen it as evidence and leaving the key where it was would be merely stupidity. For Johnny the key was a relic. To leave it stuck in a corpse's neck would be sacrilege. It was actually very peaceful. As if it was only forgotten in the keyhole at home. Johnny wondered whether if he closed his eyes, he would find himself transported home in a world where this nightmare was not happening. Alas, he opened his eyes, and he was still there, still a murderer convicted to a murderer's life. His kidneys cried.

He took hold of the key and moved it clumsily. It would not come out. Before applying more force Johnny paused, and suddenly a dreadful realization hit him. The key was beating. The man was alive. Johnny was not a murderer.

This luminous realization was soon poisoned. If this man was not dead, he could be brought back to life, if taken to the hospital. Then he might remember. Johnny did not so much worry about his destiny. *His* life was forfeit regardless. All of his associates would, too, be executed or be forced to denounce Johnny for a mere chance of survival, after examinations, after many a procedure.

This man had to die. Johnny put all of his weight into one last pull and the key came out. A spring of blood shot out in the canals. In the darkness, it was merely one black waterfall into another. One could barely tell the difference between water and blood, but he could smell it.

Johnny sat in silence. It was as if he were in prayer. It was as if it was his blood leaking out of his neck. As if it were *he* who was dying. Even an ugly-looking person, a mean-looking person, a butcher would look innocent in a time like this. To

be murdered in your sleep. To close your eyes never to open them again. To be defenceless like a babe. Johnny was certain he was committing an infanticide. This man was now a saint, a martyr. Already one foot out of this world, already half-way to God. An angelic executioner. All his sins are at this instant already erased, washed off; he is christened: not in fire, not in water but this time — in blood, the last, the second to last christening, even if in fire, in water.

Gradually the gurgling of liquid slowed. There was no longer power to it, no longer passion to it, no longer erection to it. Johnny gently touched the man's neck, in the way you touch your mother's, and found it silent, unmoving. He sighed without hearing himself and pushed the the body towards the edge. As the body's limbs moved Johnny could not help but recall how only some half an hour ago, this man moved on his own, full of life, vitality, perhaps even more alive than Johnny himself was, even now.

As the heaviness parted Johnny's hands, he felt like if he were parting from a dear friend, from Gaspar, from Kevin, from his mother. A splash, and all was gone. Some bubbles came out but too few. Johnny heard thunder.

It spooked Johnny a little bit and he shifted somewhat where he sat, after ditching the corpse. His right hand landed on something softish. It was the gentleman's cigarette pack. This was exactly what Johnny needed. Johnny opened it. Inside he found three cigarettes, a lighter and a card. He pulled out the cigarette with the urgency of a full bladder and lit it. It was the only light and it illumined the night. Johnny would have preferred to remain blind. He saw an abhorrent puddle of redness, dark redness. He saw even the outline of half of the body, and the traces the body left as Johnny rolled the body toward water. He saw blood on his very hands. And then he dragged on the thick white cock of the cigarette. Johnny found something very soothing in the glowing of the amber.

This taste must be the last perception this man had in this life, Johnny thought. For a while he continued to smoke without moving. This was Johnny's service. This cigarette would be the incense Johnny lit in honour of his victim, not really out of guilt, but out of reverence for the life he once had, for the life Johnny

took so rudely. This would be the sacrament, the consecrated, transmuted flesh Johnny would consume to prove to himself that he was more of an animal than a murderer.

It started dripping from the sky. God was pissing to put out the fire Johnny started. Sometimes a deluge is a kindness. Very quickly the flow escalated and soon it was clear: the waters of Heaven have broken. A particularly large drop shot the stump of the cigarette out of Johnny's mouth and right into the water. Johnny found himself in complete darkness. He got up, still holding the crumbled pack of cigarettes in his right hand and started running. He could not really see. The only source of vision was the moonlight reflected in the heavy droplets plummeting towards earth. Every step he made could have been into the water, but somehow his foot found solidity every time it hit downwards.

As his eyes were blinded, his ears were deafened. As if like a tropic cricket singing its song atop both ears, the rain with its loud percussive music in the clicking of heavenly castanets, exploded Johnny's eardrums. He was running from hell into nothingness. He wondered if he already was in purgatory.

Johnny found his face hitting the pavement. He had felt several tiles bite into his cheek. He hurriedly felt for his teeth. They were all there and apparently uncracked. I must have slipped, Johnny thought lazily, as if he had on some level expected it. He moved his hands. The right hand, he had just noticed, was still holding the cigarette pack. It was wetter than before.

The joint of Johnny's left hand hit a corner of the wall. It did not seem to make any sense. There were no corners. The wall was continuous and unending like in a labyrinth. Then Johnny remembered the enclaves. Upon some lively exploration Johnny confirmed his hypothesis and crawled inside the refuge. He was entirely wet. For a moment Johnny even wondered if he had in fact fallen into the water. He even had water dripping off his eyelashes.

The lighter, Johnny remembered, and hurriedly searched for it in the moist carton. His wet and shivering fingers tried to light it. The first time a sterile spark, then second, the third, and then finally, when Johnny's finger pad had already gotten

sore, it lit. At last Johnny could see again, but not far, not into the rain, but the alcove was his whole world now. He was not certain he was glad to see again, but at least the last thing he saw clearly, the blood, the fruit of his labor, that stuck his mind frozen like a photograph, was being erased. Johnny yearned for a cigarette, but decided against plundering any more. His thoughts turned to the ID card. Trembling, he pulled it out of the mass of wet matter and brought it towards the light. The handsome face of his victim was temporarily consumed by the glimmer of the light on the plastic.

The name read: Alexander Byrd. If this was his real name or not, Johnny had no way of knowing, but this would do.

— I will remember you for as long as I live, Alexander Byrd, however little it may be, and should I live a year from today, I will remember you today in a year and honour you. This is my oath. I am your murderer, but I will also be your mourner, for as long as this body lives.

Johnny whispered these words, as if he were speaking with Alexander in truth. There was nothing but rain. This was when Johnny realized that his own eyes, too, were raining.

He held the plastic card over the fire until its casing began to melt open. He was resolved. He could not even feel like this thumb was being badly burnt by the heated metal of the lighter. Johnny cooled the plastic in the rainwater and removed the card from inside the plastic. Then, it went quicker. The card was quickly consumed by fire. He held it so that the man's face was the last to burn. He was so handsome. One of the great gods must have carved that face with his very own hands. Johnny strained his brain to remember every detail of that face. Soon the fire was out, and Johnny was on his way.

## *The last word*

*Instead, two lone arrows cast their tranquil and graceful shadows upon the smoothness of his skin, like the shadow of a bough falling upon a marble stairway.*

— *Yukio Mishima, Confessions of a Mask*

Which word would be the last word God would say? How does this story He is telling end? He always had the last word, the only word. The mist made Gaspar feel like a wet cat. His clothes were dry but felt wet. The mist was even here, even inside the bar, like a vampire sucking the life and corrupting the will.

Johnny had disappeared a while ago. They were going to follow him, but instead stayed at the bar after the poetry reading ended. Soon Jacob and his wife left too, to relief the babysitter of her labor of care taking. For a long while Gaspar and Kevin sat in relative silence, slipping into late hours of the night, as if in a dream.

— Johnny left early today. He followed the white rabbit.

— If we had followed him, we would have been swallowed by the swamp where the white rabbit lives.

— When one is deep in a swamp, two others should throw him a rope.

— If all three are deep in the swamp

— Then, there is no hope.

— Whatever happened, only one of us is in the midst of it.

— Two others are holders of the rope.

— Two angles of a triangle support the third.

— It is time to go home.

— You're right. I wonder what will find us there.

— Whatever it may be, as long as we are together, we'll find a way, we'll find a way across the rending stream.

— Even if one of us will be the raft for the other two.

— And each of us would accept this fate as the highest honor.

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It felt later than it was when Gaspar and Kevin approached their apartment building. The rain had already stopped. They missed most of it. It was violent but short. The water was already freezing over. The puddles creaked. Everything shone, as if it were all covered in tiny diamonds. They were both breathing steam, as if they were smoking, but only Gaspar was. His steam was grayer. Kevin's was so white it appeared to shine in the glow of streetlights, gathering light within like a raincloud gathers water.

They half-expected to find the door to their apartment ajar, broken and the insides rampaged through. Instead the door was just like it was when they left. Or seemed so. Gaspar froze before opening it. It was as if something was off about it, some detail he could not quite perceive with his conscious mind. Something about the door was odd, wrong, improper, perverse. He checked for marks again and again. There was nothing. He tried the door. It was locked.

— What's wrong?

— Nothing. I must have had more than I thought.

He inserted the key and turned it. Then he withdrew it and went inside. Kevin followed. Gaspar switched on the light. Everything seemed in order. A sense of unease did not leave Gaspar, but at that point it felt more like superstition than anything else.

— Look. Look at your key.

Gaspar looked and saw that his key appeared to have been covered by black-red dust, as if it were rust but not so orange. Gaspar dipped his finger in it and smelled it. It did not smell like anything to him, not really.

Kevin thought he recognised it. He swiftly marched into the apartment, switching lights on in every room.

— Johnny is not here.

He went further into Johnny's room. It was a mess like it was normally.  
— It is impossible to tell if he was here or if he's taken any of his things.  
— Disorder masks disorder like black on black.

It was quiet for a couple of minutes. Neither moved, both wished it was still dark, like it was outside. Outside felt so comforting, so safe, so boundless and yet tight enough to hide, bury oneself without a trace in a wide, wide world.

— He is gone, I think.

— You are right. This place feels violated. It may look the same but subtle scars have been cut into it from the inside.

Gaspar went up to their bookshelf. He took their copy of Mao Tsedung's poetry, and leafed through it. There was a folded page in between Changsha and Yellow Crane Tower, in between, therefore, of a lament that makes one love the man inside the legend and the hymn to celestial torrents. Gaspar unfolded the page and began to read:

*My friends, and I use this word how no one else has used it, I have done something terrible, inescapable but terrible. If you found this letter, you listened to the old man well, like I have, and perhaps we have understood some of the same things. Burn this letter as soon as you finish reading it. Do not read it out loud. These words are cursed. I would not have burdened you with them, only it seemed to me you had the right to know. Were I to deny you, would this not be an insult to you two, to your manliness, to your vitality, to your bamboo-like resilience? For I know you are not weak. This is why I will burden you with the knowledge of what I have done, and I trust that your love for me will not falter, for neither of you is a coward, and we have often said that we were three and one.*

*My brothers, though brothers would have perhaps killed me, and you haven't, though I died by your hands many times, I have killed the spy who followed us. This is how I spent this evening. I saw him leave. I saw him look at us. I saw resolution in his eyes. Perhaps it was about the old man, but I couldn't risk it. He was going to do something. He could have been planning to subject us all to torture.*

*We were there. The words of the old man were cursed. He cursed us. De facto it was an illegal gathering, even since he had started telling his awful history. I couldn't take not knowing anymore. I couldn't take the suspense. It was too much. For a year now... It feels like a year or longer. I wasn't planning it. I went out to plead with him, but the moment, the moment lit up like a falling star, burning inside my nerves, inside my brain, and I struck. He fell then.*

*My beloveds, and I truly love you like flowers love sunlight, like bees love flowers, love fathers love their sons, more. I love you entirely, every organ, every thought. I love you like you could never love yourselves, each one of you I love as my only one. It pains me to leave you, but for now it is for the best. I will go back home, to my father. I haven't been there in five years. I will spend there a month, maybe two. If nothing happens, nothing happens. Then I will return. If the police come to question you, tell them where I am. Pretend like you have nothing to hide, like I have nothing to hide. Furthermore, if it cannot be helped, I'd rather you betrayed me than sacrificed yourselves — it would be less painful. Do not write me. My father wouldn't like it. As I think of coming back there I feel like I'm a seventeen year old boy again, without will of his own, without voice of his own, slave to my father's orders. If you have to write, write in code, about ordinary things. Write in metaphors, say without saying, speak nonsense that I will understand because I know your hearts. My father, like censors, does not really understand such things. Write me in an allegory.*

*My lovers, and I long for you ever, even now as I am writing this letter, this letter to say goodbye, every cell of my body and soul is screaming with desire and sadness. I have to bury him in the water, like an old viking. Bless me, for I am going away into a battle, and I may not come back. I only hope that my battle will not grow to be our war.*

*Ever faithful to you both,*

*Your Johnny*

Gaspar read the letter quickly. His eyes danced in his sockets and hungrily absorbed the information. It was perhaps the fastest he had ever read. And yet it felt like a long time to him. He had never felt more tired after reading. He sat down on Johnny's bed. His arm fell, his hand barely holding the page. He was pale, even his lips looked parched. Kevin came over to him and read the letter for himself. Then he quickly went into the kitchen. Gaspar smelled smoke. By the time Gaspar made it to the kitchen, only ash remained of the letter.

— We will be fine. This time, Gaspar, you may experience war for yourself.

— You are right.. We share the sheet of the bed, and whatever stains it we share too. If this is war, let's give battle. We share the same blood flow.

— For now, however, we need to cover the traces.

— His big party is in two weeks.

— We must cancel it.

— No. If we cancel it now, two weeks away, it will be clear something is awry. He sent the invitations a month in advance. People do not cancel events like this without a serious reason. We cannot afford to cause any suspicion. The best place to hide a lie is within the truth. A day or two days before the event we will tell the guests that Johnny had to urgently leave, that he had to urgently go home because his father is sick. No, dying. Johnny wouldn't have gone back home without a very pressing reason, something that would have demanded his presence immediately, something he couldn't postpone for even a day.

— Then it won't be suspicious, if he misses the party.

— But by then everything will have been ready. We can't cancel the party. We must hold it ourselves, and pretend like Johnny had to leave suddenly. It won't be a huge gathering but it may give Jacob and Eliana plausible deniability.

— This way it may still be alright then. Unless someone has seen him, unless there is a record... The rain would have obscured the security cameras for some of the time at least, and it would have washed any traces away. I hope he disposed of the body. The rest is up to providence.

— He may be saved. We may all be saved, after all.

They fell asleep on the bed without undressing. When they woke up, they were both hungover, but the whitish light of the late morning the Sun blinded them to despair, and the sobering headache heralded a new day with a lot to do.

*In defence of theia mania: a preliminary study  
of the sacred libido of poetry*

## *Introduction*

I will first introduce the plot and the important storylines of the trilogy, two-thirds of the first volume of which is the creative part of this PhD. It will help to contextualise the events of that section, but also ground some of the later theoretical argument and speculation into the creative part. As it is a trilogy that I am working on, certain plot lines will escalate later on in the trilogy, even though the first volume, and even just the portion that I have submitted, have their own centrepiece storylines. It has been my intention that each volume could be enjoyed on its own, even if they do benefit from each other to better explore the characters' journeys and development of the themes.

After this I will dedicate a few paragraphs to some basic theoretical considerations to introduce some of the main themes of this essay and my premises.

In the third portion of this introduction I will detail some artistic influences on the novel and present a justification of some of the artistic choice I have made.

Chapters I and II will be dedicated to the case study of Pythia, exploring her and her relationship to poetry in two different aspects. Chapter I will focus on the nature of poetry, whereas chapter II will be more concerned with the problem of truth. Chapter III will deviate from the case study of Pythia to more general consideration of the poetic and its interaction with the political, focussing on exploring Plato's *Republic* (2007) and Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* (1998).

### *The plot and structure of the novel*

The novel, a portion of which I am submitting, will be in three volumes. Each volume is furthermore subdivided into three books. The portion that I have submitted for my PhD is most of the first two books of the first volume. I have only omitted the dream sequences between chapters that connect the plot of the novel with the events

that precede it by a significant but undetermined space of time and provide extra insight into the characters' past. It will be revealed later in the novel that the dream sequences are shared by all three characters. The dream sequences will play a part in driving the trio of protagonists to fulfil the prophecy of Pythia that they inherit as their destiny. These dream sequences are particularly important for the later volumes of the novel, as they provide some of the larger context that is later supplemented by discoveries Gaspar, one of the protagonists, makes in the course of his research in first book of volume II.

The novel follows three characters: Gaspar, Johnny and Kevin. All three of them knew each other as children. Johnny was about five years younger than Gaspar and Kevin, but they were all friends and neighbours. Then as a result of a government program of urbanisation, the village was decreed illegal and all members were moved into the local urban centre. Johnny's parents ran into the mountains and hid there instead of following orders. Kevin's family home was searched and his parents were discovered to be in possession of illegal literature. As a result, they were sent away. Kevin was spared and instead became a warden of the state. Gaspar retained secret contact and friendship with Kevin over the years, despite his parents resenting the idea, but the trio only reunited at the beginning of volume I to eventually start living together as lovers.

Johnny has lived in the mountains for most of his life with his mother and father until his mother died when he was around thirteen. He made some friends with kids from the village, but their parents were not happy that their children would spend time with the child of the 'forest man' and the 'witch'. When Johnny became of age, he took advantage of a government program and moved into the city to study aviation. As the result of the political fallout of the the Day that the Sky Fell, most air travel and related activities were banned. This set off the course of events that led to resolution of volume I. Johnny's main theme is that of growing up, becoming a free, sovereign individual.

Gaspar is a young academic who teaches cultural engineering at the University. As such he has access to privileged sections of the library, which resulted

in the intensification of the trio's political awakening in the beginning of volume II, when Gaspar came across documentations of torture in the state's prison camps, including reports about Kevin's parents. Eventually, Gaspar is forced to leave his job due to his pregnancy. Gaspar is a personification, on the one hand, of a radicalisation of someone who is an integral part of the repressive machinery: the ethical responsibility of an intellectual, the intellectual's will to truth, and later on in the trilogy, the transformation of a man into a higher being, a mother of God.

Kevin is a former soldier. At the beginning of the novel he is being surveilled by the state, as are many former soldiers, which in his case leads to the escalation in 'Overdose' when Johnny kills a spy, and later on to events that ultimately lead to Kevin's death. In Book I of volume II he is faced with a choice of either betraying Jacob, his brother-in-arms or Gaspar and Johnny, and he decides to betray Jacob. This sends him into a dark spiral that results in his attack on the city government that ends in his death at the end of volume II. After that he accompanies Gaspar and Johnny mostly in their dreams as their guardian angel. Kevin is the warrior character, who is loosely based on the ideas and aesthetic kindred to *Hagakure* and expressed in it in ideas such as "Become as one who is permanently dead" (2010, Tsunetomo, p.43)

*Apollo Breaks His Silence* seeks to explore and retell certain myths. The overarching plot of all three volumes is concerned with the retelling of the myths of birth of God: Jesus, Dionysus, or any other iteration of the theme. In the first volume, Gaspar is struck by a lightning and spends time in a coma. He recovers and in several weeks resumes his work. In volume II Gaspar will begin exhibiting symptoms of pregnancy and his countenance will become more feminine. In volume three Gaspar's pregnancy will become extremely obvious and at the end of the trilogy, the new god — Apollo — will be birthed out of his navel, Gaspar himself burnt to death in the process. Apollo serves as the symbol of the new dawn, the end of the Plebiscite and the nascent triumph of liberty. I have borrowed from a whole large of literary and mythological texts to compose this plot, starting from Crowley's *Book of the Law*, and its idea of the procession of Aeons (2014), to Woolf's *Orlando*, and the

myth of Dionysus's birth. This last element is intended to hint at the fact that what I describe as the birth of God and triumph of liberty is really just another form of insemination that must bear fruit in its own time.

Volume I is mostly concerned with retelling the story of Oedipus. Volume I focuses specifically on Johnny and his plot lines, on how he is transformed as the result of the trauma that he endures. After Johnny kills the security agent out of panic and buries his body in the canals, he flees back to the mountains where the state has difficulty reaching, and stays with his father. Memories flood his mind and he decides that they are of his father killing his mother, letting her drop off the cliff. Enraged by what he thinks he remembers, Johnny takes his father to the same cliff and pushes him down. He then runs back to the city. Gaspar and Kevin accept him but he is haunted by what he has done.

In volume II it will be revealed in a dream that his father did not kill his mother. In the beginning of volume II Johnny finally finds a job as a waiter at club Agora Obscura, an underground establishment in the forbidden inner city that suffered most during the Day the Sky Fell. Kevin is forced to betray Jacob to the security services in volume II. He tries to save their child but fails. Gaspar discovers many details about the history of the Plebiscite and what happened to Kevin's parents. He does not tell him right away. After they all confess their crimes to each other, they forge even stronger bonds, and they vow that only death will divide them, and even then only for a short while, because they share a single life, a single destiny, and a single soul.

Volume II will investigate the theme of sacrifice and, to a lesser degree, redemption. In it the three protagonists will become further radicalised in their rebellion against the Plebiscite. All three of them will be haunted by the dread they have taken upon themselves in volume I and earlier in volume II. Closer to the end of the volume the three will make a decision to abandon their apartment in the city and go live in the middle of the forest, not far from where they all lived as children. The volume will end with Kevin launching a violent attack on a government facilities that gets him killed as a way of purifying himself for the sin incurred by his necessary

betrayal of Jacob and his family, as he perceives this at that moment. This volume is primarily concerned with Kevin's plot lines and the themes of death and reckoning. Much of this volume will be dedicated to literary interrogation of various strategies of radical politics and their philosophies, from the Badaar-Meinhof gang to Ernst Jünger's *Forest Passage* (2013). Ultimately, Kevin's path is discovered to have been an error, but a beautiful and important error.

In volume III the two remaining protagonists will spend their time driven deeper into the forest by the ongoing search for Kevin's accomplices. Gaspar's pregnancy is in full bloom. They are guided in their dreams and given warnings to avoid capture. Around mid-book II of the volume, Gaspar's pregnancy will have become very visible, and as the result the two are able to avoid capture by pretending to be a man and a woman, while the officers are looking for two men, and return to the city. In the city they hide around the canals and in abandoned buildings in the forbidden part of the city. Johnny steals and earns a little money doing miscellaneous undocumented work, including banditry in the closed off part of the city. They eventually receive an order from Pythia in their dreams to go to the main square of the remaining part of the city during a political performance to give a prophecy of the future. Johnny uses violence to distract the security and given an opportunity for Gaspar to give the address. Johnny dies in the process. Gaspar is able to give the minimal prophecy because he is killed, and of his dead body burst forth the yellow flame of the new god and the new aeon.

Overall, the novel is narrated by an omniscient narrator who, nevertheless, is a character in the story. Specifically, the entire novel is told by Pythia in her spiritual ecstasy. This will be revealed later in the trilogy when the three protagonists become aware of the prophecy that they are fulfilling. This explains how the reader can perceive the burnt diary entries by Johnny in chapter 'The Diary of a Free Man'.

## *Basic Premises*

Many of the sections of the following three chapters could be greatly expanded, and, I hope, will be in the future. As they are, they offer a foundational thesis, and while there are many other potential areas of interest, what I offer here is a theoretical basis for understanding the sacred libido of poetry. The alternative would have been to focus to a very narrow strand of the culture but that would not reflect that nature of my research or this project. An extremely close focus, in any science, can help to understand the workings of a particularly detail better but often fails to grasp its place within the whole and its relationship to the whole and other parts. This is suitable for a technical issue, but not for a more philosophical topic such as the subject of the current work. The desire behind this essay, insofar as it belongs to the genre of analysis, was particularly the relationship between the poetic speech, truth, and society.

The key term of this essay is poetry, and while it will be discussed and analysed in detail in chapter I of this essay, I will say a couple of words here, preemptively. One of the things that appeared to me early in my research is that the word poetry means slightly different things in different texts, even in a single language, but I presume that despite that possible difference, there is some unity implicit in the concept. Even outside of terms for poetry that are related to each other etymologically, there appears to be a place for privileged speech, that is not ordinary, is not merely for simple communication. In Chapter I I will say that by poetry I do not mean verse, but something more general, beyond mere rhythm or rhyme. I hope to later further my research into this modality to account for the phenomena of, for example, the supernatural Japanese poetry (Kimbrough, 2005), and many similar things. My desire to do so may be critiqued by pointing to that vastly different cultural contexts of, for example, Far East Asia and Europe, but I believe the benefit of marrying cultures far outweighs the danger, and the danger of focusing on Europe is much greater, as it may result in ghettoisation of non-European cultures and their de facto exclusion from the cannon. Moreover, there is a great variety of cultures in

Europe, that are vastly different in their historical and cultural contexts; and furthermore, even within a single culture, if one can truly reliably demarcate the borders of one culture as opposed to another, it is clear that cultural artefacts and knowledge of language do not guarantee understanding. All a text can do is offer a map that the reader has to walk on his or her own.

It may arouse questions why have I chosen Pythia as my case study rather than a poet in a more conventional sense, and given the socio-political implications of this study, a poet who has had an observable political, social or cultural effect in their time, who may have altered the trajectory of their society. My desire to start from a safe distance from conventional poetry, lest I ended up treating poetry as merely another form of entertainment. Pythia is in a uniquely useful position, being a figure of both authority and religion, being connected to both chthonic spirits and Apollo. All of this makes her an extremely suitable case study, in my opinion, to introduce the ideas of the first two chapters of this essay.

The last note I will add here is to do with the style of this essay. I have done my best to avoid jargon, except when it is used precisely, because in my opinion jargon can often resist the turmoil of living thought. I have used simple terms where possible, or metaphors, and sometimes I borrow words from philosophers and thinkers who have offered food for this essay. I have switched between different modalities of analysis throughout the essay, depending on what appeared to be adequate to address the topic at hand. While I have followed many of the conventions of the academic writing, at various points of the essay I sought to go beyond them, to remove the pretence of detachment, as I believe that philosophical analysis needs to have relevance and poignancy to one's life, that in an analysis or in a literary work, what is at stake is life.

### *Artistic Influences and Clarification of Details*

There have been a huge number of influences, literary, cinematographic, artistic and even musical, that led me to write *Apollo Breaks His Silence* and inspired

its different aspects. There have been a number of writers who have influenced the style and content of writing the *Apollo Breaks His Silence* the most.

One such writer was Ayn Rand, and while I do not agree with her on many particulars of her views and philosophy (such as her opinion that a woman could not be president of the United States, as available in the short interview video fragment here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL8g7zy6qwx> (uploaded in 2013)) or her purported "objectivism", not to mention her negative view of homosexuality, as is mentioned in this article from the Atlas Society: <https://atlassociety.org/commentary/commentary-blog/3791-is-homosexuality-moral>), I believe in the core ethical value expressed in this statement: "Remember also that the smallest minority on earth is the individual. Those who deny individual rights cannot claim to be defenders of minorities" (Rand, 1962, p.61); and I find her related aesthetic project of celebrating the individual in their struggle against bureaucratic tyranny most valuable. This is a motive I have taken out of Ayn Rand's work and adapted for my purposes. Each of the three main characters, Gaspar, Kevin or Johnny, is a sovereign man who fights to affirm his right to himself against the overwhelming odds and the lifelessness of the uncritical culture that entombs them.

Another writer who has inspired a very different aspect of *Apollo Breaks His Silence* is Poppy Z. Brite, who, since retiring from his writing career, has transitioned from female to male and in his personal life now goes by the name of Billy Martin. From Poppy Z. Brite I have inherited the use of sexual and violent imagery as part of my aesthetic. Particularly, his book the *Exquisite Corpse* has been a major influence. In a sense Johnny, Gaspar and Kevin, especially in later sections of the trilogy, will also share a criminal love affair. Unlike Brite's characters, Andrew Compton and Jay Byrne, the love affair in *Apollo Breaks His Silence* does not revolve around violence as such, but instead liberty, violence being only a means to it. This perhaps constitutes the reversal of the love affair between Andrew Compton and Jay Byrne, where freedom from humaneness is achieved through violence, as an aftertaste of violence that is the heart of their relationship, to offer this lament that perhaps epitomises their relationship: "if my lover had to die, why couldn't I have

been the one to kill him?” (2008, p.242). The similarity would include that fact that both love affairs would be seen as evil from the perspective of their societies but the difference is that destruction is the primary element in *Exquisite Corpse*, and liberty is the primary element in *Apollo Breaks His Silence*.

The style of the novel was one that resulted organically from my aesthetic sensibility, which is an anti-minimalist one. A good defence of this style of writing is offered by Zadie Smith in her Guardian article “This is how it feels to me” (2001), which defends diversity of styles as one of the great assets of literature. But from myself I will add that in the modern world literature must compete for the time and money of the public with film industry, television and internet shows, computer games, pornography, comic books, manga, anime, YouTube, among many other things, and each medium has its own strong and weak sides. It is my thesis that it would be misguided for literature to compete with any of these media on their terms. In other words, if one were to write a plot centred piece of fiction with minimal descriptions and stylistic indulgences, with minimal internal monologue, one could as well be writing a script. The only thing that other media cannot do is use extended metaphors and other flowery, purple elements. This is part of the reason why I have chosen the style I have chosen. *Apollo Breaks His Silence* is not intended to be read quickly, but instead indulgently, because it is, in one of its dimensions, a series of vignettes connected by a plot. The journey is seen as merely the force of movement behind the events of the novel, but the novel itself is not about arriving at the destination but rather leisurely walking towards it.

As far as the market for the book is concerned, it is difficult to ascertain with any degree of confidence how a book would do, and it appears that there are many uncertainties in the literary market, without any real recipe for success (e.g. such diverse books as Anna Burns’s *Milkman* (2018), and Eimar McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2014)). Instead I have chosen to remain authentic to myself, to my philosophy and aesthetic, and to my sensibilities generally, in order to produce a book unique to myself. Peter Thiel, a billionaire early investor in Facebook and PayPal, says he likes to pose a question during interviews: “What important truth do

very few people agree with you on?” (2014, loc. 62), therefore while I cannot guarantee commercial success of this novel, I think it represents my answer to this question, which could be phrased in many ways, but which at this point I will phrase so: beauty is truth. The point of truth is not information but experience, as I will explain later in this essay, and the point of the novel or an adventure is not the result, but rather the ceremony of its activity. The core matter is that I am against a search for meaning — there is no need for it, because the meaning is always ready to present itself, a million meanings. It is, instead, the matter of dissolving into the moment, into the depth of a detail rather than imagining a dogmatic value system of any kind to explain the world. While interpretive frameworks can be useful for specific goals, and various models may help one get insight into an aspect of a phenomenon, the model must never be confused with the phenomenon itself, which is an experience, and therefore a matter of aesthetic perception that encapsulates what is known about the phenomenon (for example, that a car is red) but opens it up to an never-ending array of connotations and implications (that the shade of the car is similar to your mother’s lipstick and that makes you hungry for apple pie); would not the second instance be more like the truth of the nature of the experience rather than the former one — the red car may be seen by several people but it would have different significance to each one of them, and unless possibly one is engineering the car or doing marketing research, what matters is how we experience personally rather than the dull record of that experience.

From all this it follows that it is better to be oneself, to develop one’s own voice and invest one’s time and money into one’s insight than attempt to write the next Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings because to quote Peter Thiel “the next Mark Zuckerberg won’t be building a social networking site, the next Larry Page will not be building a search engine, the next Bill Gates won’t be building an operating system company.” [0:25-0:36] (uploaded 2015). I believe that the same principle is applicable to the works of art. If an artist can be considered a prism, then the artist’s job is to expose themselves, and then learn to market that, to use market research and

the current trends in order to frame their work, rather than to adjust their work to those trends and as the result lose whatever it had to offer.

It is important to stress that it is not impossible for the book written in this style to succeed commercially or critically. Anne Rice's style of narration is far from minimalistic and she has enjoyed great success with her novels (for an example of her style, a quote from *Vampire Lestat*: "I let the thirst rage. I let it tear at my insides. I just clung to the rafter and I saw in one great recollection all my victims, the scum of Paris, screamed up from its gutters, and I knew the madness of the course I'd chosen, and the lie of it, and what I really was" (2011, p.135)). For an example of canonical writers we can look to modernists such as Virginia Woolf, who has vehemently defended the complexity and elevation of her work in her essay *Middlebrow*: "If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crashed worm dares call me "middlebrow" I will take my pen and stab him, dead" (2013, loc. 2049). She celebrated the highbrow as "the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of idea" (2013, loc. 1936) and the lowbrow as "a man or a woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life" (2013, loc. 1951) and condemned the middlebrow: "The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself, nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige" (2013, loc.1973). I believe Virginia Woolf is correct: there can be no forgiveness or excuse for lukewarmness. It would be a dire mistake to confuse this lukewarmness with balance, with the alchemical balance of the sacred androgyne, of the alchemy of fire and water, which is the combination of the North Pole and Sahara desert, it is lovemaking between the two, where neither loses its properties but when they join together to become something fundamentally new, like jumping into snow after sauna — it is balance with intensity, with passion, with the colour of life and art. This figure of the North Pole and Sahara, and the analogy of jumping into cold after sauna, and the entire principle, are all borrowed from Michael Winn's *Lesser Kan and Li* course (2017)

where he explains this level of Taoist alchemy, where spiritual fire and water combine together to form the neutral force that gives birth to the Immortal Embryo. This is significant because this is an example of a point where the Eastern and the Western cultural traditions may shed light onto each other and integrate creatively. Virginia Woolf does not go into these details, but a different union of the highbrow and the lowbrow, other than the middlebrow, seems possible when she describes the relationship between the two as “when highbrows need lowbrows, when lowbrows need highbrows, when they cannot exist apart, when one is the complement and other side of the other” (2013, loc. 1966). The sin of the middlebrows is conformity and fundamentally their concern with the established and the dogmatic; their sin at its pinnacle is writing endless books about Shakespeare that erase his appeal: they teach Shakespeare to the lowbrow (who would have perhaps understood more without), instead of learning from him: “how dare the middlebrows teach you [the lowbrows] how to read — Shakespeare, for instance. [...] Talk to them [Hamlet and Ophelia], as you talk to me, and you will know more about Shakespeare than all the middlebrows in the world can teach you” (loc. 2004 - 2011, 2013). From the aesthetic point of view and concerning my question at hand, only passion, in its various dimensions, can excuse writing, and inform writing: only passion lets writing live.

While this may be a very radical expression of the sentiment — and to Virginia Woolf’s credit, it was an unsent letter, I believe the core of the sentiment holds, with added nuance and softening. The core of my statement, beyond all the proof I can offer, is that I have tried to the best of my abilities, utilising my every faculty, to express the contents of my heart in the way my heart saw most fit. Marketing and selling the book are processes that must come after the book is completed, if the book is to deliver the promise of sincerity and frankness, of passion; and while there is no way to guarantee that the book will sell, it is not outside the realm of possibility any more than any other book that endeavours to study the human heart.

Anne Rice is, furthermore, another writer who has inspired certain motifs of *Apollo Breaks His Silence*. Specifically, the manner in which she manages to use genre fiction to discuss traditionally literary topics. In her *Vampire Chronicles* she uses the fantasy setting to pose questions that are relevant to all human beings, not only vampires. This is something I have attempted to do with *Apollo Breaks His Silence*. My concern is not to portray some kind of cultural boogeyman that may appear in the future, but rather ask the question as to the individual's place in society, and their duty to act in accordance with their best sense, to their duty to question inherited truths, to ask what does one do when one lives in an unfree society. This is not a question directed at the future or the past. I believe the question of liberty must be, by its very nature, a perpetually immediate concern. It is when we believe that there is no need to question the truth one is offered as natural and self-evident, perhaps with the exception of the truth of liberty itself, as liberty is the underlying condition of any such movement, then tyranny sets in, and rhetorically that can take any shape. It may appear left wing or right wing, but this categorisation does not fundamentally matter as much as the the place of the individual within the system. To my sensibility, the Westboro Baptist Church and Andrea Dworkin are of a similar category of phenomena regarding liberty. This is one of the things I have been trying to show through *Apollo Breaks His Silence*. This is why the tyranny of the Plebiscite is not clearly left or right wing, because fundamentally, when one is locked in a slaughterhouse, it really matters very little if the butchers quote Mao, Stalin or Hitler: they remain butchers. It is, I think, very important not to be deceived by names, but instead look at the heart of what is being said in each instance. No rhetoric, absolutely none, can excuse violence against an individual, female or male or of any other gender, and through the dystopian world of *Apollo Breaks His Silence* I try to understand some of the ways an individual may rebel against an inhuman system.

This brings me the question of the treatment of gender in *Apollo Breaks His Silence*. The first thing I would like to remark is that besides being a novel about liberty and spiritual evolution, it is also a novel about love, specifically the fighter-love of the Sacred Band of Thebes. It is a gay love novel about gay male love. It may

be important to note that while all the letters of the LGBT are in alliance with each other and there is much commonality, they tell different stories: all equally important but somewhat different, nevertheless. A lesbian encounters different challenges than a homosexual man or trans man or a trans woman. All of these stories need to be told, and all of these stories, told properly, support each other, but it is useful to sometimes focus on a particular letter or even an aspect of a letter to study a specific symbolic power entailed in the multifaceted queer community. It has also been a conscious decision to set it in the world where homophobia did not really exist, yet where this gay love was at the heart of a struggle. A reader may have certain conditioning surrounding the homophobia narrative, but in this case I did not want to focus on victimhood of gay men, but instead on their strength. Instead of only being hunted for who they are (and some of these themes are still somewhat translated into Johnny's storyline but instead of being hunted for who he is, he is hunted as the result of past actions and circumstances), they become a revolutionary force that kills the old way of thinking, the Plebiscite, for the sake of glittering future. There have been some curious books written on the mythology of male homosexuality, most remarkably the *Gay Spirit* (Thompson, 2013), a collection of essays by remarkable homosexuals on the nature and potential gifts of homosexuality (I am focusing on male homosexuality because this is the focus but of course, I am very aware of a wider variety of symbolic gifts concealed in female homosexuality, transgenderism and other queer identities), but it appears that much of the research and thought is driven by homophobia. We have to protect ourselves and it was an even more pressing matter in the past. This cue I am taking from *Gay Spirit* is a more positive thinking about homosexuality — not as an apology, not even as an appeal to liberty, but rather inquiring: what do gay men offer, uniquely, like no other class of individuals? Because it is a literary study, the answer is not simple: it is symbolic, but it fundamentally relates to the theme of this critical essay on *beauty as truth, truth as ecstasy*. It stands repeating that that the purpose of the novel, in this dimension, was exploration of the nature of male homosexuality and male homosexual desire and love, its symbolic strengths, beauties and uses. This is why

there are no primary female characters: it would amount in my case to straight-washing and diluting the critical potential of the work.

It is precisely because I am supported by a certain strand of feminism (most closely associated with Cixous, as will become evident from the rest of this essay), that I believe a study of masculinity, especially from a non-standard, homosexual perspective is exceptionally important. For one, studying masculinity is as important as studying femininity, because men constitute half of the humanity. Movement forward is impossible without getting them on board, without showing men why men benefit from feminism — and they benefit from the type of feminism that I practice because the repressive patterns of gender and sexuality harass men and women (here, it may be useful to refer to this study: *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men* by Élise Féron, 2018). This is an idea suggested in this interview by Cixous: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKUQWv0irVw>, (uploaded in 2007). This sort of study of masculinity also benefits women: it creates understanding, which creates the possibility for change. It would help to snatch young men away from the hands of neo-nationalists and populists. This is not the subject of this essay but regarding the relationship between masculinity and femininity and for the necessary alliance between the two I refer to Cixous's and Clément's *The Newly Born Woman* (2008), which is an intricate analysis and manifesto — a reimagining of that relationship.

I have mentioned the Sacred Band of Thebes earlier in this essay, not by accident. It is a good analogy to understand how I am focusing on masculinity. The mirror analogy would be a book written on either amazons or political lesbian communities. I do not believe that we cannot have exclusive same sex places for homosexual exploration, if we build them on the ground of *jouissance*, rather than fear. It may be said that the intimate world of the three men in *Apollo Breaks His Silence* is a like a same-sex marriage or a gay bathhouse (which I would argue often accompany the libidinal imagination of homosexual men).

There is also the matter of my personal choice (this will be further explored in this introduction when I discuss writing method). As I a gay man, who occupies a more or less safe position in the society, though I am also a Russian citizen, with all

of accompanying semi-official homophobia that is potentially threatening me like a Damocles' sword, I see many of my kind facing a much harsher fate. It is therefore my desire and duty to ease their suffering and empower them insofar as I am able. And for those who are in safety, I would like offer some myths to inspire their happiness, to inspire action and poetry beyond the limbo of the post-gay marriage world. It is possible to say that *Apollo Breaks His Silence* is, in a sense, my love letter to homosexuality, understood symbolically, as if it were an element of a ritual, understood beyond mere biology and fact, but as a potent myth that effects change, the story of struggle for liberty, and especially sexual liberty, and especially the liberty of joyfulness, for aesthetic voluptuousness, for the dancing and singing, the positive decadence of a bull's health and virility.

There is one particular character who is concerned with femininity within masculinity, Gaspar, and later in the trilogy, a kind of further blending of the already ever interacting masculinity and femininity. I have borrowed the general idea for this move from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*: "Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since" (p.88, 2004), except in the case of Gaspar, he only gets pregnant and gives birth through his navel, as he sacrifices himself on the altar of the new time. This implies a sort of masculine womb, which is an oxymoron, and this is precisely the critical potential of the symbol. For one, it plays with the experience of some trans men, but even more importantly it taps into the interplay of opposites and how the masculine and the feminine is indivisible. It introduces a fruitful melting into one another of the two genders, as kind of ghostly sex (which is also a topic discussed in Michael Winn's course on *Lesser Kan and Li* (2017) that I have mentioned earlier in this section). Without any doubt men can give birth and they have done so, not physically, but in other realms, and even in this case Gaspar is also giving birth to a god. Similarly, without any doubt women have penises, and the similarity between penis and clitoris is highlighted in Lacan when he opposes the organs to the Phallus in his essay *The Signification of the Phallus*: "Still less is it the organ—penis or clitoris—that it symbolises" (2006, p.579). The distance between two sexes, while it does exist, is

not untraversable and the farther one ventures into the realm of poetry and myth, the less it is so.

A man giving birth expands one's range of imaginings of what masculinity may be. It does not decrease the range of capacity of femininity, unless one reduces women's role to giving birth. The feminist tradition asks one to question how we imagine gender, how we think about women and men. One of the feminist projects was to expand a woman's role beyond her mere biology and accentuate her as an agent. As an agent, she is not affected by another's capacity. She can still have a child, and since this is not the core of her being, but only one form of her giving birth — because, of course, women are capable of many types of birthing, not just the physical kind — the feminist woman therefore cannot be threatened by male (re)productive capacity (as for example when a trans male gives birth to his child).

My writing methodology is a combination of a variety of techniques, but I will only detail two most significant and relevant elements in this introduction.

I determine the themes upon which I focus as I write, both on the macro, such as the overall plot and themes, and the micro, scale, such as metaphors and details, by following an advice Anne Rice gave in her video, quoting another writer, Floyd Salas, which is perhaps in itself symbolic, as a passing down of oral wisdom: “Go where the pain is” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bw2KXX7WrOY>, at 6:15, uploaded in 2012), and then she adds another principle, of her own, “go where the pleasure is” (at 6.41).

The entire *Apollo Breaks His Silence* is, of course, built on pains and joys. Every detail is a fantasy and every other detail is a nightmare. The setting of a society that rejected liberty is a representation of my nightmares. A good deal of this nightmare has started in 2014, when I have seen my native country fall into a quasi-fascistic stupor with the passing of a strange law prohibiting propaganda of homosexuality, which is, while in itself not particularly threatening, (as it is only prosecuted with a fine and rarely applied), had caused a surge of emboldened homophobic moods and completely silenced whatever public queer voices were attempting to break through into Russian mainstream. Then when I finished my MA

and temporarily went to stay in Moscow while I was applying for PhDs, the annexation of Crimea took place. I saw the justifications and the efficiency of propaganda and also various transplants of this attitude onto many different soils in other parts of the world. This made me very sensitive to violations of individual liberty that I began to perceive painfully wherever I went. It is the fight between the individual and the administrative, bureaucratise power that seeks to destroys him and her that bothered and continues to bother me. The novel is the affirmation of the right of the individual to liberty and to joy. It is the cheering on of the individual who seeks to become himself or herself. Of course, homosexuality of the characters and the sexual exuberance is also very closely related to the homophobia of that regime and the widespread criminalisation of homosexuality and consensual sexual practices amongst adults, all over the world.

I will also say a couple of words about the writing process itself. A great part of the method I use is inspired by Bradbury's *Zen in the Art of Writing* (1996): "WORK RELAXATION DON'T THINK" (p.147). The idea is to write "from [the] individual truth" (ibid., p.149), which emerges where meditation starts. It is a deeper truth than personality. It is words that emerge from the pregnant silence where things take shape by themselves guided by only a request of the personality. Further following the advice from Bradbury's book I usually have a general idea of where the plot is going and where the events are taking place, but the specifics are filled out automatically in the process of writing, following the logic of the characters and the will of the text. Meditation overall constitutes a large element of the method but I will not go into the specifics as this is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that I use a mixture of Taoist meditation methods, taught by Mantak Chia and those taught by Michael Winn and various Indian, tantric exercises of body, spirit and mind.

In conclusion I will only add a couple more details explaining an element of the critical essay that is important but remains dormant throughout the essay. While this text is concerned mainly with Western philosophy and culture, there is an underlying, underground spring of Eastern thought that informs the analysis, without

ever becoming the focus. Taoist classics such as the Tao Te Ching (2016) are key to the development of my philosophical vision. Eastern philosophy or even just Taoist philosophy is a huge topic which will not be addressed in this essay, but I will give an example of how these texts have inspired my thinking. In Chapter 2 of Tao Te Ching (2016), it says:

Difficult and easy,  
Long and short,  
High and Low,  
Sound and Silence,  
Before and After—

Each of them are complementary parts of a bigger unity. (p.19)

This is relevant to my earlier discussion on femininity and masculinity. The same principle applies here: they only exist in relation to each other and they need each other to exist and prosper. It is important to note that, just like not any object is absolutely long, nor any other absolutely short, no individual is absolutely masculine or feminine. This is demonstrated in the famous Taijitu symbol.

Another case when the Eastern philosophy has greatly impacted my understanding an idea is relevant to the idea of truth, discussed in Chapter II. Since the truth in this essay is, for the most part an esoteric truth, an absolutely truth of inspiration, it is close to the Chinese concept of Tao. This concept is exceptionally nuanced and complex but here I will refer to one of the most famous and authoritative passages on the matter:

The Tao that can be discussed is not really the Tao.

Things in the world are only temporary reflections of Tao.

The flow of Tao is all that really exists. (Lao Tzu, The Tao Te Ching, 2016, p. 18)

This refers to why the truth can never be defined, why the language of truth, poetry, needs to always be renewed lest it becomes dogma, and why there are as many forms of expression of poetry as things in the world. All of this will be discussed through the essay but mostly through Western philosophy and culture, with

only some references to the Eastern traditions, to obey the declared limit of this study.

## Chapter 1 The Theia Mania of Poetry

Some hypotheses about Pythia must be accepted as premises if this argument can be proposed. It is true of most arguments that there are presuppositions upon which they are built, and I prefer to be transparent in this regard. First, we must accept the mythology of Pythia. We must accept that Pythia is an oracle of Apollo. This means that what she says in prophecy are the words of god. Thereby we are accepting the mythology of Pythia, and can start to mine it for the insight rather than treating it as a superstition which would reduce us to the position of an anthropological observation and strip the project of any potential other than that of cataloguing customs — we would have missed out on the sacral meaning of the Pythian oracle, of her speech, of her figure, what it *might* mean, if we allow him/her/them to speak (the uncertainty as to who is speaking will be discussed in more detail in Chapter II).

We must accept that she is a woman. This has its own implications, key implications that go far beyond what is normally ghettoised as ‘women’s studies’. I will return to this shortly, looking through the spectacles offered by Cixous.

One of the theses of this paper is that Pythia spoke in poetry. It is therefore important to address the fact that Pythia spoke in verse in earlier ages and in prose later, as testified by Plutarch in II in “Oracles at Delphi no longer given in verse” in Book V of his *Moralia*:

[...] even if these verses are inferior to Homer, let us never suppose that the God has composed them; he only gives the initial impulse according to the capacity of each prophetess. Why, suppose the answers had to be written, not spoken. I do not think we should suppose that the letters were made by God, and find fault with the calligraphy as below royal standard. The strain is not the God’s, but the woman’s, and so with

the voice and the phrasing and metre; he only provides fantasies and puts light into her soul to illuminate the future; for that is what inspiration is. [...] you blame those old prophetesses because they used bad poetry, and you also blame those of today because they use no poetry, and speak the first words which come, that they may be assailed for delivering headless, hollow, crop-tailed lines. (2013, locations: 44719-44727).

Implicit in this quote is the difference between true words of Pythia and fine poetry chiefly for the pleasure of the senses rather than the creative, divine act as may be the nature of the craft, as will be discussed in more detail in several paragraphs.

Another element this quote suggests is the priority of truthfulness of poetic speech, that is: the fidelity to the divine inspiration in meaning and style over conventions of form or its agreeability. First, it must be admitted that forms of speech employed by Pythia and poets are related but somewhat different. My thesis is that both are forms of poetic speech that speak different styles of truth, but nevertheless, there is something common between them, and it is this commonality that carries most critical charge. In Pythia's case elegance of style is sacrificed for the boldness and rawness of the image, whereas in poetry, at least poetry as will be later defined by Shelley and Emerson, elegance of style is used as tool, used or discarded, to convey a less specific idea, perhaps, as images.

In the same dialogue Plutarch suggests that the level of simplicity of the prophecy is contextually determined, in the case of Pythia by the spirit of the time. Here it is, however, important to modify Plutarch's words, what he might mean when he calls a prophecy simple. Of simple style in Pythia's prophecies Plutarch says:

“if we welcome and admire what the Wise Men of old days have written up: ‘Know Thyself’ and ‘Nothing too much’, not least because of the brevity which includes in a small compass a close hammer-beaten

sense, we cannot blame the oracles because they mostly use concise, plain, direct phrases” (2013, location: 45049-45056);

and of the complex style:

“as children show more glee and satisfaction at the sight of rainbows or haloes or comets than in that of the sun or of the moon, so do these people regret the riddles, allegories, and metaphors” (2013, loc. 45072-45075).

This reveals that the distinction is also mainly stylistic rather than in terms of the depth of meaning. The Delphic maxims are evidently laconic, but profound in their meaning. Their influence on the entire Socratic tradition could be glimpsed by noting the resonance between “Know Thyself” and this quote from Plato’s *Apology* “the unexamined life is not worth living” (2015, loc. 1067). This shows, at least, some degree of affinity between the origin of (Socratic) philosophy and Apollo’s Temple at Delphi.

What follows from above is this: whether the prophecy is given in the style of a riddle or a laconic statement makes no difference either in how it demands a philosophical openness, nor to the haughtiness of its insight.

The difference between poetry as verse and poetry in a more general sense is explored in some detail by Percy Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry*. Besides meaning the form of verse, “[p]oetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be ‘the expression of the imagination’” (2002, p.635), which he defines as “the principle of synthesis, and has for its object those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself” (2002, p.635); furthermore, he adds: “[t]he distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error.” (2002, p.639). Shelley goes on to explain how a “poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (2002, 640p.), and while language is the privileged medium, poetry may also be expressed in other media such as sculpture, music and even legislation. To Shelley, poetry is about catching the eternal within the ruse of the temporal. In this sense, that Pythia has

adapted to her time, as demonstrated above, would help define her as, at least, a kind of a poet, despite her not using the metric form in later ages of the oracle.

There is a particularly relevant passage:

Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of the events: such is the pretence of superstition, which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry.” (2002, pp.637-8).

This may be interpreted as saying that prophecy belongs to poetry: in other words, that not all poetry is prophecy, but all true prophecy is poetry. It is important to ascertain the particular relationship between poetry and prophecy but for the purposes of this work, it is sufficient to establish that such a relationship exists.

*Apollo Breaks His Silence*, though it features a chapter that takes place during a poetry evening, addresses poetry on a deeper level in its aestheticisation of life, in its will to view life and its indivisible counterpart, death (To quote from *Lieh-Tzu*: “Death and life are cycles of going and coming. [...] Which is better, life or death? [...]we don’t even know whether we are better off living or dying” (2001, p. 38-39), as fundamentally beautiful: creation, therefore as an aesthetic phenomenon, its shadows and its light merged together, married:

“The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them— first to seize them, then, if need be, submit them to the control of our reason (Breton, 2012, p. 10)

Though this quote is still a little too negative about the darkness, it acknowledged the use of darkness, the use of the horrible and the obscure, its

necessity for the reason — and I think, here reason must be interpreted in its most elevated, mystical way (this will be a significant theme in chapter III where I discuss Marcuse and the Republic in the light of darkness). The ethical position of the *Apollo Breaks His Silence* is mostly amoral: it is a fulfilment of prophecy, and everything favours the fulfilment, despite numerous, apparently insurmountable trials, such as the demise of Kevin at the end of volume II. My passion has been to present the terrible as beautiful, as much as the virtuous as beautiful. Even the most unseemly elements are used to accentuate the beauty that is present: they are merely contrast. If truth is beauty, then fallacy is simply a condition for beauty to emerge.

Another point I must explore here is rewording of Pythia in terms of early Nietzsche, in terms of the *Birth of Tragedy*: in terms of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Given that I am writing about Pythia, the oracle of Apollo, this is particularly useful (not to mention that it is intimately connected with the theme of the creative component of my PhD that as an overarching plot has the birth of Apollo as Dionysus. This formula is paramount to this critical essay as much: the transition from the inarticulable to the manifest and back, the saying what is impossible to say, the *music* of words).

Nietzsche wrote of the Apollonian: “The Greeks have [...] expressed th[e] joyful necessity of the dream experience in their Apollo: Apollo, as the god of all plastic energies is at the same time the god of prophesy” (2008, p.21): there already one can see how the plasticity and order of Apollo needs and even contains within itself the gateway to the formless: how the bodies need music to move, how the unconscious impulses need form to appear, how inspiration needs words to sound; and of the Dionysian: “this is the most immediate effect of Dionysian tragedy, that state and society, indeed the whole chasm separating man from man, gives way to an overpowering feeling of unity which leads back to the heart of nature” (2008, p.45) — in the cathartic moment there is a movement that shatters all one knows to reveal the madness of passion, the boundless and chthonic ocean of the unconscious.

Furthermore, and this is of extreme importance to understand the relationship between the two:

Under the influence of its spell [speaking of dramatic art], the Dionysian enthusiast sees himself as satyr, *and as satyr he in turn beholds the god*, that is, transformed in this way he sees a new vision outside himself, as the Apollonian completion of his state (2008, p.50)

The subject is thus transformed and, having been transformed, by the instance of inspiration, where the subject's reason and identity have been suspended, for the subject is now a satyr, now belonging to a different world from everyday life. The subject is now capable of creation of an orderly form as an extension of the subject's transformation and the interruption in the subject's individuation (even and perhaps especially if the subject produces with reason as his/her medium):

And because you had abandoned Dionysus, you were abandoned by Apollo as well; [...] even your heroes possess nothing more than masked imitation passions and deliver nothing more than masked imitation speeches. (2008, p.62).

Dionysus is the inspiration, the enthusiasm, the ecstasy — the music that inspires in the crazed formless dance where one body melts into another, where the difference between 'you' and 'I' is tenuous and uncertain; whereas the Apollonian is the plastic perfection, the harmony of form, the ideal, illumined order, the heroic individual. The Apollonian is the individuation of the hero, his/her form, his/her name, and particulars; the Dionysian is that about the hero(ine) that triggers the strings of the collective unconscious, the strings of myth, of poetry and mystery. In light of this it is important to keep in mind the transformative effect of a hero as a personal phenomenon, Jung offers: "The initiate [...] is elected to be Helios; he is crowned [...], whereupon the assembled crowd pays homage to him. The suggestion of the crowd brings about his identity with the god." (2011, p.128)

Dionysus is thus the shadow cast by the Sun. He is the shadow of Apollo, but also his inspiration. Dionysus is the sense behind a word, Apollo the word: not a

dictionary definition but the true meaning, connotative and denotative, as if the two could be distinct outside of an abstraction. To divide a word and its meaning is also only possible if the word is dead, such as if it is found in a dictionary, as Virginia Woolf suggested in *Craftsmanship*: “[words] are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. [...] words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind” (2016, loc: 52475). In other words, words go beyond the mores of the writer. There is an element of unpredictability suggested in Woolf’s essay, a logic of language that cannot be limited by convention. Words present an image and create order, but they elude order imposed. They will not be manhandled: “If we insist on forcing them against their nature to be useful, we see to our cost how they mislead us, how they fool us, how they land us a crack on the head.” (Woolf, 2016, loc.2183) To divide the Apollonian and Dionysian is, in practice, impossible: there are clearly Apollonian elements in music and Dionysian elements of visual art (consider Bosch, for example).

This is not to say that the distinction between the two is not theoretically and conceptually useful, but that there is no opposition between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Apollo and Dionysus are married on the bed of Eros and Thanatos. It must be added that if we are to frame the relationship between Apollo and Dionysus as oppositional, and there is a degree of tension between the two, it may be beneficial to spend a couple of sentences evaluating that opposition. First, I would like to bring in Heraclitus: “Justice in our minds is strife” (2001, loc. 388). What is important for my purpose in this thesis is a correct understanding of justice and strife, because it appears that these are words very prone to misinterpretation. The true meaning behind the words of the obscure philosopher may not immediately obvious, but what is is that there are certain parallels between Heraclitus and Taoist philosophy, as Needham (1956) suggested, as cited in the I Ching editing by John Minford (2014): “The Tao as the Order of Nature, which brought all things into existence and governs their every action, not so much by force as by a kind of natural curvature in space and time, reminds us of the *logos* of Heraclitus of Ephesus, controlling the orderly processes of change.” (p.33). Though the two sources are of radically different

origin, they study similar things and what one has to say on the topic may be relevant to what the other has to say on the topic, and may even shed some light on the fragment by Heraclitus that I have quoted above. It may therefore be helpful to refer to this fragment of *the Great Treatise* as offered in the I Ching to understand the nature of polarity:

*Qien* is the  
Yang Thing,  
The penis.  
*Kun* is the  
Yin Thing,  
The vagina.

When Yin and Yang Energies join,  
When Firm and Soft unite,  
Then is Substance attained.

(pp.36-37, 2014)

There are many things to unpack here. The ostensible heterosexism here is illusory, as an anus is yin and the penis is yang, and the clitoris is yang and the vagina is yin. It is only the principle of transformation between active and passive, but this passage highlights very well the desire of one for the other: to love it, to become it. In this passage the text refers to attainment of Substance which is incarnation, as is in Lieh-Tzu: “People use the words “beginning” and “end” to describe the start and end of things. [...] “beginning” is really the event of coming together when energy gathers, and “end” is simply the dissolution of that energy” (2001, p.34) It is Justice in the sense of coming to be, as an affirmation of existence and ever existing and ever arriving harmony, the self-calibration.

This is not to say that violence is not a form of strife, but it cannot be properly applied to abstract notions that tend toward intercourse-synthesis; and intercourse on the level matter definitely suggests also dissolution, to refer to Bataille: “reproduction demands the death of the parents” (1962, p.61), only to say perhaps that reproduction needs decay the same way life needs death to exist. But in

the case that I am interested in, the case of Apollo and Dionysus: it is the amorous strife between lovers, the libidinal tension between Apollo and Dionysus that produces harmony in the flow and ebb of their wrestling. Eros, in other words, rules the opposites, at least as a dimension of their interaction (though Thanatos is never far from Eros and perhaps the two are in similar position to Dionysus and Apollo, as I describe it here).

Several things stand out in the mythicopoetic context that made the Apollo/Dionysus framework useful for my analysis of Pythia. Though on the first glance Pythia is solely associated with Apollo, she also had tremendous affinity with the chthonic, as is found in Plutarch's *Moralia* "the Sibyl 'with raving mouth,' as Heraclitus says, 'utters words with no laughter, no adornment, no perfumes,'" (2013, loc. 44719-44727). Furthermore, the origin of Pythia's name is Python, a monstrous dragon-serpent slain by Apollo shortly after his birth. This episode, and that Pythia takes her name from Python, is of tremendous significance. Apollo has thereby integrated an older deity into himself. As Python was slain, his blood gave birth to Apollo's oracle, an act that happened right after Apollo's birth as a sanguine baptism of him as the god he is, as is depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*:

The snake was transfixed by a thousand arrows (the quiver was almost emptied) and out of its wounds there spewed black gushes of venom.

In order that time should never destroy the fame of this exploit,  
Apollo established the sacred games [...] (2004, p.27)

One wonders if behind Python's scales one might find the face of Dionysus (as Nietzsche writes: "all the famous figures of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus, and so on, are only masks of that original hero Dionysus." (2008, p. 59). Pythia, by the virtue of and not in spite of being Apollo's priestess, is also intimately connected to Dionysus, to the chthonic darkness.

The theme of sanguine birth, or to rephrase, the theme of rebirth in death, is one of the key subjects of *Apollo Breaks His Silence*. The overarching plot of the novel, which I have described earlier in this essay, ends with the birth of the god of the new millennium: Horus or Apollo, the two are identified in the novel. The idea of

progression of Aeons and the coming of the Aeon of Horus is an idea I have discovered in Crowley's *Book of the Law*:

[Horus] rules the present period of 2000 years,  
beginning in 1904. Everywhere his government is  
taking root. Observe for yourselves the decay of the  
sense of sin, the growth of innocence and  
irresponsibility. (2014, p.17)

Apollo is born from the womb of Gaspar as he is executed by the soldiers of the Plebiscite. It may be said that the death of the three protagonists impregnates the society which destroyed them, and changes the very nature of it. Another interpretation is that the Plebiscite is the Python that needs to be slain by Apollo: as any fascist society, full of repression — that is, repressed potential, in need of liberation from the repression.

I will now return to the question of Pythia as a Poet or Poet as Prophet. I am going to consult Ralph Waldo Emerson and his insight into the poetic style in *The Poet*, which will be of significance in introducing the argument of Cixous as a way of accounting for the ambiguity as inherent in the poetic style in the case of Pythia. Emerson states: “The sign and credentials of the poet are that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes” (2010, p.622). And then: “The poet did not stop at the color or the form, but read their meaning; neither may he rest in the meaning, but he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought. [...] For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as forms and houses are, for homestead.” (2010, p.632). This suggests that poetic speech is a form of speech that transcends particulars of form and instead relates to something far beyond that which is definable, beyond what is ordinary or to be expected, or ‘realistic’ or maybe even ‘reasonable’ in a certain sense, if we can separate fully one sense of the word from another; though these specific terms can be further interrogated, and it is important to note that unreason and reason have a

mutually beneficial relationship, as I argue in chapter II, and as may be extrapolated from the above discussion on the nature of polarity.

Emerson, then, adds: “The poets are thus liberating gods. The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, “Those who are free throughout the world.” They are free, and they make free. An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterwards when we arrive at the precise sense of the author.” (2010, p.631) This is of paramount importance. It suggests again that the quality of the poetic speech, which for him is also a true speech, as above, is in the effects of its style, in breaking down the deadened structures of meaning, or tropes, and introducing new ones, still full of life and close to that ineffable category that I here term the Dionysian. Pythian speech embodies a break in the sequence of ordinary life. Many of Pythia’s prophecies were misunderstood, albeit true. This moment where the inquirer fails to understand the answer is key. By this I do not mean mere that failure to understand drives the plot of the story or how is it instrumental in a tragic twist of fate or caused by a fault in the inquirer’s character, by his lack of wisdom. What matters is the moment where reason is suspended and old forms of understanding do not work, which prevents the utterances from becoming intelligible, but the moment reason is suspended is also the moment when reason triumphs. Affinity between Socrates and Apollo, as shown in this quote from Plato’s *Phaedo* “I, too, believe myself to be the consecrated servant of the same God [Apollo]” (2015, loc. 6485), may reveal that the opposition between reason and ‘divine madness’ is indeed a false opposition.

It may be important here to interrogate an example of when Pythia’s utterance appears to have been understood best, and how it happened. As the story is told in *Apology*:

Chaerephon [...] was very impetuous in all his doing, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether [...] anyone was wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered, that there was no man wiser [...] Why do I mention this? Because I

am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, what can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of his riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. [...] I thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. (2015, loc. 769— 777).

The entire philosophical project, started up by Socrates, then, was to prove Apollo correct. Without sacrificing the virtue of humility the only way to show piety and prove Apollo correct was to attempt to prove him wrong by finding the wisest men of the land and investigating if they could teach Socrates wisdom. It may be said that the entire Western project of post-Socratic philosophy was birthed from the single Pythian “no”. The utterance leads, according to legend, to a complete shift of affairs in Socrates’s life. It might also be important that the statement is negatory. This may or may not be coincidental with the iconoclastic nature of Socrates’s philosophy.

I will now turn to Cixous to look at playfulness of Pythia. In her *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) Cixous proposes an embodied style of writing that avoids definition insofar as it is embodied. It is her playful weapon against phallogocentrism: “It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing [...] it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system.” (1976, p.883). I define phallo(logo)centrism within the framework of the Apollonian/Dionysian as the false or shallow Apollo: in other words the impulse of order stripped of its underlying vitality and the necessary disorder that makes order possible (traditionally it is defined as focus on a certain kind of disembodied masculinity and reason that are, to a great extent, synonymous; I refer here to Cixous and Clément (2008), where “logocentric plan has always, inadmissibly, been to create a foundation for [...] phallogocentrism” (p.65)). A key aesthetic quality of shallow, false Apollo appears to be what Nietzsche later came to call “gravity” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “[a]most

from the cradle they endow us with weighty words and values: ‘good’ and ‘evil’ — that is what this dowry called. For the sake of these they forgive us for being alive” (2008, p.167); and regarding this, Nietzsche also wrote: “especially my being enemy to the Spirit of Heaviness makes me of the bird’s kind” (2008, p.166); this echoes this statement by Cixous:

Let’s leave it to the worriers, to masculine anxiety and  
its obsession with how to dominate the way things  
work — knowing “how it works” in order to “make it  
work.” For us the point is not to take possession in  
order to internalise or manipulate, but rather to dash  
through and to “fly” (1976, p. 887)

This is, perhaps, the key way in which Cixous attacks phallo(logo)centrism, both in what she writes but also and more importantly, in the style she uses. To be specific, she introduces innocent playfulness as she dances with heavy ideas such as castration anxiety and penis envy, as she exposes them as projections of the dead logic that fears Medusa — that is, that fears the sacred moment, the instance of theia mania, where dogma is blown away by a tornado of inspiration or divine enthusiasm.

Prophecies such as these “The highest power at Rome shall be his, young men, who shall first among you to kiss his mother” (2014, Livy, loc. 1618), where mother means both their mother and the earth; or riddles like this regarding the location of Orestes’s bones:

“There is a place Tegea in the smooth plain of Arcadia  
Where two winds blow under strong compulsion.  
Blow lies upon blow, woe upon woe.

There the life-giving earth covers the son of Agamemnon.” (Herodotus, loc. 616)

among many other examples, while they do not serve precisely the same function as the feminine writing Cixous proposes, shares the quality of levity even and especially when most dire seriousness is concerned. Prophecies are often about

destinies of entire peoples and nations, but with the playful indifferent as in the Bhavagita:

Although you mean well, Arjuna,  
your sorrow is sheer delusion.  
Wise men do not grieve  
for the dead or the living. (2000, p.47)

It is not the levity of entertainment, but the levity amidst the battlefield, the levity in the face of death. Or another example from Tao Te Ching:

Nature is unsentimental—  
It treats the living no different than it treats debris. (2016, p.22)

This I believe to be the poetic and sacred attitude of indifference that allows compassion but not pity: the aesthetic attitude, the poetic attitude, the supreme optimism.

This sort of levity is one of the main conditions of poetic speech and its effect. Poetic speech involves creation of new metaphors, new expressions of truth, as will be explained in chapter II, but it cannot be done wholly on purpose. The *jouissance* of play appears to be a key quality of contestation of the old — and the old is all grave and solid. It is the coming of the new, of the ever new, the renewal in language, growth but by increments, every true utterance is a revolution and also reproduction. This resonates with another thesis from Tao Te Ching:

[...] the hard and stubborn is the disciple of death,  
While the soft and yielding is the disciple of life. (2016, p.93)

A key quality, therefore, of *l'écriture féminine* is that it is new (perhaps ever new, insofar as it retains playfulness: playfulness *makes* it new), and this is a quality it shares with what I mean here by 'poetic speech' and, specifically with Pythia, in whose case new meanings emerge every time that she speaks, in the very gap between her act of speech and the instance of epiphany (even in delayed cases where the meaning is misunderstood, and the story of the one who received the prophecy and failed to comprehend it becomes part of Pythia's divine poetry). Poetry is therefore not political. It is, in fact, anti-political in the sense that it is destructive to

political systems, left wing or right wing. Poetry is, then, simply antithetical to anything or anyone who wishes to hold and keep money, power, truth to themselves. This is further explored in chapter III of this essay.

To return to the original concern of this chapter: the conclusion is this: that the key quality of the poetic style is the use of media of various degrees of plasticity, from color, to word, to sound, for the purpose of creating the condition of deafening newness necessary for the epiphany, for the experience of truth-as-rebirth. It is the playful destruction of whatever degenerated into dogma that constitutes the soul of poetry, and in the context of religion, it is that element of religion that returns it to its origin: to mystery and direct experience. Pythia, I believe, is a great example of that, as her prophetic words demand from the questioner to return to the righteous path.

In the context of *Apollo Breaks His Silence*, the trinity of the protagonists are both poems and poets, writing with their actions, making their very lives poetry. The camera of the narrator's voice, the camera of Pythia, allowed me to create an aesthetic distance between the characters' own affect and the beauty of the event. I deliberately diluted the border between the authorial voice and the inner monologue of the characters to imitate how thoughts come and go without any certainty that these thoughts are one's own. I sought to write a tragedy in order to find beauty in horror, to affirm that which it is impossible to affirm: "I want to come to regard everything necessary as beautiful — so that I will become one of those who makes everything beautiful. Amor Fati" (2018, Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, p.186).

## Chapter II: The Ecstasy of Truth

What I mean by truth is not necessarily and primarily the factual truth. What makes something factually correct and how that may be known is of little relevance to this work and is far outside the scope of this essay and its theme. The truth of poetry has to be truer than truth, as poetry creates the truth, as poiesis. It may also be said that poetry needs truth to be poetry; to be revealed as poetry, poetry needs the condition of truth.

In my definition the relationship between truth that I mostly refer to in this essay and factual truth could be expressed by quoting Oscar Wilde in his discussion of Shakespeare's plays: "the aesthetic value of Shakespeare's plays does not, in the slightest degree, depend on their facts, but on their truth, and the truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure" (2011, p. 186). A truthful fact is an afterthought to truth as an ecstasy, as revelation, even in the case of prophecy. It creates a transformational experience: one does not merely receive information, one is transformed in the process. I will focus on this case from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is a prophecy and a reaction to the prophecy from the Delphic oracle but before Apollo, when it was dedicated to Themis:

"The heart of the goddess was moved and she gave her  
response to them, saying:

'Leave this sanctuary, cover your heads and ungirdle  
your garments,

then cast the bones of your mighty mother behind your  
backs.'

They were long dumbfounded. Pyrrha was first to  
break the silence

and voice her protest aloud. She refused to obey the  
goddess'

commands. With trembling lips she begged for pardon,  
too frightened  
to give such offence to her mother's ghost by casting  
her dead bones.  
Meanwhile they silently pondered the words of the  
puzzling reply  
which had come from the oracle's dark recess, and  
discussed them together.  
Prometheus' son then gently suggested, to calm  
Epimetheus'  
daughter: 'Unless my wits are awry and sorely  
deceiving me,  
oracles must be holy and never command what is  
sinful.  
Our might mother is Earth. I believe what is meant by  
her bones  
are stones on her body, and these we are bidden to cast  
behind us.' (2004, p. 24)

The fact that it was the son of Prometheus is significant in its own right, but here I would like to merely demonstrate that the prophecy used facts as merely a vehicle for expressing its inspired truth, not merely as an instruction, as this is not a story about merely what must be done in their specific circumstances, but also a story of filial piety and a demonstration of the relationship between humans and Earth, which is all the more significant since this story follows the chapter on the Flood.

To account for the above considerations truth has to be defined not as any piece of information, nor as any belief or positive statement, but rather as a state, as the state of affinity with the gods (to follow the oracle, it follows from the passage above, is to hold fast to piety). Poetry, as I widely define it, is, then, a transmission of that state. To produce truth is to renew truth. Poetry reproduced truth by destroyed

truths as decayed metaphors and dead poetry: it kills that which it resurrects by the very virtue of the sacrifice.

It seems appropriate that this discussion should be ignited by a reference to a poem, and a thesis presented in the form of poetry and in the form of verse. This is a line from Tyutchev's poem: *Silentium* (1833): "A thought, once uttered, is untrue," (1997, available from <http://www.lib.ru/NABOKOW/silent.txt>) in Nabokov's translation. For my purpose I will need to correct this translation because every word is very important as it appeared in the original. The original actually says: "A thought uttered is a lie" (1833). This shift is tremendously important for my purposes. There is a significant difference between words 'untrue' and 'lie': the former suggests factual inaccuracy and the latter a falsification. To clarify, in my definition, a falsification is not necessarily factually inaccurate. Falsification is only that which is not truth. It is, therefore, the Devil and the maya, the veil which hides the absolute ecstasy of truth as union with the divine.

I do not believe that 'a thought uttered is a lie' refers to the author's failure of precision or fact. The three lines which precede that line all questions directed at someone, perhaps a friend: the first line is concerned with, to offer my most direct translation: "How can a heart speak itself out?" (1833) This is enough proof, perhaps, that Tyutchev does not refer to the language as expressed by the tongue, by language that exists even in silence. The next line externalises the issue and brings in the question of understanding. I will again translate it word for word instead of using Nabokov's translation, which mentions the mind that is not mentioned in the original: "How will the other understand you?" (Nabokov's translation was: "How should another know your mind? (1997) And then the original continues in my translation: "Will he understand by what you live?" (1833) The last line demands an explanation. It could have been "With what do you live?" Briefly, it asks, what is it that constitutes your living, what is it that makes your life go? It is clear that what is at stake is definitely not transmission of any kind of information, but something of a higher order of understanding.

If I take the above verses as the foundation of this analysis, then logic alone cannot be the only viable form or medium of perception of truth. To slightly alter the terms of the equation I must argue here that reason is not the only way to perceive truth, not the only way to knowledge heaven, not the only organ of perception of the the soul possesses. To quote Bertrand Russel on Plato's understanding of reason: "[reason] is concerned with pure ideas, and its method is dialectic." (1996, p.125) I am not trying to undermine the Platonic method of arriving at truth via Reason, instead I am interested in the other area of truth that allows for little explanation and discussion the way philosophy, at least platonic philosophy, demands. It is possible to speak about poetry, but unless one speaks poetically, it is murder of poetry — it is missing the point, it is murder of butterflies. (It is, however, worth mentioning that the opposition between reason and what I may here unreason is not as paramount as it may seem, but may upon further study be shown to be a fallacy: whether theia mania and reason are mutually exclusive principles is far from obvious to me; instead, I would suggest that the two are like two sides the brain, mutually complementary).

There is a related area of inquiry: that of the interrelation between truth and virtue, as Plato remarks in Meno: "[...V]irtue is neither natural, nor acquired, but an instinct given by God to the virtuous. Nor is the instinct accompanied by reason [...]" (2015, loc: 15469 - 15475,.) but how this may interact with the figure of the philosopher — to what extent does the philosopher possess the knowledge, and to what extent does the knowledge possess him? In this case reason plays a specific role that may be important for understanding the difference and the special status of the philosopher-king/queen: "there may be supposed to be among statesmen some one who is capable of educating statesmen. And if there were such an one, he may be said to be among the living what Homer says that Tiresias was among the dead, 'he alone has understanding; but the rest are flitting shades'" (Plato, Meno, 2015, loc: 15469). The transmission of the art of governance is therefore not merely a transmission of information, but something a lot more complex, perhaps something akin to the transmission of truth, as I define it — in this case in the form of virtue.

The medium that I am interested in is what in Plato's *Ion* is called 'inspiration'. In this dialogue the difference between knowing the art of something and being able to move or speak by inspiration is described. The difference between the two is that in knowing the art of something one possess the free capacity to understand all the elements and practice that art at will, whereas acting by inspiration means to be moved by the gods, to be possessed and filled with divine enthusiasm.

Inspiration is also something that affects the characters of *Apollo Breaks His Silence* frequently. Mostly

It may appear that this organ of the soul's senses completely precludes communication, being an experience of a very evanescent, spiritual, personal nature, but the following passage from *Ion* suggests otherwise:

Do you know that the spectator is the last of the rings, which as I am saying, receive the power of the original magnet from one another? The rhapsode like yourself and the actor are intermediate links, and the poet himself is the first of them. Through all these the God sways the souls of men in any direction which he pleases, and makes one man hang down from another.

(2015, loc 5174)

This passage suggests that communication of and through inspiration is possible. Inspiration is the cause, the means and the object of transmission. The inspired both know and do not know. This raises related question as to the nature of knowledge, excepting the technical knowledge of a particular subject — this raises the question of knowledge of wisdom that is transmitted through divine inspiration, not directly, but — at least in my case studies — through the means of poetry.

This raises many complex questions as to the nature of philosophy. Does a philosopher possess an art? — but this question is beyond the scope of this essay too, and is mentioned here only as a faint suspicion; what is more significant is the Socrates said that he knew nothing. Given the mystical origin of Socrates, having

received his vigil from Delphic Apollo, it inspires doubt as to what extent is philosophy different from poetry, whether this difference is as fundamental as it sometimes appears in Plato's oeuvre ("[Poet] resembles [painter] both because his works have a low degree of truth and also because he deals with a low element of the mind" (Plato, Republic, 2007, p.348)).

It is clear that hearing the inspired words may not be enough to receive the inspiration concealed within. If that were not the case, anyone who came in contact with Homer's poetry, for example, would become inspired by Homer, and then there would not be individuals like Ion who were exceptionally inspired by Homer specifically, and not by other inspired poets. It is necessary to add that, based on that dialogue, different individuals may carry on the original inspiration in different ways, as the way rhapsode bears the inspiration is different from the way the actor bears the inspiration. In conclusion, what must be added to what I have said above is that the recipient must possess qualities that allow him or her to receive the inspiration at the time when it is being transmitted, and how the recipient bears the inspiration in his or her own turn depends on particular proclivities of that individual.

Another properly must, therefore, be added that in order for the transmission of inspiration to take place, an inspiring and inspired act is necessary on the part of the transmitter. In the case of a poet, the poet must write a poem through inspiration to start the chain reaction that Plato describes. This is the subject of the essay and the aspect of the poetic truth that I am concerned with in this chapter.

If one accepts inspiration in the way proposed here, then we can no longer contend that truth is altogether produced in the moment of utterance, but rather that what is produced is an opportunity of transmission of the sort of truth that can not really be put into words but that is put into words in the manner that virus inhabits cells.

In other words, if truth can only be perceived on a level that cannot really be discussed, that is being understood without understanding, that is being put in words and at same time transcending words, one speaks in order to elicit a state of truth, a state of inspiration. Speaking the poetic, inspired truth is therefore a form of

mental, spiritual or emotional stimulation that may at some point lead to the epiphany of enthusiasm.

Before I proceed to the main body of my discussion of Foucault, I will turn to apply the above to *Apollo Breaks His Silence*. The search for truth in the novel proceeds on three levels: 1) the search for truth about the history and the true working of the Republic and the Plebiscite, which begin to emerge as a suspicion in Gaspar's storyline when he begins to have doubts over the propaganda machinery of the state; 2) the search for personal truth — the journey of discovering one's true identity and what is their place: the proper way of life for one to realise one's highest potential (here I would like to refer to this quote to explain what I mean:

Do you know fire? When it comes into being, it has light, but it does not use its light, though its effectiveness is in the use of light. People are born with abilities, but they don't use their abilities, though effectiveness is in the use of abilities. So to use light is a matter of obtaining firewood, so as to keep up its glow; the use of abilities is a matter of discerning reality, in order to complete your life. (Cleary, 2011, p. 67);

3) the awakening to the fallacy of the naturalised idea as truth (as an ideology, to borrow a term from Marxism: "ideology as illusion, false consciousness, unreality, upside-down reality" (Williams, 1988, p.156)— the conquest of the ideological truth, of seeing the true nature of that which has been perceived as ordinary hitherto. These three categories are abstractions, and many events throughout the three volumes that drive the plot forwards could be classified as a combination of all three. I will limit the account here mainly to personal realisations and the role of Pythia, especially in later volumes where her prophecy becomes more prominent, as the political implications of inspiration and poetic truth will be more relevant in chapter III of the current essay.

Volume I, two thirds of which constitute the submitted draft, is mostly concerned with the past of the three characters. It felt necessary to ground them and reveal their personalities and to explore the role of criminality in their coming of age (in the sense that: “By enacting more laws,/ We create more criminals” (2016, p.74) from Tao Te Ching; in Plebiscite anyone can be a criminal and is a criminal, but the shift for the three protagonists is from passive criminality projected by the state, its brutality, to the active revolutionary violence: “The brutality of the system. [...] The more oppressive brutality becomes, the more will violence that is life be required to the point of heroism” (2004, Jean Genet, p.171) within the domain of the Plebiscite before properly introducing the prophecy. Volume I is about the collapse. If it were a Tarot card, it would be the Tower (“The destruction of the garrison may therefore be taken to mean [...] emancipation from the prison of organised life” (2014, p. 108, Crowley, The Book of Thoth)). Volume II is the Dark Night of the Soul; and volume three is the great dawn.

In volume I there are several significant episodes where a character discovers something external that reveals the truth of themselves. These episodes could be described as episodes of inspiration. One such episode takes place in a flashback in chapter ‘The Howl of a Princely Werewolf’ that depicts how Kevin witness his lieutenant threatening to castrate a young man of the wild folk. This inspires Kevin to shoot Lt. Synge. It was a moment of madness, incomprehensible from the position of pragmatic reason, incomprehensible from the standpoint of the ethics of subordination, etc. This moment of revolution returns to Kevin his true self. There is no real transmission here, besides the pure spark of inspiration. It is Kevin’s true values, his soul, his way, whatever we may call it, his inner nature, asserting itself as a revelation. This is also the starting point of Kevin’s storyline. Since the only other person in proximity was was his best friend, Jacob, he did not get exposed to the authorities, but this is also the reason why he and Jacob are being investigated by the security services, which is also one of the reasons why Johnny killed the spy, etc. These moments of inspiration or revelation are important building blocks for the novel. Gaspar’s vision after he had been struck with the lightning could be described

as another important instance of inspiration, as he is led out of the building by an otherworldly melody, and he has decided to stay underneath a tree to smoke.

This brings some of the terminology of this chapter closer to the terminology of chapter I. One could describe the instance of inspiration as a Dionysian instance, followed by or encapsulated or wrapped in an Apollonian dream. Though words are said and they do matter, there is also music that is incomprehensible but which contains the truth the words inevitably fail to convey. In chapter I I have defined poetry as an act of creation but also as an act of destruction of old, dead poetry. Poetic words that are new are therefore the revelation of a fresher inspiration, younger and therefore truer inspiration. As many still get inspired by Homer, for example, the above does not necessarily reject the old wells of poetry but it does destroy their diluted children in the words that are used in ignorance of their genealogy and original majesty. This is, I believe, what we call a cliché. To complement the original thesis, then, old poetry lives on in new poetry that may on the surface use very different words and metaphors, but what is destroyed is the diluted forms of the original that has lost awareness and righteousness of its noble progenitor. Dead words no longer carry the bite of inspiration and must be renewed with the poet's ink-blood or "in white ink" (1976, p. 881, Cixous), feminine or masculine, to refer back to Cixous — the connection to the body here, I believe, is very important, and I will return to this in chapter III.

This particularly resonates with Gaspar's comatose visions after he had been impregnated by the lightning. The pages preceding Gaspar's vision depict some of the commemorative posters from Plebiscite's past, each telling the story of a state program. It could be suggested that these posters constitute the poetry of the past, the previous age of poetry, but this would not be correct. These posters are already corrupted, diluted, dogmatic disfigurements of that previous poetic age, the ideology, which is in essence the corruption of poetry. In this sense Gaspar, Kevin and Johnny are all heirs to the poets behind the Plebiscite, while the Plebiscite is the death of that poetry.

To return to Gaspar's comatose visions, these represent the death of the old and the renewal of the genius. This is the scene when Gaspar becomes first impregnated by divine force, although the significant of what happened to him is not revealed or really addressed until volume II. At this stage, Gaspar's impregnation is still music waiting to be expressed in the plastic form. In the allegorical sequence of Gaspar's vision he is shown the poetry and he subsequently becomes reborn, born again. This mirrors the story of Dionysus, and his birth. Gaspar's former life is destroyed by the beauty of God, unknown to him, and "Zeus was able to save [him] from [...] womb and sew it up in his thigh". (2007, p. 196, *The Greek Myths*, Stephen P. Kershaw). Gaspar is therefore pregnant, but he is also that which gestates. His body is pregnant with the new era, as much as time is pregnant with him.

While poetry cannot express the truth that is inexpressible, it does, nevertheless, constitute a certain expression — the transmission of inspiration, as I suggest above. For the purpose of better understanding the poetic speech, and the effective aspect of the process of transmission — but which I mean how the speech act or utterance is constituted and how it exists in a social space, — I will now discuss the four modalities of veridiction that Foucault analyses in his *Courage of Truth*.

For Foucault's purposes the differences between the four modalities of veridiction take precedence because he is seeking to focus on one of them — parrhesia; but for my purposes I am more interested in the commonalities of the modalities to investigate what these common properties may suggest for better understanding of inspired speech. I will attempt to show that inspired speech may take place within all four modalities of truth and I will seek to see what the shape of each of these modalities could reveal about the nature of inspired speech. In other words I will look to see how each of the four modalities of truth production could accommodate the poetic truth that is not direct understood but comprehended on a different level than mundane truth — more by contagion than memorisation.

In lectures presented in *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault offers a very elaborate account of parrhesia. Here is how he originally defines it:

parrhesia is the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears. (2012, p.13)

To be precise, parrhesia in this sense is pertinent to a philosophical friendship where the two friends are in the relationship with each other that is driven by and toward cultivation of virtue, and parrhesia is the tool of honest speech through which the two friends reveal to each other the truth about each other. The speaker must have the will and the capacity to say the truth and the listener has to have the will to receive the truth, to tolerate it. One of the most relevant aspects of parrhesia appears to be this sense of personal endangerment that accompany and appear to constitute, in part, the essence of parrhesiastic speech, the ultimate test of friendship and oneself.

Foucault uses a similar quality to differentiate between prophetic speech and parrhesia. He says: "The prophet [...] does not speak in his own name" (2012, p. 15). I will address this problem in the next few paragraphs, but for now I will assume the unity of speaker and the speaking body, the unity of language and the music of language, etc. In other words, for the purpose of this point Dionysus and Apollo are completely synonymous. I will shift the perspective toward the perspective of the listener or reader rather than the speaker or writer, because *parrhesia* primarily belongs to the realm of social interactions and politics. Specifically, Foucault characterises this stage of parrhesia:

this double determination of the *psukhē* as correlate of truth-telling, and of *ēthos* as the objective of parrhesiastic practice, means that *parrhēsia*, while being organized around the principle of truth-telling, now takes shape in a set of operations which enable veridiction to induce transformations in the soul.  
(2012, p.65)

While there is a degree of trust that the receiver of the speech does not harm the speaker, there is always an implication of uncertainty, but also a duty on the part of the speaker and a different duty on the part of the listener. The speaker is both in the position of power to help his/her friend effect transformation and in the position of vulnerability, of being at mercy of his/her friend, dependent on him/her to receive the truth well.

Foucault suggests regarding political parrhesia in a democratic society: “those who say or try to say what is true and good, and not what pleases the people, will not be listened to. Worse, they will provoke negative reactions, irritations, and anger. [...]their true discourse will expose them to vengeance or punishment” (2012, Foucault, p.37) It is easily demonstrable that the inspired speech presents a degree of risk to the poet or the prophet. There are numerous cases of this taking place from around the world throughout history. Jesus Christ could be considered a very obvious example, perhaps the example of a prophet or a poet being executed or punished for their words. Such examples are numerous, though the two different modalities of inspired speech, the poetic and the prophetic, offer different sort of examples, and there remains to be the issue of authenticity of the prophet and poet, unless any case of censorship is considered an example of violation against inspired speech, whether the speech was actually inspired or not. When a prophet delivers his or her words, or when a poet delivers the poem, there is a degree of threat looming over their person, insofar as he or she is a mortal being.

In *Apollo Breaks His Silence* parrhesia is rarely encountered, and parrhesia in the political sense will not take place until the very end of the last volume, when pregnant Gaspar, accompanied by Johnny, hijack the stage during the live transmission during the spring festival. It is, nevertheless, a constant theme in the novel. In a certain sense the courage to tell the truth is the fundamental telos of the novel, and it is told not only by the political gesture of Gaspar and Johnny, but also with their very sacrifice. In this I attempt to mirror the sanguine utterance of Christ, who wrote the unsaid word with his blood and pain — “to exchange his life for a line of poetry written in a splash of blood” (2000, Mishima, *Runaway Horses*, p.338).

This is, furthermore, reflected in the title of the trilogy: in the last agonising scream the voice of the poet-god appears, after millennia of silence to burn the profanity of dead words — of every type of propaganda, of every type of insincerity, of anything that is *not* written in your blood, milk or semen.

Though not often exercised, parrhesia is, nevertheless, suggested throughout Gaspar's storyline. It is offered to him as a possibility, by the circumstances of surrounding lies and falsity. It is a possibility that he never exercises, but this only accentuates the danger of parrhesia and the courage that it entails.

For Foucault the fundamental property of prophetic truth-telling is “that the prophet's position is one of mediation,” (2012, p.15) unlike that of the parrhesiast who speaks for himself/herself, as himself/herself. I will use this opportunity to interrogate the issue of masks and acting, and particularly since I have already argued that poets and prophets, at least, inspired and speak as they are moved by the inspiration, I will reverse the polarity of my argument and begin to interrogate the difference between inspired speech and philosophy, specifically, post-Socratic philosophy: particularly, Plato.

I am provoked to consider whether Plato spoke for himself or whether he was a mediator. This opens the old wound at the heart of certainty in Western Philosophy — the wound of Plato's poetry, that “the youthful tragic poet Plato first burnt his poetry in order that he might become a pupil of Socrates” (2008, Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p.77). Despite this declaration of loyalty, Plato appears to remain a suspect, as Irwin Edman says, “[Plato] apparently can not decide on which side of the battleground [between poetry and philosophy] he wishes to take his stand” (1936, p.608); or perhaps, it is rationality itself that is suspect. This is not really my question here, however: I would like to point to the issue at heart of distinguishing between poetic or prophetic speech and philosophical speech without interrogating the border — which is not to say that there is no distinction but rather that they may be more allied with each other than is apparent at first sight.

It is important to consider if Plato spoke for himself, even if he has not only spoke as himself. The suggestiveness of demonstrating his philosophical ideas, if

they are his philosophical ideas, through characters introduces by necessity a degree of ambiguity and ambivalence. One is not presented with the finished thesis but instead with the story of that thesis played out in characters, each of whom is necessary for the story to arrive at its eventual climax — the thesis, each error, as a stepping stone, being Plato's, if we assume that Socrates' conclusion (in the majority of the dialogues) was his. Error is therefore presented as an important constituent of the philosophical truth — specifically because you need the illness in order to provide the cure, and errors need to be presented and considered to be identified and rejected as errors. A dialogue can be seen, then, as a history of an illness or perhaps several closely related illnesses: “the disease, for the cure of which a cock is owed to Asclepius, is precisely the disease of which Crito was cured when [...] he had been freed from the common opinion” (2012, Foucault, p.105).

In *Apollon Breaks His Silence* Gaspar speaks in someone else's voice, insofar as he teaches that which he does not believe in. In this sense he is not unlike Plato: he act the error out in order to discover why and how it is wrong. Gaspar speaks in someone else's voice because already at the beginning of the novel he suspects there is something fundamentally wrong with what he teaching, but he repeats the words i) as a mouthpiece of the state, out of fear for his safety and out of inertia, ii) as a cultural engineer who studies the problem by closely observing it. Gaspar does not speak the truth until the very end of *Apollo Breaks His Silence*, but he is on his journey towards the truth — a journey that is necessarily paved with errors, and it is a journey that he taking on several levels at once, on person, on the spiritual, and the political.

Foucault's definition of a sage proves curious in its relation to parrhesia and Pythia. He says:

the sage is wise in and for himself, and does not need to speak. He is not forced to speak, nothing obliges him to share his wisdom, to teach it, or demonstrate it. This accounts for what might be termed his structural silence. And if he speaks, it is only because he is

appealed to by someone's questions, or by an urgent situation of the city. (2012, p.17)

For him, Heraclitus was a great exemplar of this model, who was compelled to sentence his compatriots to death for fatal ignorance, as

he says: 'The Ephesians would do well to hang themselves, every grown man of them, and leave the city to beardless lads; for they have cast our Hermodorus, the best man among them, saying "We will have none who is best among us; if there be any such, let him be so elsewhere and among others."' (1996, Russel, p.49)

Parrhesiast's major contribution is the clarity and candidness of their speech, whereas the sage has secret knowledge — the wisdom of the initiate. The weeping philosopher sought to address deep philosophical issues in his city. What he was combating was not so much, perhaps, the matter of confusion or self-forgetfulness or corruption even, as it was erroneous philosophy: the misunderstanding of equality. There is a sacred quality to what Heraclitus had to say — his knowledge was valuable independently of the circumstances, whereas it appears from many examples that Foucault offers that the purpose of the parrhesiast is to bring back the city or the friend to their health. The illness to which the sage holds the medicine is the illness of idol-worshippers, of false ideals, contradictory to the divine knowledge the sage possesses, the illness that the parrhesiast hold the medicine for is the flu of self-forgetfulness, of corruption: it is the illness of someone who has forgotten his, her, or their proper values. Bridging the two there is someone like Seneca that carries, perhaps, both cures, as may be seen from his *Moral Epistles*.

From this perspective Pythia resonates strongly with the figure of the sage, but perhaps could be differentiated from the sage by her own privileged status. Heraclitus "deposited [his book] in the temple of Artemis and, according to some, he deliberately made it more obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt" (2015, Diogenes Laertius, loc 6540) — in other words, he left his wise words in a holy place to be perused with difficulty (which is to say, with the ease of difficulty, the ease of difficulty is being forced to

investigate instead of easily presuming the knowledge), whereas Pythia was propitiated and obeyed as mouthpiece of Apollo. Besides there is the matter of the Delphic maxims and their relationship to sagehood and wisdom, to philosophy, which has been, albeit briefly, mentioned earlier in this essay.

In other words, this is another point of connection between the ecstatic poetic speech and the modalities of expression associated with philosophy. This point where reason crosses into unreason and back is the recurring theme of interest for myself in this work and the novel and beyond. In *Apollo Breaks His Silence* the main characters frequently encounter signs — “The God whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks plainly nor conceals, but indicates by signs” (2013, Heraclitus, p.47) — even if one looks beyond the obviously mystical elements, Gaspar’s coma that leads to pregnancy, or Johnny’s vision of a fairy by the stream, etc. My intention was and is to depict the sort of psychologies that would neighbour gods. This characterisation is my rejection of the clinical madness as the dominant interpretive category of ecstatic behaviour and speech. For this purpose I used the tools of elaborate poetic descriptions that threaten the boundary between the character’s psyche and his reality. I attempted to show a reality that often appears something else, that suggests visions and presences incomprehensible to the modernised mind — and to the minds of the three protagonists too, at least at first. Their coming towards the impossible is their maturation, their spiritual puberty.

I would like to draw a parallel that is, in opinion, strongly suggested by several preceding paragraphs, by much of my comparison between the ecstatic form of speech and parrhesia and philosophy. The comparison that is suggested and is pregnant with the critical potential is between Pythia and Diogenes.

I would like to focus on the similarities between Pythia and Diogenes, and what may those suggest to our discussion of inspired, and therefore deviant, speech — for though the two modalities of speech, that of Diogenes and that of Pythia are very different, they are both deviant, that is poetic, iconoclastic and pious at the same time (as iconoclasm is a deep expression of piety, if one considers poetry a rich expression of piety, as I have said, though in different terms, earlier in the essay).

Foucault says of cynicism:

Cynicism is thus this kind of grimace that philosophy makes to itself, this broken mirror in which philosophy is at once called upon to see itself and fails to recognise itself. [...] It is the fulfilment of the true life, but as demand for a life which is radically other. (2012, p.270)

An other life is a poetic life — life as poetry, and life dedicated to the gods. When cynics possibly saw no other form of life, no other than their other — this was then already the dying of cynicism-as-poetry. It became an uncynic cynicism, a decency in itself, which is the poison of dogs and poetry. The heart of cynicism is to return the proper value to values as expressed in the Cynic “principle, “Change the value of currency.”” (2012, p.226) which, Foucault suggests, might mean: “That the coin is not misleading about its true value, that its own value is restored to it by stamping it with another, better, and more adequate effigy, is what is defined by this important Cynic principle of altering and changing the value of the currency”. (2012, p.227)

It thus follows that cynic attitude even to his/her own rags should be as to rags. A cynic cannot be afraid of finery and silk. In my understanding the askesis degenerated into life-hating, when it became possessed by the mortal illness of morality — death worse than death — as can be traced by Foucault’s exploration of the transformation of askesis, from cynicism to monasticism later in the *Courage of Truth*.

There is an odd relationship between philosophy and Diogenes and between Pythia and philosophy: the relationship of an imperfect reflection, and as I have been trying to show, there is no radical contradiction — but rather a progression of the poetic rhythm from one to another, several instruments chiming to make one symphony. It is only the dead skin on one’s eyes that precludes one from seeing this.

The most important element of the similarity between Pythia and Diogenes is that both were allies to the gods. While Pythia’s association with Apollo has been

discussed earlier, Diogenes said the following: “Everything belongs to the gods; the wise are friends to the gods; friends hold all things in common; *ergo*, everything belongs to the wise”. (2012, p.13) The obvious implication is that everything belongs to Diogenes. As Foucault puts it: “The Cynic is a true king; only he is an unrecognised, unknown king who, by the way he lives, by the existence he has chosen, and by the destitution and renunciation to which he exposes himself, deliberately hides himself as king” (2012, p.278). The poverty of Diogenes is not poverty at all. It is the rich that are poor because they have no wisdom to use their wealth to their own benefit. The point of Diogenes was to strip himself from all the earthly wealth, not because money or luxury were of any danger to him, but so that his true treasures shone brighter and were not obscured in the eyes of those who are hard of vision (it would be impossible to seriously conceive of Diogenes as scared of wealth!)

Similarly, in *Apollo Breaks His Silence* a conceal power is allied with Kevin, Gaspar and Johnny. While they are not very important within the machinery of the Plebiscite, an unseen force of Pythian prophecy drives towards, first recognising the Plebiscite as tyranny, and then eventually toppling it. As they are parents of Apollo, they can definitely be considered friends of gods, and from there, from this alliance to virtue, from their drive to virtue, though often imperfectly executed, they attain power.

Another pertinent statement of Diogenes that I think supports the statement regarding his wealth, took place at a customs post when he was asked to declare any valuables: “he bared his chest and declared, ‘I’m carrying this vessel filled with any number of good things, but you are unable to see them because you keep the eyes of your soul firmly closed” (2012, p.13).

The incident that took place between Alexander and Diogenes is significant too: “As he was sunning himself in the Craneion, Alexander stood over him and said, ‘Ask whatever you wish of me’, and he replied, ‘Stand out of my light.’” (2012, p. 53) It may be argued that Alexander the Great is divine merely by recognising the divinity of Diogenes. The meeting is the meeting of two kings. I do not believe that it

must be read as condemnation of Alexander the Great — who, I would argue, is another iteration of divinely mandated political power — because he *sees*. He, too, is the son of gods: as Pythia declared: “You are invincible, youth” (1978, p.338).

One of the most pregnant differences between Pythia and Diogenes, and why Diogenes is so useful for me in this essay: that Pythia answered questions, while Diogenes barked. It is difference between defence and attack. Diogenes is the soldier of gods, the divine dog that barks at the mundane and the self-important.

This parallel is important because Diogenes becomes another gadfly, sent by the gods. He does not simply enter the political process — he seeks to overturn it on its head. Diogenes violates taboos to show the ultimate foolishness of morality of decency, of morality of shame, of morality of the dying, and instead offers them the morality of poetry, as he masturbates on the market square to expose not so much himself but those who shop nearby. He is in this sense not unlike Artemis who bathes naked in the forest and is angered by the lustfulness of a stranger who hides to look at her instead of making himself known. The sin of Actaeon was shame, from which Artemis freed him by turning him into a deer. Diogenes curses the godless with his unbearable innocence, exposing his body and his pleasure, he exposes the chains ordinary citizens wear as jewellery: he exposes their false citizenship, for if Diogenes is a king, they all worship a usurper.

In *Apollo Breaks His Silence* the puritanical mores are subverted through explicit subject matter. One of the aesthetic movements that I make, which has a certain affinity with the authentic kind of cynicism, is refusal to ignore the body and especially sex. It is an impulse to strip off the self-important pretentiousness of the well-behaved, of the moralistic, and exposed to them, in a mirror, their own physicality, which they can never escape, despite any ruses and sleights of hand. To celebrate the sensual, the sexual and the obscene is an important sub-project within the greater spiritual and cultural intentions of *Apollo Breaks His Silence*.

In the next chapter I will address this conflict between the political and poetic in more detail.

## Chapter 3 Liberation of Eros or the Triumph of Phoibos

### Apollon

This chapter will bring the issue of poetry and inspiration into the political field. The *Republic* is a very large and complicated text and only the relevant parts will be considered, in light of the theme of this inquiry, now rephrased in social and political terms as: what is the role of the poetic, inspired speech in society? This will help me better understand the nature of the poetic speech and its role in the evolution of human society.

It must be noted as a prelude to justify the reading I am trying to offer that Plato repeatedly refers to consulting Pythia regarding various matters throughout the *Republic*, and he accepts the voice of Apollo as law. The significance of this cannot be overestimated. It adds up to accepting the mystical prescription as the positive law, as the positive knowledge. This raises the question of the role of reason, and I believe that its proper position is the original Socratic method of using it, as the medicine for the bane of ignorance, as a negative tool for cutting out erroneous beliefs. One, then, remains with the Sherlock Holmes-like formula: “when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth” (2009, loc. 2666).

It is difficult to disagree with Plato, but impossible not to disagree with his traitor-disciples. My aim here is therefore affirm some aspects of his argument destructively, in other words to challenge many of the underlying premises without abandoning the idea of the *Republic* completely. My thesis here is that utopia is only

possible as an acknowledged telos. In other words, utopia is properly always in the future, and never in the present. It is an expression of pure desire, of direction ruled by a lofty desire for harmony.

The plan to make the utopia present results in fascism and bolshevism and every other kind of anti-life ideology, but this does not really contradict the *Republic*. It is not that the utopian project is by definition destructive or impossible: the impossibility of a utopia is not a practical concern so much as it is a poetical concern, but I will return to it in a couple of paragraphs after I offer a brief defence of Plato.

Because Plato's *Republic* is a recipe, it would only function if the correct ingredients were added. In other words, the ruling class has to be the philosophers, who possess the virtuous qualities described in the *Republic*. They have to be, therefore, knowers of truth and "lovers of wisdom and knowledge" (2015, loc. 18282), willing and capable "to unite in himself philosophy and spirit and swiftness and strength" (2015, loc. 18282). This basic terminological clarification already disqualifies the Soviet Union or the Third Reich from being in any relation to the Republic, except as an obvious and embarrassing error. In other words, the Republic was never attempted properly: the cooks were always half-mad and none of them read the recipe correctly. Every attempted utopia was a gastronomical parody.

In this sense the Plebiscite from *Apollo Breaks His Silence* is also just a cracked disfigured reflection of the beautiful face Plato drew in the *Republic*. It has as a state, perhaps, fewer mistakes than the Third Reich or the Soviet Union in that it plays better at imitation of the Platonic ideas: for example, it is not ruled by the proletariat, which would be third class of people in the Republic, or by the military elite which, it could be argued, was the case in the Third Reich. It is ruled by the ideologues who fancy themselves philosophers, even though an ideologue is the opposite of a philosopher, and the two are similar only in that both categories use words. The ideologues attempt to force the population into a form proper to their theory, whereas the philosophers try to find the way would bring most happiness to the population. Admittedly, all three regimes were ruled by ideologues but their role is much more explicit in the Plebiscite and much more certain. The ideologues of the

Plebiscite are sincerely driven by their philosophical ideals — not by class interests, nor by racial hatred. All of this, however, does not matter as they are not philosophers and get everything wrong. It was my intention to model the Plebiscite not after the Soviet Union, Maoist China or the Third Reich but to imagine an extreme form of the Western world, to imagine the Western world as a dystopia. This metamorphoses have been suggested to me by observing how quickly and radically Russia became a tyranny with distorted values and views, in 2014 and 2015, which I spent, for the most part, there.

While it may appear that the utopia as an error and Plato's *Republic* are unrelated from what I have just said, my thesis is that the error is also a consequence of the *Republic* in much the same way that some dangerous myths give way to misunderstanding when the reader has no capacity to interpret them properly: "Children cannot distinguish between what is allegory and what isn't [...]; we should therefore surely regard it as of the utmost importance that the first stories they hear shall aim at encouraging the highest excellence of character" (2007, p.70). Just like an ignorant individual upon hearing the story about Kronos castrating his father may see it as a permission to castrate his own tyrannical father instead of a cosmological depiction of mystery, another ignorant individual may in the *Republic* see the permission for butchery.

The *Republic* is thus also a hermetic text, for what Plato describes as "it would be best [...] to tell it to select few under oath of secrecy" (2007, p.70) , may also be advisable to apply to the *Republic* itself in the light of the errors that the text appear to have inspired, if we follow the logic. It is not because the *Republic* is wrong, it is because it is so nuanced and so insightful that it must be relegated to a secret space within the modality of the mystery. Perhaps the place of poetry, personified by Homer, is also somewhat similar (though I have only addressed one form of accusation Plato launches against poets, and there are others: some, for example, that they are poor educational materials if the portrayal of gods and heroes cannot be accurate, by the virtue of their divine status, etc.).

I believe the core of the misunderstanding of the *Republic* in letter and spirit can be ascertained from this passage:

“‘If a painter, then, paints a picture of an ideally beautiful man, complete to the last detail, is he any the worse painter because he cannot show that such a man could really exist?’

‘No, certainly not.’

‘But haven’t we been painting a word-picture of an ideal state?’

‘True’” (2007, 190-191)

The significance of this analogy can be made clearer if one introduces another profession as a comparison to contrast the means and the purpose of the method. The painter works with a blank surface and creates at will — perhaps not altogether the painter’s will, but in accord with inspiration, but then, Plato is not painting what he wills but rather what is in accordance with reason as it is accessible to him. This sort of art obviously presumes a degree of liberty that is not to be found anywhere on this planet — the liberty from history, the liberty from any sort of historic inertia, liberty from most circumstances. It is worth recalling that Plato’s task was not in how to bring a particular government into a state of justice, but to determine the condition of justice abstractly, in the purest possible form. A painter is not limited by any reality exterior to the task in creating beauty.

Someone with the job of bringing a state into the condition of justice would have to be likened to a personal trainer or some such professional in the area of physical education — it may be more coherent to continue the analogy of plastic beauty for it is most readily observable. A good personal trainer is limited in the strategy of bringing a body to the condition of plastic beauty by the current realities of the body: its historic inertia and trajectories such as dietary habits, experience with exercise, any sort of trauma, the degree of resolution, among many other factors. If the personal trainer had decided to imitate the painter and ignore all of these factors, that constitute his material as opposed to the painter’s paint, brushstrokes and empty

space, then he would become a torturer and a butcher, and the object of his art would not become beautiful, and instead it would perish. Similarly, one cannot presume that the Plato's *Republic* would be instituted overnight and by the use of crude force and violence. It would amount to self-castration on the level of the state.

The key difference between the two modalities: that of a painter and that of a personal trainer could be expressed simply as the body. It is somewhat of a metaphor, however, because the body represents the reality other than the heaven of ideas: it is our reality, influenced to a great degree by the historic inertia but also by other factors that cannot be simply expressed and understood: there is something about the truth that always remains outside of one's understanding, as I have tried to suggest in chapter II. I call the totality of all this the body — but not just simply the body, even if it were simple. I mean the body as a temple of mystery: the body that sweats lines of poetry. This quote from Butler's *Bodies That Matter* epitomises the basis of what I am about to say:

[T]here will be no way to understand “gender” as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as “the body” or its given sex. (1993, p.2)

The above does not reject the body but compels one to recognise that a body is always inscribed. To rephrase this within my terminology: poetry is always written on the body, that the body cannot escape some type of poetry, and, to mirror this back, poetry cannot escape the body even as the poetry dies — the body as the flux of changeable realms, the force of the unconscious, etc., just as much as the body cannot escape poetry. Body and its libido are both the site, the producer and the annihilator of poetry.

In one sense, as one looks at a body, the body is always adorned with poetry, often with dead poetry: it is concealed behind the debris so that no one sees it. One might call it clothes: the old peeling skin that stands for the body, much like the Phallos conceals and erases the penis. New poetry is also always written on the body, as its libidinal rebellion, Genet's ‘violence’ (2004), perhaps, that I have briefly

referenced in chapter II. To rephrase more precisely, the body sweats new poetry-pheromones, and that poetry must remain fresh to avoid decay. The body rebels against dead poetry, as dead poetry becomes its prison, but the fire of the body heat and its white ink always succeed in washing off the rotten skin.

The dead poetry “qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (1993, Butler, p.2), but always fails to completely contain it. The body of work dismantles its own stasis by the means of a dialectic as it matures and goes through the spring of puberty again and again.

In *Apollo Breaks His Silence* the matter of the body is one of the important themes, and it was my intention to allow the body its reign — to include it even and especially in its awkward parts, and especially the awkward parts of the body. One of the organs that is particularly awkward and that is mentioned occasionally in the novel is the foreskin. In the ‘Overdose’, the chapter in which poetry is being read, one of the poems mentions a pierced foreskin. Earlier in the novel it is remarked that Jacob had a particularly long foreskin, being a part of sexual organ not necessary for reproduction, as a veiled reference to sexual tantric practices, which will be the crime he is charged with in volume II, and also as a reference to this:

For those who continuously wore the *kynodesmē*, the resulting traction on the *akroposthion* would have the benefit of permanently elongating it. It is conceivable, then, that the lengthening of the prepuce could have been the primary object, at least in some cases:

aesthetics would be improved, and morals preserved.

(2001, Hodges, p. 384)

The reason why I picked this episode is due to the special meaning attached to the foreskin in Western culture. Its amputation is the amputation of the body — or one such for amputation of the body, but I have decided to focus on it as it is a very clear and physically poignant inscription with concrete results. In the account of circumcision in mystical Judaism Wolfson concludes that one of the ideas in the story of Abraham’ circumcision is that “the foreskin is a blemish that acts as a barrier

separating the individual and God” (1987, p.197). My interpretation is that the foreskin stands for the will to life as pleasure (but then, circumcision does not always have to be literal).

As foreskins are emblems of the body, though circumcision scars could perhaps also be transformed into such an emblem by means of an interpretive gesture, as the foreskin always leaves a trace. If the foreskin stands for the body, and fresh, living poetry is the body’s way to asserting itself, it may worthwhile to briefly observe some of their similarities: both are mortified, but both grow back generation after generation as an incessant gesture of renewal — the gesture that is *destined* to overcome brutality because it is effortless, it is positive violence in this sense:

The kernel of wheat that germinates and breaks  
through the frozen earth, the chick’s beak that cracks  
open the eggshell, the impregnation of a woman, the  
birth of a child can all be considered violent. (2004,  
Genet, p.171)

At this point I would like to turn to a more systematic analysis of the repression of pleasure, in my case, the pleasure of poetry, which is really the thing that is at stake in Plato’s *Republic* as a consequence of its inclination to cut the body and its pleasure, and therefore *jouissance*, poetry. I will turn to Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilisation*, for his account of a way out of the body and pleasure annihilation. One of the most important ideas Marcuse offers is the difference between repression and surplus-repression:

*Surplus-repression*: the restrictions necessitated by  
social domination. This is distinguished from (basic)  
*repression*: the “modifications” of the instincts  
necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in  
civilization. (1998, p.35)

While repression is a necessary condition for culture and civilisation to function, being the transformation and transmutation of Thanatos and Eros into forms and areas that do not preclude from advanced social functioning and higher faculties, surplus-repression is historically concrete and is not a necessary condition for the existence of civilisation and culture. Another useful distinction Marcuse offers is between general reality principle and performance principle which is “the prevailing historical form of the reality principle”(1998, p.35). This is very important because it allows for the theoretical possibility of change in the way reality principle functions historically and therefore reduce the extent of the surplus-repression, leaving only enough to sustain the society. Marcuse, then, defines the specific nature of the performance principle:

The performance principle, which is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the process of constant expansion, presupposes a long development during which domination has been increasingly rationalized: control over social labor now reproduces society on an enlarged scale and under improving conditions. For a long way, the interests of domination and the interests of the whole coincide: the profitable utilization of the productive apparatus fulfils the needs and faculties of the individuals. (1998, p.45)

To reframe this within the context of the previous discussion, this principle, it can be argued, is an intensification of the reality principle governing the Republic. It is an Apollonian phenomenon tending towards the false Apollo — the forgetfulness of labour, the exile of dreams, joy, body, and poetry, that peaks, at least in terms of its more positive qualities of productivity, effectiveness, and wealth, starting with the industrial revolution and continuing today (I have allowed for certain simplifications to focus on aspects that are immediately important for my argument here).

Though the performance principle may sound like negative phenomenon, it is not. Marcuse (1998) agrees with Freud that it is an effective way of dealing with the natural scarcity that the primitive human encounters in their interaction with the world. It is, furthermore, the condition that allows one to imagine material circumstances where a reality principle free from surplus-repression may emerge:

If the achievements of the performance principle surpass its institutions, they also militate against the direction of its productivity — against the subjugation of man to his labor. Freed from this enslavement, productivity loses its repressive power and impels the free development of individual needs. [...] No matter how justly and rationally the material production may be organized, it can never be a realm of freedom and gratification; but it can release time and energy for the free play of human facilities *outside* the realm of alienated labor. The more complete the alienation of labor, the greater the potential of freedom: total automation would be optimum. It is the sphere outside labor which defines freedom and fulfilment, and it is the definition of the human existence in terms of this sphere which constitutes the negation of the performance principle. This negation cancels the rationality of domination and consciously “de-realizes” the world shaped by this rationality — redefining it by the rationality of gratification. (1998, p.156-157)

The performance principle, if not artificially sustained by domination against its original goal of satisfying the needs resulting from scarcity, eventually reaches its full capacity and overcomes itself which then opens up the possibility for a new kind

of civilisation and the culture of the future. Marcuse also suggests that repression impulse of domination at a certain points comes to contradict the basic impetus of the performance principle in that the domination of the drives, or particularly the erotic drive, as it concerns me to a greater extent at this point in my analysis, even if it does not serve the original purpose of minimising scarcity.

The Plebeian Republic of *Apollo Breaks His Silence* is at this kind of a historical moment, where the true technology of the age is abandoned for the purpose of repressing the dangerous drives, for the benefit of the domination. The clearest example of this is at the very beginning of the novel when after the Day the Sky Fell the government banned flight, which symbolises the creative, productive, poetic *jouissance* (as a reference to Cixous's projected I presented earlier in the essay).

At this point I am compelled to move beyond the discussion of politics to the discussion of values, and to bring the critical and creative aspect together in the last few paragraphs of this essay to show how everything I have said so far comes together.

The basic psychological impulse behind the late Plebeian Republic, which is when most of the story of the novel takes place, is that of the castrating Father who “monopolized for himself the woman (the supreme pleasure) and subjugated the other members of the horde to his power” (1998, p.61), the Father who at the same time reduces the woman to a possession and an abstraction; but it is the end of the Father's another reign, cut by the rebellion of Johnny, Kevin, and Gaspar which is the rebellion of the sons to assert the will to pleasure and joy. This is why three father figures are killed in the first volume of the novel: Lt. Synge is killed by Kevin, the nameless spy, who is a father figure by the virtue of being a representative of the state, is killed by Johnny, and Johnny's actual father is killed by Johnny in the section of the volume that is not submitted as part of this PhD. The rebellion is, however, also the rebellion of the mother. Gaspar becomes a/the mother who can ground the revolution and give birth to it: masculinity needs the motherhood to be

free from the tyrannical fantasies of the false masculine, the Father, for the true masculine to be born, the masculine that does not reject the feminine, nor that is fundamentally separate from it. This is core of the revolution that takes place throughout the novel. It affirms the rights and pleasures of the body, and the body, especially, the perverse and divine body of Gaspar, which feminine and masculine, that is: perfect.

The body is the place where revolution is started, where domination is exercised. To ground this further in the (pro-)creative, and therefore erotic capacities of the body, defined most broadly, I must refer to Marcuse's particular type of Eros: "Orphic and Narcissitic Eros is to the end the negation of this order [of reproductive sexuality] — the Great Refusal" (1998, p.171). It is a rebellion against the performance principle, but they are also the children of the Plebiscite, and of the principle, they are the self-overcoming of the Republic. This is the potential of the *jouissance* of the body, this is what, Marcuse claims and I agree with him, is the surrealist "program de pratique la poésie" (1998, p. 160) — that is, the practice of poetry, of inspired speech where one recognises everything as divine and beautiful because one is divine and beautiful, to bring this back to the end of chapter I of this essay and Nietzsche's *amor fati*.

This is the religion to which Johnny, Gaspar and Kevin arrive in the course of the trilogy. They die but their death is only a beginning. Their death is a divine ejaculation into the womb of time, their blood is the semen of Eros as in their death they really replicate themselves as the future, having also overcome themselves in the tumultuous cauldron of transformation: the scene of the novel.

The underlying sentiment of the novel, or at least its great aspect in heart if not in mind, is that if some aspects of civilisation, the old gods, need to be sacrificed on the pyre of transformation for the sake of truth, so be it. This is both a retelling of the story of Christ and its negation. There the saviour is sacrificed so that life could continue. Here, the saviours must be sacrificed so that life as it is known could end. It is the assassination not of a person or a political entity, but that of a sentiment. Fire

here represents love — passionate love, Agape but with a bite. In the end nothing is sacrificed, because sacrifice is against the law of the new logos, and all is gained: to quote from the Book of Lieh-Tzu: “The sage Po-ch’eng-kao-tzu would not sacrifice his body and mind to benefit the world [...] Every part of your body is as important as any other. [...] In thinking that our efforts can make a difference, we may have messed things up rather than helped” (2001, Wong, p.202-203).

It is the spirituality of the future, as it is not the Christian God, whatever He has become, because as Nietzsche declared: “this God has died!” (2008, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, p.250): he died of necessity for humanity’s coming of age, for humans to become gods. God has to die, so that the human may live (to rephrase Robespierre’s “Louis must die, because the homeland has to live” (p.64)). God cannot remain an idea — God must be killed, so that the human is no longer the infant s/he had been. Religion can no longer be a community or a sense of belonging but only a practice. The death of God represents the death of the old, infantile stage of humanity, lived out in the shadows of the castrating Father, even more alive when he is killed: “The father survives as the god in whose adoration the sinners repent” (1998, p.64); this new murder is carried out by the sons not afflicted by any “bad conscience” (Nietzsche, 2003, p.38). They kill the Father (Plebiscite) in a Bacchic rite and devour his flesh that also impregnates their corpses and make of them flowerbeds.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to investigate *the irrational* as the poetic language (recall chapter I where I criticise the idea that reason is the only organ of perception of the soul”, as the truth, and as the liberty of pleasure.) I have used a variety of sources from a variety of cultures, as I think it is appropriate in our age of globalisation when different cultures are finally able to meet and make love.

It is my hope that I will be able to expand this preliminary study to follow the threads I had to leave be in the course of this work; to further explore the place of the poetical, the mystical and the pleasant in society and culture; to reveal the place that these things righteously deserve, or the capacity in which we need them as the humans standing on the cliff of today and looking into uncertain but majestic ocean of the future in the hope of foreseeing and imagining the future of humanity that will have overcome the insurmountable and married theses and antitheses, to the humanity that has grown up from its pubescent misery into the *jouissance* of youth.

In Chapter I have defined the poetic speech and analysed its relationship to prophecy. I have have so by appealing to Nietzsche, Cixous, Emerson, Shelley, among others. I have used various definition of poetry from above authors and relevant modes of expression to determine that poetry is not the same as verse and instead should be defined thus: renewal of truth through style inspired by ecstasy of truth.

In Chapter II I have defined the concept of truth as an ecstatic experience that destroys convention and dogma: as something that results of lack of understanding, if it is not obscured by a pretension of understanding or plain dismissal. I have used the work of Foucault and Plato and case studies from two poets and Pythian statements, as well as building on the ideas established in Chapter I. I have discussed various modalities of truth, and the tension between the true and false (recall the section on Plato’s ruses). At the end of the chapter I have focused on the iconoclastic dimension of truth in the case of Diogenes, which connects to

Chapter III in terms of subversive effects of the sort of truth that I am exploring, as defined at the beginning of Chapter II.

In Chapter III I have used Plato and Marcuse to show how poetry is antithetical to the surplus repression. I show the mistake of erroneous versions of the Plato's *Republic* and find the body as the source of truth that inspires poetry and as the main subject of repression. As the consequence I point to Marcuse's solution and to its compatibility with poetry as disruptive and truthful speech.

Overall I have demonstrated the theoretical foundation for the aesthetic of *Apollo Breaks His Silence* and its cultural and spiritual mission: of poetic speech as inspired utterance of subversive truth that has political and cultural applications beyond mere engagement in existing political debate: it is an attack on the very order of libidinal economy, the surplus repression I discuss in Chapter III.

Even though the identity of the writers should be of secondary importance, I have used a great diversity of sources, from Ancient China and Ancient Greece to modern philosophers like Cixous and Foucault. This cultural diversity goes beyond mere lip service to the liberation project that would focus merely on identity of authors. I have avoided this tokenism by focusing on different ideas and cultures, thereby extending the potential scope of this analysis beyond Europe or the illusory First World (and as I am writing this, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the weakness of this idea is becoming more and more apparent even to the inattentive), expanding its relevance, if not subject matter, to ever shifting forms of oppression, of whatever creed and aesthetic.

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